

HYBRID AESTHETICS: AMBIVALENCE, BLUES, AND SPIRITUALS
IN AFRICAN AMERICAN NOVELS

by

DONNIE JONES

YOLANDA M. MANORA, COMMITTEE CHAIR

DOVEANNA FULTON MINOR
NIKHIL BILWAKESH
MICHELLE BACHELOR ROBINSON
CASSANDER SMITH

A DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the Department of English
in the Graduate School of
The University of Alabama

TUSCALOOSA, ALABAMA

2012

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation, “Hybrid Aesthetics: Ambivalence, Blues, and Spirituals in African American Novels,” examines the use of music in novels and its effect upon the lives of miscegenous and/or hybrid characters. The goals of my research are to theorize and understand hybrid music, interrogate psychic trauma, and explore the ambivalence of miscegenous and/or hybrid characters.

This work explores the concepts of ambivalence, which is borne in hybrid and/or miscegenous characters and blues in four African American novels. The protagonists in the texts embody an ambivalence which is akin to Du Boisian double-consciousness which forces African Americans to view themselves through the eyes of others or as the world sees them. In other words, ambivalence is an intensified form of double consciousness because the protagonists are not just African and American, but they are part Anglo-American. I argue that the ambivalence of the protagonists hinders their development and move towards acceptance of their racial and sexual identity.

Within in research, I demonstrate ways in which blues can be read as a metaphor for trauma and identity issues. I seek to provide a new approach to the use of music in novels. The foundational argument of my dissertation is that the ambivalence of miscegenous and/or hybrid characters is linked to the blues.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to Drs. Tony Bolden and the late, Robert M. Young. These men have impacted my life and helped shape my scholarship and for that I will be eternally grateful.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I give all honor and glory to God for the things HE has done and the ways HE has made. I want to thank my parents, Mr. Tommie Lee Jones and Ms. Vernell Jones, for their undying love and support and my sister, Nadine Jones, for being my biggest cheerleader. To my friend, pastor and father in the ministry, Dr. Michael E. Bush, I thank you for your words of encouragement when things just were not going well. You have been a true inspiration. To the best committee of scholars assembled: Yolanda Manora, DoVeanna Fulton Minor, Cassie Smith, Michelle Robinson, and Nikhil Bilwakesh, thank you all so much for your support, words of encouragement, and the spirited conversation. Because of you, I believe and know that this project is truly special. Thank you!

To my family, extended family, and friends who have made me smile and laugh at the times I needed it or offered support when you did not quite understand, I say thank you. To my Brothers of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. and especially those of Rho Xi Lambda, Canton, MS chapter, special thanks for understanding when I could not be there and your words of encouragement. Continue holding up the light my Brothers!

A huge thank you goes to Dr. Paul Mohr, of the Alabama Commission of Higher Education (ACHE), and Drs. Ansley Abraham and Laura Haynes and Ms. Tammy Wright of the Southern Regional Educational Board for awarding me the SREB Dissertation Year Fellowship which allowed me the opportunity to complete this project. Thank you!!

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This project explores hybrid¹ or miscegenous individuals and hybrid music in African American novels that examine the color line. In short, hybrid aesthetics is the amalgamation of different musical genres to create the blues or a blues mood. Because there is a mixture of various musical forms, hybrid aesthetics considers the ideas of class, race, and gender. The following chapters develop a discourse for considering the use of hybrid music to understand the ambivalence of miscegenous characters. My research focuses on four African American novels that explore the ambivalence of miscegenous and/or hybrid characters: James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, Jean Toomer's *Cane*, Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*, and Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*. In addition to exploring miscegenous characters, these texts utilize the musical forms of blues, classical, ragtime, and spirituals. At times in the texts, there is an amalgamation of music, which coincides with the protagonist's racial identity, for example, ragtime and classical, which creates what I theorize to be a form of blues.

Blues addresses the protagonist's needs to define sexuality, discover racial identity, and relate experiences. Ralph Ellison, in explaining the blues in his essay, "Richard Wright's Blues" writes, "The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness....As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically" (129). Ellison's explanation aptly details the problems

¹ The Oxford American Dictionary defines hybrid as the offspring of two plants or animals of different species or variations; often a person of mixed racial or cultural origin. p.718.

and issues of the protagonists considered in this project. One way in which these characters have chosen to deal with their past pain is through the use of music, and, in most cases, the blues. The various protagonists, from Johnson's unnamed narrator to Jones's Ursa Corregidora, grapple with an issue of racial identity or sexuality. These problems are often generational, and, because the protagonists lack a language to articulate their pain, they rely on the blues.

Hybrid Ambivalence

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon describes ambivalence as the mutation of one's phenotype (19).² Fanon goes on to write that this mutation, ambivalence, is also psychological. The texts being discussed contain characters that are ambivalent in nature. Some of the protagonists find themselves in situations where they must make decisions regarding their racial identity and how they live their lives or their sexual identity. The end result is a feeling of remorse as seen in Johnson's unnamed narrator and Larsen's Helga Crane. Or the protagonists must uncover familial history in order to release family demons and understand their ancestry.

Over the years, the term "hybrid" has changed. Critic and scholar Robert J. C. Young notes how "hybrid" has changed from a biological term to a cultural term. Young writes, "While cultural factors determined its physiological status, the use of hybridity today prompts questions about the ways in which contemporary thinking has been absolutely with the racialized formulations of the past" (6). Young suggests that the early biological and physiological understanding of hybridity was culturally based. Today our understanding and use of hybridity is entrenched in the discourse of race and the history of race. No longer considered a biological

² See Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin White Mask*. Fanon's reading of ambivalence suggests when the colonized go to the mother country, they return to their homeland and/or environment changed. The individual acts as if they have added some matter of substance to their being. p.19.

issue, hybridity explores race in terms of power structure and dominance. Thus hybridity can be looked at as a displacement of power.

Literary theorist Homi K. Bhabha views hybridity through a linguistic lens. In “Signs Taken for Wonders,” Bhabha identifies the “word” as the authoritative sign for the colonized. Bhabha argues that:

Hybridity represents that ambivalent “turn” of the discriminated subject into the terrifying, exorbitant object of paranoid classification—a disturbing questioning of the images and presences of authority....The displacement from symbol to sign creates a crisis for any concept of authority based on a system of recognition: colonial specularly, doubly inscribed, does not mirror where the self apprehends itself; it is always the split screen of the self and its doubling, the hybrid. 174-5

In Bhabha’s description, that is partly cultural and linguistic; he draws upon the idea of doubling and/or ambivalence duality. Hybridity, for Bhabha, is the creation of an individual who is endowed with a dual cultural nature. Bhabha’s idea of ambivalence takes a role similar to Fanon but is predicated on the ability of the colonized (discriminated) to mimic the authority or ideas of the colonizers (discriminators).

For Bhabha, ambivalence and/or an ambivalent nature is a characteristic of hybridity. In colonized individuals, they attempt to mimic the colonizers while trying to maintain their own cultural ideology. The ambivalence of the colonized individual is played out in their ability to mimic the colonizers. Ambivalence, therefore, becomes a psychological issue. Frantz Fanon suggests there is a psychic doubleness and/or duality that is expressed by the colonized which creates feelings of ambivalence among the colonized individual because they cannot become or

live up to the standards of the colonizer. Ania Loomba, in discussing Fanon's psychic doubleness trauma, suggests trauma results when the colonized individual "can [not] attain the whiteness he has been taught to desire or shed the blackness he has learnt to devalue" (148). Loomba also points out that "[w]hat skin and masks have in common is that they mark the interface between self and the world" (148) which is similar to W. E. B. Du Bois' idea of double consciousness.

In his important text, *Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois succinctly describes double-consciousness as a "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body" (11). Du Bois asserts that African Americans are in a precarious position where they have to uphold the standards of being African and American. This complex way of life creates problems, social and psychic. Du Bois explains that through the attempts of African Americans to reconcile and/or assimilate within the dominant culture, the world watches with a sense of contempt. Like Fanon, Du Bois suggests that individuals who do not meet society's standards through assimilation experience psychic trauma as a result of not coming under the authority of the dominant culture.

Psychic trauma also has a foundation in the institution of slavery. Although the novels in this project focus on the color-line, miscegenous individuals are the direct result of the economy of slavery. This is especially apparent in *Corregidora*. A part of this project examines the effects of slavery on miscegenous individuals post slavery. Ambivalence becomes key in reading these characters because it provides a theoretical lens to examine their psychic trauma. For the purposes of this project, ambivalence will not be read as a way to increase one's standing (Fanon) or as the mimesis of language (Bhabha), however, rather ambivalence will be applied to

characters as an intensified double-consciousness which leads to indecision and what one might call trouble in mind. The characters exhibit double-consciousness; because the characters are African American and Caucasian, they are hybrids. As a result, the protagonists struggle to find their place, in terms of racial identity.

Miscegenous characters also experience psychic trauma. Similar to African Americans who experience psychic trauma due to their race, miscegenous characters grapple with the question of their identity. The compound effect of race and sexual and cultural identity on the psyche of miscegenous characters in terms of the race question leads to ambivalence. As a result, the characters and/or protagonists examined lack the will to act or make decisions at key points in the novel or regret decisions they make surrounding their identity and race.

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois states that it is the desire of the African American “to be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture, to escape both death and isolation” (11). This vision of unity can be applied to miscegenous individuals who were usually disowned by both races, black and white, and treated as third class citizens. Miscegenous individuals often found themselves in the middle in terms of the race questions and how they identified themselves. The question becomes, how will this vision of unity be attained? I believe the four novels offer a cultural solution found in the Blues. Blues speak to experiences and unites individuals across racial, social, and gender lines.

Hybrid Blues Aesthetics

To say the Blues are important to the African American community is an understatement. Scholar, James H. Cone writes, “the spirit and mood of the blues have roots stretching back into slavery days and even to Africa” (98). The West African music traditions of the drum accompanied the Africans on their Middle Passage voyage. Soon these Africans found

themselves in a strange land but holding onto music which was at the core of their being. But like literacy—writing and reading—drumming was outlawed. The “spirit and mood” of Blues can be found in oppression and pain. As enslaved individuals, Africans and African Americans felt the yoke of bondage. To escape the pain, the enslaved turned to music.

With the emancipation of slaves, Blues allowed for the expression of a new outlook on life for the newly freed African Americans. Utilizing the call and response and the shout found in the church, Blues issued forth from spirituals (Jones 62). The biggest difference between blues and spirituals is the focus of the music. Whereas spirituals had a collective voice, in that they speak to the hopes and desires of a group; blues has a personal message and bears a feeling of pleasure. Post slavery, preachers were replaced by priests and priestesses of Blues.

This new way of life opened the gateway for travel. One of the most familiar tropes of blues is the railroad. Scholar Houston A. Baker, Jr. remarks “[t]he “X” of crossing roadbeds signals the multidirectionality of the juncture...that redoubles and circles, makes sidings and ladders, forms Y’s...”(7). This description of railway lines becomes a symbol for the Blues which are denoted by the coda or “X.” The individual sees where the music or song begins but has no idea as to where or how it ends. Because Blues addresses personal experiences, the meaning of songs can be multi-directional. Baker goes on to state that “blues and its sundry performers offer interpretations of the experiencing of experience” (7).

The use of Blues music in literature can be traced to the nineteenth century with Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life*. This early slave narrative reveals and illuminates the “economy of slavery.” Douglass details the sale of slaves which destroyed the family link. In addition, the crimes committed against the body—rape and beatings—reveals a collective

oppression that was common in the Blues. This early slave narrative ushers in themes that become associated with Blues.

Recent scholarship surrounding Blues has centered upon blues poets and poetics, in *Afro-Blue*, scholar and critic Tony Bolden examines blues poets by looking at vernacular based forms and moves towards a discussion of blues poets as priests. Similar to Bolden's position of viewing blues performers as priests/priestesses, Angela Y. Davis in tracing the transformative power of blues music back to West African societies describes the use of spiritual and tribal leaders performing to music in ceremonies. Davies notes that "Blues music performs a magical—or aesthetic—exorcism of the blues, those things that lead to unhappiness and despair" (129). The compelling point Davis makes of the "exorcism of the blues" is how this project will interpret the music which is read as Blues.

In reading the amalgamated forms of music as blues in the various texts, it can be noted that music has certain qualities that move one to a place of forgetfulness. Also, music has the power that allows one to relive experiences and moments in their past. The amalgamated music in the texts moves the various protagonists to accept and understand their racial identity and their plight in society. Like Davis, music performs an exorcism, but it is of the protagonist's ambivalence.

Each protagonist deals with ambivalence on some level, be it racial or identity. Music becomes the mechanism that moves the protagonists from places of uncertainty and confusion and allows them to make decisions regarding their situation. The effect music has on the protagonists is that it frees them of their ambivalence. Blues music frees the mind of the listener and/or protagonists so that the troubles, cares, and concerns are washed away. Blues aesthetics creates a discourse whereby ambivalence of miscegenous characters can be fully understood.

Racial identity creates a troubled mind for the various protagonists because they are trying to negotiate through society. The protagonists' indecision is often amplified by psychological issues they face regarding racial and sexual identity. Music and/or Blues yields a space where the angst of the protagonists' ambivalence is exorcized by confronting the issue of sexuality as depicted in *Corregidora* or choosing not to accept and/or face the issue as seen in "Kabnis."

Dissertation Overview

My dissertation will be comprised of four body chapters: "Turn the Beat Around: James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*," "I Can See the Midnight Sun: Jean Toomer's *Cane*," "When I Got the Broken Soul Blues: Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*, and "Trouble in Mind: Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*." Each chapter examines a miscegenous protagonist and how music and/or Blues contributes to the development of their identity. The novels reveal the manner in which music aids in the conquering of ambivalence.

The treatment of music in James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* lies at the heart of the text. It is through the use of music that the narrator is able to explore the nature of his racial identity. The question that emerges regarding the life and music of the unnamed narrator is why does the narrator fuse ragtime and classical music? The answer rests in the idea of "originality" or (re)creating a new identity. The narrator, the son of a former slave woman and a southern white aristocrat, desires to become an important individual. Being denied access to an education because his tuition money was stolen, the narrator sets out to educate himself in the world by working in various venues and ends up in New York where he is exposed to a Negro culture that seemed hidden to him prior. The narrator seizes upon this life and culture and moves towards (re)creating a new identity while trying to understand and accept his miscegenous identity.

Music becomes the conduit for reconciling his true identity and the catalyst for the narrator's (re)creation of his new identity. This new identity and new music are developed out of experiences to which the narrator has been exposed. The experience of slumming in New York and learning the inner workings of African American culture opens the narrator's eyes to the possibilities for advancement in the social and cultural arena by making a positive contribution to the African American race and creating a name for himself. The experiences serve a dual purpose in the life of the narrator. In a way, the narrator's life is enriched by his experiences. At the same time, the narrator is incensed by the ill treatment of African Americans. However, he is able to capitalize on his experiences and feelings of ambivalence and creates a new brand of music by fusing two distinct musical genres.

Ultimately, the narrator forsakes music for real estate and capitalistic gains. The narrator believes this new life will provide a greater sense of stability and an identity as a white business man. In the end, the narrator experiences feelings of ambivalence and is left to consider what contribution he might have made to his race and how he could have made a name for himself within black society. The answers to these internal questions for the narrator lie within a box that holds yellowed manuscripts of music compositions. Examining the compositions, the narrator has a sense that music and the arts were his true calling in life. Left ultimately with a feeling of being black and blue due to the life he chose to lead, the narrator feels he "sold [his] birthright for a mess of pottage" (211).

The search for identity is a major theme in Jean Toomer's *Cane*. In the first southern section, Toomer examines the issue of sexuality and identity by choosing to focus on southern women. Of interest for this project is a woman by the name of Becky. Becky is a white woman who has two sons by a black man. Because Becky chooses to sleep with a black man, she

contaminates the purity of the race and calls into question the identity of her children. A blues aesthetic can be found in the treatment of Becky as well as her physical location, next to a railroad track.

There is an amalgamation of spiritual and Blues music found in the “Becky” story. This mixture of music speaks to the division of the townspeople who openly pray for Becky’s sins but secretly wish to know, who the father of her sons is. At the same time, the townspeople assist Becky by leaving her provisions. The gospel/blues refrain of “O Pines, whisper to Jesus” is echoed throughout the story. At the end, a mysterious train rumbles by toppling Becky’s house.

In the second section which is based in Chicago, Toomer analyzes a bi-racial love relationship between Bona and Paul. Bona, who is a middle class white girl, is secretly in love with Paul, a black male. “What is Paul?” is the question that rings throughout the story. As individuals around Paul question his racial identity, Paul also questions himself. Even though Paul has some feelings for Bona, he is reluctant to openly pursue a relationship because he is unsure of who he is in terms of his racial identity.

When Paul looks out onto the city of Chicago and envisions a relationship with Bona, he is transported to southern cane fields. An ambivalent feeling lingers around Paul as he tries to decide what to do about or with his feelings for Bona. The difficulty of the decision he must make is compounded by the fact that he has not come to terms with his own racial identity. In addition to experiencing ambivalence surrounding Bona, Paul is ambivalent regarding himself. In his attempts to fit in with the others, he never discusses what his racial identity is or could be. It is the music at the Crimson Gardens, a dance club, that eventually bring Paul to an acceptance of his racial identity.

During a night on the town with his roommate and on a date with Bona, there is a special feeling in the air. Bona is aggressive when expressing her feelings for Paul. She tries to kiss him and tells him that she loves him. Paul, on the other hand, does not try to kiss Bona nor does he tell her he loves her. But his feelings for Bona are related through the dance. It is at this point that Paul comes to an acceptance of himself and an acceptance of his feelings for Bona. In the end, however, when Paul is ready to forge ahead with his relationship, Bona leaves him.

The last section of *Cane*, entitled "Kabnis," takes the reader back south. Ralph Kabnis is a northerner who goes south for a teaching assignment. During his stint in rural Georgia, Kabnis comes to understand some things regarding southern life and that he, too, has southern roots. Kabnis has ambivalent feelings towards the southern nights. He admires the stillness of the night, smell of pine, and beauty of the sky. At the same time, he is afraid of the stillness because he fears the possibility of being lynched.

The natural beauty of the south seems to get lost in Kabnis's attempt to not become indoctrinated to an antiquated way of life. It is Kabnis's belief that southern Negroes only know two ways of life, work and church. He fails to understand the importance of religion and spirituals to the African American community and tries to distance himself from these elements of African American culture and society. The thought of "shouting" during service signals to Kabnis a group of people who are not refined. He offers that people who would do something so unbecoming as screaming during the sermon would be dismissed from his church in the North. There is a great disconnect between Kabnis and rural Georgia.

Unlike Kabnis, Lewis, another northerner, relishes the history and southern, rural life of Georgia. Lewis does not run away from the mysteries of the south, rather he tries to uncover the mysteries and hidden crimes. He understands that in the South all black men are held to the same

standards, unlike Kabnis who believes his position of “professor” grants him immunity to being punished just because of his skin color. Kabnis soon learns that all black men are placed in the same social class of Black without regard to their position.

The real test comes for Kabnis when he is terminated as principal and works in Halsey’s blacksmith shop. At Halsey’s blacksmith shop, Kabnis is exposed to Father John, an old blind man who is a prophetic figure, who is housed in the basement of Halsey’s house and shop. Father John represents the old southern way of life. He holds the key to understand the problem of miscegenation in the South. Lewis sees the value in Father John and longs to hear him unlock the secret. Kabnis does not understand, yet Father John chooses to open up to Kabnis and reveal the answers. Because Kabnis has not tried to immerse himself in southern traditions, the answer comes across as coded language.

In Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*, the heroine of the text, Helga Crane, is a woman who seeks sexual fulfillment while coming to terms with her lack of family history. *Quicksand*, which is Larsen’s first novel, can be considered a roman a clef in that some details of the novel are closely associated with Larsen’s life. Helga is a school teacher at Naxos, which is based on Tuskegee Institute, where Larsen served as a nurse, and is frowned upon because she does not conform to the ways and methods of the school. Helga seeks individuality and does not subscribe to the idea of conformity.

Frustrated with the ideology of the school and its seeming mission to create a machine of conforming individuals, Helga decides to resign. Meeting with the principal, Helga feels compelled to stay on at the school despite her misgivings because she believes she would be letting the principal down. Although she is engaged to James Vayle, a member of a first family, Helga is sexually attracted to Dr. Anderson, the principal. Mistaking Helga for a member of a

first family, he calls her “a lady” with “dignity and breeding” (21) Helga resigns. Because Dr. Anderson thinks she is a woman of a first family of breeding, she is insulted because she knows little about her father and his family and her mother was white and from Copenhagen.

Helga’s resignation signals the start of a blues woman journey for her. Traveling north, Helga lands in Chicago where she is hard pressed to secure employment and turned away by her uncle’s wife. By luck, she finds employment as a personal assistance allowing her to travel to New York. In Harlem, New York, Helga seems to come into her own and expresses her individuality. Helga no longer felt inferior to others around her due to a lack of family heritage. New York was a melting pot of people.

Music, dancing, and partying were a big part of Helga’s life in New York. She was content and happy, but those feelings changed over time. She grew tired of race talk and those who pretended to know the ills of the Black race but were far removed from its yoke and burden. One night at a club, Helga is spiritually transported to jungle through the syncopated rhythm of jazz and “unseen tomtoms” (59). Keenly aware of her surroundings, Helga felt as though she had been lifted from her place. The enjoyment of the music signals not just a figurative move but a literal movement for Helga. This transformation sends Helga on a journey to her mother’s family.

In Copenhagen, Helga is admired by all because she is an exotic other. Her clothes, already considered different, were exaggerated the more to accentuate her racial difference. Although Fru and Herr Dahl were her relatives, they try to capitalize off of Helga’s exoticism for capital gain. In their attempt to rise in class and economic standing, the Dahls host a party of eligible bachelors vying for Helga’s hand. Axel Olson, a painter, arranges to paint Helga’s portrait. Axel does not love Helga but only wishes to be with her because of her exoticism. He

only wishes to control and own Helga as his property much like one of his paintings that he can later sell. What Helga wants and desires are never considered in Copenhagen. Helga still holds onto the idea of fulfilling her sexual desires however. Although Axel has capital and material possessions, she feels no sexual attraction towards him. After seeing an American vaudeville show, Helga is once again reminded of her difference, even in Copenhagen. She despises the black minstrel performers for awakening a sleeping giant and comes to realize that she is only a possession to Axel. As a result, she decides to return to New York.

Upon returning to New York, Helga celebrates Anne and Dr. Anderson's marriage and returns to see the one thing she has missed, the presence and company of Negroes. Secretly in love with Dr. Anderson, Helga moves out of Anne's house and into a hotel. Helga holds a connection to Dr. Anderson that goes beyond the physical and encompasses the intellectual. One evening at a party, Helga is reacquainted with her ex-fiancée, James Vayle. Vayle still has feelings for Helga and talks to her about marriage and children. Helga does not wish to marry Vayle because he does not stimulate her sexually. She responds that to have children would mean to willingly place a child, a black child, in a position to suffer. For African Americans, children "...must be sinful. Think of the awfulness of being responsible for the giving of life to creatures doomed to endure such wounds to the flesh, such wounds to the spirit..." (103). Perhaps remembering her upbringing, Helga decides she does not wish to do something so selfish.

