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“Vital Glowing Things”: The Art of Women’s Writing, 1910-1935

Elizabeth C. Decker
The Graduate Center, City University of New York

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“VITAL GLOWING THINGS”: THE ART OF WOMEN’S WRITING, 1910-1935

by

ELIZABETH DECKER

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2016
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by

Elizabeth Decker

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

“Vital Glowing Things”: The Art of Women’s Writing, 1910-1935

by

Elizabeth Decker

Advisor: Hildegard Hoeller

The rising field of new modernisms continues to breathe new life into the literature of marginalized writers of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century. By imagining modernism as a series of modes and strategies, and expanding the axes upon which we map modernism’s boundaries, we make way for writers who were shut out by the often imbalanced, limited modernism of the past and illuminate the field with new possibilities. This dissertation takes part in this exciting, vibrant conversation by identifying a mode of modernism present in the literature of three early twentieth-century women writers, who all used visual art techniques to incorporate biographical interests into their literature, thereby strengthening and invigorating their work. Relying on new modernist theories proffered by Rebecca Walkowitz, Douglas Mao, and Paul Saint-Amour, this dissertation takes new approaches to the lives and literature of writers Fannie Hurst, Edith Summers Kelley, and Nella Larsen.

The dissertation explores the way each writer harnessed techniques of a visual art practice to respond to biographical preoccupations. Hurst, writer and political activist, engages collage to use her literature to “react and protest” against America’s political climate and the rapidly evolving socioeconomics of New York City in the early 1900s. Back-to-the-land traveler and mother of three, Edith Summers Kelley, employs techniques of modern photography to reach across America and find the “great and deep humanity” that connects us all; and Nella
Larsen—biracial, bicontinental, a woman with multiple careers and lives—enacts aesthetics of painting to explore the (in)visibility of women in a developing global and social climate. Each reading aspires to illuminate the literature of these women, the vital glowing things each one has left for her readers. In doing so, the dissertation contributes to the emerging work of new modernisms.
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INTRODUCTION

LIGHTING A FIRE

In the Spring of 2012, I enrolled in a Graduate Center seminar entitled “Faking it: American Women Writers and the Masks of Modernisms.” Designed by Dr. Hildegard Hoeller, the course sought to answer this question: how did American women writers “[manipulate] their texts and the reader/writer contract within the rich critical context of modernism's use of modes and strategies such as collage, textual borrowing, translation, ethnography, folklore, masking, and primitivism”? In so many ways, that single course was the genesis of my graduate study and this dissertation. It introduced me to Professor Hoeller, who would soon become my advisor. And, it introduced me to women writers that my high school and college education failed to include: Julia Peterkin, Nella Larsen, Fannie Hurst, Edith Summers Kelley, Anzia Yezierska, and more. The exposure to these writers, these women’s voices telling women’s stories, many of them silenced by the academic, literary canon, alit an interest in feminist scholarship that would guide me to this dissertation project.

In addition to these so-called unmet friends, a term created by Carolyn Heilbrun, the questions and assumptions that motivated the seminar ignited my scholarly interests in the ways that women writers formed relationships with themselves as writers, with their readers, and the “strategies” enacted in their art. In particular, the assertion that modernism is a set of modes—as stated in the course description: collage, textual borrowing, masking—instead of a blanket label applied to a writer and their work, opens up new ways of thinking and talking about modernist writers. That these strategies could be applied to writers who fell on the boundaries or fully outside of modernism breathed new fire into my academic curiosities about the accomplishments of the non-canonical, marginal writers of the early twentieth century. Thinking about the
purposeful ways women manipulated their texts, and the ways they positioned themselves within the text, made space for exploring their biographies and how their art came to reflect the preoccupations of their lives.

And so, the flames of this dissertation began to burn. Inspired by the work of the course, I pursued study of the women writers included in Professor Hoeller’s course, deepening my understanding of their lives and their literature. I interpreted some of the work of the course to reflect biography as theory, suggesting that the writers’ lives informed their literature. Of the writing by American women of the early twentieth century, I ultimately found most inspiration from three writers whose scholarly associations place them outside of modernism’s boundaries: sentimental, middle-brow writer Fannie Hurst, naturalist Edith Summers Kelley, and Harlem Renaissance star Nella Larsen. While each writer is critically situated in their own way, viewing them together illuminates their participation with modernist modes. Each writer engages one form of visual art in their writing to negotiate their role as author; Hurst, writer and political activist, engages collage to use her literature to “react and protest” against America’s political climate and the rapidly evolving socioeconomics of New York City in the early 1900s. Edith Summers Kelley, back-to-the-land traveler and mother of three, employs techniques of modern photography to reach across America and find the “great and deep humanity” that connects us all. And Nella Larsen—biracial, bicontinental, a woman with multiple careers and lives—enacts aesthetics of painting to explore the (in)visibility of women in a developing global and social climate.

In many ways, this dissertation is a biographical and cultural history project in addition to a literary one, moving across life and work to illuminate the artistic lives of Hurst, Kelley, and Larsen. Of course, circulating all around these women are other unmet friends: Zora Neale
Hurston, Kate Chopin, and Edith Wharton, to name a few. While the dissertation will attend almost exclusively to Hurst, Kelley, and Larsen, I know they exist in the spheres of influence of one another and the women writing all around them. With this in mind, I approach literature as a social project, believing that fiction shapes our perception of reality. The lives that are left out of fiction—both the writers themselves and the characters they create—disappear from our cultural imagination. Writers that do not endure in critical or scholarly work do not contribute to public perception of literature or life from a past era. This elision is what makes canonization so dangerous and what inspires me to focus my scholarship on writers and literature that tell the stories that may otherwise go untold. Especially in the case of Hurst, Kelley, and Larsen, their lives also represent the experiences of women coming of age in the early twentieth century.

Despite their fascinating lives and critically acclaimed literature, the legacies of Hurst, Kelley, and Larsen did not endure over time; however, Larsen was “rediscovered” in 1970 and she is now included in the canon of the Harlem Renaissance and American modernism. Even during their lives, each writer in her own way seemed to be a vital, glowing artist whose flame was extinguished prematurely; in this way, they recall Clare Kendry, the “vital glowing thing” of Nella Larsen’s *Passing*, who is there one moment but disappears the next, plummeting to her sudden death. For these authors, the recovery work, and in some places, the discovery work, is compelling because it challenges the existing discourse on what we know, or believe we know, about the authors, illuminating new paths to discovering them. For example, critical work on Hurst tends to circle around conversation on the role of the popular writer, the modern, female romantic protagonist, and, almost exclusively due to her novel *Imitation of Life*, representations of race. These characterizations approximate a classification of Hurst as a kind of modernist, articulated by Stephanie Lewis Thompson as a “middlebrow” modernist. Though Hurst
published eighteen novels and eight short story collections, almost all of her works have been out of print since the 1930s and 40s. In Kelley’s case, though she published one critically acclaimed novel in her lifetime, her archive reveals a vast and deep collection of stories telling the lives of America’s women, and America’s others. The limited scholarly work on Kelley fails to realize the breadth of her accomplishments. Especially in the case of Hurst and Kelley, their once-popular and critically acclaimed works are decentered from scholarly conversations, have been eliminated from or perhaps never were part of any educational curriculum, and have generally been excluded because they do not fit with canonical expectations of literature. Differently, Larsen, whose work underwent a renaissance in the late twentieth century due largely to the scholarly work of Deborah McDowell, garners a respectable amount of critical and public attention. In fact, in addition to recognition of Larsen as an accomplished Harlem Renaissance artist, scholars like Barbara Johnson, Judith Butler, Meredith Goldsmith, Hildegard Hoeller, and Pamela Caughie persuasively study Larsen as a modernist. I wish to carry forth the illumination of Larsen’s work to reflect on Kelley’s and Hurst’s.

An understanding of Hurst, Kelley and Larsen’s biographies is fundamental to my belief that their life experiences motivated how they approached their art. All three, born between 1884 and 1891, came of age at a time when women were beginning to emerge alongside men as artists in their own rights, when Edith Wharton’s “going-round” began to seem old-fashioned, and when the pursuit of independent careers and lifestyles was becoming an increasing reality; they were the manifestation of the hopes for the “new woman.” Hurst, Kelley, and Larsen embraced the possibilities newly afforded to women by pursuing political, academic, and artistic interests, each of them having a career independent of their writing one. To overlook that they were responding to these changing times in their literature is a disservice to them and their
writing. As such, each chapter in this dissertation will explore the life of each writer, looking back to the origins of their careers, at their influences and outside interests, and leading into their artistic work and the way they used modernist art techniques to enrichen, embolden, and illuminate their literature.

The chapter “‘React and Protest’: Collage in Fannie Hurst’s *Lummox*” demonstrates Hurst’s use of collage as a socially motivated aesthetic choice. Born an only child to an upper-middle class family in St. Louis, Missouri, Fannie Hurst did not always seem destined to be a writer for the people. It was only when she successfully convinced her parents to enroll her in the overpopulated, diverse public high school that Hurst encountered the swarming, mingling masses that would ignite her interests in being among, and writing about, the stories of the overlooked and marginalized “anonymous public,” a phrase she would use to describe the crowds she would come across once she moved to New York City. Her other-half characters—immigrant families, working-class women, child laborers—steered Hurst into an unlikely trajectory as social activist. Coming of age and into celebrity alongside sea changes in national social policies and practices, Hurst became an accidental spokeswoman for the rights of immigrants, women, and children. This chapter proposes that evidence of her social interests does not end with her characters and storylines, but suggests her engagement with the collage technique as an aesthetic choice that voices her protest against contemporary social practices.

The chapter reveals the way collage technique enables Hurst to use her art to “react and protest” against the many inequities she witnessed in New York. Rachel Farebrother, in *The Collage Aesthetic in the Harlem Renaissance*, traces the use of collage in writers of the Harlem Renaissance as reacting and protesting against race issues. In identifying collage techniques such as mandatory viewer/reader interpretation and repetition of motifs to emphasize salient points,
Farebrother provides a way to read collage in literature. I trace the origins of Hurst’s artistic impulses first in a series of short stories before moving on to *Lummox*, where Hurst creates her unlikely protagonist, Bertha, a young, poor, orphaned, ethnically white woman working her way through the homes of New York City’s upper class and the other half’s back alleys. In reading *Lummox* as a collage, I identify the elements that give the reader the double-take Farebrother names as the activating element of literary collage. For example, Bertha’s heartbeat is a symbol that appears throughout *Lummox*: as the body’s blood-source, Bertha’s heart is dangerous, pumping her ethnically ambiguous blood throughout her large, white body. Hurst references Bertha’s heartbeat at charged moments in the novel: during her rape, during her dismissal, during her revival of a young child—every time, calling attention to the conditions of Bertha’s life and work. Hurst’s use of roaming motifs, genre-switching, and manipulations of language, as well as including visually collaged elements, makes *Lummox* a literary collage. In doing so, she elicits double-takes from the reader, drawing attention to the social conditions of New York and making cases for social welfare reform; Hurst seeks in her reader a reaction to and protest against the conditions that Bertha and other characters work and live in.

An author equally concerned with telling the stories of the everyday experience but in many ways quite contrary to Hurst is Edith Summers Kelley, the focus of the next chapter. Kelley was a Canadian-born American writer, who, like Hurst, moved to New York City directly after graduating from university. After almost ten years in New York, Kelley and her partner C. Fred Kelley decided to join the back to the land movement, embarking on a series of agricultural adventures that took them from rural New Jersey, to tobacco farms in Kentucky, to southern California’s Imperial Valley. While working on the farms with Fred and raising their three children, Kelley continued to write, finding motivation for her stories in each new community. A
keen observer with a desire to tell the true stories of the American people, Kelley embraced each new community she settled in, and sought to aestheticize their experiences for her literature. In “‘A great and deep humanity’: Edith Summers Kelley and the Everyday,” I identify the presence of the insider-outsider technique practiced by early twentieth century photographers in Kelley’s short stories and novels. The insider-outsider technique, exemplified in the chapter by the photographs of Walker Evans and Doris Ulmann, uses as subjects the populations of America that America did not want to see: the forgotten poor, the tenant farmers, the outliers. However, in seeing their differences, Kelley, like Evans and Ulmann, seeks out their sameness. Kelley, Evans and Ulmann did not seek to exploit or exoticize, rather they desired to witness the shared experiences across state, class, and social lines. They focused on the stories of the everyday person, locating and evidencing the “great and deep humanity”\(^1\) that connects us all.

