

Mind the Gap:
The Visual Arts, the Reader-as-Viewer, and Identity Critique
in Early Twentieth-Century American Women's Writing

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Abstract

My dissertation examines the aestheticization of female protagonists in early twentieth-century American women's writing and demonstrates how tropes from art and literature come together to produce a transformative and revolutionary aesthetics of the female body. Adopting a feminist framework, my work offers a political intervention into the ways in which women are both viewed and view themselves in literature. "Mind the Gap" argues that in evoking tropes from the visual arts, the writers I analyze emphasize the gap between the visual perception of a female body and the consequent cognitive awareness of femininity. This gap enables the reader to pause and evaluate not only the protagonists' relationship to the world, but also the reader's participation in codes of cultural recognition. My first chapter investigates the artists Claude Cahun and Adrian Piper to establish the theoretical and visual practices available to American women artists and writers. Chapters 2 and 3 employ Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905) and Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928), respectively, to demonstrate the ways in which art is used to aestheticize Lily Bart and Helga Crane's bodies in oppressively raced and gendered ways. Ending the dissertation with Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899), I consider the revolutionary subjectivity proposed by Edna Pontellier's rejection of passive aestheticization and her assertion of active artistry. In each of the chapters, I unpack how the aestheticization of female protagonists in early twentieth-century American women's writing functions as a mechanism for raced and gendered oppression, but also as a way to critique, interrupt, and open up transformative models of female identity.

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**Mind the Gap: The Visual Arts, the Reader-as-Viewer, and Identity Critique
in Early Twentieth-Century American Women's Writing**

Introduction

This dissertation examines the aestheticization of female protagonists in early twentieth-century American women's writing and demonstrates how tropes from art and literature come together to produce a transformative and revolutionary aesthetics of the female body. Using a feminist framework, my work is an intervention into the ways in which women are both viewed and view themselves in literature. "Mind the Gap" argues that in evoking tropes from the visual arts, the writers I analyze emphasize the gap between the visual perception of a female body and the consequent cognitive awareness of femininity. This gap enables the reader to pause and evaluate not only the protagonists' relationship to the world, but also the reader's participation in codes of cultural recognition. In effect, the gap produced by aestheticization can serve as an intellectual pause for the reader: a way to interrupt the ready acceptance of gender and race cultural codes and an opportunity to propose bold, individual alternatives. "To mind" connotes paying attention to, but it also suggests the reader's literal *mind*, her need to use intellect to disrupt the known world of viewing.

My first chapter investigates the artists Claude Cahun and Adrian Piper to establish the theoretical and visual practices available to American women artists and writers. Chapters 2 and 3 employ Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905) and Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928) to demonstrate the ways in which art is used to aestheticize Lily Bart and Helga Crane's bodies in oppressively raced and gendered ways. Ending the dissertation with Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899), I consider the revolutionary subjectivity proposed by Edna Pontellier's rejection of passive aestheticization and her assertion of active artistry. In each of the chapters, I unpack

how the aestheticization of female protagonists in early twentieth-century American women's writing functions as a mechanism for raced and gendered oppression, but also as a way to critique, interrupt, and open up transformative models of female identity.

In particular, I examine the ways in which portrayed literary protagonists—Lily Bart, Helga Crane, Edna Pontellier—are marked by seeing and knowing. I show that Edith Wharton, Nella Larsen, and Kate Chopin position the reader-turned-viewer as a critical agent capable of critiquing gendered, raced, and classed subject positions that suggest exclusion, inferiority, or disciplinary violence. Art historian Amelia Jones argues that “we simultaneously cling to the belief in the veracity of visual signifiers to convey the truth of who people are yet consistently doubt what these signifiers mean” (xvii). I contend, however, that as we use “see” to mean “understand” or “know,” we simultaneously train our eyes to accept that no gap exists between seeing and knowing. In “Mind the Gap” I assert that in evoking tropes from the visual arts the writers I analyze mark a break between visual perception and cognitive awareness and thus enable the reader-turned-viewer to consider not only the world outside but also herself as autonomous seeing subject. In this way, my project seeks to demonstrate how the intersection between early twentieth-century women's writing and the visual arts has much to teach us about our ways of viewing our present world and ourselves.

This dissertation takes as a given the ways in race and gender are constructed visual categories. In 1984 Joan W. Scott submitted a paper to the *American Historical Review* entitled “Is Gender a Useful Category of Historical Analysis?” The *AHR*, which does not accept paper titles containing question marks, asked that Scott revise

her title; at final acceptance, the title read: “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis.” This revised title suppressed the questioning mode inherent to the paper, which critiqued the validity of gender (the behavioral, cultural, or psychological traits typically associated with and inscribed to one sex) as a category, as a *thing* with definitive parameters, jurisdictions, and historical inevitabilities. Hortense Spillers, in her groundbreaking 1987 essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” reflected that “in the historic outline of dominance, the respective subject-positions of ‘female’ and ‘male’ adhere to no symbolic integrity” (58); in particular, black women, culturally interpolated within the historical oppression of slavery, are bereft of female-as-subject (one who possesses sexual, cultural, and maternal rights) gender signification. Gender, Spillers puts forth, is no more inviolate than kinship as a social construct if it can be culturally and discursively eliminated in mercantile exchange, as was the case with chattel slavery. In this way, Spillers importantly joined considerations of race critique with gender questioning.

In 2011’s *The Question of Gender*, Judith Butler and Elizabeth Weed reflected upon Scott’s contribution to feminist studies by arguing for the untenability of gender as an inviolate and singular category: “Gender as a category never works alone. . . . To say that gender does not have single meaning or, even that there is no such thing as ‘women,’ is simply to say that we make a mistake if we expect that gender, or the categories of women and men, are either culturally established in fixed form or timeless kinds of beings” (4). Considering Scott and Spillers’s contributions to the field, Butler and Weed declare that a critique of gender as a category must precede all feminist discussions, for “gender cannot be counted as one useful category of historical analysis among others, since gender is operating to help in the

very definition and historical production of major dimensions of social and political life, including labor, class, politics, and rights” (4). In short, without a critique of gender as a category, feminists risk academically reifying and reinscribing those very modes of thinking—including uncritical acceptance of cultural mores—which we seek to eliminate in social practices.

During the course of my analysis, two visual artists were central to my reading of visual cues in written texts, the white surrealist Claude Cahun (1894-1954) and the African-American conceptualist Adrian Piper (1948-). In Chapter 1 I aver that their work underscores the kind of visual tropes my chosen writers use to expose the reader-turned-viewer’s cognitive reliance on visual cues of race, gender, and class.

Claude Cahun, by playing with our often too-ready acceptance of the “authenticity” of performed gender identifications, stages for the viewer productions of seeing signifiers and thus “knowing” identity. What I am calling Cahun’s dandy self-portraits from 1920, 1921, and 1928 expose gender as dependent on external markers to delimit itself. In her dandy self-portraits, Cahun invokes the portrait conventions of the male intellectual or the flâneur-about-town only to expose a viewer’s reliance on these forms of visual coding to determine gender identity. In so doing, the viewer becomes exposed as complicit in internalizing a set of assumptions about the readability—and thus supposed knowability—of gender. The gap here is between Cahun’s biological sex and the viewer’s assumption of her gender. Therefore, the performative nature of the portraits, as well as their ironic moniker of “self,” underscore the problematization of identity as something one can both “know” in oneself and “see” in others.

In contrast to Cahun, Adrian Piper exposes a viewer's reliance on knowledge—stereotype or reinscribed myths concerning American race and gender identifications—to delimit how she, the viewer, *sees*. In this way, Piper inverts Cahun's "seeing as knowing" critiqued paradigm to suggest one in which the white viewer problematically "knows" first and then imparts that knowledge as a function of viewership. With the Mythic Being (a kind of dandy figure), Piper presents the viewer with race as spectacle, stages the constructedness of race itself, and then evokes racism as an affective response that distorts the social and cultural experience of viewing. In this way, Piper underscores how stereotype precedes and determines seeing in a racist society. As Piper maintains in *Out of Order, Out of Sight*, "racism is a visual pathology" (Vol. 1, 177) which "requir[es] every African-American to draw a sharp distinction between the person he is and the person society perceives him to be; this is, between who he is as an individual, and the way he is designated and treated by others" (Vol. 1, 285). In her construction of stereotype as a precondition of seeing for the white viewer, Piper implicitly invokes Frantz Fanon, who wrote in *Black Skin, White Mask* that "not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man" (90). That is to say, how the white viewer sees the black subject's racial identity is determined by a white social gaze that positions blackness as the pejorative counterpoint that sustains elevated whiteness. Or, put another way, the black subject's social construction is dependent on the white viewer's visual *documentation* of pre-determined cultural ideologies.

Piper confronts her presumed to be white viewers by underscoring their complicity in the creation, implementation, and reification of stereotypes. She uses confrontation as a politicized artistic mode through which she can teach white

viewers (*Out of Order*, Vol. 2, 99), proclaiming both explicitly and implicitly, “I embody everything *you* most hate and fear.” By transforming herself, a small, light-skinned black woman, into the Mythic Being, a black male possessing the phenotypical and sartorial markers deemed threatening by whites (afro, sunglasses, baggy jeans), Piper dramatizes the very transcription of stereotype. The gap here is between the subject’s self-knowledge and the viewer’s “knowledge” of social stereotype. White viewers are all complicit, Piper claims, in the internalization of visual identity codes that regulate, marginalize, dissect, and distort the black subject as a means of confirming the viewers’ own hierarchical whiteness. Only confrontation, not affirmation, will begin to break such codes apart and allow the eye, as Fanon says, to “correct cultural mistakes” (178).

In Chapter 2, I contend that through her portrayal of Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth* (1905), Edith Wharton anticipates and stages Cahun’s “seeing as knowing” paradigm as an act of collusion between the reader-turned-viewer and Lily’s male admirers. Those of Lily’s world “see” her and yet do not know her at all. Through Lily, Wharton claims that white leisure-class femininity depends on a very specific visuality—aestheticization as a visual art object. Lily needs this aestheticization to support her inter-connected race (white) and class (leisure) identifications. The *tableau vivant* scene in which Lily poses as Mrs. Lloyd by Sir Joshua Reynolds serves as the apotheosis of Lily’s aestheticization: she is a breathing high art piece, a veritable artifact of stunning, culturally constructed femininity. Instead of celebrating this feminine deification, however, Wharton uses it to make the reader pause and think. The gap between Lily’s artistic reification and her psychological separateness from those around her emphasizes to the reader-turned-viewer that this

is a woman emotionally destroyed by the very aestheticization on which her social identifications depend.

As the novel progresses, Lily is no longer exulted as a beautiful art piece. Without this explicit aestheticization, Lily loses her leisure-class status and becomes less white; however, she also becomes *less feminine, but more gendered female*, a new claim in the novel's criticism. As Lily falls in class status and her whiteness is blackened through contact with Simon Rosedale, she becomes a more *embodied* female who must rely on her physical being rather than her beautiful aesthetic form to survive. Only in the complete passivity of death can Lily be re-aestheticized as an art piece and her femininity restored.

In Chapter 3, I analyze *Quicksand* (1928), Nella Larsen's condemnation of the restrictive visual and social choices of self-representation available to black women in the 1920s —asexual lady, arbiter of black bourgeois “uplift,” primitive exotic, or folk matron. I put forth that Larsen anticipates Piper's “knowing as seeing” paradigm by depicting her protagonist Helga Crane as an art object and by turning the reader into a spectator whose viewing position is governed by predetermined racial knowledge. Those of Helga's world “know” her because they see her as a racial type. For Larsen as for Piper, knowing precedes seeing in a racist society. Because she is interpolated within a history of oppression that positions black women as literal objects—those who can be owned and consumed—Helga's female gender identification (unlike Lily's) collapses at the moment of aestheticization. By examining Helga as a visual art object, I consider how Spillers's idea of the black female body's *physical* ungendering can transpose into an *aesthetic* ungendering.

The moment that Helga's portrait is painted by the Danish painter Axel Olsen provides a moment much like Lily's *tableau* for the reader to pause and critique Helga's aestheticization. Unlike Lily, however, Helga recognizes her aestheticization for what it is—a destructive reinscription of racial type onto a canvas—and invites the reader-turned-viewer to do the same. The narrator emphasizes the distance between Helga's awareness of her own subjective personhood and the dehumanization of Olsen's prejudicially raced aestheticization of her female body. In elucidating this gap, the reader-turned-viewer can potentially interrupt her own ready participation in supposedly clear codes of cultural recognition. The raced aestheticization of Lily Bart and Helga Crane is different, although their eventual objectification is not. Lily's feminine artifice depends on aestheticization, while Helga's female gendering is undermined through the process, since it interpolates her within a visual discourse of historical and current oppression. Yet both are oppressed by a cultural process that distances women from their own minds and their own bodies.

Chapter 4 looks at Edna Pontellier's gendered artistry in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899). Of the three female protagonists I examine in this dissertation, Edna is the only one who is both aestheticized object and artist-subject. Edna Pontellier is not an amateur artist as many critics suggest, but a "genius" in the masculine sense: alienated and isolated. As I assert, it is Edna's ability to inscribe herself within a masculine artistic framework that leads not only to her artistic productivity but also to her suicide. Edna's position as a white, upper middle-class artist allows her to gender herself, and her self-gendering leads her to seek the masculine prerogative of the solitary genius. I argue that it's those very rights and

privileges—Edna’s ability to inscribe herself within a masculine artistic framework—that lead not only to her artistic productiveness but also to her suicide.

Here, Chopin asks the reader to question the gap between Edna’s artistic achievement and the literal cost to her life: is there not another way? Through dying Edna, frustrated that unmitigated rights elude her in life, lays ultimate claim to masculine privilege. Her decision to take her own life arises from her acknowledgment that she will never be as free, as unencumbered, as men of her race and class. Edna’s suicide lays claim to the masculine right to loneliness, to a (literally dead end) solitary life that her ambition as an artist had prefigured.

By examining the gap produced by the “always mediated nature of representation” (Barnett 577), I identify how the reader-turned-viewer can begin to recognize and critique those forms of aestheticization that purport to be mimetic but actually reproduce reductive stereotypes of race and gender. By using tropes from the visual arts and then by asking the reader to occupy the position of the viewer, Wharton, Larsen, and Chopin dramatize and stage the performative and flexible nature of identity constructions in a way that would be cognitively ineffective if evoked through words alone. We need the gap produced by aestheticization to pause and re-evaluate the subject positions of viewed protagonists as well as of our own. Anne Cheng maintains that “we do not master by seeing; we are ourselves altered when we look” (21). My dissertation acknowledges this fact and argues that the work of Cahun, Piper, Larsen, Chopin, and Wharton challenges the perceived known world of viewing. It is in minding the gap between self-determined bodily life and culturally-constructed femininity that the reader-turned-viewer can pause and evaluate both the protagonist’s world and her own.

Such recognition allows the reader-turned-viewer to begin to break apart knowing as seeing by acknowledging how race and gender categorizations produce her subjectivity as spectator in particular ways, perhaps at the expense of those whom she views. In particular, I read Piper and Larsen asking white readers-turned-viewers how the aesthetic documentation of another's abjection determines their own sense of subjectivity. In order to access a more ethically determined position of viewership, these white readers-turned-viewers must both acknowledge and re-evaluate their own politicized position of viewership as dependent on others' aesthetic objectification. Larsen does not suggest an "allocation of visibility" as a solution to the "crisis of visibility" (Cheng 171), a kind of re-distribution of the gaze, a conferment of power, to those previously made invisible. As Peggy Phelan has warned us, political empowerment through visibility is at best a precarious endeavor for those who are always already defined by their bodies or its presentation. Instead, Piper and Larsen suggest that in order for political change to occur the white spectator, not the person of color, must re-evaluate her position of aestheticized viewership, must examine what presumed axis of authoritative viewership she stands on and how that axis encodes exclusion or disciplinary violence. She must realize and change everyday acts of "knowing as seeing" that replicate the horror that can come from retransposing stereotype.

Finally, the agency that all of these artists and writers champion lies not with their subjects or protagonists, but with us as readers and viewers, who can choose to construct a new readership/viewership paradigm that more ethically determines one's place in a world marked by insidious paradigms of knowing and viewing. Cynthia Griffin Woolf once asked of Wharton's protagonist, Lily Bart: "What ought

[she] to do?” (*HM* x). Perhaps this is not the question these writers foreground, but rather, “what will *you*, reader-turned-viewer, do now that you are confronted with this knowledge?” Indeed, as Wharton, Larsen, and Chopin assert, the first step may be for us to take such understanding beyond the reading experience, into the life of the mind and of the body, into the heartbeat of a raced and gendered world. In minding the gap, we will identify our own failures of recognition, but we may always witness and comprehend the means to our liberation.

Chapter 1

[Mind the Gap] Between Sex and Gender: Claude Cahun and Adrian Piper

In this chapter, I seek to compare and contrast the work of two important visual artists, Claude Cahun and Adrian Piper, from two very different time periods and artistic perspectives/ideological frameworks, the 1920-30s and the 1970-80s, surrealism and conceptualism, respectively. As far as I know, a comparison of these two artists has never been done.¹ I do not seek to invoke Cahun and Piper as “representative” artists of either their specific time periods or their particular identifications—the white lesbian, the black philosopher, the surrealist, the conceptualist—although I will, when necessary, draw upon these identifications when the artists themselves invoke them as points of conceptual critique. Instead, I hope to make nuanced claims for how these highly individualized artists, at different periods and perhaps without knowledge of one another’s work (at least the case for Cahun), came to similar conclusions about the necessity of critiquing performative structures of categorical identity. I am not intending to put forth an exhaustive study of either artist’s work, but am attempting instead to ask these artists to speak to and challenge one another in productive ways that provoke audience questioning of “identity” operating on multiple identification registers. Through such an examination of the dialogue between Cahun and Piper, I will argue that both artists’ work possesses political import, for it forces the viewer to reevaluate (and perhaps, eventually to relinquish) her own particular Western axis of female-gendered and white aestheticization.

Both artists, I contend, invoke a kind of dandy figure in order to highlight gender identification’s indelible link to other mechanisms of identity construction:

race, sexual orientation, class, religion, etc.² The Oxford English Dictionary defines the dandy, first used in our understood contextual framework in the 1780s, as one who “*studies* above everything else to dress elegantly and fashionably” (emphasis mine). The dandy’s careful artifice (the “studied” component) of his appearance and his popular alignment with artistic or “cultured” society position him against the eighteenth century “fop,” who was neither self-aware nor particularly cultured, but simply “foolishly attentive to and vain of appearance, dress or manner” (OED). The dandy is a liminal figure in terms of gender, sexual orientation, race, class, even religion, not because of his invisibility or even mutability, but because of his *steadfast hyper-visibility*: the artifice of his self-presentation (manifest, overt stylization), the performative nature of his physical appearance (self as art object),³ and the renegotiation of the traditional gaze (man as recipient, not perpetrator of possessive viewership)⁴ all serve to undermine binary categories of identity construction. Moreover, because of his interest in traditionally feminine prerogatives like “dressing-up” and being viewed, “the dandy is a subject that represents an oscillation between gender positions . . . [he is placed] outside the dichotomous distinctions of unalloyed masculine versus feminine” (Blessing 196). Cahun and Piper’s interest in evoking the dandy clearly stems, at least in part, from the figure’s ability to suggest freedom from the reified gender binary.

Drawing upon the work of dandy-interested critics like Monica Miller and Susan Fillin-Yeh, I contend that Cahun and Piper invoke the dandy in order to access the productive marginality inherent in the figure’s aesthetic artifice and performative hyper-visibility which can “subvert and fulfill normative categories of identity at different times and places as a gesture of self-articulation” (Miller 5).

Indeed, the dandy is “a kind of embodied, animated sign system that deconstructs given and normative categories of identity (elite, white, masculine, heterosexual, patriotic) and reperforms them in a manner more in keeping with his often avant-garde visions of society and self” (Miller 10). In this sense, the dandy is an inherently political figure who over-performs—and thus exposes the artifice—of visual signifiers marking one’s identifications in order to underscore the precariousness and, perhaps, the untenability of identity itself. Importantly, however, the dandy’s performance is neither (completely) narcissistic nor inherently masturbatory; conceived as either the traditional flâneur—walking, observing, and being watched about town and on the street⁵—or the modern street-performer, the dandy engages with others by challenging the viewer’s expectations of how certain identifications—race, class, gender—“should” be aesthetically manifested as well as visually consumed.

Since both Cahun and Piper are biologically women and yet invoke the dandy as one trope useful in parodying gender “readability,” I agree with Fillin-Yeh that “the conventional notion of the dandy as a Western European man-about-town is in need of refurbishing. . . . [We must look for] new dandies from other places, and female as well as male manifestations of dandyism” (3). However, the ways in which Cahun and Piper invoke dandyism productively suggest very different—indeed, inverted—paradigms of cultural viewing critique. Both of these artists document the possibilities of visual subversion and thus ask the viewer to critique her inclination to collapse *seeing* with *knowing*. In *Seeing Differently*, art historian Amelia Jones contends that “we simultaneously cling to the belief in the veracity of visual signifiers to convey the truth of who people are yet consistently doubt what these signifiers

mean” (xviii). Although I agree with Jones that we “cling” to external, visual signifiers to capture a sense of one’s internal, “hidden” (and therefore inviolate and “real”) identity, I do not agree that we “consistently doubt what these signifiers mean.” Instead, I assert, it is precisely this interrogation of visual signifiers that is missing from popular discourse; as we discursively use “see” to mean “understand” or “know,” we simultaneously train our eyes to accept that no *visual* gap exists in this *linguistic* elision. However, critiquing this gap between visual perception and cognitive awareness enables the viewer to evaluate not only the world around her, that world encased by the eye, but also herself as “I,” as “autonomous” seeing subject. In short, it enables self-viewership. As Peggy Phelan has argued, “to doubt the subject seized by the eye is to doubt the subjectivity of the seeing ‘I’” (1). This is exactly what I see this re-evaluation of seeing doing for the viewer. Only by questioning the viability of another’s representation can the viewer critique who she is (or how she continually re-presents herself), what presumed axis of authoritative viewership she stands on, and how that axis encodes a certain determination of exclusion or of disciplinary violence.⁶

Claude Cahun, by playing with our often too-ready acceptance of the “authenticity” of performed gender identifications,⁷ stages for the viewer productions of *seeing* signifiers and thus “*knowing*” identity. Cahun’s “dandy self-portraits” (as I term them), those from 1920, 1921, and 1928, expose gender as dependent on external markers to delimit itself⁸; as Whitney Chadwick claims, “Cahun’s self-representations . . . tend to emphasize the culture coding of the body (i.e., clothing, hairstyle, makeup) rather than the body itself” (152). In her dandy “self”-portraits, Cahun invokes the portrait conventions of the male intellectual or

the flâneur-about-town only to expose the viewer's reliance on these forms of visual coding to determine gender identity.⁹ In so doing, the viewer becomes exposed as complicit in internalizing a set of assumptions about the "readability"—and thus "knowability"—of gender. Therefore, the performative nature of the portraits, as well as their ironic moniker of "self," underscore the problematization of identity as something one can both "know" in oneself and "see" in others.

In contrast to Cahun, Adrian Piper exposes the viewer's reliance on "knowledge"—meaning, stereotype or reinscribed myths concerning American race and gender identifications—to delimit how she, the viewer, *sees*. In this way, Piper inverts Cahun's "seeing as knowing" critiqued paradigm to suggest one in which the white viewer problematically "knows" first and then imparts that "knowledge" as a function of viewership. With the Mythic Being (a kind of dandy figure), Piper presents the viewer with race as spectacle, stages the constructedness of race itself, and then evokes racism as an affective response which distorts the social and cultural experience of viewing.¹⁰ In this way, Piper stages how "knowledge" precedes and determines "seeing" in a racist society. As Piper argues in *Out of Order, Out of Sight*, "racism is a visual pathology" (Vol. 1, 177) which "requir[es] every African-American to draw a sharp distinction between the person he is and the person society perceives him to be; this is, between who he is as an individual, and the way he is designated and treated by others" (Vol. 1, 285). In her construction of stereotype as a precondition of "seeing" for the white viewer, Piper implicitly invokes Frantz Fanon, who famously said that "not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man" (90). That is to say, how the white viewer "sees" the black subject's racial identity is determined by a white social gaze that positions

blackness as the pejorative counterpoint that sustains elevated whiteness. Or, put another way, the black subject's social construction is dependent on the white viewer's visual *documentation* of pre-determined cultural ideologies.

In making the claim that Piper's art interrogates the affective parameters of racism, I acknowledge that I risk reductively limiting Piper's work to the untenable ghetto of "black art." That is to say, I take seriously Darby English's point that "[the art establishment has] a tendency to limit the significance of works assignable to black artists to what can be illuminated by reference to a work's purportedly racial character . . . [thus, it risks] suspending the aesthetic life of the object and replacing it with a predetermined social one" (6, 34). However, unlike some of the artists English investigates in *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (2010) (of which Piper is not one), Piper is precisely interested in *using art* as an effective tool useful in delineating how the racial subject's social experience is predetermined by the visual pathology of racism. That is to say, I want to draw the important distinction here between "black art" and the black artist. Piper identifies as a black artist while refusing for her art (even as she uses it to plunge the political and discursive depths of racism) to be categorized within the pre-set parameters of "black art."

Cahun and Piper also diverge in their construction of audience. As has been well-documented, Cahun exhibited very few of her photographs while alive; she was not recuperated as a member of the feminist art historical community under the late 1980s and early 1990s ("Claude Cahun and Lee Miller" 157). Cahun lived with another woman, her step-sister Suzanne Malherbe (pseudonym: Marcel Moore), for her entire adult life; most scholars now accept that Cahun's photographs were made in conjunction with Moore and were to be viewed by her alone.¹¹ Cahun's biography

is necessary here to understand the photographs' intended audience—the single person with whom Cahun shared a deep and incredibly long lasting relationship based on artistic, intellectual, and sexual rapport—and thereby extension, to comprehend the photographs themselves.¹² Because Cahun's intended viewer was always Moore, Cahun playfully enacts signifiers which fail to convince, which fail to persuade, and thus lets Moore “in on the joke,” as it were, rather than aggressively challenging her viewer/lover to critique the standards of gendered viewing presuppositions. In this way, a sense of mutual affirmation, of reciprocal gazing, and of desire link the viewer, Moore, to her artist-subject, Cahun. However, as critics and viewers, we also must consider that, quite obviously but still importantly, we are *not* Moore. Where then, does this leave us? As the photographs were not made public, are we unwelcome voyeurs to the presumed affirmative and erotic interchange between Cahun and Moore? Or, do we imaginatively assume and appropriate the position held by Moore: a knowing friend, a trusted confidante, a lifelong lover? Or, are we something else entirely: a generic respondent, holding the gaze of Cahun but without Moore's affirmative, insider knowledge, a viewer who must be schooled in the politics of gender performance and the untenability of gender as a cultural presupposition? Unless otherwise stated, the viewer I will speak of here is this generic one for it is she, it seems, who stands to benefit the most from Cahun's politics of presentation.

In contrast to Cahun who acts as a more gentle teacher for this generic viewer, Piper confronts her (presumed to be) white viewer by underscoring her complicity in the creation, implementation, and reification of stereotypes by proclaiming, explicitly in one instance and implicitly in many others, “I embody

everything *you* most hate and fear.”¹³ Piper forces the viewer, again, whom she presumes to be white and middle class, to face her own reliance on stereotype both as a means to construct a “naturalized” and “authentic” gendered and raced visual subject and to police and subjugate the non-normative. White viewers are all complicit, she argues, in the internalization of visual identity codes which regulate, marginalize, dissect, and distort the black subject as a means of confirming the viewers’ own hierarchical whiteness. Only confrontation, not affirmation, will begin to break such codes apart and allow the eye, as Fanon said, to “correct cultural mistakes” (178).

Claude Cahun

Claude Cahun was born Lucy Renee Malhilde Schwob on October 25, 1894 in Nantes, France. She was the daughter of Maurice Schwob, the director of a regional paper, *La Phare de la Loire*, and Victorine Courbebaisse. She was also the niece of the avant-garde writer Marcel Schwob, who was one of the founders of the *Mercure de France*.¹⁴ Books and new literary ideas pervaded the Schwob extended family and, as Kristine von Oehsen contends, “Lucy Schwob was strongly influenced from an early age by her family’s passion for literature” (10). In 1909, Schwob met Suzanne Malherbe; her widowed father later married Malherbe’s mother in 1917, the same year that Schwob and Malherbe moved into an apartment together in Nantes. It was around this same time that Schwob began consistently to adopt the pseudonym Claude Cahun, a moniker which served to underscore her paternal and literary lineage (in its reference to her paternal granduncle, Léon Cahun) and her Jewish

heritage *while* eliding her biological sex (which had been highlighted by her hyper-feminine given-name “Lucy”). The artistic moniker “Claude Cahun” suggests but does not definitively place Lucy Schwob’s shifting identifications as lesbian/ “third sex,”¹⁵ Jew/agnostic, man/woman.¹⁶ Indeed, the name itself is purposefully slippery. By engaging in self-naming, Cahun paradoxically assumed control of her public “self” while beginning to critique the extant possibility of any coherent, inviolate, and essential “selfhood.” Moreover, as Julie Cole asserts, Cahun’s gender-ambiguous pseudonym colluded with her artistic presentation by this time; “in 1917, the year Lucy Schwob ‘became’ Claude Cahun, she had shaved her head, but she continued to appear as feminine characters or masked women, and often exhibited both ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ traits within a single image” (Cole 346). Therefore, through both her self-naming and artistry, Cahun challenged the authenticity and “naturalness” of binary gender paradigms which are dependent on external markers of signification to mark and delimit themselves.

In 1922, Cahun and Malherbe (who began to go by the pseudonym Marcel Moore) moved to Montparnasse, in Paris, and began to move in Surrealist artistic circles (von Oehsen 14-5).¹⁷ In 1924, the movement’s leader, André Breton, defined (or attempted to) the group’s artistic ethos: “Surrealism, noun. Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express—verbally, by means of the written word . . . the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern” (quoted in “Claude Cahun and Lee Miller” 141). In effect, the surrealists sought to destabilize reified binaries of Western thought—conscious versus unconscious, fantasy versus reality, sanity versus madness—by articulating a new

state of artistic expression which was unexpected, “surreal,” and yet, more truthfully evoked the unfixed state of human perception than art of the past (“Claude Cahun and Lee Miller” 141). In their artwork, surrealist artists tended to manifest this critique of reified polarities through masking, doubling, rupture, defamiliarization, unexpected juxtaposition of figure and object, and the unconscious and the phantasmic (“Women, Surrealism, and Self-Representation” 6). With the surrealists, Cahun and Malherbe found a community of artists with whom they could share ideas and projects. And yet, Cahun and Malherbe, although friends with André Breton, remained outsiders to the community.¹⁸ A large part of this was the result of the movement’s positioning of women.¹⁹ As Abigail Solomon-Godeau says, “the surrealists’ ideals of femininity—sorceress and visionary, *femme-enfant*, incarnation of mysterious beauty, and locus of eroticism: male fantasies all—were formulations that reified Woman at the expense of women, women artists, of course, included” (111). In effect, women as type—as muse, as inspiration, as embodied sexuality—were useful for the surrealists, but individual women, with their pernicious capacity to speak back and, sometimes, to create their own work which established themselves as creators, not simply receptacles of masculine energy, and which suggested alternative sites/sights of desire beyond an “etherealized,” privileged heterosexuality, were considerably less so.²⁰

That being said, many women artists, of course, most notably for this study, Cahun, but also Frida Kahlo, Dorothea Tanning, and Leonora Carrington, among others, were able to access surrealism’s invoked traits of fragmentation, rupture, juxtaposition, and defamiliarization while establishing woman as subject, as artist, instead of as various embodiments of object—archetype, erotic body, ethereal being,

etc.²¹ Chadwick maintains that surrealist women artists, “positioned to collude in their objectification, unable to differentiate their own subjectivity from the condition of being seen, [attempted to find ways] of framing the otherness of woman that direct attention to a moment of rupture with—or resistance to—cultural constructions of femininity” (“An Infinite Play of Empty Mirrors” 9). Rather than reifying social constructions of femininity which value woman only as object and “womanhood” only as the unthinking, passive counterpoint to Cartesian, active masculinity, surrealist artists such as Cahon used the fragmentation and rupture inherent in surrealism to challenge the objectified woman paradigm but, their more incisive point (at least from our twenty-first century purview²²), to question gender itself as a readable and authentic identificatory marker. By using their own bodies as the point of departure in this process, surrealist women artists tended to “collaps[e] interior and exterior projections of the self” (“An Infinite Play” 4) in a way that resonates with contemporary feminist discussions about subjectivity as a negotiated course between the life of the mind and that of the body. As Chadwick points out, “this body of work appears to have no parallel in the work of male Surrealists more inclined to project their desires outward, locating moments of rupture between conscious and unconscious, subject and object, in bodies Other to theirs” (“An Infinite Play” 4). In this way, female surrealist artists were able to access but, more importantly, to expand male surrealists’ conceptions of self as subject.

In her 1929 essay, “Womanliness as Masquerade,” Joan Rivière stated: “The reader may now ask how I define womanliness or where I draw the line between genuine womanliness and the ‘masquerade’. My suggestion is not, however, that there is any such difference; whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing”

(quoted in Stephan Heath 38). Anticipating much later feminist critics such as Judith Butler, Rivière reasons that femininity is not natural or authentic, but rather a learned, constant performance of empty, compensatory signifiers meant to hide the woman-as-unconscious-actress's very real anxiety about her social positioning (Solomon-Godeau 115, Shaw 37).²³ Numerous critics including Solomon-Godeau and Jennifer Shaw have drawn upon Rivière's influential work in relation to Cahun's project because Cahun's larger critique of categorical gender aligns with but also challenges Rivière's argument establishing the social formation of feminine behavior as a performative construct. In Cahun's more expansive critique, both/all genders perform and stage signifiers of gender readability which place people into recognizable—and therefore limiting and false—social types.

Despite her interest in the critique of gender as identificatory category, Cahun's project is ultimately a strangely universal and humanist one, for “rather than a ‘false identity hiding a ‘real,’ one, [Cahun’s] shifts in costume and persona propose in fact that the Self is not unitary, that it is flexible, and . . . changeable; that it holds within itself the capability of manifesting multiple facets of [a] collective history” (Rice 19-20). In effect, Cahun's project is inclusive rather than exclusive, in that it asks *all* people to question the validity, the usefulness, and the authenticity of the identifications which we use to define our “identities” and thus limit our lives. Chadwick contends that “surrealist self-portraits by women often reveal a tension between the investment of self in the reflected Other and the fear that behind the elaborate productions that stage the feminine as Other there lies only emptiness” (“An Infinite Play” 29). Here, I fundamentally disagree with Chadwick, for a Cahun asserts that “under this mask another mask” (“*sous ce masque un autre masque*,” quoted

in Blessing 186). In her constant performance of masking and unmasking, Cahun affirms the possibilities inherent in the mask over an “inviolable” selfhood which neither sustains nor, it seems, exists at all. Instead of looking for a coherent “self” in the represented image or in one’s own life, the viewer, Cahun argues, should instead begin to see the politically affirmative possibilities of living with identity indeterminacy—that which cannot police and exclude. The artist Eleanor Antin has stated that “autobiography in its fundamental sense is the self getting a grip on [her]self” (quoted in Lippard 34). What if we instead, Cahun asks, let her go?

Judaism, Family, and Intellectualism: Cahun’s 1920 Portrait

Cahun’s 1920 self-portrait (Plate 1) links—and then challenges—gender’s apparent readability to other identificatory categories, particularly religion, class, and academic/intellectual achievement. In the photograph, Cahun is turned in profile to the viewer, as was the expected convention for portraits of male intellectuals. She wears a simple, corduroy type jacket and crosses her arms lightly and self-consciously, as if this is not a natural pose for her. The prominent nose, close-cropped hair, and light coming toward her face all serve to highlight Cahun’s skull, the center of her intellectual energy.²⁴ She looks forward but slightly down, a self-conscious gesture which acknowledges the photographer and the viewer: this photograph is taken for a purpose; it is meant to be viewed.

In the art historical community, some discrepancy exists about the date of this portrait. Whitney Chadwick and Cahun’s biographer, Francois Leperlier, place it

at 1919 (“Claude Cahun and Lee Miller” 148-9), while most other critics seem to place it at 1920. This discrepancy is of minor importance except for the fact that a photograph of Cahun’s father, Maurice Schwob, exists in which the sitter assumes a nearly identical pose to Cahun (Plate 2). Therefore, the question of Cahun’s portrait pre-dating or post-dating her father’s raises issues of who is imitating whom or, who is attempting to access whose intellectual traditions (“Claude Cahun and Lee Miller” 149). Assuming the identical pose, in his portrait, Maurice Schwob crosses his arms more authoritatively and forcefully than Cahun; moreover, his dress is more complicated, seemingly richer (the jacket appears to be made of velvet) and more “fixed” (a tie is evident), while Cahun’s simple, slightly rough-looking jacket gives her a more student-like, ascetic appearance, augmented by the fact that she sits cross-legged on the ground. Regardless of the dating of the photographs, the portrait of Maurice Schwob fits more concisely than Cahun’s in a tradition of intellectual profile portraits in which authority is suggested both through the sitter’s pose and his (generally) sumptuous or, at least, moderately courtly, attire. Whether or not her father’s portrait serves as her specific point of artistic departure, Cahun, with her rougher and simpler attire, seems to be attempting to revise his invoked model of the leisured bourgeois intellectual. However, Cahun’s self-consciously cast eyes (thrown downward rather than directly out, as is the case with her father’s) and lightly folded arms (again, in contrast to her father’s authoritatively and definitively placed ones) suggest, unfortunately for the feminist critic hoping to read confidence in Cahun’s subversion of visual gender signifiers, a degree of discomfort with this revision of portraiture tropes.

Intervening on the familiar “representational territory” (“Claude Cahun and Lee Miller” 149) of the intellectual profile portrait, Cahun establishes her connection—as a woman, although unreadable and unknowable as such—to her family’s larger literary heritage. In so doing, she also implicitly links herself and her work to a Jewish religiousness whose markers of signification, although continuously monitored in various forms throughout European history, were beginning to be more systematically disciplined in this era between the wars. As Chadwick maintains,

Here [Cahun] places herself firmly within a tradition of intellectual profile portraits while at the same time suggesting a broader dialogue with representations of Jewishness as otherness in the 1920s. Representations of ethnicity in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century photography were quickly appropriated to the perceived social function of photography as an apparatus of the state, frequently used to establish and circulate typologies of the social deviance (the criminal, the degenerate, the homosexual and, by the 1930s, the Jew. (“Claude Cahun and Lee Miller” 153)

Drawing upon Erin Carlston’s argument in *Thinking Fascism: Sapphic Modernism and Fascist Modernity* (1998), Chadwick goes on to say that

early-twentieth century writing about sex and the body shared a set of ideas about perversion, heredity, and degeneracy that often linked Jewishness, homosexuality, and degeneracy . . . [by] inserting her own body into this representational history, Cahun . . . acknowledges linkages between the representation of homosexuality . . . and that of ethnicity and degeneracy. (“Claude Cahun and Lee Miller” 154)

Although I take seriously Chadwick’s point that by invoking these tropes, Cahun, at least in part, reifies them, I would also claim that by citing “readable” visual identifications which prove false (the artist’s gender), Cahun contests a larger social policy of the surveillance of Jews by exposing its dependency on extremely precarious visual signifiers to identify, to marginalize, and to police.

Furthermore, the 1920 portrait plays with conventions of cross-dressing as well as of drag. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler contends that cross-dressers attempt to “pass” for one gender, while drag artists underscore the performative nature of a given gender; in so doing, they visually highlight the precariousness of gender as a category of identity formation.²⁵ Butler argues that, in effect, drag implies that

all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation. If this is true, it seems there is no original or primary gender that drag imitates, *but gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original*; in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an effect and a consequence of the imitation itself. (quoted in Solomon-Godeau 121, italics original)

However, Cahun’s work complicates Butler’s relatively polarized cross-dressing-as-passing versus drag-as-gender-“intensification” divide. From one portrait to another, the viewer cannot be sure “which one it is,” as it were; moreover, even in a singular portrait Cahun seems to invoke characteristics of both cross dressing and drag. Cahun is simply not interested in reified divides, even in those which complicate the duality of gender as a construct. For instance, in the 1920 portrait Cahun seems, at least at first glance, to be attempting to “pass” as a man. Simone de Beauvoir has asserted that the female sex is “marked” while the male is not. Initially, Cahun’s portrait seems to act as a complicit partner in this assertion: to be masculine, for Cahun, seems to be, to invoke an unfortunate pun, “stripped down,” to possess signifying gestures which assert their power through their “naturalized simplicity,” their seeming lack of “dragness.” However, I argue that Cahun’s 1920 portrait relies on a kind of false hyper-naturalness—white, heterosexual masculinity as “normal,” as “unperformative”—which serves as a parallel dramatization to drag performers’ hyper-performativity—femininity as artificial, as extant only when brought into being through display. In this way, the 1920 portrait’s understated, yet posturing and typed

masculinity evokes the self-conscious staging of the dandy who accesses a standard of visual tropes to draw attention to his body. In its staging and yet paradoxical denial of its artifice, Cahun's portrait exposes masculine signification as a different and yet equally performative form of gender encoding. However, Cahun's portrait does not simply expose policing modes of cultural "normalization"; as an art work which engages the viewer in a process of gender recognition and questioning, it serves as an agent of political change, for as Butler suggests, "cultural configurations of gender confusion operate as sites for intervention, exposure, and displacement of [masculine/feminine] reifications" (*Gender Trouble* 31).

Tirza True Latimer proposes that "portraiture, as practiced by Cahun . . . performed something other than the traditional functions of commemoration or classification. It appears to have served, on the contrary to destabilise the notion of the 'self' that the portrait genre has historically upheld" (57).²⁶ In the 1920 portrait, Cahun invokes various inter-related conventions from cross-dressing, drag, and dandyism not to "enact" a selfhood, but rather to disrupt the category of "self" and its presumed claims to authenticity, knowledge production, and truth. Or, perhaps, she enacts a self only to dismantle it. Cole asserts that by highlighting "the artificial nature of the role she enacted . . . [such as] the dandy . . . [she sought to] gain *access* to the privileges and prerogatives associated with them" (350, italics mine). Considering that this portrait, like almost all of her portraits, was made and exhibited for Cahun's *l'autre moi*—Moore—alone, I propose that Cahun sought to disrupt—rather than to access—male privilege through her troubling of visually typed gender identifications—femininity as well as masculinity. Rather than a reductive "access" model which seeks a "usurp[ation] of masculine power" (Cole 350), Cahun's

disruption paradigm introduces a dynamically new method of engaged political viewership free of gendered binaries which only serve to determine, police, and limit other categories of identification.