Later at another party, Helga bumps into Dr. Anderson who kisses her. Helga's sexual desire is awakened. Even though she is aware of Dr. Anderson's marriage to Anne, she dreams of the day when he would fulfill her sexual desire. Later when Dr. Anderson apologizes, Helga, feeling betrayed, slaps him and runs away. Overwhelmed and frustrated by the act of Dr.

Anderson's refusal, Helga lands in a store front church revival service. As it rains heavily outside, inside, the congregants sing "Showers of Blessings." The song is appropriate for the scene because it signals a new start in Helga's life. Seemingly in a hysterical state of mind, Helga moves from crying, to laughing, and back to crying. In the end, Helga repents and gives her life to Christ.

Escorted home by Rev. Mr. Pleasant Green, Helga takes on a different role in life. No longer a traveling woman, Helga finds herself back south in Alabama where she becomes a baby breeding machine. Her marriage to Rev. Green provides her the sexual fulfillment she desires, but it comes at the price of wear on her body. No longer able to sustain the lavish lifestyle, sexual fulfillment becomes unpleasant. In the end, Helga seems to have chosen the lesser part of life. She chose not to settle for a loveless relationship with James Vayle due to his family background, but marries Rev. Green a man of little substance and no known lineage.

Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* examines oral storytelling in the passing of family history. Corregidora is a Portuguese coffee planter who settles in Brazil. He exploits the female slaves and uses them as prostitutes. Certain female slaves he uses for his own pleasure. Corregidora is fond of Great Gram's coffee bean color and refers to her as one of his prize possession. Ursa Corregidora, a blues singer, is charged by her mother, Gram, and Great Gram with "making generations" because children serve as evidence and so as not to forget the sexual crimes committed against women's body. After fighting with Mutt, her first husband, Ursa falls down some stairs and loses her unborn child and womb. Ursa grows despondent, unable to pass the family's narrative in the manner she was taught, she finds an alternative method through the Blues.

Another problem that looms for Ursa is how to sustain a relationship with a man. After she is discharged from the hospital, Ursa stops singing at Happy's Café and lives with Tadpole, the owner of Happy's Café. Tadpole is secretly in love with Ursa, but he has generational problems of his own that have not been resolved. Later, moving in with Cat, a friend and lesbian, Ursa begins to sing again. Cat notices the different sound in her voice as if she has been through something and knows what she is singing about. "Trouble in Mind," which becomes Ursa's song of choice, becomes the outlet she uses to pass on the Corregidorean story.

Music figures in the life of the Corregidorean women as Gram listened to the blues, and Ursa's mother to spirituals. Because of the oppressive and exploitative experience of Gram, blues become a coping mechanism for her in that they provide a sense of relief. The fact that Gram was raped by her father, Corregidora, is a collective burden that could only be released through a blues channel. Ursa's mother listens to spirituals to provide her a sense of freedom from the effect of Corregidora on her life. Even though she was physically removed from Corregidora's crimes, the impact of his crime was far reaching.

Ursa's identity as a blues woman is solidified when she reflects on what could make Corregidora love and hate Great Gram. Acting in the vein of performance, Ursa performs the sex act of fellatio on Mutt to reclaim a part of her life that had been taken away by the Corregidorean narrative. The act of fellatio allows Ursa to freely love Mutt without inhibition. The notion of being restricted by how men operate in the life of Corregidorean women is void. Ursa reclaims her body and in the process frees herself of the oppression of Corregidora.

I intend for this project to illuminate the use of music, especially blues, as a metaphor for the ambivalence of miscegenous characters that helps them cope with the burdens of racial identity, sexuality, and sex. The protagonists struggle for racial and sexual freedom rests in their

ability to use the hybrid music in the texts as an agent of change. Blues speaks to the collective racial and sexual identity struggle the protagonists undertake.

CHAPTER TWO

TURN THE BEAT AROUND: JAMES WELDON JOHNSON'S *AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF AN EX-COLOURED MAN*

Born in Jacksonville, Florida, James Weldon Johnson was the son of James and Helen Louise Johnson, a head waiter and the first African American school teacher in Florida. Johnson received his early education at Stanton School in Jacksonville where his mother served as a teacher, and he would later serve as principal. After graduating, Johnson furthered his educational studies at Atlanta University. Johnson spent two summers teaching in rural Georgia. This experience provided Johnson with an up close account with poverty especially since he had a middle class and Victorian upbringing.

After earning his A.B. in 1894 from Atlanta University, Johnson returned to Jacksonville, Florida to serve as principal of his alma mater, Stanton. Johnson proved to be an innovative and creative individual. He started a newspaper, the *Daily American*, which closed after eight months due to financial problems. He was the first African American to pass the Florida State Bar Exam, a classically trained pianist, and in 1897, after his brother J. Rosamond graduated from the New England Conservatory of Music, they began collaborating on musical projects.

In addition to being a classically trained pianist, Johnson had a very successful venture as a musical songwriter. When Johnson was the principal of Stanton School in Jacksonville, Florida, he and his brother, Rosamond, wrote the song, "Lift Every Voice" for the President Abraham Lincoln celebration. "Lift Every Voice" became recognized as the Negro National Anthem. Along with his brother J. Rosamond and Bob Cole, the trio formed the successful music composing group of Cole and Johnson Brothers. The trio wrote vaudeville musicals and scores

that were absent the normal stereotypes referencing watermelons and degrading names of African Americans. The trio wrote over 200 songs that were performed in vaudeville shows. Their most successful song, “Under the Bamboo Tree” was published around 1901. Johnson’s training as a classical pianist was instrumental in him not only composing vaudeville music but poetry as well.³

In addition to his illustrious career as a music composer, Johnson also enjoyed a successful political career. In 1906, Johnson secured a consulship to Venezuela where he stayed until 1909. In 1909, he married Grace Nail, daughter of a wealthy New York real estate broker and was transferred to Nicaragua where he wrote and published *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* in 1912.

James Weldon Johnson, the author, creates a character, the unnamed narrator, who indirectly ties musical tastes to racial identity. At various times in the text, the narrator uses music to help define his racial identity. For example, when the narrator moves to New York, he associates with African Americans who would be considered low brow; it is through this association that the narrator garners the title of “Professor” for his mastery of ragtime music. When the narrator tries to secure the heart of the woman, who is white and becomes his wife, he uses the music of Chopin. The racially ambivalent nature of the narrator is inextricably tied to his music. It is interesting that the narrator chose two distinct and “opposite” musical genres, ragtime and classical, to master. This musical mastery seems to suggest the mastery of two racial identities. With the association of ragtime to brothel houses and the lower class of society, it was viewed as risqué. Ragtime music is closely akin to blues as both were popular in vaudeville

³ See James Weldon Johnson *Along This Way* (Da Capo 2000).

shows. Ragtime comes to express the conditions and experiences of being black in America for the narrator.

Autobiography Synopsis

James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* is the story of an unnamed narrator who is the son of a white male aristocrat and a former slave woman. His mother is perhaps a self taught pianist. The narrator and his mother move to Connecticut where his father would infrequently visit. One day at school, the narrator's racial identity is revealed and proves devastating to the narrator. For so long the narrator believed he was white and went as far as to poke fun at the black students in class.

The narrator's mother dies shortly after he graduates high school. The narrator moves south to Atlanta to attend Atlanta University and falls victim to robbery at the rooming house where he stayed. He opts not to enroll in Atlanta University and moves to Florida where he establishes himself as a man of many talents and one who acquires knowledge rather fast. The narrator provides piano lessons and serves as a Spanish reader in the cigar factory. After a period of time, the factory closes and the narrator and some other workers move to New York.

In New York, the narrator uses his talents as a musician to make a name for himself. He garners the title of "professor" for his ability and style of ragtime play which consisted of transposing classical music into ragtime. The narrator's famous transposition was ragging Mendelssohn's "Wedding March." Enjoying much success as a musician, the narrator secures a patron. After the narrator witnessing the murder of a white woman, his patron takes him to Europe. In Europe at various functions, the narrator is urged to play the new American music. The narrator is a success at every stop until he plays this new style of music in Berlin. After playing the new American music in Berlin, a "big bespectacled bushy head" German man

transposed the narrator's rag into classical music. Awed by the German's feat, the narrator decides to forsake ragtime, move to the southern United States to mine the music and folklore of African Americans.

On the narrator's expedition south, he finds a wealth of information at his last settlement due to a "big meeting" taking place where Singing Johnson was the song leader. The narrator leaves the Sunday "big meeting" inspired and enthusiastic about the material he obtained. Later that night, his work was interrupted by the sounds of men's voices and horses. The narrator discovers that a lynch mob is being formed for an alleged criminal. The mob disperses at day break and returns by noon with the alleged criminal in tow. The narrator and others watched as the mob lynched the man. The narrator forsakes his race and decides to let the world take him for what it would.

The narrator moves back to New York and pursues life as a realtor and falls in love. He falls madly in love with a white woman but does not reveal his racial identity. After much laboring, the narrator reveals his racial identity to the woman he loves. To his dismay, she avoids him and wishes not to see him when he calls on her. Seeing her at a card party, the woman plays Chopin's Thirteenth Nocturne, for which the narrator was a master of playing. After the woman confesses her love for the narrator, he plays the Nocturne passionately and ends it with a major triad which was an improvisation.

The couple is married and has two children, and the wife dies during the birth of their second child. From time to time, the narrator reminisces about the life he surrendered by looking at the yellowed manuscripts he keeps hidden in a box. The narrator wonders what contributions he could have made to the African American race. Ultimately, the narrator feels he has sold his heritage for a mess of pottage.

I posit that the narrator's use of transposed classical music into ragtime signals a move towards a blues aesthetics. The narrator's decisions throughout the text often leave him in a *blues* state or remorseful. Subsequently the narrator forsakes his race and lives a life that is materially gratifying but void of fulfillment. In addition to the narrator's *blues* state due to his decisions, he is also blue due to his ambivalent feelings regarding his racial identity.

Critical Analysis

The nameless narrator in *Autobiography* uses music, both ragtime and classical, as an agent of uplift but forsakes them to "make a white man's success" (193); however, the narrator uses music to establish a link to the African American world. The narrator's ambivalent nature is evident through his use of ragtime and classical music. Ragtime and classical music are tied to low and high culture, respectively, which reflects the racial identity of the narrator. The narrator learns to play classical music as a boy, and he returns to classical music when he wants the world to take him for what it wants. He learns to play ragtime tunes in the gambling house in New York.

Of the various classical composers to use as an introduction into Anglo-American culture, why does Johnson use Chopin to signal the narrator's transition? Similar to the life of the narrator in the *Autobiography*, Chopin's life was marred by contradiction and ambivalence. Frédéric Francois Chopin (1810-1849), a Polish born musician, was an innovative pianist. According to critic and essayist James Huneker, Chopin was regarded as an indecisive individual (13); "Chopin had his salon side when he played with elegance, brilliancy, and coquetry. But he had dark moments when the keyboard was too small, his ideas too big for utterance....His mood- versatility was reproduced in his endless colorings and capricious rhythms" (55). Huneker's assertion that the temperamental mood of Chopin was evident in his music suggests the

instability of Chopin helped facilitate the new, innovative style of music that he penned. One could surmise an imbalance or ambivalent nature is the ultimate reason for Chopin's success.

Huneker remarks that Chopin was the master of "musical emotions" (68) and Chopin's music is the "external conflict between body and soul" (69). This conflict is similar to W. E. B. Du Bois' idea of double-consciousness which could explain Johnson's use of Chopin and his music. When comparing the musical conflicts experienced by Chopin to the identity conflict experienced by the narrator, we come face-to-face with two musicians of different racial backgrounds and who are in a state of confusion about their identity.⁴

From Huneker's account, we find that Chopin's works were influenced by incidents in his life. This idea of Chopin's music being influenced by life's incidents or experiences seems to suggest an anticipation of the ideas and structures of Blues music. Critic Leroy Jones, later Amiri Baraka, defines Blues as "a Negro experience" (94);⁵ Baraka relegates the form to only those of African descent. Ralph Ellison in his seminal essay "Blues People" defines the Blues as "a group experience shared by many Negroes," Ellison goes on to express that "any effective study of the blues would treat them [Blues] first as poetry and as ritual" (268). The definition that Ellison

⁴ Chopin, much like the narrator, was believed to have lived a detached life. Although Chopin was an accomplished musician, his life was in constant turmoil: "his early love life, his sorrow of parting from his parents and home, the shock of the Warsaw revolt, the death of his father and his friend Matuszyński, and the rupture with Madame Sand" (3). These incidents, in the life of Chopin, are similar to incidents in the life of the narrator which leads to the narrator's ambivalence. It is not known how much Johnson knew of the life of Chopin; however, we do know that Johnson was familiar with the works of Chopin as a classically trained musician.

⁵ See Leroy Jones (Amiri Baraka) *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*. (Perennial 2002, 1963). Baraka shows the evolution of classic blues from the vaudeville stage to coon shouters. Jones states that "*Blues* means a Negro experience" which says this is a music form that is tied specifically to an African American experience.

presents narrows the scope of Blues to “poetry” and “rituals.” However, Ellison does provide space for the Blues to be examined as a shared art form.

In seeking to relate the Blues to Chopin, it is beneficial to draw from Ellison’s idea of Blues as poetry. Huneker writes that Chopin was “not only the poet of the piano, he is also the poet of music, the most poetic of composers” (72). Chopin’s compositions possessed a depth and breadth that were poetical in nature. Although words are absent from Chopin’s compositions, listeners hear the story of joy, sorrow, melancholy, and ambivalence in Chopin’s music. Perhaps it is for Chopin’s ability to transcend the art of piano playing that Johnson uses Chopin’s music in *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*.

Another musical form that is essential to the text is ragtime. The words “rag” and “ragtime” were not used in conjunction with music until 1896 (Magee 389). How the heavily syncopated music came to be known as “ragtime” is not quite known. Samuel A. Floyd, Jr. suggests “the music was named by its black makers, after the customary practice of the ‘flaunting’ of handkerchiefs (the black folk called them ‘rags’)” (70). Ragtime, according to musicologist Jeffrey Magee, “emerged from an aurally transmitted regional music developed by itinerant black pianists in the South and Midwest” (389) in the 1890s. Floyd relates that ragtime was not solely an African American musical invention but was helped by “superimpose[ing] European forms on the rich and simmering foundation of African religious beliefs and practices” (85). Although European musical practices were “superimposed” on traditional African music, the music was African. “The syncopated patterns that distinguish ragtime have their roots in African musical practices that came to America through the slave trade” according to Magee (389). Magee’s position seems to omit any association between European musical practices and

tradition of ragtime; however, Floyd recognizes that the use of syncopation could possibly be a European practice.

The creation of ragtime is a “social phenomenon” in that the rise of ragtime comes during the Victorian Age. The Victorian Age is a time marked by sheer conservatism and genteel manners. Jeffrey Magee points out that ragtime was in direct opposition to the beliefs and morals of Victorian thought. The loose and heavily syncopated beats were thought to make people immoral and mad. “Ragtime, it was claimed, had the power ‘to lower moral standards’” and “[i]t was an ‘evil music’ to which one could become ‘addicted’ as to alcohol” (Magee 390). Ragtime received a label of being immoral due to its use in bars and houses of ill-repute.

The syncopated rhythm of ragtime was contagious as presented by the unnamed narrator. The narrator’s description of ragtime and its effect upon listeners show ragtime to be complex and fun. The narrator is mesmerized and “stopped talking to listen” (98) when he first hears the music. The narrator’s description depicts a musical form that encourages the participation of listeners through foot patting and hand clapping. He describes a “barbaric harmony” with abrupt jumps “from one key to another” (99) and abrupt beats. The players of ragtime “improvised crude and at times vulgar words to fit the melodies” (99). This description is similar to Samuel Floyd, Lynn Abbot, and Doug Seroff observation of coon songs.

Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff define coon songs as “lyrics in Negro dialect, caricaturing African American life, set to the melodious strains of ragtime music” (11). Coon songs “portrayed the African-American male as a fun-loving dandy, a chicken—or ham-loving glutton, a razor-totin’ thief, gambler, or drunkard, or an outrageously unfaithful husband or lover” (Floyd 60). In addition, the African-American female “was presented as very black, fat, large-lipped mammy or carouser, or as a beautiful light-skinned ‘Yaller Rose of Texas,’” (60). Coon songs

perpetuated a false sense of identity regarding African American citizens which led to an increase of terrorism and lynching towards those citizens. Floyd points out that music, in the late nineteenth century, became the primary vehicle for “developing, perpetuating, and communicating the negative images of black people in American society” (60). What is important about coon songs is they are derivatives of African American songs, more often spirituals, and the music was given titles such as “All Coons Look Alike to Me” and “Da Coon Dat had de Razor”. It should be duly noted that coon songs lacked “ring traits, and the rhythms were rigidly uniform” (60) and lacked rhythm.

However, the significance of ragtime music can be traced back to its use in the theatre in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Near the turn of the twentieth century, there were two sets of minstrel shows being performed. One was performed by white cast members in black face; the other consisted of performances by African Americans in black face. The difference in these performances was the music that accompanied the acts. Abbott and Seroff discuss the inauguration of ragtime coon songs and coon shouters. Around 1897 “a new generation of white, predominantly female ‘negro specialists’” (Abbott 15) burst upon the minstrelsy scene called “coon shouters.” Coon shouters are “untrained vocalist of a certain ‘robust degree’” (15). These coon shouters, who were white, recorded music that was in Negro dialect but held little resemblance to African-American musical style (16). African American female coon shouters performed with black vaudeville companies and “became signally associated with the coming generation of black female blues singers” (22).

When we consider the music created by the narrator, the music was composed to entertain those in brothels and bars, and the patrons were able to identify with the themes of the narrator’s music. The unnamed narrator becomes a masterful ragtime player. He credits himself

with being the first individual to transcribe classical music into ragtime. The amalgamation of ragtime and classical music speaks to the ambivalence of the narrator's identity in addition to the creation of a blues themed music. In his seminal text *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, Amiri Baraka discusses two types of blues: primitive and classical. In the chapter "Classic Blues," Baraka places the birth of classic blues within the same time frame as the popularization of jazz. Classic blues and jazz "are the results of social and psychological changes within the Negro group as it moved toward the mainstream of American society" (93). The idea of social and psychological change comes to bear through the identity (racial) and the music of the narrator.

Textual Analysis

The narrator's life is plagued by ambivalence and indecision. His ambivalence is borne in the early section of the novel as his mother fails to confirm his racial identity. Until a certain period of his life, the narrator believed he was Caucasian when he was in fact Black. The narrator details accounts of how he and some Caucasian students would "walk behind [Black students] repeating: 'Nigger, nigger, never die/Black face and shiny eye.'" (15). After a white child is wounded by a Black child, the narrator rushes home and relates the event to his mother. While retelling the event, the narrator calls the Black students "nigger." Without giving a reason as to why he should not use the term, his mother simply admonishes the narrator "Don't ever use that word again, and don't you ever bother the coloured children at school. You ought to be ashamed of yourself" (15). Robert Fleming explains that a major psychological problem of the narrator is that he does not know who he is (121). Days after the incident, the principal entered the narrator's class and asked all the white students to stand. The narrator rises but is told to be seated and "rise with the others" (16). Shocked and dismayed that he is the "Other," the narrator

hurried home for a self-examination. After his examination, the narrator rushes downstairs and asks his mother “Tell me, mother, am I a nigger?” (18). This moment in the text is important for the narrator because it sets the tone for how the narrator sees the world as well as himself. Desperately seeking the truth to his racial identity, the narrator notices this question brings pain to his mother:

There were tears in her eyes and I could see that she was suffering for me. And then it was that I looked at her critically for the first time. I had thought of her in a childish way only as the most beautiful woman in the world; now I looked at her searching for defects....She must have felt that I was examining her, for she hid her face in my hair and said with Difficulty: “No my darling, you are not a nigger.” She went on: “You are as good as anybody; if anyone calls you a nigger, don’t notice them.” 18

Because the mother does not respond in the affirmative or negative, she breeds a feeling of ambivalence within the narrator. The narrator reads the anguish and pain as defects or hidden secrets to his mother’s identity. It is troubling that the mother does not take this moment to educate the narrator as to his identity and how the world views him. Instead of providing comfort, the mother’s vague response illicit further questions, “Well, mother, am I white? Are you white?” (18). The mother’s answer is self-effacing and somewhat contradictory to the teacher, “No, I am not white, but you—your father is one of the greatest men in the country—the best blood of the South is in you—“ (18). The mother leaves room for further questioning in the narrator’s mind. She confirms that she is not white, and his father is of the best bloodline of the South leaving the narrator in a position of racial uncertainty. Marred by ambivalence, this scene becomes representative of the narrator’s life in that it creates an unstable and shaky foundation.

Also, this scene marks how the narrator perceives his mother and their relationship. The ambivalent nature of the narrator has its foundation in the relationship of the narrator and his mother. The mother has reared the narrator to be an aristocrat. By moving the narrator to Connecticut and training him in classical piano, the mother grooms the narrator to become a refined, successful man of his race. Because the narrator later feels his mother has tried to hide his racial identity, he rejects his mother's ideas of aristocracy and lives a carefree, improvised life.

But despite the misgivings the narrator has about his mother, he is able to capitalize off of the musical ability that she has passed on to him. By the age of seven, the narrator could play by ear certain tunes he heard his mother play. Most interestingly, the narrator held a fondness for the black keys. The black keys on the piano are the keys of contrast—flats and sharps. Without the black keys, it would be impossible to play any piece of music. The importance of the black keys for the narrator is that they signal a “both/and” racial identity rather than “either/or.” Just as black keys function as both sharps and flats, the narrator lives along the color line existing as a Black and White individual.

Leaving Connecticut for college, the narrator arrives in Atlanta and is disappointed. Instead of finding a flourishing city with prominent African Americans, the narrator finds a group of people mired in poverty with a carefree approach to life. Despite their living conditions and circumstances, the narrator finds comical relief in their language and dialect. The narrator surmises the colorful word play and ability to laugh has been a saving grace for these southern African Americans who appear to suffer from economical, educational, and political inequities that would otherwise render them despondent or blue.

Outside of his element and absent a protector, the narrator falls victim to robbery at the boarding house. The narrator, who now does not have money to pay his tuition, ponders his options for school. For fear of appearing “an imposter or beggar” (63), the narrator decides not to speak to the college president concerning his finances. Instead of using his musical talents to procure finances, the narrator decides to change the course of his life. After returning to the boarding house to retrieve his belongings, the narrator speaks with another porter who suggests moving to Jacksonville, Florida. The porter assures the narrator he could secure a job in one of the hotels. With financial assistance and help from the porter, the narrator takes the train, riding in the porter’s closet, to Jacksonville, Florida.