Though the chapter will work with short stories and dramatic works from Kelley’s unpublished (and mostly unstudied) archive, most of the evidence of Kelley’s practitioner as an insider-outsider artist will come from her published novels: the 1923 critically acclaimed *Weeds*, and the posthumously published *The Devil’s Hand*. Through the protagonists of each novel, Judith from *Weeds* and Rhoda from *Hand*, Kelley creates epics of the south and the west, weaving together the communities Judith and Rhoda live and work in, their families, their struggles, their joys and their heartbreaks. Like photographers Evans and Ulmann, who used documentary-aesthetics to make their unfamiliar subjects familiar to us, Kelley creates entire communities so different from the ones her readers live in, yet so familiar in their dynamics and

\(^1\) In her work *A New Heartland*, Janet Gallingani Casey writes: “As Ulmann herself put it, she hoped through her artistic effects to reveal the ‘great and deep humanity’ of her subjects; in 1930 she commented to Allen Eaton of the Russell Sage Foundation that she wished her photographs to ‘serve some social purpose’ rather than being appreciated merely as examples of art” (165).
ultimately, in their shared humanity. Though classically (and correctly) classified as a naturalist and regional-realist writer, Kelley’s enactment of this modernist mode allows her readers and critics another way to appreciate and understand her motivations and accomplishments. Through techniques of photography, including framing, perspective, repetition, and the grotesque, we outsiders become insiders to these unfamiliar communities. In Judith in particular, the struggles of tobacco-land become our own, distant yet familiar, as Kelley troubles the marriage plot, confronts the struggles of the artist manqué, and reveals the double-bind of living the life one must live and living the life one wishes to live.

While I find that this commitment to the stories of everyday life illuminates Kelley’s work, Kelley felt that her writing career failed because the American public simply did not care about the everyday person, only the scintillating stories of the upper class or of alleged real-life fairytales (Whitman “Novel”). After working with her photographs, it was no surprise to find that Ulmann felt similarly, saying once that though she often took portraits of accomplished writers, she has “been more deeply moved by some of my mountaineers than by any literary person. A face that has the marks of having lived intensely, that expresses some phase of life, some dominant quality or intellectual power, constitutes for me an interesting face” (“Doris Ulmann”). The ability to see and tell these stories from the insider-outsider perspective, to recognize in others the “great and deep humanity” that binds us all, makes Kelley a writer of enduring importance not only to our literary, but also to our cultural, imagination.

Finally, in “‘Study in Contrasts:’ (In)Visibility in Nella Larsen,” I discuss the aesthetic of visibility as parallel to the development of women’s interiority. In paralleling visibility and invisibility with subjectivity and objectivity, Larsen meditates on what it means to be—physically, spiritually, mentally—and what it means to be perceived. Larsen’s biographer George
Hutchinson suggests that Larsen was an “invisible” writer (1), and felt compelled to play with the dynamics of seeing and knowing in her writing. In this study of contrasts, I consider Larsen’s own struggle with how she was seen during her lifetime; examining ways Larsen manipulates visibility in her novels suggests a reconsideration of ways women were seen and unseen in the early twentieth century in multiple social and global contexts.

Larsen’s desire to explore (in)visibility is motivated by her own critical experiences with a life on the margins. At the height of her success she felt too visible, always uncomfortable, a deep-seated mandate from childhood to blend into her surroundings, to never stand out. From her earliest years, because of how Larsen looks, she was never fully seen: by this, I mean, her difference made her invisible. It is these issues of visibility and invisibility, and developing the subjectivity of female characters, which underlie the stories of Larsen’s protagonists, specifically Helga Crane of *Quicksand* and Clare Kendry of *Passing*. Larsen, who maintained lifelong interests in multiple arts, including design, decorative, and the visual arts, employs techniques seen in modernist painters to tell these stories. This chapter explores these shared aesthetics in Larsen and the painter Archibald Motley, a pairing first made in Cherene Sherrard-Johnson’s 2004 “‘A Plea for Color:’ Nella Larsen’s Iconography of the Mulatta.”

In Larsen and Motley’s works, the contrast between women as set in portraiture versus amongst a crowd reflects on their place as subjects or objects. In portraiture, when we see the women in isolation, we are afforded a sense of interiority. When the women emerge in the crowd—on the street, at parties—they are objectified and as readers and viewers, we lose a sense of their subjectivity. While both Larsen and Motley are classically considered exemplars of the Harlem Renaissance movement, their considerations of the relationship between self-and-other in their art also enact modernist modes, thereby broadening the conversation we have about their
Art. Other aesthetic devices—color, music, and the grotesque—inspire manipulations of (in)visibility and invisibility in Larsen and Motley’s work. Both artists used these aesthetic techniques to create the surroundings that their protagonists must negotiate. The characters’ responses to these surroundings informs their relationship with their worlds. For Larsen, we know this aesthetic is personal: she felt both too visible and totally invisible her entire life. By creating protagonists who navigate the same issues, Helga Crane in particular, Larsen aestheticizes her own formative experiences with (in)visibility.

By approaching modernism as a series of modes and techniques, we broaden its boundaries to better include writers like Fannie Hurst, Edith Summers Kelley, and Nella Larsen, who exist in their own spheres of formation and influence bordering and approximating modernism in time or subject, but not always intersecting with it: regionalism, realism, naturalism, the Harlem Renaissance. Identifying the connection between biographical interests and the interdisciplinary in their art illuminates the works of these three writers and makes way for the discoveries in each chapter about their lives and literature.

**Ashes, Embers, Glowing Flames**

Lest anyone think these reflections on the writing of women have existed in a vacuum since that 2012 seminar, I can assure you that my attachment to this project originates from a decades long renaissance of exploring and rediscovering writing by women: a renaissance that it is my pleasure and privilege to contribute to, but that is one that hearkens back to the feminist critics of the 1970s and 80s who felt, finally, that a canon without women writers was not a

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2 This is recognized explicitly for Motley by the 2014 retrospective of his work, entitled “Archibald Motley: Jazz Age Modernist.” The relationship between modernism and the Harlem Renaissance is explored by George Hutchinson’s *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White.*
canon at all. An inspiration for this renaissance was art scholar and critic Linda Nochlin’s 1971 essay “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?,” where she concludes that any answers to this question must stem from examinations of institutions of art, and not of individual artists. Nochlin argues that it was institutions that authorize artistic greatness and that their systematic elision of women from the institution left our cultural memory bereft of women artists. Scholarship in the late 20th century in the field of literary modernisms by critics such as Tillie Olsen, Elizabeth Ammons, Ellen Friedman, Elaine Showalter, and Rita Felski consider for the first time in academia the marginalized role of modern women writers. Standing on the shoulders of Nochlin, literary historians continue to propose ways that we may create a more inclusive, less gendered paradigm of what constitutes success in the field of nineteenth and twentieth century literature. This work continues today with scholarship and criticism from feminist literary and cultural scholars. I view my dissertation as an intervention into current work in the field that continues to correct the imbalanced modernist canon by reintroducing marginalized or forgotten women writers.

Concurrent to Nochlin’s essay but in the field of literary history, feminist scholars studied the systematic elimination of women’s voices. In Silences, published in 1978, Tillie Olsen identifies gender as one of the many ways authors are eliminated from America’s literary imagination. Decades later, Elizabeth Ammons’ Conflicting Stories would offer critical analysis on many women writers whose work had been silenced, or who were unable to produce further work due to their silencing. Ammons’ critical work was predicated on the identification of a “network of recurrent, complicated themes” addressed by American women writers at the turn of the twentieth century (for example, “the will to break silence…sexual exploitation of women…the difficulty of dealing with multiple discrimination—being an immigrant, being
lesbian, being black or Eurasian or Indian”) (5). In doing so, she lays out a path that moves scholarship beyond merely identifying the disappearance of women writers from the academy. Ammons work focuses on writing by women that took place during the modernist period, broadly conceived. As such, the work that emerged from *Conflicting* is of particular importance to the genesis of this project.

Since the publication of *Conflicting*, feminist scholars have demanded a revision of the type of work we call modernist, many seeking to disrupt the long-standing male-dominated standard of modernism. Elaine Showalter and Ellen Friedman’s “The Other Lost Generation” (1991) and “Missing Contents” (1995) suggest that we had yet to articulate a non-gendered understanding of the features of modernism. As Showalter explains, there was “little tolerance for female unconventionality [and] originality,” and female authors were mocked by and excluded from the patriarchal critical arena (107). Showalter and Friedman’s arguments, as well as Rita Felski’s 1995 *The Gender of Modernity*, enlighten the field to the traditionally male-normed boundaries of modernism. Indeed, Felski’s work is based on the “desire to reread the modern through the lens of feminist theory,” asking “How would our understanding of modernity change if instead of taking male experience as paradigmatic, we were to look instead at texts written primarily by or about women?” (10). Similarly, Bonnie Kime Scott’s *Refiguring Modernism: the Women of 1928*, also published in 1995, wishes to rectify the “unconsciously gendered masculine” modernist canon (as suggested also in *The Gender of Modernism*). In *Gender*, Scott includes Diane F. Gillespie’s “The Gender of Modernist Painting,” which discusses the challenges female modernist painters faced in their exclusion from a circle of artistic practice, and the ensuing development of their own creative practices. Gillespie’s study parallels a central question of this dissertation and imparts a model for interart modernist studies.
These works by individual scholars point us towards the emergence of a more egalitarian approach to modernist literary study, the so-called new modernisms. The emergence of new modernism in modernism changed the playing field for academic scholars and critics. According to the primary documenters of new modernisms, Rebecca L. Walkowitz and Douglas Mao, new modernisms evolved out of the 1999 Modernist Studies Association conference and the increasing desire exhibited by books, conference panels, and other scholarly production, no doubt inspired by the work of Olsen, Ammons, and others, to expand modernist studies. As scholarly work in the field continues this trend, Walkowitz and Mao formally introduce new modernisms in their 2006 *Bad Modernisms* and they continue to conceptualize the movement in an article in 2008’s *PMLA*. They suggest that “three [overlapping] strands of expansion—the temporal, horizontal, and vertical” allow a more inclusive historical, geographical, and social history of modernity (738) and meet the demands of expanding modernist scholarship. In addition to theorizing the future of new modernisms, the article also overviews the undeniable presence of these expanded axes of modernism in work since 1999 through the date of the article’s publication in 2008. The works highlighted by Walkowitz and Mao suggest alternatives to the artificially created high-and-low modernism. They also discuss critical works expanding across axes: for example, globally, in Laura Doyle and Laura Winkel’s *Geomodernisms*, and temporally, in Susan Stanford Friedman’s work reading E.M. Forster and Arundhati Roy comparatively (744).\(^3\) In late 2015, Bloomsbury Academic announced a new series titled *New Modernisms*, with the first six books already in line for publication.

\(^3\) Walkowitz and Mao’s article is exhaustive in its examples, and I present the aforementioned titles as merely suggestive of the other works representing similar academic impulses.
Responding to the *PMLA*’s call, both *Literature Compass* and *Modern Fiction Studies* published special issues considering women’s writing in modernism in 2013. In the introduction to the *MFS* special issue, entitled “Women’s Fiction, New Modernist Studies, and Feminism,” Anne E. Fernald writes that the articles therein go beyond presenting “compelling new work on women writers from the first half of the twentieth century” to demonstrating “the theoretical energy, historical importance, and intellectual weight of current feminist work on women writers. In doing so, it makes the case that no new work on modernism should go forward without serious engagement with women and feminist theory” (229). In the special issue, several articles deal directly with the biographical component to studying writing by women: Anne Cunningham considers the way “failure permeated Jean Rhys’s life, and [how] she wove it into her textual world,” (373); Andrea Adolph reviews the influence of “wartime sexuality and infidelity” (396) experienced firsthand by Marghanita Laski on her novels; and Rowena Kennedy-Epstein discusses the role of Muriel Rukeyser’s journalism career in her production of her novel *Savage Coast*.