Drag, Audience, and L'Autre Moi: Cahun's Dandy Portraits of 1921 and 1928

Cahun's 1921 and 1928 self-portraits (Plates 3 and 4) more explicitly evoke drag characteristics than the 1920 "academic" self-portrait. In the 1921 portrait Cahun stands in front of a blank background, her right hand resting on a cocked hip and her left hand rolled into a tight fist. She wears an elegant dark suit and a white cravat. Lizzie Thynne argues that "the 1921 portrait of Cahun . . . subversively appropriates and critiques the dandy, mimicking the pose of Wilde as aesthete in the 1882 Napoleon Sarony photographs" (183). As both Thynne and Blessing assert, part of Cahun's critique of dandyism lies in that oddly tight left fist, which suggests anger and latent hostility in contrast to the traditional dandy's cultured ethos of leisure and dilettante *joie de vivre* (Thynne 186, Blessing 194). Moreover, Cahun's head, with its deeply shadowed eyes, seemingly anemic coloring, prominent ears, and close-cropped (or nearly shaven) hair²⁷ challenges the dandy's investment in handsome and pleasing (meant to be viewed) physical presentation.²⁸ Here, as she does elsewhere, Cahun invokes a two-fold performance which challenges both polarized gender identification and the larger existence of an affirmed, inviolate "selfhood."²⁹ Cahun evokes an already ambiguous figure—the dandy, the male homosexual—and then cites visual markers—the carefully tailored suit, the cravat—of that recognizable, marked figure in such a way that the viewer is never sure if seeing confirms knowing. Subversion of categorical identifications, Cahun contends here, is not to be produced

through complacent, affirming viewership which denies the artistic subject's constructedness, but rather through new, vigilant modes of seeing which aggressively stage the subject's artifice and therefore deny the tenability of identity itself.³⁰ Thus, Cahun's identificatory markers remain slippery and she remains elusive, which, it seems, is exactly how Cahun wishes them to be and herself to be perceived.

In her 1928 portrait, Cahun wears a flamboyant checkered jacket with an upturned collar. She holds the edge of that collar in a jaunty, dandyish way, revealing a pearl ring that she wears, in the masculine-style, as a signet ring on her pinky finger. She is standing in front of a mirror, but looks away from it, at the viewer. Here, her pointed stare, more so than even her clothing, suggests the kind of public display masquerading as personal performance that is the hallmark of dandyism; as Fillin-Yeh proposes, dandies are "looking subjects whose performative impact surrounds them like an aura; sartorial projection is protection. They are not simple (and not passive) recipients of the gaze. On the contrary, looking goes in both directions" (20).³¹ Pulled by this direct gaze, the viewer immediately notes that the emaciated, anemic pallor of the 1921 portrait has been replaced by a radiant tan; the hair is still short, but, perhaps from the effect of the flash, golden blonde. The pose is provocative (the lips are slightly open and seemingly painted a deep red) rather than confrontational as in the 1921 portrait. Here, Cahun juxtaposes signifiers of dandyish masculinity (the flamboyant jacket, the signet ring) with traditional femininity (the red lips, the blonde hair) in order to again purposefully challenge the viewer's reliance on visual signifiers which mark the "readability" of gender.

By staging herself in front of a mirror, Cahun's invokes two "self" images and thus seems to suggest—and then promptly to dismiss—gender as reified doubling, a construction which only exists as a typed binary. In *The Second Sex*, Simon de Beauvoir argues that

All her life the woman is to find the magic of her mirror a tremendous help in her effort to project herself and then attain self-identification. . . . Man, feeling and wishing himself active, subject, does not see himself in his fixed image; it has little attraction for him, since man's body does not seem to him an object of desire, while woman, knowing and making herself object, believes she really sees *herself* in the glass. (quoted in "An Infinite Play" 3, italics original)

By self-consciously looking away from the mirror, at the viewer, and by staging gender signifiers which disrupt a binary understanding of gender itself, Cahun seems to visually reject a traditional understanding of womanhood as brought into being only through the mechanisms of manifest, mirrored "selfhood." She knows she does not "really see herself in the glass" because she knows there is no "real self" to be seen; it is through this denial of identity as something inviolate, essential, and authentic that Cahun discovers the freeing possibilities in mutable and masked shifting identifications that may not ever produce a single, solid "identity." Shaw maintains that Cahun uses photography to "unravel" the myth of Narcissus, "the false belief that one might truly know the self by looking at the self" (44). Of course, in the Greek myth, Narcissus fails in love with his own image but believes it to be that of another; Cahun revises the myth by turning away from her image, by actually meeting the gaze of another, and therefore acknowledges that "self"-knowledge can never be found in the mirror, cannot be found through inward reflection, but can only be discovered by addressing another, by meeting a reciprocal gaze.³²

Therefore, as Solomon-Godeau notes, although “nowhere in her writing does [Cahun] accept or affirm her identity as lesbian” (117) it is still “appropriate to consider these pictures as consisting in part of an address to the other, rather than considering them solely within the category of self-representation in its more solipsistic sense” (Solomon-Godeau 116).³³ Gen Doy, evoking Victor Stoichita, suggests that

the relationship of the self to the mirror reflection is recognition of the self as ‘sameness,’ while the recognition of one’s shadow is a perception of the self as ‘other,’ since shadows are often in profile. Now the shadow of the photographer is seldom in profile, but its presence can certainly mobilize the intrusion, or perhaps the invitation, of an ‘other’ into the constructed space of the photographic image. The shadow of Moore in photographs of Cahun is ambiguous because it is the shadow of the ‘other,’ who is also the ‘same’—the loved person who is different but similar. (“Another Side of the Picture” 75)

Here, Doy draws a constructive metaphor linking an image’s relationship to its shadow with Cahun’s relationship to her “*l’autre moi*.” Rather than simply underscoring a sense of narcissistic sameness³⁴ (e.g., you are already me, your gaze not only answers but *reflects* mine, in a continual mirroring of the “self” (“*moi*”),—I assert that this linguistic invocation more importantly suggests the necessity of reciprocal recognition, of *productive* otherness (“*l’autre*”), as part of a negotiated process of truly human artistic exchange. Moore becomes for Cahun not “you are other and therefore not me,” but instead, “otherness is always contained in ‘me’ as well.” In effect, “I am already other.”

Most art historians now recognize that Moore, at least in part, helped Cahun to plan and construct her self-displays and, it seems, shot the photographs themselves (Cole 344). James Stevenson, however, citing artistic intention rather

than physical contribution (meaning, who operated the shutter), argues that “there is clear evidence in the Jersey Heritage Trust collection to prove that the artistic input was clearly Cahun’s” (53). Latimer, as if anticipating Stevenson (although their essays are published in the same book, *Don’t Kiss Me: The Art of Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore*), asks: “What social prejudices and artistic hierarchies does the erasure of Moore accommodate?” (56). By striking Moore from the photographic process, Stevenson attempts to reinscribe a traditional understanding of artistic output as that which is produced alone by a masculine solitary “genius.” Stevenson’s attempt to place Cahun within a traditional (coded masculine) artistic paradigm in which only one person can be responsible—can be given “credit”—for a work of art fundamentally disregards Moore’s participation as a co-producer and anticipated responder to these works of art. Instead, what is truly revolutionary about Cahun’s art is that, even while critiquing categorical gender, it manages to articulate a new model of artistry which privileges both female art production and female viewership as an affirmative partnership of reciprocal gazes and ideas. By eliminating Moore from the artistic equation, Stevenson ignores or, simply, fails to appreciate the “cultural transgressions . . . including refusal to participate in a heterosexual economy” (Cole 345) cannot be considered irrelevant to her artistic *production* because they fundamentally determined *how* and *why* Cahun constructed her work as she did.³⁵

Finally and perhaps most importantly, Stevenson’s exclusion of Moore elides and therefore attempts to discount Cahun’s fundamental aesthetic ethos: the rejection of categorical identifications (even that of the solitary genius) as mechanisms of subjugation, policing, and surveillance. Cahun uses “self” as an

ironic moniker when describing her portraits, for self, like identity, like gender, like religion, is one of the many categorizations that her project seeks to interrogate. Dean proposes that Cahun's project is "no giddy repudiation of epistemological certainties, no celebration of unknowability, but an ironic, cynical, and never-complacent insistence that responsible knowledge, like art, can only ever refuse its own stability even when it appears continuous with a stable canon" (91-2). That being said, although the word itself is never explicitly invoked in the portraits, "love" is one certainty that Cahun never seems to question. Love pervades her work: it is that which makes art possible, brings it into existence; which establishes its sense of a manifest reciprocity, of mutual gazing; which links understanding and creation in a closed circle of affirmation, of desire.³⁶

Adrian Piper

Adrian Piper was born in 1948 in Harlem, New York, to middle class parents. According to her own website,³⁷ she graduated from the School of Visual Arts in New York in 1969 and then subsequently attended City College of New York, receiving a B.A. in philosophy with a minor in medieval and renaissance musicology in 1974. While still in art school she began producing and exhibiting her work, a practice which continued while she pursued and completed a doctorate in analytic philosophy at Harvard University under the direction of John Rawls.

From her beginning as an art student at the School of Visual Arts, Piper was interested in conceptual art, which in the late 1960s was gaining artistic momentum. Sol LeWitt, one of the movement's early leaders, in 1967 claimed that

in conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art. (LeWitt)

Rather than traditional forms of art, which privilege the artwork's aesthetics (how the object appears to the viewer) and/or its medium (paint, graphite, marble, clay), conceptualism stresses the idea behind the artwork itself. In effect, conceptual artists attempt to make an idea, a concept, become art through some sort of artistic staging. As Franklin Sirmans argues, "by marking a point where the idea becomes thing of art, Conceptual Art widened the parameters of what could potentially be understood as art" (12). In this way, art becomes less a medium to visually consume than an object to cognitively know.

Conceptual artists' disavowal of traditional artistic production involves a larger critique of the "display, reception, and commodification" (Wark 44) of artwork within the traditional closed gallery and auction house system in which aesthetic "worth" ("good art"³⁸) becomes inseparable from market *value*. This conceptual approach, as Jayne Wark suggests, seeks to "expose the previously suppressed fallacy of the sphere of artistic production as separate from the conditions of instrumentality and consumption that bear upon all aspects of social and cultural experience" (44). Often through installation pieces which foreground the constructedness of the gallery or museum's circumscribed space *or* through performance pieces entirely independent of the gallery/museum's traditional system of artistic display, conceptual artists stage (rather than tacitly ignore, as is the case with aesthetic/medium-centered art) the artificiality of Eurocentric art's mechanisms of production, display, and consumption. Because of this investment in institutional critique, in cognitive recognition over aesthetic viewership, and in self-imposed, discursive parameters determining "legitimate" artistic production, conceptual art is often criticized for its "lack of totalizing vision," its "profound ambivalence about art's capacity to bring about liberating change" (Wark 44).

In art school under the direction of Sol LeWitt, Piper began producing conceptual pieces, such as *Untitled, 0 to 9* (Plate 5), which rely on abstraction and commonplace objects to effect a cognitive, rather than affective, response in the viewer. As Piper defines it, "abstraction is freedom from the socially prescribed and consensually accepted . . . [it] is a solitary journey through the conceptual universe" (quoted in *Adrian Piper* 34). By the mid 1970s, however, Piper was beginning to see that conceptualism's investment in "pure abstraction" re-inscribed and re-instated a

“universal” (coded white, male, heterosexual) viewing audience which, rather than challenging Eurocentric art’s capitalist system of production and display, worked tacitly to confirm and affirm it as assumed and irrefutable—a kind of Foucaultian manifestation of power: invisible yet inviolate. In claiming to “exist beyond politics,” purely abstracted art, Piper found, did not “transcend the particularities of the moment” (*Adrian Piper* 35) or of the artist’s subject position, but rather elided addressing such difficulties at all. Therefore, by 1972, with her first “Mythic Being” work, Piper continued to invoke conceptualism’s privileging of cognitive reception (idea/concept) over visual consumption or aesthetic “worth,” but she did so by foregrounding her personal/political identifications as black and female,³⁹ often by using her own body as artistic subject.⁴⁰ In this way, Piper importantly introduced concerns of political ethics to conceptual art. As Diarmuid Costello and Dominic Willson ask in *The Life and Death of Images* (2008), “what is art’s capacity to embody human freedom? What is the function of art in the formation or negation of human ethos? Can art motivate us to ethical action? How can art contribute to social change?” (7).⁴¹ Piper takes up these concerns for art’s possibilities of inciting “human” ethical action, but does so by underscoring the untenability of the universally “human,” both for the artist and the viewing audience’s subject positioning. Thus, instead of the individualism prized by pure abstraction (in which one’s own cognitive response is prized above all else), Piper recognizes and invokes a community of respondents who share, acknowledge, or challenge her political concerns. With the inception of the Mythic Being series, Piper began to see that art can never be either impersonal or apolitical and any art fails to possess political efficacy if conceived without “the dawning awareness that each of one’s qualities is

shared by some different social group [which leads to] the achievement of political identity and the public assertion of that identity” (*Out of Order*, Vol. 1, 174).

For Piper, the political efficacy of her art stems in large part from her construction of audience. As previously mentioned, in contrast to Claude Cahun, Piper exposes the white viewer’s dependence on “knowledge”—meaning, stereotype or reinscribed myths concerning American race and gender identifications—to determine how she, the viewer, *sees*. In this way, Piper reverses Cahun’s “seeing as knowing” critiqued model to evoke one in which the white viewer problematically “knows” first and then transposes that “knowledge” to a certain (often limiting and pejorative) mode of viewership. As Michelle Wallace has concisely articulated, “how one is seen (as black) and therefore, what one sees (in a white world) is always already crucial to one’s existence as an Afro-American. The very markers that reveal you to the rest of the world, your dark skin and kinky/curly hair, are visual” (366).⁴² For Piper, a self-identified African-American artist who, as one critic problematically noted, could “easily pass for white” (quoted in *Adrian Piper* 1),⁴³ visual cues of race can and should be staged, theatricalized, and thus underscored in such a way as to expose the white viewer’s reliance on them to categorize, to “overdetermine from the outside,” (Fanon 95) (and thus to limit and distort) the black subject’s identity. As Bowles puts forth, “in Piper’s work identity becomes a constant struggle against imposed identifications [in this case, the black person who can “pass”], which it is the artist’s avowed project to denaturalize” (“Acting Like a Man” 644). However, Bowles does not note what is truly problematic about this critic’s statement: not simply that Piper can “pass,” which suggests she illegitimately possesses white privilege that she fails to use, but that she can “easily” do so. Such “ease” implies

that no sense of personal *amputation* results in such a renunciation of blackness. Therefore, Piper, like Fanon, “refuse(s) to accept [such] amputation [reduction to a glorified negritude, to a “white-washed” intellectualism, or to an (at least perceived) anti-intellectual black folk culture] [for her] soul [is] as vast as the world, truly a soul as deep as the deepest of the rivers” (Fanon 119).⁴⁴ In short, Piper claims a complexity of self-presentation that, as she notes, has been the traditional prerogative of white artists. Cahun invokes identifications to, more often than not, playfully expose their artifice; Piper, like Cahun, stages racial and gender cues to foreground their constructedness, but also (and herein lies an important difference between the two artists) their very real social and political relationship to mechanisms of power and privilege, or dispossession thereof.⁴⁵

Moreover, while Cahun’s affirmative audience—her partner Marcel Moore—helped to construct and stage the production of visual signifiers (and thus acted as both participant and audience in a closed, playful, and ultimately affirmative circle of referents), Piper prefers an anonymous white viewer who can be staged as complicit in the distortion of the “other’s” identity through the imposition of invoked identifications/stereotypes. For Piper, this foregrounding of “knowledge” as a presupposition of viewership lies at the heart of racism, in “our tendency to try to eradicate each other’s singularity through stereotyped conceptualization” (*Out of Order*, Vol. 1, 242). Piper’s preference for the anonymous, defensive white audience implies not only the position most people find themselves in any moment, particularly in urban societies (meaning, not knowing most of the people who surround one), but also serves as a kind of staging for society writ large, in which “those who the subject requires are predisposed to see him according to racialized

and gendered assumptions about who he is, and the subject is only capable of communication that is also already inscribed within discourses of racism and sexism” (“Acting Like a Man” 624).

This audience defensiveness stems from Piper’s desire to always “confront” her white viewers with their preconceived suppositions (couched as “knowledge”) of race, gender, and class which distort and delimit mechanisms of viewership and therefore reduce or eradicate the viewed person’s subjectivity. As early as 1970 with her *Catalysis* series, Piper sought to foreground her audience (rather than herself as artistic subject) as a kind a complicit partner in society’s diminution of individual “selves” to reductive cultural “types.” In regards to this series, Piper wrote that “one reason for the making and exhibiting a work is to induce a reaction or change in the viewer. The stronger the work, the stronger its impact and the more total (physiological, psychological, intellectual, etc) the reaction of the viewer” (*Out of Order*, Vol. 1, 32). With the inception of the *Mythic Being* series, Piper’s unspecified yet hoped for artistic reaction evolved into a very specific desire for political change—how the white viewer will re-conceive her cognitive understanding of gendered and racial tropes (in effect, her ready repertoire of invoked stereotypes) and thus alter her own viewing position after being confronted with Piper’s work.⁴⁶ Indeed, in her own writing, Piper stresses the need for artistic “confrontation,” in which she aggressively presents artwork which will challenge the audience’s reliance on problematic visual cues, which will reinvigorate lazy viewership, and which will foreground the conceptual gap between stereotype and understanding:

The antidote [to political blindness or dismissal], I suggest, is confrontation of the sinner with the evidence of the sin: the rationalizations, the

subconscious defense mechanisms, the tragedies of avoidance, denial, dismissal, and withdrawal that signal on the one hand the retreat of the self to the protective enclave of ideology; on the other hand, precisely the proof of subjectivity and fallibility that the ideologue is so anxious to ignore. (*Out of Order*, Vol. 2, 50)

Although Piper “turn[s] her[self] into spectacle” (Wark 45), she uses the self-objectification inherent in this mode of artistic production to incriminate her white audience as a complicit partner in this objectification, this reduction to otherness. After all, Piper’s art invokes no tropes that are not already extant in white popular consciousness; if she did, such art would fall to “catalytically” act upon the viewer. Rather, Piper’s work underscores how white viewers use and apply such stereotypes in day to day existence. Valerie Cassel Oliver contends that “the inability of black artists to use a theoretical Conceptual Art framework to assert personal politics and expression without drawing attention to their ‘Otherness’ became an internal paradox which would lend to an even greater sense of alienation” (21). As I suggest, Piper certainly draws attention to her “otherness” and thus may demonstrate a sense of “alienation” in her work, but she also diffuses this alienation by implicating—and thus making it be shared by—her white viewing audience. White viewers are all complicit, she argues, in the internalization of visual identifications that “normalize,” essentialize, conform, or corrupt. That being said, despite Piper’s confrontational imperative, her message is ultimately a hopeful one: “despite all evidence to the contrary, [it would seem] that the world were open to rational change” (*Out of Order*, Vol. 1, xv). Cognitively changing the audience’s viewing position through politicized conceptual art, Piper proposes, is one of the best mechanisms to achieve this change.

One way in which Piper makes clear how cultural presuppositions distort the experience of viewership is through her own manipulation of the photographic

medium. In works like *Mythic Being: I/You Her* or the *Vanilla Nightmares* series, Piper overtly manipulates pre-existing photographs by painting or drawing upon them with ink and felt-tip pens. This manifest renegotiation of a medium which we prize for its “realism” (consider the problematic term “photo-realistic”) allows Piper to underscore the artifice and “readability” inherent in *any* invoked visual identification. In *American Archives: Gender, Race, and Class in Visual Culture* Shawn Michelle Smith reasons that photographs not only “reflect” but also “shape” how individuals place themselves within varied imagined communities as determined by their inclusion or exclusion from national fantasies of history and belonging (6). As I think that this idea is important to Piper’s manipulation of the photographic medium, it is useful to quote at some length:

The photographic archive generated and maintained essentialized discourses of interior character, and trained observers in how to read the body for the signs of a knowable interiority . . . Bodies were mapped as the vehicles of gendered and racialized interior essences; that is, bodies were posed as the surface signs of interior depths. To ‘read’ a body was to inscribe it with an imagined interiority, an essence that linked one to a specific position in a social hierarchy. . . . Paradoxically, however, by throwing the body relentlessly into focus, photography highlighted the very constructed and contingent nature of the interiorities on which so much came to depend in . . . American self-conceptions. If interiority was the essence imagined to be stable as external signs fluctuated, it was stabilized only through the proliferation of surface signs, of representations of the body, called upon to make such essences readable, apparent, knowable. (4-5)

In effect, through her manipulation of the visual cues which we use to map another’s interiority, Piper exposes and then underscores the artifice inherent in any invoked visual tropes, and thus asks the white viewer to question the tenability of both her system of reductive “knowledge” and her applied method of limiting and distorting viewership. Thus, Piper foregrounds the constructedness of not only “realistic” mediums like photography (it seems that that critique is an auxiliary result of her

manipulation of the photographic form), but, more importantly, the tenuousness, the possible illegitimacy, of the very imagined communities which police and regulate these discursive visual codes.

Another way in which both Piper challenges our linguistic and conceptual collapse of “seeing/knowing” is through the invocation of the dandy, a figure who, through his hyper-performativity forces the viewer to question her ingrained presuppositions of viewership. In this way, the dandy is an inherently political figure who over-performs—and thus reveals the artifice—of the visual cues delineating one’s identifications in order to highlight the instability and, perhaps, the untenability of identity itself. No critic, as far as I am aware, has referred to Piper’s Mythic Being as a kind of dandy figure. By calling the Mythic Being a dandy I do not seek to limit and categorize Piper’s representation within a narrow criterion of invoked historical tropes; rather, I want to examine how Piper herself seeks the liminality and freedom inherent in the dandy as a way in which to critique gender, race, and class identifications, even if it means “re-dressing” the dandy to near unrecognizably for a Civil Rights Era audience.

Miller argues that “the Race Man’s uniform, as designed by Du Bois, is a well-fitting three-piece suit, symbolic of normative masculinity and authority itself” (139). The dandy signified⁴⁷ upon this suit by adding a top hat, gloves, a monocle, and a cane (Miller 159). With the Mythic Being, Piper takes this three piece suit, cane, and top hat and deconstructs it to its 1970s equivalent: jeans, tee shirt, dark sunglasses, and sandals.⁴⁸ Like the traditional dandy, the Mythic Being is hyper-sartorial, but he wears his/her “I don’t care” attitude as self-consciously as the nineteenth century dandy wore his pocket-square—as a testament to his civic

inclusion. In that the dandy stages bourgeois consumption as a marked performance onto his body, he demonstrates his capacity to fulfill the specific standards of capitalist consumerism implicitly underlying the civic, republican ethos. However, in that the dandy *over*-performs bourgeois consumption, he becomes a transgressive figure who subverts the restrictive boundaries of that same identification and therefore invites the policing gaze of the state—which determines those who are to be included in civic life—onto his body.⁴⁹ As perfect dress signified the black man's desire and possibility for civic inclusion in the nineteenth century (both pre and post abolition), in the socially fraught climate of 1960s, 1970s and 1980s America,⁵⁰ being able to testify that one can *disregard* the imperative of sartorial panache registers a seemingly opposite, but actually very similar signifying cache to that of the nineteenth dandy: "I have the right to refuse your bourgeois imperative of conservative dress, as only someone secure—or pretending to be secure—in his position of civic inclusion can do." Of course, this is the fearful class transgression which is part of "I embody everything you hate and fear": by eliminating *markers* of bourgeois life, the dandy figure challenges the tenability of class distinctions.

Moreover, in her construction of the Mythic Being, Piper stages and theatricalizes not simply the generic white viewer's surveillance of the black male body, but the state's (explicitly and implicitly a white construction of power) policing of that same body. Why does Piper is the dandy for this purpose? That is to say, why is the dandy a particularly useful invocation to stage state surveillance of the black male body? Miller maintains that "as a form of cultural resistance, black dandyism functions as a kind of fashionable 'weapon of the wear,' an 'everyday form of resistance' (to use James Scott's terms) the enslaved and marginalized use to

comment on their relationship to authority” (15). However, I would propose that the dandy’s sartorial “comment” is done in dialogue, not as a monologue, with the responsive gaze of state power. It is important that the sartorial process is a visual one, because it invites the (literal) gaze of authority, indeed, of the state, onto the dandy’s body. In that the black body is always policed, (Piper as) Mythic Being/black dandy’s self-conscious staging of consumption and sartorial process as a marked bodily performance announces her own knowledge of this policing/surveillance. By making the Mythic Being a dandy Piper announces that the state polices not only the actions *produced* by the black body (for instance, the Mythic Being robbing a white man in Cambridge, Massachusetts), but the black body (particularly, as she suggests by cross-dressing, the black *male* body) *itself*, the black male body at rest.

I argue that Piper inflects the Mythic Being with dandy characteristics for two reasons. First, by invoking a figure that, in popular culture, is already connected with parodic associations through his ability to signify on white culture, Piper avoids the reinscription of black iconographies which fail to more overtly critique white identifications. As Cherise Smith claims, “in order for performances like [Piper’s] to critique stereotypes, they must overperform exaggerated iconographies in order to emphasize how they flatten out and circumscribe the individuals they represent . . . this labor is treacherous, for it threatens to reinforce iconographies already in place” (21). Like the invocation of fetish, parody can come dangerously close to the thing itself, and thus is at risk for reinscribing that which is parodied as a legitimate site/sight of desire. However, by invoking a parody (the Mythic Being) of a parody (the black dandy’s signifying of white masculinity), Piper immediately cues the viewer

into the critical—rather than desiring—position of her invoked subject. Thus, like a drag artist Piper relies on a “camp factor” to “call attention to the ‘artifice, exaggeration’ and ‘stylization’” (Smith 15) of her dandy figure and thus asks the viewer to critique the legitimacy of “readable” identifications which construct “knowable” identity.

Secondly, I assert that Piper invokes the dandy as a way to foreground her own position as a black subject. Miller argues that “black and blackness are themselves signs of diaspora, of a cosmopolitanism that African subjects did not choose but from which they necessarily reimagined themselves. . . . As a social practice that mounts critique against the hierarchies of society, dandyism appears to be a phenomenon particularly suited to blacks” (6, 10). As Piper explains in regards to her artistic practice:

As a Woman of Color who is often put in the moral dilemma of being identified as white and hence subject to the accusation of ‘passing,’ [art] gives me the chance to affirm and explore the cultural dimensions of my identity as a black in ways that illuminate my personal and political connection to other (more identifiably) black people, and celebrate our common cultural heritage. (*Out of Order*, Vol. 1, 204)

In effect, by invoking dandyism, Piper is able to foreground her own blackness (a subject position with which she identifies) by making herself more “identifiably” black and therefore allowing her to position herself within wider black community often denied to her based on physical appearance. Of course, this is a tenuous position for Piper to take, for while underscoring her own racial identification, she in turn asks the viewer to critique “black” and “white” as presupposed viewing categories.⁵¹ However, even with her critique of identification registers and social stereotype wrongly transposed to viewership, Piper never aligns herself with

“multiracialism” as a solution to the black subject’s dispossession of agency when viewed through white stereotypes. Instead, Piper stages *racism* not *blackness* as the main problem preventing visibility from existing as a productive source of cultural recognition between American subjects. In this way, she anticipates later cultural and literary critics such as Jared Sexton, Tavia Nyong’o, and Frank Wilderson who argue that multiracialism ultimately figures as “antiblackness.” As Sexton contends, “in the register of contemporary racial politics, black identity appears as an antiquated state of confinement from which the ‘multiracial imagined community’ (Stephens 1999) must be delivered” (6). National deliverance, Piper suggests, must be achieved from racism, not from blackness. Similarly to Sexton, Nyong’o, invoking the term “hybridity” instead of multiracialism, suggests that “identifying hybridity with our national Thing normalizes its transgressions, putting its inversions to work for the project of a national enjoyment” (16). In effect, multiracialism/hybridity insidiously reinscribes the very rhetoric of national belonging (unity through “oneness”) that excluded blacks, Jews, the Irish, etc from categorical whiteness and thus, from legal and social articulations of civic inclusion. Concurring with Sexton and Nyong’o, Piper contends that multiracialism/hybridity elides difficult questions of racial equality by “deferring”⁵² them either to a perpetually emerging present (Barack Obama as a “postracial” president) or a not-too-distant future in which racism ceases to exist through the eradication of visual racial differences.

The Mythic Being: Dandyism and Miscegenation

In *The Mythic Being: Cruising White Women #1* (1975) (Plate 6), Piper, wearing wide-leg jeans, sandals, an “afro” wig, and mirrored sunglasses, sits on a step in Harvard Square, ostensibly to “cruise” or “check out” white women. Part of the dandyish nature of Piper’s dress stems from its overtly “costume-y” and affected nature; although Piper is looking at white women, the photographer/viewer is positioned in such a way as to look at Piper, thus evoking the dandy’s imperative of being viewed.

I would argue that the affected, yet seemingly *laissez-faire* sartorial panache accessed in Piper’s Mythic Being figure is best exemplified by a contemporary of the artist: Bob Marley. As Piper does with the Mythic Being, Marley wears casual clothes to signify the security of his inclusion within the larger white body politic (even as he contests the very tenability of that politic). As Richard Powell proposes “in the context of American racism the black dandy has the potential to be metaphorically dressed in an even bolder array of social and cultural signifiers: a wardrobe that speaks of modernity, freedom, oppositionality, and power” (226). Marley, perhaps more than any other black figure of the 1960s and 1970s, epitomizes this precarious balance between modern freedom as an expression of inclusion (consider Marley’s worldwide popularity) or of oppositionality (Marley’s counter cultural persona and politics).

In Plate 7, Marley affects a nonchalant pose by leaning against his guitar and looking away from the viewer, a contented smile playing on his face. At first glance, the pose seems casual; at second and subsequent looks the viewer becomes aware that the pose is simply a posture of casualness: Marley’s crisscrossed legs and strong backward lean onto the guitar are unnatural, are unlikely to be produced without artful direction. In such a pose, Marley’s legs and the guitar create a series of

equilateral triangles that produces for the viewer a pleasing artistic impression. Here, Marley's famous dreadlocks, like the Mythic Being's afro, serve as an unmistakable signifier of Africanness; the invocation of such a signifier stresses that Marley is in no way trying to pass into white society. Rather, Marley underscores his very Afro-Caribbean heritage; he announces it to the viewer. As Piper does as the Mythic Being, Marley wears a casual cotton or linen shirt over wide boot-cut jeans. The seeming casualness of his clothes, however, contradicts the studied nature of Marley's appearance, particularly his carefully unbuttoned shirt. I argue that the intentionality, the studied nature of this unbuttoned shirt, announces—as the traditional dandy did with his artfully folded pocket square—that Marley is not only aware that he is being viewed, but that he has *invited* the complicated racial gaze of the Civil Rights era (part affirmation, part recognition, part policing surveillance) onto his body.

At the time of the inception of *Cruising White Women*, Piper defined the Mythic Being as “a fictitious or abstract personality that is generally part of a story of folktale used to explain or sanctify social or legal institutions or natural phenomena” (quoted in Smith 50);⁵³ he is also a “public figure, existing in the common consciousness of all those who think about him” (*Out of Order*, Vol. 1, 112).⁵⁴ The power of the Mythic Being lies in his embodiment of stereotype, his ability to evoke recognition in collective white American consciousness. Bowles claims that

As stereotype, the Mythic Being is the figure whites feared meeting and middle-class blacks dreaded being compared with—the naturalized justification for an unspoken racist ideology that cast blackness as masculine, heterosexual, and working-class. For the white viewer, he is the figure against whom all blacks are judged, and, as fantasy, he establishes a racialized norm for blackness in the American imagination. (“Adrian Piper as African American Artist” 109)

The sense of recognition—and subsequent dread—that both whites and bourgeois blacks are supposed to feel when viewing the Mythic Being implicates them in the retention, production, and perpetuation of a stereotype which reduces blackness to a series of pejorative tropes. This reduction to stereotype—“knowing first and then ‘seeing’ second”—in turn serves to reinscribe the mechanisms and manifestations of racism while discrediting blackness as an affirmative identification. Piper asserts that the Mythic Being is a “faintly unholy embodiment of expressed hostility, fear, anxiety, estrangement. His obsessions are the failure of friendship, of dialogue, self-interest, mistrust, and mutual indifference; dishonesties, evasions, polite surfaces, deflected contact” (*Out of Order*, Vol. 1, 138). Although the Mythic Being may embody or exhibit hatred, fear, mistrust, and estrangement, his ability to “catalytically” act upon the white viewer suggests that these obsessions are not only shared with the viewer, but that the viewer is subsequently *transformed* by them. As Bowles suggests, “Piper’s self-deprecating imagery [her “complicity” in her own “disfigurement”] does not simply record or express the artist’s personal experiences. Instead, it theatricalizes the effects of racism” (“Adrian Piper as African American Artist” 111). Racism, as staged by Piper, becomes an affective response between viewer and subject which destroys the racial subject’s subjectivity by transposing him/her into stereotype, but also, less obviously but no less insidiously, violently⁵⁵ diminishes the humanity of the white viewer who becomes little more than stereotype herself: the racist, the perpetrator of a shameful national collective consciousness.

Of course, the fear that Piper locates is sexually based: the sense of impotence white men and bourgeois black men are supposed to feel when

confronted with stereotyped aggressive, lower class black masculinity, and the simultaneous desire and repulsion white women undergo when exposed to this potent sexual power. Bowles suggests that the Mythic Being, when “gawking” at women in Harvard Square, “figure[s] the fears and fantasies that define the myth of American whiteness, which locates miscegenation as the founding crisis of race consciousness” (“Acting Like a Man” 626). Here, by easily transforming herself visually “into her seeming opposite” (*Out of Order*, Vol. 1, 147) and thus by staging the precariousness of visual markers of race, Piper ridicules our nation’s legacy of hypodescent and “one drop” laws, which allowed Southern white men sexual impunity in their relations with enslaved black women (and thus located white womanhood as a highly charged symbol supporting larger white social, economic, and political interests), while maintaining the myth that miscegenation had never occurred, “the races were kept pure in [our nation]” (Davis 174). Evoking the stereotype of her present historical moment, Piper suggests the anxiety of white men towards emboldened, Civil Rights’ era black men, who could now meet the supposedly recently unrestrained sexual permissiveness of white women. Piper’s informal, yet profoundly deliberate and affected 1970s dandy costume evokes the apparent current (social and political) invigoration of the black male: casual clothing, rather than a three piece suit fit with a pocket square, testifies to the ease with which he accepts his civic inclusion. In this way, Piper stages a reworking of nineteenth-century white anxiety over the loss of clothing as an unalloyed signifier of power, status, and privilege, and as yet another visual guarantor marking white women as the exclusive property of white men: “[for white men] the donning of the clothing of

elites translates to a desire not only for social mobility, but also for the most extreme form of integration, interracial sex” (Miller 99).

In journal entries describing her experience enacting the Mythic Being, Piper foregrounds a kind of stereotyped sexual aggressiveness: “My sexual attraction to women flows more freely. . . . My behavior changes. I swagger, stride, lope, lower my eyebrows, raise my shoulders, sit with my legs wide apart on the subway, so as to accommodate my protruding genitalia” (*Out of Order*, Vol. 1, 117).⁵⁶ Again, here Piper invokes physical tropes of stereotyped black masculinity in order to underscore their constructed and performative nature. Bowles argues that

the popular discourse blamed black women for their failure to conform, accused them of being too masculine or too black. Piper’s Mythic Being work can be understood as her response. Her costume self-consciously drew attention to masculine excess while simultaneously staging the denial of her femininity. (“Acting Like a Man” 630)

Where, however, are black women in Piper’s Mythic Being portrayals? Considering how black women have been pejoratively fashioned as masculine and emasculating figures since Reconstruction (consider the Moynihan Report (1965)), Piper’s staged “denial of her femininity” through the Mythic Being already evokes the menial black male’s stereotyped counterpart: the dominant black female. Therefore, through the Mythic Being Piper invokes and critiques both black men and black women’s social typing as conceived through the lens of white anxiety. Of course, with her gaze already contained by her black male equivalent and not conceived as a viable object of the white male gaze (as white women are), Piper’s suggested female Mythic Being exists as a kind of blind and invisible signifier of on-going historical oppression. As Wallace contends in regards to this racialized gaze:

Although the white male ‘gaze’ (or the gaze of the dominant culture) objectifies and, therefore, dehumanizes the white woman, in fact, that

objectification also implicitly verifies the crucial role white women play in the process or circuit of spectatorship. In other words, the process of objectification also inadvertently humanizes as well a built-in advantage that is then denied to women of color in general, but to the despised (or desired) black woman in particular. (483)

As Wallace indicates, because the “universal” gaze fails to recognize the “despised (or desired) black woman,” it cannot secure for her even the partial sense of vicarious power and subjectivity granted to white women from being viewed, from, literally and figuratively, *being seen*, both as an individualized person and as a possible erotic object. With *Mythic Being: Cruising White Women*, Piper encodes the menial, heterosexual, and aggressive black male *as already containing* the dominant black female as trope; therefore, she problematically both enacts (thus forcing the viewer to question his or her own viewing position: a politically progressive move) and participates in and reinscribes (a politically regressive move) this pejorative cultural elision which positions the “despised (or desired) black woman” as beyond the recognized purview of the male gaze.

In *The Mythic Being: I/You (Her)* (1974) and *The Mythic Being: I Embody Everything You Hate and Fear* (1975) (Plates 8 and 9) Piper again takes up these questions of who is allowed to gaze upon whom (and thus, who is granted both active, viewing agency and passive, viewed subjectivity) in a racist society. In *The Mythic Being: I/You (Her)*, over a series of ten photographs which are altered with ink, tempera and felt-tip pen, Piper transforms herself from a seeming young white girl into the Mythic Being: the dandy-ish, sexually aggressive, menial black man. In each photograph, Piper (who was a teenager when the picture was taken) sits with a white school friend, identified as “Lizzy” in her journals.⁵⁷ In the series of images, as the Mythic Being adopts more and more visual markers of his racial, class, and sexual

position (darkened skin, enlarging “afro,” moustache, mirrored sunglasses),⁵⁸ his form begins to eclipse that of the white girl behind him, thus indicating Piper’s view that racism eradicates both the racial subject and the white viewer’s subjectivity: both are reduced to type when inscribed within a limiting, damaging discourse of historical oppression.⁵⁹ Each image possesses a “thought bubble” in which the evolving Mythic Being accuses Lizzie of stealing her boyfriend and commences to implicate both this white friend and members of the presupposed white viewing audience of “knowing” cultural identifications and then replicating, reinscribing, and reinstating suppositions of viewership. As the Mythic Being states in one of these bubbles: “You instinctively perceive me as the enemy, and nothing I say or do is sufficient to change that.” In this way, Piper incriminates her audience in the very production of the Mythic Being: without our particularly virulent form of racism he would simply fail to exist.

Furthermore, Piper’s “emphasis on the becoming of identity [consider the Mythic Being’s slow evolution over the course of the images] indicates that she understood identity as socially mandated and performative, as a set of preestablished behaviors that one was compelled to act out in order to claim and assume a new identification” (Smith 64). Evoking Butler’s insistence on the performativity of identificatory tropes, Piper calls into question the larger possibility of identity as “natural, universal and fixed” (Smith 64). Unlike Claude Cahun, however, who seemed to need only a single affirmative viewer to accept the oscillation of her subject positions/identifications and thus the possible untenability of her aggregate personal identity, Piper demands a much larger, anonymous, and confrontational or defensive white audience who can witness the theatricalization of its own racial and

gender visual markers and understand its complicity in the social positioning of such identifications.

In *The Mythic Being: I/You (Her)*, Piper stages miscegenation as the foundational fear of the racist response: if I (Piper) can look white (consider the first image of *I/You (Her)*) and transform myself to “be” black (consider the last image of the same work), you (white viewer) *may already “be” black*. As Piper argues in regards to herself, “I am the racist’s nightmare, the obscenity of miscegenation. . . . I represent the loathsome possibility that everyone is ‘tainted’ by black ancestry: If someone can look and sound like me and still be black, who is unimpeachably white?” (*Out of Order*, Vol. 1, 229).⁶⁰ By foregrounding her own fungible visual racial markers in the Mythic Being series, Piper underscores a history of U.S. oppression (the sexual and reproductive ownership of female slaves) which produced blackness as “mixed-race” and, perhaps more importantly, our seeming collective national amnesia as to this fact, our liberal/academic impulse to believe that “mixed-race” unions are only a product of “enlightened” modern times, in which two consenting adults of different races can live within the acceptable and prescribed confines of bourgeois intimacy.⁶¹ Of course, as Piper maintains, these unions are not new, only our recognition of them is. Therefore, despite the Mythic Being’s embodiment of many pejorative racial tropes—the threat of class violence, unrestrained sexual lasciviousness, and unthinking brute force—his greatest threat, Piper suggests, is his ability to expose the extremely tenuous position of whiteness and thus, the precariousness of the social, economic and institutional power and privilege on which it is based.⁶² As Piper proposes, “among politically committed and enlightened whites, the inability to acknowledge their probably African ancestry is

the last outpost of racism” (*Out of Order*, Vol. 1, 293). Because Piper uses the theatricalization of visual tropes to underscore our collective amnesia of our mixed-race past, *The Mythic Being: I Am Everything You Hate and Fear* is less about the racial “other” as an embodiment of all that the white viewer despises, and more about how that embodiment of otherness already exists in the white viewer. Therefore, the collective horror staged by *I Embodiment Everything You Hate and Fear* lies in the recognition that no “other” exists or, if he does, he is already contained in one’s white self.

The Vanilla Nightmares: Foregrounding Whiteness

In many ways, Piper’s 1980s Vanilla Nightmares series, in which she drew stand-alone images or re-worked newspaper advertisements featuring white models by drawing large menacing or lascivious black bodies on them, picks up where the Mythic Being project left off. However, to a greater extent than the Mythic Being series, the Vanilla Nightmares foregrounds whiteness as a constructed identificatory position. In “Blinded by the White: Art and History at the Limits of Whiteness,” Bowles argues that “artists [like Piper] have examined whiteness in order to render visible and alien the shared fantasies that determine the image of privilege in which white subjects make both history and themselves” (41).⁶³ Whiteness presumptively passes as “unmarked” (“Blinded by the White” 39); thus, its privilege is dependent not on its obvious specificity, but rather on its “universality,” its “unraced-ness, its “ahistoricity,” and its ethereal “transcendence,” unspoken characteristics which in turn render white dominance of socio-economic, political, and educational systems of power to pass as naturalized, normative, and inviolate.⁶⁴ Here, I will not be

examining all of the images of the *Vanilla Nightmares* series, but rather a few representative examples that most overtly critique the presupposed universality of whiteness.