After arriving in Jacksonville and securing lodging with the assistance of a minister, the narrator has an opportunity to meet his fellow lodgers and survey the city. This boarding house was different from the one the narrator occupied in Atlanta. The boarders in Jacksonville are multi-ethnic, the owners are married and a bi-racial couple, and the boarding house feels like home. The city of Jacksonville is beautiful and fresh with two grassy squares and tree shaded sandy streets.

In Jacksonville, the narrator establishes himself as a man of quality. After securing a job in the cigar factory, he masters Spanish which is primarily spoken at the boarding house and factory. Due to the narrator’s mastery of Spanish in the factory, he is selected to read, daily, “the important news from the papers” (73). From this point, music will serve as the narrator’s introduction to society. Music, more specifically the songs of his mother, creates space for the narrator to mingle with upper class African Americans in Jacksonville.

From the narrator’s association with a diverse racial and social class of individuals, he begins to ponder the race question: the struggle taking place in the South. The narrator observes

there are three classes of African Americans; he experiences life within each of the classes during the course of the text. The progress and contribution of the African American race can be seen in the “originality and artistic conception” (87) of the African American people. The narrator supports his claim of African American racial progress by highlighting the areas of dance, literature, and music.

After contemplating a life in Jacksonville that includes marriage, the narrator takes a steamer to New York. The move to New York proves successful in terms of the narrator’s music. The narrator’s foray into New York City’s nightlife is similar in term of people that he observed in Jacksonville. While in the gambling house, the narrator observes the manners, language, and attitude of the men engaged in the various sports. Something overcomes the narrator while watching the men roll dice that he becomes a participant. He had the lucky roll, and people wondered, “’Who is he?’” (94). The narrator enjoys the fascination people have with him. The idea that he is an unknown and new to dice (re)establishes the talent and genius of the narrator.

Accompanied by a small group of admirers and friends, the narrator leaves the gambling house and is introduced to ragtime. Settled in the club, the narrator stops speaking to listen to the melodies coming out of an adjoining room. Mesmerized by the technique and artistry of the piano player, the narrator observes that this music required “physical response, patting of the feet, drumming of the fingers, or nodding of the head” (98) to the “barbaric harmonies” (99). The narrator’s description of this novel music shows that ragtime is music of change. There are masterful jumps and changes in rhythm and off syncopation but the beat remains the same. Ragtime was taking the country by storm.

Using his superior talents and music abilities, the narrator becomes a ragtime pianist. He garnered the title of “professor” and reminds the reader that he is the first person to “[make] rag-

time transcriptions of familiar classic selections” (115). Cristiana Ruotolo sees the revision of classical music into ragtime as a challenge to the color line by the narrator (249). In perhaps the first essay to address the musical aspects of *Autobiography*, Ruotolo in “James Weldon Johnson and the *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Musician*,” she outlines the importance of music in facilitating the narrator crossing the color line. Although Ruotolo makes an interesting point in locating music as a challenge to the color line, I do not read the transposing of classical music and ragtime as a challenge but rather a point of negotiation. By mixing two distinct musical traditions and forms, the narrator attempts to reconcile his Du Boisian double consciousness. In addition, the amalgamation of these musical forms is an attempt to (re)create an identity for the narrator.

The narrator uses this new musical form to not only gain name recognition for himself, but the narrator uses it to create a space within the wider community. Because of the narrator’s ability, he becomes almost a priest⁶ or celebrant for the Anglo American community. The idea of the narrator as a celebrant or priest can be traced to the early Blues performers. In the early 1900s, the term “coon shouter” would be aptly applied to Negro women singers who garnered success on the vaudeville stage, but “[a] subtly modified designation, ‘up-to-date coon shouter,’ became signally associated with the coming generation of black female blues singers” (22). The name change was signaled by a change in dress and style. Instead of wearing the ragged caricature outfits, these women began to adorn themselves with headdresses and sparkling jewelry. To the eye of the audience, they were arrayed as priestesses of the people. Ralph Ellison, in commenting on Bessie Smith as priestess and celebrant, notes that Smith was not

⁶ See Tony Bolden *Afro Blue: Improvisations in African American Poetry and Culture* (Illinois 2004) pp. 49-50.

admired as a priestess or celebrant due to her clothes but because her music “affirmed the values of the group [African American working class] and man’s ability to deal with chaos” (287). The same can be said about the narrator because his mastery of hybrid ragtime “secured a wedge which has opened [for him] more doors and made [him] a [more] welcome guest than [his] playing Beethoven and Chopin could ever have done” (115). However the narrator fails to acknowledge that it is the fusion of ragtime with the works of Beethoven and Chopin that have secured him his position. Simply playing ragtime would probably not yield the narrator a position of reverence within the African American community, but it is his ability to take the music of the upper class and (re)configure the music so that it is palatable to the general masses that brings him success.

The fascination with being the genius and mastermind behind hybrid ragtime would eventually fade for the narrator as he journeys to Europe with his patron. European musicians had mastered ragtime and were able to (re)construct a more advanced version of hybrid ragtime. European musicians’ creation precipitated the narrator’s move away from hybrid ragtime towards an African American music tradition—spirituals. While the narrator’s accomplishment was worth noting, the weight, in terms of cultural value, in the mind of the narrator, was miniscule compared to what the German pianist had accomplished.

Entertaining his patron and patron’s guest at a party, the narrator was asked to play “the ‘new American music’” (141). The narrator believed he would mesmerize the group much as he had when he first heard ragtime. After playing his “most intricate [hybrid] rag-time piece” (141), the narrator is unseated by “a big bespectacled, bushy-headed man” who transposed ragtime into classical music. The narrator was able to take a high cultural art form, classical music, and produce a low art form; whereas, the German pianist was able to take a low art form and

transform it into a high art form. The narrator experiences a psychological blow to his fragile and ambivalent psyche. He feels a sense of worth and value through his musical prowess. Music makes the narrator feel he is fulfilling his mother's desire that he become an elite member of society. In his text, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon addresses the idea of ambivalent psyche and inferiority complex which the narrator is experiencing at this juncture of the text:

When the Negro makes contact with the white world, a certain sensitizing action takes place. If his psychic structure is weak, one observes a collapse of the ego. The black man stops behaving as an *actional* person. The goal of his behavior will be The Other (in the guise of white man), for The Other alone can give him worth. That is on the ethical level: self-esteem. (154)

After encountering the German pianist, the narrator has misgivings about his ability. Even though hybrid ragtime has opened doors for him in the United States, the music has paled in terms of cultural significance in Europe. The narrator purposes to go to the South “to live among the people” (142) and mine “not only modern rag-time, but also the old slave songs—material which no one had yet touched” (143) in order to fulfill his dual purpose.

On the narrator's journey south, he encounters several individuals who interact with each other regarding the race question. Although the narrator is privy to the conversation, he never makes his position known. However, at the end of the debate, he is saddened by the insurmountable mountain southern African Americans must climb. Despite the intellectual and artistic contributions to society, African Americans would be classified as second class southern citizens.

Later, after some time spent in the South, the narrator finds a plethora of material to be mined. Due to the “Big Meeting,” which is akin to a camp meeting or revival, the narrator is able to retrieve spirituals that mirror call and response. “Singing Johnson,” who is the song leader, represents an art form, spirituals, that is unappreciated. The creation of spirituals is baffling to the narrator; however, he realizes the power of these songs can leave an indelible mark upon the soul of an individual. Although “educated classes” shunned and felt “ashamed” (182) of spirituals, the narrator believed spirituals would “be the most treasured heritage” (182) of African Americans.

While looking over his notes and jotting down ideas (184), the narrator felt a “sense of alarm” (184). He hears voices and footsteps outside. Unable to maintain his excitement, the narrator ventures outside to observe. He witnesses a mob of white men gathering at the railroad station. At the break of dawn, the men in different groups dispersed. Although the crowd of men was no longer, crowds of women and children began to form along with crowds of African Americans along the perimeter. By noon the mob returned with a black male they had apprehended. The narrator feels a sense of sorrow for the position of African Americans within American society.

The apprehended man stands “in form and stature” (186) a man, but he is absent “whatever reasoning power he had ever possessed” (187) due his impending judgment. The narrator feels a wave of shame for the apprehended man and belonging to a race that is ill treated. Watching the man being lynched causes the narrator to reconsider his position of making his mark in life as an African American. Ultimately the ability to live free of discrimination and marginalization propels the narrator to flee the South. He decides to “let the world take [him] for what it would” (190) and goes about to make a new life for himself. Despite the narrator’s

attempt to escape music, it is ever a part of his life. The narrator is fortunate to find a woman with whom he falls madly in love. During their time together, the narrator would often play Chopin's "Thirteenth Nocturne." The "Thirteenth Nocturne" is a very moving piece that progresses through stages similar to a suite; the middle of the nocturne brings to mind a jazz piece that could be regarded as improvised as Chopin moves freely along the keyboard. It would be appropriate that Johnson would choose this piece as the movements of the nocturne becomes symbolic of the narrator's life—freely lived and highly improvised.

For the narrator and the woman of his desires, the nocturne serves as a vehicle for communication. The narrator reveals his racial identity to his future wife while playing the nocturne. It is while playing the nocturne that the woman accepts the narrator's marriage proposal and accepts him—including his racial identity. To express the joy of the moment, the narrator improvises the end and "clos [es] it with the major triad" (209). This strong improvised ending signals a strong, stable start in the life of the narrator in terms of marriage and wealth.

Likewise, the narrator's mastery of classical, and more specifically Chopin, demonstrates the aristocratic nature and bourgeois attitude of the narrator. Indicative of the narrator's quest to fulfill his mother's desire for superiority, the narrator uses classical music as a bridge into mainstream society. By taking the Thirteenth Nocturne of Chopin and "closing it with [a] major triad" (209), the narrator signals that a major change is about to occur. Instead of ending the Thirteenth Nocturne with a soft pianissimo as written, the narrator ends with a loud fortissimo. This change in chord and dynamic symbolizes the narrator relinquishing his African American heritage and culture and fully immersing himself within Anglo American culture. In addition to signifying a racial and cultural change, the chord change gives the narrator ownership of his life and in essence becomes the narrator's last great masterpiece.

In spite of the success the narrator attains later in life, having married his beloved and attaining wealth, he feels that he has forsaken his race. When the narrator reflected on the influential black leaders, he realized that he had chosen a lesser lot in life. Although he was living the American Dream, family and money, the African American leaders were building a race and “making history” (211). The narrator maintains a connection to his past—yellowed manuscripts; however, his children make him glad he is the person he is. When the narrator weighs everything in the balance, he feels he has “chosen the lesser part” and “sold [his] birthright for a mess of pottage” (211).

Cultural (Re) Memory and Originality

Cultural memory and revision of culture are evidenced by the narrator’s transposing of classical music into ragtime. Revising and commingling the distinct culturally different musical forms provides space for the narrator to try and reconcile his identity issues. In addition, by transposing the musical forms the narrator makes ragtime his own invention. As a result, ragtime does not become “ragtime” as we know it, but a hybrid form of the blues.

From the very beginning of black African encounters with the Americas, black Africans were modifying the ideas of the dominant culture for their own benefit. The drum was banned due to slave rebellions, uprisings and its use as a mode of communication. Although the drum and dance were banned, they found their way back into the life of Africans and American culture through Christianity. In an attempt to make the slaves more obedient and better servants, slave masters attempted to evangelize the enslaved. As a result of evangelism, a new religious or belief system was established for slaves. Also evangelism created the space for the dance or ring shout to materialize. Through the ring shout, African slaves modified the Judeo Christian belief of “spirit filled.” The dance of the slaves’ ancestors was modified mnemonically into the ring shout.

The importance of the dance, ring shout in America, is that it promoted community. Floyd, in describing the importance of the ring shout/dance writes, “dances enforced and reaffirmed community, discipline, identity, and African cultural memory—an identity and a memory that the slave owners sought to eradicate in order to make better slaves” (39). African slaves modified the idea of the Spirit overtaking a clean body and used mnemonics to (re)create a form of community and identity that was familiar to them that was based on the religion of their masters or the dominant class.

Just as African Americans modified and/or signified upon Judeo Christian practices, they also signified upon the autobiographical genre. Through literature, African Americans found an expressive medium through which they could tell their stories of great tribulations and mistreatment by their European brothers most notably *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* which served not to confess sins but rather to indict the masters and condemn the institution of slavery. By rewriting the autobiography as we know it, Brent and Douglass fully anticipate Zora Neale Hurston’s idea of “Originality”⁷ by modifying the autobiographical genre and reinterpreting the autobiography—from a confessional to an indictment—opens the door for future modification of the autobiography.

With the 1912 anonymous publication of *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, we see another modification to the autobiographical genre. Johnson’s *Autobiography* is not an autobiography but a work of fiction that capitalizes on features of the autobiography. In his essay, “Passing as Autobiography: James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-*

⁷ See Winston Napier *African American Literary Theory* “Characteristics of Negro Expression.” Hurston defines originality as “the modification of ideas.” Originality is reinterpreting an idea to create something new. p.37. Also, see Tony Bolden’s chapter on “Elaborations” where Bolden discusses riffing in blues music as a way to “transpose vernacular expressions into written poetry.” pp. 54-57.

Coloured Man,” Donald Goellnicht asserts that Johnson, in an attempt to gain an audience for his fictional work, plays on the popularity of slave narratives with white audiences to create a foothold for his text. Although William L. Andrews accounts for Johnson’s hoax as an economic ploy (18), the autobiography revision by Johnson was precipitated as a cultural act than an economic one. Johnson’s *Autobiography* signifies upon the slave narratives just as the slave narratives signify upon the autobiography.

Goellnicht queries “why a novel about a black man who passes for white would itself pass as a genre it was not: autobiography” (18). Johnson shapes his work by examining the cultural and sociological life and experiences of African Americans. In fact, Goellnicht points out; the appeal of slave narratives to white audiences was that they offered an opportunity to know the problems and struggles of African Americans (19). The unnamed narrator provides this glimpse with an in-depth sociological look at Negro life. Although the narrator is removed by “passing,” he takes the reader behind the veil of black cultural life and reveals what it is like to be black while navigating through the world as an Anglo American.

Johnson’s successful modification of the autobiography depends upon his ability to successfully sell the unnamed narrator as an individual who has experienced African American life and can then take the reader behind the veil of African American society. In “Politics of Passing: The Fiction of James Weldon Johnson,” Richard Kostelanetz brings to light the narrator’s ambivalence with regard to “passing”. Kostelanetz points out that the narrator’s ambivalence is detrimental to the character because he experiences “a loss of heritage” (24). After observing the lynching, the narrator forsakes the African American race and wants the world to take him for what it will. In addition, the narrator harbors guilt over “opportunistic materialism” (24). When the narrator forsook the African American race, he sought to make a

name for himself through capitalistic gains. In lieu of embracing his heritage and the contributions of African Americans to society, the narrator opts to accept the material gains of Anglo American culture. Even though the narrator feels a sense of fulfillment by providing a comfortable life for his children, he also feels he has turned his back on his race and “sold his birthright for a mess of pottage” (211). Ultimately the narrator is left feeling empty. Kostelanetz shows us that ambivalence pervades the narrator’s life.

Not only is the narrator plagued by racial ambivalence but also by cultural ambivalence. Throughout the *Autobiography* the narrator finds himself in a dilemma regarding race matters and music. Time after time the narrator finds himself consumed in conversations surrounding the race question or music. Although he is a part of the conversation, the narrator fails to engage in the conversation or speak on the issues and problems. The narrator reports the attitudes of the participants and makes his thoughts known through his consciousness.

Creating music that would secure prominence for him, the narrator believes he has produced a musical style that reaches across racial boundaries. However, musical aesthetics become problematic for the narrator as he hears his renditions of the “new American music” inverted into a more complex form. The amalgamation of classical and ragtime shows the fusion of high and low culture. Used by the narrator as a form of racial uplift, this new American art music is problematic. Even though this hybrid music melds two different and distinct musical genres and/or cultures, it renders one genre and/or culture dominant or superior. Because one genre is dominant over the other, the other becomes in a sense obsolete. The narrator discovers that success and progress cannot be staked in the new wave of American music. The new music causes one to assimilate to either high, ragtime to classical, or low, classical to ragtime, culture.

The narrator ultimately decides that success and progress rests in the foundation of African American music—spirituals.

Conclusion

The centrality of music in the *Autobiography* is inescapable. Johnson uses music to express and signify racial conflict in the life of the unnamed narrator. The unnamed narrator, who often feels the burden of trying to negotiate through society as a miscegenous individual, relies on his musical genius. His ability to play by ear aids him in creating a new wave of American music. The narrator is successful in fusing two distinct genres—classical and ragtime—to create this new musical form.

Like the unnamed narrator, this new music is nameless. Examining the birth of this music leads one to consider this music as a form of blues. Created out of the experiences of the narrator, this music holds the narrator's desire to fulfill his mother's dream and his inability to come to terms with his racial identity. It is these experiences and problems that make this new music powerful. The idea of being a great individual in society lies in the subconscious of the narrator. In everything he does, the narrator indicates that he was successful or mastered. This mastery of acquiring languages, factory work, and music goes to the heart of the narrator being a great individual. But for each instance of greatness, the narrator shows his struggle with racial ambivalence.

Although this new music provides a sense of accomplishment for the narrator, it does not create the means to being a great individual. During his European trip, the narrator discovers that his musical invention pales in comparison to what the European musician was able to perform. The German pianist was able to take what is considered a low culture art form, ragtime, and transpose it to a high culture art form, classical. The narrator, who was performing the opposite,

opts to forsake his new music invention for spirituals. Subsequently, the narrator forsakes the African American race after witnessing a lynching.

Disturbed by the condition of the African American race in society, the narrator wants the world to take him for what it would based on his appearance. The appearance of the narrator is that of an Anglo American. The narrator seeks to earn material gain for himself. Investing in real estate, the narrator creates a comfortable life for himself. He marries and fathers two children which provide a sense of accomplishment; however, the narrator still has a longing feeling of incompleteness. The narrator feels he has forsaken his race and calling, music and being a great individual, for a lesser lot in life. Although he is successful in business, the narrator feels his life is lacking fulfillment. The yellowed manuscripts from his musical mining expedition remind him of what he could have accomplished. Ultimately, the narrator has not fulfilled his mother's dream, and the yellowed manuscripts recall the narrator's ambivalence.

CHAPTER THREE

“I CAN SEE THE MIDNIGHT SUN”: JEAN TOOMER’S *CANE*

The life of Nathan Eugene (Jean) Toomer can be characterized as one of ambivalence, indecision and directionless. Born into the elite, political, upper middle class family of Louisianan Pinchbacks, a family with a varied ethnic background, Toomer associated himself, racially, from his teenage years through adulthood with Caucasians. His grandfather, P. B. S. Pinchback (May 1837-December 1921), who was born to a white planter and a freed black slave woman, served a brief stint as governor of Louisiana. Pinchback was able to cross the color line. During Pinchback’s bid for governor, he touted his identity as an African American; however, during Pinchback’s early political career, sometimes he was known to “pass” or waffle concerning his racial identity. Toomer, who was the son of Nathan and Nina Pinchback Toomer, both of whom “could live as white” (West 330) inherited their light skin complexion. Toomer “concluded his racial bloodline included German, African, Native American, French, Creole, English, Dutch and Spanish origins” (330). Toomer’s embodiment of a mixture of races in an American culture based on a black/white binary caused him great concern.

If internal struggle and literary creativity could be linked to an individual to an individual, Jean Toomer would be the ideal candidate. Toomer’s internal struggles can be traced to his early childhood when Toomer’s family lost their fortune and were forced to live with Toomer’s uncle Bismarck (1868-1924) in a black section of Washington, D.C. During this time, Toomer developed a love for literature as well as questions about his ancestry.⁸ The end result of

⁸ See Charles R. Larson’s *Jean Toomer and Nella Larsen: Invisible Darkness*. Larson describes the fondness of books that Jean Toomer develops as a result of listening to his Uncle Bismarck read to him. Also, Toomer begins to

Toomer's racial query can be found in *Cane* (1923) where he seeks to expel the demons of racial consciousness that had plagued his life. Divided into three sections, *Cane* explores rural regions of Georgia as well as the urban life of Washington, D.C. and Chicago, Illinois.

Cane can be considered a hybrid text in form consisting of short stories, poems, and a pseudo-drama which is infused with lyrical prose that can be tied to spirituals, blues, and jazz. This chapter examines *Cane* as a hybrid text, one that Toomer uses as a space for the creation of a "new being." According to Toomer, this "new being" is not defined by color or race but a conscious awareness of one's place in America.⁹ To this end, Toomer creates characters who are confronted with issues of race. The characters look for ways to overcome racism as they seek to live in harmony with others. Toomer provides an up close and personal look at the issue of race in the United States in both southern and northern spaces. The idea of a "new being" is realized through the various characters in the sketches.

Just as Toomer envisions the death of an old segregated race society, he notes the abandonment of a social bridge, music.¹⁰ Music, and more specifically spirituals, has been regarded as African Americans' greatest contribution to this country (Du Bois 155). In *Cane*, music leads to answers concerning questions of race as demonstrated in "Bona and Paul" and "Kabnis." Throughout the text, there are blended forms of musical genres embedded in the

question his racial ancestry. Although his family acknowledges and lives as African Americans, Toomer believes this is a dramatic gesture on his grandfather's part.

⁹ See *The Wayward and The Seeking* ed. Darwin T. Turner. In "The Cane Years," Toomer discusses the emergence of a new being of which he was one of the first members. Toomer envisioned this new race as simply Americans in which divisions were mended and racial differences were reconciled. p. 121.

¹⁰ Ibid p. 123.

various sketches. On one level, the different musical forms speak to varied geographical locations. On the other, the amalgamated music signals ambivalence which is found in miscegenous characters such as Paul.

Hybridity and ambivalence in relation to *Cane* can be read within the framework of Postcolonial theory. Bhabha's theory of ambivalence suggests that individuals who attempt to assimilate into a culture that has a position of dominance in relation to their own find there is no room for immersion, and they are left with a feeling of malaise, indifference, and/or ambivalence.¹¹ Ania Loomba writes, "[f]or Fanon psychic trauma results when the colonised subject realises that he can never attain whiteness; he has been taught to desire, or shed blackness he has learnt to devalue. Bhabha amplifies this to suggest that colonial identities are always a matter of flux and agony" (148). Flux and agony are created through psychic trauma. Fanon's psychic trauma termed "black skin/white masks" whereas for Bhabha, psychic trauma "evokes an ambivalence that indicates not just the trauma of the colonial subject but also the workings of colonial authority" (149). For Bhabha, psychic trauma leads to an understanding of difference, be it social, racial, or economic.

Divided into three sections, *Cane* examines black cultural aesthetics. Section one explores male/female relationships and sexuality. Toomer writes about six southern women who experience sexual and racial abuse at the hand of other southerners black and white. These women are marginalized and victimized by a segregated and unjust social structure that devalues women. I wish to examine the "Becky" story from the first section which explores hybridity and ambivalence.

¹¹ Homi K. Bhabha, "Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree Outside Delhi, May 1817." See *"Race," Writing, and Difference* ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago 1986).