Harnessing the success of the essays of the *MFS* special issue, Fernald uses the introduction as an opportunity to take to task the 2008 *PMLA* Walkowitz and Mao essay, in which gender is cited in a long list of “add-on” concepts rather than a “defining” one.⁴ In Fernald’s reading, this relegation inhibits the global development of scholarly modernism on women writers (230). This attitude towards gender as a less than vital consideration in reforming the field of modernism is reflected in the flagship journal of the Modernist Studies Association,

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⁴ Walkowitz and Mao acknowledge they have chosen specific veins of interest to highlight, but that “questions pertaining to literary form, intraliterary influence, narratology, affect, gender, sexuality, racial dynamics, psychoanalysis, science, and more continue to propel important scholarly endeavors, and we might reasonably have chosen other directions to dwell on [in the article]” (738).
Though noting that the 2013 issue of *MFS* is the first on feminism in the journal’s history, she reveals that “MSA, has not, in nineteen years, devoted a special issue to a woman writer or to feminist theory. Only eight essays in that journal have ‘feminist’ or ‘feminism’ as a key term, while an additional twenty-six have ‘women’ as a key term” (230). Despite its responsibility as the flagship journal of MSA, *Modernism/modernity* is not alone in its implicit continuance of the elision of women writers from a modernist canon: as Fernald notes, “although *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms* includes many women contributors, only one of the twenty-eight chapters mentions women in its title, and, of the six authors mentioned by name, only one—Jean Rhys—is a woman” (230). Fernald’s criticism of the MSA and Oxford University Publishing speaks for itself when considering what harm these gender-based elisions do to the field. This elision harms our academic conversations, and we need look no further than the compelling and innovative work presented in the 2013 *MFS* special issue to see what we miss when we do not include scholarly work on women writers.

While the focus of the *MFS* special issue is critical studies of women writers, *Literature Compass*’s 2013 Special Issue, “The Future of Women in Modernism,” focuses instead on methodological approaches that may be used by critics to further scholarship on modern women writers. This special edition is important because of its specific focus on approaching women writers, therefore mapping out the potential of this new scholarship. Pamela Caughie’s introduction is in clear agreement with Fernald in its insistence that the debate over how to best approach women’s writing in modernism is far from over; in fact, the inventive approaches to feminist scholarship suggested by the special issue only highlight how much work remains. Sonita Sarker’s summative comments conclude that:
this broader context [as suggested by the other essays] for “women’s literature in modernist studies” could serve two purposes: to see transnationality, interdisciplinarity, and technology as *constitutive* of the field rather than as exogenous strands to which it relates, and thus to contribute to new understandings of the roles of modernist women writers themselves. (10)

Using the transnational, interdisciplinary, technological, and other innovations of modernist women writers to motivate new conversations about women writers will advance the currently emerging scholarship in the field. Only in the doing of this work do we influence the future of literature and modernist studies to include women writers for their roles in the movement.

Despite the clear call to action by *PMLA* and *Literature Compass* and *MFS, Modernism/modernity*, has yet to engage directly with the future of women’s writing. A new journal, *Feminist Modernist Studies*, will lead the charge in making modernism a less biased, more inclusive space for literary scholarship. MSA does, however, acknowledge the existence and importance of new modernisms. As written by Friedman in 2010 in *Modernism/modernity*, with the advent of new modernism, “Modernism…became a reflection of and engagement with a wide spectrum of historical changes” (473), an approach she continues to explore in her 2015 *Planetary Modernisms*. Friedman lists some of these changes, like the influences of war, evolving technology, and changing social relations (by the categories “gender, class, and race”) (473). She concludes that once modernity responded “to thinking about the specific conditions of modernity for different genders, races, sexualities, nations, and so forth[,] Modernity became modernities, a pluralization that spawned a plurality of modernisms and the circulations among them” (473). The inclusion of Friedman’s article leads us to believe that the Association feels the impulse to respond more fully to the needs of an ever-expanding field of modernism. Breaking
down the canonical “M” Modernity, we enter a world of many modernisms—a world that allows for new applications of modernism’s modes and new connections between artists and their lives.

Exploration of these potentialities took place with vigor at the 2016 Modernist Studies Association conference, proving that despite its absence from *Modernism/modernity*, scholarship on the field of women’s modernisms is of great importance to many members of the MSA. In a seminar inspired by Jane Marcus, whose work focused primarily on feminist British modernism, participants were asked to identify feminist revolutions in modernisms by picking up Marcus’ charge to think back through their scholarly mothers. A critical line of examination was shared across the work of participants, which was the identification of patterns in women’s writing and in their lives to establish literary networks of innovation. For example, Magdalena Bogacka-Rode studies the work of Martha Gellhorn and Virginia Cowles to identify ways women writers practiced modernism. Though contemporaries, Gellhorn and Cowles were not colleagues, and no scholarship exists connecting their writing, yet Bogacka-Rode has identified and pursued patterns of innovation in the works that draw out new ways of establishing a women’s practice of modernist writing. Erica Delsandro’s work took a similar approach with more well-known but equally unaffiliated writers: Virginia Woolf and Mina Loy. Ann Martin and Jean Mills approached their work by first identifying a literary element—in Martin’s work it is the motor car, in Mills’ it is the “holophrase”—and how those elements surfaced in women’s work. In each instance, the scholars worked across and outside of accepted networks to identify patterns in the lives and work of women writers. In doing so, they began to suggest biographical spheres of influence not previously considered, opening new spaces for the study of women writers.

This line of thinking circles back to considerations of how we define modernism, modernity, and modernists in light of new modernism. A current critical approach under new
modernism encourages scholars to continue to break apart the canonical models of modernism. Paul Saint-Amour’s recent work *Future Tense* proposes the acceptance of “weak theory”. In other words, by weakening the traditional, long-held definition of Modernism and becoming more accepting of a Modernism that is “pluralized, adjectivalized, [and] decoupled from high culture” (41), we actually strengthen the field of study. Saint-Amour cites work by Susan Stanford Friedman, Jessica Berman, and Eric Hayot to demonstrate the field’s movement towards study that broadens the focus of canonical modernism. By thinking of modernism as a series of modes, or as stated by Berman, “a dynamic set of relationships, practices, problematics and cultural engagements with modernity” (Berman quoted in Saint-Amour 41), we open the field to artists whose work is improved by modernist aesthetics but does not fit within its current boundaries. When we move away from these definitions and allow the primary texts to guide our scholarship, we find ourselves in a liberating and ultimately more accurate arena of literary study.

Weak theory is just one theoretical approach inspired by new modernism. Using language evoking the same sense of “wrongness,” Rebecca Walkowitz and Douglas Mao put forth in 2006 the suggestion of “bad modernism.” In practicing “bad” modernism, scholars “[reconsider] the definitions, location, and producers of modernism.” In suggesting that modernist literature emerged from authors and artists not canonically considered, bad modernists challenge modernism’s traditional boundaries. Just as other scholars have identified features of Hurst, Kelley and Larsen’s writing that persuasively categorize the writers as modernist,^5^ I also suggest

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^5^ Examples include the previously mentioned work of Caughie, Goldsmith, Hoeller and Thompson on Hurst and Larsen. Work by Cherene Sherrard-Johnson on Larsen’s aesthetics, Amelia DeFalco’s work on Larsen and primitivism, and Jennifer Fleissner’s study of Kelley in *Women, Compulsion, Modernity* identifies a reoccurring theme of cyclical compulsion in women’s fiction that ultimately stands as a feature of women’s modernist writing.
a strategy of modernism that Hurst, Kelley, and Larsen use to fulfill biographically motivated interests. Bad modernism allows for the fiction produced when bringing “less evidently experimental texts” into the conversation, especially “against” the “criteria of high modernism” (2). Fundamental to the theories of Saint-Amour, Walkowitz, and Mao is the idea that by weakening the strictures around what we call “modernism,” we actually strengthen the field.

The interdisciplinary mode of modernism in Hurst, Kelley, and Larsen’s work positions study of the authors within the long critical history of interdisciplinary studies. One question often facing scholars of the interdisciplinary is the question of “why?” The fear seems to be that without a clear motivation—a clear “why”—that interdisciplinary study will devolve into comparative studies across disciplines. This leads scholars like W.J.T. Mitchell to insist that we must first question if a clear line of analysis of investigation motivates our pursuits. I agree with Mitchell that interdisciplinary scholarship is most productive when we move beyond comparison and into a study of application, purpose, and design. As such, my analysis of the interdisciplinary presence in Hurst, Kelley, and Larsen’s work also locates the incorporation of biographical interests into their literature.

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6 Early scholars of the interdisciplinary invest heavily in why we read art across disciplines. In a foundational essay, Svetlana and Paul Alpers concluded that in seeking “fixed likeness in such elusive and problematic phenomena as form, structure and harmony… [that] surely the game is not worth the candle” (456).

7 A prime example of this is W.J.T Mitchell’s Iconology and Picture Theory, which, like almost all work on the interdisciplinary, opens with references to the Laocoön problem, which addresses the fundamental limits of each discipline of art; limits which then make translation across disciplines more complicated or, to some, inherently unsatisfying. Mitchell spends most of his work theorizing on the why of word-image study, concluding that gains range from the political to the philosophical. Where Mitchell works with semiotics and structures to more answer the question of “if” we can do this, I do not wish to be stymied by this question. Mitchell criticizes people of my ilk, who treat the “if” question as an “annoyance to be overcome,” (156) and says that studies that do so will always already be missing a point.
Other scholars of the interdisciplinary like Wendy Steiner and Daniel Albright suggest far-reaching payoffs for visual-verbal work, the kind that this dissertation pursues. I feel this project envelops the literary and the cultural, in that these writers were developing their aesthetic techniques in response to and in tandem with other cultural production of their day. In *The Colors of Rhetoric*, Wendy Steiner concludes that in doing interart comparison in and across disciplinary periods, we arrive at a more fundamental understanding of all the media being produced at a time. I agree with and am motivated by Steiner’s conclusion. Steiner’s practice of naming the bases of language (e.g., phonemes, syntax) as translatable to the elements of art (brushstroke, color, canvas) is a more precise analogy than one this project will make; she sets an authorizing example of how language and art evolve together as a response to changing times.

And then there is another model for the interdisciplinary pursuit, which is to start at a point beyond a “why” and devote the energy instead to establishing approaches and theories of interart studies. Daniel Albright’s foundational interdisciplinary study *Untwisting the Serpent* is primarily concerned with updating the dated status of interart readings. We must move beyond the spatio-temporal divide of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (who, in the eighteenth century, introduced the first modern argument against Horace’s *ut pictura poesis* and addressed the Laocoön problem) and into a contemporary arena where “moving pictures” (cinema), make up part of our daily experience (to say nothing of the ubiquitous screens of our contemporary daily experience). By moving beyond “comparison” and by theorizing ways in which media interact, Albright, like Steiner, provides an evidentiary result that inspires ways of viewing interart modalities. Indeed, they would both agree that “interartistic comparison inevitably reveals the aesthetic norms of the period during which the question is asked” (Steiner 18). Albright’s
reading, like Steiner’s, inspires interdisciplinary scholarship, agreeing that only in the doing may we find answers to the “why.”

Another fundamental methodology of this project is that attention to biographical context underlies a successful literary study. In this dissertation, an understanding of the personal histories of each writer newly illuminates their literature and accounts for the innovative uses of the interdisciplinary. A study motivated by similar assumptions is Bridget Elliot and Jo-Ann Wallace’s *Women Artists and Writers: Modernist (Im)positionings.* *(Im)positionings*, a cultural and literary interdisciplinary study with the goal of thickening existing research. This approach originated by anthropologist Clifford Geertz, ultimately falls into the realm of pattern-identifying and meaning making for women writers and artists. Focusing on William’s argument that values of the avant-garde and modernism were “temporally specific” (164) to the urban environments they were reacting to, Elliot and Wallace wish us to reapproach these communities to interrogate the way women were participating in and reacting to the same phenomena, or different, as male artists. Elliot and Wallace insist that what scholarship needs goes beyond just recovery and into detailed examinations—"thick descriptions" (14)—of the ways which women’s modernisms happened and the ways which they participated in (or subverted) male dominated modernism: “both a materialist and a formalist fleshing out of women's modernism” (14).