In Plate 10 (1986), for instance, Piper underscores the profoundly presumptive nature of white privilege.⁶⁵ Here, in an advertisement for Bloomingdale's, a white model stands looking at the viewer. Five other smaller images show different models wearing similar clothing which evoke the caption "street safari." Next to the foregrounded white model Piper has drawn a large black male with phenotypically exaggerated features, including an extremely wide nose and lips. He lays one large hand around the model's neck, thus seemingly encapsulating her in his embrace. With the black figure's inclusion, the white model's look of seeming wide-eyed innocence is seemingly transposed into one of fear. In the un-doctored advertisement the white model is imaginatively positioned against a completely black—and therefore, at least for the Bloomingdale's ad department, entirely invisible—backdrop of "Africanness." Piper's inclusion of the black male figure serves to critique this pervasive system of ethnic appropriation, of, as Toni Morrison contends in *Playing in the Dark*, invisible blackness used only to highlight startling whiteness. Moreover, the menacing nature of the figure underscores the miscegenation fears laid bare by the Mythic Being series: white womanhood still needs to be protected, to be shielded from threatening black masculinity, or whiteness itself will be irrevocably compromised. As Sexton argues, "if white racial identity has a public regulation as a form of purity, then antimiscegenation is the mode of production for the value of whiteness" (25). Miscegenation serves not only to undermine whiteness in a statistical sense (proportionally, fewer and fewer people

in the country can claim to be “white”) but, more importantly, highlights the very permeability of the supposedly inviolate category itself. Piper foregrounds these fears of inter-racial sex in her description of the Vanilla Nightmare series, in which she purposely evokes sexually evocative language to manifest the indivisible desire/anxiety always extant in the white viewer’s subject position:

The fear I target is the more pervasive fear of the dissolution of the boundaries of the self in intimacy with an Other, through the seduction that coaxes your deep, unsubdued drives into the open. . . . My unrelenting otherness, my shameless implacability to conceptual assimilation raises the nightmarish spectre of the disintegration of your self into chaos: the dissolution of social conventions, of sexual prohibitions, of the political control of the unrestful. . . . I trigger your desire and your anxiety together; you come apart to let me in. On the far side of intimacy you glimpse death. (*Out of Order*, Vol. 2, 132)

Despite (or because of) the purposeful titillation of both this passage and the series itself, Vanilla Nightmares, much like the Mythic Being series, possesses a strong sense of political efficacy: by underscoring stereotypes, by manifesting them visually in such a way that the viewer’s own fears, anxieties, and desires are laid bare, Piper inculcates a sense of mediating self-awareness that can lead to the white viewer’s “repudiation” (*Out of Order*, Vol. 2, 130) of fixed cultural tropes which eradicate the agency of those pejoratively racialized as well as diminish the white viewer’s own subjectivity. Maurice Berger proposes that

while people of color routinely evaluate the status of their skin color in relation to the prejudice they experience, white people are under no obligation or constraint to acknowledge, let alone examine, their whiteness. It is precisely this refusal to name whiteness, to assign it meaning, that frees white people from seeing their complicity in the social, cultural, and historical economy of racism. (55)

To name whiteness, to strip it of its presumptive Western universality, is the first step in the viewer’s eventual repudiation of its power and privilege which is dependent on the continuous surveillance, marking, and categorization of racial

“others.” By interrogating whiteness, Piper seeks to strip it of its universality in the West, its presumption that it need not be named. Yet, in the forward to her 1996 collection of essays, *Out of Order, Out of Sight*, Piper argues that she still desires to speak in what she terms the “objective universal” for it is the “voice of innocent, humble authority. With very few qualifications, and in spite of the ways in which my work has evolved, it expresse[s] ideas in which I continue to believe” (Vol. 1, xxxiv). Despite her professed interest in the “innocently” universal, however, I would assert that Piper’s work, with its foregrounding of racial, gender, and class identifications, puts forth a critique of identity structures that is less naïve than aware and informed. If the “universal” is to be found as a viewing and artistic position, then it must be structured not as a present actuality, but rather as a future supposition—in a world in which *racism*, not *race*, ceases to exist.

Conclusion

With its implicit, yet catalytic message of political efficacy, Piper suggests that she seeks a world, more specifically, an America, in which her work will no longer be necessary. Yet, by locating race, gender, and class identifications within a register of national shame, of explicit historical subjugation and implicit present racism (illustrated through access or lack thereof to mechanisms of power and privilege), Piper positions her project as one birthed from the past, for it is the past which, at least for some of us, we seem unable to escape. Sabine Bröck, in her insightful book, *White Amnesia—Black Memory* (1999), asserts that American memory has problematically always been racialized, with the burden of remembrance falling on those interpolated within a discourse of ongoing historical oppression. As Bröck

asks, “why are memory and historical consciousness segregated, why does black memory stand in as a national reservoir of historical shame and responsibility? Why can whites afford nostalgia instead, and hold on to universality and innocence masking for ignorance and naïveté?” (16). This white amnesia allows whiteness to create social subject positions constituted on wholeness, on hopefulness, on present, lived experience, while blackness remains a compromised subject position, formed through its fractured-ness and an isolating and burdensome relationship to the past. As Piper maintains in her work, white forgetting of past oppression permits the refusal of acknowledgment of present inequities and thus, the very much still extant necessity of wider political change.

In their critique of identifications categories, both Cahun and Piper anticipate later post-structuralist critics, such as Judith Butler’s, questioning of identity itself as a viable consideration within feminist theory. As Butler asks, “what political possibilities are the consequence of a radical critique of the categories of identity? What new shape of politics emerges when identity as a common ground no longer constrains the discourse of feminist politics?” (*Gender Trouble* xi). Piper, for instance, has a clear political agenda, in that it forces the white viewer to confront her own reliance on social stereotype as a means through which to determine and mark visual codes of identity formation. Instead of looking for a coherent “self” in the represented image or in one’s own life, the viewer, Cahun suggests, should instead begin to see the politically affirmative possibilities of living with identity indeterminacy—that which cannot police and exclude. However, considering the discussion mentioned above—white amnesia’s ability to elide the difficulties of (what should be) collective shame—perhaps we should be cautious of accepting the

“universal” applicability of a white artist’s wholesale rejection of identity as a viable mechanism of social positioning. As Piper maintains through *The Mythic Being* and the *Vanilla Nightmares*, determining this indeterminacy is itself a posture of privilege—one often not granted to those interpolated within a discourse of historical oppression and present inequity.

Interestingly enough, however, on her own website, Piper herself seems to have recently claimed this privilege; she declares, without elaboration, that as of 2012, on her 64th birthday she “retired from being black” (<http://www.adrianpiper.com/biography.shtml>). Considering Piper’s examination of social “identity” categories (“ ‘black’ and ‘white’ are among the terms my work critiques,” quoted in *Adrian Piper* 1), this refusal to claim, even late in her career, a certain identification is not surprising. However, in view of her long-held investment in *blackness* both as a personal and as a social identification necessary in the propulsion of political change,⁶⁶ Piper’s renouncement of blackness, if taken literally, of course, is disappointing, for it suggests the achievement of an artistic universal (one not coded white, heterosexual and masculine) that has yet to be actualized in our present moment. More likely, however, the white reader/viewer should read Piper’s statement ironically: unable to ever actually “retire” from her black identification, Piper’s public statement of retirement manifests the desire seen throughout her artistic career: to force the white viewer to accept her complicity in the reiteration of a nostalgic whiteness which condemns blackness to the register of national shame and historical forgetting. If here Piper ironically suggests that she has “retired” from being black, perhaps she is un-ironically proposing that you, white viewer, should retire from being white. In this artistic articulation (and constant

reiteration) the white viewer discovers the political and revolutionary⁶⁷ quality of Piper's work: it is no less than the reevaluation (and perhaps relinquishment) of the white viewer's own privileged white and Western axis of aestheticization. It is no less than seeing the world anew.

¹ Cahun, because of her interest in cross-dressing, drag, and the subversion of visual expectations of gender, is often linked with—and seen as a kind of precursor to—the later artist Cindy Sherman. When Cahun’s photographs began to be studied in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Therese Lichtenstein argued in “A Mutable Mirror: Claude Cahun”(1992) that “the sense of multiple selves, of masquerade, of gender as a series of conventions, and also of narcissism [evident in Cahun’s work] prefigures Cindy Sherman’s photography—the black and white *Untitled Film Stills* of the late seventies and the color images of the eighties and nineties which stage stereotypical and historical feminine identities of self-portraits” (66). Shelly Rice also linked the two artists in her compelling 1999 anthology *Inverted Odysseys: Claude Cahun, Maya Deren, Cindy Sherman* by arguing that these artists “refus[e] to adhere to a fixed notion of identity [and thus] . . . expose the potential for empowered projections of many-sided selves in multifaceted realities” (xi). In “In Or Out of the Picture: Claude Cahun and Cindy Sherman” (1998) Katy Kline importantly underscores the differences between these two artists, particularly the size of their images (small versus large), use or misuse of fetish, and type of invoked gaze. Because of the now somewhat expected comparison drawn between Sherman and Cahun in art criticism, I find it necessary to explain why I will *not* be investigating Sherman here. The reasons are all equally important: 1) frankly, from an art critical standpoint, the comparison between Sherman and Cahun has now been exhausted of its more productive analysis 2) I find that Sherman’s critiqued invocation of female-gender as fetish to be dangerously close to the original, the stereotype of femininity, and thus at risk for reinscribing and thus reifying as a legitimate site/sight of desire the very thing it (ostensibly) seeks to dismantle 3) Piper’s work speaks to and yet challenges Cahun’s work, particularly in her subversion of traditional expectations of viewership and the gaze. In both Cahun and Piper’s work, it is often unclear who functions as subject and who serves as object; audience and artist frequently switch viewing positions or occupy both states simultaneously.

² As Monica Miller argues about the black dandy in *Slaves to Fashion*, “because conceptions of race are always interpolated with considerations of class, gender, sexuality, and nation, the black dandy signifies in all these arenas at once. . . . In that dandies of any color disrupt and destabilize conceptions of masculinity and heterosexuality, they are queer subjects who deconstruct limiting binaries in the service of transforming how one conceives of identity formation. In that the black dandy adds a deconstruction of racial and ethnic ‘notions’ of this queerness, he might better be called ‘quare,’ or queer with a distinctly black accent” (11).

³ “The dandy is both artist and living art: his presence has a double density” (Fillin-Yeh 3).

⁴ Here, I am referring to Laura Mulvey’s seminal 1975 pronouncement that “pleasure in looking has been split into active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is stylized accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*” (48). Although Mulvey’s argument has been challenged in many different ways from various ideological perspectives (consider, of course, its lack of concern with how race may effect “universal” masculine/feminine viewing paradigms, a point of critique made by bell hooks in *Art on My Mind* (1995)) since its publication, I believe it still holds critical weight, if only to serve as a point of departure when assessing how other identifications besides gender—such as race and class—interpolate, challenge, and intersect the masculine/feminine viewing paradigm.

⁵ Baudelaire’s 1863 essay “The Painter of Modern Life,” published in installments in *Le Figaro*, served to articulate the dandy’s position as a kind of flâneur, whose dual position as observer and observed is better suited for the street than the drawing-room.

⁶ My point in this dissertation is not to take a stand, as Phelan does in *Unmarked* (1993), between the viability of the invisible or the visible. Rather, I wish to assume the importance of both, but particularly the visible, for it is the moment in which one becomes a viewer that one runs the risk of assuming knowledge. We can not, it seems, get around the importance of seeing and being seeing (as Phelan does by reasserting the extant power of the unseen) in Western culture as a formation of one’s subjective understanding. We can, however, reformulate the way in which we see and thus, the way in which we know ourselves and the world around us. Indeed, the eye is fallible, but it can, as Fanon argues in *White Skin, Black Masks*, be trained to “correct cultural mistakes” (178).

⁷ By which I mean Cahun oscillates in her invocation of “hyper-gendered” tropes (such as the bull-fighter or the courtesan) in order to expose the performativity inherent in gender constructions.

⁸ Evoking Katy Deepwell as well as other critics, Katy Kline argues that “Cahun prefigures the development of queer theory, postulating the postmodern ‘possibility of a plurality of gendered identities and identifications’ and demonstrating that identity is not a fixed, autonomous condition” (79).

⁹ As I will later discuss in this chapter, it is unclear if Cahun wishes her performance to read as cross-dressing or dressing in drag. She seems to invoke both modes in different photographs. This confusion seems purposeful, a way to critique another (false) binary—that between cross-dressing and drag.

¹⁰ Considering both Piper and own investment in racism as a primarily “visual pathology” I choose to concentrate on the visual constructions of race. However, I take seriously Mark M. Smith’s point in *How Race is Made* (2006) that “even though we know that ‘race’ is a construct, an invented category that defies scientific verification, we still understand that construction as a largely visual enterprise. . . . [However] whites of all classes racialized [all] the senses in a deliberate effort to impose and maintain the artificial binary between ‘black’ and ‘white’” (2, 9).

¹¹ Julie Cole argues that too little attention has been paid to the collaborative nature of this relationship “and to the fact that the photos were produced for them alone. . . . In fact it is believed that in most cases Moore, who is almost never visible in any of the surviving portraits, stood behind the camera and made the exposures of Cahun” (344).

¹² Both literary and art critics are often taught to ignore or disregard biography in the examination of “the work alone”; here, I want to emphasize how important biography can be to the actual understanding of the work itself.

¹³ Piper herself uses the word “confrontational” to explain her positioning of audience and aesthetic goals. According to Piper, the artist-audience relationship must be: 1. “Confrontational”: “The artist confronts her audience with the work, and the audience confronts the artist with its response to the work. 2. “Didactic”: “The artist gradually teaches the audience her concerns, strategies, idioms, and the audience simultaneously teaches the artist its potential, its limitations, and its normative conventions of judgment and communication” (*Out of Order*, Vol. 2, 99).

¹⁴ As Kristine von Oehsen points out, much of Cahun’s family was involved in literary activities in some capacity. Her paternal granduncle Léon Cahun, was a conservator for the Bibliothèque Mazarine in Paris as well as an accomplished fiction writer (von Oehsen 10). Marcel Schwob, the (then) most famous member of this family, “during the last two years of his life, from 1903 to 1905 . . . was a member of a formidable literary circle along with Paul Léautaud, Paul Fort, Henri de Regnier, Sacha Guitry and Colette” (von Oehsen 10). Although I do not want to reduce Cahun’s significant literary and artistic talent to a product of her familial environment, I also do not wish to ignore the manifest role her cultured family played, through both indirect influence and direct encouragement, in the fostering of her various gifts.

¹⁵ Whitney Chadwick notes that Cahun was actively engaged with Havelock Ellis’s theories on the homosexual as a “third sex,” as argued in his treatise *The Psychology of Sex* (1933). Indeed, Cahun “had read widely in psychology and in 1929 translated Ellis for French readers” (“Claude Cahun and Lee Miller” 152-3). Cahun positively responded to Ellis’s challenging of a traditional understanding of gender as binary based on “essentialized” and “natural” social constructions of masculinity and femininity.

¹⁶ This interest in variable identifications becomes apparent in Cahun’s photographic work. As Chadwick argues, “the shifting notion of self or selves explored in Cahun’s work included her sexuality (lesbian), her religious origins (Jewish) and her intellectual identifications (literary and philosophical)” (“Claude Cahun and Lee Miller” 148).

¹⁷ Cahun and Moore were also involved in political activity. As Von Oehsen notes, “from 1932, Cahun and Moore were increasingly involved in political issues” (15) including the *Association des Écrivains et Artistes Révolutionnaires* (AEAR). Moreover, Cahun’s “politics remained rigorously leftist [throughout her life]; as a member of the French Resistance during World War II, she and Suzanne Malherbe were imprisoned on Jersey and barely escaped with their lives” (“Claude Cahun and Lee Miller” 159).

¹⁸ Famously changing his favorite café to avoid the couple, Breton, although friends with the women, was repulsed their homosexuality (and homosexuality in general) (Doy 110). As Carolyn Dean notes, in nineteenth-century avant-garde literary and artistic movements (including Oscar Wilde’s “Art for Art’s Sake”), homosexuality was positioned as one way to combat the perceived priggishness of Victorian morality which collapsed virtuous living with morally purposeful art. Positioning themselves neither with nineteenth-century aestheticians such as Wilde or Walter Pater nor with traditional bourgeois artistic moralists such as Sir Joshua Reynolds or Matthew Arnold, the surrealists sought to define a new, free-love heterosexuality (Breton termed it *l’amour fou*) as the privileged site of artistic expression. Dean argues that Breton’s issue with “bourgeois morality was that it was not moral or pure enough, and he countered it with an idealized, liberated, natural heterosexuality purged of the tainted, repressed, and hence compromised bourgeois ideal of love that produced adultery, treachery, and presumably, homosexuality. . . . the surrealists’ antibourgeois sentiments—at least in the realm of gender and sexuality—sustained the dichotomies between heterosexuality and homosexuality, pure and impure, and fantasy and reality they sought in theory to challenge” (78).

¹⁹ This is not to say that Cahun and Moore didn’t receive affirmation, artistic and sexual, elsewhere. Solomon-Godeau argues that “the manifest self-fashioning of Claude Cahun was likely abetted and sustained by the existence of a remarkable lesbian subculture in Paris in the 1920s” (115).

²⁰ Chadwick argues that Lee Miller, the blonde, athletic American fashion model, eventual photographer, and consistent surrealist muse, was the ultimate “surrealist woman,” for she seemed to be “this mythical being who existed as a locus of desire in the psyche of the male surrealist, as an object in the world onto which he could project his sexual and creative energies” (“Claude Cahun and Lee Miller” 143).

²¹ For an excellent primer on these surrealist woman artists, see Whitney Chadwick’s *Women Artists of the Surrealist Movement* (1985). Cahun is not included in this book because her work had not yet been “discovered.”

²² Although my interest in Cahun is less historical than meta-historical (that is to say, how the ideas her work suggests play out on different registers, including when applied to literary studies), I take seriously Solomon-Godeau’s point that “Cahun’s oeuvre, with its consistent play with the instability of identity, its frequent deployment of masquerade, its penchant for masks and mirrors, is startlingly close to the terms of contemporary feminist thinking about identity, gender, and sexual difference. Consequently, it requires almost more of an effort to resituate Cahun in her actual time and milieu than it does to consider her work in the context of contemporary theoretical formulations about femininity, identity, and representation” (114).

²³ As I argued in the introduction to this dissertation, Cahun’s investment in this wider critique of gender as staging anticipates Judith Butler provocative 1990 assertion (in *Gender Trouble*) that gender is something one performs rather than “is.”

²⁴ Numerous critics including Julie Cole note how Cahun draws attention to her head rather than to her body, often “employ[ing] distortion in order to draw attention to the cranium, the seat of intellect and Cartesian subjecthood, rather than to the body” (353). Although Cahun’s interest in highlighting her skull is evident in numerous photographs (most notably *Aveux Non Avenues*, in which two mirrored sides of Cahun’s cranium seem to speak to and challenge one another), I disagree with Cole that Cahun fails to place equal weight on the body as a possible site of subjective mastery. Indeed, Cole’s privileging of “subjecthood” as a sole property of the mind seems to reinscribe the very tropes which reify a false binary of masculinity/the rational mind/ and femininity/the unruly, instinctive body that Cahun contests in her widely-ranging work.

²⁵ Marjorie Garber argues that “one of the most important aspects of cross-dressing ‘is the way in which it offers a challenge to easy notions of binarity, putting into question the categories of ‘female’ and ‘male,’ whether they are considered essential or constructed, biological or cultural” (quoted in Fillin-Yeh 15). Of course, as Fillin-Yeh, Miller, and Blessing have noted, the dandy’s interest in “dressing up” suggests a similar desire for gender oscillation or indeterminacy.

²⁶ Lucy Lippard argues Cahun’s cross-dressing is one way in which she “extends the self” (35). Although I find this phrase quite elegant, I argue that Cahun’s project is more invested in disrupting notions of inviolate selfhood rather than reifying—even through expansion—the category “identity” itself.

²⁷ Once again demonstrating how various identifications intersect and buttress one another, Thynne argues that this photograph “is not beautiful but rather grotesque in a conventional sense, not an ‘ideal treatment’ but instead a persona neutered by the shaving of [Cahun’s] head. Among the many connotations of the shaved head is Jewishness, since it evokes the ritual of Orthodox women. Moreover, it suggests the idea of punishment because in many European conflicts hair removal has historically been the punishment of prisoners, adulterers, and women who consort with the enemy” (186).

²⁸ Interestingly, before I began studying Cahun’s work, I came upon a photograph of her, but did not know who she was or that she was a woman. For a 2011 graduate seminar on romantic literature (concentrating on the summer of 1816), I was assigned John William Polidor’s *The Vampire* (1816), which includes the first portrayal of the seductive, charismatic vampire figure later popularized by Bram Stoker, Sheridan Le Fanu, and even Anne Rice. The Broadview critical edition I purchased included Cahun’s 1921 self-portrait on its cover (although the publisher dates it to 1920). Despite the anachronistic dating of this portrait (a photograph from 1920 used to portray a text published in 1819 and set even earlier), Cahun’s cultured sartorial presentation coupled with her anemic/sickly and somewhat depraved facial appearance are an excellent choice to manifest Polidori’s decadent degenerate, Lord Strongmore. Moreover, Cahun’s androgynous physical appearance evokes the gender/sexual ambiguity and transgression inherent in literary and popular constructions of the vampire.

²⁹ Dean similarly argues to me that “gender inversion in this context ([in which] she poses as a male homosexual) does not simply signify the transgression of normative gender roles, but marks the undoing of any stable binary distinction between genders or between gender and sexuality, and hence the undecidability—the mobility—of all identity” (91). Dean goes on to connect this gender inversion to Cahun’s homosexuality: “It is thus because female homosexuality is the privileged manifestation of the mobile immobility that constitutes normative, gendered subjectivity as a lost and indispensable referent that Cahun never names lesbian desire in [*Heroines*]” (91).

³⁰ Not surprisingly, Cahun does something similar in her literary text *Heroines*. In the text, Cahun rewrites the stories of archetypal females—Helen of Troy, the Virgin Mary, Sappho, Cinderella, etc—so that her new feminist “heroines” “acquire a degree of self-consciousness . . . even though their dawning understanding is not at all what our dominant cultural narratives would have led us to assume” (Conley 25). Notably, Cinderella’s prince is not charmed by her, but by her feet: he has a foot fetish. In her discussion of the stories’ “counter-archival” goal, Katharine Conley contends that they achieve something similar to what I argue about Cahun’s self-portraits: “Cahun succeeds in the goals of jolting her readers out of a *complacent* understanding of these mythic heroines, insisting that we re-evaluate what we thought we knew about them just as, in her photographic self-portraits, she often guides us to reconsider *what we think we have seen*” (31, first italics original, second italics mine).

³¹ Fillin-Yeh goes on to say that “there is at least some space on the street for her as the female dandy flâneuse whose consciousness of being seen does not at all prevent her from looking back” (20). Fillin-Yeh is not specifically discussing Cahun here, although her book does include a chapter on Cahun (Jennifer Blessing’s “Claude Cahun: Dandy Provocateuse,” which I have already cited). However, I think it is important to note that although Cahun’s performance is certainly meant to be seen and she absolutely does look back, she is not a flâneur (or “flâneuse,” as Blessing tries to feminize the word) in the traditional sense because this performance is never public, constructed on the street; rather, it is only ever private, only ever domestic, and only every produced for an audience of one: Cahun’s partner, Marcel Moore. Therefore, although I invoked the idea of Cahun as a “female dandy,” I think we should resist writing Cahun into its corollary masculine paradigm of the flâneur, because Cahun and Malherbe’s artistry, although dependent on gazed affirmation, is private and domestic *not* public and civic. Indeed, as Thynne notes, “the skirting board included in [the] frame emphasizes the incongruous staging in space marked as private . . . a scene of fantasy that is being performed in a domestic environment rather than a professional studio” (186).

³² Shaw argues that through Cahun’s partnership with Moore, she was “able to critique the male-centred models of subjectivity implied by their visions of Narcissus and to challenge the cultural discourse of egoism that denigrated women for their own pursuits of self. Photography’s mirrors and masks were their emblems for the partiality of self-knowledge. They were also [her] tools for imagining alternatives to the universalizing models of Art and interpersonal relationship [her] culture

had to offer—for imagining a mutual mirroring and a collaborative process of making as the origins of art” (44). Although I agree with Shaw’s above statement, I do not agree with an assertion she makes earlier in that same essay, in which she argues that Cahun constructs herself as a “female Narcissus” (in contrast to woman’s traditional role of Echo—“the female supplement to Narcissus whose only purpose was to echo the words of the male poet” (Shaw 37)): “A woman whose belief in her own self-cultivation might result in significant cultural production, even works of art. Purporting to be self-exploration, [Cahun’s work] participates in a reconceptualisation of female subjectivity from supplementary to self-actualizing” (37). Although I agree that Cahun seeks to “reconceptualize female subjectivity” from a sort of supplementary, or derivative, artistic terrain, I think Shaw’s ideal of a “female Narcissus” aligns too closely with Blessing’s concept of the “female flâneur.” Both concepts seek to place Cahun within a masculine paradigm that fundamentally elides Moore’s fundamental participation as a co-producer and anticipated responder to these works of art.

³³ Importantly, although Cahun may have refused the categorical identification of “lesbian” as part of her larger project of identity critique, she also rejected Freudian notions that lesbianism is contingent on a “masculinity complex” or that female homosexuality is either “deviant or imitative” (Solomon-Godeau 120). Solomon-Godeau argues that “in her embrace of [certain] definitions (i.e. ‘uranian’ or ‘third sex’) [Cahun] discursively produced homosexuality as a positivity in itself (120).

³⁴ Narcissism was, of course, one of the complaints lodged against homosexuals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries. Dean argues that “the presumed narcissism of homosexuals exemplified the sterility, stasis, and artifice associated, often subversively, with homosexuality . . . this metaphorical sterility implies a boundaryless self that sees nothing but its own reflection. . . . The identificatory logic of homosexual desire precludes the recognition of a boundary between self and other, and so between fantasy (the ego-ideal) and reality (the alterity of the other). Because they can only see in others phantasmatic reflections of themselves, homosexuals cannot see things as they are: in short, they live in a dream world of their own making. In cultural terms, homosexuality violates the most basic rules of the social contract—the recognition of the distinction between self and other implicit in the ability to distinguish between reality and fantasy. Homosexuals thus cannot practice the ‘judicious altruism’ that guarantees national harmony” (76-7). As suggested above, I contend that Cahun’s fundamental recognition of the other in the “self” promotes understanding and reciprocity between two people rather than narcissism and selfishness within one’s self; in effect, if “I know I am fundamentally like you, how can I not treat you as well as I treat myself?”

³⁵ Cole further claims that by “existing outside the normative heterosexual paradigm wherein women were defined by and in relation to their male partners, [Cahun] was no longer required to play the subordinate female role that was as strictly defined among the Surrealists as within the culture at large” (349).

³⁶ In regards to the Cahun and Moore’s mutual gaze, Cole puts forth that they purposely exclude the traditional male spectator (Mulvey’s “bearer of the look”), as they “frustrate [his] attempts to locate himself in relation to the image, and he is prevented from fully entering a play of gazes that are not narcissistic but self-sufficient, reciprocal, and lesbian” (351).

³⁷ <http://www.adrianpiper.com/biography.shtml>

³⁸ In *Out of Order, Out of Sight*, Volume II, Piper herself claims that this presumption of artistic “standards” (what she terms “critical hegemony”) based on market value rather than conceptual—or even aesthetic worth—is designed to foreclose minority artists’ participation in traditional forms of artistic production and distribution: “The socioeconomically determined aesthetic interests of these individuals define not only what counts as ‘good’ and ‘bad’ art but what counts as art, period. Through art education, criticism, exhibitions, and other practices and institutions devoted to preserving and disseminating what I shall refer to as *Euroethnic* art, the socioeconomic resources of this class of individuals enable its art practitioners to promulgate its fascinating but ethnocentric artifacts as High Culture on a universal scale. According to these shared criteria, then, those creative products that are dominated by a concern with political and social injustice or economic deprivation, or which use traditional or ‘folk’ media of expression, are often not only not ‘good’ art, they are not art at all. They are, rather, ‘craft,’ folk art,’ or ‘popular culture’: and individuals for whom these concerns are dominant are correspondingly excluded from the art context” (65).

³⁹ Piper has argued for, artistically speaking, the productive collapse of the personal and political: “the union of the personal with the political often makes such work seem excessively confrontational or

didactic to some viewers. . . . [but I use this] not only as a medium of exploration but also as a medium of communication between me and the viewer” (*Out of Order*, Vol. 1, 24).

⁴⁰ “[Piper] resolved to use her body and identifications as agents of confrontation” (Smith 41).

⁴¹ Costello and Willsdon claim that it is often “unclear” what artistic practices like Piper’s “aim to achieve,” so to speak: “is it, for example, real social change on whatever scale, or is it to develop awareness about how existing social systems and networks operate?” (11). Of course, “real social change” is profoundly difficult to determine; however, considering Piper’s general disengagement with traditional mechanisms of political engagement *per se* (specific movements, campaigns, protests, rallies, etc) (see Bowles’s discussion of this in *Adrian Piper*, p. 234), it seems that she is more invested in Costello and Willsdon’s latter investment in art as a mechanism of developing wider social awareness rather than as a tool of inculcating a specific political philosophy.

⁴² Wallace, like Piper, is intensely invested in vision as a form of sensory perception that intimately affects our cognitive responses, inter-personal relationships, and political self-positioning. In *Dark Designs in Visual Culture*, Wallace states that she is “interested in the potential for a revolution in vision. The relationship of the problem of visibility (who produces and reproduces vision) to popular culture and material culture and, ultimately, history is vital” (191).

⁴³ In her seminal essay, “Passing for White, Passing for Black” (1992), Piper highlights the sense of personal objectification, of self-contempt, which can result from another person falsely “classifying” her as one sort of racial subject: “In their attempts to [you] within [their] rigid stereotype[s] of black people . . . their ridicule and accusations then function to both disown and degrade you from their status, to mark you not as having *done* wrong but as *being* wrong. This turns you into something bogus relative to their criterion of worth, and false relative to their criterion of authenticity. Once exposed as a fraud of this kind, you can never regain your authenticity” (*Out of Order*, Vol. 1, 281, 276).

⁴⁴ Again, here Piper’s project aligns with Fanon’s, who argues in *Black Skin, White Masks* that “there is not *one* Negro—but are *many* black men” (115).

⁴⁵ In an essay entitled “Government Support for Works of Art,” Piper argues, that seemingly counter-intuitively, the U.S. government should fund the production of works of art which “question prevailing ideologies of power relationships . . . [These works of art] thereby call into question whether the particular form democracy assumes in our troubled society is the most fully realized form democracy can take. In questioning the social power relations that define our prevailing conception of democracy, unconventional works of art thereby conduce to the evolution of social norms more appreciative of the questioners, respectful of the powerless, and tolerant of the unconventional; and thereby reaffirm the ultimate value of democracy itself” (*Out of Order*, Vol. 2, 206).

⁴⁶ Piper privileges artwork which can compel political efficacy over any artwork’s relative aesthetic value, at least how such value is traditionally conceived: “Because my creative commitment is inherently political, I am primarily motivated to do the work I do by a desire to effect concrete, positive, internal political change in the viewer, independently of—or in spite of—the viewer’s abstract aesthetic evaluation of my work” (248).

⁴⁷ Here, I am invoking Shawn White and Graham White’s concepts of signifying and “stylin” from *Stylin’: African American Expressive Culture from its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit* (1999). To “signify” is for black subjects to use white culture, but to reorder it, so it becomes new: “Each iteration of black style attempts to escape stereotypes, fixity, essentialization—signify on them—and functions as a process of identity formation grounded in irony, satire, wit and self-consciousness” (Miller 15).

⁴⁸ As Smith argues, “despite her theorization of a mythic and ahistorical background for [the Mythic Being], his experiences were culled from Piper’s own, the signs she used to compose him were, and continue to be, situated in a historically and politically particular moment” (49).

⁴⁹ Moreover, as Miller notes, because dandies implicitly contest traditionally masculine roles, they are inherently queer subjects who destabilize social markers buttressing the republican heterosexual imperative. In that the black body is always “queered,” made other, in hegemonic American discourse, the body of the black dandy is doubly queered, both as a racial and sexual subject (Miller 11). Miller contends that as “quare” (as in doubly queer) subjects, black dandies’ “performativity necessarily holds fluid notions of race, sexuality, gender, class and nation in concert and in tension. As queers of color, black dandies challenge what Roderick Ferguson calls ‘ideologies of discreteness,’ instead opting to ‘decode cultural fields not from a position outside those fields, but from within them as those fields account for the queer of color subjects’ historicity” (12).

⁵¹ “Black’ and ‘white’ are among the terms that my work critiques” (Adrian Piper, Letter to the Editor. *Artforum* 12, no.5 (January 1974): 9).

⁵² “American national fantasy, I argue, does not so much dismiss as *defer* racial hybridity, endowing it with the peculiar privilege and power of a horizon, one at which we never quite arrive. . . . Our belief in the novelty of our contemporary moment is only a repression of our awareness of the history of such deferrals” (Nyong’o 9).

⁵³ Smith argues that “regardless of Piper’s intention to create a generalized male figure, some of the signs she used, such as the large Afro and black turtleneck, signal the black American male nationalist, while others, including the mustache and cigar, point to an international radicalism personified in the figures of Che Guevara and Fidel Castro” (50).

⁵⁴ Interestingly enough, it was not until 1990 that Piper called the Mythic Being “black.” Reflecting on the Mythic Being project in 1990, she stated that she “dressed in drag as a young black male” (*Out of Order*, Vol. 1, 263). In 1975, she said that the figure was used to “transform [her] individual self into its seeming opposite: third-world, working-class, overtly hostile male” (*Out of Order*, Vol. 1, 147). I would suggest that Piper began foregrounding the Mythic Being’s blackness in the early 1990s as a response to a change in national race consciousness, a change which included the rise of bi-racial and multi-racial personal identifications. For Piper, blackness, arising as it did as a result of the sexual ownership inherent in chattel slavery, has always been “mixed-race.” As I previously argued in this chapter, Piper, by emphasizing “blackness,” anticipates later cultural and literary critics such as Jared Sexton, Tavia Nyong’o, and Frank Wilderson who argue that multiracialism ultimately figures as “antiblackness.”

⁵⁵ Piper herself uses the word “transform” to describe the racist response: “If [the Mythic Being’s obsessions] are continually acknowledged and articulated, they would transform our interactions into acts of violence” (*Out of Order*, Vol. 1, 138).

⁵⁶ Furthermore, Piper notes the “queerness” of her position while enacting the Mythic Being: “My sexual attraction to men is complicated and altered by my masculine appearance. I envision the possibility of deep love relationships based on friendship, trust camaraderie, masculine empathy; but I instinctively suppress expressions of sexual feeling for fear of alienating the comparatively tenuous feelings of kinship with men I now have” (*Out of Order*, Vol. 1, 118).

⁵⁷ In her preparatory notes for the Mythic Being, Piper notes that she “learned a lot from [Lizzy] about how to flirt, how to be engagingly feminine, how to act in a socially confident and poised manner. I learned all this by simply copying some of her mannerisms and behavior, which she had copied from her older and very sophisticated sister” (*Out of Order*, Vol. 1, 126).

⁵⁸ Smith, for instance, argues that the “afro came to signal African Americans, clothing refers to class background, and behavior is taken as an indicator of education and cultural background” (47).

⁵⁹ Many critics seem to miss Piper’s crucial point that racism eradicates or, at least, diminishes, the subjectivity of both the viewer and the racialized subject. Smith, for instance, in an otherwise astute analysis, notes that “because [Piper] seemed to understand that stereotypes hinder and limit the subjectivity of the stereotyped individual, Piper afforded the Mythic Being a measure of agency and autonomy by allowing him to act on the audience” (54). Although I agree with Smith that Piper uses stereotype to demonstrate how it limits the “agency and autonomy” of the racialized subject, I think she makes a no less important claim that stereotype may diminish (if not eradicate completely, as it often does for the racial subject interpolated within a discourse of racism and historical oppression) the subjectivity of the viewer.

⁶⁰ In *Cornered*, a video installation, Piper takes up similar questions. In this work, Piper presents family birth certificates (one in which her father is marked as “octoroon,” another as “white”) in order to underscore the tenuousness of racial markers. Moreover, she again confronts the audience, challenging the viewers to question their own racial identifications: “You are probably black What are you going to do?” See Bowles, “Adrian Piper as African American Artist,” for a longer discussion of this work.

⁶¹ In *Amalgamation Schemes* Jared Sexton argues that in current liberal discourse interracial sexuality has been reconstructed as a kind of bourgeois intimacy which elides its violent past. As Sexton asks, “how and why does this new discourse of interracial intimacy insist upon, perhaps require, the

disavowal of the structure of (sexual) coercion at the heart of the racial formation in the United States?” (37).

⁶² “Racial classification in this country functions to restrict the distribution of goods, entitlements and status as narrowly as possible, to those whose power is already entrenched” (*Out of Order*, Vol. 1, 291).

⁶³ Bowles argues that with the *Vanilla Nightmares* series Piper has “staged what she had specifically identified as the dilemma of “Colored Women Artists”: to make art that treats issues of race and gender is to risk being marginalized as making autobiographical art that is without universal validity, but to make art that is so abstract that it cannot be understood as referencing race or gender reifies the association of anonymity with whiteness” (“Adrian Piper as African American Artist” 114). In short, Piper either risks “ghetto-izing” herself as a “black artist” who deals with “black issues” or producing—and thus tacitly affirming the legitimacy—of “universal” art which is always coded white.

⁶⁴ Smith makes a similar point: “The racial category of whiteness . . . presents itself as ordinary, normal, and decidedly unraced. . . . Nonwhites are represented as being ‘raced’ at the same time that they are assigned a variety of negative attributes that predicate their disenfranchisement. Whiteness represents and perpetuates itself in cultural products and socio-political, economic, and legal systems as decidedly unraced and normative through various narrative, structural, and semiotic strategies” (11). Jared Sexton takes the types of arguments made by Smith, Bowles, and even Piper herself one step further by contending that the social and historical construction of the “human” (as he argues, anyone who is not black) could not have been produced without first discursively positioning the black as a ultimate sign of the inhuman: “The race of Humanism (White, Asian, South Asian, and Arab) could not have produced itself without the simultaneous production of that walking destruction which became known as the Black. Put another way, through chattel slavery the world gave birth and coherence to both its joys of domesticity and to its struggles of political discontent; and with these joys and struggles the Human was born, but not before it murdered the black, forging a symbiosis between the political ontology of Humanity and the social death of Blacks” (21).

⁶⁵ Piper’s *Vanilla Nightmare* re-envisioning of a Calvin Klein underwear advertisement (1986) produces similar fears, but ones which are inflected by homophobia as well as racism. In this work, Piper has drawn a large black male figure onto (lying with) a prone white model. The drawn black figure looks at the viewer from the corner of his eye, as if to draw him/her into the lasciviousness of inter-racial sex. The white model looks away from the viewer, seemingly unaware that he is being watched.

⁶⁶ For evidence of this personal identification see, for instance, *Cornered* or Piper’s calling card series in which the artist declares: “Dear friend, I am black.”

Chapter 2

[Mind the Gap] Between Life and Art: Lily Bart in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*

As I argued in Chapter 1, Claude Cahun, by playing with our often too-ready acceptance of the “authenticity” of performed gender identifications, stages for the viewer productions of seeing signifiers and thus “knowing” identity. In so doing, the viewer becomes exposed as complicit in internalizing a set of assumptions about the “readability”—and thus “knowability”—of gender as something legible and knowable, as well as its inter-related identifications—race and class. As I will contend in this chapter on *The House of Mirth* (1905),¹ Edith Wharton foregrounds a similar “seeing as knowing” act of complicity for the reader-turned-viewer, who is led to assume—and then to question—the visual validity of seeing through the eyes of Lily Bart’s admirers. The *tableau vivant* scene in which Lily poses as Mrs. Lloyd (Plate 11) by Sir Joshua Reynolds serves as the apotheosis of Lily’s aestheticization: she is a breathing high art piece, a veritable artifact of stunning, culturally constructed femininity. Instead of celebrating this feminine deification, however, Wharton uses it to make the reader pause and think. The gap between Lily’s artistic reification and her psychological separateness from those around her emphasizes to the reader-turned-viewer that this is a woman emotionally destroyed by the very aestheticization on which her social identifications depend.

Through her portrayal of Lily, Wharton claims that white leisure-class femininity is dependent on a very specific visuality—aestheticization as a visual art object. Lily needs this aestheticization to support her inter-connected race (white) and class (leisure) identifications. Without this explicit aestheticization as a visual art object, Lily loses her leisure-class status and becomes less white, a claim made by

some critics including Harrison-Kahan², particularly through her growing association to the Jewish and therefore (in contemporary determinations of race) questionably white Simon Rosedale. However, through her slippage in racial and class categories, Lily also becomes *less feminized, but more gendered female*, a claim made, as far as I am aware, by no other critics. As Lily falls in class status and her whiteness is blackened through contact with Simon Rosedale, she becomes a more *embodied* female who must rely on her physical being—rather than her beautiful aesthetic form—to survive. In short, as the novel progresses, Lily is de-feminized and put in the category of female.