The “Becky” story is a key story that addresses the issue of miscegenous relationships in the South. Becky, who is the protagonist, has sexual relationships with unknown African American male(s). Through her relationships, she bears two sons who are pitied for the stain they bear—skin color. Upon the town’s learning of Becky’s miscegenous child, Becky is labeled, “common, God-forsaken, insane white shameless wench” by the white folks, and the father was considered a “Low-down nigger with no self-respect” (7) by the black folks. With this sketch, Toomer shows the consideration of southerners to relationships that cross racial lines. The townspeople are curious as to who fathered Becky’s children. And with the permission of the railroad boss, they built her a cabin on “a narrow strip of land between the railroad and the road” (7).

More importantly, the product of these relationships is troublesome to southern society. The reactions by the townspeople speak to a larger issue of identity. Jim Crow law stated “one drop” of black blood makes an individual black. Often, physical appearance did substantiate Jim Crow. Identifying individuals as miscegenous was problematic for some southerners when traits of blackness were invisible.

“Becky” Critical Analysis

Cane is a swan song on several different fronts. For Toomer, *Cane* serves as an attempt to write into existence the creation of a “new being.” In a letter written to Claude McKay in 1922, Toomer points out the difficulty he has experienced trying to live in harmony with his multiracial make-up.¹² Ultimately for Toomer, he sees himself as an American, but he understands the nature of America to place individuals into racial categories. Unfortunately an American category does

¹² See *The Wayward and the Seeking* ed. Darwin T. Turner. In “Reflections of an Earth-Being,” Turner notes a letter Toomer writes to Claude McKay detailing his difficult experiences living as a multiracial individual. p.18.

not exist. Therefore, Toomer sets out to create space for the new being that render useless old ideas of racial identity. People should not be judged or valued based on skin color. The experiences of each person should be an American experience.

When discussing the rationale for his poem, “The First American,” which lays the foundation for his new being, Toomer provides his vision and qualifications to speak on the subject of race as “...I had observed what seemed to me to be authentic—namely, that a new type of man was arising in this country—not European, not African, not Asiatic—but American. And in this American I saw the divisions mended, the differences reconciled—saw that (1) we would in truth be united people existing in the United States, saw that (2) we would in truth be once again members of a united human race” (Turner 121). Toomer’s vision of a world where divisions are mended and differences reconciled would not be realized in *Cane*. Instead what the reader finds is a world where divisions exist not only between various races, but within individuals, as racial differences are not internally reconciled in characters of mixed race.

In her insightful article, “Jean Toomer’s *Cane* and the Erotics of Mourning,” Jennifer D. Williams points out that *Cane* shows an overlap of desire and loss that occurs on the bodies of black women” (88) and in the case of Becky, white women’s bodies. Becky’s sexual desires remain hidden to the reader but are evident in her miscegenous children. A sexual relationship takes place between Becky and an African American male. In Southern ideological terms, a contamination of the white race occurs through their sexual act and progeny. Patricia Collins in examining the construction of race in the United States writes, “U.S. notions of racial purity, such as the rule claiming that one drop of Black “blood” determines racial identity, required strict control over the sexuality and subsequent fertility of Black women, White women, and

Black men” (133). Historically white males have been the perpetrators of sexual crimes that impact race.

According to Collins, regulation of sexuality was extended to all except white males. Toomer modifies the narrative of racial amalgamation in the “Becky” story. Instead of a white male using the body of a black female to procreate, a black male procreates with a white female. Becky’s sexual relationship and birth of her sons constitutes a violation of Southern ideological race purity. By using Becky, a white Catholic, as the perpetrator of this crime against racial purity, the story presents a universal face to race amalgamation. Race amalgamation is no longer a white male sexual crime against black female bodies, but white women comingling with black men. Becky’s crime signals a new way of examining race amalgamation as well as ushering in a new American being.

The community’s indictment of Becky and the “buck nigger” lends to a blues tone. Because the indictment focuses on the body and sexual act rather than the redemption—the new being—of Becky and the “buck nigger”, a secular blues tone is established. According to James H. Cone, “blues are ‘secular spirituals.’ They are *secular* in the sense that they confine their attention solely to the immediate and affirm the bodily expression of black soul, including its sexual manifestations” (100). The focus of the community is on the denigration of Becky and the shamelessness of the “buck nigger” and how their sexual act has tainted both individuals and the seed of their act. Cone indicates that their focus on the “sexual manifestation” yields a blues theme. The white citizens see Becky’s sexual liaison as an act of treason because Becky knowingly contaminates not only the blood of the race but her body by engaging in sexual acts with someone Black. Meanwhile, the Black citizens felt the father defiled himself by sleeping with Becky. Even though whites are of the dominant culture and perceived to be “quality,” there

is an underlying tone that suggests that Black men who slept with white women were denigrating themselves.

Jennifer Williams remarks that “fears of miscegenation were common to both groups, a black desire for racial integrity stems in part, from a history of sexualized and racial trauma and cultural loss” (95). Williams’ idea of “racial integrity” addresses the notion of maintaining a cultural and racial identity that was free of racial impurity. The problem of trying to maintain an “unstrained” racial and cultural identity is a historical one. During slavery, slave owners often fathered children through slave women. During and post-slavery, the question often arose of what to do with miscegenous individuals. The “Becky” story suggests the South, post-slavery, was unwilling to accept neither interracial relationships nor the products of those relationships.

Becky’s Blues

The “Becky” story is similar to African American blues stories. By choosing impure or pariah sexual partners, Becky expresses her sexual freedom. The act and ability of women to choose how their bodies would be utilized exemplifies an act or resistance to the social and political structure of the time. In her seminal text, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, Angela Y. Davis states “during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century’s, sexuality [as well as] travel, provided the most tangible evidence of freedom” (67) in relation to African Americans. Sexuality as a means of freedom is evident in this sketch. Unlike her white male counterparts, Becky is punished for her sex acts.

The refrain “O pines, whisper to Jesus” is riffed throughout the story. It is spiritual in tone but symbolizes a blues lament. The structure “O pines, whisper to Jesus” does not appear in the standard twelve bar, AAB structure, but rather is situated throughout the text in the form of primitive blues or work songs:

The pines whisper to Jesus.

The pines whispered to Jesus...

O pines, whisper to Jesus

O pines, whisper to Jesus

Pines shout to Jesus!

Critical points in Becky's story can be marked by the refrain. For example, the first time we see "The pines whisper to Jesus," is in the epigraph of the story where the reader is introduced to Becky and her two sons. Jennifer Williams reads the mound where "the Bible flaps its leaves" (Toomer 7), from the epigraph, as a "grave pile and as the rise of female genital area—conflate[ing] Becky's sexuality and death" (95). This first instance mourns the death of Becky and addresses her sexual freedom as opposed to the second use of the refrain "The pines whispered to Jesus" which signals an act that has been performed, the birth of Becky's first son and the Blues.

There is a slight variation in the refrain in that the verb tense of "whisper" has changed to past tense which denotes that this story is being retold and the secrets of racial amalgamation are in the past. The depiction of "The pines whispered to Jesus" finds Becky has been relocated to a "narrow strip of land between the railroad and the road: (7). This movement does not come about as a result of Becky's freedom or choosing but as a form of punishment or ostracism for exercising authority over her body and giving birth to a miscegenous child. Becky's relocation places her at the crossroads of stagnation and movement.

In her essay "The Race Question and the 'Question of the Home': Revisiting the Lynching Plot in Jean Toomer's *Cane*," Susan Edmunds writes, "[f]or Toomer, the tradition of African American folk song harbors the power not only to save the community's moral outcasts

from the permanent censure of oblivion but also to save the community itself from embracing the terms of its own subjugation” (152). In other words, the use of the refrain serves to awaken and appeal to the moral consciousness of the community. The community, which is steeped in Christianity, fails to act upon its Christian principle and accept Becky and her sons. Becky and her family are viewed as pariah and banished to a small tract of land. In essence, Becky is viewed as “Other” as a result of her contaminating her body and race. Toomer makes a poignant point by banishing Becky. If those who are steeped in religious views cannot accept miscegenous individuals, is it possible for those outside of religion to embrace them?

What is significant with regard to Becky being placed at the crossroad between the railroad tracks and land is that it places Becky’s story in the context of Blues. In Houston Baker’s noted text *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature*, he explains the value of the crossroads denoted by the “X.” In his definition of the Blues, Baker writes, “The ‘signature’ is a space already ‘X’ (ex), a trace of the already ‘gone’—a fissure rejoined” (5). When applied to Becky’s story, the placement of the crossroads in this story could be read as a call for understanding and acceptance of racial difference. More so, this marked space represents the (re)connection of a racial divide. The plot of land on which Becky lives comes to represent the idea of a new racial being evidenced through her sons. The crossroad juncture, in a way, addresses the various experiences of those ostracized for the creation of this new race. Just as the “X” of railroad crossings has an infinite number of possible directions and no end, the future of miscegenous and new beings is infinite.

When looking at “Bona and Paul” and “Kabnis,” the actions and/or reactions of those not steeped in religion are the same of those of religious background in “Becky.” The common action taken is to ostracize these miscegenous and/or new beings and treat them as pariah. The

decision to ostracize Becky and her sons, and ill-treat Bona intensifies the ambivalence they feel. A question Toomer seems to posit is how can we move toward acceptance of this new race?

“Bona and Paul” Textual Analysis

Section two of *Cane* takes the reader on a journey to the North, more specifically, Washington, D.C. and Chicago. Unlike the stories in the first section which contain an element of blues and spirituals, the stories in the second section contain an element of jazz. Toomer uses jazz because it is an urbanized form of blues. In addition, there is a move towards a more urban, metropolitan lifestyle.

The story of “Bona and Paul,” set in Chicago, is similar to a personal experience of Toomer.¹³ In the “Bona and Paul” story, Toomer presents Paul who longs to find a medium in society or a new world that is free of prejudice and discrimination. Paul, who is racially mixed, attends a majority white college and develops feelings for Bona, a white student. Color mixture is an integral motif in the story. When the reader is introduced to Paul, he is described as “red-brown” (72). The ambivalence Paul experiences at the Crimson Garden are represented by “[w]hite lights” and “pink lights” (77) that eventually look purple. Even though mixed relationships were taboo for this time period, Toomer creates in Bona a character that is willing to defy the social standards and publicly pursue a relationship with Paul. Whereas, Paul is apprehensive and ambivalent regarding his feelings for Bona.

Paul’s relationship with Bona is signified by two windows in his apartment which represent the two of them. Each window holds a depiction of their past and/or insight into the future. When Paul peers through his window, he is confronted by a slavish past and a depiction

¹³ Ibid. “The Years of Wandering” pp. 99-103.

of Georgia. A southern Negress, who is in Paul's vision, chants a lullaby that represents a move toward freedom as the song moves through the cane and corn fields. The journey Paul undertakes while peering through the window pane, ends in a happy space and place for Paul. Toomer writes, "Paul follows the sun into himself..." which suggests Paul must find peace and acceptance from within. The only way Paul could love Bona is by loving himself. He has to move beyond the issue of race and locate inner peace concerning his ambivalent feelings of race.

Throughout "Bona and Paul," Toomer uses colors to serve as markers for ambivalence. Toomer's use of lavender and gray indicates something or someone in the middle of conflict or indecision. Lavender and gray are shades of colors situated between two contrasting colors, blue and red and black and white, respectively. Paul's ambivalent nature is depicted by the gray and lavender tinted roofs. The gray tinted roofs Paul looks out upon are symbolic of his racial make-up. Just as Paul is a crossbred of black and white, the roofs present a similar mixture of color. In addition, color ambivalence is found in the last section of "Bona and Paul" as Paul contemplates life while absorbing the Crimson Garden and the gathering crowd. Paul sees "himself, cloudy, but real" (77) which indicates he is coming to terms with his racial identity. Although Paul maintains some feelings of ambivalence, he is on the cusp of finding that inner peace, with his racial identity, that he seeks. In an attempt to fit into the urban culture, Paul, like Johnson's unnamed narrator, does not reveal his racial identity. He allows those around him to speculate and/or assume his identity. Because Paul is a part of the Crimson Garden culture, he ponders if his removal would change the face of the Crimson Garden culture. This idea is represented through the language of color in Paul's contemplation of whether or not the Crimson Garden would turn purple if he went outside or left the club (77).

Bona, too, harbors ambivalent feelings towards Paul. In section three of “Bona and Paul,” Bona is depicted as a confident woman, but she has waning feelings about Paul. While holding Paul’s hand, “her spirit drops” (75). Bona’s spirit drops because she does not know how to accept Paul or his mixed racial heritage. At times, Bona appears confident in her ability to be a support system for Paul; however, she proves fragile and unable to come to grips with the effects of having a relationship with Paul. The feelings Bona and Paul share for each other is a conflict.

Bona is not enamored with Paul because of his exotic look; she has genuine feelings for Paul. There are conflicts in feelings between Bona and Paul; however, the greatest conflict resides in issues of Paul’s racial identity. In route to the Crimson Garden, Bona queries Paul to “tell [her] something about [him]” (76), but Paul evades her question. When Paul evades Bona’s question, she expresses her love for Paul. Instead of drawing closer to Bona, Paul retreats farther away informing Bona that he could not speak of love “unless it is wet with kisses” (76). This dare can be read as a tease as Paul questions whether or not he can go through with a public kiss. In the end, Bona cannot go through with the kiss, and Paul cannot tell Bona he loves her.

Despite the internal dilemma of identity and the gazes Paul faces, he is able to move towards an acceptance of self and a love for Bona. In response to their conflicts and tensions, Paul engages Bona in a sensuous dance. In explaining the place and importance of the dance and/or “Jook” within African American culture, Zora Neale Hurston writes, “The idea in the Jook is to gain sensation, and not so much exercise....A tremendous sex stimulation is gained from this” (40). In “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” Hurston notes the dance plays an integral part in creating sexual tension. Samuel A. Floyd, Jr. historicizes the dance and notes the importance and progression of the ring shout from sacred to secular.. Free to gather socially post Emancipation, freed slaves gatherings took on a secular style. African traditional elements,

dance, drum, and shout, changed to accompany the secular mode. “Solo and couples’ dances” (66) began to emerge which included the funky butt, the buzzard lope, the slow drag, and the itch.¹⁴ These dances were often seductive and sensuous in nature.

It is the sensuality of the dance that draws Bona to Paul. At the onset of the dance, Paul finds Bona “a little stiff” (79). Bona’s stiffness could be read as apprehension or fear of being “intimate” with Paul in a public setting. As a result, Paul finds himself drawn to Helen a “perfect little dancer” (79). Because Helen is expressive in her dance, Paul longs for the moment when he and Art change dance partners. Continuing to dance with Bona and engaging her in conversation, Paul wishes to express his feelings through the dance rather than dialogue. The dance creates the romantic space for Paul to confess his love for Bona. After Paul wounds Bona’s pride, she tries to pull away from him. Paul pulls Bona closer, and “their eyes meet” (79). It is at this moment their feelings are made for each other. “The dance takes blood from their minds and packs it, tingling, in the torsos of their swaying bodies. *Passionate* (my emphasis) blood leaps back into their eyes” (79). At this point, there is no need for words as everything that needs to be said is stated in their dance. Through the dance, Bona hears the words she has longed to hear Paul say, I love you.

Seemingly in a world of their own, Bona and Paul dance away from Art and Helen and towards the exit. As they pass the suspecting doorman, the night air awakens Paul from his love induced trance. For the first time, Paul clearly sees himself and accepts his love for Bona. This is signified by the Crimson Garden being purple (79). Paul acknowledges his prior struggle with

¹⁴ See Toomer’s “Theater” *Cane* ed. Darwin Turner p. 54. Turner notes Toomer’s belief that “individuals could express their emotions and their souls through dancing.” Just as Dorris uses the dance in “Theater,” Paul uses the dance to “tell” Bona that he loves her.

wanting to know Bona. In some way, the dance allowed Paul to understand it is alright to love someone who is racially different. Seeing Bona leave with Paul, the doorman believes it is another fling. However, Paul wants to make it clear that he is in love with Bona. Paul's comment, "...that white faces are petals of roses. That dark faces are petals of dusk. That I am going out and gather petals....which are purple like a bed of roses would be at dusk" (80) signals the acceptance of interracial relationships. The notion that Paul is going to gather petals indicates a desire to consummate his relationship with Bona. Paul depicts Bona as a rose and himself as dusk. That the petals are purple like roses at dusk shows an intermingling of the two races.

Despite the fact that Paul is ready to move forward with a public relationship with Bona, she does not wait for him. Just as the air awakens Paul, Bona too is awakened. When Paul leaves to share with the doorman, Bona is left standing alone outside. However, when Paul returns Bona has left. The journey towards self acceptance of his racial identity and love ends in a dilemma for Paul. In the end, Paul learns to love himself. He accepts his racial identity and sees the beauty in his skin. Even though he does not consummate his relationship with Bona, Paul realizes it is possible to love someone of another race.

"Bona and Paul" Critical Analysis

Loosely based on a love affair Toomer experienced while a student at the University of Chicago, "Bona and Paul," although the last story in Section Two, could actually be considered the last story or ending of *Cane*. The protagonist, Paul, "is the only mulatto in *Cane* who even tries to 'pass' for white" (Christ 44) and is attracted to Bona Hale. Bona, on the other hand, is attracted to Paul but has ambivalent feelings. She is afraid of establishing a public relationship with Paul for fear of what her friend, Helen, would think.

In his article “Jean Toomer’s ‘Bona and Paul’: The Innocence and Artifice of Words,” Jack M. Christ writes, “... ‘Bona and Paul’ rather clearly culminates the theme of absorption of Black Americans into the philistine life of white Northern urban Jazz Age America...” (44). Christ’s article fails to acknowledge the sexual tension between Bona and Paul. He also fails to address Paul’s struggle with acceptance of his racial identity. The idea of absorption does not speak to the complexity of Paul’s character. Paul is not absorbed into any culture; rather, he struggles to find his place. The idea of absorption and assimilation is one to which Toomer seeks answers. Christ is correct in that at the end of “Bona and Paul,” the reader finds that Paul has made inroads into white culture, but he also finds himself abandoned. Music and dance, however, aid in bringing Paul to a clear sense of his identity and his feeling for Bona.

Nellie McKay in her critical text *Jean Toomer, Artist: A Study of His Literary Life and Work, 1894-1936*, comments on the relationship between Bona and Paul and writes, “In his (Paul’s) relationship to Bona, he aims for a physical and spiritual fusion that will transcend their history” (147). McKay addresses the key issues that lay at the heart of “Bona and Paul.” Paul does not wish to be viewed by Bona through a lens of wonder and intrigue. Paul wishes Bona would receive him as she would any other individual without trying to determine his racial identity.

Often, Bona has conflicting and/or ambivalent feelings surrounding Paul; at times the reader finds Bona is sure of her feelings and at other times, she is uncertain of her feelings. The fact that Bona is uncertain of who Paul is racially and individually, family, she harbors ambivalent feeling for Paul. Paul’s inability to overcome Bona’s feelings of ambivalence along with his own personal conflicts impedes his desire to fully love Bona.

Despite the questions surrounding his racial identity and Bona's ambivalence, Paul comes to an acceptance of his racial identity. Throughout "Bona and Paul," there is a quest for the acceptance of racial identity. At the end, Paul comes to term with his racial identity. Upon understanding his racial identity, through the aid of dance, Paul gains an appreciation and love for Bona. Paul's quest, although successful, does not yield complete satisfaction. Bona abandons Paul during his epiphany celebration of self-discovery and love. Paul's consummation of his relationship with Bona is not the quest. Rather, the quest is accepting his racial identity and realizing the potential to love individuals regardless of racial makeup. When individuals can love others regardless of their racial identity, this speaks to the creation of new American beings because race and/or color are obsolete.

Paul's quest is not a journey towards sexual fulfillment with Bona. Even though she is a key player in Paul's journey, Bona does not contribute in a significant way to Paul's understanding of self. Toomer positions Paul to move toward an intimate relationship with Bona, but she abandons him at the moment when sexual tensions are high. Toomer seems to suggest there are alternate ways to complete the journey to an acceptance of racial identity. Music, specifically jazz, plays an integral part in Paul's awakening. The syncopation and lively tempo of the music makes Paul feel alive. He no longer worries about the implications of being with Bona as he wishes to make his love for her public. Through jazz music, Paul is able to connect with his inner desires and achieves, albeit briefly, intimacy with Bona.

Kabnis Overview

Finally, in the last section of *Cane*, Ralph Kabnis, the Northern protagonist who goes South on a teaching assignment, fails to acknowledge the history of sexual abuse of African American women in relation to his ancestral roots. In addition, he lacks a historical connection to

his family's past. Toomer, in his final textual journey south, attempts to reconcile Kabnis' struggle with identity and southern life. Set in rural Georgia, Kabnis' journey toward self realization and identity begins with an observation of nature. After killing a chicken in his living quarters, Kabnis asks God to make everything around him ugly. He feels tortured by the Georgia nights and "folk-songs, so close" (85) which seem out of reach. After debating the existence of God, Kabnis surmises that God is ugly. Hence everything that is made is ugly. The ambivalence Kabnis holds towards natural beauty is similar to the ambivalence he holds for himself.

Indicative of Kabnis' ambivalent nature is the description offered for him. Kabnis is described as a "lemon face" man with "thin hair streaked on the pillow" (83) that indicates Kabnis is a racially mixed individual. In addition, Kabnis feels his skin color and position, teacher, provide him a place of privilege among the townspeople. Layman, however, makes Kabnis aware that "Nigger's a nigger down this away, Professor. An only two dividins: good and bad. An even they aint permanent categories" (89) indicating African Americans do not hold positions of privilege in the South.

Kabnis' desire to be "good" is countered by another northerner, Lewis, who is the antithesis and doppelgänger of Kabnis who is perceived as bad. Lewis is inquisitive about the stories of lynching he has heard. A foil to Kabnis, Lewis is something of a prophetic figure in this story/drama because he has the ability to look into the lives of others and see the future. Lewis peers into Carrie's eyes and knows what her life has been like in this town. Because Kabnis and Lewis oppose each other, in terms of their positions, there exists an "either/or" binary between these characters. The reader must determine whose position, in relation to race matters, provides the best solution for growth. Kabnis and Lewis are either good or bad individuals to the townspeople. Kabnis assumes the "good" position by not prying into the

lynching of African Americans in town. Whereas Lewis is perceived as “bad” for the reason that he does investigate the crimes. The black townspeople send Lewis a message to leave town, but Kabnis is the recipient. Kabnis is plagued by thoughts of lynching. Afraid of being taken and lynched at night, Kabnis shows himself to be a coward by looking for a way to escape. When Lewis explains to Kabnis that the note was intended for him, Kabnis seems surprised that Lewis is in no hurry to leave town.

Section five, the last section of “Kabnis” and of the text *Cane*, takes the reader underground, to the cellar of Halsey, where the secrets of the south lie with Father John. Father John is a prophetic figure and historical link that connects the past to the present. Upon seeing Father John, Lewis sees a prophet and a new religious order. For Lewis, Father John represents the aesthetic of the old; everything that is beautiful about southern life and culture can be found in and through Father John. In a way, Lewis acts as a disciple of Father John and sees him as the link to Black southern life. However, Kabnis does not understand the significance of Father John nor his link to the past of Black southern life.