In pairing verbal and visual artists, Elliot and Wallace trace the techniques women used to innovate during the modernist period: how Natalie Barney and Romaine Brooks both subverted gender roles by taking on masculine points-of-view; how Vanessa Bell and Virginia Woolf both mediated the woman-artist questions through hesitancy in their works; how Gertrude Stein and Marie Laurencin negotiated the demands of “genius” through their works; and finally how Djuna Barnes and Nina Hamnett turned themselves into subjects in order to embrace the
avant-garde. This type of argument investigates “why” modernist artists innovated the ways they did, not only seeking evidence of where this happened, but also looking to what ends were accomplished (the “thick descriptions” Elliot and Wallace insist upon). In other words, we are urged to identify artists worthy of recovery, and within those artists, write into being shared patterns of innovation and greatness.

Looking back to the literature of Hurst, Kelley, and Larsen from the 1910s, 20s and 30s, to the later twentieth century critical and scholarly attention from Nochlin, Olsen, Ammons, to the current work by feminist modernist scholars and the forthcoming series New Modernisms, this dissertation is part of a bright, active conversation desiring to rediscover marginalized voices and illuminate the field of new modernisms. From this long genesis of a renaissance in the discovery, celebration, and appreciation of writing by women, by the insistence that this work can, should, and in fact is, being done, in ways that the writing by women demands and deserves, comes this dissertation. I write not in a vacuum but in a well-lit room, illuminated by the work of my comrades in literary and cultural study, dedicated to filling the gaps with the names of the lesser-seen, lesser-known, but no less vital writers to our American cultural imagination. As the work of new modernisms continues, we set aflame the vital, glowing works of our women writer foremothers.
CHAPTER ONE

“React and Protest”: Fannie Hurst’s LUMMOX AS COLLAGE

“I was walking these days…with the slum’s shouting children, born or imported into a hurdy-gurdy world which was to separate them by language and cultures from their bearded and shawled parents behind the pushcarts. I had not sufficient vision at the time to alert myself to the significance of this boiling mixture of race, cultures, colors. Out of this amalgam had come, and was to come, not the Americanized but the American people.”

Fannie Hurst, Anatomy of Me

Fannie Hurst’s influence in the 1920s and 30s crossed literary, political, and social boundaries. As the highest paid short-story writer of the time, a veritable darling of publisher William Hearst, her light shone brightly in New York City and beyond. In cities and towns of substantive population her presence was ubiquitous: her face would greet you in print advertisements at bus stations and in marketing pamphlets; she would be speaking at one of the local clubs on issues of child labor laws or women’s and immigrant’s rights. Any subscriber to popular women’s magazines would anticipate the publication of one of her many serialized novels or short stories. You would read about her in the New York Times as she evolved from author, to activist, to style icon. As print culture and media became increasingly available, photographs would document her every move, supplemented with a report in the “Society” section on her latest comings and goings.

Hurst’s books changed people’s lives; they had made a genuine impact on the way people perceived the plight of young women in the city and of child and immigrant labor; so much so that she actually became the face of child and immigrant labor movements. Two of her most well known books would go on to become successful films, and one would even be remade decades later. More than that, her books were widely read and popularly liked, striking a delicate balance between sentimental, didactic, and pleasurable. The working class saw themselves in her novels,
and her genteel readers read about themselves and the other half in her “sob-sister” novels (so phrased by the *New York Times* in her first-page obituary) (“Fannie Hurst”). As one of the world’s first literary celebrities (in our modern sense of the word), Hurst was considered great by her colleagues, friends, and the literary and socially minded public.

As Hurst crossed lines between artist, activist, and socialite in her public persona, she seamlessly crossed genres in her writing as well. She maintained an interest in art and music, and this chapter undertakes the employment of these interdisciplinary interests in her novel *Lummox*. She viewed her novels and public persona as a way to “react and protest” (Thompson 175) against inequalities in life, harnessing the collage to incorporate activism into her works and creating characters like Bertha, the lummox-like protagonist of Fannie Hurst’s *Lummox*, who exist on the underbelly in 1920s New York—in dark alleys, attic bedrooms, and closed-off kitchens. This understudied 1923 novel, Hurst’s self-purported favorite, often falls in the shadows of her commercially popular works; however, in it we see Hurst engaging with formal experimentation and incorporating her activist interests. Using her 1923 novel *Lummox* as a pivot point, I will include short stories prior to its publication to reveal Hurst’s development of the collage aesthetic to address her activist concerns; contextualizing Hurst’s rising success amongst 1920s social rights movements, particularly labor and immigration laws, illuminates her use of literature to react and protest against unjust federal legislation.

*Lummox*, reflects the collage aesthetic that would emerge in the Harlem Renaissance, a movement intricately linked with the Jazz Age writ large. In this novel, Hurst writes a tale where the aesthetic intersection is not through the traditional gaze on the visual literary figure (a lá Edith Wharton’s Lily Bart and Nella Larsen’s Helga Crane), but rather an aesthetic where the narrative itself mimics the visual tradition by participating in collage technique. Collage remains
a popular artistic medium and there is a foundation for studies on collage as a multi-modal platform. By elucidating the collage aesthetic in *Lummox* and other works, I intend to display Hurst’s engagement with the collage style. We recognize the same pattern in Hurst as in other authors more traditionally recognized experimental writers, such as Jean Toomer and John dos Passos. Her reimagining of collage-inspired repetition and genre-switching reinforces the gender, labor, and immigrant activist underpinnings of her writing and echoes the politically motivated foundation of the Harlem Renaissance.

**Growing Up: Fannie and the “Anonymous Public”**

From a young age, Hurst was aware of the role of identity politics. Born in 1889 to a middle-class family in St. Louis, Missouri, Hurst spent her childhood years and adolescence in a variety of small homes and boarding houses, all while planning big things for her future. Despite her confidence, Hurst was aware that her Jewish background marked her as different from most others in her St. Louis community. In her autobiography *Anatomy of Me* Hurst recounts an incident from childhood, where one friend innocently suggests they go around in a circle and share their religious affiliation. While most of the girls chime in with “Protestant” or “Lutheran,” Hurst remembers her embarrassment at her avowal of “Jewish.” Despite anxiety over her identity, Hurst, by her own account and verified by Brooke Kroeger in *Fannie: the Talent for Success of Writer Fannie Hurst*, felt invigorated by intermingling with the masses—presumably, because of the many different religions, races, backgrounds, and cultures one would find therein.

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Hurst insisted upon attending the Central High School of St. Louis, despite her parents’ keen desire to send her to a private women’s finishing school. Hurst recounts her thrill at her first days at Central High: “Here were the masses! I swam into their midst like a delighted duck into new water. Subconsciously, I suppose, I was already seeking the people, and Harperly Hall had been a matter of persons” (45). Hurst’s interest in the “anonymous public” (218) can be traced to her time in public high school:

A turn of mind that was to influence many of my later attitudes began to take shape. People en masse, even these public school youngsters coming as they did from varied social, economic and cultural backgrounds, struggling, squirming, pushing, filled me with a kind of pity or a warm glow. (46)

Central High School offers a microcosm of the diversity Hurst will encounter and embrace in New York City as well as inspiration for the diverse characters that will fill Hurst’s pages.

Her move to New York would mark the beginning of her successful publishing career and her political interests. An early meeting with publisher Walter Marion Reedy brought forth many writing and publishing connections. She soon counted future mayor Fiorello La Guardia amongst her friends, along with Kathleen Norris, Sinclair Lewis, David Belasco, Bob Davis, and Edward O’Brien, who would include her short stories in his Best Short Stories collections for the years to come. Just a few years later in 1915, Harper’s Monthly and Vanity Fair both featured Hurst: Vanity Fair naming her to their “Hall of Fame,” and Harper’s to their list of high-earning New York City women (Kroeger 39). One year later, her image would be plastered to every streetcar in Manhattan, promoting her commissioned series of short stories for Metropolitan Magazine. Her stories began to draw attention not just to her literary skills, but also her activist interests, like 1912’s “Power and Horse-Power” and 1915’s “T.B.” In 1916, just one year later,
the invitations to speak as a public rights activist would start coming in. A mere five years after her arrival to New York, Hurst’s legacy as both writer and activist was established (45). Soon Hurst would join the feminist group The Heterodoxy Club, along with other well known artists Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Zona Gale, and Susan Glaspell; with this same group of women, Fannie would sign “the charter of the Lucy Stone League” (35).

Just as she made the choice to attend a large, public high school instead of an elite, private school, Hurst spent her free time with the “anonymous public.” She purposefully avoided the writerly circles of her day, saying she was invited often to the Algonquin for lunch at that legendary table, but always turned it down, and “at a carefully preserved and reserved distance” (218). She was acquainted with authors Edna St. Vincent Millay, Willa Cather, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Zona Gale, and Rebecca West (218). Returning to her glee at being amongst the masses of Central High, Hurst reflects that she always preferred to “run with the anonymous public, hot and bothered about it most of the time, but happiest with my long-time friend, the crowd” (218). Hurst’s immersion with this “anonymous public” would inform her of the lives of the “other half,” the immigrants, women, and children that she would go on to write about in her novels.

We do know from Anatomy that Hurst’s desire to be amongst the crowd is the germination of Lummox. “As far as it is possible to trace the genesis of a book, Lummox was the outgrowth of my groping absorption in the milling masses, all creeds, all colors, which make the narrow island of Manhattan a wide, wide world” (275), Hurst says of her own self-proclaimed favorite work. As she continues the anecdote, she also begins to shadow her use of the collage

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9 Heterodoxy was a gathering space for female intellectuals; the Lucy Stone League had the particular goal of encouraging married women to preserve the use of their maiden names.
aesthetic for us and of the mingling of objects to create one whole picture comprised of disparate elements:

I wandered into a dark basement on a very east Fourteenth Street where two women, obviously Slavic, sat in the open doorway around a large carton filled with buttons of multifarious shapes and colors. Picked up by the handful, they were just a mass. But selected separately, each one claimed its identity. Pink and green buttons, crystal, bone, and pearl. Large, small, medium, oval, square. (278)

In this passage, Hurst reveals her sympathy for the faceless, nameless bodies of the lower East side. By highlighting their existence in the “dark” spaces of the city, Hurst reacts against the federal movements that regulated and devalued immigrant bodies. By focusing on each face and recognizing its individuality, much like focusing on the virtues of each individual button, Hurst marks her space as a champion of immigrant rights.

THE CHANGING CROWD: FEDERAL LEGISLATION AND THE CITY’S “ANONYMOUS PUBLIC”

Coming of age in New York City in the 1910s and 20s meant the “anonymous public” that Hurst felt inspired to intermingle with would have shifted in make-up during those years and especially in the years after. Recognizing her own Jewish background as a mark of difference, Hurst surely sought difference and sameness in the intermingling, “large, small, medium, oval, square” faces she encountered in the crowds. However, federal legislation and public opinion that began to take shape in the late 1890s came to a head in the 1920s with the passing of the Immigration Act of 1924, also commonly known as the Johnson-Reed Act. This particular act, which gained momentum from 1882’s Chinese Exclusion Act and the Immigration Act of
1917,\textsuperscript{10} and was grounded in the federal algorithm of the National Origins Formula, sought to limit the annual number of immigrants from any country to 2\% of the number of immigrants from that country already living in the United States. As the center of the nation’s “melting pot,” the people of New York City felt a special anxiety about the increasingly complicated roles of ethnicity and whiteness in their lives. Hurst absorbed this anxiety and saw first-hand the troubling treatment of lesser-valued immigrants, particularly the Eastern and Western European populations in New York. \textit{Lummox}’s Bertha was created as a reaction and protestation against this type of treatment. Hurst’s stories tend to focus more on the lives of the immigrants already in New York and less with the fallout from immigrant quotas; as such, we can be confident that she stood for bettering the lives of immigrants and imagine she was in favor of equitable and open immigration laws.

The presence of immigrant women in particular is charged because of the association with reproduction. As reproductive bodies, those who were fearful of immigrant populations were increasingly fearful of the women that would bear out bloodlines of ethnically ambiguous origins and even of mixed-ethnic and racial origins. These fears, grounded in long national anxiety over preserving bloodlines and “one-drop” rhetoric, made the female immigrant body a charged space where national anxiety over identity became manifest. In New York, the amount of female immigrant bodies made it a space rife for examination and study. In news, politics, and in literature, the “immigrant problem” and especially the presence of immigrant women comes under consideration. As Katrina Irving details in \textit{Immigrant Mothers}, scholars in the field of anthropology, sociology, philosophy, economics, and people in the field of social work,

\textsuperscript{10} This Act excluded marginalized groups from entering the country, including the disabled, illiterate and poor.
journalism, and novel-writing, all took to task the many issues surrounding immigration (in
Irving’s focus, in the years 1890-1925). Irving names Hurst among those penning “imaginative
literature” that addressed immigration, other names she includes are Willa Cather, Stephen
Crane, Harold Frederic and Frank Norris (2).