The social world in which Lily moves uses passive, aestheticized femininity rather than productive, embodied femaleness as its *haute bourgeois* class marker (identified in Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* [1899]). Without the visual staging extant in art objecthood and its inherent passivity,³ Lily becomes less feminine, loses her class status, and is racially blackened.⁴ As part of her unacknowledged feminist project,⁵ Wharton critiques her world's seemingly inviolate association among race, class, femininity, and passivity. But this critique begs the question that perpetually haunts feminist criticism of Wharton: if femininity undermines female subjectivity, what is Wharton's solution to this dispossession of agency that occurs during aestheticization? Or, as Cynthia Griffin Wolff has concisely asked: "What ought Lily Bart to do?" (*HM* x).⁶

In her 1974 essay, "Lily Bart and the Beautiful Death" Wolff establishes how Lily Bart functions as an art object in her *haute bourgeoisie* world:

Women like Lily[,] who had nothing more to offer than a superb capacity to render themselves agreeably, might be lured by the seductive confusion between representation and reality. Should this confusion occur, the woman would view herself not as person but as an object—to be admired, to be

sustained in her beauty. The men around her would be significant principally as connoisseurs or collectors. . . . Her beauty—even more, her general aesthetic aura—is not only her fortune in this newly capitalistic society; it is the only thing about her that makes her interesting or valuable to others. (21-3)

As Wolff argues, Wharton establishes Lily as a living “art object” who is commodified in society and on the “marriage market.”⁷ In regards to my argument—the eventual failure of Lily’s femininity when un-aestheticized—Lily-as-art-object possesses two significant features: her static passivity and inactivity⁸ and her conspicuousness: her seeming failure to exist when not actuated by the gaze of others. Wharton notes that Lily’s persistent reliance on appearance in framing her conception of “self” dates back to her childhood, when Mrs. Bart tells a young Lily that she will “get [the family fortune] all back—you’ll get it all back, with your face” (*HM* 28).⁹ Mrs. Bart had “watched [Lily’s beauty] jealously, as though it were her property and Lily its mere custodian” (*HM* 34). Here, Wharton uses the language of legal ownership (“property,” “custodian”) to underscore the indelible connection between white femininity and *haute bourgeois* class status, as least for a young woman without her own fortune. From young adulthood, Lily has been taught to view her appearance abstractly, as an element of “self” that can be fundamentally disassociated from herself—possessed by her mother and used to re-acquire fortune.¹⁰ As their economic and social fortunes dwindle, Lily’s mother comes to view Lily’s beauty as the family’s only remaining economic and social asset. At the beginning of the novel, Selden even explicitly asks Lily: “Isn’t marriage your vocation? Isn’t it what you’re all brought up for?” (*HM* 9), thus affirming that the value of Lily’s beauty rests on its being a tradable commodity in the marriage market.¹¹ Elizabeth Ammons proposes that *The House of Mirth* “examine[s] the

dilemma of the young American woman whose objective in life is independence but whose one option is marriage” (*Edith Wharton’s Argument with America* 38). Like Charity Royall in Wharton’s *Summer* (1917), Lily craves an “individual adventure” (*Summer* 156) rather than a socially prescribed path but finds independence impossible within society and life intolerable without.

Ultimately, Lily’s passive beauty is prized by her mother for both its leisure class representativeness and its ability to re-affirm the family’s class status in the marriage transaction. The ability to exist as a wasteful consumer and an aesthetic object represents the highest goal for a woman of Wharton’s *haute bourgeoisie*. Although Lily may be bred to be eventually sold, she will be sold not as the “industrious wife” esteemed by the middle class, but as an object of the *haute bourgeoisie* that exists to manifest leisure. As critics since Wolff have noted, Lily embodies Veblen’s theory of the leisure class wife who exists as both a luxury object herself and as a non-producing consumer: “The wife . . . has become the ceremonial consumer of goods which [the husband] produces” (83). The leisure-class wife, whose ability to *consume* time in leisure activities, exists as what we would now term the ultimate “status symbol” for her husband, for she is characterized by consumption of time, and needless *over*-consumption of goods.¹² The leisure class wife’s passivity and inactivity serve the purpose of affirming her husband’s social position and thus, vicariously, her own.

The wife that Lily is bred to be, however, is both a consumer and *consumed* object herself, a luxury item that is “valuable on [the] account [that she] can be appropriated or monopolized; [she is] therefore, coveted as a valuable possession, and [her] exclusive enjoyment gratifies the possessor’s sense of pecuniary superiority

at the same time that [her] contemplation gratifies his sense of beauty” (Veblen 129). To men like Rosedale, who seek Lily both as a sexual possession and as an embodiment of his own worldly achievements (indeed, she is an “asset” in the literal, financial sense of the word), Lily represents a triple acquisition—she is the non-productive, leisurely wife, a manifestation of the husband’s “pecuniary ability to afford a life of idleness” (Veblen 43), a high-art object that suggests her husband’s ability to appreciate aesthetic beauty, and the form by which her husband can enter society. As Ammons notes, “for a rich man, ownership of a woman is not a luxury, but a necessity. She is his means of disseminating Wall Street power beyond the limited masculine world of Wall Street . . . [she] translate[s] financial power into social power” (*Edith Wharton’s Argument with America* 33). Although bred-to-be-wives like Lily may not “work” in a factory or an office, they certainly labor to produce social capital.

The conspicuousness of Lily’s aestheticization guarantees that she possesses no value when unviewed; her worth is established by various gazes of affirming possession. As Barbel Tischleder persuasively asserts, the novel “bears witness to the visual orientation of Lily’s self-perception—a consciousness of self that has internalized social demands of feminine propriety and ideals of attractiveness—a specifically gendered kind of self-discipline that is oriented toward and actualized by the gaze of others” (63). Barbara Hochman similarly draws a comparison between Wharton’s work as a novelist and Lily’s “work” as self-as-art-object: both “process[es] of generating images and meanings [are] reciprocal: [they] cannot proceed without an audience” (148). Early in the novel, Wharton establishes Lily’s reliance on “feminine conspicuous[ness]” (Merish 249) to construct a position in her

social world. When Lily takes the train to Bellomont in Chapter 1, for instance, she “arrange[s] herself in the corner with the instinctive feeling for effect which never forsook her” (*HM* 17). This dependence on the gaze of others guarantees that “self-actualization” is for Lily always a vicariously achieved endeavor, thus assuring, as I will later discuss in regards to the tearoom scene, that Lily “feels as though she falls out of existence in moments when she is unobserved” (Tischleder 62).

Much feminist criticism, which focuses on Lily’s oppression by an unspecified patriarchy, fails to account for Lily’s complicity in her own aesthetic objectification. However, as Linda Dittmar suggests, though Lily “clearly relishes the aesthetic shaping of these narratives as a creative activity steeped in class privilege, the power she derives from such art rests on her willingness to *collude* with her own apparent objectification” (143, italics mine). As is noted through the alternative (if, according to Wharton’s portrayals, distasteful) careers of women like Carrie Fisher and Gerty Farish, it is not biological *femaleness* that prevents white women like Lily from affirming substantive existences independent of aesthetic value, but rather their acceptance of a *femininity* that serves white patriarchal agendas. For Wharton, this patriarchal collusion guarantees that Lily’s participation in the public sphere is limited to material consumption and aesthetic ornamentality, while her exclusion from generative public activity is deemed both appropriate and natural.¹³

Therefore, if women like Lily possess a sense of agency it is “double-edged. Affirming women’s will, it makes that will serve interests that thwart women’s autonomy. Registering women’s capacity for empowerment, it channels that very capacity toward social practices that will appropriate and neutralize it” (Dittmar 141). In this way, Lily’s collusion with her self-aestheticization mimics that of gazed-upon

women like Sarah Bernhardt or Josephine Baker's complicity in their overt, public sexualization. Although Lily, Bernhardt, and Baker may claim the power and agency of the seller, none completely recognizes how such transactions conform to pre-established patriarchal codes guaranteeing bodily accessibility and thus foreclose the possibility of genuine empowerment. Because aestheticization affirms women's bodiliness through the apotheosizing process of art objecthood, it "makes the body constitutive of identity while it obliterates selfhood" (Stange 6-7) which, as I will discuss in the next chapter, evinces a kind of social "blackening" of the observed woman's body.

For instance, when Lily waits for Selden in the park near Bellomont she expresses the kind of collusion which prevents her from accessing a determination of "self" beyond aestheticization:

The spot was charming, and Lily was not insensible to the charm, or to the fact that her presence enhanced it; but she was not accustomed to taste the joys of solitude except in company, and the combination of a handsome girl and a romantic scene struck her as too good to be wasted. . . . No one, however, appeared to profit by the opportunity. (*HM* 61)

As Merish notes, "even Lily's moments alone are structured by the imperative to 'be seen' by someone" (250). As readers-turned-viewers, we see how Lily's ability to actualize a sense of "selfhood" comes into question when unobserved ("she was not accustomed to taste the joys of solitude except in company"); we also "witness" Lily's willing complicity in her own objectification. Moreover and, perhaps most importantly, Wharton's inclusion of the word "profit" demonstrates how Lily's self-aestheticization/patriarchal complicity plays out across conflicted gender, race, and class identifications. As Dittmar contends, "it is ultimately [Lily's] conflicting allegiances and contradictory self-definitions that account for the ways [she]

collude[s] with [her] own objectification” (151). Reliant on her beauty, her stunning aesthetic appeal, to secure her position within the leisure class, Lily cannot perceive how such particular feminine aestheticization undermines her capacity to gain a life less “corros[ive to] the soul” (*HM* 154).

Of course, Lily is willing to collude in her own objectification because she herself possesses, as Selden does, the aesthete’s delight in visual beauty. In her near-obsession with both visual pleasure and material possessions as methods of aesthetic and emotional pleasure-production, Lily substitutes visual and material gratification for emotional fulfillment and, more notably, sexual satisfaction. Rather than the sexual life of the body, visual and material culture becomes the discursive site by which Lily enacts realities—or fantasies—of pleasure.¹⁴ When observing her receiving her breakfast tray at Bellomont, the narrator notes Lily’s sensitivity to and appreciation of visual beauty:

Near the bed stood a table holding her breakfast tray, with its harmonious porcelain and silver, a handful of violets in a slender glass, and the morning paper folded beneath her letters. There was nothing new to Lily in these tokens of a studied luxury; but, though they formed a part of her atmosphere, she never lost her sensitiveness to their charm. (*HM* 40)

Suzanne W. Jones asserts that through such scenes in which Lily’s appreciation of life itself is nearly wholly derived from aesthetic satisfaction Wharton “position[s] visual sensitivity and ethical behavior as incompatible. Lily Bart comes to a bitter end, in part because of a hyperactive aesthetic sense—a love of beautiful objects which she cannot afford and an aesthetic response to life which seems to produce a ‘moral lassitude’” (188). Of course, as seen in her moderately keen appreciation of nature at Bellomont or in her pleasure in Selden’s fine quality but “pleasantly faded Turkey rug” (*HM* 7), Lily’s love of aesthetic beauty is not limited to the purely

luxurious: she is not, after all, a member of Wharton's condemned *nouveau riche*, but "Old Money," able to appreciate objects for more than their capacity to represent buying capability. That being said, more often than not, Lily still collapses "the beautiful" with the luxurious which does not "encourage a sympathetic understanding of visual sensitivity" (Jones 188) for the reader-turned-viewer. For instance, when on the Sabrina, the Dorsets' yacht, the narrator notes "how beautiful it was—and how [Lily] loved beauty!" (*HM* 196). Lily, it seems, sees too well for her limited means.

Despite Lily's complicity in her own objectification, Wharton is unwilling to condemn Lily's beauty—or beauty itself, even as manifested through material objects—as a totalizing mechanism of female oppression. Therefore, in critiquing *The House of Mirth*, the reader must recognize the lack of utility of contemporary feminist theorists such as Naomi Wolf's theory of beauty as a "myth." For Wharton, aesthetics, whether of a body or of a vase, simply *do matter*. In the novel, all recognize Lily as, quite simply, a beautiful person. In viewing her, Lily's friends and we, as reader-turned-viewers, experience a pleasurable sense of visual gratification that, as Elaine Scarry suggests in her compelling aesthetic treatise, *On Beauty and Being Just* (1999), "confirms the value of human attention" (66). Furthermore and more problematically, however, Lily fulfills the cultural standard of feminine beauty, as she is endowed with "a crisp upward wave of hair . . . and thick . . . straight black lashes. . . Everything about her [is] at once vigorous and exquisite, at once strong and fine" (*HM* 5). Lily also possesses a sense of confidence that suggests to the viewer inner "radiance" (*HM* 4); she is appropriately youthful, with "girlish smoothness" and a "purity of tint" (*HM* 4). The importance of the social response towards Lily's beauty

should not be underestimated, for it is this response that often confirms her sense of self-worth. Indeed, Lily's beauty tends to entrance, to mesmerize those around her, a fact which cannot be ignored when considering her social interactions. As Wharton acknowledges through Lily's portrayal, beauty is compelling and potentially life-affirming, but can be problematic in interpersonal relationships because the power a beautiful woman evokes may *not* be self-determined.¹⁵

Because my interest lies less in the inviolability of Lily's interconnected race, class, and gender identifications than in the precariousness of those identifications, I am especially interested in the point in which the strength of those identifications begins to undermine and collapse upon one another: the *tableau vivant*. Since Wolff critics have been torn on whether Lily's *tableau* represents a kind of demonstration of feminist agency (again, the tenuous agency of the seller) and thus enables Lily to retain her subjectivity (Deborah Barker, Emily Orlando, Gary Totten)¹⁶ or whether it serves as the kind of ultimate expression of Lily's dispossession of agency (Dittmar, Wolff). The format of the *tableau vivant* itself encodes a kind of confusion between agency and disempowerment. *Tableau vivant* means "living picture." The term, borrowed from the French, describes a singular person or a group of costumed actors or models, posed in such a way as to evoke famous paintings or sculptures. Throughout the duration of the spectacle, the actors do not speak or move, while the audience is invited to guess at their artistic invocations.

The *tableau* intersects multiple disciplines and frameworks which may simultaneously grant women agency and dispossess them of it: "Painting, after which the *tableau vivant* modeled itself in the early history of the genre; fiction, which deployed the *tableau vivant* as a trope; and narrative cinema, a genre that the *tableau*

vivant anticipates in its attempt to combine the visuality of fine art and the narrative of fiction” (Chapman 25). Mary Chapman notes how women who participated in *tableaux* were called “model-artists” (25), a term which suggests both the passivity, the disempowerment of the artist’s model, and the agency, the active creativity, of the artist herself. However, the woman’s functioning as object in the *tableau* is underscored by her inability to either move or speak¹⁷; such presentations, as Chapman contends, contribute to “nineteenth-century constructions of women as silent and immobile” (27). Moreover, as Jennie Kassanoff argues, “*tableaux vivants* involved a representational shell game in which the person (Lily, in this case) represented a thing (a painting by Reynolds), which in turn represented a person (the original “Mrs. Lloyd”), who then represented a thing (a classical archetype)” (50). Therefore, as I will discuss, by seeing “the real Lily Bart” through the mechanisms of the *tableau*, Selden only “sees” Lily when explicitly viewed as an object, as Kassanoff’s final reduction makes evident. In this case, Lily’s capacity for quite literally *being seen* by Selden is inseparable from her object-ness, her *thingness*.

Although I believe that Lily’s performance in the *tableau* demonstrates an adherence to predetermined, patriarchal cultural codes that ultimately undermines any actualization of personal agency, in other ways I think that the very question of this demonstration of agency/retention of subjectivity is an over-discussed and over-determined one.¹⁸ When, in feminist discourse, did this question of subjectivity become an either/or: one has “it” or one does not? Much like Anne Cheng claims of Josephine Baker (as I will discuss in greater depth in Chapter 3 on Helga Crane) I propose that although Lily participates in a staged performance of femininity (Cheng 39), she does so with conscious acknowledgment that such a performance places

discursive signs onto her body, a positioning that causes her “selfhood” to oscillate between personhood and bodily-ness, and between subject and object. This is not to say that Lily is the “willfully subversive agent” (Cheng 172) hoped for by feminist critics of Baker, undermining pejorative cultural codes even as she enacts them, but rather that Lily, like Baker and Helga, claims the female subject’s vacillation between subject and objecthood as her own—*itself* a kind of dissident cultural act.

Again, although the question of Lily’s demonstration of agency/retention of subjectivity in the *tableau* is indeed an important one (if over-examined and somewhat exhausted at this point of critical inquiry), what really interests me about Lily’s *tableau* is its seeming apotheosis¹⁹ as a demonstration of a literally and figuratively staged and marked white femininity through which Lily colludes in her own objectification. In the *tableau*, Lily’s white femininity is underscored on two fronts: through the emphasis on her conspicuous, passive corporeality and through her overt staging of the signifiers of classed, white femininity and her audience’s failure to understand them as such. To establish my argument, I will quote the passage on Lily’s *tableau* at some length:

Here there could be no mistaking the predominance of personality—the unanimous ‘Oh!’ of the spectators was a tribute, not to the brush-work of Reynolds’s ‘Mrs. Lloyd’ but to the flesh and blood loveliness of Lily Bart. She had shown her artistic intelligence in selecting a type so like her own that she could embody the person represented without ceasing to be herself. It was as though she had stepped, not out of, but into, Reynolds’s canvas, banishing the phantom of his dead beauty by the beams of her living grace. The impulse to show herself in a splendid setting—she had thought for a moment of representing Tiepolo’s Cleopatra—had yielded to the truer instinct of trusting to her unassisted beauty, and she had purposely chosen a picture without distracting accessories of dress or surroundings. Her pale draperies, and the background of foliage against which she stood, served only to relieve the long dryad-like curves that swept upward from her poised foot to her lifted arm. The noble buoyancy of her attitude, its suggestion of soaring grace, revealed the touch of poetry in her beauty that Selden always

felt in her presence, yet lost the sense of when he was not with her. (*HM* 135)

Here, Lily's "unassisted beauty," "flesh," "pale draperies," and "the long-dryad-like curves [from] . . . poised foot to . . . lifted arm" all serve to emphasize that what the viewers of Lily's tableau are examining, and what we, as reader-turned-viewers, are invited to imagine, is not "undisguisedly the portrait of Miss Bart" (*HM* 134) but rather "undisguisedly" the full-length display of Miss Bart's passive *body*. As Judith Fryer notes, "what is different in this *tableau* is the frank presentation of Lily's body, an acknowledgment of an erotic nature that is never mentioned in her society, though its currents run deep beneath the surface" (77).²⁰ This bodily *passivity* in the *tableau* importantly contrasts with the active, productive labor emphasized by Lily's eventual reduction from *feminine* to *female*.

The complete, feminized corporeality of Lily's presentation becomes evident when her cousin Ned Van Alstyne notes that until the *tableau* he "never knew . . . what an *outline* Lily has" (*HM* 138, italics mine). Van Alstyne's use of the word "outline" evokes the language of the visual arts—"outline" meaning the preliminary sketch an artist makes of his (passive) model-subject before completing a work—and explicitly references the bodiliness of Lily's presentation: he speaks not of Lily herself, but of her "frame," her "outline." As Peggy Phelan maintains in *Unmarked* (1993), a text on the affirmative possibilities of the not-made-visible, for women political empowerment through visibility is a precarious endeavor, for by "excessively marking the boundaries of the woman's *body*, in order to make it thoroughly visible, patriarchal culture subjects it to legal, artistic, and psychic surveillance. This, in turn, reinforces the idea that she *is* her body" (30). Indeed, Lily's other male cousin, Jack Stepney, also underscores the corporeality of Lily's presentation—Lily-as-passive-

body—when he notes that Lily stood in the tableau “as if she were up at auction” (*HM* 157). Here, it is unclear if Stepney believes Lily is selling herself as an art object at an expensive auction house like Christie’s²¹ or, as Augusta Rohrbach proposes, at an antebellum slave auction (105).²² Either reference, however, is ultimately fitting because both reduce Lily’s personhood to abject bodiliness: a tradable object between men. Orlando and other critics claim that Lily’s possesses sellable agency²³; however, in making this assertion they fail to appreciate how these transactions conform to pre-established patriarchal codes assuring female bodily accessibility. Because it underscores women’s bodiliness through the apotheosizing process of art objecthood, aestheticization divorces the body from the mind, heart, soul, selfhood or subjectivity (whatever one may term it) and thus allows the stand-alone, passive body to represent the entirety of a woman’s socially determined identity.

Secondly, I assert that Lily’s *tableau* is significant because through it she can stage the markers of femininity which guarantee her racial and economic positions. Without this art-object aestheticization through which she theatricalizes her femininity, Lily’s inter-connected race and class identifications are undermined and ultimately become untenable. In turn, the formerly feminized Lily is “reduced” to female. In this way, Wharton’s project establishing femininity as artificial, as extant only when brought into being through display, anticipates that of Claude Cahun. And a similar argument can be made about Wharton’s treatment of Lily’s whiteness: it is both brought into being and affirmed by the gaze of others. In the *tableau vivant* the choice of Lily’s embodied subject—Mrs. Lloyd—becomes especially important. As Ammons argues, “Mrs. Lloyd . . . is unquestionably, purely white. . . . What Reynolds’s *Mrs. Lloyd* stands for—nationalized “natural” Anglo-Saxon dominance –

Lily embodies” (“Edith Wharton and Race” 79). If we accept that Lily’s *tableau* is the apotheosis of her femininity, we must note that this femininity is raced as unquestionably white. Lily’s elevation in the *tableau* is overdeterminedly feminine, leisure class, *and* white; and beyond this point, all three identifications begin to erode and collapse upon one another.

In the *tableau*, Wharton’s emphasis on Lily’s “unassisted beauty” (*HM* 135) may initially give the impression that Lily is not reliant on external markers of femininity—notably dress and hairstyle—to delimit her aesthetic presentation. However, a closer examination of the language which marks Lily’s *tableau* informs the reader that Lily’s “dressed-down” presentation serves not only to emphasize her passive, but embodied white femininity, but also to underscore her invocation of the mannered tropes and personified ideals connoting her white femininity as such. In this sense, the *physical* artifice of Lily’s posture—from her “long dryad-like curves” to her “poised foot” and “lifted arm”—serve to create the feminized *ideals*—the “nobility,” the “grace,” the “poetry,” the “beauty,” and the “harmony”—which characterize Lily’s aesthetic presentation. Of course, the point here is that these ideals are themselves feminized and raced and, as Chapman notes, the “silent, immobile woman [with] assumed virtue” is the figure by which the audience accesses them. The understated, yet posturing and “typed” white femininity of Lily’s *tableau* evokes the self-conscious staging of the model, actress, or dancer who accesses a standard of visual tropes to draw attention to her body. In its staging and yet paradoxical denial of its artifice (“a type so like her own”), Lily’s *tableau* exposes white feminine signification as a particularly performative form of race and gender encoding. Thus, as I suggested in the section on Claude Cahun in Chapter 1,

Wharton, in her critique of Lily's aestheticization, anticipates later feminist critics such as Rivière and Butler by arguing that femininity is not natural or authentic, but rather a learned, constant performance of empty, compensatory signifiers meant to hide the woman-as-unconscious-actress's very real anxiety about her social positioning (Solomon-Godeau 115, Shaw 37).

Even before the *tableau*, Wharton is careful to establish that Selden's estimation of Lily is confined to the visual; ultimately it is Selden's ability to act as an aesthete in the "Grand Manner" (Wolff 25) that prevents him from acknowledging the gap between seeing and knowing, between life and art. Again and again, Wharton uses the language of visual perception to establish Selden's relationship to Lily. "As a *spectator*, [Selden] had always enjoyed Lily Bart" (*HM* 4, italics mine), which allows him to "preserv[e] a certain social detachment, a happy air of *viewing* the show objectively" (*HM* 54, italics mine). After beginning to fall in love with Lily, Selden even further collapses seeing with knowing, of mistaking ideal aesthetic viewership with genuine human understanding: "He seem[s] to see before him *the real Lily Bart*, divested of all trivialities of her little world" (*HM* 135, italics mine). Selden conceives Lily completely in terms of the nineteenth-century aesthete. While appreciating her lovely presentation, Selden also believes that he perceives "beyond" her outward beauty, apprehending, as the 19th-century aesthete Walter Pater stated, "the unseen beauty—that abstract form of beauty . . . [which suggests the] spirit, almost clairvoyant through the frail and yielding flesh" (56). Selden trusts that his ideal, aesthetic vision can divorce Lily from the material accoutrements, "the trivialities," of her world. Acting as a "pure" aesthete, Selden abstracts the art object from her immediate physical setting; thus, his viewership encodes a kind of

“disciplinary violence” (Merish 24) that transposes Lily’s individual and physical beauty into a universal and spiritual ideal of unmediated harmony—his own artistic appreciation.

In effect, Selden is unable to interrogate the visual signifiers of gender, race, and class that constitute Lily’s stunning *tableau*; therefore, he discursively accepts—as the reader-turned-viewer is invited to question—that no visual gap exists in the seeing as knowing linguistic elision. As Barbel Tischleder persuasively claims

The House of Mirth . . . links the question of Lily’s knowability with her semblance; Selden’s will to know is not only initiated by his spectatorship, but his quest for the ‘real Lily Bart’ will, throughout the novel, remain closely related to his scopophilia—the pleasure he takes in looking at Lily—rather than to an effort to penetrate her façade. (62)

Whether or not there is a façade to penetrate, whether or not a “self” lies beneath Lily’s compensatory feminine staging, is beside the point here. Rather, what Tischleder emphasizes is how Selden’s acceptance that he knows “the real Lily” because he views her encodes a kind of visual violence that renders Lily’s own subjectivity irrelevant.

Of course, as a witness to Lily’s *tableau*, Selden is not the only viewer to fail to mind the gap between seeing with knowing. Gerty Farish, for instance, tells her cousin Selden that the *tableau* “makes her look like the real Lily—the Lily I know” (HM 135). As Martin Meisel argues, “the *tableau vivant* . . . afforded the pleasures of ‘realization’” (49). What do Lily’s viewers “realize?” They know nothing and yet they believe that they have seen and thus accessed the “real Lily Bart.” As Wharton’s presentation of Lily’s *tableau* makes evident, the “pleasure in realization,” in recognition, which viewers of *tableaux* are supposed to experience serves as the perfect mechanism to critique seeing as knowing. Through the *tableau*, Selden, Gerty

and all the other viewers are invited *to realize* Lily's presentation as "undisguisedly . . . Miss Bart" (*HM* 134); although, what they really witness (and yet fail to cognitively know) is Lily's seemingly inexhaustible capacity to manifest idealized tropes of white femininity.²⁴

Indeed, as Chapman notes, "women are stars of these [*tableau*] performances, but as stars, are imprisoned in prescribed feminine behaviors such as maternal devotion, submission to suffering and hysteria" (30). Little room for agency or artistic creativity exists in the *tableau* format because, as so-called "model-artists," women were inscribed within a certain pre-determined set of behaviors. Of course, as seen throughout the novel, Lily is able to embody such confined feminine comportment when not overtly aestheticized as an *object d'art*. However, the explicit aestheticization of the *tableau* makes apparent that even when Lily *stages* her white femininity as performance, the audience of her world fails to interpret this performativity as such. Therefore, I contend that the "pleasure in recognition" that Lily's audience experiences is simply confirmation that white leisure class femininity conforms to white patriarchal agendas which collapse white femininity with passivity and powerlessness. The audience fails to acknowledge any gap between Lily's own selfhood and her presentation. Yet, as previously noted in regards to Selden's viewership, Lily's audience's inability to critique her visual productions of feminine signifiers opens up a discursive space in which we, as readers-turned-viewers observing Lily but also observing her audience, can act as critical agents, capable of such critique. We, Wharton tells us, can *see* better.

In contrast to Selden's singular, self-determined, and myopic spectatorship, Lily's viewership is characterized by its complete ability to see through someone

else's eyes, in this case Selden's: "the secret . . . [was] his way of readjusting her vision. Lily, turning her eyes from him, found herself scanning her little world through his *retina*: it was as though the pink lamps had been shut off and the dusty daylight let in" (*HM* 55, italics mine).²⁵ Because of Selden's influence, Lily begins to doubt the validity of the only value system she knows—the life of aesthetics, of moral achievement conceived in terms of stunning physical appeal. For instance, the narrator notes that Selden's "presence always had the effect of cheapening [Lily's] aspirations, of throwing her whole world *out of focus*" (*HM* 88, italics mine). At one point Lily asks Selden why he makes her question the legitimacy of her material strivings: "Why do you do this to me? Why do you make the things I have chosen seem hateful to me, if you have nothing to give me instead?" To which Selden replies, "No, I have nothing to give you instead. If I had, it should be yours, you know" (*HM* 72). Although Selden does not possess material goods to bestow upon Lily, he has already given her a grand, but ultimately destructive gift: the ideas and the intellectual modes—in effect, a framework of viewership—by which to critique her aesthetic and thus social position.²⁶ In turn Lily offers her beauty—the entirety of her social value—to Selden in exchange for his doubting, imperfect love.

Unlike Selden, Rosedale is able to critique the performativity of Lily's gender, race, and class markers. Rosedale simply sees—and thus knows—substantially better than Selden, Gerty, and others of their world. Here, I agree with Harrison-Kahan that "in the *tableau vivant* Selden stops seeing [Lily's] performance for what it is, mistaking her construction for the 'real Lily Bart.' Rosedale, on the other hand, consistently sees Lily as another performative self" (43). Selden is more than willing to accept that Lily's compensatory staging of gender, class, and racial signifiers

represents “the real things,”²⁷ but also that they apotheosize *more than* themselves: an aesthetic life morally conceived. In contrast, Rosedale’s “business astuteness” (*HM* 16) ensures that he understands that the value he places on Lily’s physical beauty rests on its very *performed* feminine artifice and thus, its transposed literal value in their *haute bourgeoisie* world—the leisure class husband’s “pecuniary ability to afford a life of idleness” (Veblen 43). Rosedale prizes the artifice and performativity of Lily’s beauty and acknowledges that her aestheticization can only be judged through its market value—how others of their world determine its worth.²⁸ For instance, after Lily’s *tableau*, Rosedale notes that “if [he] could get Paul Morpeth to paint her like that, the picture’d appreciate a hundred per cent [sic] in ten years” (*HM* 158). By invoking the name of the most popular society painter of the day and by using the language of financial growth to describe Lily’s recent staging of white femininity, Rosedale underscores that the literal value of Lily’s beauty is as a theatrical performance with a pecuniary audience capable of judging worth and of buying and selling beautiful commodities.

Rosedale’s ascending whiteness not coincidentally parallels his financial and social rise, while his contact with Lily marks if not ensures her racial and class collapse. In this way, “Lily’s understanding—and . . . identification—with Rosedale exposes the fictions of gender, sexuality, race, and class simultaneously, providing the best evidence of how these identities are mutually constitutive” (Harrison-Kahan 45). When Lily says she will marry Rosedale after being disinherited and falling out with both the Welly-Brys and the Gormers, he replies that he’s “more in love with [her] than ever,” yet says: “but if I married [her] now I’d queer myself for good and all, and everything I’ve worked for all these years would be wasted” (*HM* 256).

“Everything” Rosedale has worked for includes his financial and social position, but also his affirmed whiteness, his ability to have discarded through pecuniary ascent a pejoratively raced ethnic identity outside of the bounds of “inviolable” whiteness.

Harrison-Kahn proposes that

Queer theorists argue that ‘queer’ resists definition, referring instead to identities that are always in the process of being destabilized and thus cannot be fixed or defined. But ‘queer’ as it is used today usually refers to sexual identity. In contrast, Rosedale’s fears about marrying Lily play out in terms of race, class, gender, and sexuality. In stating that a union with Lily would queer him ‘for good and all,’ Rosedale indicates that queerness was a part of his identity that he tried to shed as he worked his way up in society. (35)

As Harrison-Kahan contends, in our modern theoretical parlance, “queer” is often conceived positively, as a freedom from reified identifications which ultimately serve to limit one’s sense of personal possibility. However, for Rosedale, queerness suggests the precariousness of the ethnic newcomer’s inter-related class, gender, and race identifications: contact with one whose own identifications have been compromised can undermine the tenability of the *parvenu*’s carefully constructed house-of-cards social identity.

Meanwhile, Lily’s own contact with Rosedale exposes how feminine and white racial identifications fail to constitute one another as class status erodes. Rosedale agrees to marry Lily, but only if she blackmails Bertha Dorset into re-accepting her into society. Lily almost acquiesces to Rosedale’s conditions, but as she is tempted to do so the invisible specter of their impending miscegenated marriage looms as Rosedale physically “move[s] suddenly nearer” and Lily realizes that he suspects her of “cheat[ing] him of his share in the spoils” (*HM* 260). The “spoil” is, of course, Lily herself: the body of which Rosedale hopes to take physical possession and the feminine affect of which he wants to make social use. It is this

knowledge that she herself is the “Lily-white” spoil to be consumed (and thus, to be ruined and blackened) that causes Lily to physically turn away from Rosedale and reject his offer.

Because Rosedale is not quite white, Wharton establishes him as a kind of hyper-masculine figure whose tenuous racial position is augmented by the specter of his potent masculinity. Indeed, Rosedale’s stereotypically strong, embodied presence contrasts with Selden’s sensitive aestheteness. Described throughout the novel as ostentatious, vulgar, meddling, and, as if to manifest all of these character traits, racially Asiatic, Rosedale’s otherness is used to “throw Selden and Lily into lofty, hyper Anglo-Saxon relief” (“Edith Wharton and Race” 80). The relief in which Lily is established however, is not above racial contamination. Kassinoff argues that through Lily Wharton insists that “racial status is reassuringly immutable. Race becomes an essentialist—if deeply problematic—answer to the cultural vulnerabilities of class and gender” (38). However, as illustrated in the above scene, the phallic actuality, the literal physicality of Rosedale’s embodied presence in Lily’s socially compromised life, undermines the seeming inviolate nature of Lily’s racial position.²⁹ Race, it seems, is no less vulnerable than class and gender to contamination by another’s—or one’s own—compromised identifications. Faced with financial ruin, Lily turns to the not-quite white Rosedale to affirm her class status; in turn, he darkens her, compromising her “Lily-whiteness.” That said, importantly Rosedale, through flirtation and business arrangements, only temporarily darkens Lily; he does not permanently blacken her through marriage. As Ammons proposes, Rosedale is “the outsider, the carrier of race whose presence sets in relief Anglo-Saxonness . . . Even though [Lily] decides late in the novel to marry this man,

Wharton will not let that happen” (“Edith Wharton and Race” 81). When faced with miscegenation, Wharton would rather kill off her heroine—and thus preserve her whiteness—than marry her to a Jew.

A compromised racial position also undermines Lily’s femininity. In the above scene in which Lily rejects Rosedale’s offer to blackmail Bertha Dorset, he begins to treat her less like a feminized embodiment of the leisure class and more like a masculinized business associate: “[He put things] in terms of business-like give-and-take . . . like a transfer of property or a revision of boundary lines” (*HM* 259). Once Lily has fallen yet again (she is working at the milliner’s), Rosedale offers her money as a “plain business arrangement, such as one man would make with another” (*HM* 299). In both exchanges, Rosedale *de-feminizes* Lily and comfortably treats her like a male comrade—in effect, he *masculates* her—precisely because of her compromised racial and socio-economic status.³⁰ Without immutable race and class status, Lily is no longer regarded by Rosedale as a coddled feminine object but rather as a masculated female, capable of appreciating a “plain business arrangement.”

The slippage of Lily’s feminine and racial status as a result of her economic fall is anticipated by her early, foreboding contact with the charwoman, Mrs. Haffen, and then manifested late in the novel in the millinery and tea-room scenes. Upon Lily’s leaving Selden’s apartment at the Benedick the narrator notes that “there was no one in sight . . . but a char-woman who was scrubbing the stairs. Her own stout person and its surrounding implements took up so much room that Lily, to pass her, had to gather up her skirts and brush against the wall” (*HM* 13). Selden’s apartment building itself, tellingly named “The Benedick” after the confirmed bachelor of the same name from Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing*, establishes the over-

determined nature of masculinity and femininity in the novel. In entering the flat, Lily exclaims: “How delicious to have a place like this all to one’s self! What a miserable thing is to be a woman” (*HM* 7). Lily’s comment here establishes the text’s treatment of masculinity and femininity: masculinity can—perhaps, should—exist in solitude, while femininity can only be brought into being through art, through staging, through the gaze of a rapt audience.

Later in the novel, at her aunt’s house, Lily again encounters the charwoman, and finds “herself met by a lifted stare which had once before confronted her under similar circumstances” (*HM* 99). In both of these instances, Mrs. Haffen’s gaze is one of recognition: despite Lily’s present feminized affect, she will become an embodied female, who must, like Mrs. Haffen, use her body in labor. Here, Lily’s literal and visual contact with Mrs. Haffen anticipates both her later social fall and her surveillance by the lower-class women of the millinery.³¹ The social world in which Lily moves uses passive, aestheticized white femininity—rather than productive, embodied femaleness—as an *haute bourgeoisie* class marker. But as the novel progresses, Lily becomes a more *embodied* female who must rely on her physical being—rather than her beautiful aesthetic form—to survive.

In the millinery, Lily quite clearly has become an active female laborer rather than a passive feminine object. As an employee, Lily cannot rely on a bodily affect of typed femininity—downturned eyes, artful blushing, a slow gait—to guarantee her social position: “Lily looked down ruefully at her handiwork. The forewoman was right: the sewing on the spangles was inexcusably bad. What made her so much more clumsy than usual? Was it a growing distaste for her task, or actual physical disability?” (*HM* 286).³² Taught to be ornamental and to think of herself as

exceptional, Lily is somewhat dismayed that her training and inculcated sense of superiority work against any talent toward active employment.³³ It is the very necessity of Lily's active work that dispels the last vestiges of her interconnected identifications as a feminized white embodiment of the leisure class: such a woman, by definition, cannot work, she *must* be passive.³⁴ Indeed, when Rosedale meets Lily for the last time and Lily confesses that she has lost her job and is "out of work," Rosedale expresses shock at such an idea on the precise grounds that any discussion of work compromises Lily's typed, white femininity: "Out of work—out of work! What a way for you to talk! The idea of your having to work—it's preposterous" (*HM* 298).

In the tearoom after she has been dispelled from the millinery, Lily is once again rendered inactive, but now she is also inconspicuous. The eyes of others no longer rest on her tired frame:

The room was full of women and girls, all too much engaged in the rapid absorption of tea and pie to remark her entrance. . . . She felt a sudden pang of profound loneliness. . . . Her eyes sought the faces about her, craving a responsive glance, some sign of an intuition of her trouble. But the sallow preoccupied women, with their bags and note-books and rolls of music, were all engrossed in their own affairs . . . (*HM* 302)³⁵

Lily fails to feel self-actualized when un-viewed: she can only conceive of recognition by others in terms of visual confirmation. Therefore, although she is again inactive here, she does not manifest leisure class white femininity which is dependent on freedom from labor: at this juncture, Lily *needs* to be working. Wolff claims that Lily "has learned so thoroughly to experience herself as an object that is being observed by others—not directly as an integrated human being—that her sense of 'self' is confirmed only when she elicits reactions from others" (34).

Without aestheticized conspicuousness, without observation by others, particularly,

as Amy Kaplan notes, the spectatorship of the lower classes (89-90), Lily's comprised "identity" of tenuous identifications—white, leisure class, feminine—simply fails to exist: it is both actuated and valued through aesthetic viewership.

Here, Phelan's suspicion of collapsing visibility with "empowerment" proves useful:

In conflating identity politics with visibility, cultural activists and some theorists have also assumed that 'selves' can be adequately represented within a visual or linguistic field. . . . If representational visibility equals power, then almost-naked young white women should be running Western culture. The ubiquity of their image, however, has hardly brought them political or economic power. (10)

As previously acknowledged when discussing the *tableau*, the gazes which observe Lily tend to make a one-to-one reduction between Lily her-"self" and Lily as typed representation of white femininity. Such reduction has prevented Lily from establishing a sense of non-visual kinship between herself and others, indeed, as it were, a recognition between souls. Interestingly enough, it is only at the moment when spectatorship fails to be activated—when she fails to be observed in the tearroom—that Lily understands that spectatorship, meaning visual possession, does not guarantee (indeed, may prevent) recognition of one's identity beyond the visual. For others to *see* her, Lily realizes, does not confirm that they *know* her.

Lily's failure to understand the difference between spectatorship and recognition contrasts with Cahun's artistic staging of this difference. In her work, Cahun intentionally confuses the relationship between socially-invoked identifications and personally-perceived identity, even by suggesting the impossibility of the "self." Yet, in doing so, Cahun still manifests a sense of profound understanding between herself and another person, her collaborator, partner, and lover Marcel Moore. Cahun may document the impossibility of visual

confirmation—seeing does *not* confirm knowing—and therefore, the untenability of the “self,” but she still affirms the extant possibility of mutual recognition between like-minded individuals. “Selfhood,” Cahun argues, need not be holistically or inviolately conceived; indeed, it may not exist at all in order for understanding to exist between two people. Lily, in contrast, confuses being observed with being known, with being appreciated, indeed, with being loved.

In the scene in the working class Nettie Struther’s apartment, Lily again seeks spectatorship over recognition by attempting to explicitly re-stage and thus reclaim her femininity for a rapt audience.³⁶ However, I assert that this representation suggests a kind of hollowness, especially when the narrator notes that Lily felt “as though [Nettie’s] child entered her and became a part of herself” (*HM* 316)). Lily’s appropriation of an affected maternity, the most “feminine” of all gendered acts, she has certainly never experienced and seemingly, never even desired,³⁷ serves to underscore the now complete failure of Lily’s leisure class white femininity. While Lily holds Nettie’s baby, she aestheticizes herself in an old *tableau*-like way, anticipating “Nettie’s eyes resting on her with tenderness and exultation” (*HM* 316). Like Wolff, I agree that this scene “gives poignant evidence of Lily’s inability to conceive herself in any other way than as the object of aesthetic attention” (quoted in Showalter 152). Envisaging this self-orchestrated scene in terms of another’s aesthetic response, Lily briefly reclaims a femininity that is actuated through spectatorial staging: when viewed through Nettie’s eyes, Lily becomes a mother figure. However, like the femininity of Lily’s *tableau*, this performed maternity is precarious explicitly because it is staged; it is dependent on a viewership, not actuality. Lily can function here as an actress in a stage set, briefly claiming a baby

and thus a degree of feminized maternity, but only for the purposes of viewership. When the viewer stops looking, she loses the baby *and* her femininity. Therefore, even in a scene suggesting the redemptive capacities of reproduction, of life beyond life, Lily's possible maternity is exposed as dependent on another's viewership: a sterile proposition imitating Echo's aesthetic consumption of Narcissus.

Simultaneously, Lily's attempt to claim femininity through maternity ironically positions her as an embodied mother like Nettie—someone who, unlike the presumably virginal Lily, employs her body to give birth to another human being. That is to say, Lily's effort to reclaim her white, feminine leisure class identity by holding the baby of a lower class mother, simply manifests how far her *feminine affect* has slipped into *embodied femaleness*. In this scene, Wharton suggests Lily's reduction to such femaleness by describing “the soft weight [of the baby] sink[ing] trustfully against [Lily's] breast” (*HM* 315); here, Lily and Nettie's baby, Marry Anto'nette, merge together into one embodied form: an earthly Madonna.³⁸ In the millinery, in the tearoom, and in the Rosedale and Nettie scenes, the reader-turned-viewer witnesses Lily's femininity become “reduced” to femaleness, a differing but seemingly inviolate gender system still operating and defining Wharton's protagonist.