In the cellar, Lewis “merges with his source [Father John] and lets the pain and beauty of the South meet him there” (107). Lewis absorbs the energy of Father John. The energy emitted by Father John takes Lewis back to the “red soil” (107) of the South and a painful time in the life of African Americans. Awaken out of his trance by the revelers, Kabnis, Halsey, and Stella, Lewis is drawn to Kabnis. Kabnis does not like the attention and tells Lewis to focus on the women to obtain his satisfaction. When Lewis tells Kabnis that Father John is the “spirit of the past,” Kabnis denounces Lewis and asserts proudly “[his] ancestors were Southern blue-bloods—“(108). Kabnis’ remarks imply a disconnection from his Black southern past as well as a lack of understanding of Father John’s connection to him.

In the end, Kabnis hears Father John speaking the word “Sin” (116). Kabnis believes the only sin Father John has knowledge of is the preacher’s sin of making the Bible lie. However, Kabnis does not understand the significance of the sin. Because preaches are called to guard and guide men’s souls, misdirecting men’s souls is a terrible sin. But Father John reveals “Th sin whats fixed....upon th white folks....f tellin Jesus—lies. O th sin th white folks ‘mitted when they made th Bible lie” (117). Father John suggests without the aid of the Bible, the institution of slavery would have been impossible.

Kabnis Blues

It is at the end that we find the beginning. Logically “Kabnis” should be the start of *Cane* because “Kabnis” lays the foundation and raises the critical textual questions of how does the miscegenous race come about? In addition, “Kabnis” unveils secrets of southern life. Set in the South, “Kabnis” examines the trials of Ralph Kabnis, a northerner who has some idea about southern life. What Kabnis knows of southern life, lynching, shapes his perception of the people he encounters as well as his fear of southern nights.

Tom Marvin in his overview of “Kabnis” entitled “Jean Toomer’s Kabnis” suggests that “most of the play’s conflict takes place within the mind of the title character, Ralph Kabnis—an educated, light-skinned, Northern teacher—as he tries to come to grips with the terror and beauty of rural Georgia” (43). Indeed, a large part of Kabnis’s fear resides in his mind, but those fears and conflicts are a direct result of true stories of lynching and terrorism that have taken place in the South.

Nellie McKay links this internal conflict to double-consciousness and ambivalence. In the text, the reader is presented with Kabnis the school teacher, and Kabnis the aspiring orator. Due to internal struggle, Kabnis develops a double consciousness. Unlike the Du Boisian idea of

double-consciousness which relies on the ideas of the dominant culture, double-consciousness for Kabnis is based on the views of southern Blacks and how they perceive northern Blacks. When Halsey and Layman speak about northern Blacks, they discuss the belief of northern blacks not “lik[ing] folks down this way” and being “stuck up” (88) which suggests that northern Blacks feel they are better than southern blacks. Kabnis feelings of ambivalence about the South are due in large part to southern Blacks perceptions of northern Blacks, and to the tales of danger that lurk in the southern nights.

Southern nights recall a distant past of terror that lend to the “historical meaning of place and time” (153) for Kabnis. The historical time period that comes to bear for him is slavery. Kabnis’s cabin, which he refers to as a hole and a grave, is a former chicken coop that resembles a slave’s quarters. Nellie McKay, in referencing the significance of Kabnis’s cabin and its historical framework, writes, “. . . [Kabnis] will have buried the burden of slave history there. Before he can do this, however, he must accept this history as his own, and he does so symbolically by living there” (155). Although Kabnis accepts, symbolically, his past and slave history, he does not embrace southern black aesthetics.

After Layman and Halsey tell Kabnis of the dangers of lynching, Halsey invites Kabnis to church to which Kabnis replies, “no sir, not by a damn sight. Once a days enough for me. . . . Couldn’t stand the shouting and that’s a fact. We don’t have that sort of thing up North” (91). Religion and church, arguably the most important aspects of southern Black life are rejected by Kabnis. Although Kabnis symbolically accepts a part of his history by living in the cabin and occasionally attending church, he dismisses aspects of African American cultural expression associated with the church which are spirituals and the shout.

Because Kabnis fails to fully assimilate to African American southern culture, he fails to understand the significance of the spirituals. John Lovell, as quoted by James H. Cone, points out that “spirituals were ‘the slave’s description and criticism of his environment’” (14) more importantly, “spirituals are the story of black people’s historical strivings for earthly freedom” (15). Kabnis does not understand the importance of these cultural signifiers that call attention to the social ills of the South while providing a message of hope to downtrodden souls. The disconnection is attributed to the fact that Kabnis lacks an understanding of southern African Americans and the role spirituals play in their lives. Kabnis believes the “rude” songs of the South, Spirituals, do not advance the cause of African Americans but weakens their cause.

However, Lewis, who can be read as Kabnis’s doppelganger, understands the culture of the South and realizes a secret lies hidden in the southern soil. Lewis readily undertakes investigating alleged crimes against African Americans and searching for answers to southern secrets. Kabnis is more like these rural, southern African Americans than he realizes. Instead of impacting the lives of the townspeople, which is characteristic of a good teacher, Kabnis’s life becomes acted upon so that he begins to live as the townspeople. On the other hand, Lewis becomes an unwelcomed guest and marked as the “northern nigger” who is urged to “Git along” (92). This behest for Lewis to leave comes from the African American citizens. Because Lewis has been asking questions that examine historical and racial issues, the people believe Lewis’s actions will cause agitation and an increase in lynching and terrorism. The deeper Lewis goes into his investigation, secrets of miscegenous relationships that do not coincide with southern ideology of history and race emerge that support Father John’s claim of making the “Bible lie” (117).

The ideology used to support slavery and support the separation of races was the belief that African Americans were different. African Americans were supposedly the cursed seed of Ham, Noah's son, and thought to be an inferior race. This belief was supported by scriptures that spoke to a master/slave dialectic. However, race commingling is evident and visible in the offspring of southern African American women. The evidence of commingled blood serves to refute the claim of African Americans being "different" and "inferior."

Alongside one another, Lewis resembles a Christ-like figure that is fulfilling his prophesy and mission the South while Kabnis is ever unsure of who he is and his purpose. When examining section five of "Kabnis," the idea of Lewis being a Christ-like figure becomes more evident, while Kabnis further estranges himself from Lewis and draws closer to southern African Americans. This section has a religious and blues mood and tone that centers around Father John. The mood and tone is religious in nature, as Father John is positioned as the high priest or oracle that, although silent for a time, is ready to dispense information and provide the secret key. The blues tone can be summarized through Ralph Ellison's essay, "Richard Wright's Blues" where Ellison writes, "...[blues] at once express both the agony of life and the possibility of conquering it through sheer toughness of spirit" (143) which is an apt description of Father John. Positioned as a time worn god, who is immobile and mute, Father John, who seems defeated, holds the spirit of life that is ageless and has endured the hardships of slavery.

The southern secrets that Kabnis feared and Lewis sought have been buried with Father John. Upon seeing this timeless, aged man, simply known as Father, Lewis feels connected to him. This connection comes from the fact that Lewis is aware of his heritage and is in tune with African American cultural expressions and traditions. Lewis embraces the songs and the way of life of southerners. Also, Lewis is aware of his heritage that is linked to Father John. Kabnis does

not connect with Father John because he lacks an understanding of his ancestors nor does he embrace African American cultural expressions. Kabnis feels Father John mutters non-sense because Kabnis, unlike Lewis, is not in tune with African American cultural expressions and traditions. This is evident when Kabnis fails to understand the shout during church services. Lewis longs for the words of wisdom from “[t]he old man as symbol, flesh, and spirit of the past” (108) a past that is linked to slavery.

Several times Lewis makes comments to Kabnis regarding his ancestors, and in response, Kabnis denies his blackness, “My ancestors were Southern blue-bloods—(108) which indicates a misunderstanding and misconception of his lineage. Kabnis takes pride in declaring the fact that his ancestors’ blood was commingled with Anglo American blood; however, Kabnis fails to acknowledge how this commingling was achieved. Kabnis’s failure to understand the historical aspects of slavery and the burdens placed upon the female body during slavery renders him incapable of understanding Father John’s message. Lewis states, “Master; slave. Soil; and the overarching heavens. Dusk; dawn. They fight and bastardize you. The sun tint of your cheeks, flame of the great season’s multi-colored leaves, tarnished, burned. Split, shredded: easily burned,” (109) speaking to the idea of race mixing. Lewis suggests a loss of identity and heritage is created by intermingling blood as well as the creation of ambivalence within miscegenous characters and/or individuals.

Conclusion

Music and dance are the aesthetical engines whereby Toomer seeks to develop his new race being. From the opening of *Cane*, the reader comes face to face with the problem that haunts Toomer, amalgamation of race. The use of music, specifically spirituals, becomes an integral part of the lives and narratives of the southerners and helps Toomer relate the various

narratives. In *The Cambridge History of American Music*, Jacqueline Cogdell Djedje remarks that spirituals “often referred to everyday experiences as well as scriptural concepts” (128) which is similar to the Blues. The Blues as defined by Ellison and described by Baraka is the music of experiences.

The use of African American cultural forms—spirituals and jazz—provides a clearer view into Toomer’s psyche. Although Toomer did not wish to be identified as a Negro writer, his use of spirituals and blues provides an umbilical cord or connection to a culture and people that is not easily broken. Because these cultural forms are figuratively in his blood, it is impossible for Toomer to escape their presence and influence. Also on another level, Toomer’s use of the spirituals and blues appears to be his method of reaching out to the African American community for salvation.

In describing jazz, William Brooks in *The Cambridge History of American Music* views jazz as a “cover” and a music of revisionists (270). In *Cane*, Toomer attempts to (un)cover racial identity. The reader finds stories wherein characters distance themselves from their racial identity—Kabnis in “Kabnis,”—relish their blackness—Lewis in “Kabnis” or have no idea how they fit into larger society—Paul and Becky’s two sons.

Even though *Cane* examines many issues regarding race, Toomer seems to come back to cultural history. If one were to examine the text so that “Kabnis” is the beginning and “Bona and Paul” is the ending, the answer becomes apparent of how miscegenous individuals fit in society. In the drama of “Kabnis,” Kabnis does not wish to embrace southern or African American culture, and in “Becky” Becky’s sons do not have access to African American culture to accept or deny it. Paul is the only miscegenous character who has the ability to accept African American cultural productions as a tool. Paul uses the dance as an expression of freedom that

allows him to accept himself and love Bona. By Paul's acceptance of self and love of Bona, he no longer sees himself as a mixed race individual but simply an American which is Toomer's idea of new beings.

CHAPTER FOUR

“WHEN I GOT THE BROKEN SOUL BLUES”: NELLA LARSEN’S *QUICKSAND*

The Harlem Renaissance (1919-1937)¹⁵ was considered a period of significant expression by African American artists. During the Harlem Renaissance, the presence of women’s voices paled in comparison to men’s voices politically. Women finally gained a foothold with the emergence of such writers as Jessie Fauset, Zora Neale Hurston, and Nella Larsen. These African American women writers provided a voice for Black women by creating female characters that were fully developed and possessed substance; in addition, these women writers dealt with issues that were germane to contemporary women of that period.

With America only a little over fifty years removed from slavery, the struggle for racial equality was still being waged. Located at the intersection of race and gender, African American women were looked upon as third and fourth class citizens. Through the space of the novel, African American women writers provided a voice for their female characters that was often missing in society. Nella Larsen’s works, *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929), present a different dynamic and perspective from Jean Toomer’s *Cane* which objectified women and James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* in which women were basically absent. Larsen’s female characters, Helga Crane of *Quicksand* and Clare Kendry of

¹⁵ The Harlem Renaissance is often ascribed the years 1919 or 1920 through 1930; however, I use the year 1937 to mark the end of this artistic period which is the publication year of Zora Neale Hurston’s important text, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

Passing, are both miscegenous characters and grapple with identity—“racial and sexual” (McDowell xii). Embedded in this identity is the discourse of passing.

The creation of female characters on a quest for racial and sexual freedom is radical for this time period. Larsen (re)defines how women will and should view themselves. Through Helga Crane and Clare Kendry, Larsen explores the possibilities of freedom, both sexual and racial. Though the choices are not always fulfilling or rewarding, Larsen suggests that it is the woman’s choice and not society’s to determine her fate. McDowell writes that Larsen limits these dynamic heroines, Helga and Clare, to “conventional fates of narrative history: marriage and death, respectively” (xi). Although Larsen is viewed as a visionary in her semi-liberation of these female characters, she is limited in granting total freedom. Perhaps the fact that Larsen did not feel a sense of freedom and liberation in her own life might serve to explain the conventional fate to which she leaves her female heroines.¹⁶

Although the debate about the development and ultimate freedom of Helga and Clare would be fruitful, this chapter will focus on Larsen’s *Quicksand* and issues related to sexuality and identity. Within the text of *Quicksand* lies a blues theme that encompasses Helga’s sexuality and redemptive identity. Redemptive identity serves to describe Helga’s identity post her religious experience. The identity Helga assumes after meeting Rev. Mr. Pleasant Green is that of a working woman and breeding machine. This kind of lifestyle is not the glamorous and sexualized lifestyle that Helga envisioned for herself. Life in Alabama reflects a blues discourse as captured in Angela Y. Davis’s *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*. Davis points out that the blues allowed working class women to create ideas and notions of womanhood and to express themselves in new and constructive ways (46, 7).

¹⁶ George Hutchinson *In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of The Color Line*

Although Helga is not a member of the working class, she seeks ways to express herself through her apparel. Teachers at Naxos were admonished to wear drab, sterile colors which did not suit Helga. Her desire for beautiful objects and yearning for colors made her an outcast. Helga exemplified the attitude of the middle class but lacked the proper pedigree and/or ancestry.

Helga Crane does not conform to conventional ways in terms of demeanor, dress, and attitude but seeks to find her unique voice and place in society. Similar to the author Larsen, Helga is absent of the pedigree and/or ancestry which would provide a sense of security and place in society. Without an established line of ancestry, Helga essentially carries the racial identity and class burden on her shoulders. In order to negotiate in through middle class society, where Helga finds herself, it is important to trace one's ancestral roots. Because Helga cannot trace her ancestral roots, she avoids discussion of ancestral history and works to prove she belongs. I argue that Helga's quest for "redemptive identity" and the reclamation of her sexuality leads her to a life of sacrifice and Blues.

Quicksand Synopsis

Helga Crane is a teacher at Naxos in Alabama. Engaged to James Vayle, also a teacher at Naxos, Helga is unhappy. She is unlike the other teachers in that she does not subscribe to the schools ideas of dress and thought. Helga feels the school has become a machine because it does not produce free thinkers, but individuals who fit a particular mode of lifestyle. Having grown tired of her life at Naxos, Helga meets with the school principal, Dr. Anderson, to inform him of her decision to leave the school. While talking to Dr. Anderson who tries to convince her to stay, Helga finds herself being drawn to him. Ultimately Helga feels that if she was to have Naxos, she would be hurting Dr. Anderson. He tells Helga that she is what Naxos needs because she has

pedigree and stock. To this remark, Helga informs Dr. Anderson that she lacks pedigree and is not a good fit for Naxos and leaves the school.

With her belongings, Helga moves to Chicago to seek assistance from her uncle Peter. When Helga arrives at her uncle's home, she is surprised to find he has gotten married. His wife is not welcoming to Helga and informs Helga that she is not his niece because her father was Black. With her finances waning, Helga searches for a job in Chicago. She interviews and accepts a position for a personal secretary position to Mrs. Hayes Rore. As a result, Helga accompanies Mrs. Rore to New York where she settles with Anne Gray the niece of Mrs. Rore. Helga immerses herself in the night life and culture of New York. At a night club, Helga has a jungle experience as she enjoys the jazzy beats of the syncopated rhythm of the band.

After receiving a letter and a check from her uncle Peter, Helga decides to leave New York and travel to Copenhagen. In Copenhagen, Helga is an exotic beauty. Her aunt and uncle dress Helga in elaborate clothing to accentuate her color and host a party to attract suitors. To their delight, Axel a wealthy painter promises enough security to increase the Dahl's standing. When Helga realizes that Axel does not love her but only wishes to own her as a painting, she leaves Copenhagen to sail back to New York.

Helga returns to find that Anne Gray has married Dr. Anderson, and when Helga sees Dr. Anderson at a party, he passionately kisses her on the mouth. From this moment, Helga's sexual desire for Dr. Anderson is reawaken. She waits for the opportunity to fulfill her sexual desire with Dr. Anderson; however, when she meets him at a bar, Dr. Anderson apologies for kissing her. Infuriated, Helga slaps Dr. Anderson and runs outside in the rain and stumbles into a store front church where revival services were taking place.

Crying uncontrollable, the congregants believed Helga to be a prostitute. The song services continued, and Helga casts herself on the altar. Emotional spent from the services, Rev. Pleasant Green escorts Helga home. They marry and move south to Alabama.

In Alabama, Helga is not respected as the Mrs. Rev. Pleasant Green. Her life in Alabama is miserable, and she becomes a baby breeding machine for Rev. Pleasant Green. The blissful life she envisioned has been tarnished as life for Helga is unpleasant.

Nella Larsen: My Life, My Story

In order to understand the novel *Quicksand*, one must be familiar with the life of Nella Larsen. An in-depth reading of Larsen's life is critical to reading the novel because one finds the key to Larsen's unhappiness and Helga's tragic end. Larsen writes *Quicksand* around age 37. She takes the early experiences of her life and translates them into this novel. George Hutchinson's biography, *In Search of Nella Larsen*, provides an in-depth look into Larsen's life. Even though Larsen changes her occupation and the name of some places, one clearly sees the link to Helga Crane. *Quicksand* can therefore be placed alongside not just the great modernist texts but also the modern roman á clef novels.

Nella Larsen's life is similar to Helga Crane's. Larsen's biographers, Charles R. Larson and most notably George Hutchinson, note parallels. In his text, *In Search of Nella Larsen*, Hutchinson notes the problem with "legitimacy"¹⁷ Larsen would have experienced in adulthood due to her parentage (20). For Larsen and other individuals born through miscegenous relationships, their racial identity comes into question. Similarly, Helga deals with the same

¹⁷ Legitimacy deals with the racial identity of an individual. Miscegenous individuals born to a white parent had questions surrounding their racial identity. They did not belong in white society and often had problems in black society.

problem of “legitimacy” within the African American community. Even though Helga and Larsen are able to negotiate in and through middle class African American society, the stigma of mixed parentage casts a shadow of doubt upon their identity.

Born in Chicago in 1891, Nella Larsen experienced family hardship and subsequent separation from her mother and family. Born to Mary Hanson, a white Danish immigrant and Peter Walker, a black West Indian immigrant, the family suffered economic difficulty. Mary felt the burden of discrimination by bearing the child of a black man. Shortly after Larsen’s birth, Larsen’s father left, and Larsen’s mother was left to provide for her daughter which was difficult at best. According to Hutchinson, “...Nella’s mother faced a future of abject misery and shame” (25) forcing Mary to make some decisions to guarantee the safety and protection of her daughter, Nella, Mary married Peter Larsen, and this marriage became a defining event in [Nella’s] emotional life” (Hutchinson 25). Larsen began to understand the burden of being an African American in a white household. Her mother’s stain, Larsen became the source of tension within the household. Mary, wanting desperately to rear her daughter and needing the support of a man, was caught in the middle. As Nella grew older, the only way to alleviate the tension in the Larsen household was by giving Larsen an opportunity to further her education away from Chicago.

Larsen was sent to Fisk Normal School and College to finish high school. Charles R. Larson does not discuss Larsen’s formal education; however, Hutchinson shows the continual separation and isolation from her family that Larsen experienced. According to Hutchinson, during Larsen’s year at Fisk, students began to complain concerning the strict codes of the school. The students felt the rules were “outmoded” and “racially motivated” (Hutchinson 62) as Fisk’s president was an Anglo American. In addition, rules governing students’ dress and/or apparel were enacted “because a few [had] dressed in a manner contrary to the wishes of several

of the faculty” (63). Students were not permitted to wear “extravagant and expensive dress and jewelry” and female students were to wear “one ring” and a “uniform on all social occasions” (62-3). This mandate was similar to what Helga and the students experience at Naxos. Because of Larsen’s refusal to conform to the norms of dress at Fisk, she, along with several others, was suspended from the university (63).

Unable to return to return to her mother’s and stepfather’s due to rising racial tension in the neighborhood where they resided, Larsen visited relatives in Copenhagen. Hutchinson notes that during this time, census records show that Mary and Peter Larsen purported to have only one daughter, Anna. This omission by Larsen’s mother and stepfather exemplifies the racial tension that existed in their home as well as highlights the estrangement Larsen felt from childhood through adulthood. In what was to be a journey of self-discovery and a quest for a sense of belonging, Larsen’s trip to Copenhagen is a dichotomy that is “both profoundly enriching and emotionally discouraging” (Hutchinson 73). It was Larsen’s hope and perhaps her mother’s that she find a place in Copenhagen with her family. Larsen was exposed to a wide-range of Danish culture and possibly took free courses at Folk University which is affiliated with the University of Copenhagen¹⁸, but in the end, Larsen does not feel at home in Copenhagen and returns to the United States shortly before her twenty-first birthday.

Without money to support herself or a place to go, Larsen is believed to have returned briefly to Chicago. Employment opportunities for women in 1912 were very limited and almost non-existent for Black women. Black women who held college credentials could obtain

¹⁸ According to Larsen’s application to the Library School of new York in 1922, she was enrolled as a student at the University of Copenhagen. However, Hutchinson points out Larson was not officially enrolled at the University of Copenhagen. The need to embellish and create credentials could stem from Larsen’s exposure to writers and thinkers at Folk University as well as her expulsion from Fisk.

employment as teachers or librarians. With some high school education, women could pursue a career in nursing. Along with Provident Hospital in Chicago, Lincoln Hospital in the Bronx had an excellent reputation for training Black nurses. What was unique about Lincoln Hospital is they provided care to white and Black patients. For Larsen the advantages of studying at Lincoln School of Nursing were that it provided room and board which were not available at Provident and removed Larsen from her family. Had Larsen remained in Chicago for school, residing with or seeing her family would have created tension. On May 2, 1912, Nella Larsen entered Lincoln Hospital and Homes to study nursing and sat for her exams in January 1915.

After graduating from Lincoln, Larsen accepted a position as head nurse at Tuskegee Institute in Tuskegee, Alabama. Larsen's stint at Tuskegee proved difficult and trying. The reputation of Tuskegee Institute as an advanced school for African Americans fell short in Larsen's eyes. Individuals who became students and employees of Tuskegee "either got with the program and entered wholeheartedly into the mission, or one resigned or got kicked out" (Hutchinson 92). Helga's sentiments of Naxos being "no longer, a school" but "a machine" (4) speaks to the Booker T. Washington (BTW) machine that encouraged conformity and frowned on individuality. Because Larsen was a non-conformist with a flair for fashion, she would have been found in contempt of the policies of Tuskegee thereby making her an unwanted individual on campus.