As she had done in many other facets of her life, Hurst seized the opportunity to involve
herself with these burgeoning civil rights movements. She marched in the October 1915 New
York Suffrage Parade. Just one year later she accepted the invitation by the Authors League to
“serve on a committee to consider its possible affiliation with the American Federation of Labor”
(Kroeger 43), thereby cementing her role between politics and the arts. A few years later, she co-
authored the immigrant drama *Land of the Free*, which would eventually appear on Broadway.
Hurst’s Jewish background kept her in the political eye during the developments of World War I.
Her vocal, visual acts of political involvement led to her covering the national political
conventions of the early 1920s. On top of women’s and immigrant’s rights, she also supported
emerging black artists, and was one of the judges in the “first *Opportunity* magazine literary
prize competition,” where the first-place poetry prize went to the young poet Langston Hughes
(121). By the mid-1930s, she was the face of the arts for politics; for the June 1936 Democratic
Convention, she agreed to write the book reviewing “the administration’s efforts in behalf of all
arts.” (241). While I am citing only a handful of Hurst’s political engagements, by the mid-1920s
Hurst was inundated with speaking requests and was forced to become more selective with her
appearances. She was truly a literary figure of influence and as she used her art to make
statements about real-life issues.
FANNIE’S “MODERNISM”

Given Hurst’s role as a public and literary figure, her loss in the American cultural imagination is a disservice to Hurst and the many people who she supported, inspired, and fought for. Over the past fifteen years, scholars have been recovering Fannie Hurst and locating her in the American literary canon; of note is Susan Koppelman, who edited and introduced the 2004 Feminist Press Edition of *The Stories of Fannie Hurst*. Koppelman’s introduction delineates the many ways Hurst’s short stories reveal the fabric of twentieth century American history, relevant to literary scholars as well as scholars of American Judaism and the working-class. Koppelman comments on and praises Hurst’s content, structure, tone, diction, description, and construction of vitally important American characters, all in the regional-realist tradition. In *Lummox*, the verity of Hurst’s writing serves to emphasize the collaged nature of the text; Hurst’s strong grasp on writerly conventions is what allows for the successful experimentation in *Lummox*. However, critical approaches to Hurst traditionally down-play the extent of Hurst’s experimental models. This likely happens because of Hurst’s popular success and the resulting reputation as a middlebrow writer. In her work on realism in Hurst (and Wharton and Cather), Stephanie Lewis Thompson encourages us to “devise a new model of American literary history, one that explores the clashes between highbrow and middlebrow, modernism and more classical models of literature” (x). In line with the motivation behind new modernism, Thompson and others encourage us to move along axes of study to create a more inclusive modernist canon.

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11 Koppelman on Hurst: “Hurst transferred the meticulous artistry of the nineteenth-century regionalist realists—their emphasis on the telling details of domestic life, accessible language, and the stories of common women and social injustice—to urban workers of the early twentieth century. She was an ironist, a humorist, and a modern tragedian.” (xviii)
A benefit of Hurst’s very public success is that we have firsthand her thoughts on her relationship to contemporary literary movements. Hurst was aware of the mass-market popularity of her novels, but was reluctant to allow that popularity to group her into the lowbrow or middlebrow category (Thompson 156). Hurst’s experimentation with narrative style and stream-of-consciousness reveals an early desire to participate in “high” modernist aesthetic practices. However, at a speech delivered in Hawaii in 1935, Hurst “seems to offer an explanation for her own turn away from narrative experimentation, and she specifically targets modernist techniques as ‘faddish’ ones that will not bear the test of time” (173). Rejecting these overt techniques of high modernism does not preclude Hurst from continuing to experiment in her novels, but her increasing interest in activist issues and rejection of high modernist aesthetics give her works a different appearance than what the canon classically considers as modernist. In an unpublished essay, Hurst spells out the obligations of art: “Art, in its highest forms, is not a mere imitation of life. It is rather a reaction and protest against it” (quoted in Thompson 175). Clearly stated, Hurst does not view her art as fitting the regional-realist middlebrow character that she has come to be associated with; rather, Hurst experiments with literature to “react and protest” against life. In this way, she is moving along with the literary trend towards the documentary style. One way she does so is by employing a visual aesthetic—collage—that was also frequently used as a political reaction and protestation.

Critics of Hurst’s works, particularly Lummox, recognize the visual impulse as a cinematic one. In Abe C. Ravitz’s Imitation of Life: Hurst’s Gaslight Sonatas, Ravitz names Lummox as Hurst’s “ultimate refinement of cinematic strategy” (105). Ravitz realizes the
political, realist, activist, and artistic importance of Bertha and concludes that *Lummox* is “a combination of her successful short story themes fused with cinematic/episodic technique” (120). This conclusion implies the presence of experimental modernist writing techniques which allow the visual elements to be so gripping, so intensive, and so visual, in the first place.

Providing historical grounding for Ravitz’s interpretation, Austin Harrison’s 1923 review in *The English Review*, says *Lummox’s* “method resembles a picture theater” (quoted in Ravitz 105). Harrison’s review goes on to say that in Bertha, “we are confronted with woman as she is; in her aspect as toiler and work-a-day servant of society-as fate:…she compels us to face the hideous slave life embodied in the social mechanism, and to see the souls of tens of thousands of such women unable to escape from their environment” (120). Obvious here is that early critics note the visual efficacy of *Lummox*. The anonymous reviewer for the *New York Times Review of Books*, however, best captures and alludes towards eliding the visual elements with the verbal, identifying Bertha as “a notable character, etched in verbal mezzotinting several types of NY people…with a certain diaphanous and almost mystical skill she has fashioned a heroic character from indifferent material” (106). Like the art of mezzotint itself, which relies on the layering of print tonalities through finely detailed methods to create a finished product, the reviewer pinpoints Hurst’s success for the finely layered, detailed work that emerges from subtle semantic tonalities. Critic Carl Van Doren particularly focused on Hurst’s writing style as *Lummox’s* most compelling feature: “sustained by an impetuous vitality which rarely shows a sign of languor, the

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12 Ravitz acknowledges the political realm of *Lummox*, with Bertha’s portrayal of: the plight of the woman-alone-in-the-city, the alienation of children from parents, the intimidating problems in modern marriage, poverty, and “the social evil”—all portrayed against a meticulously accurate background, thoroughly detailed and camera ready, as it were, delivered in Hurstian fragmentized style, here appropriate and delineate the rapid scenic shifts and abrupt transitions of place and time (106).
story moves as with wings. Too serious for humor, it has irony. It has flexible, living dialogue, much haunting music. Amazing power!” (119).

One element of Hurst’s work that inhabits a space between modernist experimentation and regional-realism is her use of language in her novels. Moving beyond regional dialects, the incorporation of silences, limited or broken language, and language internal to individual communities means that “her stories are, in fact, bilingual, reflecting what several generations later Gloria Anzaldua referred to as ‘code switching’ and labeled ‘borderlands language’” (Koppelman xxii). In many of her short stories and in her novels, language becomes an internally codified structure within family units, or the limits of language represent the outlier status of some of Hurst’s women. In experimenting with language and representations of language, Hurst will also incorporate non-verbal elements into her prose. As such, language in Hurst’s work takes on multiple meanings beyond regional-realistic representation and therefore contributes to the presence of the modernist collage aesthetic in her work.

THE COLLAGE

Collage has long been considered an ideal aesthetic representation of modernism; as Katherine Hoffman puts it, “collage may be seen as a quintessential twentieth-century art form with multiple layers and signposts pointing to a variety of forms and realities” (1). Clement Greenberg’s 1959 essay titled “Collage” posits “a major turning point in the whole evolution of modernist art in this century” (67) and the essay can be considered as the beginning of an ongoing conversation about collage in cultural history. Beginning with Pablo Picasso’s Still Life with Chair Caning, audiences and viewers ask themselves: what is part of the art? And what is part of reality? How do we interpret texture as image? As Picasso’s techniques veered from
collage into cubism, his art sought to challenge the singular perspective available in the object-viewer relationship. As with modernism, collage forced the western world to step back from its accepted truths and come to face a new reality. This encouraged and spirited questions about the relationships of self with the other, science and technology, epistemology, and senses of space, time and reality. Collage in both visual art and literature asks us to consider our relationship with the other and to actively consider what we see in order to align the object with our expectations of art and reality.

Hurst viewed her literature as a vehicle for the political—a reaction and protest against life—as one of collage’s ends. Of course, art as political engagement exists well before Picasso’s Chair; collage is yet another medium by which artists may address reality through their visual art, and it remains perhaps the most innovative aesthetic to do so to this day. Hurst took a type of “high” modernist—engagement with visual art—and brought it to serve the “anonymous public” of New York City’s back streets. One of the ways collage is successful in representing Hurst’s hurdy-gurdy world is in its polysemic nature; as explained by Wendy Holmes in Katherine Hoffman’s Collage: Critical Views, the elements of collage allow for multiple understandings, an option in multiple mediums: “prose, verse, genre- lyrics, novel, drama, [and] hybrid genres: manifesto, performance, visual poem, documentary novel, media” (196). Hurst looks to collage to create a literary construction of the “boiling mixture” of the American public, turning the uncountable sea of languages, cultures, foods, sounds, clothes, and bodies she moved amongst into a work of art.

In thinking about applying the aesthetics of a visual work to a verbal one, it is necessary to translate the aesthetic across the medium. To do so, I turn to Rachel Farebrother’s The Collage Aesthetic in the Harlem Renaissance, which is useful here for several reasons. First, Farebrother
creates a rubric by which the effects of visual collage work in verbal collage; secondly, because Farebrother studies collage in the time contemporary to Hurst. I will extend Farebrother’s analysis of the use of collage by African-American authors in the Harlem Renaissance to its implementation by Hurst—a Jewish American. This requires not an equation of African-American experience to the Jewish-American one but to acknowledge, as set forth by Lori Harrison-Kahan’s *White Negress: Literature, Minstrelsy, and the Black-Jewish Imagination*, the shared outlier status of African- and Jewish-Americans. One of the goals of *Negress* is to “demonstrate how considerations of gender and femininity complicate the paradigms that currently dominate our understandings of cross-racial performances and interminority encounters” (2). She theorizes the “Black-Jewish imaginary as a realm of literary and cultural production in which Jews and African Americans imagined themselves and each other in relation to the white mainstream,” naming Hurst’s career as a “case in point—because her engagement with black culture was seen as superseding her own ethnic background, Hurst has stood accused of strategically using African Americans in order to make herself, in the words of one critic, ‘white and assumable’”13 (“White” 2). Like Koppelman and Ravitz, Harrison-Kahan seeks to redeem Hurst in *Negress*, raising her above the “‘sob sister’ sobriquet often attached to her name,” and the line from her front-page *New York Times* obituary as the “popular author of romantic stories….read under every hairdryer in America” (101). Though most of Harrison-Kahan’s work focuses on *Imitation of Life*, she singles out *Lummox*’s “ability to meld the

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13 While it is tempting to look at Hurst’s relationship with Zora Neale Hurston to explore this dynamic, the two first met in 1925, two years after Hurst published *Lummox*, so we must leave the oft-discussed analysis of the two women’s friendship as indicative of Hurst (and, Hurston’s), attitudes towards the black and Jewish literary and real “imagination,” as it were.
reformist sensibility of naturalism with modernist experimentation” (“White” 102). *Lummox* becomes the ideal space to explore Farebrother’s rubric for the verbal collage.

With this methodology in mind, let us consider a primary assertion of Farebrother’s approach to collage: that transatlantic cultural exchanges...[underpin] modernist experimentation. Therefore, collage becomes a metaphor for not only the relationship between the visual and the literary, but also between the transatlantic exchange of ideas and the cross-cultural exchange between blacks and whites and “other” minorities in, for our purposes, Manhattan. 14 This is much like Hurst’s own realization of the same dynamic while walking the Lower East Side, also mentioned earlier in this chapter: “As far as it is possible to trace the genesis of a book, *Lummox* was the outgrowth of my groping absorption into the milling masses, all creeds, all colors, which make the narrow island of Manhattan a wide, wide world” (*Anatomy* 275). This dynamic of cultural exchange brings the collage aesthetic to life in her work, just as many aesthetic innovations of the Harlem Renaissance were invigorated by the exchange of cultural traditions.