Merish maintains that “inconspicuousness” ensures Lily's social, and then her literal, death” (253). Bereft of a gaze, all of the identifications—white, leisure class, feminine—which Lily uses to construct her identity collapse upon one another and begin to fall away. In death, however, Lily's white femininity, contaminated by active work, a social fall, and racial darkening,³⁹ is restored, its apotheosis achieved: her femininity is once again completely aestheticized, rendered conspicuous, passive, and entirely accessible to the male gaze.⁴⁰ With Selden coming into Lily's room after her

death, the narrator notes that “though the blind was down, the irresistible sunlight poured a tempered golden flood into the room, and in its light Selden saw a narrow bed along the wall, and on the bed, with motionless hands and calm unrecognizing face, the semblance of Lily Bart” (*HM* 325). The specific aesthetic framing of Lily’s death scene—the drawn blind, the “irresistible sunlight” lighting her bed and yet suggesting a redemptive heaven beyond this world—evokes the kind of clichéd renderings of female demise popular with Wharton’s artistic contemporaries, the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood.

Evoking the Pre-Raphaelite models, Lily’s beauty in death becomes both more intense and more profoundly valued by the fetishizing male viewer. The last image of the novel shows us Selden in a position of penitent repose: “[he] had kept alive the faith that now drew him penitent and reconciled to her side. He knelt by the bed and bent over her, draining their last moment to its lees” (*HM* 329). The scene evokes the mourning, mythologized male lover frequently depicted in the paintings of the Pre-Raphaelites, particularly calling to mind Rossetti’s *Dante’s Dream at the Time of the Death of Beatrice* (Orlando 74, see Plate 12). Orlando contends that the deathbed trope allows Wharton

to critique a tradition, manifest in the work of Rossetti and his Pre-Raphaelite brothers, that positions dead beautiful women as subject to the gazes of men who fail to rise to their occasion. Visual images of this sort freeze an aesthetically appealing woman into a posture that is disempowering, passive, and forever to-be-looked-at while immortalizing the male in the active position as gazing consumer. (74)

Selden’s implied spiritual epiphany—the knowledge that “at least he had loved [Lily]” (*HM* 329)—suggests a necrophilic conflation of “spiritual ecstasy and sexual rapture” (Orlando 49). By observing Lily totally passive—dead—Selden achieves a kind of heightened spiritual awareness suggestive of sexual ecstasy. Here, Wharton

seems to be critiquing the disturbing Pre-Raphaelite paradigm of fetishizing love and passive beauty in which “women are programmed for death and ready to die without struggle [indeed, Lily dies in her sleep] so that the observer may experience the ultimate orgasm of watching innocence expire” (Judith Fetterly, quoted in Chapman 6). Of course, in death Lily cannot collude in her own objectification through conscious theatricalization of signifying white femininity. Therefore, the Pre-Raphaelite-like staging of her body—the light, the bed, the penitent male mourner—suggests, through the narrator’s use of free indirect discourse, Selden’s continuing desire to inflict such tropes on Lily and thus to derive pleasure, indeed, “the ultimate orgasm of watching innocence expire,” from a oppressive form of raced and gendered aestheticization.

In this moment, although Selden pores over Lily’s body, he simultaneously “denies” that “it was her *real* self” (*HM* 325, italics mine). Here, the narrator uses the same word, “real,” which Selden uses after Lily’s *tableau vivant* (“the real Lily Bart”) to affirm seeing as knowing. However, Selden’s hopeful doubt that the image may *not* be Lily herself, may *not* be “the real Lily Bart,” suggests both his guilt and his new consciousness of the gap between viewing and understanding. In her last visit to Selden right before her death, the visit during which she threw into the fire Bertha Dorset’s letters to Selden, Lily explains her motivations more thoroughly than she has ever done before in the effort to make him “*see* her wholly for once before they parted” (*HM* 307, italics mine). Considering how long Lily has internalized Selden’s conception of life and aesthetics, it is not surprising that at the end of her life, confronted with his love, confronted with his judgment, she still wants her self-determination to be known in terms of his vision. However, Lily’s unwillingness to

inform Selden of the sacrifice she has made for him—the burning of the letters—suggests that she has begun to understand the imperfectness of his vision. A great act of kindness, of selflessness, cannot, she has decided, overcome a lifetime of accepting the infallibility of aesthetic viewership.

Through her slippage in racial and class categories, Lily becomes less feminized, but more gendered female. As we, the readers-turned-viewers of *The House of Mirth*, observe during the progression of the novel, Lily falls in class status and her whiteness is blackened through contact with Rosedale. In turn, Lily becomes a more embodied female whose only former cultural capital—a beautiful aesthetic form and a feminine affect—is rendered irrelevant in relation to an active physical body. Without white leisure class aestheticization, Lily is ultimately defeminized and put in the category of female.

In many ways Wharton's narrator functions like Cahun: the critical agent capable of staging the precariousness of visual identifications and thus of allowing the reader-turned-viewer the capacity to critique her own viewing position. As Dianne L. Chambers suggests, "the discrepancy between Selden's perspective as primary reader of Lily Bart and his repeated misunderstandings of events becomes an invitation for the reader to consider how conventional narrative structures can distort female experience." (54). Although I agree with Chambers, I would assert that "viewing" should be substituted for "narrative" in her statement. Dominant codes of viewership block Selden's and the other characters' understanding of Lily, but invite an empathetic, yet critical response in the reader-turned-viewer who can critique the tenability of race, class, and gender identifications reliant on tenuous visual staging. Subversion of categorical identifications, Wharton suggests, is not to

be produced through complacent, affirming viewership which denies the artistic subject's constructedness, which accepts seeing as knowing. Rather it is produced through new, vigilant modes of seeing which aggressively challenge the subject's presentation.

Therefore, the agency that Wharton champions, I contend, lies not with Lily or any character of either gender in the text, but with her reader-turned-self-aware and questioning viewer. That reader can choose to construct a new readership/viewership paradigm that more accurately ascertains one's sense of "self," even if she decides, as Cahun does, that such a "self" may not exist at all, that "under this mask, [lies] another mask" (Claude Cahun, quoted in Doy 47). To again invoke Wolff's question from the beginning of this chapter, perhaps Wharton does not ask, "What ought Lily Bart to do?" (*HM* x), but rather, "what will *you* do, reader-turned-viewer, now that you are confronted with this knowledge?" Perhaps, Wharton argues, the first step is for us to take such understanding beyond the reading experience, into the life of the mind and of the body, into the heartbeat of a raced and gendered world.

¹ All references to *The House of Mirth* come from the Penguin 1993 edition with an introduction by Cynthia Griffin Wolff. In subsequent notes or references I will abbreviate the book title *HM*.

² “*The House of Mirth* reveals not only the construction of gender identity (as it is commonly read, but also the ways that fictions of femininity are intimately entwined with the fictions of Lily’s whiteness” (Harrison-Kahan 35).

³ As Peggy Phelan argues, “[art can] make visible the symmetrical drive of spectatorship: the desire to see always touches the desire to be seen. It is necessary then to speak of both the object of the gaze and the gaze of the object” (21).

⁴ Lily’s loss of femininity *sans* visual staging is a close inversion of that which occurs to Helga Crane. Unlike Lily, Helga *loses* her female gender through visual staging because, through such aestheticization, she becomes interpolated within a discourse of historical oppression that equates blackness with the not-quite-human—that which can be owned and consumed. As feminist critics living in a post-Butler age, we are perhaps too quick to accept the untenability of gender, its formation within a discursive space without a solid framework, and therefore, its apparent lack of power, use, and functionality. Even if we accept the ultimate untenability of gender, it is important, as Larsen reminds us, to acknowledge what it is like for the racial subject to live *without* gender’s protective—if limiting—confines. As Adrian Piper does in her Mythic Being series, Larsen, through her portrayal of Helga Crane, suggests that the ability to disregard gender is itself demonstrative of a position of both traditional authority (white) and historical specificity (modern). This is not to say that Larsen means to recuperate gender as a category, but simply that she intends to demonstrate that to discount it entirely may itself be a posture of privilege. In her portrayal of Helga’s loss of female genderedness through aestheticization, Larsen effectively underscores the fact of this racial dispensation, of white women’s exclusive ability to exempt themselves from the visual and social signifiers of gender.

⁵ As has been well-documented, Wharton explicitly did not position herself as a feminist (“New Woman” in early twentieth-century parlance). Deborah Lindsay Williams, for instance, argues that “as [a] writer who [was] deeply invested in shaking off nineteenth-century traditions of female authorship, [Wharton] did not want to ally [herself] with ‘old-fashioned’ views of women, but [she] did not want to be labeled as New Women, either. Neither the nineteenth-century model of ‘lady authorship’ nor the twentieth-century model of activist-writer seemed to fit” (89). Because she wished to be seen as an artist, not a “scribbling” lady novelist, Wharton refused to identify with nineteenth-century women writers; moreover, her fundamentally conservative class allegiances prevented her from seeing validity in the social justice type writing of twentieth-century New Women. This not to say, of course, that we cannot read elements of feminist subversion in Wharton’s work. However, we must recognize that Wharton’s own politics may not fit into a modern, progressive model; moreover, we must acknowledge the untenability of any holistic, universalizing claims of “womanhood” when discussing Wharton’s work. As Dianne L. Chambers argues, “criticism can examine how the text reveals gendered cultural and material characteristics of signifying practices that shape the speaking subject” (21) without making assertions that claim to speak “for all women.”

⁶ Williams argues that Wharton, like Willa Cather, does offer alternatives, but not for their female protagonists: “Lily Bart and Antonia Shimerda so fill the center stage of each novel that [Carry Fisher, Gerty Farish, Tiny Soderball, Lena Lingard] can go about their alternative careers with impunity” (91). Although I agree that the strongest suggestion of Wharton’s feminism may occur “off-stage,” as it were, I would also assert that Wharton’s pejorative representations of Carry Fisher and Gerty Farish undermine Williams’s assertion that these women serve as positive (or even possible) models for Lily Bart to emulate.

⁷ Jennie Kassanoff argues that as representative of “old money” New York, Lily is “part of an endangered species . . . not so much a circulating commodity as she is a rare museum piece, desirable precisely because she is out of circulation” (53). In her analysis, Kassanoff agrees with Ammons that for Wharton (whose anti-Semitic sentiments have been well-documented) Lily must die, must “become extinct,” so she isn’t contaminated by the “reproducing Jew” (53).

⁸ This passivity, as Wolff argues, was reflected in women’s literal presentations in the art world: “Various forms of art [i.e., impressionism and art nouveau] that gained currency during the later nineteenth century served to reinforce this notion of the woman as a passive creature whose primary

interest was in offering herself as the ultimate ‘consumer item.’ . . . Always, the women were portrayed as essentially static; sitting, reclining, standing pensively, these women became emblematic assertions of the notion that woman’s ‘natural’ role is passive rather than active” (*HM* xxii-iii).

⁹ Of course, Lily’s complete and lifelong acceptance of her beautiful ornamentality makes it difficult to distinguish the threads of agency and personal culpability that characterize her ultimate social and financial collapse. Lily herself seems to acknowledge this difficulty, for when Gerty asks her to tell her “the whole truth from the beginning” about what happened with the Dorsets Lily exclaims: “Why, the beginning was in my cradle, I suppose—in the way I was brought up, and the things I was taught to care for” (*HM* 226).

¹⁰ In her essay, “Debasing Exchange: Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*,” Wai-chee Dimock argues that for the *haute bourgeoisie*, not only Lily’s appearance, but all human interactions and relationships are subordinated into the logic of marketplace: “The power of the marketplace, then, resides not in its presence, which is only marginal in *The House of Mirth*, but in its ability to reproduce itself, in its ability to assimilate everything else into its domain. As a controlling logic, a mode of human conduct and human association, the marketplace is everywhere and nowhere, ubiquitous and invisible. Under its shadow even the most private affairs take on the essence of business transactions, for the realm of human relations is fully contained within an all-encompassing business ethic” (123-4).

¹¹ Although Wharton’s primary interest lies in the limited choices (i.e., marry well or be dependent on relatives) available to women of Lily’s *haute bourgeoisie* world, she also places the occasional careful cue that men of smaller means are also sometimes placed in similar difficult positions. For instance, the narrator notes in regards to Lily’s cousin, Jack Stepney, that “[he] had once said of her [Miss Van Osburgh, his future wife] that she was as reliable as roast mutton. His own taste was in the line of less solid and more highly-seasoned diet; but hunger makes any fare palatable, and there had been times when Mr. Stepney had been reduced to a crust” (*HM* 47). Men like Jack Stepney, allowed to work, as Lily is not, but not expected to work “too hard” (hence, leisure class), are encouraged to marry for money, as are women like Lily. By pointing out this example, I am not arguing that men experience the same degree of social limitation/aesthetic objectification as do the women as Lily’s world. Rather, I am noting how Wharton herself draws attention to the habits and expectations of the leisure class, which encourage financially advantageous marriages and discourage active participation in the wider world.

¹² As Janice Peterson argues, Veblen’s *Theory of the Leisure Class* continues to be significant in modernity as a result of Veblen’s “recognition of the fundamental economic significance of gender” (117).

¹³ Here, I am influenced by Elizabeth Maddock Dillon’s argument of how images of women are used to articulate definitions of the public and private spheres: “The public sphere is used to create and circulate images that define women as private . . . thus to say that women are absent from the public sphere because they are consigned to the private sphere is incorrect: rather powerful *public* images of femininity identify women as private” (5). In effect, “woman” becomes a metonym for “private” as it circulates in *public* discourse.

¹⁴ As I will discuss in Chapter 3, Helga participates in a similar displacement of emotional and sexual pleasure onto visual and material consumption.

¹⁵ In this way Lily’s beauty seems most aligned (despite Wharton’s obvious objection to such a comparison) with the dark, smoldering models of Pre-Raphaelite paintings reproduced today as posters. Although the feminist reader-turned-viewer may acknowledge the sickliness, subjugation, or infantilized nature of portrayed Pre-Raphaelite women, virtually no one can refute their popular appeal—indeed, their undeniable beauty. As her acquaintances are drawn out of themselves to be entranced by Lily’s dark eyes and vivacious, yet elegant presence, we, as modern viewers, are lured into the painting’s frame to be mesmerized by the luxurious unwieldy hair, the sumptuous satin dress, and the sunlit, fine skin of a Pre-Raphaelite beauty like the model of William Holman Hunt’s *The Lady of Shalott*. The persistence with which Pre-Raphaelite paintings are reproduced testifies to their extraordinary, popular appeal; however, this reproduction is also self-fulfilling, for the more something is reproduced for its beauty, the more the kind of beauty depicted becomes synonymous with “beauty” itself. Such reproduction has obvious links to consumerism; what initially is individually conceived as appealing or attractive can quickly become, through infinite reproduction, an entire culture’s standard of beauty.

¹⁶ Barker asserts that Lily “does not simply imitate *Mrs. Lloyd*; she displaces Reynolds’s masterpiece with her own personality. Her ability to obliterate the role she is performing through her ‘predominance of personality’ signals her greatest artistic triumph” (151). Orlando argues that “Lily’s *tableau* is a reincarnation of a Reynolds lady, but it fails to eclipse her character” (70). Totten contends that “Lily’s portrayal of Reynolds’s portrait, *Mrs. Lloyd* (1776), is also an instance of representation representing itself, but Lily’s subjectivity remains intact in the process. . . . Rather than having her subjectivity eclipsed in the *tableau*’s structure, Lily uses the *tableau* to stage her subjectivity” (72-3).

¹⁷ Kassanoff insightfully draws a racial connection between the immobility and silence of *tableaux vivants* and the similar noiseless stasis of taxidermy: “The logic informing both styles of exhibition reveals a stunning instance of nature’s unnaturalness, the decadent preservation of the organic in the service of a perfect but failing racial myth” (47). Although I find Kassanoff’s claim interesting and persuasive, I would contend, as my own argument makes evident, that Lily’s portrayal of “herself” in the *tableau* is not simply a demonstration of the fallibility of racial myths, but also a manifestation of the untenability of intersecting, failing identifications: white, upper class, feminine.

¹⁸ Although, as I have noted, I do not wish to trap myself in the agency/subjection debate of Lily’s *tableau*, I will say that I find that Lily demonstrates personal/artistic agency most profoundly *after* the *tableau*, when she refuses a portrait from Paul Morpeth, the high society portrait painter known for his idealized renderings. Even though Morpeth is “immensely struck by Lily’s plastic possibilities—not the face: too self-controlled for expression; but the rest of her, gad, what a model she’d make,” Lily tells Carry Fisher that “I don’t care to accept a portrait from Paul Morpeth” (*HM* 251). Because Morpeth is known for virtually eradicating his subjects’ individuality through complete glorification, Lily’s refusal to accept a portrait by Morpeth suggests that she prefers her own self-presentation to an idealized rendering of a woman like and yet not, herself. In this instance, Lily resists the appropriation of her own image, choosing instead to retain “artistic control” over her own bodily presentation. As noted by numerous critics, the character of Paul Morpeth is a thinly-disguised, sarcastic portrayal of John Singer Sargent, whom Wharton disliked for his idealized (and ultimately self-serving) portraits of American and European society women. Sargent’s portraits are characterized by close attention to material detail and (to his critics) a certain vapidness of subject of matter. In *The Custom of the Country*, Wharton presents a similar caricature of Sargent through the character of Claud Walsingham Popple.

¹⁹ Both first and secondary definitions of “apotheosis” work in this context. The first definition of apotheosis—“elevation to divine status” (Merriam Webster)—evokes the extreme kind of social elevation Lily’s beauty, particularly when staged, grants her within her world. The secondary definition—the “perfect example or quintessence” (Merriam Webster)—explains more literally how the *tableau* functions in the context of my argument. This is to say that the *tableau* is both the high point and the perfect example of Lily’s staged femininity.

²⁰ Lily’s own erotic nature, the world of desire encased by her body, is never mentioned, only the male relationship to the desire evoked by that beautiful body. As feminist critics, how should we take this silence? Is Lily without desire? Without the discursive mechanisms to articulate that desire? Without the willingness to acknowledge it even to herself? Or without Wharton’s willingness to acknowledge it? I agree with Harrison-Kahan that the one time Lily shares a bed with Gerty “is the most erotic [scene] in the novel . . . it suggests and then discards the possibility of same-sex intimacy” (44). Although Wharton may not be comfortable articulating the *actualization* of same-sex passion, she seems even less able to render even the *possibility* of active female desire. Indeed, the activeness of Lily’s nature seems more inclined toward material objects rather than to sex, or, as Merish argues, “Lily Bart’s passion for men is much less convincingly rendered than her passion for things” (236); “she is repulsed by men who want to touch her” (Fryer 91). Indeed, Lily’s repulsion of Rosedale may be sexual as well as anti-Semitic (although that is not to say that those two repulsions may not be intertwined). Selden, presumably but not explicitly the object of Lily’s virgin desire, is a kind of *flâneur* (Merish 250, Tischleder 69), delighting in objects, in standing apart, in watching and being observed, not in dirtying himself with the messy business of sustained human interactions. Such an ability to stand apart—to exist as a non-penetrative threat to Lily’s seemingly inviolate virginity—may be part of Selden’s appeal for Lily, who expresses no desire herself, only the urge to evoke it in her admiring male viewers. Although Selden himself is no virgin nor no saint (his former relationship to Bertha Dorset forms one of the crucial plot points of the novel), his desire for actual sexual possession seems to remain (oddly and yet fastidiously) with married women, not virginal, unmarried women like Lily.

Such a choice suggests that Selden's allegiance is to social determinations connoting "acceptable" sexual transgressions (married women who are already "defiled"), not to conventional moral codes of sexual monogamy.

²¹ Christie's opened in 1766, so such a reference is not anachronistic.

²² Hochman argues that "Selden is the spectator who refuses to bid at the auction, just as Lily herself is the object on display but ultimately not for sale" (155).

²³ Orlando contends, as I do not, that this objectification affords women a kind of agency: "[Through] the objectification of their own bodies. . . . [women] oversee, direct, and coproduce their body art, and their body is less 'enshrined' than it is enthroned. Rather than being seduced or killed into art, these heroines find life and power in representation. Although the options may not always satisfy or gratify, they at least endow women with a means of survival and a way to overturn the perversely sexist, markedly necrophilic model of creativity" (53).

²⁴ What surprises me is just how many critics seem to accept that in witnessing Lily's *tableau* they too see "the real Lily Bart." Kassanoff, for instance, argues that "by choosing 'a type so like her own that she could embody the person represented without ceasing to be herself,' Lily transcends typology altogether: she effectively performs the impossible, subordinating the Galtonian composite to her own personal specificity" (52). Other critics' views, of course, align much more closely with mine. For instance, Margit Stange argues that "since the stunning artistry of the *tableau* is available only through the realization that it is a representation (that Lily is *not* the portrait), Lily's conspicuous artistry is in the difference between Lily and what she manifests—is in, that is, her unexhausted capacity to represent" (69, italics original).

²⁵ "Lily . . . is all too able to see the world (herself in particular) through *his* eyes—to identify with his values and his artistic standards" (Wolff 29).

²⁶ Merish insightfully argues that "it is precisely because he *can't* afford (but *appreciates*) Lily that Selden best enacts the dynamics of visual desire in consumer culture. In her characterization of Selden, Wharton dramatizes the compelling, apparently irresistible nature of the commodity spectacle and the new pleasures of 'just looking' in a specialized social milieu. It is Lily's exorbitant 'price' that, for Selden, marks her as desirable *precisely because [she is] out of reach*. And it is because Selden remains *just* a spectator—in a suspended state of visual desire—that he best evinces the fantasies of proprietorship engendered by modern consumerism" (240, italics original).

²⁷ Here I am explicitly referencing Henry James's short story "The Real Thing" (1892) which is, appropriately, about an impecunious aristocratic couple, the Monarchs, who seek work as artist's models.

²⁸ Or, as Stange argues, "in the discourse of the exchange of woman, value is inextricable from the attribute of femaleness. An embodied condition—a 'given' of the natural constitution of humans as sexed bodies—femaleness is also, in a system imagined as the exchange of woman, a conspicuously symbolic made, by social invention and agreement, to represent a variety of material and social desirables" (6).

²⁹ Harrison-Kahan similarly argues that Rosedale "reveal[s] Lily's performance to be one of white femininity—a performance of race, as well as of class and gender" (47).

³⁰ I suggest that Lily's position in the millinery connects her to the legions of poor Eastern European (another questionably white group, according to contemporary understandings of racial positioning) immigrants flooding Manhattan in early twentieth-century America.

³¹ Maureen E. Montgomery contends that the millinery is "heavily laden with symbolic significance because hat shops were notorious fronts for brothels" (10).

³² This sense of exceptionalism does not seem to have disappeared entirely, as indicated by Lily's pondering if she possesses an "actual physical disability" (*HM* 286).

³³ "Since she had been brought up to be ornamental, she could hardly blame herself for failing to serve any practical purpose; but the discovery put an end to her consoling sense of universal efficiency" (*HM* 297).

³⁴ Lily's struggle with this labor underscores the dependence of white leisure class femininity on the unseen labor of often darker skinned lower-class women. As Ammons argues in "Edith Wharton and Race," Wharton's failure to mention the labor of darker women serves to underscore how "conservative, dominant-culture ideologies of race, gender, and class synchronize to offer a seemingly effortless account of how natural, how spontaneous, how beautiful . . . white privilege is" (77).

³⁵ Elaine Showalter, in a classic feminist reading, attempts to argue that “*The House of Mirth* ends not with a death, but with a vision of a new world of female solidarity, a world in which women like Gerty Farish and Nettie Struther will struggle hopefully and courageously. Lily dies—the lady dies—so that these women may live and grow” (153). However, I contend that the failure of solidarity in the tearoom scene—the “sallow,” “preoccupied” working class women’s inability to notice Lily’s distress—undermines the tenability of this presupposition of larger female kinship, especially if it can only occur as a result of the death of one of their own. In a new reading, Meredith Goldsmith argues that addictive consumption, “female self-medication,” rather than work, as is often argued, aligns Lily with other women (251).

³⁶ Numerous critics have concentrated on how this home seems to be the only real place of “shelter” in the novel. Dimock, for instance, argues that “the fantasized ancestral house does appear in the book after all, is only in the modernized and modified form of the working-class tenement . . . A ‘naturalized’ working class represents Wharton’s best hope for an organic life beyond the marketplace” (137). Of course, Wharton’s own interest in homes and shelters is self-evident, as the first book she ever published was *The Decoration of Houses* (1897), an interior design manual she wrote with her architect, Ogden Codman, Jr.

³⁷ Showalter argues that “childbirth seems to be one of the dingier attributes of the working class; the Perfect Lady cannot mar her body or betray her sexuality by giving birth” (142).

³⁸ Ammons suggests that this scene gives us a “final vision of Lily as virgin white mother” (81).

³⁹ Kassanoff contends that Wharton uses Lily’s extinction to apotheosize her racial identity rather than her femininity: “Wharton captures and immobilizes her heroine at the moment of racial perfection, a fate clearly preferable, she implies, to monitoring Lily’s slow demise in New York’s competitive wilderness. Lily’s final tableau of death thus transforms her into the period’s quintessential museum piece—the perfectly preserved taxidermic specimen. . . . The emphasis on Lily’s completeness in fact outweighs the possibility that she might eventually produce future generations of eugenic offspring. She is more useful dead and stuffed, as it were, than alive” (56-7). Indeed, dead Lily cannot jeopardize her racial perfection by marrying the questionably white Simon Rosedale.

⁴⁰ William E. Moddelmog argues that “[In *The House of Mirth* Wharton] conclude[s] that the most appropriate representation of female privacy [is] death itself” (357). Ultimately, this may be true, but not, I argue, at the moment of Lily’s death bed staging, for both Gerty and Selden visually consume Lily’s body. There is little privacy in the aesthetic conspicuousness of Lily’s recent post-mortem.

Chapter 3

[Mind the Gap] Between Beauty and Stereotype: Helga Crane in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*

Critics have long contended that Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928) functions as a condemnation of the restrictive visual and social choices of self-representation available to black women in the 1920s¹--asexual lady, arbiter of black bourgeois "uplift," primitive exotic, or folk life figure. The manifestly visual quality of these culturally mediated images of blackness demands an aesthetic as well as intellectual response in the reader, who must deconstruct limiting and pejorative resonances of typed blackness on several registers.

In this chapter I will first argue that because Larsen's protagonist Helga Crane is interpolated within a history of oppression and marketplaces that position black women as literal objects—those who can be bought, owned, and consumed—Helga's gender cultural-categorization, mediated through race, collapses at the moment of aestheticization. Secondly, I will put forth that Larsen uses a "knowing as seeing" paradigm² by depicting Helga as an art object and by turning the reader into a spectator whose viewing position is governed by predetermined racial "knowledge." I will hold that for Larsen, "knowing" precedes "seeing" in a racist society. The moment that Helga's portrait is painted by the Danish painter Axel Olsen provides a moment much like Lily's *tableau* for the reader to pause and critique Helga's aestheticization. Unlike Lily, however, Helga recognizes her aestheticization for what it is—a destructive reinscription of racial type onto a canvas—and invites the reader-turned-viewer to do the same. The narrator emphasizes the distance between Helga's awareness of her own subjective personhood and the dehumanization of Olsen's pejoratively raced aestheticization of her female body.

In elucidating this gap, the reader-turned-viewer can potentially interrupt her own ready participation in supposedly clear codes of cultural recognition.

Here, I will use “cultural-categorization” to imply the elements of the self that are imposed externally; to contrast with this term, I will use “self-identification” to suggest those elements determined by one’s self. Of course, it is often difficult to determine how self-determined identifications really are; but that struggle, although illuminating, is not the focus of this inquiry, as I seek to critique the external cultural-categorization that the reader-turned-viewer brings to the viewing experience, not necessarily the internal struggle of the protagonist’s self-assessment. Finally, I will occasionally use the term “personal-affiliation” to articulate the connection across race, gender, or class that the reader-turned-viewer may experience with the viewed protagonist.

In “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” (1987) Hortense Spillers argues that the effects of the Middle Passage and slavery in the New World quantified black bodies in such a way that they not only dehumanized but ultimately *ungendered* black persons: Specifically the anatomical differences between men and women were reduced to spatial ones—how much area these undifferentiated bodies were assigned, on the slave ship:

[The order of the ‘New World’], with its human sequence written in blood, *represents* for its African and indigenous peoples a scene of actual mutilation, dismemberment, and exile. First of all, their New World, diasporic plight marked a *theft of the body*—a willful and violent (and unimaginable from this distance) severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire. Under these conditions, we lose at least *gender* difference *in the outcome*, and the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender-specific. (60)³

In *Quicksand*, the matrix among race, class, and gender imposes a version of blackness onto Helga’s body. By examining how Helga is turned into a literal art

object, I will consider how the *physical* ungendering of the black female body can transpose into an *aesthetic* ungendering. Many critics have observed that Helga's exotic visual presentation in Denmark maintains the historical hyper-sexualization of black women. However, I will contend, as no critics have, that through this very exotic staging Helga is rendered both hyper-sexualized and, paradoxically, ungendered, bereft of culturally confirmed gender subjectivity.⁴ Helga Crane, a mixed-race woman who experiences the unbroken system of dehumanized racial oppression originating with chattel slavery, oscillates among various modes of cultural representation, yet in all she is ungendered, dismissed as body-object.⁵

Helga's presentation as a visual art object, particularly in her highly exoticized visual staging in Denmark, serves to articulate the ungendering of her particularly classed black female body; moreover, through this articulation of black female ungendering, Larsen condemns a discursive system that provides no aesthetic, personal, and social framework for black female subjectivity.⁶ As Edith Wharton mournfully contends of her protagonist Charity Royall in *Summer* (1917), "in the established order of things . . . [there is] no place for [this woman's] individual adventure" (156).⁷ Larsen's critique, however, is not devoid of mechanisms to propel change. Rather, through her depiction of Helga, Larsen provides an opportunity for readers-turned-viewers, whether white or people of color, to question the pejorative resonances of the racialization of gender in the life-realms of the world, of art, and of their own bodies.

Larsen gives the reader access to a revised, questioning mode toward gender and thus claims what Spillers will come to call the "monstrosity" (85) of a liberating self-naming neither dependent on cultural codes of gender cultural-categorization

nor on notions of inviolate, essentialized “identity” (both positions against which I place this reading). Like Pamela Barnett and Cherene Sherrand-Johnson, I assert that Larsen compels such a critique by constructing a literary work that functions as a series of viewed images, thus turning the reader into a viewer by demanding a “painterly rather than writerly” (Sherrand-Johnson 836) reading of the text. As Sherrand-Johnson notes, the content as well as the form of Larsen’s text is visual, for it is “anchored in a critique of the visual images of African American women then circulating throughout the culture” (28).⁸ Risking the reinscription of fetish, Larsen responds to these images by invoking them as points of social critique for her readers-turned-viewers, who are left to reconceive the visual framing of black women while simultaneously reevaluating their own subject positions. As Barnett proposes we must

read the description of Helga Crane in terms of visual art and the positioning of the reader as spectator as assertions of the *always-mediated nature of representation*. By focusing on the elaborate-process by which Helga, a black woman character, becomes an object of art, Larsen criticizes a tradition of representation that purports to be mimetic but actually reproduces stereotypes of the black female. (577, italics mine)

Evoking codes of racial gendering, Larsen theatricalizes a colluded exchange between the reader-turned-viewer and the perpetrators of racist ideology. (Consider, for instance, the moment in the Danish vaudeville house. Before describing Helga’s aversion and unwillingness to self-identify with the “cavorting Negroes on the stage,” [Q 84] Larsen first describes the scene *without* Helga’s reaction, as if daring the reader to accept the dangerous pleasure of pejorative racialization.) Barnett asserts that in the novel “the reader is challenged to focus attention on Helga as an individual rather than as a spectacle. The difficulty of this task, and finally the impossibility of this task, is Larsen’s point” (578). During the course of *Quicksand*

the reader-turned-viewer is “lulled into a false sense of security . . . [and] caught in the moral ambiguity of looking” (Mulvey 51). However, the critic cannot assume an “unracialized” reader-turned-viewer as she cannot assume a genderless one. In effect, Larsen asks for a different reaction from her white reader-turned-viewer than from her reader-turned-viewer who is a person of color. As I will later discuss in more detail, for the white reader-turned-viewer, Larsen mediates the process of seeing by demanding that she question the assumption of mastery, of unthinking racial authority, she brings to the reading/viewing experience. For the reader-turned-viewer who is a person of color, Larsen stages the problems of racial cultural-categorizations and thus asks this reader to critique *the institution of race as such*, because for Larsen, neither blackness nor whiteness (nor an untenable racial in-betweenness) provides access to subjectivity, conceived as it only can be, through the process of knowing one’s self. In order to effectively critique race people of color, Larsen proposes, must in effect *resist* racial self-affiliation with the viewed protagonist.

In *Quicksand*, the exposure of the insidiousness of racist ideology is marked throughout the text but perhaps becomes most apparent in Denmark, a fictionally conceived “all-white” space where Helga is turned into a painting, an art object. Through the process of art production, the narrator literalizes the aesthetic objectification facing Helga in ordinary life and thus forces readers to confront their own culpability in the acceptance or the perpetration of exotic/erotic aesthetic framing which reduces black women to pre-determined racial “types.”

Here I rely on Jennifer Gonzalez’s definition of “race discourse” which I understand “as the process or experience of subjection through which people are transformed into signs of culturally preconstituted sign positions” (3). I am

articulating a discursive, rather than biological, definition of race. In arguing for this definition of race, I am not attempting to diminish how race has been used as an ontological category to perpetuate mechanisms of social, political, and institutional control as irrefutable, inviolate, and, perhaps most insidiously, “natural.” As Gonzalez points out, “recognizing that race is a social construct rather than a biological fact does not imply . . . that the stakes in the contest over its meaning have decreased” (3). In *Quicksand*, Larsen invokes visual tropes to expose the white viewer’s reliance on “knowledge”—meanings, stereotypes, or reinscribed myths concerning race—to delimit how she, the viewer, *sees*. Thus, Larsen documents how the white reader-turned-viewer problematically “knows” first and then imparts that “knowledge” as a function of viewership.

Larsen uses *the body* as the index through which to document the repercussions of the disciplinary gaze of social and political control. Although, as Irene Redfield articulates in Larsen’s second novel, *Passing* (1929), “nobody can [determine blackness]. Not by looking” (77), visibility remains the most persistent mechanism through which the body is read as an index of social and cultural positioning.⁹ As Gonzalez maintains, “the body is the site where race discourse is seen to play out because it is where race is presumed to reside. As an artifact of cultural framing, the human body is the object that must always display its signs. There is no escape from its ‘epidermalized’ status; the materiality of the body is understood to offer a continuous surface of legible information” (10). Through her construction of the pejoratively inflected Mythic Being, Adrian Piper plays upon the white viewer’s inclination to “read” the body by staging visual cues of race and then by exposing her reliance on them to categorize, to “overdetermine from the outside”

(Fanon 95), the black subject's identity. Larsen, in delineating Helga's movement from black bourgeois lady (which is already to stage a contradiction in terms to the white dominant order) to exotic primitive to Southern folk matron, draws upon similar visual markers which fix an individual into a predetermined racial type.¹⁰

The question to ask, then, is to what ideological end these writers and artists invoke such tropes. What are the political stakes in such staging? As Anne Cheng articulates in *Second Skin*

If, as all good feminist and film theories—indeed, arguably, a whole history of Western philosophical discourse—tell us, the realm of the ocular is highly suspicious, prone to deception and reification, then what can an ethical position for both the viewer and the producer of visual images look like? . . . What are the visual conditions under which a (raced and gendered) body comes into visibility at all? What is at stake here is the very status of the racial sign: how we recognize it; how we confer or rescind value. These issues touch on the very fiber of how we imagine the psychological, social, and even legal basis for forging identity and its concomitant rights. (168)¹¹

All of the artists and writers in this dissertation attempt to provide a new, more ethically determined position of viewership. Assuming that the “personal is political,” change must not come from how the racial subject presents herself, but how the always racialized spectator views her and, relationally, constructs her own subjectivity. Of course, in order for the viewer to reconceive her viewing position, these artists and writers must parodically invoke the very markers of visual stereotyping which they wish to critique, and thus risk reinscribing that which is parodied as a legitimate site/sight of desire. Because Larsen documents the dehumanizing effects of “knowing as seeing”—the reduction to objecthood birthed from a history of racial injustice—she successfully stages for readers-turned-viewers such visual markers as paradigms of intellectual critique rather than as reifications of

social ideology. In this way, she “undermines” race discourse (Gonzalez 4) and its controlling mechanisms of power, dispossession, and privilege.

Larsen’s solution of spectatorship is markedly different than later black artists and theorists (most notably in the context of this project, Adrian Piper). These artists stage *racism* not *blackness* (as a racial institution and as a self-identification) as the main problem preventing visibility from existing as a productive source of cultural recognition between people. Like contemporary theorists such as Jared Sexton, Tavia Nyong’o, Frank Wilderson, and Sika A. Dagbovie-Mullins, these artists argue that multiracialism ultimately figures as “antiblackness.”¹² Larsen, in contrast, is less likely to attribute affirmative resonances to *any* racial identification, because for her all reduce and confine a complex individual to a predetermined type. Such failure to assert the importance of racial identity (or the unchangingness of blackness) holds particular significance for Larsen’s readers-turned-viewers who are people of color, for they are asked to avoid a kind of celebratory racial personal-affiliation which privileges racial difference.¹³ George Hutchinson suggests that “the desire of the text of *Quicksand* is for a world in which races would not exist and women’s bodies would not be mortgaged to them” (“Subject to Disappearance” 178). Larsen marks this distaste for racial identifications through the narrator’s use of free indirect discourse: “[Helga] didn’t, in spite of her racial markings, belong to these dark segregated people. She was different. She felt it. It wasn’t merely a matter of color. It was something broader, deeper that made folk kin,” (*Q* 58). Clearly that something else is not biology. Helga relies on visual cues to position race; she is aware that she possesses the racial markings positioning her as black. However, growing up black with a white mother, she cannot connect a black racial

cultural-categorization to the familial bonds (which “make folk kin”) which, at least in part, are determined by feelings of understanding, of acceptance, of at homeness.¹⁴¹⁵

As Hutchinson contends, those critics who argue for the perceived snobbishness of Larsen’s—and by extension, Helga’s—distaste for black solidarity fail to appreciate the particular quality of Larsen’s raced identity and, more importantly, how that quality directly affected her upbringing, her family, and her emotional connections. Hutchinson points out that “the mere fact of her having biologically ‘mixed’ ancestry was insignificant. At issue was the problem that ‘race’ posed to the security of Larsen’s primary attachments [particularly her separation from her mother]. . . and her emotional security” (*In Search of Nella Larsen* 29). Critics who situate Larsen’s lack of a black solidarity in her novels as well as in her life as a white self-identification or class pretension not only miss a crucial element of Larsen’s biography but also more importantly elide Larsen’s devastating critique of the institution of race as such.¹⁶ Larsen cannot conceive any racial cultural-categorizations or self-identifications without emotionally devastating consequences; for her, to determine an ethically derived position of viewership means to reevaluate the construction of race itself.

“In the Spirit of the Work . . . of Individuality and Beauty”: The Construction of Helga as Visual Spectacle

From the very beginning of the text, Larsen highlights Helga’s visual presentation over her psychological interiority, thus constructing the narrator as visual artist and the reader as spectator.¹⁷ On the first page of the novel Helga is described as

A slight girl of twenty-two years, with narrow, sloping shoulders and delicate but well-turned arms and legs, she had, none the less, an air of radiant, careless health. In vivid green and gold negligee and glistening brocaded mules, deep sunk in the big high-backed chair, against whose dark tapestry her sharply cut face, with skin like yellow satin, was distinctly outlined, she was—to use a hackneyed word—attractive. (*Q* 5-6)

This description is compelling for several reasons: first, the narrator literally frames Helga (consider how she sits “deep sunk in a high-back chair, against whose dark tapestry her sharply cut face . . . was distinctly outlined”) thus inviting an aesthetic, rather than literary, response in the reader now conceived as spectator. As Barnett suggests, “Larsen’s decision to explore the setting before the character establishes an aesthetic distance between reader and character; this distance places the reader as an observer of the representational process from the beginning of the novel” (583). The narrator becomes a visual artist who notes the “outlines” of Helga and evokes an aesthetically sensual response in the reader-turned-viewer by referencing the tactile nature of Helga’s body and the objects which frame it: “glistening brocaded mules,” “dark tapestry,” and “skin like yellow satin.” In the last instance, the narrator explicitly objectifies Helga’s body, turning her living skin into a materialized husk which glistens but does not breathe.¹⁸

Helga’s appearance collapses with that of the room and both are depicted sensually (“gold negligee,” “brocaded mules,” “dark tapestry”), erotically coded for maximum visual consumption. The careful delineation of Helga’s physical features—her “sloping shoulders,” “well-turned arms and legs,” “sharply cut face,” “skin like yellow satin”—calls to mind many earlier traditions, including the early modern blazon tradition, in which the (male) poet masturbatorily notes his absent lover’s separate features.¹⁹ The woman herself becomes a fragmented object, a discursive site for the musing male to develop his own erotic fantasies. By self-

consciously evoking such a literary tradition of raced and gendered objectification, Larsen critiques such a system of representation, but also makes readers-turned-viewers (in a similar way as readers of the blazon poem) participants in and thus complicit with such a system of subjugation.