Margaret Murray Washington (1865-1925), the third wife of BTW and woman principal of Tuskegee Institute, was instrumental in establishing a dress code, authorizing uniforms and regulating the moral conduct of women faculty and female students. Murray Washington believed the moral conduct of women was linked to their dress; therefore, she required all female students to wear a "wrap of three-quarter length" that was "a heavy dark-blue." (Hutchinson

101). Murray Washington's edict to wear what Larsen considered dull colors is similar to the dean of women at Naxos, who is a characterization of Murray Washington, when she replies, "Bright colors are vulgar"—"Black, gray, brown, and navy blue are the most becoming colors for colored people" (16-17). Larsen found it difficult both as a student at Fisk and more so as a faculty member at Tuskegee to adhere to strict dress codes. After a stressful year as head nurse, Larsen left Tuskegee and returned to New York to pursue a career as a public health nurse.

Around 1918, Larsen met Elmer S. Imes (1883-1941), whom she would wed in 1919, Imes provided Larsen access to the New York black elite (Hutchinson 124). Due to Larsen's lack of pedigree, Imes not only provided access to elite friends, but he provided legitimacy and stability. For the first time in a long time in Larsen's life, the feelings of being alone and loneliness were erased. Even though Larsen had "arrived," she was hampered by feelings of insecurity. However these feelings of insecurity proved to hold merit upon learning of Elmer's affair with Ethel Gilbert (346). Despite her hope that their marriage could withstand this act of infidelity, Larsen soon found herself alone.

When comparing the end of Larsen's life with that of Helga, the isolation and separation they experience is similar. Larsen withdrew from her social network of friends and resumed her work as a nurse; Helga became a machine cut from the pattern of southern women in that she bears numerous children. Although Larsen and her heroine, Helga, live lives that are filled with travel, adventure, and the demonstrated ability to overcome obstacles, they subsequently end in the state where they began—alone.

Textual Analysis

At Naxos Helga is an outcast among her colleagues. Helga's "...joy and zest...of doing good to [her] fellow [man]" (Larsen 5) is in direct opposition to the establishment at Naxos.

Naxos “had grown into a machine” (4) that extinguished ideas and reproduced the values of the dominant culture.

The idea of beauty had no place within the confines of Naxos. Because Helga “loved and longed for nice things,” she found that her “craving...for beauty...helped to bring her into disfavor in Naxos—‘pride’ and ‘vanity’ her detractors called it” (6). In Helga’s mind, African Americans are beautiful people because they are comprised of an array of colors and hues. The various colors and hues of African Americans should be celebrated by accenting and accentuating them with vivid colors.

The use of colors results in Helga standing out among the other teachers and often makes her seem exotic. Larsen’s description of Helga at the opening of *Quicksand* paints a picture of an exotic individual. Helga’s style and color of her clothes, which are forbidden and frowned upon at Naxos, speaks to an individual who is misplaced. Helga is portrayed as “A slight girl of twenty-two years, with narrow, sloping shoulders and delicate, but well-turned, arms and legs....In vivid green and gold negligee and glistening brocaded mules...” (2), this description depicts Helga as a sensual woman; however, Helga represses her sexual desire. Helga’s apparel shows her to be progressive and free thinking . The bright colors she chooses symbolize a freedom of choice.

In addition to colors, music plays an important role in *Quicksand*. In Helga’s quest for identity and attempt at sexual expression, music plays an integral part. Helga is reminded of her racial ancestry through the sounds of “unseen tomtoms” (59) found in the syncopated beats of jazz music at a club. The sound of tomtoms in jazz music signals the root and base of jazz music which are spirituals. Early African presence in colonial America was marked by the drums, dance, and ring shout. In a scene where Helga ponders the question of race and racial identity,

she is transported “drugged, lifted, [and] sustained, by the extraordinary music” (59) to her African American ancestral past as she observes the dances. When the music stops, Helga comes back to the moment only to discover she enjoyed the experience. The experience makes Helga keenly aware of the power of African American music. And while confronting her role as an exotic “Other” in Copenhagen, ragtime and vaudeville music exposes, in Helga’s mind, the weaknesses and buffoonery of the African race.

After Helga is rejected by Dr. Anderson, music, spirituals, becomes the redemptive element that permeates her life. As it is raining outside, ironically as Helga enters a make-shift church, the congregation was singing “Showers of Blessings.” This spiritual resonated with Helga for “she was conscious of having heard [it] years ago” (110). Then “there [was] hushed solicitous voices” and “[t]he singing began again, this time a low wailing thing” (111). The hymn changed to one that emphasized the importance of emptying one’s self and taking on the characteristics of Christ in “More of Thee.” This hymn moved Helga to weep uncontrollably and become a participant in the worship services. Becoming aware of her surroundings and the gaze of the worshippers upon her, Helga notices the harmonious song of the worshippers change to “There’s Not a Friend like the Lowly Jesus” which provides a sense of comfort. Like the jazz music at the club, the spiritual songs bring Helga to “an indistinct horror of an unknown world” (113). Unlike her experience with jazz where Helga felt “shameful” but “enjoyed” the jungle experience (59), spirituals leave her terrified. In the end, however, Helga succumbs to the invitation of the spirituals to come to Jesus. The reader finds her at the end of the church scene asking God to “Have mercy on [her]!” (114).

Ultimately in Helga’s final attempt to suppress her sexual desires, she is moved and transformed by the sorrowful moans of spirituals. In the church, Helga hears words of acceptance

in the midst of the hymns, “Remembah de words of our Mastah: ‘Let him that is without sin cast de first stone.’” (112) which admonishes the congregants to examine themselves rather than focusing on what they believed to be the sins of Helga. Because Helga accepts and/or embraces the place the music takes her, the music is able to fulfill the void Helga faces in the areas of racial identity and sexuality.

Blues Woman Syndrome

Although scholarship has been dedicated to the role of racial and sexual identity in Larsen’s *Quicksand*, scholarship is absent that interrogates the significance of music in Helga’s quest for racial and sexual identity. Helga essentially becomes the prototype of the Classic Blues woman who travels to find her love, and in this case, her life. As noted by some scholars and critics, the blues is based on the experiences of a people. LeRoi Jones, later Amiri Baraka, in *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* writes, “*Blues* means a Negro experience” (94) limiting the blues to African Americans. While Ralph Ellison, in “Richard Wright’s Blues,” states “blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness,” (129) providing a more encompassing view of the blues. Blues become a mechanism whereby one is able to articulate the real experience of life through a critical medium. James H. Cone, writing in his book *The Spirituals and the Blues*, asserts “[t]he blues are true because they combine art and life, poetry and experience, the symbolic and the real” (103). Blues tell stories of lost love, travel to escape a person or violence, and sex and sexuality. Blues is complex and is common to both men and women. It provides women a safe haven to challenge society’s dictates regarding women’s space and place in the world (Davis 74).

Reading Helga as a “Blues woman” is critical to understanding important issues in her life. Helga challenges the idea of what it meant to be a woman, and the space designed for

women. In her attempt to define what it means to be loved and to love, she finds herself in a space, domestic, that she finds suffocating and stifling. Helga seemingly spends her life running, through travels, from the idea of being tied down to a domesticated life that her life ends in that position. At the end of the novel, the reader does not find a liberated heroine but one who is overcome by the blues.

One notion of women's space that Larsen challenges is that of domestic space. Throughout *Quicksand* the reader sees Helga traveling or moving in search of self—racial and sexual. Angela Y. Davis in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, discusses the importance of travel for women, writes “the ability to travel implied a measure of autonomy...some control over the circumstances of their lives, especially over their sexual lives” (74). Travel becomes a means whereby women are empowered. Larsen portrays Helga as a nomad, but if we consider Helga in the context of Davis' Blues travel paradigm, Helga is a powerful individual.

Whereas one would label a transient individual a person who is unstable and uncertain, Davis reads this transiency as power or control. When transiency is applied to Helga, what appears to be her attempts to escape become moments of empowerment. For example, when Helga leaves Naxos, it appears she is running away from the repressive and suffocating code of conduct the school employs to suppress the individuality and voice of its members. However, Helga leaves to maintain her individuality. In order to carry out her plans, Helga meets with Dr. Anderson who served as principal of Naxos. During this meeting, Helga experiences “a mystifying yearning” she feels an “urge for service, not now for her people, but for *this man* (my emphasis) who was talking so earnestly of his work, his plans, his hopes. An insistent need to be a part of them sprang in her. With compunction tweaking at her heart for even having entertained the notion of deserting him...” (20). Meeting with Dr. Anderson awakens something within

Helga. She is moved to serve not for the people but the man, Dr. Anderson. The desire to serve Dr. Anderson weakens Helga's individuality. In order to maintain her position, Helga opts to leave Naxos.

When discussing the song lyrics of Gertrude "Ma" Rainey that dealt with travel, such as "Traveling Blues":

Train's at the station, I heard the whistle blow
The train's at the station, I heard the whistle blow
I done bought my ticket and I don't know where I'll go
I'm dangerous and blue, can't stay here no more
I'm dangerous and blue, can't stay here no more
Here come my train, folks, and I've got to go.

Davis explains, "Travel is not synonymous with uncertainty and the unknown but rather is undertaken with the aim of bringing certainty and stability into the woman's life" (80). Helga's constant movement throughout the novel leads to her understanding of her identity.

In "It Just Be's Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues," Hazel Carby points out "women blues singers embodied the social relations and contradictions of black displacement: (46) which explains in part why Helga flees to Copenhagen. Despite living life as an African American, Helga knows little about her father's lineage and family. She is cut off from her paternal kinsmen and does not fully understand her place in African American society. Helga therefore relies on the kindness of her mother's sister to establish her identity. Because Helga's uncle who resides in Chicago refuses to assist her due to his wife's objection, Helga is forced to seek refuge with her aunt. These disconnections or lack of relationships send Helga in search of her racial identity.

In her important article “In Body and Spirit: Representing Black Women Musicians” Carby discusses the role of the black female subject and the role of the black musician. Carby suggests that Blues music of the twenties and thirties by female artists served a two-fold purpose: (1) the music spoke of personal freedom for the singer and (2) the music challenged the sexual and gender roles of women (180). Carby explains these purposes were due to women traveling. Although women were not able to jump railroad cars, they were able to participate and travel with vaudeville shows which broadened their experiences. Instead of men making decisions regarding women’s freedom and sexual roles, women became empowered to make those decisions for themselves as demonstrated in Gertrude “Ma” Rainey’s “Don’t Fish in My Sea.” Rainey tells her man to simply leave her alone. In this melody, Rainey’s man has been running around and she makes a decision regarding her body: “If you don’t like my ocean, don’t fish in my sea/Don’t like my ocean, don’t fish in my sea/Stay out of my valley and let my mountain be” (Davis 214). Carby asserts this type of assertiveness is derived from Rainey’s experiences and travels.

Helga becomes a representation of the Blues. Because Helga is able to make decisions regarding her individuality and her sexual identity, it makes her “the most fully realized and convincing black woman” (Larson 68) in literature. Helga’s depth creates a model for future writers. In “It Jus Be’s Dat Way,” Carby points out that “Larsen explores questions of sexuality and power within both a rural and urban landscape” (473) which can be seen through Helga’s movement from the south to the north and back south. At Naxos while engaged to James Vayle, Helga finds their relationship repressive. Dr. Anderson is able to awaken a sexual desire in Helga that she has expressed by the style of her clothes. These feelings and sexual desire are soon

destroyed when Dr. Anderson brings to bear the question of legitimacy prompting Helga's departure for the North.

Later in the text, it is Dr. Anderson who is responsible for Helga's permanent move south. After returning from Copenhagen, Helga meets Dr. Anderson at a party. After exiting an upstairs room where she repaired her dress, Helga stepped out and into the arms of Dr. Anderson. Without warning, Dr. Anderson "stooped and kissed" (104) Helga. Weeks later Helga learns Dr. Anderson has no sexual interest in her. She slaps him and leaves. After running through the rain in a mad fury, Helga finds herself in church and ultimately in the South.

The question of sexuality and power are not limited to a rural and urban setting; they extend to Europe. Helga's arrival in Copenhagen signals an awakening of racial identity and sexual desire. While in the United States, Helga has been in control of her body and sexuality. But in Copenhagen, Helga becomes more aware of the desire men have for her body, and she experiences a sexual awareness of herself as a sexual being. Helga's aunt takes every opportunity to use Helga's body for personal gain. Helga is told her clothing is "too sober" and that she "must have bright things to set off the color of [her] lovely brown skin. Striking things, exotic things. [She] must make an impression" (68). The push to stand out is different for Helga. At Naxos, Helga was forced to suppress her individuality and sexuality. However, in Copenhagen, Helga's clothes and body become commodity for Herr and Fru Dahl.

Helga's experiences in Copenhagen, as they relate to her body, are reminiscent of African American women. African American women had no control over their bodies, who they would marry, or with whom they slept. All of these decisions were made by the slave master. In Helga's case, Herr and Fru Dahl come to represent the slaveholder. Scholar and critic Adrienne Davis in her essay, "Don't Let Nobody Bother Yo Principle" points out the ramifications of "the economy

of American slavery systematically expropriated black women's sexuality and reproductive capacity for white pleasure and profit" (216). Although Helga trusts and loves her aunt, her aunt's ultimate goal is to profit from Helga's exoticism. After arriving in Copenhagen, Helga's aunt and uncle arrange a "showing" of Helga during a dinner. Their purpose was to arrange a courtship to a wealthy individual who would raise their economic standing as well. As Helga maintains her genteel ways, her Aunt Katrina tells Helga to consider marriage (79). Helga feels totally unsure, but Fru Dahl tries to reassure her by listing the "rich" eligible suitors who would love to marry her.

Among those suitors is Axel Olson. Axel Olson, the artist and painter, desired Helga not because of her intellectual capacity but because of her exoticism and difference. Axel desires to obtain Helga's hand in marriage and that marriage would, in turn, lift the Dahls' socially in the Copenhagen class structure. Feeling sure of having won Helga for his own pleasure and possession remarks, "You know, Helga, you are a *contradiction* (emphasis added). You have been, I suspect, corrupted by the good Fru Dahl, which is perhaps well. Who knows? You have the warm impulsive nature of the women of Africa, but my lovely, you have, I fear the soul of a *prostitute* (emphasis added). You sell yourself to the highest buyer. I should of course be happy that it is I. And I am" (87). This exchange between Axel and Helga shows Axel's desire to own Helga as part of his art collection. By comparing Helga to a prostitute, Axel shows he has little or no affection towards her but sees her as a life size portrait to be used to express his showmanship.

Axel tells Helga she is a contradiction, in other words, a site of ambivalence. In *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*, Houston A. Baker, Jr. illustrates the railway junction as a trope for the Blues:

The railway juncture is marked by transience. Its inhabitants are always travelers—a multifarious assembly in transit. The “X” of crossing roadbeds signals the multi-directionality of the juncture and is simply a single instance in a boundless network that redoubles and circles, makes sidings and ladders, forms Y’s and branches over the vastness of hundreds of thousands of American miles. (7)

Baker’s rail yard is an apt depiction of what is taking place in the life of Helga Crane. The juncture is equivalent to the destinations travelled by Helga represented by the “X”. This includes her journey from Naxos to Chicago; Chicago to New York; New York to Copenhagen; Copenhagen to New York, and New York to Alabama. It is at these various crossings that Helga experiences ambivalence or contradiction regarding her sexual and racial identity. One thing to note regarding the “X” of the railroad crossing is that it marks the infinite directions which can lead one to any given place. With regard to Helga, we find the “X” often leads to a place of ambivalence that forces Helga to leave. Another point that Baker brings out in his illustration that is true of Helga is the idea that the railway is a “network that redoubles and circles” (7). If we look at Helga’s travels, she ultimately ends up in the same place that she starts. Within the framework of Helga’s travels, she doubles back to New York and Alabama. Although her circumstances are different, the fact remains she returns to the south.

Helga’s travels yield a Blues experience. Helga’s life after migrating north becomes frustrating due to economics, the race question, and her sexual suppression. In *Blues People*, Baraka writes that Blues and jazz “are the results of social and psychological changes within the Negro group...” (93) which is an effective way to describe Helga’s expeditions. These musical forms were created from the social struggles Civil Rights and psychological changes of being

African and American double consciousness in America. The social impact of Helga's travels forces her to examine her racial identity in the world. Similarly, Helga experiences a psychological change sexual identity and sexual tension that yields a Blues experience for her. She has struggled and come to terms with her sexual identity and the sexual tension that has characterized her life.

Salvation, Matrimony, and the Blues

After Helga returns to New York from Copenhagen, the question of her racial identity appears lost in the wake of her sexual identity. Helga departs Copenhagen having learned to expect and accept admiration for her exoticism and the mystery that surrounds her. In New York, Pandora's Box of eroticism and mystery is unlocked when Dr. Anderson kisses Helga. At a New York party, Helga, who has unconsciously sexually admired Dr. Anderson, finds herself in his arms and in an awkward moment, he kisses her. Helga experiences conflicting feelings, "She fought against him with all her might. Then, strangely, all power seemed to ebb away, and a long-hidden, half-understood desire welled up in her with the suddenness of a dream" (104). The moment that Helga has waited for seemingly her entire life has come.

Dr. Anderson awakens long repressed feelings. Helga leaves hopeful and with uplifted spirits. The kiss conjures up for Helga a dream state of desire that has been suppressed for a long time. Unfortunately this dream turns into a nightmare. What appears joy and bliss turns into betrayal and disappointment. Helga has a feeling of expectancy: waiting for the moment when Dr. Anderson would satisfy her sexual desire. Instead, Dr. Anderson feels shame because he is married.

Dr. Anderson's kiss awakens Helga's desires, but it is Dr. Anderson's refusal that leads Helga to a path of destruction. In a meeting that Helga was sure to provide her sexual expression,

Dr. Anderson apologizes to Helga stating, “[h]e was afraid that [Helga] might have understood; might have been unhappy about [the kiss]” (107). In actuality, Helga was elated about the kiss but feels jilted by Dr. Anderson’s apology. And to show her disappointment, Helga “savagely slapped Robert Anderson with all her might” (108). Dr. Anderson’s betrayal and/or refusal sends Helga into a downward spiral of a figurative death.

In an effort to relieve herself of the shame and humiliation she felt in the face of Dr. Anderson’s rejection, Helga wishes for death but, while wandering the streets, finds herself in a strong thunderstorm. This literal storm serves to wash over the figurative storm that Helga has entered. As a result, Helga wanders into a storefront church and finds herself in the midst of a revival service with the congregation singing “Showers of Blessings.” This song is fitting in that the rain is able to provide a literal and symbolic cleansing of Helga and her problems. Within Christian theology, the ability to forget the humiliation and shame of Dr. Anderson could only come through the cleansing of water.

Likewise, spirituals, the music and the root of African American Christianity, are important because they provide “hope, faith, and a sense of community” (Djedje 129) which Helga is void of the moment she enters the revival services. Spirituals, according to theologian James H. Cone in *The Spirituals and The Blues* “are the story of black people’s historical strivings for earthly freedom, rather than the otherworldly projections of hopeless Africans who forgot about their homeland” (15). What is evident is that Helga’s retreat to the church is a consequence of her thwarted desire for sexual expression. Helga is not seeking physical freedom from an overlord, but rather, she seeks psychological freedom the rejection she suffered at the hands of Dr. Anderson. Furthermore, Cone, when examining W. E. B. Du Bois’ *The Souls of Black Folks*, points out that in addition to containing and holding hope for freedom, the spirituals

also spoke of “an affirmation of life” (13). Du Bois writes “Through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things” (386). This hope seems to be lost for Helga after she is spurned by Dr. Anderson. More importantly, Helga feels her chance at sexual expression is lost.

Through her marriage to Rev. Mr. Pleasant Green, Helga hopes for a blissful life that is sexually satisfying. Only through marriage is Helga able to restore any hope of sexual expression. Helga takes on mentoring roles in the community offering homemaking advice to the women parishioners. Her life is consumed by work and absent of joy and bliss.

Christianity turns upon ideas of redemption, regeneration, and being made whole. Helga’s immersion into Christianity is marked by the rain or water which is symbolic of the death of the old and the resurrection of the new; however, we find that Helga’s birth into Christianity does not lead to a new life of redemption and happiness, but rather a miserable existence without any meaning. It appears that Helga is on the cusp of something wonderful and exciting occurring in her life, but once the music stops and the pleas for salvation end, Helga finds there is no joy or comfort in Christianity or her marriage.

Helga’s marriage to Rev. Mr. Pleasant Green proved, in the beginning, to be what she wanted and needed. Helga was enamored with her life as Mrs. Pleasant Green. She immersed herself in the duties of a pastor’s wife by advising the women of the church on ways to make their homes beautiful. She felt that her humble life and devotion to her husband and service to the community were all she needed to make her happy. Helga overlooked the fact that Rev. Green ate audibly and was dirty (121). Rev. Green provided Helga with a sense of security that came with a price. The price of security for Helga meant giving up her identity, subjecting herself to the patriarchal rule of her husband and birthing children. Eventually, the feelings of

marital bliss began to wane. The southern nights brought a “medley of feelings” (120) which made Helga question why was she living this life? The women did not respect her, especially Clementine Richards who openly showed devotion for Rev. Green. Moreover, over time, Helga began to despise her life with Rev. Mr. Pleasant Green as she contemplated his inability to fulfill her mental visions of bodily satisfaction. Though Helga’s marriage provided the sexual satisfaction she desired, she found her life less than desirable. Along with the birth of three children “born within the short space of twenty months” (123) childbirth began to leave Helga in a depressed state or feeling blue.

An understanding of Hazel Carby’s idea of “black displacement” can provide insight into Helga’s depressed state. Carby, in writing about blues women and their music, contends that “the music and song of the women blues singers embodied the social relations and contradictions of black displacement: of rural migration and the urban flux” (476). Christianity and spiritual music are used in the last part of the text to demonstrate a move toward fulfillment; however, child birth sends Helga to a blue state of mind. First, there is a reverse migration pattern. Instead of moving from the South to the North, Helga moves from the North to the South. Although Helga is happy with her new life at the onset, she becomes dissatisfied and worn out by the birth of children. Helga’s migration to the South signals an unfulfilled life rather than a life of opportunity. Similar to James Weldon Johnson’s unnamed narrator in *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, who “[sells] his birthright for a mess of pottage” (211), Helga, after a religious experience, marries a man and moves south to fulfill marital bliss. Instead of finding strength, courage, and hope on her migratory journey, Helga finds an unfulfilled life that is tantamount to hell.

In order to engage the effectiveness of spirituals and Blues performance, it is imperative to gauge the audience. When describing the effect of Blues on audiences, Angela Davis writes, “[t]he blues in performance creates space for spontaneous audience response in a manner that is similar to religious testifying. Just as the sermon lacks vitality when no response is forthcoming from the congregation, so the blues performance falls flat without the anticipated affirmation of the audience” (55). Davis’ description of blues performance is an apt description of Helga’s experience in the mission church. Even though Helga’s conversion is spiritual, we find examples of the Blues performance present. The urging on of various songs for the different moods of the service by the parishioners or those present at the revival service ultimately leads to a plea for repentance and forgiveness by Helga. Sadly, the new life Helga sought is never realized. Her new found joy soon turns into sorrow.