Farebrother acknowledges that cultural exchange is at the heart of any modernist consideration and agrees with Houston A. Baker’s assertion that Harlem Renaissance modernism was a “distinctive kind of modernism that was necessarily subversive” (3). Farebrother also points out the benefits and limitations of this project: that “any direct correlation between visual and textual collage is impossible….but focus on collage as a technique that... offers a useful

14 Farebrother writes: “taking collage in Harlem Renaissance and modernist art as my point of departure, I mine visual art for a critical vocabulary through which to analyse literary patterns of synthesis and fragmentation. This search for ways in which the visual and the literary might illuminate one another is alert to a dynamic flow of ideas and techniques across the Atlantic, which inspired European and American writers and artists to experiment with collage-like forms” (2).
conceptual framework for analysis of the formal choices made by Harlem Renaissance writers” (4). Farebrother names several key themes “central to [her] formulation of the collage aesthetic: the tension between fragmentation and synthesis; how we read collage; the politics of collage; and the use of collage forms to transform dominant historical narratives” (6). Analyzing the repetition and shifting genres of *Lummox* evidences the techniques named by Farebrother, particularly the tension between fragmentation and synthesis, positioning *Lummox* as an exemplary instance of Hurst’s experimentation.

For this project, I distill Farebrother’s four themes into two discernible techniques: one, that fragmentation and synthesis constitute how collage must be read, and two, that the use of collage form gives political and historical significance to the work. Farebrother views fragmentation and synthesis as the tension that animates collage: an element that appears to be whole is “actually all disparate elements.” (6). These multiple perspectives cause the “double take, that crucial instant of recognition when we realize that a collage is at once a collection of disparate parts and integrated whole” (8). This forces the reader to recontextualize, as it does the viewer, to be a “researcher.” The second grouping of techniques, the political significance of collage and its ability to reenvision history, also has to do with the defamiliarization thrust upon the reader in the literary collage: “the sense of defamiliarization generated by rearrangement of familiar elements on the canvas offered a means of fixing attention on uneasy realities about contemporary society” (9). Indeed, Farebrother insists that literary collage is “inevitably subversive” (9).

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15 Farebrother uses Picasso’s *Guitar and Wine Glass*, 1912, as a visual example (6). The affect is that the viewer, or reader, is immediately defamiliarized from what they think they know, and needs to recontextualize what they see (or read). (8)

16 The political edge becomes particularly important to African American practitioners of literary collage, “not least because they used collage to express the hybrid character of African
The collaged “fragments in a textual whole, encompassing such effects as temporal
disruption, correspondence, fusion, dislocation, masking, contamination, rupture, synthesis and
surprise” (191) all appear in *Lummox*. To readers more accustomed to Hurst’s “sob sister”
novels, it is perhaps the presence of these elements that most highlight the impulse to react and
protest in *Lummox*. The modernist techniques of *Lummox* gave extra agency to her audience, a
responsibility that her readers responded to, especially the more activism-minded.

MOVING TOWARDS COLLAGE: EXPERIMENTATION IN HURST’S SHORT STORIES AND NOVELS

Though *Lummox* is the masterpiece of Hurst’s collage experimentation, her earlier short
stories provided trial space for Hurst to experiment with less conventional types of storytelling.
A review of a handful of short stories published prior to *Lummox* allows a glimpse into Hurst
shoring up for the experimentation she undertakes in *Lummox*. Over time, her short stories
become increasingly experimental and begin to reflect a greater commitment to the lives of New
York’s underworld.

Figure 1. Illustrations from *Just Around the Corner*: Left, “The Paradise Trail.” Right, “The Squall.”

American cultural identity. Crucially, such hybridity does not function as a celebratory means of
confounding essentialism; rather, artists introduce violent disjunctions that encapsulate the
discontinuities of African American history.” (Farebrother 11)
In Hurst’s first published collection of short stories, *Just Around the Corner: romance en casserole* (1914), we see Hurst engaging with the visual as the first printing included four illustrations. Common accompaniments to magazine short stories, the inclusion of these images nevertheless reveals a public interest in the visual element of storytelling. The four illustrations, one as frontispiece and the remaining placed within the stories themselves, are traditional black-and-white sketches without obvious formal experimentation. But in these images, we see hints towards differing artistic approaches, exemplified by the illustrations accompanying “The Paradise Trail” and “The Squall” (fig. 1). On the left, the background is only sketched out, with care devoted to the gesture from the man to the woman and our attention inevitably drawn to the space of the gesture. On the right, however, scene-setting such as the open window with blinds and partly opened door distract from the central conversation between the two figures. In a small way, these images reflect a movement away from conventional drawing (on the right) into a space of freer, less rigid expression. Though the differences may be slight, the inclusion of images from Hurst’s earliest publications foreshadow the way representation and visualization can be manipulated by both writers and illustrators.

As is suggested by the image for “Paradise Trail,” in this first collection of short stories we do see evidence of Hurst experimenting with representation. Hurst begins to show thoughts of the colliding worlds of the old and the new. She tries her hand at cinematic writing in the opening of “Breakers Ahead,” to explore this dynamic, describing a train throttling past one of the many small towns on its route:

> A fire-bowelled engine with a grimy-faced demon leaning out of his red-hot cab, and, on every alternate night, a green eye with a black pupil which winked a signal from that same heat-roaring cab and from a dirt-colored frame shanty in a
dirt-brown yard, where a naked tree stretched its thin arms against the sky, an answering eye which gleamed through a bandana-bound lantern and outlined the Hebe-like silhouette of a woman in the window. (153)

The aesthetic vision of the train passing through the town exemplifies the cinematic style commented on by Ravitz. The “winking signal,” naked, stretching tree, and women’s silhouette create a visceral setting where this engine slices through the small town. Personifying the train and the tree asks the reader to consider nature and the machine as contending forces; Hurst paints the train—a modern invention that spurred cross-country travel and commerce—as violent, aggressive, even other-worldly, where the tree is naked, reaching up towards its ally, the sky.

The woman is an afterthought, and where the non-human objects of the passage are brought to life, she is reduced to inanimate shadows: a silhouette. Hurst uses these early short stories to contemplate the changing times of America’s first decades of the twentieth century.

In her next collection of short stories, Every Soul hath its Song (1916), Hurst continues to experiment with cinematic writing and uses the female body as a site of experimentation. In “The Nth Commandment,” Hurst writes of a woman who goes out on the town with her boss to relieve the monotony and stress of taking care of her invalid husband. Virginia Smith, referred to only as “doll” by her escort, acts out:

She leaped forward in her narrow little skirt, laughing. Chairs scraped back and a round of applause went with her. Knives and forks beat tattoo on frail glasses; a tinsel ball flung from across the room fell at her feet… Her hair, rich as Australian gold, half escaped its chignon and lay across her shoulders. She danced light as the breeze up the marble stairway, and at its climax the spotlight focused on her,
covering her with the sheen of mica; then just as lightly down the steps again, so rapidly that her hair was tossed outward in a fairy-like effect of spun gold….

Like a bird in flight she danced to the gold coping, paused like an audacious Undine in a moment of thrilled silence, and then into the purpose and gold, violet and red rain of the electric fountain, her arms outstretched in a radiant tableau vivant... (220)

Hurst brings the reader into the scene of action by placing Smith’s body as central to a room where we become part of the implicit audience. We see her “narrow little skirt” and hear the scraping chairs and tingling glass. Hurst incorporates real and unreal moments into the scene: Smith’s body covered in mica, her hair fairy-like; but above all, she gives us this female body, performing as spectacle in the crowd, the snippets of sound, color and light, all read cinematically. We feel the frenetic energy of Smith’s movements as she leaps, dances, and flies and finally, as she loses herself in the “electric” fountain.

In these moments, we question Hurst’s motivations for Smith: in a slightly veiled reference to her literary peer, Edith Wharton, is Smith an “audacious Undine,” a “tableau vivant”17—does Smith control her body in the crowd? As she turns from “thrilled silence” to run into the multi-colored fountain, has she surrendered herself to the pleasures of her audience? In the end, we know that in Virginia Smith we have a woman experimenting with the power of her body, which involves negotiating her own performative desire with becoming an object for the

17 The capitalization of Undine, paired so closely with the mention of the tableau vivant, make me wonder if Hurst is gesturing towards Wharton here, and paralleling Smith with the circulating bodies of Undine Spragg and Lily Bart. Then again, an undine is a mythological creature associated with water, and as Smith will soon throw herself into the fountain and Hurst does like to use classic and mythological references in her work, reading the presence of Wharton might be overdetermined.
crowd’s pleasure. Written so actively and cinematically, this scene from “Nth” marks Hurst’s exploration of the performing female body as a site that reflects back on the public within which it lies.

Just two years later in 1918’s Gaslight Sonatas Hurst has made major strides in preparation for her engagement with the plight of the “other-half” that she will undertake in Lummox. In “Here’s Not to Reason Why,” Hurst introduces Ann ‘Lisbeth, an early figuration of Bertha, and directly criticizes the reader for not considering the plights of women like Ann ‘Lisbeth: “You who love the city for its million pulses, the beat of its great heart, and the terrific symphony of its soul, have you ever picked out from its orchestra the plaintive rune of the deserving poor?” (140). By Hurst’s address of us as reader, we become complicit in the world where Ann ‘Lisbeth’s work required her to clean dishes in a sink where the “tepid water [clung] to her like fuzz” (142), undeniably aware now of the conditions immigrant women were working under. The work begins to transpose itself into and onto her body: “the grease-laden heat of the kitchen, the smell of strong foods, raw meat, and fish stews thick above the sink…She was grease-stained now, in spite of precautions, and her hat, with her hair uncurled to sustain it, had settled down over her ears, grotesquely large” (143). Here, we have a body radically different than the ones on the marriage-market, or the ones actively shirking the marriage market, one that circulates in the rooms behind the parties and the restaurants where spectacle takes place, one that is truly outside the possibility of the “Roaring Twenties,” yet one who is also fundamental to the city. In Ann ‘Lisbeth, Hurst reveals her desire to write the forgotten women who also comprise the collage of Manhattan. Additionally, Hurst weaves elements of the grotesque within a regional-realist work. As this chapter will discuss later, this pairing together of genres is part of the implementation of the collage.
The next two collections of short stories that Hurst will publish move us increasingly toward *Lummox* in their formal experiments. Formally in the collections, we see evidence of collaged descriptive writing, of incorporation of non-prose elements, and the meshing of the grotesque and impossible with the real, also known as genre-switching. As a storyteller, Hurst embraces the lives of the immigrants on the Lower East Side. As Hurst will reveal in these short stories, collage lends itself to telling the stories of the hurdy-gurdy worlds of tenement housing, while also arguing for bettering the lives of these families. We can see this quiet insistence in the opening lines of the title work of 1919’s *Humoresque*:

By that impregnable chemistry of race whereby the red blood of the Mongolian and the red blood of the Caucasian become as oil and water in the mingling, Mulberry Street, bounded by sixteen languages, runs intact. Latin length of push-carts, clothes-lines, naked babies, drying vermicelli; black-eyed women in rhinestone combs and perennially big with child; whole families of buttonhole-makers, who first saw the blue-and-gold light of Sorrento, bent at home work round a single glass flare; pomaded barbers of a thousand Neapolitan amours. To Mott Street, to Allen Street. (1)

Surely representing her experiences being among the masses, Hurst’s aestheticization of the tenements alleys, which at once embraces their lively diversity, also comments on the condition of the families residing in them: naked babies, inevitable and constant reproduction, tortuous working conditions, all stretching from one lower east side street to another. Instead of delving into minute details, Hurst gives her reader glimpses of things, of people, of histories, emphasizing that it is the contribution of each individual part to the whole that is paramount to her story.
Hurst continues to write these types of scenes, pushing the fragment-like sentences and visual snippets even further. In a passage from “The Smudge” in 1922’s *Vertical City*, published just one year before *Lummox*, the protagonist describes one night of work at the theater: “Purple lips with loose muscles crawling under the rouge. Fetidness of scent on stale bodies. Round faces that could hook into the look of vultures when the smell of success became as the smell of red meat…’Gawdalmight, Tottie, them’s my teddy bears you’re puttin’ on.’…Ego, the actor’s overtone, abroad everywhere and full of strut. ‘Overture!’…Faces swimming in the stage ozone and wolfish for cue. The purple lips—” (147). With the brief snippets of scent, sight and aural clues, this collage description pulls the reader into the action of the moment where we see not only the wholeness of the theater backstage, but the individual, at times grotesque, elements of its wholeness.