Larsen also declines to note Helga's racial cultural-categorization.²⁰ In this way, she subversively assumes the prerogative of white authors describing white protagonists: as the unspoken "universal" the white body need not be named, while the black body must always be marked as such. Larsen refuses to code Helga's body with either racial inflections or specific, identifiable physical attributes (beyond being an "attractive" girl with "sloping shoulders"). Laura Tanner reasons that this lack of corporeal presence corresponds with Fanon's determination that the person of color develops "bodily schema with great difficulty; by rendering the subject in/as the black skin with culture overdetermines with a set of constructed meaning, 'a racial epidermal scheme' disrupts the attempt to affirm the self as a body anchored in the spatial world" (181). Echoing Fanon, Tanner contends that Helga's constant awareness of herself as a racial subject produces a feeling of hypervisibility that unmoors personal subjectivity as rooted in bodiliness, in an awareness of one's own physical presence. The narrator frames Helga's psychological dissatisfaction in terms of lack, "a lack somewhere" (*Q* 11). Larsen is careful to mirror this emotional lack in Helga's physical absence: a combined psychological and physical ghostliness. Through the implied lack of Helga's body, Larsen documents the racial subject's disembodiment as occurring through hypervisibility. Through such lack she contests the white reader's mastery as spectator who is left without a definitive object to view;

she also subverts the black reader-turned-viewer's reductive slide into racial personal-affiliation with the viewed protagonist.²¹

By eliding the foregrounding of racial "knowledge" as a precondition of seeing, Larsen begins to dismantle race and all readers-turned-viewers' reliance on visual coding to determine racial cultural-categorization. Larsen does not want to tell the reader-turned-viewer details of Helga's physical appearance (in effect, she refuses to acknowledge any racial signifiers) because to do so would confirm if knowing matches seeing, if cultural stereotypes match visual schemas of racial determinations. All readers-turned-viewers are confronted with "lack," but through such *documented* lack they are forced to contest what they "know" and how they know it. Yet in unactualized, connection Larsen draws between the body and the mind, personhood and corporeal life, the objectification Helga experiences as a disembodied racial type, a lack that figures her as "thing" rather than as a person.

Den Sorte's "*Peacock's Life*": *Helga Crane in Denmark*

The visual consumption of Helga as an eroticized/exoticized object is most tellingly explored when she enters a putatively all-white society: Denmark. In Larsen's revisionary depiction of her own experience as a mixed-race woman in Scandinavia, Denmark becomes homogenously white; yet, considering the country's history as a colonizer for over three and a half centuries and its participation in the Middle Passage slave trade and then colonialism (which was still on-going), black persons were present in some professional capacity in Danish society, for instance, as sailors or servants.²² By choosing to present Helga as *den sorte* ("the black" in Danish) against an all-white background, Larsen underscores Helga's racial otherness,

providing a conveniently “blank” discursive space to delineate conceptions of racial essentializing.²³ However, in conceptualizing Denmark as “all white,” Larsen also elides the violent history of Danish colonialism. This elision produces what Arne Lunde and Anna Westerstahl Stenport call a “structuring absence” that recreates “the Danish public’s silence regarding its own colonial heritage in the early twentieth century” (229).²⁴

Helga’s uniqueness in Danish society is figured more in racialized class terms than as a “purely” raced identification: “In this Copenhagen upper-class setting [Helga] is aestheticized as racially abstract and exotic, rather than identified as belonging to a small, but nevertheless present, group of servant blacks of African or Afro-Caribbean descent” (Lunde and Stenport 236). Larsen can place Helga as the only *sorte* in the Dahls’ bourgeois context because Danish society is different than Denmark itself.²⁵ For instance, Larsen pointedly inverts the expected cultural paradigm of the black servant and the white mistress by giving Helga a white lady’s maid, Marie.²⁶ When Helga notices Marie’s interest in her, she reflects that Marie “had probably never seen a Negro outside the pictured pages of her geography book” (*Q* 69). Considering Denmark’s historical involvement in the slave trade, Marie’s purported lack of visual precedent of black people is less likely than her cultural ignorance of the existence of blacks who are given white servants of their own. It is unclear if Larsen purposely ignores the probable other black people bordering the periphery of the Danish society to underscore Helga’s own blackness (for the parodic purposes of eventual critique), or if she is playfully marking the American reader’s own assumption that Denmark exists outside the realm of the slave trade. In either case, Larsen uses this inverted paradigm as a way to revise both

the popular and high art *visual* image of the black maid as a racial and discursive non-entity useful in highlighting the white mistress's intertwined racial, class, and gender cultural-categorizations and self-identifications.

Rather than Manet's *Olympia* (1863, Plate 13) which presents the passive high society white prostitute as a hyper-visible counterpoint to the black servant's nearly invisible—but necessary—presence, Larsen presents a black woman whose cultural-categorizations and self-identifications as black, as female, and as leisure-class must be underscored by their corresponding white inversions. In so doing, Larsen continues her assault on the institution of race by effectively critiquing either black or white racial cultural-categorizations as untenable when evoked alone. When unsubscribed from the typed black-white binary, either categorizations' cultural import becomes exposed as invalid, simply fails to exist. As Lorraine O'Grady has concisely argued, "the two bodies [white and black] cannot be separated, nor can one body be understood in isolation from the other in the West's metaphoric construction of 'woman'" (1).

Through Helga's own aesthetic positioning with her white servant, Larsen subversively critiques a long history of Western art which used black people for a variety of purposes: to underscore whiteness, to demonstrate wealth, to connect themselves to colonialism and the slave trade. Jean-Marc Nattier's *Mademoiselle de Clermont at her Bath* (1733) (Plate 14), for instance, does all of these. Rather than use a single, dark-skinned black figure to highlight the white mistress's gleaming whiteness, Nattier uses a cast of six black, brown, and "yellow" servants to invoke a kind of color spectrum of attendants, one in which whiteness pointedly still goes unchallenged. *Mademoiselle de Clermont* is the focal point of the painting, a

position established through perspective as well as light, as her face and neck are prominently highlighted. De Clermont looks directly at the viewer, while her servants all look at her with the exception of the light-skinned girl, who looks at some drapery. (This artistic dispensation seems to have been granted because of the servant's own light-skin.) The rich "satins, ermine, cottons, and patterned carpet . . . all . . . commodities from the non-European world" (Bindman and Gates 82) connect the conspicuous consumption of the Mademoiselle's buying practices to her excessive use of black labor.

Charles-André van Loo's *Portrait of Madame de Pompadour en sultane* (1754) (Plate 15), again features one reclining white woman (the chief mistress of Louis XV) and one engaged and attentive black servant. Unlike the Olympia setup (which Manet later popularized into a kind of trope) the *action* of these two subjects—the servant presents her mistress with a cup of coffee—literalizes the commodification of bodies as part and parcel of the colonial project. As Bindman notes, coffee "had for some time been popular with those involved in colonial commerce" (Bindman and Gates 84). Although de Pompadour is touching the saucer, her weak wrist indicates that the real holding effort is still being done by her servant, whose crouching positions suggests suspended animation. Therefore, in this moment, the white mistress declares herself to be a functionary of the colonial system who claims both the commodity of coffee and the body of the black servant as her undisputed possessions.

Nicholas Lafrensen's miniature *A Woman at Her Bath with a Black Servant* (exact date unknown, mid 1700s) (Plate 16) demonstrates a compelling counterpoint to these other works, with their seeming inviolate hierarchical whiteness. In this

image, a white woman is being helped into (or less likely, out of) a wide bath by a black attendant. Although the viewer's eye is initially drawn to the startling expanse of displayed white skin, it does not stop there: it quickly moves to the attendant's contrasting sumptuous attire, which includes a necklace, earrings, and a bracelet. The naked white woman, leaning on the attendant and gazing into her face, is placed in a position of vulnerability, if not outright supplication, to her black companion. Finally, the firm grasp of the black and white hands indicates the easy—even sensual (two shadowy figures, likely men, sneak a peek from behind a curtain)—familiarity between the two women. Perhaps the painting was completed as a miniature because the near subversive nature of the evoked themes—familiarity, even love across races, black consumption of luxury, and the tenuousness of constructed racial hierarchies—necessitated it being enjoyed alone, in private.

Larsen may have had many such images in mind when she wrote *Quicksand*. Considering *Olympia's* popularity, its easy ability to lend itself to parody,²⁷ and Helga's own eventual transposition to painted image, Larsen may very well have had that specific painting in mind when she cast Helga and Marie in their narrative roles. As I discuss in Chapter 2, passivity is crucial to a white woman's self-identification with the leisure class. With *Olympia*, Manet playfully critiques these intertwined identifications by suggesting that "Olympia" is actually a prostitute, whose passivity connotes sexual availability rather than freedom from labor. In this way, he establishes that the white bourgeois angel and the lower-class whore are merely two sides of the proverbial coin: looking visually the same, both can be bought. Considering Helga's relative passivity in Denmark (she spends much of her time shopping, posing for a portrait, and being visually present but functionally silent at

bourgeois dinners), she too manifests the coinage structuring the lives of leisure class (white) women. To suggest, therefore, in a reductively celebratory reading, that Larsen commits a subversive act by inverting the white/black binary of Olympia and her maid is to elide Helga's precarious but highly visible class position in Denmark. In *Olympia*, "part of the maid's role is to make the white figure whiter via her constructed, contrasted difference" (Brody 105). In Larsen's inverted paradigm, Helga is not "whitened" by assuming the role of the mistress/whore; rather, her juxtaposition with Marie serves (much like the bracelets and clothing, as I will later discuss) to further *blacken* her: to manifest her difference from the "pink and white" (Q 85) people who claim her as their aesthetic property. That is to say, the Dahls use Marie's whiteness to contrast with Helga's blackness in order to manifest their buying power: even the peculiar black relative, like a pet child of a slave-master, can have a maid (white no less) of her own. (For an archetypical visual example of the black "pet" consider Jonathan Richardson's *Portrait of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu in Turkish Dress* (1725) (Plate 17). The young well-dressed page, wearing a slave collar, stands behind the sumptuously dressed Montagu.²⁸) Although both Marie and Helga labor in the service of manifesting the Dahls' wealth, Marie's racial position remains inviolate even as she assumes the supporting role in the background of the theoretical painting.

The consumption process by which Helga's aunt and uncle use clothing and jewelry to mark identifiers of racial othering onto Helga's body also blackens her. Here, the visual documentation of pre-determined racial typing is obvious. The Dahls mark Helga's already marked body; they seek to show Modernist conceptions of African primitivism (typified by performers like Josephine Baker) onto Helga's

(not stereotypical enough) black body. As Catherine Rottenberg contends “the Danish positive re-evaluation of blackness, Helga also begins to realize, merely becomes a fetishization, a way of maintaining difference while disavowing how difference operated to produce and maintain inequality” (92). The classed pedestal on which the Dahls place Helga is little more than a zoo cage guaranteed to manifest Helga’s inequality—her difference from her spectators—and her simultaneous visibility and entrapment.

As critics note the way in which the Dahls blacken Helga corresponds to the way in which Josephine Baker adopted markers of stereotypical racialization. In order to enhance the unintellectual pleasure-producing capacity of her performance, Baker adopted signifiers of white-constructed blackness which confirmed “knowing as seeing” for that same audience.²⁹ As Debra B. Silverman argues “ ‘blackening’ of the Revue Negre was a move to domesticate and homogenize the black American performers in the show—to create ‘authentic’ blackness as already figured in stereotypes of blackness” (599). As with visual “realism,” the “authenticity” of Baker’s performance was predicated on the ability of the audience to recognize pre-existing tropes. When Helga first arrives in Denmark, her aunt Katrina finds her clothes too sedate, too neutral, in effect, *too white* to incite the voluptuous social interest that Katrina hopes to be gained from Helga. Therefore, Katrina sets out to buy Helga “bright things to set off the color of [her] lovely brown skin. Striking things, exotic things . . . [to] make an impression” (*Q* 70).³⁰ On her first night in Copenhagen the Dahls buy Helga loud earrings and shoe buckles which make her “feel like a veritable savage” (*Q* 71). Larsen’s inclusion of the word “savage” implies not only that the clothes and jewelry they want Helga to wear are “loud,” designed to

draw attention, but that they conform to the Copenhagen bourgeoisie's conception (drawn from film, literature, and, of course, live performances like Josephine Baker's) of what a young black woman wears. Importantly, the name of Baker's most famous dance was *Danse Sauvage*: Helga is to be made "*sauvage*" through *both* over-exposure (the cut-down skirt) and adornment (bright and imported articles that highlight her affinity to "exotic" cultures and difference from her white social peers).

To guarantee that Helga's physical presentation comports with stereotypical (and Modern/primitivist) notions of blackness, both the Dahls and Axel Olsen assume visual ownership over her. Although they do not literally own her in the way that the master owned slaves in the antebellum South, their actions suggest that they believe in the ownership of Helga as their own aesthetic creation. Both Axel Olsen and the Dahls recreate Helga. Olsen creates a representation of Helga as a static visual object; the Dahls establish her as a living, breathing performance piece in their upper-class world. Each eroticizes and exoticizes Helga's gender and race. Both parties seek to gain from this production, this "visual ownership": Olsen, through sexual proprietorship, the Dahls through social gain. When discussing Helga's clothing choices, Katrina notes the social clout that she hopes Helga will help her husband and herself secure. As the narrator notes, Katrina hopes to use Helga to "advance the social fortunes of the Dahls of Copenhagen" (*Q* 70)). The Dahls encourage—even demand—that Helga dress herself not in clothing *per se*, but in *costumes* that are carefully chosen to connote maximum racial otherness. By choosing clothing that evokes racial difference, the Dahls purposely mark onto Helga's body the signs of predetermined cultural subject positions: the erotic other, the temptress,

the aesthetically consumable black object. In this way, Helga's position in the Dahls' household again echoes that of the historical "Negro favorite," the mistress's pet.

Because Helga does not choose her own aesthetic self-presentation in Denmark and yet is hypervisible within Danish society, she feels disconnected from her own body. Tellingly, part of the bodily dispossession Helga feels seems to come from the way in which she is made to feel like an animal, like "not quite" a woman. For instance, the earrings and buckles the Dahls send for, instead of pleasing Helga "make [her feel] like a veritable *savage* . . . This feeling was intensified by the many pedestrians who stopped to stare at the queer dark creature . . ." (*Q* 71, italics mine). Helga is aware that she is admired not as a beautiful woman, but as a breathing artifact of black primitiveness, dressed up to enhance rather than minimize her exotic difference. As Anne Cheng notes of Josephine Baker, Helga's skin also becomes a kind of dress in itself (172), a cloth that serves paradoxically both to cover her body, to be the literal surface of the self, and to expose it, to stand as the sign of accessible erotic primitiveness.³¹ In her first presentation to Copenhagen society in which she wears the large earrings and buckles, Helga dons clothing that enhances not her beauty, but her nakedness, and thus, her apparent affinity to primitive cultures:

Marie had indeed 'cut down' the prized green velvet, until, as Helga put it, it was practically nothing 'but a skirt.' She was thankful for her barbaric bracelets, for the dangling earrings, for the beads around her neck. She was even thankful for the rouge on her burning cheeks and for the very powder on her back. No other woman in the stately pale blue room was so greatly exposed. (*Q* 72)

Amelia DeFalco maintains that "*Quicksand* points to the many discourses that constructed the black female body as excessively sexual, fetishizing it as a symbol of licentiousness that simultaneously soothed anxieties of the transgressive self and

justified the denigration of the black subject” (2). Because of the longstanding visual conventions of the female nude in high and popular art and in pornography, Western cultural consciousness often collapses female nakedness with female sexuality. Yet by marking on Helga’s body the signs of her “exotic primitiveness”—the “dangling earrings,” “the beads around her neck,” and, most tellingly, “the *barbaric* bracelet” (italics mine), Larsen intentionally connects Helga’s exposure, her sexualization, to historicized oppression via ungendered ownership. Larsen substitutes the anatomical and reproductive markers—teeth, skull size, skin coloring, hair texture (Dawahare 28), as well as breasts and hips—used to determine a black woman’s economic worth under slavery (and her social position within that system: mistress, house servant, field hand, etc) for sartorial ones—a short skirt, a “barbaric” bracelet. In so doing, Larsen demonstrates the insidiousness of a system of ungendering subjugation whose mechanisms of racial and economic policing can be transposed from the body itself to the accoutrements of bodily presentation without loss of their cultural determinism. These sartorial elements become what blackens Helga, thus definitively and carefully maintaining her difference, her placement outside of but visible to Danish society. To the Dahls, Helga becomes a kind of pampered house servant who does not “work,” but who is constantly employed, both for Dahls and for members of the wider social circle whom they hope to impress, in visually evoking the exoticized other. Work indeed.

Despite her perpetual longing for material objects, for “things, things, things” (*Q* 69), Helga realizes that the ability to consume must be conducted on the Dahls’ terms and thus comes at a great price: the potential loss of her *personhood*. Again and again, the narrator describes Helga feeling like a “savage” or an animal.

At the first dinner with the Dahls she “felt like nothing so much as some new and strange species of pet dog proudly exhibited” (Q 71); when shopping, she realizes that her newfound proliferation of “things” “conveyed to [her] her exact status in her new environment. A decoration. A curio. A peacock” (Q 75).³² Here, Larsen establishes a parallel between legal articulations of racial separateness and aesthetic constructions of pejorative and ultimately dehumanizing racial exoticism.

Because of this positioning of Helga’s body as primitive or animalistic, the women of Danish high-society are not intimidated by Helga’s beauty, for although recognizing her as attractive, they cannot bring themselves to see her, quite literally, as a woman. Here, the Danes’ ungendering objectification of Helga, birthed from the ongoing discourse of historicized slave trade oppression, speaks to Hazel Carby’s groundbreaking 1987 assertion that the “[cult of true womanhood] describe[d] the parameters within which [black and white] women were measured and declared to be, or not to be, women” (23).³³ Helga, although overtly sexualized, so “greatly exposed,” remains an oddly ungendered exotic object to the Danish socialites’ gaze: “The women too were kind, feeling no need for jealousy. To them this girl, this Helga Crane, this mysterious niece of the Dahls, was not to be reckoned seriously in their scheme of things. True, she was attractive, unusual, in an exotic, almost savage way, but she wasn’t one of them. She didn’t count” (Q 72). In a Fanonian sense Helga’s heightened exotic visibility paradoxically renders her *invisible* according to prescriptive white determinations of female gendering. Helga’s constant awareness of herself as a racial subject produces a feeling of hypervisibility that unmoors personal subjectivity as rooted in bodiliness, in an awareness of one’s own physical presence. Therefore, the abjection she feels in relation to the white women’s gaze is

awareness that her hypervisibility renders her an ungendered object, one who “doesn’t count” not just in their predetermined standards of female attractiveness but also in their considerations of what constitutes *female gender itself*. Larsen tellingly augments this sense of Helga’s objecthood when exposed to the white socialites’ gaze, for she says nothing during most of the dinner (*Q* 72). Although the Dahls shower Helga with expensive clothes and jewels, they do so not out of familial love or even to enhance Helga’s manifest beauty, but rather to produce an exotic piece of art that will increase their own social position. Their plan is foolproof: they construct an exotic object that will enhance their own social recognition but whose exoticism is so extreme that she is ultimately rendered ungendered. This ungendering—despite Axel Olsen’s tepid and relatively unconvincing marriage proposal to Helga—forestalls white Danish fears of possible miscegenation.

At the cabaret in Denmark Helga realizes she has been conforming to stereotype; the vicarious power she believes she has gleamed as the Dahls’ favorite Negro “pet” is illusory:

Helga Crane was not amused. Instead she was filled with a fierce hatred for the cavorting Negroes on the stage. She felt shamed, betrayed, as if these pale pink and white people among whom she lived had suddenly been invited to look upon something in her which she had hidden away and wanted to forget. (*Q* 85)

Helga feels “fierce hatred for the cavorting Negroes on the stage” and “betrayed . . . by these pale pink and white people” because here she is faced with her own complicity in her objectification. Even if, in the entire time she has lived in Denmark up to this point, Helga has denied how she has blackened her own body to conform to predetermined racial type, to manifest “knowing as seeing” for her appreciative “pink and white” audience, then at this moment she can no longer deny

that she has also been “cavorting” on a much wider social stage and for a much longer period of time than these named-as-such black performers. Scheper argues that “I read in [Helga’s] silence the exercise of resistance as a means of political response. . . . her silence signals her complicated disidentification with the images on stage” (692). Such an argument, I assert, is too celebratory. While Helga may “disidentify” with the “images”³⁴ on the stage, she does not, at this moment or previous ones, relinquish the vicarious economic and social power that has come with adopting bodily markers of typed blackness. Although Helga’s distaste for the exoticizing and blackening of her body from the beginning of her time in Denmark suggests she understands the parodic implications of stereotype invocation, she does not help her appreciative white audience complicate its viewing pleasure by depicting fetish as parody. Rather than subscribing subversive intentionality to Helga, Larsen’s condemnation of Helga’s failure to undermine the pejorative resonances of her blackened body positions all readers-turned-viewers to re-evaluate their positions as spectators.

Despite Helga’s silence in the cabaret, she does start to recognize her complicity in her own objectification and thus begin the process of self-assertion, even if, as it must be, such a process is mediated through pejorative cultural resonances. Although Helga participates in the staged performance of black femininity (Cheng 39), her dissatisfaction in the cabaret allows her to acknowledge that such a performance places discursive signs onto her body, a positioning that causes her selfhood to oscillate between personhood and bodiliness, between free-woman and slave and between subject and object. As Cheng asserts, “the staging of the fetish never secures subjective mastery as is often thought but initiates instead a

vertiginous renegotiation of subjecthood and objecthood” (48). Helga is not the “willfully subversive agent” (Cheng 172) hoped for by feminist critics of Baker, undermining pejorative cultural codes even as she enacts them, but rather Helga, like Baker, claims the racial subject’s vacillation between subject and objecthood as her own—itsself a kind of dissident cultural act.

Such oscillation, I believe, holds promise for the feminist theorist, who is often trapped by the subject/objecthood binary. It is precisely this acknowledgment of the “vertiginous renegotiation” of women’s physical presentation that I believe has been missing from race and gender discussions of represented women—and the reader-turned-viewer’s understanding of them—in the past. What would it mean to accept this “vertiginous renegotiation” of presentation, in effect, to get beyond the empowered subject/dispossessed object binary, to break it apart or, at the very least, to begin to see the critically positive possibility that a represented woman can be, from one moment to the next, subject then object or even, perhaps, at the same moment, *both* subject and object? As O’Grady has asserted, feminism has been consistently guilty of subscribing to the either/or logic of (masculine) Western thought, in which “someone must always win” (14). Not only does such rigid thinking re-apply the white, heterosexual, and masculine universal onto a (in name only) feminist discourse but, perhaps more importantly, it fails to account for the multiplicity of women’s subject positions and the tension in which they may exist. Indeed, “there have been no last words spoken on subjectivity. If what I suspect is true, [then] it contains a multiplicity of centers and all the boundaries are fluid . . . [with in] between spaces” (O’Grady 16). As I will next discuss in regards to Axel Olsen’s portrait of Helga, a revised critical perspective may mean recognizing that

Olsen's fetishized depiction of Helga, although a reduction to stereotype, may still, problematically and yet truthfully, evoke elements of Helga's character which she has tried to repress. It may mean acknowledging that Helga "*is no* jungle creature, and *is* a jungle creature" (Silverman 612, italics original).

"The True Helga Crane": Axel Olsen and Visual Proprietorship

To a perhaps even greater extent than do the Dahls, Axel Olsen controls Helga's aesthetic presentation. Because Olsen accompanies Helga on a shopping trip before her portrait is painted (*Q* 75), he seeks "to control her image both on and off the canvas" (Barnett 585). As Venetria Patton argues, the very way in which Olsen arranges for the portrait to be made contrasts with the "European practice of portrait painting in which a bourgeoisie subject contracts for a portrait, thus making the artist an employee; [instead] Olsen appraises Helga and makes arrangements with her relatives to paint her portrait without ever speaking to Helga, despite her ostensible bourgeois status" (81). The contractual moment between Herr Dahl and Olsen for Helga's aesthetic presentation—a moment in which Helga tellingly doesn't speak (*Q* 73) underscores Helga's position as a commodity object traded between men, one who can be bought and sold. Although it remains the artist's right to control the presentation of his artistic subject, both the shopping trip and the contractual arrangement suggest that Olsen desires to collapse Helga's general aesthetic "self"-production³⁵ with that of the primitive, erotic and ultimately iconographic black woman of his visual portraiture. Olsen seeks to confirm "knowing as seeing" for his fellow Danes, to reduce Helga to an immediately recognizable iconographic determination of primitiveness, otherness, and exoticism.

This reduction of Helga's visual presentation may read as artistically realistic (although Larsen never notes Olsen's artistic mode), but only because it comports with the spectator's preconstituted determination of the characteristics constituting black womanhood.

Olsen's desire for both visual and sexual ownership of Helga is most disturbingly exhibited in his extremely odd proposal to her. He tells Helga that "you have the warm impulsive nature of the women of Africa, but my lovely, I fear, the soul of a prostitute. You sell yourself to the highest buyer. I should of course be happy it is I. And I am" (*Q* 89). In this supposed proposal, Olsen frames Helga as a prostitute, the ultimate sexually available woman (for those with money), as well as (or perhaps because of her position as) the primitive other, a woman "of Africa." Although ostensibly motivated by love (Olsen tells Helga "I didn't want to love you, but I had to" [*Q* 89]), the narrator cues the reader into the performative and false nature of Olsen's proposal, which possesses a "theatrical note" (*Q* 89). Olsen invokes the fatalistic conventions of the romance plot ("I didn't want to love you"), but only through the mediated standards of racial subjection, in which sexual availability is predicated on racial otherness. In this way, Olsen's alleged proposal harkens back to his previous, implicit sexual propositioning of Helga, in which marriage is substituted for "something less—and easier" (*Q* 86).

In referring to the moment in which Olsen insinuates that Helga become his mistress, the narrator tellingly notes that Olsen speaks not to Helga herself, who is posing for his painted portrait, but to the image on the canvas which he is crafting, to her "painted face" (*Q* 86). Here Larsen documents the ultimate act of "knowing as seeing": Olsen simply creates what he knows, in effect, the *re*-creation, the re-

inscription of pre-existing iconographies of pejorative blackness, in order to confirm what he sees. Unlike someone like Wharton's Selden, who can submit to "vision-making influences as completely as a child to the spell of a fairy-tale" (*HM* 133), Olsen does not rely on imagination to collapse spectatorship with cultural presumption. Rather Olsen manually recreates that presumption to guarantee that "knowing" will always match seeing. Barnett contends that in speaking to Helga's painted face Olsen "cannot tell the difference between the two; he speaks to her image as if it is Helga herself" (589). Although Olsen does speak to Helga's image "as if it is Helga herself" it is unclear whether Olsen is conscious of the difference between black woman-as-trope and black-woman-as-subject. Considering how Larsen frames Olsen as operating within a system of historical oppression, it seems he may be unaware of the existence of the latter option, thus making an understanding of the "difference" between image and subject a visual and a cognitive impossibility. This is a moment that forces all readers-turned-viewers to evaluate their own subject positions, to assess "not only who identifies with the Other but also who counts as Other, who is allowed to make representations of this Other, and who has the authority to enforce those representations" (Gonzalez 12). Although Olsen, the rich white Danish male, establishes his right to paint Helga as a racial type in a contractual exchange with another white male, Larsen's problematizing of Olsen's spectatorial position invites readers-turned-viewers to assess Olsen's enforcement of a mode of representation which underscores hierarchical oppression.

Helga knows she is living a "peacock's life" (*Q* 83) in Denmark; however, she does not outwardly reject the consumption of herself by the Dahls, by Olsen, and by the general society of upper-class Denmark, until Olsen proposes to her. Then, she

knows that she “is not for sale [and] do[esn’t] at all care to be owned” (Q 89), thus attempting to reject all visual, sexual, and social possession of her body, her self, and her future. As Roberts asserts, “in rejecting Olsen, Helga is attempting to renegotiate her position as a consumable object” (115); that is to say, she is trying to acquire the agency of the seller. However, even Helga’s rejection of Olsen, conducted within a moment evoking a history of racial and sexual subjection, does not affirm Helga’s position as an inviolate subject. In the proposal scene—a mediated rejection of white masculinity—Larsen suggests that subjectivity remains an unobtainable dream for a gendered and racialized subject if she is, as always, interpolated within the discursive systems of historicized oppression. Tellingly, Helga does not tell Olsen that she will never marry, but that she is not ever “for sale . . . to any white man” (Q 89); she asserts that marriage connoting partnership versus marriage determining ownership is impossible in a moment of objectified exchange.³⁶ Thus, Larsen confirms that in his aesthetic presentation of Helga, Olsen has interpolated her within the master-slave dynamic of historical subjection. Again as Spillers argues, such lack of bodily possession culturally renders Helga as less than a woman, as *not-quite a woman*.

At the proposal, readers-turned-viewers’ sense of the intertwined nature of Olsen’s exoticized ungendering of Helga is augmented by Larsen’s note that when Olsen speaks, “even Thor, the enormous Persian [cat] . . . had rested for the moment from his incessant purring under Helga’s idly stroking fingers” (Q 87). Here, Helga is literally connected to an exotic pet, whose origins and ownership are linked to a history of trade and exploitation; like the Persian cat, Olsen asserts that Helga, by virtue of her race and gender, can be touched, claimed, and owned. Although

Olsen's proposal seems charged with erotic possession, it is the sexual proprietorship of the master who guarantees the irrefutability of his sexual advances by establishing the black woman as ungendered object, without rights, without the ability to articulate a "no" that can be heard.

Yet in rejecting Olsen, Helga recasts *him* as the aestheticized object, that which is made to be consumed. In establishing herself as subject, Helga can in turn assert herself as a spectator (Barnett 590). After Olsen proposes, Helga's "ironic gaze rested on the face of Axel Olsen, his leonine head, his broad nose—'broader than my own'—his bushy eyebrows, surmounting thick, dropping lids, which hid, she knew, sullen blue eyes" (Q 89). Although in critical discourse much has been made of the manifest "unattractiveness" of Helga's eventual spouse, Reverend Pleasant Green, Olsen, we should note, is made equally unattractive. At the beginning of the novel the narrator initially presents Helga as a fragmented object of the reader-turned-viewer's gaze, in particular the white reader-turned-viewer's gaze. By presenting Helga's body as a site of fragmentation *that must be read as such*, the narrator invokes an uncomfortable site of collusion between the white reader-turned-viewer and the traditional, consuming white male spectator. Helga notably subverts this conventional system of gendered and racialized visual subjection by establishing herself as viewer and inverting the object of the gaze. Olsen's body becomes the site of visual fragmentation; his facial features are reduced to component parts which, significantly, can be pejoratively racialized.

Of course, in a discussion of Helga as an aesthetic object one cannot ignore Helga's literal construction as a piece of visual art. This is in many ways the crucial scene of the novel, the one at which the white reader-turned-viewer is explicitly

asked to undermine knowing as seeing, to re-imagine cultural presuppositions of viewership, and the reader-turned-viewer who is a person of color is invited to resist racial personal-affiliation with Helga. In viewing the portrait, the narrator notes that it wasn't, Helga

contended, herself at all, but some disgusting sensual creature with her features. Herr and Fru Dahl had not exactly liked it either, although collectors, artists, and critics had been unanimous in their praise and it had been hung on the line at an annual exhibition, where it had attracted much flattering attention and many tempting offers. Anyone with half an eye could see that it wasn't, at all, like her. (Q 91)

As Jacquelyn McLendon notes, Olsen's portrait of Helga is "reminiscent of a tradition of European art in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in which black women (and men) were depicted in paintings in order to sexualize the paintings" (73). Yet the narrator does not tell readers-turned-viewers that the portrait is sexualized; rather, the narrator suggests that *Helga believes* that such a sexualized image, such a "disgusting sensual creature," is not her. The slipperiness of Larsen's use of free indirect discourse here creates a space in which readers-turned-viewers can critique *both* Olsen's representation and Helga's reaction to it.

Larsen proposes that what the "collectors, artists, and critics" praise in the portrait is that it sufficiently exoticizes and eroticizes Helga: as a projected and evacuated space, the portrait adequately comports with pre-existing notions of what constitutes blackness in the white European imagination.³⁷ In contrast, although the Dahls aestheticize Helga in a similar manner as Olsen, they dislike the portrait. Such distaste implies that although Helga's painted image comports with the same eroticized notions of blackness that the Dahls have attempted to cultivate as Helga's visual *raison d'être*, it does not confirm the upper class status they hoped that their

exoticism (made up of expensive articles from around the world—a “Manila shawl,” a “leopard skin coat” (Q 76)) of her would engender.

Larsen leaves it purposely unclear what Helga hates about the portrait. Does she dislike that Olsen has overtly sexualized her—thus turning her into a stereotype of black womanhood, the wanton primitive? Or does she hate that he has somehow captured the latent sexual longing that she has tried to repress, Anne Grey like, through the codes of Danish bourgeois respectability?³⁸ This deliberate confusion is augmented when Helga speaks with her maid Marie about the portrait:

“Marie, do you think this is a good picture of me?”

“Of course, Frokken, I know Herr Olsen is a great artist, but no, I don’t like that picture. It looks bad, wicked. Begging your pardon, Frokken.”

“Thanks, Marie, I don’t like it either.” (Q 91)

Marie does not say that the portrait does not look like Helga; in fact, Marie implicitly intimates that the portrait captures Helga’s physical likeness but acknowledges that the portrait is disturbing for its manifestation of Helga’s latent but palpable “wickedness.” Because Marie has already been established as Helga’s *Olympia* inverse, the scene in which the two women assess Helga’s painted image evokes a significant moment of meta-discourse concerning the matrix of art, class, and race. In effect, Helga and Marie have stepped out of Larsen’s inverted version of *Olympia* in order to critique it. Despite Marie’s explicit position as servant in the Dahl household, her use in the *Olympia* framing device serves to further blacken Helga, as it reveals the Dahls’ buying power and Helga’s position as a favorite “pet.” Therefore, Marie’s white racial identity goes challenged even while she waits on black Helga. In this scene, Marie indicates this sense of unquestioning lower class white

authority by commenting on the presumed morality of the portrait and therefore, by extension, the character of her mistress.

That is not to say that the portrait does not evoke Helga's character. In an otherwise astute reading, Barnett reductively claims that the Olsen portrait captures none of Helga's qualities; it is, she argues, a "false representation," suggesting "the myth of libidinous" (587). Surprisingly, most critics agree with Barnett: this portrait is simply an iconographic representation of pejorative blackness.³⁹ I think that such a simplistic reading avoids the subtlety of the text as well as elides the importance that Larsen places on sexual desire as a way to affirm female subjectivity.⁴⁰ In order to establish personal agency divorced from racialized and gender subjection, Helga is right to reject a visual manifestation of self—the so-called "true Helga Crane" (Q 91)—created outside herself and predicated on derogatory determinations of racial othering. Yet, Larsen is careful to hint that Helga's rejection of a *sexualized portrait* should not commence a whole-hearted rejection of *sexuality itself*. For readers-turned-viewers, in particular black race readers-turned-viewers who are asked to avoid reductive racial personal-affiliation, Larsen uses this moment to critique codes of acceptable behavior, especially those perpetuated by the black bourgeoisie. "Wickedness," she proposes, does not have to be read negatively. Instead, it can indicate the personal agency, latent sexual desire, and subjectivity that Helga seeks but which perpetually elude her.⁴¹

DeFalco proposes that for Helga "to acknowledge any aspect of herself in the painting would be to consent to her own primitivist Othering, an acknowledgment of her own desire that would align her with stereotypes that inevitably deny her own subjectivity" (4). And yet, again, the syntactical slyness of

Larsen's dialogue—importantly, Marie does not say that the portrait does not look like Helga, but that *she does not like it* (in effect, she refuses to answer Helga's question)—suggests that the problem is not Helga's desire, but her inability to conceive of desire in anything other than pejoratively racialized terms. In seeking to evade negative constructions of black womanhood predicated on sexual accessibility, Helga also avoids discovering an affirmed sense of subjectivity, existing as it can in the moderate life between restrictive codes of bourgeois morality and racialized determinations of sexual wantonness. By articulating a more nuanced understanding of Helga's reaction to her portrait, I seek to unpack the “vertiginous renegotiation” of women's subject positions, which, in realistic rather than celebratory or condemnatory polarized terms, may entail an oscillation between subject and objecthood as a lived cultural and bodily experience.

Regardless of how readers-turned-viewers read Helga's reaction of the portrait (and Larsen's positioning of that reaction), this scene “makes clear [that] Helga's understanding of her racial self is mediated through cultural artifacts and constructs created by others” (Hostetler 36). As Dittmar claims, Olsen's notion of the “true Helga Crane” comports closely with Selden's of “the real Lily Bart”: both “men's notions of ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ encode the social and political agendas that guide the gaze beyond considerations of line and color” (151). In revealing the danger of assuming the validity of the white male gaze, Larsen compels the white reader-turned-viewer to examine her viewing position and determine how it may engender hierarchical spectatorship founded on predetermined codes of race and gender. Importantly, Larsen refuses to describe Helga's portrait in a way that definitely marks her subject's body. As she does in the opening description, Larsen

speaks of Helga's physicality only in vague terms or through the grammatical and contextual slipperiness of free indirect discourse. In so doing, Larsen resists confirming if knowing matches seeing, if cultural stereotypes match visual schemas of racial determinations. This refusal to code Helga's body with racial markers subverts the white reader-turned-viewer's habitual transfer of stereotype as a function of viewership and the black reader-turned-viewer's reductive slide into racial personal-affiliation.

"This Terrible Reality": Helga's Marriage and Maternal Life

According to Fanon's determinations of bodily schema, Helga's heightened exotic/erotic visibility paradoxically renders her *invisible* according to prescriptive white determinations of female gendering. Helga's constant awareness of herself as a racial subject produces a feeling of hypervisibility that unmoors personal subjectivity as rooted in bodiliness, in an awareness of one's own physical presence; therefore, the abjection she feels in Denmark is awareness that her hypervisibility renders her an ungendered object, a "peacock," a "curio," one who "doesn't count" in white constructions of what constitutes female gendering. After her return from Denmark and a failed attempt to claim her own sexuality (and positively re-gender herself) through an affair with Robert Anderson, Helga gives herself over to an itinerate black preacher sardonically named Rev. Pleasant Green, marries him, and moves to the Deep South. Although many critics read this move as Helga's attempt to disassociate herself from the "material realities" (Goldsmith 109) of a culturally constructed and pejoratively inflected body, I view this as Helga's "desperate attempt

to locate herself in a body that she can inhabit in experiential rather than theoretical terms” (Tanner 194).

Tanner reasons that “Helga’s willingness to sleep with this decidedly unattractive man [Green] appears to issue from the promise of his overwhelming corporeality” (195), even though Greene’s “unattractiveness” seems no less pronounced than Axel Olsen’s. The very solidness of Green’s weight seems to hold emotional appeal for Helga, for it is a way for her to ground her own corporeal life. The narrator notes that Helga “thought of [Green] not at all. . . . Besides, what need to think of him? He was there” (*Q* 122). It is Green’s unqualified “thereness”—his seeming overwhelming physicality—that draws Helga to her husband in a desperate attempt to access vicariously such unselfconscious acceptance of one’s physical presence. Moreover, it is through Helga’s consensual relationship with someone of her own race as opposed to the master/slave dynamic suggested by her relationship with Olsen that she uses to re-gender herself. The narrator describes Helga’s sexual life with her husband as “emotional, palpitating, amorous, all that was living in [Helga] sprang like rank weeds at the tingling thought of night, with a vitality so strong that it devoured all shoots of reason” (*Q* 123).⁴² Besides its obvious depreciatory resonances (Helga’s desire toward her husband is described as “rank weeds”), what interests me about this description is the total absence of Green in relation to Helga’s desire: it exists as a thing apart, a “rhetorical blank . . . which invokes Helga’s corporeality only to suspend it” (Tanner 198). Although she seeks to ground her own body through the corporeality of another, Helga’s desire emerges as a thing apart, a sign without a real world referent.⁴³ Thus the slipperiness, the

intangibility, of Helga's desire fails to establish her sexual life as rooted in physical (rather than aesthetic) experience.

The reader may expect Larsen to affirm Helga's female-gendered bodiliness through her maternal life; yet at the end of the text Larsen refuses to use maternity as a ready solution to the physical, emotional, and aesthetic pain of Helga's raced and gendered oppression. Instead, Helga's children "use her up" (*Q* 124), suggesting that even if Helga's physical bodiliness had momentarily been affirmed in the wake of aesthetic ungendering, it becomes untenable against the greater consumptive processes of childbirth and rearing. Although Larsen's ending is a kind of "undoing, [a] de-aestheticization" (Gray 267), it proves that such de-aestheticization neither brings nor guarantees corporeality as a solution to the ungendering processes of sustained historical oppression. Many critics, including most recently Jessica Labbe (2009), argue that the scene in which Larsen leaves Helga is the protagonist's final one.⁴⁴ Like Dorothy Stringer, I believe, however, that it is more productive for readers-turned-viewers to see that the image of Helga as not one of finality but rather one of openness, "to read Helga's living death as not . . . a literal death [to show] that history's traumas can, and do, repeat themselves on both the psyches and the *bodies of those they have always already marked*" (86, italics mine). Such openness forces readers-turned-viewers outside the text itself to examine those mechanisms of raced, classed, and gendered oppression that are evoked and sustained by certain practices of aesthetic consumption.

Throughout *Quicksand*, Larsen invokes a knowing as seeing paradigm by depicting Helga as an art object and by turning the reader into a spectator whose viewing position is governed by predetermined racial knowledge. As Barnett

contends, “Helga Crane is Larsen’s assertion of the always-meditated nature of representation—an assertion of the ideological content of supposedly pure aesthetic choices” (599). However, the openness of the novel’s ending turns readers-turned-viewers outside the text itself, beyond a mere statement or assertion, by forcing them to acknowledge the “vertiginous renegotiation” (Cheng 48) of Helga’s presentation, her oscillation and/or in-betweenness between subject or object, person or thing. For my own feminist theoretical practice, such recognition will generate a more nuanced understanding of the complexity of women’s represented positions, an acknowledgment that any reading and viewing experience “enables and encapsulates a complex network of mediated desires and cross-narratives” (Cheng 47) in which both mastery and subjection are arbitrated but not confirmed by culture and personal experience. This oscillation is the “crisis of subjectivity, the volatile fluctuation between person and thingness, between body and husk” (Cheng 172).

Such recognition allows the white reader-turned-viewer to begin to break apart knowing as seeing by acknowledging how racial and class cultural-categorizations and self-identifications produce her subjectivity as spectator in particular ways, often at the expense of those whom she views. I read Larsen asking white readers-turned-viewers how the aesthetic documentation of another’s abjection determines their own sense of subjectivity. In order to access a more ethically determined position of viewership, these white readers-turned-viewers must both acknowledge and re-evaluate their own politicized position of viewership as dependent on others’ aesthetic objectification. Larsen does not recommend an “allocation of visibility” as a solution to the “crisis of visibility” (Cheng 171), a kind of re-distribution of the gaze, a conferment of power, to those previously made

invisible. As Peggy Phelan has warned us, political empowerment through visibility is at best a precarious endeavor for those who are always already defined by their bodies or its presentation. Instead, Larsen suggests that in order for political change to occur the white spectator, not the person of color, must re-evaluate her position of aestheticized viewership, must examine what presumed axis of authoritative viewership she stands on and how that axis encodes exclusion or disciplinary violence. For the reader-turned-viewer who is a person of color Larsen wages against her reliance on racialization, her inclination for reflexive personal-affiliation, to confirm subjectivity, because for Larsen such affiliation cannot come without hierarchical underpinnings which confirm historical oppression and assert otherness for its own sake. Larsen seeks a world in which race—not just racism—ceases to exist.