The subsequent expression of Helga’s feelings can be found in the Blues. James Cone in his discussion of the rise of Blues remarks “[i]t is not that the blues reject God; rather they *ignore* God by embracing the joys and sorrows of life, such as those of a man’s relationship with his woman, a woman with her man” (99). This statement holds merit in reading *Quicksand* especially when we consider the end of Helga’s life in New York and her life in Alabama. The question must be considered as to whether or not Helga really has a religious conversion at the revival service or does she become immersed in the emotions of the moment that she mistakes for religion? To overcome Dr. Anderson’s rejection, Helga, through a Christian frame, seeks to turn her sorrow into joy by seeking religion. Helga’s desire to sexually express herself and gain freedom is doomed because Rev. Green is unfulfilling in that he is unclean and lacks a wider social standing.

But if Helga's conversion was in fact not real, Helga would be left with a void in her life after the jubilation of her supposed conversion ends. Finding herself in a place that is a far cry from the urban, metropolitan life of New York, Helga becomes disenchanted and her mood changes to blue. The fact that Helga marries a minister adds a new dimension to her life, and one that comes with a burden of responsibility that Helga was not prepared to accept socially or psychologically. What is important to note, too, is the fact that Blues are viewed as "secular spirituals." James Cone describes "secular spiritual" as Blues because "they confine their attention solely to the immediate and affirm the bodily expression of black soul, including its sexual manifestations. They are *spiritual* because they are impelled by the same search for the truth..." (100). In Alabama, many of Helga's problems centered upon her body. She is weary from working in the garden, worn from child bearing, feeble in mind out of concern about the welfare of her children, which caused her a great deal of angst, anxiety and blues. Helga's marriage, in a way, has removed the emphasis from her sexual satisfaction to the welfare of her children.

In the end, Helga looks to her children. Even though she experiences great labor pains, the thought of leaving and abandoning her children is not an option. Because Helga knows the pain one experiences from abandonment, she does not want to put her children through that ordeal. Helga's children give her a reason to continue in her marriage and with life. Continuing her marriage provides her children stability and a family connection. Even though her children seemingly take life from Helga during birth, she receives life through them which allows her to endure.

Conclusion

Nella Larsen's life serves as the backdrop of *Quicksand*. *Quicksand* provides Larsen a place to expel the horrors of her life and rewrite her experiences. In Larsen's and Helga's life there exists a level of dissatisfaction and unhappiness. Larsen and Helga are unhappy due to a lack of family connection; however, for Helga this feeling is compounded by a lack of sexual fulfillment. Oddly enough, when Helga finds sexual fulfillment, the end result of child birth is unbearable for her. Although Helga is tired from child birthing, she finds in her children the strength to live.

This novel could be characterized as a story of women's choices and rights. From the beginning of the novel, Helga makes decisions that empower her. She was on the verge of rescinding her resignation at Naxos until Dr. Anderson unknowingly insults her. This move leads Helga to continue on the path to self expression. From this point forward, Helga is put in situations that require her to exercise authority over her situations and body. Perhaps the one question mark in terms of decision making is her marriage to Rev. Mr. Pleasant Green.

Although Helga achieves sexual fulfillment with Rev. Green, there still exists an emptiness in her life. Helga never seems to have all the pieces line up properly for her. She is either in a great social setting without sexual fulfillment, or she achieves sexual fulfillment without a social setting. It could be argued that Helga's blues state at the end of the novel is a direct effect of a hasty decision to marry Rev. Green. From what the reader is presented, Helga's marriage to Rev. Green is not well thought out or planned. It appears that Helga attaches herself to the first individual following being spurned by Dr. Anderson.

Likewise music can be seen as an agent of change and decision-making for Helga. The sound of tom-toms, the ragtime tunes, and spirituals cause Helga to examine herself and

subsequently make a decision. Music set Helga in motion. She became a traveling woman and a blues woman as a result.

CHAPTER FIVE

“TROUBLE IN MIND”: GAYL JONES’S *CORREGIDORA*

Born in Lexington, Kentucky, Gayl Jones is an African American writer. She credits her childhood environment as the source of her storytelling. The “speech of her characters is the speech she heard in the streets and homes of her community” (Byerman 128). The segregated community of Lexington and her family provided Jones with valuable lessons in writing. According to Keith Byerman, Jones comes from a line of women writers. Jones’ grandmother and mother were both writers. Jones’ grandmother “wrote plays for church productions” (128), and her mother, a homemaker, wrote short stories and often read her works to her children (Brewer 212).

Storytelling, part of Jones’ writer identity, is derived from her community. During the time she was writing *Corregidora*, Jones “was particularly interested, and continue[d] to be interested, in oral traditions of storytelling” (Tate 143). Jones does not simply relate her stories from the authorial standpoint; the reader sees and hears the character relating their tales. The reader learns of the sexual violation of the women’s body from Ursa and the *Corregidora* women. Often detailed information would be locked in the conscious of the character and revealed through the narrator; however, Jones chooses to let the characters tell their stories. This method makes the story fuller and gives the reader a sense of being privy to the dark history of the family.

Due to her childhood, Jones’ novels are a blend of such storytelling and the blues. *Corregidora* can be considered a blues narrative because “it deals with both the pains and

pleasures of human relationships” (Byerman 129). Keith Byerman further explains that blues, in relation in *Corregidora*, “has the ... connotation that the teller of the tales gains control of her experience in the process of describing her loss of control” (129). Through Ursa’s process of telling her story, the reader sees and feels her loss and pain. The reader sees the pleasure/pain dialectic being worked out in Ursa’s search for answers to the Corregidorean narrative history and locating her voice.

In Jones’ personal life, she experienced a period of depression and loss in 1998 after her husband, Bob Higgins Jones, who was a student at the University of Michigan where Jones was a professor, “appeared at a gay-rights rally in Ann Arbor, Michigan, carrying a shot gun” (Brewer 213). Before his trial, Jones and Higgins Jones fled to Europe. Jones tendered her letter of resignation to the University, and she sent a letter to then President of the United States Ronald Reagan “denouncing the American system of justice” (213). After fifteen years in Europe, Jones and Higgins Jones returned to Kentucky to care for Jones’ ailing mother. In 1998, the Lexington, Kentucky police tried to serve Higgins Jones with an existing warrant. “The couple barricaded themselves in their house” (213) and when the police entered the house, Higgins Jones was dead from a self-inflicted gunshot wound. They were able to save Jones who suffered carbon monoxide poisoning. Jones spent some time in a mental institution after the ordeal.

Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* is a blues novel that explores “passing.” Ursa Corregidora comes from a line of women who were sexually abused by their slave owner. The Corregidorean women, beginning with Great Gram, pass the story to each generation of women in order not to forget the evil of men. Ursa Corregidora is a blues singer and is married to Mutt. Mutt is jealous of the gentlemen who hear Ursa sing at Happy’s Café. One night after leaving Happy’s and

arguing with Mutt, Ursa fell down some stairs. As a result of the fall, she lost her child and her “womb [had] to come out” (4).

After being released from the hospital, Ursa moves in with Tadpole, the owner of Happy’s. Tadpole is secretly in love with Ursa and guards her from visitors. Ursa tells Tadpole the Corregidorean narrative and wonders where is the next generation coming from? How will the narrative go forward? When Ursa gets better, she moves across the street to Cat’s house. Cat is a lesbian and Ursa’s friend. In the evenings, Cat looks after Jeffy, a young girl who is also a lesbian, while her mother works at the factory. One night Jeffy slept in the bed with Ursa. While sleeping, Jeffy began feeling and rubbing on Ursa. Ursa awoke hitting Jeffy and kicking her out of bed. The next morning Cat fixed Ursa breakfast, and Ursa sang “Trouble in Mind” for Cat.

After overhearing Cat and Jeffy discussing the groping incident, Ursa packed and moved back to Tadpole’s. Ursa and Tadpole begin having sex and after a short period of time, Ursa goes back to work singing at Happy’s. Eventually Ursa and Tadpole marry, and Ursa feels inadequate sexually in part because she cannot have children. As a result of Ursa’s insecurities and lack of desire for sex, Tadpole began having an affair with another singer from the club. When Ursa catches them, she moved to the Drake Hotel.

After some time of singing at the Spider, Ursa decides to visit her mother to learn “her private memory” (104). Ursa wants to know about her father and mother’s relationship. Her mother confesses that “Corregidora [was] responsible for that part of [her] life” (111). Ursa’s mother tells how she met Martin at a diner where he worked. Ursa’s mother revealed how her mother and Great Gram would talk to her about making generations, but she was not interested in men. Martin introduced himself to her one night when she came in for supper. Ursa’s mother

never ate supper in the diner only lunch. Her body began craving what Martin could give her, a child. After that night, she started eating lunch and supper in the diner.

On the fourth night, Martin started a conversation with Ursa's mother and offered to ride the bus to Bracktown with her. On the ride, Martin did not try to kiss or touch her. Another night that Martin was going to ride the bus with Ursa's mom, it was cold so they went to his house to get a jacket. Ursa's mother goes upstairs with Martin. After he got his jacket, he touched her hand and asked if he could touch her in different places to which she said, yes. Martin entered Ursa's mother and she pushes him out. She becomes pregnant with Ursa and Great Gram goes and talks to Martin. As a result, Ursa's mother and Martin get married.

After Ursa is born, Ursa's mother goes to Cincinnati because Martin moved there two years after they were married. When she enters the house, without warning, Martin grabs her and begins slapping her across the face. When he stopped, he looked evil when trying to smile. As Ursa's mother tried to leave, Martin grabbed her pants breaking the elastic in the waist. He orders her out of his house without providing any assistance for her pants. The look of Martin is seared in Ursa's mother mind. She believed that she drove Martin to hate her. After taking a walk and a period of silence, Ursa's mother began talking again this time she talked as if she was Great Gram.

Great Gram and Gram often talked about life on Corregidora's plantation. The women soon found they were not just sharing the story with each other but also with Martin. On one particular occasion after Martin had gone fishing, he entered the house from the back where Great Gram and Gram slept. Walking down the hall, Martin saw Gram powdering under her breast. He watched her for a long period of time. Even after Martin saw Ursa's mother, he half

smiled and continuously watched Gram. Gram knew that Martin was watching her. She put the powder box down and looked at Martin hatefully cussing him.

The memory of singing at Preston's and meeting Mutt when she moved to the city still consumed Ursa. Eventually Ursa and Mutt reconcile. Mutt enjoys Ursa's singing and feels a bit insecure regarding the men who come to hear Ursa sing. Ursa reassures Mutt of her faithfulness and desire for him by performing fellatio on him. In the moment before performing the act, Ursa realizes that it must have been a moment of pleasure and pain that caused Corregidora to hate and love Great Gram.

Jones does not examine "passing" from the color line perspective but from the vantage orally passing a story and passing something, a story, through birth. The Corregidorean women do not want to forget the horrors of Corregidora, so they make generations and orally pass their history of abuse. The burden of "making generations" creates psychological problems for Ursa and her foremothers. Psychological problems come to bear in their relationships or lack of ability to sustain meaningful, love relationships. The lack of love in the Corregidorean women's relationships creates a blues ethos.

Blues can be defined as "secular spirituals,"¹⁹ because they "depict the 'secular' dimension of black experience" (Cone 97). In other words, blues music takes the everyday lived experiences of African Americans and sets them to music. The concept of love, sex, infidelity, travel, and freedom become the basis and theme of the music. African Americans understood the messages in blues songs because as an oppressed people who survived slavery, they, in fact, had lived the blues.

¹⁹ See Tony Bolden's *Afro-Blue: Improvisations in African American Poetry and Culture*. p.93.

The effects of slavery and the imprint of slavery upon the female body are felt through three generations of Corregidorean women. Within the institution of slavery, African American women's bodies were used as "a mode of production and a mode of reproduction" (Davis 225). Adrienne Davis suggests a "sexual economy of slavery" as a way to understand the dual nature and impact slavery had on women of African descent.²⁰ Not only were African women used in the production of crops and for manual labor, they were also used for the (re)production of slave labor. Davis's historical overview of the manner in which African American women were objectified for sexual and economic gain coincides with Jones's portrayal of the slaveholder, Corregidora, who used Ursa's Great Gram and Gram for his sexual pleasure and economic gain.

Adrienne Davis points out that "the economy of American slavery systematically expropriated black women's sexuality and reproductive capacity for white pleasure and profit" (216). Davis also comments on the "Fancy Trade"²¹ through which African American slave girls were sold as mistresses—"[s]ome ended up in bordellos" (228)—in order to encourage and increase the economic wealth and promote the sexual exploits of white men. The girls and women chosen for the "fancy trade" were selected "for their grace, beauty and light skins" (Davis 228) is in juxtaposition to Jones's description of Great Gram, who although pretty, possesses "coffee-bean skin" (10). Davis's scholarship shows two ideas at work. First, the idea of beauty as a means of ranking slaves is at play. In the taxonomy that Davis locates, light-

²⁰ See "'Don't Let Nobody Bother Yo' Principle:' The Sexual Economy of American Slavery." *Still Brave: The Evolution of Black Women's Studies* ed. Stanlie M. James, Frances Smith Foster & Beverly Guy-Sheftall.

²¹ Ibid. Fancy Trade is a market where enslaved women were sold and used for prostitution as an economic means versus manual labor.

skinned slaves were privileged as opposed to dark-skinned slaves. But Corregidora prefers dark-skinned slaves. Corregidora's choice of dark-skinned slave girls speaks to a Manichean aesthetic.

Because Manichaeism examines the binaries of good vs. evil and light vs. darkness, Corregidora's sexual acts with coffee-bean colored slave women signal a battle between good and evil. William Harmon and Hugh Holman explain the effect of the Manichean aesthetic on the body by pointing out the struggle between God and Satan in the cosmos and in individuals. The spiritual struggle is tantamount to the internal struggle of individuals because they comprise good and evil and/or light and darkness. Ultimately, good overtakes evil, providing space for darkness to be dispelled by light.

Corregidora appears to eradicate evil through his sexual acts. However, Kathy G. Willingham reads Corregidora's longing for coffee-bean or dark-skinned slave women as a fetish or fetishism because he has begun acquiring women for sexual economy. He prefers pretty women but "He wasn't buying up them fancy mulatto women though. They had to be black and pretty. They had to be the color of his coffee beans" (173). For Corregidora, the coffee-bean colored women represent sexual beauty.

Thus the idea of "coffee-bean" goes beyond the idea of skin color, and, according to Willingham, references "the inextricable link between sexual and economic exploitation" (314). Along those lines, Adrienne Davis points out the yoke placed upon African slave women required they contribute to all phases of slave labor and "satisfy the economic, political, and personal interests of white men of the elite class" (219). Because coffee is one of the major crops harvested on Corregidora's Brazilian plantation, the coffee-bean color of the women thus speaks to the economic exploitation as well as sexual fetishism. In essence, Great Gram, who represents the cash crop of coffee-beans, is moved from production of crops to (re)production of additional

slave labor on Corregidora's plantation. Corregidora takes Great Gram from the fields where she provided economic labor and moved her in the house where she fulfilled his sexual fetish and produced additional labor.

Because Corregidora burned the slave papers that provided evidence of him fathering children by slave women, it becomes imperative that the three generations of Corregidorean women orally relate the story. (Re)production becomes a major issue for Ursa who is unable to make generations and/or produce children due to losing her womb. Ursa must find another means to corroborate her personal narrative of abuse by men as well as passing the Corregidorean narrative. Charged by her Great Gram, Gram, and mother to make generations, Ursa must "pass" down the story and "leave evidence" "[b]ecause they didn't want to leave no evidence of what they done—so it couldn't be held against them" (14).

The early Corregidorean women used procreation to sustain their narratives. Show and tell, the method by which Great Gram feels their story will continually be told, creates complications for Ursa. Thus, she is forced to find an alternate source to show and tell the Corregidorean tale. In addition, Ursa's inability to procreate leads her to (re)examine the Corregidorean narrative and how she would pass the narrative. The ability to tell their stories empowers these women and allows them to take control of their bodies. It is important these women tell their story because as individuals who have been exploited and objectified, maintaining their voice shows they have not been broken, in spirit, by the crimes committed against them. However, it is not enough to tell the story. There must be physical evidence to show.

Making generations provides the evidence that is needed to corroborate the crimes against the women. It is simply not enough to use language to tell of the atrocities; physical

evidence must be present. The Corregidorean women use their ability to sexually reproduce in order to indict their former slave owners. In a way, their method is very similar to what Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs do with their slave autobiographers.²² They indict the political and social structure of the slave institution by revealing personal information that show crimes committed against the body by slave owners. But what happens when one is unable to produce the physical evidence to accompany one's story?

After arguing with Mutt, Ursa accidentally falls down stairs—although she believes Mutt pushed her down the stairs—and loses her unborn child. As a result of the trauma, her “womb would have to come out” (4). Ursa loses her canal of birth and life which would allow her to produce the physical evidence needed to accompany her story. However, Ursa finds another outlet to aid her in telling the family's story, the blues. In this chapter I argue that the blues not only address and (dis)locates the pain of an incestuous family history that has been buried by a long history of hatred, but it substitutes for the lack of physical evidence and supports Ursa's narrative.

Individual vs. Collective

In this section, I explore how the Corregidorean narrative, a collective tale, becomes an individual narrative. The early Corregidorean women, Great Gram and Gram, experienced firsthand the abuse of Corregidora. While Ursa and her mother did not experience the abuse, they learn of the abuse through oral narratives. As a result, they become partakers of the early generations' pain but rewrite the narrative to address their personal issues.

²² See Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and Linda Brent's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

The collective voices of the Corregidorean women is not lost but modified after Ursa's fall in a way that produces a new offspring—blues—that allows a new story to be told—one of redemption. By using the blues, Ursa latches onto her Gram's idea of moving away from past memories to create her own memories. The Corregidorean narrative over time and generations becomes absent of the initial memory and sting of abuse and violation experienced by Great Gram and Gram. Ursa chooses the blues to exorcize the psychological demons of the Corregidorean past that haunt her future.

The Corregidorean women's narrative is indelibly marked by a psychic trauma that is passed from generation to generation. Each generation presents the history of Corregidora through a narrative of incest and hate for men, one that is passed down from female heir to female heir. However, with each passing generation, the story takes on a renewed significance. For Ursa, the story provides an incentive to break the Corregidorean curse. As Willingham notes, "While the first Corregidorean women 'write the body' with strictly one purpose in mind, namely to produce historical evidence about slavery, Ursa's narrative encompasses many more concerns, from history and historiography to act and autogynography and, finally, her ontological and psychosexual transcendence or freedom" (311). Due to being made barren, Ursa examines the trauma of the Corregidorean narrative from a different lens. She explores the history of Corregidorean women that reveals a disdain for men. As a result, the Corregidorean women are unable to maintain a loving relationship with men.

Great Gram's story and experience, although unique to her, somehow becomes the story of future generations. The sexual exploitation that Great Gram experiences of being removed from the fields and made to become a sexual slave (11) and eventually made to sleep with Corregidora and his wife (13) affects her psychologically. Because she does not make the choice

to sleep with Corregidora and his wife, she loses control of her body. As a result, Great Gram views her body as contaminated. Even though it is apparent that there is a psychological effect, the earlier generations did not have a language or a mastery of language to adequately articulate their pain nor speak to the psychological effects of the crimes against their bodies.

The importance of telling the story and making generations has been ingrained into Ursa's mind, but it becomes formulaic and "los[es] the intimacy that generational narratives must preserve to enrich and nurture personal history" (Harb 119). Part of the source of this loss of intimacy is the generation removal. When Ursa receives these stories, it is impossible for her to feel the pain that her Great Gram and Gram experienced, and too, the idea of slavery has taken on a different meaning. Slavery for Great Gram and Gram is denoted by sexual objectification and sexual (re)production instead of economic labor and production. In other words, it is hard for Ursa to know what these women and others endured and experienced at the hands of slave owners.

While Great Gram and Gram focused on sexual exploitation and (re)production of slave labor, Ursa focuses on the sexual freedom she gains as a twentieth century blues woman. Even though the Corregidorean women narratives speak of the pain and abuse by men, the focus of the narrative shifts. Whereas the early generations, Great Gram and Gram, told their story in order to keep the atrocities of slavery alive and to show the mark of slavery upon the body. The latter generations, Ursa and her mother, gravitated towards the ability to maintain relationships with men and sexual freedom. Ursa altered the idea of her body to center upon the "psychosexual"—the psychological effects of sex. Unlike her mother and foremothers, who see men as necessary for procreation, Ursa seeks fulfillment through her marriages with Mutt and then Tadpole. Ursa does not see men as a means to "making generations" but rather a source of her happiness.

Ursa tries to connect to the collective voices and narrative of her foremothers. After catching Tadpole with another woman and ending a second marriage, Ursa decides to explore the family's secret and her mother's private memory (104). Feeling that there has to be an ancestral reason as to why she has been unable to maintain a relationship, Ursa questions her mother for answers. Siréne Harb discusses Great Gram's tale and states, "the ancestral narrative does not leave any space for Ursa to explore her personal story" (119). The ancestral narrative, as Ursa finds when talking to her mother, explains the distrust or lack of trust these women have in men. Indeed, aside from imparting familial history, the Corregidorean women have taught Ursa to be wary of men. A common thread that Ursa sees in her failed relationships and her mother's failed marriage is the inability to love men. Ursa is able to see similarities in the narrative of her ancestors and her own life and begins the process of trying to move from an ancestral story and gain control of her life and begin her own story.

As a result of Great Gram's sexual exploitation by Corregidora and Gram's incestuous relationship with Corregidora, these women suffer from a lack of love for and trust in men. The sexual violence these women experience causes them to view men negatively. The traditional view of men depicts them as the protector of women. The Corregidorean women, however, see men as perpetrators of violent crimes against the female body. A disruption in the role males play in the life of women occurs due to the sexual abuse endured by Great Gram and Gram. Although Corregidora was the slave owner and father of Gram, he fails to protect his property and family. And as a result of Corregidora's actions, men become reviled objects in that they are used in order to produce seed and discarded afterward.

When Ursa's mother recounts her story of meeting Ursa's father, she prefaces the narrative, "Corregidora is responsible for that part of my life. If Corregidora hadn't happened

that part of my life never would have happened” (111). Blaming Corregidora for her inability to sustain a viable relationship and love men, Ursa’s mother shows how un-redressed sex crimes create psychological and psychosexual problems. When Ursa’s mother meets Martin at the diner, she is faced with the question of whether or not to trust him. Ursa’s mother notices the way he looks at and watches her like “[he] want something. It don’t have to be to open [my] legs up. Sometimes I think he wanted something else, and then sometimes I think that’s all he wanted” (112). From the outset of the relationship, Ursa’s mother is concerned with the possibility of being sexually exploited.