Hurst begins to create formal collages in her stories as well, rehearsing for the ways she will push against the fourth wall in *Lummox* and make it clear that the fictional story of Bertha is meant to motivate a reaction and protestation on behalf of the “real” Berthas. One way she does this is through incorporation of dramatic dialogue. For example, “A Petal on the Stream,” from *Humoresque*, contains the following dialogue and stage direction in the midst of the prose:

MISS KINEALY (*slumped in her chair so that her knee rose higher than her waist-line*): I always…

MRS. SCHUMP (*stooped for an infinitesimal stab of needle*): She don’t…

MISS SCHUMP (*in a pink, warm-looking flannelette kimono and brushing out into fine fluff her flaxen-looking hair, and then, in the name of tomorrow’s kink, plaiting it into a multitude of small, tight-looking braids*): You can talk, mamma. You, too, Cora…. (89)
Later, a “Chorus” is introduced into the story. Hurst includes this type of dramatic dialogue in several other stories (“Heads,” “Even as You and I,” and “Back Pay” (from The Vertical City)). As readers, we are forced to take a second-look at the story, fulfilling one of the purposes of the collage named by Farebrother. We think we are reading a short story, but suddenly we are reading a play, imagining actors on a stage. The inclusion of the “chorus” calls to mind Greek drama, conjuring up impressions of historically traditional storytelling, which “Petal” is decidedly not. The moral judgment, too, of the Greek chorus also figures in: is there now an authoritative voice judging the rights and wrongs of “Petal”? No longer passive readers of fiction, the reader must make decisions about their engagement with the story as an artistic piece, as an extension; they reflect more deeply on the story itself. Formally, the work becomes a collage, with different literary elements combining to make a complete whole.

Inclusion of the Greek chorus is not the only way Hurst experiments with the authorial voice. She provides critical commentary on the ending of “Petal”: “In the pyramidal plot-structure of this story the line of descent is by far the sheerer. Short-story correspondence-schools would call it the brief downward action leading to denouement” (115); she laments in “Back Pay” that she is unable to write the story she set out to write:

I set out to write a love story…Just my luck that, with one of these modish tales at the tip of my pink pencil, Hester Bevins should come pounding and clamoring at the door of my mental reservation, quite drowning out the rather high, the lipsy, and if I do say it myself, distinctly musical patter of [Arline Kildale]. That was to have been her name…Sweet, don’t you think, and with just a bit of wild Irish rose in it? (59)
In these meta-narrative moments, Hurst draws her audience in and out of a story-telling mode, at times bringing them behind-the-scenes into her writing process and provoking double-takes. Hurst will continue to develop this narrative device in *Lummox* by employing the direct “you” and experimenting with ambiguous narration.

One short story from *Vertical* reveals Hurst’s rehearsal of blending genres together. In her truly bizarre short story “Guilty,” printed in *Vertical*, Hurst experiments with temporal realities, fantasy and delusion, and the grotesque. By incorporating these many experimental and often conflicting elements into a single story, Hurst activates the reader’s need for the double-take and rehearses the technique of genre-switching that she will employ in *Lummox*. “Guilty” opens at the story’s end but soon circles back to the story’s origin. This initial challenge to the reader’s orientation is furthered by the struggle between reality and fantasy for the rest of the story. “Guilty” is about the slow mental decline of the Jett women. The mother Emma, upon falling pregnant, has visions of fish: “Sitting sewing, suddenly it seemed to her that through the very fluid of her eyeballs, as it were, floated a school of fish. Small ones— young smelts, perhaps—with oval lips, fillips to their tails, and sides that glistened” (195). While we can initially accept this as perhaps merely a vivid and somewhat gruesome description of a strange anatomical abnormality, Emma’s visions become increasingly surreal until one night she opens in her eyes in bed and finds that “That was a fish lying there beside her! A man-sized fish with its mouth jerked open to the shape of a gasp and the fillip still through its enormous body, as if its flanks were uncomfortably dry!” (197). The reader wonders what Emma really sees—who or what is really in bed with her, why does Henry appear as a fish?

This dysmorphia is hereditary, as their daughter Anne Elizabeth (a more refined “Ann ‘Lisbeth”) inherits the same mania. When her father comes to visit her, Anne Elizabeth cries:
“Don’t you come in here. … My daddy’ll kill you if he finds you here. He’ll slit you up from your tail right up to your gill. He knows how. … You won’t let me swallow. You’re slippery. … Don’t touch me! You can’t! You haven’t any arms! Horrible gills. You’ll never get me—you fish!” (216). Moments later, out of the despair of seeing this fish-father, she takes her own life. This strange story, which starts out at the end in a seemingly crime-drama focused genre, incrementally becomes stranger and stranger until the reader can no longer decide what is real and what is fantasy. The grotesque descriptions of the fish, first lying in bed alongside Emma and later touching Anne Elizabeth with its slippery, horrible fins walks some line between fantasy and reality that “Guilty” never resolves. Hurst will continue to experiment with the grotesque and its borders between fantasy, reality, and delusion in Lummox.

LUMMOX

Fannie Hurst’s novel Lummox was published in a stream of popular and critical successes after her first novel Stardust and a robust handful of short story collections, many detailed above. Lummox opens with and follows the life of its protagonist Bertha, from her mysterious and gruesome circumstances of birth, to her life as a young servant-maid for a variety of employers, until she becomes an old, tired servant woman, and closes with an unexpectedly idyllic resolution. As this chapter’s epigraph suggests, Fannie Hurst’s autobiography Anatomy of Me reveals the distinct crossover between Hurst’s experiences living in New York’s Lower East Side and her artistic vision for Lummox, which partakes in the emerging literary collage aesthetic, a technique emerging from and symbolic of the Jazz Age, and one that allows her to use literature to react and protest against the changing shape of civil rights in America and more specifically, New York City. The use of the collage motivated critics to connect Hurst with high-brow
modernists. In his 1928 review of *Lummox*, Heywood Broun acknowledges Stein’s interdisciplinary influence on Hurst’s writing:

> It is interesting to find how far that little Gertrude Stein candle has shed its beams. To us Miss Stein is the smallest of illuminations, but from Miss Stein came Dorothy Richardson, and from Dorothy Richardson came May Sinclair, and now we have Fannie Hurst, best seller, making her own contribution to the Stein tradition. “It was good to set out the milk bottles. Six in a row. They were so there. Quarts. Bulge. Dimension.” Understand, we like it. The paragraph does convey an idea to us, but it looks queer as the eye first encounters it on the page.

(30) (Brandeis Archives 1.136)

The interdisciplinary nature of the text was visible to contemporary critics, yet Hurst is only marginally considered as a modernist. However, her ability to bring high art to the streets, to the anonymous public, should only add to her accomplishments. Using collage techniques, Hurst engages her reader with Bertha’s story, motivated by shifting social conventions to use her literature as a reaction and protestation against the institutionalized oppression of women, children, laborers, and immigrants.

**Heartbeats and Double-Takes: The Roaming Motif in *Lummox***

Returning to the techniques of literary collage outlined earlier, Hurst uses fragmentation and synthesis to highlight elements of the novel meant to inspire her readers. One technique of fragmentation and synthesis is the use of the roaming motif, or an element that appears over and over again in the novel. The repetition in *Lummox* emerges in many degrees and shapes. The repeated elements range from the minor but steady presence of Bertha’s ox-like beating heart
against the frailty of another, to the unexpectedly reappearing figure of the servant-girl Helga; further, the repetition is punctuated randomly throughout the work—sometimes marking a transition in Bertha’s life, other times catching the reader by surprise.

One very significant roaming motif in *Lummox*, as it emphasizes Hurst’s desire to speak to contemporary immigration-motivated identity issues, is Bertha’s ambiguous identity. Throughout the novel, Bertha remains a largely enigmatic character. While some things about her are clear—in particular, her big-ness and white-ness—Hurst never fails to remind the reader how unknowable Bertha is to people, and her unknowability becomes a “roaming motif” (Farebrother 8). This roaming motif defamiliarizes; on instinct, the more we read of Bertha’s life, the more we should know Bertha—yet, we are consistently reminded of her elusiveness. This is a purposeful move by Hurst, who recalls in *Anatomy of Me* as she walks through the Lower East Side: “It was out of this milling world of people with no faces in particular, no identity in particular, that my Lummox began to take heavy shape…. She became a composite of many soils, of many climates, of many lineages” (275-6). Though our impulse is to read Bertha’s “whiteness” as a type of pure-ness of blood, *Lummox* comes as a time where ethnic whiteness began to cause anxiety; she is a composite of “soils, climates, lineages.” As western Europeans became systematically oppressed, and eastern European immigrants sought to establish themselves as a more desirable sect, Bertha’s unknowable, untraceable whiteness haunts the people around her like a specter.

This amorphous composite image manifests in *Lummox*’s opening lines:

Nobody quite knew just what Baltic bloods flowed in sullen and alien rivers through Bertha’s veins….There must have been a good smattering of Scandinavian and even a wide streak of western Teutonic. Slav, too. Because
unaccountably she found herself knowing the Polish national anthem. Recognized it with her heart as it rattled out of a hurdy-gurdy (1)

These lines reveal the immigrant anxiety underlining Bertha’s character: her unidentifiable cultural heritage makes her blood “sullen and alien;” despite being born an orphan in New York City, she knows the Polish national anthem. In many ways, Bertha represents the diluting of whiteness that immigrant reformers feared. Just as readers are spurred to take “second looks” at Bertha, other characters also take second looks. When Bertha’s first employer, Mrs. Farley, says that Bertha is: “Swede, I imagine, or perhaps one of those blonde Poles. But she’s a good plain cook….” (7). The half-hearted assumptions about Bertha’s ethnicity continue throughout the novel: “She didn’t know the reason, but she looked the reason, Swedishly,” (10); the narrator names her “Slav lips!” as she dances at the Musliner’s picnic, and another picnic-goer exclaims “Look at [the] Swede!” (73); when she meets Mathilde Oesetrich on the street who exclaims, “I like your looks. What are you? German? Scandinavian? Pole? No? Well it doesn’t matter, you seem to be a little bit of everything,” (197); and the Oesetrich girl who says, “What is she, anyway? A Pole or a Swede? Sort of a Sacred Cow from the look of her” (205). These onlookers can all see Bertha, but cannot know her; their reactions to Bertha represent the type of public phobia invoked by immigrant women (who would become mothers of equally ethnically ambiguous children).

But more so than ethnically ambiguous, Bertha is unknowable on another, spectral level. One of the Oesetrich sisters defines Bertha through the lens of her German heritage: “There is an old German saying my father used to be fond of. It translates something like this. ‘He was strange with the wisdom of his ear to the ground.’ That reminds me of Bertha” (204). This saying is reminiscent of Bertha’s gothic beginnings—as her mother died while Bertha was still inside of
her, she was privy to the “secrets of the grave;” Bertha somehow is otherworldly. This, “loosely” translated saying about Bertha, as Bertha is always “loosely” identified, form into an unsettling image—this big, unknowable, supernatural, white girl, who does not even know herself. The reader must, as Farebrother says, be “faced with collage…piece together meaning actively: they must tease out relationships between parts—each fragment is perceived in relation to other fragments, to the whole (and possibly to other collages) and to its origin” (8). The repetition of the fragments serves to reinforce Bertha’s status as immigrant persona-non-grata. In *Lummox*, Hurst returns to Bertha’s inscrutability time and again to highlight public anxiety about ethnic whiteness, as well as the loss of identity experienced by immigrants in America.