Ultimately, through the re-evaluation of subject positions all readers-turned-viewers will (literally) see how the “crisis of subjectivity,” the oscillation between person and object, is an on-going and negotiated process for themselves as well as the viewed protagonist. Cheng astutely argues that “we do not master by seeing; we are ourselves altered when we look” (21). Perhaps it is time we, as readers-turned-viewers, acknowledge this fact and our stakes in its evaluation. To do so may mean to grant the fragility—but also the transcendent fluidity—of the subjectivity which we use to buttress our lives and understanding of the world.

¹ As do other critics, Kimberly Roberts argues that the arbiters of the black “uplift” movement used the bodies of black women as a way to guarantee bourgeois respectability: “While late-Victorian sensibility was waning in the rest of America at this time, the arbiters of the New Negro movement, men like W. E. B. Du Bois, maintained the importance of strict sexual mores for the betterment of the race. Similarly, the women affiliated with the black Baptist church—more than a million strong by 1900—espoused what Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham has called the ‘politics of respectability.’ Led by women like Nannie Helen Burroughs and Virginia W. Broughton, this powerful women’s movement emphasized the reform of individual manners and morals as a goal in itself, but also as a strategy for reforming the whole structural system of American race relations” (109-10).

² In this sense, Larsen’s “seeing as knowing” paradigm anticipates the work of Adrian Piper, who enacts a similar paradigm in her own work. However, as I discuss in this chapter, Piper and Larsen differ in how they believe the dismantling of “knowing as seeing” should be conducted. For Piper, it entails a negotiation of a gaze of historical oppression which reconstitutes blackness as an affirmative identification; for Larsen, it involves critiquing *the institution of race as such*, because for Larsen, neither blackness nor whiteness (nor an untenable racial “in-betweenness”) provides access to subjectivity, conceived affirmatively and holistically.

³ Spillers cites the “Brookes Plan” which included a careful delineation of the spatial dimensions necessary to transport black captives: “Let it now be supposed . . . that every man slave is to be allowed six feet by one foot four inches for room, every woman five feet ten by one foot four, every boy five feet by one foot two, and every girl four feet six by one foot” (quoted in Spillers, 69). Although Spillers acknowledges that these spatial determinations do take into account the general size differences between men and women, they do not, she argues, do so on the basis of gender, for gender determinations are constructed culturally, not anatomically. In particular, she contends that such differences are composed within *domesticity* (Spillers 69).

⁴ Although this argument has not been made about Helga specifically, such an observation—the hyper-sexualization and ungendering of black women—is a common argument in black studies.

⁵ Considering the history of the slave-trade, Spillers claims that a distinction must be made between “flesh” and “body” and thus between “captive and liberated subject positions”: “Before the ‘body’ there is the ‘flesh,’ that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography. Even though the European hegemonies stole bodies—some of them female—out of West African communities in concert with the African ‘middleman,’ we regard this human and social irreparability as high crimes against the flesh, as the person of African females and African males registered the wounding. If we think of ‘flesh’ as a primary narrative, then we mean its seared, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship’s hole, fallen, or ‘escaped’ overboard” (61).

⁶ Chip Rhodes makes a similar point: “In *Quicksand*, Nella Larsen provides a critical aesthetic distantiating of all these ideologies while simultaneously pointing up [sic] the absence of a viable alternative during this time of political retrenchment” (200).

⁷ Roberts, (probably inadvertently) echoes these words when she suggests that Larsen “implicitly critiques a system that has no room for an individual women’s existence” (112).

⁸ For an extensive examination of such images, please see David Bindman and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s *The Image of the Black in Western Art* (2011).

⁹ Here, I again agree with Gonzalez that “race discourse, in all its historical complexity, is not reducible to visuality; visual representation is merely one of the most powerful techniques by which it operates and is maintained as evident and *self-evident*” (5). By arguing for a visually-focused discussion of race discourse, I am not disregarding the other ways in which race has and is socially and culturally “determined.” In *How Race is Made: Slavery, Segregation, and the Senses* for instance, Mark M. Smith insightfully documents the ways in which racial identity has historically been judged across the senses, not simply through sight.

¹⁰ Of course, as Gonzalez notes, the way in which a body is raced is never about race in exclusion; rather, it is always about race as a cultural matrix which also encompasses “gender, class and geography” (6).

¹¹ Moreover, Cheng persuasively contends that this crisis of representation is a unique problem of the visual arts, which has historically both excluded women and racial minorities (particularly from “high art” institutions supposedly “legitimate” conferring artistic value) and been especially complicit (compared to other art forms, such as music) in perpetuating processes of aesthetic objectification: “When it comes to representations of women and racial minorities, the visual is almost always negatively inflected and usually seen as a tool of commoditization and objectification. It is not a coincidence that in fields such as African-American studies the locus of revolutionary possibility often gets located in sound/music, while the visual remains a less than productive area. And where the visual does get recuperated by liberal rhetoric, it seems limited to gestures of idealization or authentication” (168).

¹² Dagbovie-Mullins argues for what she terms “black-sentient” perception: mixed-race individuals choosing a black identification as a way to orient themselves in the world and to serve as a locus of political subjectivity. Like Sexton and others, Dagbovie-Mullins figures multi-racial politics as ultimately “diminish[ing] blackness” (3), for at the moment in which black theorists and cultural producers have begun to gain cultural visibility, they are asked to deny the relevance (or even the existence) of their racial identification.

¹³ Of course, Larsen would not have to be “anti-race” if racism did not exist.

¹⁴ Although my primary interest lies in the novel’s racial and gender dynamics, not in its position within literary history, I think it is important to note that part of Helga’s loneliness (which Larsen conceives as basically unceasing, a life-long burden) stems to some extent from Larsen writing the text using the Modernist model. Like her white, British contemporary, Virginia Woolf, Larsen conceives Helga’s fragmented sense of self, dissatisfaction, alienation, and perpetual loneliness partly as a result of the (racial and gender determined) nature of her choices, but also simply as a condition of (modern) existence.

¹⁵ As Hutchinson persuasively maintains in his 2006 biography, *In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line*, Larsen’s critique in her novels of race as an institution is formed in large part through her own emotionally debilitating upbringing. The daughter of immigrants, a white Danish mother and a black West Indian black father, a racial upbringing mirrored in Larsen’s autobiographical protagonist Helga Crane, Larsen was a mixed-race person who had to be identified as “black” according to US hypodescent laws which served to reify and police whiteness.

¹⁶ Considering Larsen’s condemnation of the black bourgeoisie in *Quicksand* she was surprised that it received such a warm reception, particularly from W.E.B Du Bois, in the Harlem elite (*In Search of Nella Larsen* 293).

¹⁷ Barnett suggests that “Larsen’s choice to narrate with the diction and perspective of the visual artist prefigures her central exploration of representation in the section where Helga serves as a model for the Danish artist, Axel Olsen” (581).

¹⁸ Helga Crane is often compared to—and put in conversation with—Josephine Baker. Here, Helga’s skin evokes the glistening quality of the way in which Baker’s was often described. As Cheng suggests of Baker, “her nakedness never stands alone and instead frequently exercises an eccentric communion with other epidermises, both natural and inorganic. In short, with Baker, *being unveiled often also means being covered over*” (8).

¹⁹ Without explicitly referencing the blazon tradition, Barnett notes the fragmentation of Helga’s body as “composed of attractive parts” (583).

²⁰ “Larsen refrains from telling us in th[e] opening passage that her protagonist is black” (Dittmar 147).

²¹ However, one could claim that the reader’s knowledge of Larsen’s own racial makeup predetermines her knowledge of the race of Larsen’s protagonists. Put simply, Larsen was black so, for the reader, her subjects are assumed to be black. Such familiarity of authorship is yet another way that “knowing” predetermines “seeing”/reading for the reader-turned-viewer.

²² Lunde and Westerstahl Stenport provide a helpful, albeit abbreviated, record of the Danish slave trade: “The Danish West Indies was colonized in 1666 and ruled by Denmark for three and a half centuries until it was sold to the United States in 1917 and renamed the Virgin Islands. Although these three islands (especially Saint Thomas) played a vital role in the black Atlantic’s Middle Passage and the transfer of slaves, goods, and capital in the eighteenth century and beyond, Denmark’s legacy

as a slave trader and colonizer continues to be overlooked. Denmark imported 1,000 slaves annually from Africa to the West Indies until the trade was abolished in 1803” (231).

²³ Toni Morrison first suggests this idea of black/white relationality in American literature in *Playing in the Dark* (1992). As she proposes, Huck Finn, for instance, only understands himself in relation to what he is not: a “nigger.”

²⁴ In some sense this silence has continued to the modern day, for as Lunde and Westerstahl note, “none of [Larsen’s] fiction has been translated into a Scandinavian language, and writing on her in Scandinavian publications is limited. This neglect of Larsen’s place and function in the context of Scandinavian-American studies is especially critical, since her writing redefines the normative boundaries not only of the Harlem Renaissance but also the Scandinavian-American literary canon” (241).

²⁵ The question of Helga being the single black in Denmark raises important issues about the necessity of critical mass for a minority subject. In effect, what does it mean for Denmark to be “all white?” With one black person is it “less white?” With two? With three? At what point does Denmark fail to be racially homogenous?

²⁶ As numerous critics have noted, Marie is a variation of Larsen’s own mother’s name, Mary. Like Mary Larsen, Marie is a skilled dressmaker who “cuts down” Helga’s skirt to make it smaller and more alluring.

²⁷ For more on this, please see Jennifer’s De Vere Brody’s article “Black Cat Fever: Manifestations of Manet’s *Olympia*.”

²⁸ As Bindman points out, such an image held little historical accuracy: “As Lady Mary well knew, child slaves in Turkey were usually white, while black slaves were usually adults” (79).

²⁹ Cheng asserts that Baker’s relentless self-fetishization made her “not just a black female performer, [but] a performer who relentlessly enacted fantasies of black femininity” (39).

³⁰ Ann E. Hostetler argues that “the display of Helga in Denmark recalls the nineteenth-century European practice of exhibiting black women as a form of social entertainment” (41). Indeed, the intensely exhibitionist quality of Helga’s presentation recalls that of the so-called “Hottentot Venus.”

³¹ Cheng asserts that “the perennial opposition between what is open and naked versus what is veiled and hidden has been as important to the racist imagination as it is to the critical intervention designed to decode it. For the racist, nakedness signals rawness, animality, dumb flesh and is repeatedly invoked, socially and legally, as the sign of the inhuman and the other. For the critical race theorist, that nakedness is deconstructed as an entirely socialized and juridicized concept yet nonetheless reproduced as that which irreducibly indexes skin’s visual legibility” (12).

³² In regards to the question of Helga’s gender, telling she is not described as a “peahen.”

³³ In this same monograph, Carby believes that such discourse held debilitatingly pejorative resonances for black female novelists, who “in order to gain a public voice as orators or published writers . . . had to confront the dominant domestic ideologies and literary conventions of womanhood which excluded them from the definition of ‘woman’” (6).

³⁴ I find it strange and, indeed, somewhat unsettling, that Schaper uses this word—“images”—when Helga is at a live performance and thus the performers are in fact physical bodies. Indeed, the word “performances” is appropriate; the word “images” is not.

³⁵ Here, as elsewhere, I put “self” in quotation marks to suggest that Helga never entirely controls her personal appearance. Especially in Denmark, Helga’s personal presentation is always highly manipulated by Olsen and her aunt and uncle to connote maximum exotic otherness.

³⁶ Hutchinson astutely points out that Helga’s “reasons for rejecting Olsen’s hand are specific to her personal history, deriving from a feeling of personal injury at his presumptuousness and from her desire that her children should not have the difficulties she has had” (“Subject to Disappearance” 184). Of course, considering the autobiographical nature of the novel, Helga’s reasons for rejecting Olsen are similar to Larsen’s own distrust of interracial marriage.

³⁷ Such exoticism and (presumed) aesthetic and cultural binarism were quite important to the Modernist project and the making of the “white artist” in both literature and the visual arts. For instance, consider Stein’s *Three Lives* or Gaughin’s Tahiti paintings.

³⁸ Anne’s name evokes “The Good Anna” of Gertrude Stein’s *Three Lives*. Both Anne and Anna are more hypocritical than “good,” a word which implies both superior quality (e.g., “better than”) and elevated moral sense (e.g., “a ‘good’ person”).

³⁹ In contrast to these views, Claudia Tate, in her now canonical psychoanalytical reading, argues that “from the moment that Helga gazes at Olsen’s portrait of her, she unconsciously recognizes the sexuality that she has so carefully sublimated or adamantly rejected” (249).

⁴⁰ Sherrand-Johnson, for instance, maintains that “in condemning this painting, and refusing Olsen’s offer, [Helga] interrupt[s] the gaze and inserts [herself] as spectator viewing Olsen’s art, just as Olympia’s gaze and the gaze of her maid disconcert viewers by preventing easy identification and erotic pleasure” (848). I contend that not only is such a reading too automatically celebratory, but that, again, it avoids the subtlety of Larsen’s text, which allows for a space in which the reader-turned-viewer can *resist* identifying with Helga.

⁴¹ In a particularly reductive reading, Deborah E. McDowell collapses not only Helga’s view of her own sexuality with that of the narrator, but Helga’s view with *Larsen’s* as well: “However much Larsen criticizes the repressive standards of sexual morality upheld by the black middle class, she is finally unable to escape those values. Significantly, sexuality is linked throughout the novel to imagery of descent and animalism, suggesting moral degradation” (152).

⁴² As numerous critics have pointed out, the most sexual scene in the novel is not connected to any man, but is instead the (female) homoerotic conversion scene: “Arms were stretched toward her with savage frenzy. The women dragged themselves upon their knees or crawled over the floor like reptiles, sobbing and pulling their hair and tearing off their clothing. Those who succeeded in getting near to her leaned forward to encourage the unfortunate sister, dropping hot tears and beads of sweat upon her bare arms and neck. . . . the thing became real. A miraculous calm came over her” (Q 115). The conversion itself, with its indistinguishable mass of bodies, reads like an orgy, while the “miraculous calm” of the aftermath evokes post-orgasmic tranquility.

⁴³ Larsen suggests that Green, despite his apparent unattractiveness, is not exactly to blame for failing to ground Helga’s corporeality. Indeed, after Helga kisses Robert Anderson, the narrator notes that “she lived over those brief seconds, thinking not so much of the man whose arms had held her as of the ecstasy which had flooded her” (Q 106). Again, the man himself is absent from Helga’s desire; it is seemingly neither prompted nor sustained by him.

⁴⁴ Interestingly enough, Labbe draws this comparison by invoking the other two female protagonists—Lily Bart and Edna Pontellier—discussed in this dissertation: “Larsen does not deliver Helga’s *tableau mort* such as Edith Wharton paints for Lily Bart at the close of *The House of Mirth*. Instead, Helga’s end more closely resembles Kate Chopin’s Edna Pontellier—whom we leave amid what we only assume will be her final swim” (108).

Chapter 4

[Mind the Gap] Between Artistry and “Genius”: Edna Pontellier in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*

Despite the similarity of their objectification, the gendered aestheticization of Lily Bart and Helga Crane is quite different. Lily’s feminine artifice depends on aestheticization, while Helga’s female gendering is undermined through the process, since it interpolates her within a visual discourse of historical oppression. The aestheticization of Edna Pontellier, the protagonist of Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* (1899), functions yet another way. Of the three female protagonists, Edna is the only one who is both aestheticized object and artist-subject. As I will argue, her position as a white, upper-middle class artist allows her *to gender herself*, a possibility unavailable to the white, leisure-class Lily or the black, between classes and worlds Helga, both of whom remain objects of aesthetic contemplation. For the most part, Edna’s self-gendering leads her to seek a masculine prerogative—those rights and privileges unavailable to her as a woman, particularly as a woman aestheticized as art-object. In this framework, the reader is still a viewer, but this time she is a kind of meta-viewer of the artist herself—one who can evaluate the artist’s position, her self-aestheticization, and her use of art, which may include the exploitation of other women as objects of aesthetic contemplation.

At various points in the text, Edna oscillates in her gender identifications and briefly relinquishes her hold on masculine privilege by engaging in reciprocal relationships with other women, most notably Adèle Ratignolle, and therefore affirms the validity of feminist aesthetics, which value unity, connection, and collaboration. However, if Edna oscillates between gender self-identifications, she does not vacillate between racial and class ones. Her self-identifications as white and

upper middle-class remain inviolate throughout and, as I will contend, contribute to her eventual, somewhat petulant, decision to take her own life. As a woman of her race and class, Edna seeks the privilege she associates with white, upper middle class men that she is denied despite the masculine prerogative she gains as an artist. In this sense, she desires not a fundamental change in the racial, class, and social system of her world, but simply the elimination of the barriers which prevent *her* from accessing all the vestiges of masculine privilege. Hers is a model that leaves the oppression of others—including the black women who take care of her children—in place.

Edna's recognition that a white, upper middle class male model of privilege will remain unavailable to her eventually pushes her toward an unpremeditated suicide. For the reader-turned-viewer, this suicide functions as a warning. It serves not as a "cautionary tale" (Wershoven 28) of the risks of challenging patriarchy's restrictive bonds (as was often true of nineteenth-century fiction), but as a siren-warning of the dangers of privilege which breeds solipsism, even to the point of melodramatically taking one's own life. For the white reader-turned-viewer the warning of the text forces the gaze inward, to evaluate a subject position which may maintain oppression. For all readers Edna's suicide encourages questions about the overall validity of a rights-access model of social justice. Perhaps, Chopin's text suggests, it is time for a new social justice model based not on the access of privilege but on the true elimination of oppression.

In *Aesthetics and Gender in American Literature* (2000), Deborah Barker contends that writers often depicted female protagonists as visual artists rather than writers in order to "signal the aesthetic seriousness of their own writing and explore issues of

creativity and sexuality that conflicted squarely with the limitations of female decorum that readers and critics often expected of the woman writer and her heroines” (11). Like other writers, Chopin seizes on the trope of the female artist as a way to affirm the value of female engagement in the arts as well as to make a meta-commentary on her own artistic abilities as serious and dedicated. Critics from Elizabeth Ammons to John Carlos Rowe¹ have long argued that Edna lacks any “distinctive artistic talents” (Rowe 135), a claim that goes almost uncontested in the criticism of the novel. However, in my view Chopin suggests that Edna’s rapid development as an artist implies profound, natural gifts—the sort of innate rather than cultivated talent traditionally associated with the male “genius.” Moreover, Edna’s talent for selling her work implies a tremendous ability to engage in the masculine realm of the art-marketplace—a talent necessary for the solitary male genius to reach a rapt audience.

Well-meaning critics’ ready desire to excommunicate Edna to the realm of the “amateur,” “dilettante,” and “dabbler” participates in the same kind of gendered separation of artistry—amateur groups of women produce domestic crafts in the home, professional male solitary geniuses create high art for the marketplace—that has long plagued female engagement in the arts. As art historian Deborah Cherry explains, “[a]s a category of value, amateur is mobilised [sic] against women’s art to secure masculine definitions of the artist and the professional” (quoted in *Gender and Aesthetics* 17). Likewise, Kathryn Lee Seidel contends “who can be an artist [is a] culturally based question” (228), one which it is important to add is always already overlaid with gendered and raced assumptions.

Interestingly, in publicity and interviews, Chopin played into the image of herself as a kind of dilettante author. But, as explained by her foremost biographer, Emily Toth, Chopin was in fact a very dedicated and ambitious writer: “[Chopin] seriously and deliberately presented herself as a different creature from the dedicated writer she was. When asked about her writing, she was often evasive, and vague if not untruthful. . . she made herself seem more nonchalant and breezy, and far less ambitious, than she actually was” (164). Fragments of Chopin manuscripts found in 1992 show extensive editing that indicates diligent revisions and almost obsessive attention to detail (Toth 167). Careful not to align herself with either the emerging “New Women” or the retrograde, sentimental lady novelists, Chopin seems to have played a sort of public relations game in which she emphasized both her feminine role as widow and mother and (presumed) masculine role as a “breezy,” natural talent. Of course, we cannot know Chopin’s particular reasons for taking this position. But probably she sought to toe the line between popular appeal (her public image) and social critique (the content of her work).

Edna is similarly dedicated and talented. Elaine Sargent Apthorp notes that “Edna is so deft with a brush that she is selling her paintings for tidy sums after only a few months of experimentation” (6). This point is important. When we first meet Edna-as-artist, we learn that “Mrs. Pontellier had brought her sketching materials, which she sometimes dabbled with in an unprofessional way. She liked the dabbling” (A 21); yet one page later are told that Edna “handled her brushes with a certain ease and freedom which came, not from long and close acquaintance with them, but from a natural aptitude” (A 22). Chopin’s inclusion of the terms “ease” and “natural aptitude” suggests that Edna is some sort of prodigy who can go

untutored, untrained, and basically without practice while still producing good work. Such terminology begins to write Chopin's protagonist into the paradigm of the male solitary genius who, even if untrained, would presumably emerge into the world as a fully formed artist. Edna's masculinely-coded natural aptitude explicitly contrasts with the practiced accomplishments—sketching, piano playing, needlework—deemed necessary for nineteenth-century ladies of leisure to acquire.

The way in which Edna engages with the wider world also suggests Chopin's desire to insert her heroine into the role of the masculine solitary genius. Late in the novel, Edna comments to Robert: "I don't mind walking. I always feel so sorry for women who don't like to walk; they miss so much—so many rare little glimpses of life" (A 176). Edna both claims and valorizes the masculine role of the flâneur—the Baudelarian city stroller and (presumably) detached observer who is both part of and apart from the action of the street. Unlike the artist's model-muse, who exists solely as a consumed object of contemplation, the flâneur may invite the gaze of others, but he also is a profound consumer of life on the street, which he may bring back to the drawing room to be sketched or shared as stories. Edna claims this masculine role of the flâneur, enjoying the freedom to be observed but, more importantly, to observe and determine for *herself*. She positions herself as the artist representing life rather than as the muse helping a man to capture its meaning. Like a traditional male genius, Edna conceives life as an individual adventure and believes its essence and strength are to be derived from solitary contemplation. The narrator notes that Edna "had her life long been accustomed to harbor thoughts and emotions which never voiced themselves. They had never taken the form of struggles. They belonged to her and were her own, and she entertained the conviction that she had a

right to them and that they concerned no one but herself" (479). As Elaine Showalter has argued, "indeed, *The Awakening*, which Chopin subtitled "A Solitary Soul," may be read as an account of Edna Pontellier's evolution from romantic fantasies of fusion with another person to self-definition and self-reliance" (33). Evoking Emerson, whom Edna falls asleep reading at the end of Chapter 24, Showalter codes Edna's "solitariness" as a masculine prerogative that must be nurtured and protected by the artist herself and, as I will explain, by a mother-muse, a woman like Adèle.

Despite the importance of Edna's development as an artist to her awakening, its value is often ignored or undermined in the criticism. Critics such as Cynthia Griffin Wolff and Patricia S. Yaeger have long been preoccupied with what they term Edna's "inarticulate" speech, the "thoughts and emotions which never voiced themselves," and/or her willingness to describe her feelings in the codified language of romantic discourse. Such inability to access a discourse that gives expression to her personal feelings prevents Edna, these critics reason, from gaining subjectivity. This argument is circular: Edna cannot access a discourse to express herself; therefore, she cannot conceive herself as a subject. Edna is not a subject because she cannot express herself in language denoting subjectivity. Yet more troubling than this circularity is the presumption that *language* is the sole mechanism of accessing and manifesting subjectivity.

Rather than words, images and artistic expression are the way in which Edna articulates self-awareness. This is not to say that Edna's produced images such as the "Bavarian peasant" or the "basket of apples" (492) lack codified influences, but rather that her "inarticulation" becomes less pronounced when we as critics assume

that Edna's chosen and truest mode of self-expression lies with her brush rather than with her mouth. As the predicament of female protagonists in countless texts demonstrates, neither mastery of speech nor of physical presence guarantees freedom from oppression. Edna's art, the sphere in which she finds the most personal and creative gratification, suggests a language of her own, a way of knowing of her own, indeed, a world of her own, which speech does not elucidate. When Edna tells Robert right before her death that "I suppose this is what you would call unwomanly; but I have got into a habit of expressing myself" (*A* 175), the reader can easily assume, based on her recent development as an artist, that Edna refers to aesthetic and bodily rather than linguistic expression. Articulation takes many forms.

Moreover, Edna's artistic articulation has an audience. Unlike the female amateur, who may paint for amusement or to create gifts for friends, Edna is adept in the masculine realm of the artistic marketplace. Toward the end of the novel, the narrator notes that "Edna worked several hours with much spirit. She saw no one but a picture dealer, who asked her if it were true she was going abroad to study in Paris. She said possibly she might, and he negotiated with her for some Parisian studies to reach him in time for the holiday trade in December" (*A* 172). Besides the obvious privilege of her class position ("maybe I will, maybe I won't go to Paris"), what is striking here is Edna's easy negotiation of the terms of economic exchange, a masculine prerogative in her class and her time.² In this instance Edna "speculates" on her future talent, on her future artistic production, in much the same way as her husband speculates on futures in the stock market (*A* 172).

By seeking and claiming the masculine prerogative she associates with artistry, however, Edna perpetuates the system of female subjugation, most notably

through her portrayals of her friend Adèle Ratignolle. A conventionally lush beauty, Adèle possesses “spun-gold hair that comb nor confining pin could restrain; . . . blue eyes that were like nothing but sapphires; two lips that pouted, that were so red one could think of cherries . . .” (A 17). Tellingly, Adèle’s conventionally romantic and feminine physical appearance contrasts with Edna’s more masculine one. The narrator describes Edna as “handsome rather than beautiful. Her face was captivating by reason of a certain frankness of expression and a contradictory subtle play of features” (A 9). Edna’s “handsomeness” and “frankness” mark her as more masculine, a woman who does not possess conventionally feminine soft and sensual beauty or employ a conventionally feminine coy and flirtatious affect. Evoking Linda Huf’s analysis in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman*, Suzanne W. Jones asserts that the

the artist hero [is often described] having conventional ‘feminine’ traits—passivity, sensitivity, shyness—and the artist heroine as having conventional ‘masculine’ traits—liveliness, strength, fearlessness. . . . Women writers of the artist novel pit their female protagonists against sexually conventional foils and they do not create male muses because they do not idealize men. (3)

Adèle is Edna’s conventionally feminine foil, but she is also her muse, a complex role of simultaneous glorification and objectification. When the narrator gushes that “there are no words to describe [Adèle] save the old ones that have served so often to picture the bygone heroine of romance and the fair lady of our dreams” (A 17), Adèle is immediately typed and codified as a romantic figure of collective consciousness (“our dreams”) rather than as an individualized subject. Yet this passage is also a moment of free indirect discourse. It is not that Adèle *cannot* be described in anything but the conventionally romantic terms of masculine objectification—the fragmenting blazon tradition in which eyes become inanimate

sapphire and lips inert cherries—but that Edna herself cannot, for the most part, conceive of Adèle in anything but these terms. The gap between Edna’s view and the narrator’s comment provides a space for the reader-turned-viewer to critique Edna’s positional failure, her inability to understand Adèle apart from codified tropes of femininity.

Barker affirms that “with its traditional emphasis on the female form (particularly the female nude as an essential feature of art training), painting serves as a metaphor for the psychological and economic subjugation of women” (“The Awakening of Female Artistry” 62). Of course painting not only serves as a metaphor for this oppression, but it also perpetuates this gendered system—female models are required to be silent, immobile, and museful bearers of artistic masculine determinations of life, love, and, perhaps most insidiously, the male artists themselves. Therefore, Edna’s compulsion to paint her friend/muse “brings to the foreground the problems she faces as a woman artist in attempting to paint her own desire without objectifying Adèle” (“The Awakening of Female Artistry” 63). Rather than worrying about objectifying Adèle, however, Edna precisely *seeks* this process of masculine artistic objectification. I agree with Ivy Schweitzer that “Edna’s desire to capture the romanticized maternal image places her in a masculine position by linking her to the masculine world of representation and power. By imagining Adèle as ‘some sensuous Madonna,’ she stereotypes, fetishizes, and silences [her]” (173). It is both Edna’s inability *and her unwillingness* to see beyond type that produces her stereotypical renderings of Adèle, for to render her unique would jeopardize the masculine privilege she seeks to gain through artistry.

Even at the very beginning of the novel, Chopin presents the burgeoning relationship between Edna and Adèle as one of viewed objectification: “Mrs. Pontellier liked to sit and gaze at her fair companion as she might look upon a faultless Madonna” (A 20), and she “stood watching the fair woman [Adèle] walk down the long line of galleries with the grace and majesty which queens are supposed to possess” (A 23). Like the traditional male artist, Edna appreciates the beauty her female subject brings to the world; yet, the lens through which Edna views Adèle is not one of personalized discernment—the individualized woman Adèle—but rather one of generalized typography—“the faultless Madonna,” the “fair queen.” When Edna picks up her sketching materials, the narrator notes that “she had long wished to try herself on Madame Ratignolle. Never had that lady seemed a more tempting subject than at that moment, seated there like some sensuous Madonna, with the gleam of the fading day enriching her splendid color” (A 22). The failure here is not in Adèle’s self-representation, her inability to present herself as anything *but* a queen or the Madonna, but in Edna’s practice as an artist. Instead of using her artistic gifts, the presumed greater discernment of artistic eyes and an artistic soul, Edna chooses to employ tropes to depict Adèle as a type—“the mother-woman . . . who idolized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals” (A 16).

This inability to depict the individual Adèle becomes especially pronounced when Edna does produce a portrait of her friend, which

bore no resemblance to Madame Ratignolle. She was greatly disappointed to find that it did not look like her. But it was a fair enough piece of work, and in many respects satisfying. Mrs. Pontellier evidently did not think so. After surveying the sketch critically she drew a broad smudge of paint across its surface, and crumpled the paper between her hands. (A 22)

If we assume that Adèle is the best judge of her own appearance, than it is unclear what has gone wrong. As with Axel Olsen's portrait of Helga Crane in Larsen's *Quicksand*, the reader-turned-viewer must beware of the slipperiness of narrator's presentation of the scene and unwillingness to describe the portrait itself. Edna's failure to capture a "likeness" of Adèle may lie with her ready willingness to transpose Adèle to type, to transfer one of her own circumscribed views of her friend—copied from romantic discourse and pre-existing artistic tropes—onto the canvas.

The problem may also lie in Adèle's *own* artistic lens, which, considering her own fawning over Edna's "lifelike" basket of apples (A 92), seemingly does not permit artistic appreciation beyond the realistic mode. Toth argues that Chopin was likely introduced to the Impressionist painter Edgar Degas when he visited New Orleans (73), which may have prompted her to imagine Adèle's portrait in the Impressionist manner, "the painterly alternative . . . [which sought] a visual realism based on sensational response to light and color" (Barbara Novak, quoted in "The Awakening of Female Artistry" 67). Chopin's writerly style, which both privileges the senses and invites a sensuous response in the reader-turned-viewer,³ suggests the influence of Impressionism in her written work which she would have naturally transposed to her visual images. Although Edna may have been guilty of portraying Adèle as type (an assumption we cannot make from the purposefully vague description of the portrait itself, but rather from her previous and subsequent willingness to view Adèle in this way), Adèle's failure to see herself in the image and her general lack of appreciation of its artistic merit may have much to do with Edna's use of an impressionistic rather than a realistic mode of depiction. Impressionism

had not yet found an appreciative audience in Grand Isle. Edna, viewing such lack of appreciation as an indictment on her artistic skill, chooses to “crumple the paper between her hands” and thus erases the masculine prerogative to be artistically daring which she had momentarily claimed.

As an artist whose talent needs to be nurtured, Edna uses Adèle not just for her aesthetic appeal, her ready capacity to be rendered (and reduced) in art, but for her maternal qualities, her willingness to serve as encouraging mother as well as sensual muse. Like the traditional male artist, Edna claims the masculine prerogative to use women both for their aesthetic appeal and presumed emotional comfort, the kind of comfort sought by Lily Bart’s admirers. After completing a great deal of work, Edna takes her images to Adèle:

She knew that Madame Ratignolle’s opinion in such a matter would be next to valueless, that she herself had not alone decided, but determined; but she sought the words of praise and encouragement that would help her to put heart into her venture.

“Your talent is immense, dear!”

“Nonsense!” protested Edna, well pleased.

“Immense, I tell you,” persisted Madame Ratignolle, surveying the sketches one by one, at close range, then holding them at arm’s length, narrowing her eyes, and dropping her head on one side. “Surely this Bavarian peasant is worthy of framing; and this basket of apples! Never have I seen anything more lifelike. One might almost be tempted to reach out a hand and take one.”

Edna could not control a feeling which bordered upon complacency at her friend’s praise, even realizing, as she did, its true worth. (A 92)

Edna has determined that in terms of artistic views, in terms of aesthetic taste, Adèle’s opinion is “worthless.” However, it is not, Edna acknowledges, “valueless.” Although in everyday language “value” and “worth” are often used interchangeably, their literal meaning actually differs somewhat. Value can indicate use or importance

beyond the monetary, while worth strictly defined connotes only monetary significance. Although Adèle may not provide Edna with criticism that is helpful to produce art for the market (to increase its literal *worth*), her encouragement does increase the value—the importance—Edna derives from her own artistic endeavors.

Like the traditional male artist, Edna seeks Adèle for her encouragement, “to put heart into her venture,” to confirm her place in the world and nurture her dreams. This is a kind of gendered oppression, for Adèle possesses no value of her own. As the enabler of Edna’s artistry and the maternal guardian of her vision, Adèle is only relationally important. When Edna begins to explore her artistic talent and blossoming sexuality, she “realize[s] her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her” (A 25). Edna automatically accepts the false universal (raced white, gendered male) of what it means to be an individual: she adopts a masculine prerogative that assumes the privilege of aesthetic and sexual possession of other women. Edna accepts that the subjectivity she can gain through art is a hierarchical and masculine right that can only be claimed at the expense of other people and other modes of being.⁴ In order to realize her potential as an individual she needs the aesthetic beauty, the museful appeal, and the maternal encouragement of someone like Adèle. Rather than finding a new paradigm of feminine reciprocity, Edna chooses to adopt the masculine paradigm of the artist and his model-muse who is used for both aesthetic inspiration and artistic affirmation.

This relationship, as noted by other critics, is not without sexual underpinnings, as was often true of the artist’s model and his mistress. In such a relationship, the female model-muse serves the male artist sexually, aesthetically,

emotionally.⁵ When Edna opens up to her friend about her past Adèle “laid her hand over that of Mrs. Pontellier, which was near her. Seeing that the hand was not withdrawn, she clasped it firmly and warmly. She even stroked it a little, fondly, with the other hand, murmuring in an undertone, ‘*Pauvre chérie*’” (A 30). Adèle tests Edna’s receptiveness to the possibility of sensual/sexual contact (“seeing that the hand was not withdrawn”) that doubles as emotional comfort. In the same conversation, Edna “put her head down on [Adèle’s] shoulder. She was flushed and felt intoxicated with the sound of her own voice and the unaccustomed taste of candor” (A 33). Of course, Edna’s “flush” suggests a bodily effect of sexual desire. However, even while presumably wanting Adèle in some or many ways—the artist’s confused mix of needing his model for aesthetic inspiration, emotional comfort, and sexual gratification—Edna’s own desire eclipses both Adèle’s bodily figure and her emotional appeal. Her need for Adèle is self-reflexive, masturbatory, for Adèle is the person who allows Edna to “intoxicate [herself] with the sound of her own voice” and through whom Edna can articulate her own artistic vision.

That said, a complete chastisement of Edna’s artistic “use” of Adèle is both unfair and incomplete. The narrator notes that

The excessive physical charm of the Creole had first attracted her, for Edna had a sensuous susceptibility to beauty. Then the candor of the woman’s whole existence, which every one might read, and which formed so striking a contrast to her own habitual reserve—this might have furnished a link. Who can tell what metals the gods use in forging the subtle bond which we call sympathy, which we might as well call love. (A 26)

Although the narrator’s description of Adèle’s emotional and aesthetic appeal for Edna reads as another instance of Edna’s objectification of her friend, the suggestion that such appeal fosters “sympathy”—presumably our modern notion of the more reciprocal “empathy”—and “love” implies a sense of feminine aesthetics, of unity,

connection, and cohesion divorced from hierarchal masculine notions of subjectivity gained at the expense of others. In this reciprocity Edna's friendship with Adèle suggests a positive feminine affiliation. As Elaine Scarry theorizes the viewer's mastery can be undermined—rather than confirmed—in the presence of startling beauty (73) and proposes that because a beautiful object forces us often literally to pause and reevaluate previous perceptions, “at the moment we encounter something beautiful, we undergo a radical decentering. . . . We willingly cede our ground to the thing that stands before us” (111-2). Perhaps it is this ceding that Edna feels in Adèle's presence.

If so, Edna's feminine and reciprocal movement toward loving Adèle suggests that looking, visually appreciating beauty, does not necessarily denote objectification. Ellen Zetzel Lambert calls this “the gaze of love”: “[As feminists] we can acknowledge that all gazes are *not* alike, that there is a . . . gaze that looks at a woman's body with the eyes of love, as well as one that looks at that body with desire for mastery over it” (15). Perhaps these two gazes—one of “love,” one of objectification—are not as distinct and possible to disentangle as Lambert suggests. That said, Chopin's construction of a spectrum of gazes encourages the reader-turned-viewer to assess an oscillating position as both artist and muse in her own life.

Like her engagement with Adèle, Edna's relationship with her father, Colonel Pontellier, suggests a complex oscillation between masculine and feminine modes of gender identification. Almost immediately upon his arrival, “Edna began by introducing [the Colonel] to her atelier and making a sketch of him” (A 113). As she does with Adèle, Edna claims the traditionally masculine artistic prerogative to choose her subject and then, through the artistic process, to transform a *person* into a

sketch or a painting, quite literally, to turn the person into an object. The Colonel becomes the mechanism through which Edna can realize artistry, and thus, the subjectivity acquired through being the articulator of life rather than the muse-ful bearer of its power and mystery. Like Adèle, the Colonel is the model-object (although not a muse in the same way as Adèle) and Edna is the artist-subject. However, the Colonel is quite obviously not Adèle. Not only is he hyper-masculine (the reader is told he possesses “white and silky” hair and moustache, which emphasizes the “rugged bronze of his face” [A 113]),⁶ but he is Edna’s *father*, not a representative of the patriarchy, but its literal manifestation. Despite Edna’s claiming of masculine privilege, the right to draw and objectify others, she is, with her father seated in front of her, explicitly interpolated into a patriarchal framework. Jennifer B. Gray argues that when Edna draws her father she “symbolically shapes and controls [him] through her art, simultaneously rejecting the hailings of patriarchal ideology and advocating the artistic fulfillment encompassed in an alternative discourse, the ideology of the ‘artist-woman’” (65). That is to say, Edna’s position *as a woman* is unavoidable when marked as her father’s *daughter*; therefore, when drawing him she may not adopt a masculine artistic identification (as she does with Adèle) than claim the right to be a woman *and* to be an artist, to be a woman-artist. Therefore, in drawing her father Edna subverts the patriarchal system which presumes the artist to be male, active, and virile, and the model to be female, passive, and weak. Here, the *female* prerogative becomes one of strength and vigor.

Edna’s claiming of female artistry, achieved through sketching her father and subverting the patriarchal system embodied by his presence, seems to allow the woman Edna greater freedom to oscillate between the traditionally polarized gender

identifications of masculinity and femininity. For instance, when she goes to the racecourse with the Colonel, Edna is enlivened by the masculine world of gambling and speculation, but in such a way that produces a feminine physical affect: “she was excited and in a manner radiant” (A 116).⁷ Thus, when the Colonel begins to prepare to depart, Edna

grew melting and affectionate, remembering his many acts of consideration and his repeated expressions of an ardent attachment. She was solicitous about his health and welfare. She bustled around, looking after his clothing, thinking about heavy underwear, quite as Madame Ratignolle would have done. . . (A 120)

Here, Edna adopts the role of the “mother-woman,” epitomized, of course, by her friend Adèle. She becomes stereotypically feminine, someone who fawns over an older man, who becomes “melting and affectionate,” and who worries about banal domestic trifles like “heavy underwear.” Importantly, Edna acts this way with her father, and thus lays claim to kind of domestic control denied to her in childhood.

The presence of Mademoiselle Reisz, the self-declared “artist” of the novel, suggests the dangers of the masculine artistic prerogative denoting possession and control. Despite what the novel assures the reader is Reisz’s manifest unattractiveness as a human being, most feminist critics accept her claim that *she* functions as the true artist of the text and Edna is a dilettante who possesses neither the talent nor the discipline to produce great art. Ammons, for instance, claims that Reisz “transcended the rules [of the patriarchy]. But if that is so, it is because she has genius . . . the price Mademoiselle Reisz has paid for her independence and brilliant artistry is personally crippling.” (73). Although Ammons acknowledges that art “deforms” Reisz, produces a profound degree of loneliness and self-denial that is literally manifested onto her crippled body, she also assumes that Reisz is still the

“genius” of the novel, the true artist in the text. Such a reading not only fundamentally ignores Chopin’s characterization of Reisz as destructive and repulsive but also ironically reinscribes a gendered understanding of artistry which positions masculine possession/control/objectification as the only mode through which to produce art. That is to say, a woman can be an artist, but only if she claims the prerogatives of a man.