A feeling of ambivalence pervades Ursa’s mother before she has sexual relations with Ursa’s father, Martin. Ursa’s mother’s ambivalence hinges on “...trusting [Martin]” and “trusting [herself]” (116). For the first time in the Corregidorean women history, they have a choice in how to use their body. By choosing to “trust Martin,” Ursa’s mother fulfills her role in the narrative—to procreate. However, she seemingly forsakes her mother’s advice on men. Ursa’s mother’s ambivalence leads her to mimic and/or relive the Corregidorean history rather than escaping the narrative. In her endeavor to move past the Corregidorean syndrome, Ursa’s mother ventures to explore a love interest but finds she cannot give herself completely to Martin. Ursa’s mother wants to procreate but “that feeling of him in there” (117) is less than desirable. The feeling of Martin being “in there” in her space encompasses more than just her sexual space, but it also encompasses the idea of having to nurture him in a loving way which is outside of the norm of Corregidorean women view of men as objects to be hated and not nurtured. For the Corregidorean women, men who seem to have good intentions eventually hurt and injury women.

For three generations, the idea of sex and sexuality was the equivalent of enslavement for Corregidorean women. What separates Ursa from the previous generations of Corregidorean women is that sexuality and sex for Ursa exemplifies a movement toward independence and freedom. As Angela Y. Davis points out in her important text, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, post-slavery women performance artists “preached about sexual love, and in so doing they articulated a collective experience of freedom, giving voice to the most powerful evidence there was for many black people that slavery no longer existed” (9). According to this view, the ability to sing about and act upon one’s notion of sex and sexuality connotes a sense of freedom. Such an ethos is evident in Ursa yet absent in previous generations. The collective sexual experience for the Corregidorean women did not equal freedom and choice. Even as a young child, Ursa felt somewhat comfortable with sex and her sexuality. While recalling an episode from her childhood, Ursa recalls playing doctor and lying across a board on her stomach while the boy raised her dress (42). Mock sex lays the foundation and creates a space whereby Ursa views sexuality and sex as something pleasurable that leads to freedom.

Scholar and critic DoVeanna Fulton Minor explains in her critical text *Speaking Power: Black Feminist Orality in Women’s Narratives of Slavery* that “the charge to make ‘generations’ defines sexuality within a framework of the womb and [a woman’s] ability to bear children” (94). Despite Ursa’s experiences with sex and sexuality, she lacks offspring which the previous generations of her family did experience. This rite of passage, “making generations,” ensures the continued production of the narrative while providing an outlet to ease the troubled mind of the storytellers affected by Corregidora. “Making generations” provides a space to locate the trauma of incest by passing the narrative along. The problem for Ursa, the inability to pass the family’s story, is first physical but becomes psychological as detailed by Jennifer Griffith in that

“Ursa...worries that the story will remain trapped within her now that she can no longer ‘make generations’” (359). With the inability to make generations, Ursa loses her sexual drive and freedom. As a result, Ursa turns to the blues as a means of passing the Corregidorean narrative.

The lyrical form of blues provides the necessary framework for Ursa to articulate her experiences—loss of womb and child—while coming to a resolution. The blues allow Ursa to sing through the psychological and psychosexual problem of sexual abuse that has plagued her family for generations. This new method does not yield a physical offspring, but it creates a path that leads Ursa towards freedom. In a fashion similar to her Gram who loved and listened to the blues, Ursa becomes a student of the blues and sings the blues (103). The blues allow her to move from the past atrocities to new memories. As a result, women will no longer have to speak of sexual abuse, but they can also sing of them.

(Re)Memory

Individual and collective voices relate the method of how the Corregidorean narrative was told and passed along. Embedded in the method of “making generations” is the use of (re)memory. The scares of Corregidora’s incest and rape have directly and indirectly affected the psyche of the Corregidorean women.

The role memory plays in *Corregidora* is a central part of the text. Much of what we know of Ursa’s family’s history and the characters is related through some form of memory or recall. Although there has been some criticism that explores the idea of memory in *Corregidora*, scholars have not examined the manner in which utilizing memory, which can be located in the text, can be used to (dis)locate trauma and to turn trauma into a redemptive space. Each Corregidorean woman has a particular memory that impacts her life and in a way affects and plays a part in developing her identity

The pain of memories past is found in the oral Corregidorean narrative. In turn the narrative and pain, not physical, are passed to future generations. This dynamic is carried out in the way Ursa chooses to live her life as a blues singer who makes generations through song. When an oral narrative or family history is absent, the individual(s) has no agency for (dis)placing and (dis)locating the familial trauma. Mutt and Tadpole know very little about their family's history. Mutt has some recollection of his grandfather working as a blacksmith and [going] crazy after his wife was taken to fulfill a financial obligation. And Tadpole reveals a miscegenous past that is relatively free from horror and hurt. As a result, these men are unable to neither identify with Ursa's past nor provide the emotional support she needs. Ursa turns to the blues to locate her trauma. Mutt and Tadpole, on the hand, who are not able to articulate their family's history carry their familial trauma and (mis)direct their rage through violence and infidelity. The ability to clearly articulate family problems proves important.

Although it appears in the early stages of the text that (re)telling and remembering the traumatic past does not allow one to move beyond the trauma, at the end of the novel, it is through the act of reenacting and remembering that Ursa and Mutt are able to get to a place of reconciliation. Ursa is able to (dis)locate the trauma of the Corregidorean experience by performing a sex act on Mutt that possibly could have been performed by Great Gram on Corregidora. Through the sex act, Ursa understands the pleasure/pain dialectic and garners a sense of redemption.

In his essay, "A Non-Negotiable Blues Catharsis: Billie and Ursa *Lady Sings the Blues* and *Corregidora*," Alfonso Hawkins reads blues as a form of storytelling and asserts that through this form of storytelling, "[m]emory acts as a mechanism to transform pain and suffering into dignity and self-worth" (657). In essence the act of memory and/or storytelling allows

individuals to move beyond trauma in their lives to a place of peace. This transformation is possible because telling the story and passing the story to others provides a salve to the soul and strengthens the individual. DoVeanna Minor states "...the relationship between narrator and listener in a testimonial situation is paramount to the process and flow of witnessing or narrating a story of trauma and to healing the testifier" (90-1), supporting Hawkins's reading and idea that storytelling provides a source of healing and holds transformative power.

Part of the healing process centers on the ability to "pass" information and knowledge to subsequent generations. Unlike the idea of "passing" referenced in previous chapters that referred to the color-line, "passing" here is equivalent to the dissemination or transference of information and wisdom. Information and wisdom is passed through an oral tradition of (re)production and/or "making generations." Unable to produce an offspring, Ursa abandons the Corregidorean narrative and (re)creates a blues story. By using song, Ursa employs what Zora Neale Hurston terms originality,²³ reinventing her foremother's method of storytelling. Remembering her childhood, Ursa recalls both an oral tradition and one filled with music. Blues and gospel fills Ursa's memory as outlets. Gram relates to the blues while Ursa's mother prefers spirituals. In his important and salient text *The Power of Black Music*, Samuel A. Floyd, Jr. notes the importance of music in the development of cultural memory²⁴. Floyd writes, "it [cultural memory] confirms the validity of new knowledge and new ideas as no amount of rational

²³ Zora Neale Hurston's "Characteristics of Negro Expression" (1934). See *African American Literary Theory: A Reader* ed. Winston Napier p.37. Hurston defines originality as the modification of ideas.

²⁴ See Samuel A. Floyd Jr. *The Power of Black Music* (New York, 1995). Floyd defines cultural memory as "the subjective knowledge of a people, its immanent thoughts, its structures, and its practices; these thoughts, structures, and practices are transferred and understood unconsciously but become conscious and culturally objective in practice and perception" (8).

thought will or can” (4), alluding to the power of music in the production of knowledge. In addition, Floyd’s idea suggests the power of (re)memory in devising new ways to cope with tragic events and situations as in the case of Gram and Ursa’s mother.

Why does Gram choose the blues and Ursa’s mother spirituals? It would seem the foreparents would choose the spirituals and the offspring the blues. When examining the spirituals and blues, a relationship exists between the two musical forms that show the black experience from a spiritual and secular viewpoint, respectively. These musical forms, when compared, “unite joy and sorrow, the love and the hate, the hope and the despair of black people” (Cone 5) are influenced by experiences. Gram’s experience of incest leaves a mark upon her consciousness which leads her to the blues. Scholar and critic Tony Bolden, in providing a definition and locating the origin of the blues, states, “The word ‘blues’ in its original sense, seems to have come from the despondent mood associated with having a fit of ‘blue devils’ that anyone could experience” (39). Bolden further writes, “...the blues are themselves products of hybridization. In addition to the ballads’ capacity to resolve contradictions (God/Devil, bad/good), which stemmed from the spirituals, the blues absorbed other forms, including ‘fables, metaphors, and melodies’” (39) which shows that, along with the experiential basis and/or source, the blues comes out of a spiritual tradition. Similarly, Samuel Floyd asserts spirituals are derived from “the black experience in America” (40), an experience that is tied to a dream of freedom which we find in both musical forms. The common thread that binds blues and spirituals is a desire for freedom.

It is the lived experience of Gram that gives her the blues. James Cone, in detailing the rise of the blues, writes, “slavery is the historical background out of which the blues were created” (98). Such is the case for the Corregidorean women in that the history and narrative of

Corregidora provides the background for Gram's blues. Blues provides its listener and singer an image of freedom that seemed a distant thought during slavery. The concept of freedom was shown through songs that addressed love, sexuality, the body and travel. For Gram, her story of freedom and song center on the body. Because her body and mind are free from sexual and mental abuse at the hands of Corregidora, Gram has a sense of freedom. Although Gram revisits and remembers her experiences, the blues provide an escape for her mind.

Spirituals act in the same vein as the blues, and Cone describes the birth of spirituals as "the spirit of the people struggling to be free" (30) which aptly describes Ursa's mother who seeks a loving relationship. In her attempt to pass along a story from which she is divorced, Ursa's mother finds that the (re)memory of Corregidora has become counterproductive and has poisoned any chance of her finding happiness with a man. Ursa's mother gravitates to spirituals could stem from her hope for a better day in terms of finding a meaningful love relationship. Even though she has been taught romantic relationships with men fail because men saw women as sexual objects to control and abuse, Ursa's mother's negative perception of men and the (re)memory of Corregidora ruin her marriage.

For Ursa, the blues provide a language to articulate the freedom narrative she has received from her mother and her Gram. Freedom can be viewed in terms of Ursa's desire to escape her hometown and live an uninhibited life free from the narrative of Corregidora. But the loss of her child and womb at the hands of Mutt, her husband, causes the memory of her childhood, the story of Corregidora, and the charge to make generations come rushing back to her memory and leaves Ursa troubled in mind.

Trouble in Mind

Trouble in mind, I am blue

But I won't be blue always

For the sun will shine in my back door again.

These lyrics penned by Bertha “Chippie” Hill (March 15, 1905-May 7, 1950) in 1926 become the anthem for Ursa after she loses her child and her womb. What “Trouble in Mind” seems to express for Ursa is the ability to look forward to something better in the future—For the sun will shine in my back door again. Trouble develops for Ursa after she is rendered sterile by Mutt. How can Ursa make generations and leave evidence of Corregidora’s crime? How will the narrative of Corregidora be carried into the world without a new generation of Corregidorean women?

The role of the blues in Ursa’s life serves as a substitute for the progeny of a child. Unable to bear children, the blues speak to the ancestral and current pain that Ursa is experiencing. In addition, the blues provides a method of discourse to express the differences and similarities of jazz and blues, Alfonso Hawkins asserts, “[blues] is a desperate attempt to replace emotional exacerbation through the balm of song. Through the articulation of the event, the blues musicians triumphs over a particular dilemma or obstacle surrendering it to less powerful psychological pressure (often sequestered by the singer) thwarting his or her life” (656). The idea of emotional replacement and triumph describe what the reader sees transpiring in Ursa as she evolves throughout the novel.

Even though Ursa has a domestic life, she is committed to the life of a blues singer. As Angela Davis points out in “I Used to Be Your Sweet Mama” what society expected of women and their roles within blues culture were different. Social expectations positioned women as domestic (married). However, women blues singers contradicted the notion of women being

happy in domestic spaces by singing about travel and sexuality as a means for women to find and achieve happiness (11).

For Ursa, however, sexuality becomes a source of discontent. In part, Ursa acts like a blues woman in that she leaves home (travel) and seeks to escape the Corregidorean narrative and women. The act of leaving home for Ursa is not for the purposes of exploring the world but to forget the Corregidorean narrative and to reside in an urban area. As opposed to rural living, urban areas offered more economic opportunities for women than were available in rural areas, which only offered agricultural opportunities for women. Women in urban area could work in the service industry, nightclubs, sing or have access to education. The idea of urban life presented a new frontier that brought with it a set of expectations of freedom that was unimaginable and deemed wicked in rural society. A great deal of this perception comes from the popularity of the blues.

But while Cone describes the blues as spirituals “because they are impelled by the same search for the truth of black experience” (100), the blues are spirituals because the sorrow of the song resonates with the listener and speaks of truth. Truth can be located in the words and message and does not require a search. Also, the truth of the experience is made or felt through the singer who undergoes a transformation and takes on the meaning and essence of the song. This idea of truth realized through performance is demonstrated when Ursa sings for Cat one evening:

“Trouble in mind, I’m blue, but I won’t be blue always,” I sang and stopped. “Go on.” I was sitting up in bed. She was on the cedar chest. I went on and finished the song....” It didn’t sound like it used to,” I said. “Your voice sound a little strained, that’s all. But if I hadn’t heard

you before, I wouldn't notice anything. I'd still be moved. Maybe even moved more, because it sounds like you been through something. Before it was beautiful too, but you sound like you been through more now. You know what I mean?" 44

Cat's response comes from Ursa's ability to infuse the song with the emotions and feelings of someone who is troubled in mind. Prior to her fall and the loss of her unborn child, Ursa was troubled in mind by the Corregidorean curse. The inability to carry out her ancestral edict, of "making generations" to pass the Corregidorean narrative leads to the deeper feelings Ursa is able to exude in the song.

Indeed the trouble that Ursa sings about prior to her accident was minimal at best. Before her fall, Ursa lived a double life. She successfully lived a domestic life while singing the blues. Ursa was able to enjoy some semblance of happiness with Mutt while ministering to the needs of the blues patrons. Any thoughts of Corregidora seemed to be erased as Ursa enjoyed her freedom from the constant reminders to "make generations."

Even though there is no verbal articulation of the Corregidorean narrative in Ursa's song repertoire, these memories, to make generations, are borne out in Ursa's song of choice. Bracketed by a sense of hope in the first and last stanza, "Trouble in Mind" has a sense of doom in the middle. Before the fall, Ursa carries an age old narrative about the crimes committed against the female body. With the loss of her child, she becomes troubled as to how she would pass the Corregidorean narrative. Verses two and three of the song provide an apt picture of what Ursa experiences:

Trouble in mind, it's true
I have almost lost my mind

Never had so much
Trouble in my life before.

I'm gonna lay my head
On some lonesome railroad iron
Let the 2:19 train ease
Ease my troubled mind.

While remembering her fall, Ursa recalls being delirious and “cussing [Mutt] and the doctors and nurse out” (4), not for the fact that she falls, but because her canal of birth and life have been removed. Now it is impossible for Ursa to carry out her familial duty of “making generations.”

The burden of not being able to fulfill her familial obligation leaves Ursa in a state of mind that is close to death. The loss of her unborn child coupled with her inability to have children, gives Ursa’s song a fuller blues feel. In addition to the loss of her child, Ursa also experiences two divorces. This pervading feeling of being blue continues for Ursa until she talks with her mother who holds the key for Ursa’s angst and feeling blue. Ursa learns from her mother that the root of her problem—the inability to make a relationship last— stems from the history of abuse at the hands of the “first man,” Corregidora. Because Corregidora sexually abused their foreparents, the Corregidorean women never learned to trust nor love men.

Because Corregidora sexually abused Great Gram and had an incestuous relationship with Gram, his daughter, there lies a deep-seated hatred for men in Corregidorean women. Corregidorean women fear that the men who enter their lives will abuse them. Therefore, it is imperative that the Corregidorean women leave a testimony, “make generations,” to the atrocities of past sexual abuse experienced during slavery. These testimonies serve as a reminder

to the evil of men and caution the women in the family to be on guard against men's sexual abuse. These psychological issues create barriers that impede loving and lasting relationships.

The final verse of "Trouble in Mind" states

Trouble in mind

Oh yes I am blue

But I won't be blue always

Yes, the sun will shine in my back door someday.

"Trouble in Mind" ends the way it begins. There is an expression of hope for a brighter day and future. This hope is realized for Ursa through her reconciliation with Mutt. After over twenty years of divorce, Ursa and Mutt are both able to address the trauma of their familial histories that caused problems in their marriage. It is a sexual act that Ursa performs, that she refused to perform while married, that signifies Ursa's move toward freedom. Scholar Paula Giddings, commenting on the act of sex as pleasurable, notes that by the late nineteenth century, due to urbanization and women working outside the home, these factors contributed to a "commodification of sex in forms of pornography and brothels" (161). According to Giddings, women who worked outside the home were considered highly sexual and/or bad because they had no male protection to guard against vices. Because Ursa sang in clubs, she would fit Giddings description and would have possibly learned the sexual act of fellatio in the club setting.

Ursa obtains psychological freedom by performing the sexual act of fellatio on Mutt. While preparing to performing the act of fellatio, Ursa wonders "What is it a woman can do to a man that make him hate her so bad he wont to kill her one minute and keep thinking about her...A moment of pleasure and excruciating pain at the same time, a moment of broken skin but

not sexlessness, a moment just before sexlessness, a moment that stops just before sexlessness, a moment that stops before it breaks the skin” (184). In a sense, the act of fellatio paves the way to heal the wound of a broken marriage and move toward reconciliation of self and happiness with a man.

Why is the act of fellatio healing and transformative for Ursa? Ursa does not see the act of fellatio as submitting to Mutt but liberating. Inflicting pain by breaking the skin of Mutt’s penis allows Ursa to take control of not only her body but also Mutt’s body. Although the position Ursa assumes, “between [Mutt’s] knees,” (184) is submissive in posture, she wields control and power over Mutt. In this submissive position, Ursa has the ability to bring Mutt pleasure and inflict pain and in so doing, she reclaims her sexuality. By inflicting pleasurable pain, Ursa is able to reclaim her sexuality by taking away the pleasure and satisfaction from Mutt. Sex is no longer only a method of pleasure for Mutt but also Ursa.

By carrying out a sexual act believed to have been performed by her Great Gram upon Corregidora, which provided freedom, Ursa reclaims her sexuality and frees her psyche. The psychological issues that have affected the relationships and sex life of the Corregidorean women are expelled through Ursa’s sex act. Only after her mother shares her private memories does Ursa understand the psychological damage that has affected the Corregidorean women. In the end, Ursa chooses to confront generational demons by reenacting a sex act that brought her Great Gram freedom.

CHAPTER SIX

CODA

In the scope of scholarship, this project follows the work of Tony Bolden's *Afro-Blue*, Houston Baker's *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*, and Aldon Nielsen's *Black Chant and Integral Music* in the use of music, blues, as a text. By understanding the use and effect of blues upon the lives of African Americans, it opens doors to understand the use of music in the novels discussed. As it was stated in the introduction, music is a language. It is a language that continues to evolve and speaks to the circumstances and experiences of people across racial, gender, and sexual borders.

By gaining an appreciation for the blues, the reader becomes equipped to understand the plight of the various protagonists. This project extends Fanon's reading of ambivalence to not just those of African descent but to include those of biracial heritage. Ambivalence, then, can be read as an intensified form of double-consciousness because of the tripartite nature of the protagonists.

I believe this project provides space to reconsider the works presented here as blues texts. Readers will be able to understand the cultural importance of blues and music in the lives of African American writers. More importantly, I believe this project shows the importance of considering blues not just for understanding poetry but as a trope for reading novels.

Blues tells an individualized story that is understood by others. The music addresses multiple concerns from infidelity to sorrow. The sorrow of blues speaks to the ambivalent nature of the protagonists in that blues leaves one with a feeling of melancholy. The protagonists

encompass and possess a level of blue emotions. As seen in the texts, the protagonists' struggle with issues of racial identity and sexual fulfillment leaves them in a state of regret. The protagonists wonder about the other side of life but remain in their situations and blue state of mind. The answers to the protagonists' questions are found in the amalgamated music genres.

In an attempt to reconcile all parts of their being, the protagonists use various musical forms to speak to their ambivalence. Blues becomes the metaphor that addresses their ambivalence in part because the racial and sexual identity experiences of the protagonists are of a social and cultural nature. Because some of the protagonists seek to gain entry into the middle and upper middle class of society, they lack the proper stock and breeding to be fully accepted. Music becomes the mechanism that opens the door for Johnson's unnamed narrator to gain entry. For Larsen's Helga Crane, music and travel creates space for her to navigate through middle class society. In addition, dance and music creates the cultural aspect that allows the protagonists to address their ambivalence. Through the dance, Paul is able to express his love for Bona; through music, Ursa is able to (re)create the atrocities of her family's past.

From the early days of this country's existence, race has been a point of contention. Post slavery the question of race grew, and more importantly, the question surrounding miscegenous individuals. What would the country do with the newly freed Africans and African Americans and how would they fit into the fabric of the country was at the center of debates. Also, how would the country classify the "new race" or miscegenous individuals? For so long, Africans and African Americans were the driving force of labor. Now they would become a part of free enterprise. How would the country account for them in governance? And because some miscegenous individual's complexion was light enough to be considered white, the nation had to guard against the mixing of blood. More importantly, individuals who were miscegenous could

not reap the benefits of their white brothers and sisters. Thus, the struggle begins the trials and tribulations of miscegenous individuals who were free and passable. Although they possessed the skin color that would afford them certain rights and privileges, their African ancestry rendered them void.

As novels were circulated that examined the miscegenous individual, the history disappears of miscegenous individuals. The secret sins of slavery seemed to get brushed aside. But for the individuals who bore the criminal atrocities of rape in their skin, the history of slavery would not be forgotten. The novels discussed in this project bring to light not just miscegenous individuals but the trauma—psychic, social, and cultural—they experienced.

Even though a goodly number of miscegenous individuals could have passed for white, there still existed a burden of ambivalence that had to be addressed. Ambivalence takes on traumatic weight as the miscegenous individual tries to negotiate through society. For the protagonists in the texts discussed, music aids in their quest. Although some protagonists denied their heritage, they could not escape the power of music. Because music has such a presence in the life of Africans and African Americans, it is played out in the lives of the various protagonists. As evidenced by the unnamed narrator in Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, in the end, he comes back to music. He is endowed with a musical compass that guides him along his journey. It is not just music that assists these characters, but it is blues.

The blues experience for the protagonists propels them to name and accept their identities as in the case of the unnamed narrator, Paul, and Ursa Corregidora, or deny their identity in the case of Kabnis. Either way these protagonists arrive at their final destination via a particular experience that shaped their being. Their blues experience brings about an epiphany moment that

yields a realization of their identity. In other words, blues music becomes a metaphor for their ambivalent identity.

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