When we first see Reisz, we are told that “she was a disagreeable little woman, no longer young, who had quarreled with almost everyone, owing to a temper which was self-assertive and a disposition to trample upon the rights of others” (A 43).⁸ Reisz’s willingness to trample upon the rights of others reads as the white masculine prerogative to achieve subjectivity through the subjection of other people. Tellingly, Chopin figures this objectification in sexual as well as artistic terms; when Reisz and Edna are at the beach together, Reisz “raved about Edna’s appearance in a bathing suit” (A 82). As an artist, Reisz gains self-worth through the very kinds of manipulation that eschew collaboration, the kind of reciprocal art production that confers value and understanding on both artist and viewer. She seeks to produce art in such a way that only valorizes her, that guarantees her position as artist-God, as producer of all artistic, intellectual, and emotional meaning. For instance, when she gives Edna Robert’s letter to read, she plays a “soft interlude [that] was an improvisation” and then the Chopin Impromptu. The music is “strange and fantastic—turbulent, insistent, plaintive and soft with entreaty” (A 106); it causes Edna to “sob” (A 107). By giving her the letter to read directly before playing, Reisz orchestrates Edna’s emotional response and through Edna’s tears, she receives artistic valorization, the acknowledgment of a seemingly god-like but

actually paternalistic ability to control and oppress. As Joseph Church proposes,
Chopin

principally renders Mademoiselle Reisz a cautionary figure, a self-serving and self-deceived artist who misuses her talent. Chopin understands that ideally art works for the greater good to bring knowledge—especially self-knowledge, self-clarification—to both artist and audience. Here, in a kind of meta-commentary on her own work and its relation to readers, she subtly but critically exposes Mademoiselle Reisz as one who fails to develop, an artist who remains unconscious of self-deceptively indulging herself and of inducing others, most of all a needful Edna, to continue similarly unaware. (20)

By rendering Reisz a cautionary figure who uses her art to manipulate others, Chopin implicitly suggests that there are other, more reciprocal modes of artistry, such as Edna experiences in part with Adèle, in which *both* artist and viewer/listener grow and come to understand something about themselves and the world.

Reisz attempts to control the reader's perception of who can be considered an artist, a determination that critics must be careful to critique, but which we have, unfortunately, been all too willing to replicate. When Edna goes to visit Reisz after embarking seriously on her art production, the following conversation ensues, with Reisz speaking first:

“What are you doing?”

“Painting! I am becoming an artist!”

“Ah! An artist! You have pretensions, Madame.”

“Why pretensions? Do you think I could not become an artist?”

“I do not know you well enough to say. I do not know your talent or your temperament. To be an artist includes much; one must possess many gifts—absolute gifts—which have not been acquired by one's own effort. And, moreover, to succeed, the artist must possess the courageous soul.” (A 105-6)

Speaking in the problematic universal, Reisz has implicitly coded “courageous” to be masculine; for her, the courageous soul is the one who lives virtually as a recluse, the male solitary genius codified in popular culture as the only version of what it means to be an artist. But Edna wants to critique this vision of artistry, wants to ask in effect: “Why are *my* ambitions pretensions? Why is the male solitary “genius” our *only* cultural vision of the artist?” As the narrator notes, Edna is willing to question “how she could have listened to [Mademoiselle Reisz’s] venom for so long” (A 82). Perhaps it is time, we, as critics and as reader-turned-viewers, do the same.

Whitney Chadwick argues that traditionally art historians have excluded women from the genius category of art production by defining the great artist as dominant and virile and his female artistic subject as passive and weak. Of course, this categorization not only disqualifies women based on gender, but also narrows the category of art itself to that which always and already subjugates and oppresses. Seidel suggests that Reisz “urges Edna to take this approach to her art. Yet Edna continues to see her art as self-expression and as a way of understanding herself and her close relationships. These motives for art are the values associated with female artists” (232). Although Edna may not possess such complete understanding of reciprocal modes of art production, the feminist aesthetic ideals of community, unity, and collaboration, she does, particularly in her emotional undoing and personal artistic Renaissance with Adèle, move toward such an ideal. Recognizing the “venom” of Reisz’s masculine ideal of art as aesthetic subjection and mastery, Edna is hungry for a new model in which she is considered courageous, and considered an artist.

Edna's relations with Adèle and Reisz seem somewhat contradictory in the way they affirm masculine values yet hint at feminist possibilities. On the whole, however, as a woman and as an artist Edna perpetuates the raced and gendered system of subjugation of her class and time. In *Conflicting Stories*, Ammons critiques the white middle class feminist community's willingness to characterize Edna's story as one of "universality": "Though she does not see it, [Edna's] freedom comes at the expense of women of other races and a lower class, whose namelessness, facelessness, and voicelessness record a much more profound oppression in *The Awakening* than does the surface story of Edna Pontellier" (75). In particular, Edna's ability to exist as the focal point of her own unfolding portrait rests on the presumed "dusky" background position of the black women⁹—"carefully categorized as black, mulatto, quadroon" (Ammons 74), but never given actual names—who populate her world and artistic framework. Edna uses women of color as both literal color (in her artwork) and as local "color," full of vibrancy and immediacy, in her day to day life. For Edna, the usefulness of such color is that it does not need to be examined, it can be accepted as is, *de facto*, without intellectual critique. For instance, distracted and thinking of Robert, Edna feels suddenly prompted to "go down and le[ad] the children out of the sun, [and to] scold the quadroon for not being more attentive" (A 79). The children's nurse, someone Edna is with nearly everyday, needs not be named, for a description of her *color* (and resulting social position) is enough to establish her place in Edna's mind and world. Another such moment occurs when Edna watches the nurse observe the children:

The quadroon was following [the children] with little quick steps, having assumed a fictitious animation and alacrity for the occasion [playing with the boys]. A fruit vendor was crying his wares in the street . . . Edna looked straight before her with a self-absorbed expression upon her face. She felt

no interest in anything about her. The street, the children, the street vendor, the flowers growing there under were all part and parcel of an alien world which had suddenly become antagonist. (A 89-90)

After observing the nurse, Edna does not even bother to name her in the description of the local color—"the street, the children, the street vendor, the flowers growing there"—which fills her mind's eye. The nurse's very visibility—her difference from Edna in terms of skin color—renders her invisible according to Edna's determination of subjective value. Edna's failure to rename the nurse indicates "an invisibility made possible by limiting notions of what is the South and who is Southern" (Maguire 136).¹⁰ The nurse can be part of Edna's scene, the local color¹¹ populating her cornea and serving her artistry, but she need not be in Edna's consciousness, in her mind's eye.¹² In *The Awakening* Chopin literalizes this invisibility as absence when Edna goes to look in on the children and discovers that the "quadroon had vanished" (A 67). Chopin pointedly asks that we, as reader-turned-viewers, watching Edna watching and yet failing to see the woman who takes care of her own children, see more and perceive better. Edna's failure, Chopin, suggests, should not be our own.

Edna's failure to reinscribe the quadroon may be a place for the reader-turned-viewer to acknowledge that the nurse, unlike the street, children, vendor, and flowers, is *not* alien, and *not* an antagonist. In this way, Chopin opens up a space for us to see that Edna and the nurse—like other women of color in the text—share a bond and sense of affiliation that Edna herself may be unwilling to acknowledge. Chopin offers space again and again for the reader-turned-viewer to recognize the subjectivity of other women which Edna herself fails to perceive. At the very beginning of the text, in which Leon Pontellier, not Edna, surveys the scene of

Grand Isle, he notes that the “children were there . . . A quadroon nurse followed them about with a far-away meditative air” (A 6). When Edna goes to visit Robert at the LeBrun house, the narrator notes that the “the little negro girl who worked Madame Lebrun’s sewing machine was sweeping the galleries with long, absent-minded strokes of the broom” (A 55). The nurse’s “meditative” air and the young servant’s “absent-minded” broom strokes indicate self-reflection and intellect unacknowledged by the women’s white employers. Such intellect and self-awareness suggest these women’s “alienation from their work” thus “refuting the [Southern] myth of contented servitude” (Elfenbein 181).¹³

The reader-turned-viewer is invited to recognize and critique this lack of white recognition of black subjectivity. When first introduced to Madame Lebrun’s black servant girl, the reader is told that “Madame Lebrun was busily engaged at the sewing machine. A little black girl sat on the floor, and with her hands worked the treadle of the machine. The Creole woman does not take any chances which may be avoided of imperiling her health” (A 38). In this scene, the black person’s social position as menial, unchanging (the same subjection replayed like the unrelenting action of the sewing machine treadle, which moves but does not move *forward*), and subservient becomes literalized as the black girl sits at her white employer’s feet. Moreover, Chopin’s somewhat facetious comment that the “Creole woman does not take any chances which may be avoided of imperiling her health” indicates her own distance from this view of stereotypical racial reinscription.

This moment also opens up a space for the reader-turner-viewer to note the distance between Anglo-American (Edna and Chopin) and Creole (Leon and Adèle) versions of race and racial hierarchy. In regards to the question of difference,

O'Rourke maintains that some critics too easily place *The Awakening* "within the clearly polarized black/white racial codes of Anglo-America, instead of seeing as its context the more complicated and unstable racial distinctions and stratifications constructed in nineteenth-century New Orleans" (169). The question is further complicated by the usages of the term "Creole" itself, which "until the Civil War . . . meant anyone of either race born in New Orleans" (Benfey 151) but after the war was usurped as an exclusively (French-descent) white prerogative. Antebellum lines in New Orleans were drawn between Anglo-American and Creole (with free blacks falling into either camp); after the war, they were drawn across racial ones.¹⁴ Of course critics must be careful not to impose a binary view of race and race relations onto New Orleans and its people which, historically speaking, possessed more fluid ideas of race than those found in other American cities, that, on the whole, subscribed to a hypodescent definition of blackness which preserved the "integrity" of whiteness. However, we must also remember that although New Orleans may have subscribed to a different racial model than other American cities, such a model did not question the importance and inviolate nature of whiteness, as Chopin's critique of Madame Lebrun's sewing practices makes evident. Although quadroon may be better than mulatto and mulatto better than black, white, such reasoning goes, is always and already better than all of these. Gradations in racial hierarchy do not necessarily undermine the hierarchy itself. Indeed, such gradations of color simply encode a caste—rather than binary—system of racial difference.¹⁵ What critics like O'Rourke do not acknowledge is the changing nature of the term Creole and how Creoles themselves were similarly invested in racial difference—one perhaps no less insidiously established as a caste rather than binary system.¹⁶

Like her treatment of the quadroon nurse, Edna's engagement with Mariequita, the Mexican woman over whom the Lebrun brothers fought, suggests a willful ignorance of her privileged racial position. When first introduced to Mariequita, the reader is told that

She had a round, sly, piquant face and pretty black eyes. Her hands were small, and she kept them folded over the handle of her basket. Her feet were broad and coarse. She did not strive to hide them. Edna looked at her feet, and noticed the sand and slime between her brown toes. Edna liked it all. She looked Mariequita up and down, from her ugly brown toes to her pretty black eyes, and back again. (A 56-7)

This passage is another example of Chopin's use of a kind of interlocking framework, her movement from implicitly asking the reader to act as a viewer of another person to asking her to act as a meta-viewer of *Edna observing this person*. The description moves from a standard one—the narrator describing Mariequita and, implicitly, asking the reader to visualize Mariequita—to a description of Edna's own observation, thus placing the reader in a position to either comply with or critique Edna's objectification of the woman. Tellingly, Edna automatically assumes the white and masculine prerogative to unabashedly observe a woman of color—"to look her up and down, from her ugly brown toes to her pretty black eyes." Such visual ownership suggests the sexual possession assumed by white men over women of color, an assumptive privilege Edna is all too willing to accept.

Soon after Edna meets Mariequita the dinner conversation at Grand Isle turns to a discussion of the Mexican people. The narrator notes that "[Edna] herself could think of nothing to say about Mexico or the Mexicans" (A 72). It is initially unclear if Edna refuses to participate in the perpetuation of stereotypes (Madame Ratignolle notes in the course of this conversation that she knew but one Mexican who "sold excellent tamales" [A 71]) or if she simply refuses to consider people of

color at all and the bond she may share with women of color. But Edna's subsequent behavior indicates that the latter is the case; it is as if people of color do not exist for her. Although Edna may be unwilling to consider Mexicans an appropriate or interesting topic of dinner conversation, she is more than willing to objectify them for personal and artistic purposes. After Robert returns from Mexico, Edna jealously and provokingly says that "they are very handsome, I suppose, these Mexican women; very picturesque, with their black eyes and their lace scarfs" (4168). The "lace scarfs" suggest a visual framing of these imagined women's faces that invites the reader-turned-viewer's complicity in their objectification; likewise, the repetition of "their" indicates Edna's presumed racial, cultural, and social distance from these women, her easy willingness to other them. Apparently Edna does have something to say about Mexicans, but only if they are sufficiently aestheticized and objectively othered and thus minimized as a threat to her assumed racial superiority.

In terms of her art, Edna also makes use of the women of color whom she employs:

The quadroon sat for hours before Edna's palette, patient as a savage, while the housemaid took charge of the children, and the drawing room went undusted. But the housemaid, too, served her terms as model when Edna perceived that the young woman's back and shoulders were modeled on classic lines, and that her hair, loosened from its confining cap, became an inspiration. (496)

As she does with Adèle, Edna accepts that subjectivity, as gained through art, is a hierarchical and masculine right, one that can only be asserted by compromising other people. In order for Edna to realize her potential as an individual she needs the aesthetic beauty and willful objectification of white women such as Adèle and women of color such as her children's nurse. Rather than finding a new paradigm of feminine reciprocity, Edna chooses to adopt a white, masculine prerogative and re-

inscribe the traditional dynamic of the artist and his model-muse, one now overlaid with implications of the black mistress/white master paradigm. This objectification, unlike her viewership of Adèle, possesses no suggestions of reciprocity. The nurse, with her ability to be completely passive, to sit “patiently as a savage,” and the housemaid, with her hair which “became an inspiration,” only provide muse-ful artistic stimulation for Edna. Importantly Edna never invites either woman to speak, to articulate even the relational subjectivity, the emotional and artistic validation, inherent in her relationship with the hyper-white Adèle.

Although Edna may reject the affiliation, the bond she shares with women of color, her movement to the “pigeon house” (A 132) suggests that such a relationship exists whether she recognizes it or not. O’Rourke notes that the so-called New Orleans pigeon house was most likely the former residence of a light-skinned black mistress of a white man; such a house was the “most common means of inheritance for a woman of color was the acquisition of legal right to the house in which she had been maintained”; therefore, “Edna’s move into her ‘pigeon-house’ identifies her with the women of color whose lives revolved around extralegal sexuality” (169).¹⁷ Ammons argues that “at its deepest formal level *The Awakening* articulates a primary, shared female creative pattern fundamentally influenced in Chopin’s world by African American women” (77). And yet, I propose that Edna’s behavior in the pigeon house, rather than indicating recognition of her affiliation with other women again suggests her desire to assume the privileges of white men. Unlike the *plaçage* mistress, whose residence was sometimes bequeathed to her at her “benefactor’s” death, Edna buys the house with her own money—money given to her in *mother’s* will. In this way, her moment of physical independence arises through her kinship

with another woman. Edna's pigeon house, again sustained by the labor of women of color, is the space that allows her to pursue her own sexual adventures; much like the *plaçage* "benefactor," *she* determines those who will fulfill her extralegal sexual desires and, when necessary, brings them into a separate, non-familial physical space.

Edna does not recognize moments of affiliation across class and race simply because she does not want to recognize them. She desires the rights of white, upper class men, not the recognition and sense of shared responsibility that comes with acknowledgment of her relationship with other women, including poor white women and all women of color. As Elfenbein argues, "Edna's failure to take any interest in the plight of women like her maid and Mariequita is one manifestation of her inability to escape from the conventional constraints placed upon white, upper-class women . . . and her suicide is another manifestation of that same inability" (179-180). I contend that it is precisely this inability to recognize a sense of shared (which is not to say equivalent) oppression—to see beyond the limitation and impossibility of a rights-access model—that prompts Edna's suicide.¹⁸ Critics of the novel have long been torn on whether Edna's suicide represents a moment of celebratory liberation, a feminist and heroic act, or a resigned defeat, a recognition of the untenability of a woman's dreams and desires within her current cultural framework and historical moment.¹⁹ The suicide is neither. Its efficacy, or its failure, lies not with Edna at all but with the reader-turned-viewer, who can choose to accept or ignore its implicit warning: solipsism, even self-determinism, will never provide women with freedom because such ideas, founded as they are on white masculine principles, re-encode an individualism that isolates women from one another, and it is, seemingly paradoxically, one another whom we all need to be free.²⁰

Barbara Ewell posits that

the story of [Edna's] struggle is perhaps the nineteenth century's most vivid and sustained rendering of what it means for a woman to try to achieve the selfhood that Emerson described as the most sacred tasks of human beings—the American Dream of becoming an individual, a self. But, I would argue, Edna's death reveals that the achievement of such integrity is finally a specifically *male* dream, one whose terms virtually exclude women, who cannot ignore or resist the role that 'others' play in defining our lives. (160-1)

Edna has done her very best to ignore the role others—in particular the black employees who populate the background of her world—play in defining her life. Her willful ignorance reinscribes a particularly insidious mode of raced and classed oppression (which echoes slavery's tenets) onto the physical bodies and psychic consciousness of these women. Such ignorance concurrently blinds Edna to the possibility of a more creative liberation based on community and acknowledgment of oppression not individualism and access of privilege. It is Edna's racial and class *privilege*—not her gendered *oppression*—that prevents her from reconceiving her life as one worth living, and one worth fighting for. This is not to say, in a retrograde fashion, that the oppression Edna, a white, upper middle-class woman, and poor white women and all women of color experience is one and the same.²¹ Rather, it is to suggest that privilege, like oppression, can limit the framework of consciousness. For Edna such limited consciousness means conceiving freedom only in terms of a masculine solitary life that ignores the necessity of other women and other, transformative modes of being.

Given her failure to question the hyper-masculine ideal of freedom that she embraces, it is not surprising that Edna's self-definition as an artist is equally male-defined and that it leads to her suicide. Rather than wanting to transcend or reconceive masculine artistry, Edna seeks to access a well-established male artistic

tradition—the life of the artist as the solitary genius.²² If she truly wanted to go beyond masculine artistry—if she wanted to find a new model—she would be above objectifying other women. But that is simply not the case.

The same male-centric outlook that shapes Edna's conception of herself as an artist dictates her attitude toward motherhood. Although motherhood temporally links women to their children and psychically joins them to other women, giving birth does not necessarily make a woman a mother, as impregnating a woman does not make a man a father. Edna accepts that she has given birth—the children are an extant fact of her existence—but she does not adopt the caretaker role connoted by “mother,” as the contrast between Adèle Ratignolle and herself makes clear. She rejects such a role by hiring other women not just to tend to (as was typical of her class) but also to nurture her offspring. Rarely in the novel do we see her caring for her children. As Edna proclaims, “I would give up the essential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I won't give myself” (A 80). Such an assertion claims the masculine right of self-possession that divorces one's self from other people and denies its inevitably relational construction. Edna has internalized a masculine conception of selfhood that argues for its inviolate singularity. In recognizing that such singularity—particularly as one who has given birth to another human being—is forever denied to her, Edna chooses a self-directed death as the only way to manifest its possibility and legitimacy: “The children appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her, who had overpowered her and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days. But she knew a way to elude them” (A 189). Critics who are likely to see Edna's suicide as a heroic act are also inclined to see her rejection of motherhood as

courageous.²³ They valorize suicide as a positive—indeed, perhaps the ultimate—mode of self-assertion. Yet, such a reading encodes a masculine determination of selfhood as a withholding endeavor, one in which others are always and already antagonist forces that encroach upon—rather than support, nurture, and sustain—the individual self.

What Edna ultimately wants is the masculine prerogative of the solitary genius: the right to exist—and die—alone.²⁴ Living and producing art in this masculine realm is ultimately impossible for a woman of Edna's race and class, but *dying in it* is quite possible. Edna's death is a bodily enactment of the raced and class-based masculine ethos that she has bought into personally and as an artist. Throughout the text, she has *submerged* herself in the masculine values of her privileged race and class; yet those unmitigated rights elude her. Suicide by drowning is the logical, and terrible, outcome of her misguided decision to immerse herself in these values. When Edna is near the sea, she discovers she is "absolutely alone" (A 189), as if the approach of death affirms and validates the masculine right of the solitary soul. Critics often read the sea as feminized ("the touch of the sea is sensuous" (A 189)), and Edna's death of one of ease, of passive acceptance. Yet, in the moment at which Edna begins to lose consciousness the sea is explicitly masculinized, even violently so: "exhaustion was pressing upon and overpowering her" (A 190). The sea literally *assaults* Edna: it is an unfathomably strong force that makes it impossible for her to draw breath, to touch her feet to the ground, to continue to live in the world. Importantly, as she fades into unconsciousness, Edna hears the sounds of two hyper-masculine forces that loomed large in her life and conception of masculinity: her father and her adolescent crush, the cavalry officer,

with his “clanging” military spurs (A 190). She also imagines Reisz, the female embodiment of solitary masculine artistry, “laugh[ing]” and “sneer[ing]” (A 190) at her “pretensions” of courageous artistic living. It is *their* privileges Edna sought, *their* sea of rights in which she throws away her life.

Through dying Edna, frustrated that unmitigated rights elude her in life, lays ultimate claim to masculine privilege. Her decision to take her own life arises from her acknowledgment that she will never be as free, as unencumbered, as men of her race and class. Through the act of dying Edna makes a final, resolute claim to the masculine right to loneliness, to a (literally dead end) solitary life that her ambition as an artist had prefigured. Far from a feminist heroine, Edna is, in fact, a cautionary vision of what it means to buy into a concept of complete and utter personal freedom—including artistic freedom—that is at its core male-defined and life-denying.

Edna’s position as artist allows her to gender herself; this self-gendering leads her to seek both masculine rights and feminist aesthetic prerogatives based on community, connection, and cohesion. While Edna oscillates between gender self-identifications, she does not between racial and class ones. Her self-identifications as white and upper middle-class remain inviolate throughout the text and contribute to her eventual decision to take her own life. The manner in which Edna fails is the way in which a lot of us fail: by refusing to acknowledge bonds and relationships that are a burden, that bring pain, but which may also facilitate freedom. While Edna lives and dies in the text, the reader-turned-viewer of her life will not. Our survival, as readers, viewers, and subjects in this world, compels us to gaze inwardly while simultaneously perceiving outwardly: to acknowledge a different mode of justice

based on community and relational selfhood, not accessed rights and individualism which always retains elements of hierarchy and exclusion. Edna refuses to recognize the difference, the gap, between rights and privileges, but it is in identifying her failure that we can begin to articulate and propose a different model. Mind the gap indeed.

¹ Ammons contends that “as an artist Edna will never be more than a dabbler, despite the fact that she sells her drawings and sketches” (72). Rowe argues that “Edna’s drawings express nothing more than the listless yearning of the leisure-class white” (136).

² Barker contends that “by selling her painting, Edna enters the economic sphere as an agent and not as an object of exchange. It is precisely her positional role as a woman that she insists on disregarding” (“The Awakening of Female Artistry” 71).

³ Consider, for instance, the most famous and oft-quoted line the text: “the voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring . . .” (A 25),

⁴ Schweitzer claims a similar point when she claims that “through art . . . [Edna] wants to ‘reproduce’ Adèle’s image as the symbol of unity, the guarantor of the subjective coherence she perceives and imitates in the masculine realm of work, property, and passion” (173).

⁵ Barker takes this one step further and argues that “Edna’s unfulfilled desire for her ‘beloved’ represents her love for Adèle, not Robert, and that Robert is merely a poor substitute whose inclusion in Edna’s list of unsustainable lovers reflects the fact that men do not satisfy her sexually or emotionally” (“The Awakening of Female Artistry” 74). Although this is an interesting line of inquiry, my interest lies less in Edna’s literal sexual interest in Adèle (which possibly exists in the text) than in Edna’s appropriation of Adèle’s image as a masculine, artistic prerogative laced with sexual overtones.

⁶ The narrator suggests, however, that this hyper-masculinity may be in part performative, as the Colonel “wore his coats padded, which gave a fictitious breadth and depth to his shoulders and chest” (A 113).

⁷ Something similar happens when Edna goes to the racecourse after her father has gone, when she meets Alcée Arobin and Mrs. Highcamp: “She did not perceive that she was talking like her father as the sleek geldings ambled in review before them. She played for very high stakes, and fortune favored her. The fever of the game flamed in her cheeks and eyes, and it got into her blood and into her brain like an intoxicant” (A 124). Here, Edna actually channels her father (“talking like [him]”) and speculates as he apparently did when losing their familial estate. However, the gambling produces the rather codified feminine affect of a blush.

⁸ Gray argues that Reisz’s disagreeable mode of being and unattractive appearance allow her to claim a masculine artistic prerogative without being threatening to the patriarchy (62).

⁹ Here, I refer to Toni Morrison’s idea stipulated in *Playing the Dark* (1992): white writers use black characters as artistic “foils” to underscore white protagonists’ own startling whiteness.

¹⁰ Maguire argues that it is important that Edna is from Kentucky, the state which, as E. Merton Coulter contended, “waited until after the Civil War to secede.” Kentucky’s position as a defender of the union was deeply complicated by its geography and its own investment in slavery. Edna is similarly “in-between”: she is not “quite” Southern, yet she embodies the position of the Southern lady. Such an embodiment entails the adoption of privilege that refuses to recognize its own constructedness, and its own perpetuation of oppression.

¹¹ When Edna goes to see her children at the Pontellier plantation the black laborers become part and parcel of a truly stereotypical “local color” scene: “She went with [the boys] herself to see the pigs and the cows, to look at the darkies laying the cane, to thrash the pecan trees, and catch fish in the back lake” (A 157). Although “thrashing pecan trees” and “catching fish” are active, engaged activities, “seeing pigs and cows” and “looking at darkies” are both passive. Moreover, the passive viewership of both the pigs and cows and the “darkies” indicates Edna’s willingness to group them as peers, thus objectifying the black laborers as less than human, as the viewed equivalent of pigs and cows.

¹² We should not, however, mistake Edna’s failure to note black subjectivity as Chopin’s own. In many of her short stories, Edna places people of color as the center of her text. In her famous short story “Desiree’s Baby,” people of color (Armand and, it seems for most of the text, Desiree herself) are main characters not background “color.” While *The Awakening* presents a singular woman seemingly apart from larger female connections, “Desiree’s Baby” describes the deep bond between Desiree and her adopted mother, Madame Valmonde, who looks beyond ambiguous family/racial origins in (what the text establishes as) the greater service of love.

¹³ This view is a critique of Ammons's earlier position, as Elfenbein maintains that Chopin's depiction of black characters is not purely stereotypical.

¹⁴ "The drawing of the color line was [especially] wrenching in New Orleans. It was not a demarcation of the status quo, or even a restoration of pre-war conditions; it was instead a violent unraveling of human relations that had taken a century to weave" (Benfey 151).

¹⁵ Such color gradations were often, of course, difficult to determine; however, these very difficulties suggest the tenuousness of the racial system. Benfey relates an anecdote told to George Washington Cable in which New Orleans "White Leaguers" (segregationists) "faced [difficulty] in telling which students [in an integrated school] were black and which were white" (222).

¹⁶ O'Rourke insightfully notes that Edna does not know by "American standards" if her husband is black or white: "Edna's blithe indifference to her companions' uncertain genealogy and to the possibility that her own behavior would type her as something less than properly 'white' exposes the absurdity of the 'American' obsession with the necessity of some essential difference between black and white" (174).

¹⁷ Pegues takes a related but less convincing line of argument by contending that "Edna assume[s] the same outcast status as the tragic mulatta . . . [she] appropriate[s] the sexuality that is traditionally associated with the racially Other" (11, 2). Presumably Edna "assumes such outcast status" because she has extramarital affairs; however, these sexual transgressions, although no doubt causing her—like her fellow adulteress Mrs. Highcamp—to drop in her society's esteem, do not necessarily "blacken" her in the way that Pegues suggests. She is not the first white woman to have an affair and her "struggle to harmonize her authentic (passionate) identity with her submissive (maternal, marital) social role" (Pegues 8) may suggest a conflicted, "in-between" identity, but such in-betweenness, even in New Orleans, does not automatically position her as a kind of "tragic mulatta."

¹⁸ In an interesting reading, if tangential in the context of this argument, William Nelles contends that Edna is pregnant at her death (presumably with Alcée Arobin's child). This pregnancy is Edna's "literal motive for suicide" (47).

¹⁹ In conversation, Christina Sharpe pointed out to me the connection between this ending and similar endings in other genres, particularly slave narratives and "tragic mulatta" stories, in which freedom brings death. Chopin would have been familiar with these narratives and tropes, although she pointedly erases and elides such narrative connections in *The Awakening*.

²⁰ Like me, Wershoven (28) and Ramos (147) contend that Edna's death serves as a warning to the reader, but for quite different reasons.

²¹ I agree with Ammons that although Edna herself fails to acknowledge the bond she shares with black women (even the black women who nurture her children), such a relationship is present in the text itself. See Ammons, 77.

²² For a different view, see Barker ("The Awakening of Female Artistry" 75, 79).

²³ See Stange, 289.

²⁴ In contrast to my view, Schweitzer argues that Edna's suicide "is her way of rejecting . . . society's notion of [masculine] selfhood conceived as self-possession and all that implies" (162). Yet, suicide can be viewed as the ultimate act of self-assertion.

Coda

I began this project with great hope. I saw it as a way to join my critical interests in American women's writing and the visual arts and demonstrate the potentially transformative possibilities of the reader *viewing* female literary protagonists. In concluding the project I realize I did not discover the hopeful transformation I sought. I do still believe that in evoking tropes from the visual arts the writers examined here produce a cognitive pause for the reader: a way to interrupt and potentially disrupt an automatic acceptance of cultural codes of race and gender. It is in the recognition that seeing and knowing are not the same that the reader-turned-viewer can begin to offer alternatives; this is an ethical intervention into the aestheticization of women. Yet, I was surprised that ultimately my conclusions regarding the examined protagonists were so dismal: aestheticization is inherently limiting, pejorative, or dehumanizing (or all three), but also that female artistry is untenable within a patriarchal framework that defines the parameters of art. In many ways it was difficult to accept that aestheticization literally took the lives of two (and one can argue all three) of my female protagonists.

The project has faced challenges both in terms of genre and chronology. Chapter 1 focuses on two women visual artists because I wanted to first examine the kind of visual tropes employed by women authors in written texts. I chose Cahun and Piper—despite the fact that Cahun is French, and Piper comes much later chronologically than the other examined artist and writers—because I believe that they are the best examples of women artists critiquing prescribed modes of the aesthetic presentation of race and gender. Cahun and Piper have never been compared before, but I found that they spoke to and challenged each other in

productive ways. Particularly, I examined how Cahun denigrates the possibility of selfhood (“under the mask, another mask”) while Piper highlights a performative self that can challenge racist social and cultural conventions. I also appreciated how the two artists diverge in their question of audience: Cahun’s work speaks directly to her “l’autre moi,” her white female lover, Suzanne Malherbe, and thus operates within a closed circle of affirmative identification and understood gender subversion. In contrast, Piper’s work confronts a presumed-to-be white audience with its complicity in the reification and perpetuation of racist cultural tropes that dehumanize black subjects and distort white viewership. Thus, examining the two artists together allowed me to appreciate both the possibility and limitations of an instructive viewing experience, of women speaking to other women through visual coding.

This initial chapter offered plenty of hope for the ways in which “gaps” can interrupt the reader-turned-viewer’s easy acceptance of cultural codes. If Cahun and Piper are able to critique prescribed modes of race, class, and gender and thus can suggest a different viewing experience, indeed, a different mode of life, for the viewer, perhaps women writers invoking similar modes of identity critique can do the same. Yet, I found this not to be the case. Cahun’s dandy self-portraits expose gender as reliant on external markers to demarcate itself; Piper’s *Mythic Being*—who “wears” the phenotypical and sartorial markers deemed threatening to whites—dramatizes the inscription of stereotype used by white viewers to regulate, marginalize, and distort the black subject. Yet, it seems that part of these artists’ success in underscoring the precariousness and untenability of visual cues to determine race, gender, and class lies in their choice of genre and visual medium: predominantly, photography. (Piper of course uses mixed medias, but most of the

projects examined here rely on photography.) Photography lends itself to a kind of self-fashioning—and artistic independence—that was often difficult for nineteenth and early twentieth-century American women artists (barred by rule or sexism to museums and schools) to access or achieve in traditional mediums such as painting or sculpture. Therefore, Cahun and Piper’s success lies in large part with their initial choice in artistic medium, one which both encourages artistic freedom and independence and facilitates the kind of self-fashioning—and race, gender, and class visual critique—so essential to their artistic philosophies.

Therefore, it is not entirely surprising—if somewhat disappointing—that the limited, objectified, racist, and dehumanizing aestheticization that Lily and Helga suffer from is the result of paintings made by male artists, not photographs produced by their own hands. It is ultimately instructive that both Lily and Helga’s moments of artistic inscription and codification—Lily as Reynolds’s *Mrs. Lloyd* (1776), Helga as Manet’s *Olympia* (1863)—are through paintings that come much earlier chronologically than either the texts’ action or publication. In terms of cultural consciousness, the white women of Wharton’s late nineteenth-century *haute bourgeoisie* world are yet imbibing eighteenth-century Reynolds’s (the founder of Britain’s Royal Academy) artistic mandates of idealization, stillness, and placidity in (white) female subjects; while twentieth-century Axel Olsen’s reversal of Manet’s famous mid nineteenth-century *Olympia* (the white maid Marie speaks to black bourgeois Helga), (in)famously a painting of a prostitute, underscores the resilience of pejorative racial tropes of black women, which linger long after slavery and the colonial project have officially ended. The dehumanization Lily and Helga experience inhabiting these typed roles illustrates the still extant nature of the women’s historical oppression;

indeed, as Faulkner famously warned, “the past is never dead. It is not even past.” Wharton and Larsen evoke paintings from the past to instruct the reader-turned-viewer, to make her realize the long (male) hands of history. These are the tropes which fade and flare like surveying spotlights, which distort women’s bodies into shapes predetermined. For Wharton and Larsen, this is a hard but important lesson.

I end the project with the earliest text, Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, because I believed that the autonomy achieved through Edna’s assertion of active artistry rather than passive aestheticization would suggest a different model, a different mode of life and of being. Although *The Awakening* is the earliest text examined in this project, I chose to put it last sequentially because of the feminist possibilities offered by Edna’s own artistic endeavors. In short, I hoped that Edna might attain the kind of independence through artistic self-fashioning seen with Cahun and Piper. My conclusions regarding Edna’s artistry were ultimately disappointing. Tellingly, Edna seeks artistic fulfillment through painting—the same mode that limits and distorts Lily and Helga’s aestheticization. Instead of offering a different model, a new mode of life, love, and artistry to be seen and gained by reader-turned-viewers, Edna accesses the ideal of the alienated and isolated male “genius,” which causes her to objectify her friend Adèle and seek solipsistic solitude rather than redemptive community. This inscription into a masculine artistic framework ultimately leads to Edna’s artistic productiveness and able participation in the art marketplace but also to her suicide. Through dying Edna, frustrated that absolute rights elude her in life, lays ultimate claim to masculine privilege. She decides to take her own life through an acknowledgement of the limitations of her freedom; her suicide manifests the masculine artistic ideal of complete solitude, of a life perpetually withheld.

Although the aestheticization of Lily and Helga and the artistry of Edna may not provide the encouraging sense of feminist subversion offered by Cahun and Piper, both illustrate the still extant nature of historical oppression. Moreover, all three protagonists' engagement with the traditional artistic medium of painting produces a kind of readerly wariness of the genre: perhaps a different model for both aestheticization and artistry can only be found in a different medium, one not always already undermined by historical mechanisms of raced, gendered, and classed domination. This recognition is powerful in its own right: hope may yet lie beyond these novels, in other texts, in different modes of life and artistry. The gap produced by aestheticization can serve as an intellectual pause for the reader, a way to interrupt and disrupt these visual means of cultural oppression. Yet, perhaps it is in the moment after this pause that the real work takes place, the moment in which mediums are reevaluated and rejected, and both art and life emerge anew.

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Image 1: Claude Cahun, *Self-Portrait* (1920)



Image 2: Portrait of Maurice Schwob (1920?)



Image 3: Claude Cahun, *Self Portrait* (1921)



Image 4: Claude Cahun, *Self-Portrait* (1928)

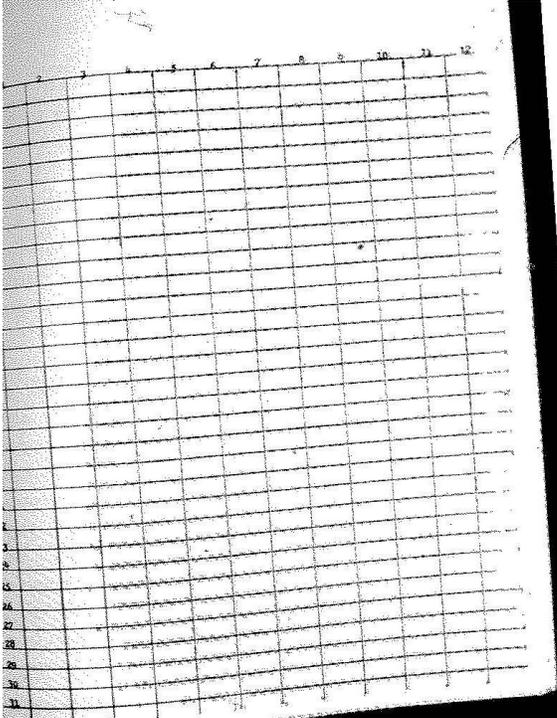


Image 5: Adrian Piper, *Untitled 0 to 9* (1969)

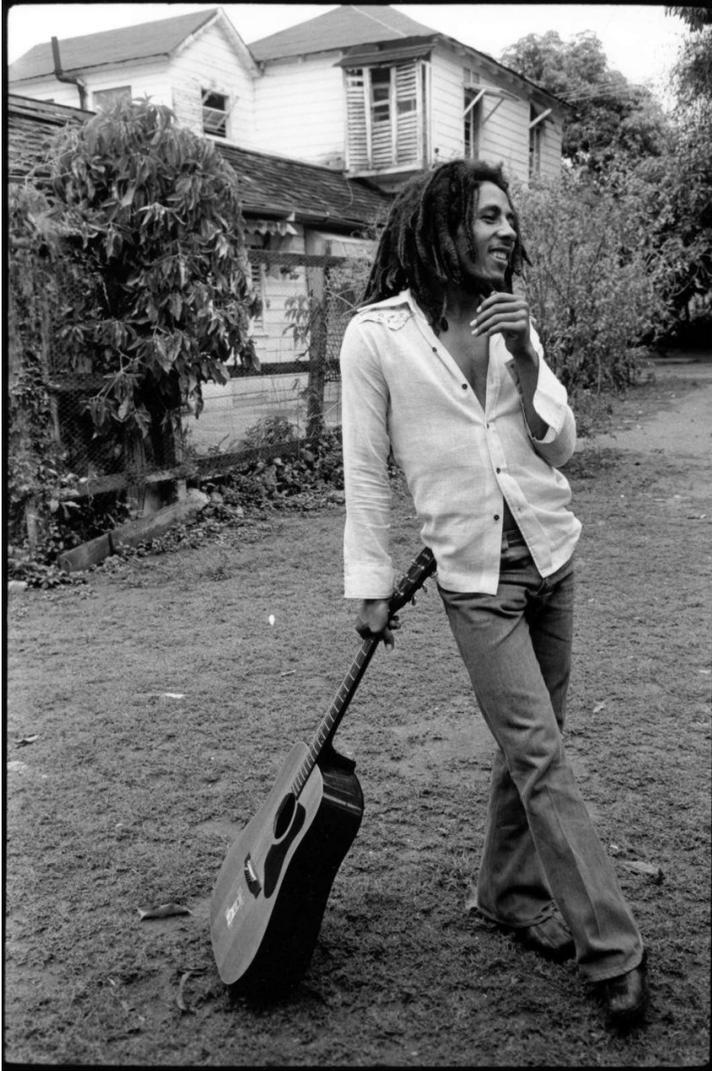


Image 6: Bob Marley, (~1960s)



Image 7: Adrian Piper, *The Mythic Being: Cruising White Women* (1969)



Image 8: Adrian Piper, *The Mythic Being: I/You (Her)* (1974)



Image 9: Adrian Piper, *The Mythic Being: I Embody Everything You Most Hate and Fear* (1975)

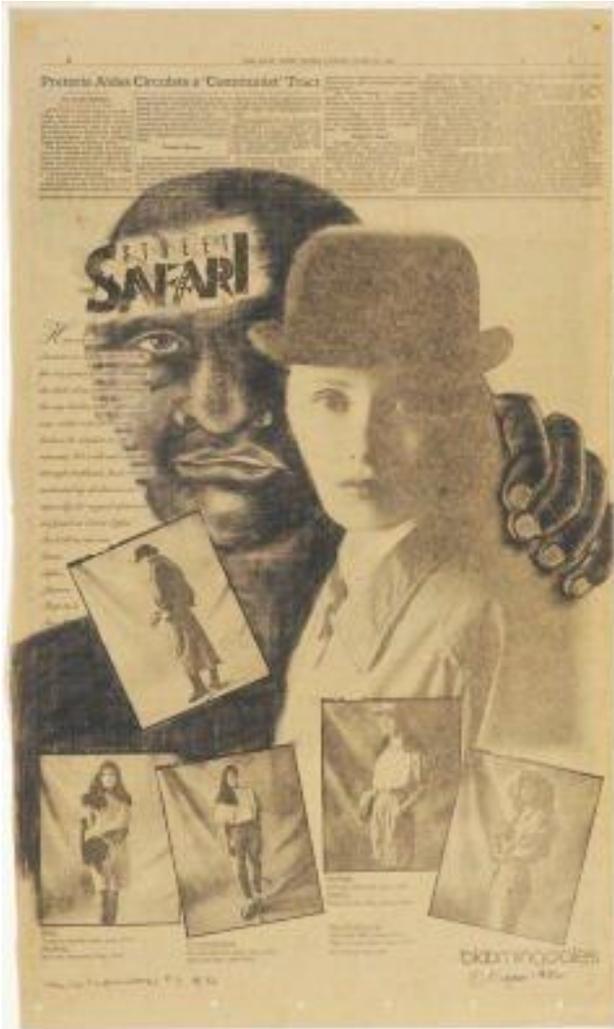


Image 10: Adrian Piper, *The Vanilla Nightmares* (1986)



Image 11: Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Mrs. Lloyd* (1775)



Image 12: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Dante's Dream at the Time of Death of Beatrice* (1871)



Image 13: Édouard Manet, *Olympia* (1863)



Image 14: Jean-Marc Nattier, *Mademoiselle de Clermont at her Bath* (1733)



Image 15: Charles-André van Loo, *Portrait of Madame de Pompadour en sultane* (1754)



Image 16: Nicholas Lafrensen, *A Woman at Her Bath with a Black Servant* (date unknown, mid 1700s)



Image 17: Jonathan Richardson, *Portrait of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu* (1725)