Hurst does not shy away from using other ethnicities to play off of Bertha’s whiteness. Bertha is described, while wandering: “Her face, fatty white, like jade, was so square, so riveted in its pain” (51). Most readers would be struck by the idea of the possibilities of expressing a face “riveted” by pain in a hard stone, but Hurst furthers Bertha’s exoticness by re-casting her ethnic whiteness into the creamy white stone generally associated with Asian origins. Bertha’s horrifying “home” is on Front Street, and Front Street is where the world, mostly in this instance the Asiatic world, comes to Manhattan: “Men of all yellows. Malay. East Indian. Chinese. Javanese. Cooks. Stokers. Mates. Stowaways…. Public schools where the cross-breeding of white skin and slant eyes was frequent…” (47). The same passage says that Bertha did not think Front Street was “fantastic,” as the narrator claims it to be, but perhaps that is only because the racial mixing is an unwelcome confrontation against Bertha’s own assumed racial mix, her “mutton fat” jade face. The Asian references, combined with the vague Eastern European references, collage together both visually and literally to create a most defamiliarizing and unsettling, unknowable Bertha. Manhattan claims Bertha as its own, as one of Hurst’s milling
masses, her face standing as one of many in a “sea of buttons” (*Anatomy* 275). Bertha represents a certain racially white but ethnically unknown group of immigrants, and Hurst reminds her reader that Bertha’s whiteness is just one of many kinds of populations facing discrimination.

Hurst re-creates the “sea of buttons” when Bertha visits Division Street with Mrs. Wallenstein, who asks: “Berthie—who are your people?” Bertha replies: “My people? Why those are my people. Out there. All. Everywhere” (107). Bertha is at once nobody and everybody; her ambiguous amalgam of ethnicities means she is one with all of the anonymous public. She represents the image that the fragments come together to create, and yet she is just one of the fragments herself. As Farebrother writes, one use of collage is to “exploit a variety of interpretive modes, or reading spaces…. [It refuses] to allow readers a comfortable, complacent position in relation to their texts” (7). These types of contradictory passages, or ones that force various interpretations, are another way of forcing the double-take, the investigative reader-role, which demands that the reader grapples with Bertha’s myriad complexities and society’s erasure of the immigrant woman.

As Bertha remains largely unknowable to the people around her, as well as the reader, a second roaming motif reinforces her strained relationship to the world: her heartbeat—the muscle that courses the unknowable blood throughout her body. Bertha’s heartbeat comes in contact first with the infamous Rollo Farley, dilettante son of her first employer. He touches her. “How she beat there,” says the narrator; “Why Bertha, how you beat—underneath that whiteness,” says Rollo Farley (12). The heartbeat becomes a “roaming motif” (Farebrother 8) of Bertha’s contact with another human being—a fleeting, fragmented contact that will always in some way mean a slipping away. Later, when Rollo rapes Bertha, she disconnects from her body and we are left only with “the sullen booming of her heartbeat, like some faint ocean rolling and
tossing over its treasures” (36). At her next workplace, Bertha soothes the hysterical Mrs. Musliner after she fights with her husband: “they sat still, crouched in the gold-powdered darkness, heartbeat to heartbeat” (83). The intimacy of these heartbeat encounters is made painful by the fact that they result in Bertha’s subsequent dismissal from her employers. Readers are disoriented by the possibility offered by the intimacy, only to have to “double-take,” to read it as a negative trope—Bertha’s ability to comfort becomes her demise. The human body relies on heartbeats to stay alive: without a beating heart, blood does not circulate, and the body gives way. Bertha’s heart circulates blood of unknown lineage, and the proximity of her heart to the pure-blooded hearts of others is dangerous. In Bertha’s next home, old Mrs. Wallenstein’s words make her way into Bertha’s heart: “A little winged sob that could beat its way and nest in Bertha’s heart and hurt there” (110). Soon after, the reader is asked to refigure this redeeming heart as Bertha has her “cheek to Mrs. Wallenstein’s dead heart” when Mrs. Wallenstein passes—a moment that also prompts Bertha’s dismissal from the house (127). The proximity of Bertha’s ambiguous white body to the purely ethnic and racial bodies of her employers is surrounded by violence and death, a jarring presentation of the complications of the body’s beating heart.

In addition to acting as emotional caretaker in the houses where she cleans, Bertha maintains pseudo-maternal relationships with two servant girls: Helga, a type of younger-sister to Bertha, and Chita, a girl-child servant. After a particularly demanding day of work, Chita is held in Bertha’s “big, man-sized arms. Close. Pressing her little boniness against her breast, while the beat of her heart pounded through” (144). Just as the proximity of Bertha’s beating heart to her employers’ motivates subsequent dismissal, the nearness of Bertha to Chita also foreshadows a separation: immediately after this moment, Chita will be taken from Bertha (by
Bertha’s arrangement) to the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. Bertha’s repeated, roaming heartbeat, “generates disorientation because the images are twice removed from their original context…: viewers are tempted to identify underlying themes and preoccupations, a quest that can only end in frustration” (Farebrother 8). The heart, which has both saved and destroyed characters, is a reoccurring image twice-removed, forcing the reader to recontextualize and reorient assumptions about what we know of Bertha and her life and work.

Other small instances of repeated motifs sprinkle *Lummox*, indicating an intentional formal literary move by Hurst. This application of the collage aesthetic allows the reader to work through the novel’s many references to feet and shoes, or the role of music and maternity, and specific images like the magnolia or Mrs. Farley’s old sea-green evening wrap. The repetition of these singular objects continually asks the reader/viewer to do a “double take,” to re-analyze their associations with an image. In doing so, readers actively participate and consider what the implications of repetition are, leading us to the historical and political realm of the collage aesthetic (and also linking Hurst to established modernist writer Gertrude Stein). As mentioned, it is not difficult to see Bertha as a reaction and protestation against the 1920s legislations against and erasure of immigrant bodies. Bertha, invoking anxiety with her unknowable whiteness, also represents the strong immigrant mother who will create only increasingly ethnically unknowable offspring. Her body, which gives of its lifeblood to sustain her employers, is used and discarded at their whims. In Bertha, Hurst uses the double-take of the collage to create a character who represents the struggles of immigrants, women, and laborers.
LEDA’S SWAN AND STICK FIGURES: GENRE-SWITCHES AND ROAMING MOTIFS

The roaming motif elements that serve to destabilize readers of *Lummox* are amplified when placed within the collage of genres Hurst includes in the novel. Hurst is praised for her ability to be a realist and for her activism, and “notorious” for her sentimental or “sob-sister” elements; however, collaging together these genres, along with the surrealist and the gothic, creates a narrative that “generates disorientation,” forcing the reader to “piece together meaning actively” (Farebrother 8). As with the roaming motifs, genre-switching forces readers to take an active role in *Lummox* and is a technique that reveals Hurst’s political motivations.

From the beginning of *Lummox*, Hurst challenges the reader’s orientation: a regional-realist descriptions opens the novel, but is followed shortly after by a gothic passage. As readers, we are unsure what type of tradition we are in, and we approach the novel warily. On a symbolic level, Hurst signals the type of disorientation felt by marginalized populations in New York City and America—unsure of where they stand, where they came from, where they are going. From the start, Hurst gives us a harsh, real look of Bertha’s New York: “Bertha had been born in a furiously dark sailors’ lodging house on Front Street where New York harbor smells of spices and city garbage rides by to the dump on barges. One of those frightening emergency births of rusty instruments, midwifery and a sinister room” (1). This realist description is followed by Bertha’s gothic introduction: that Bertha is of “no particular father (although the China seas could probably have yielded up the secret of his rollicking lane), and of a dead mother. She had died two minutes before Bertha was born” (1). Annie tells Bertha that “for two minutes you was in the grave with your dead mother,” and “the secrets of the grave” are “written on [your] face. You got a look in that wide place between your eyes like the sound of a clump of dirt falling on a
“coffin” (2). Annie repeats a couplet to Bertha: “Born of a dead mother, / Secrets of the grave you’ll utter” (2-3).

Situating the reader in a space between the real and unreal, Hurst continues to describe Bertha’s otherworldly-ness: “Great pale spuds with muscular toes that could spread separately like a wine presser’s, and were full of a predatory power to clutch. She could almost breathe in with her feet….Toes. The prehensile curving of toes around the branches of the dark forest” (4-5). This surreal description, which also nods to a naturalist style, is then immediately interrupted with the linear, realist description of Mrs. Farley who “sweeping through the swinging door into the kitchen, found [Bertha] on her knees before the oven…the soles of her bare feet upright…‘Bertha, don’t ever let me find you barefoot in the kitchen again. It’s disgusting.’” (5). The transition in these few pages from regional-realism, to haunting gothic and surrealism, and immediately back to the realist, sets the tone for the collaged genre of *Lummox*. As Farebrother reports, Picasso, the founder of visual collage, says “that it is collage’s capacity to shock, its jarring rearrangement of previously familiar elements, which carries political implications for the present. Collage becomes a mean of addressing the difficulties and complexities of modern life” (9). Throughout the novel, Hurst will use this technique to continually re-orient the reader to the text, forcing the reader to “address the complexities” of Bertha’s life as a female, laboring immigrant, yet Bertha is decidedly NOT an immigrant. However, she is multiply positioned as an immigrant, one without family, without language, with very little money or skill, wandering New York City alone and disconnected.

Hurst uses this realist-gothic collage frequently throughout *Lummox* to continually remind the reader of the heinous conditions Bertha—and by extension, all those that Bertha represent—live in. This combination is particularly poignant when Hurst describes Bertha’s
bedroom. While the home in general represents domestic stability, a safe, clean space to lay one’s head at night is just one step above basic human needs of food, water, and air. Bertha’s rooms in *Lummox* serve to emphasize the deplorable conditions she lives in. For Bertha, whose first bed was a “cot that crawled with vermin,” (3), her maid’s room is barely a step above:

Bertha’s room cowed under the roof of the finely austere house in Gramercy Park beneath a slant ceiling that was like a threatening slap. No heat unless she left the door open and the warm breath of downstairs came up. A bed with a short fourth leg and a spring that sagged like a hammock to the considerable heft of Bertha’s body. A bureau rigged up out of a discarded desk of Rollo Farley’s and a pitcher and a bowl on a soap box. For six years Bertha slept up there with that slanting ceiling on her chest. (6)

This unpleasant but realistic description then moves directly into the gothic mode: “But usually she was so very tired that her sleep was like a death and the slant a clod of earth on the grave of another day” (6). Again, we are disoriented by Hurst’s move here: at first, a straightforward depiction of a neglected servant’s room in stately Gramercy Park. Suddenly, the room becomes a living coffin, the slating ceiling not “near” but actually “on” her chest, a “clod of earth on the grave of another day,” while Bertha’s “sleep was like death.” She is, in other words, the living dead, buried alive by the oppressive upper class. This collaging together of genre shakes up the realist rhetoric of early tenement life by using the supernatural gothic to emphasize the harrowing reality of the immigrant and laboring lifestyle.

And while not sleeping, Bertha is, of course, laboring. Hurst uses the same collage of realism and the gothic to invoke the same reaction to Bertha’s labor as it did to her domestic
situation. This passages channels Hurst’s preparatory work, Ann‘Lisbeth in Gaslight Sonatas, revealing the horrors of Bertha’s job in gothic and grotesque detail:

Day after day of it. Day-jobs where the residuum of dirty work was apt to lie waiting and accumulated. Wet, sloppy, puddled days. Cold, gaunt houses about to be occupied. Public buildings with rooms full of the stench of neglect. Once, at a fishmonger’s, scales clung to her arms. Shining fish scales that hung to the flesh like burrs and would not wash off. She scrubbed at the faucet, and suddenly panic of them, the wet, slimy things, seized her and she screamed. The fishmonger, enormous and stained and with a mallet for pounding down codfish steaks in his hand came and plucked off a few of them for her and laughed, and then, because her arm was white and firm, kissed her with wet, fish-smelling lips. She struck him with his own mallet by jerking back his arm until he hit himself in the head, and in his rage he struck back and she went home discharged and with a blue welt coming out above her cheek bone. (163)

The conflation here of the monotony of the everyday with death, the pervasive anxiety and sexual and physical violence of her workplace, as well as the contrast of Bertha’s “whiteness” against the dirtiness and blue-ness of her assault, demonstrate Hurst’s use of collage to create a jarringly vivid picture of Bertha’s daily experience. Hurst combines realism with the grotesque, and the comic—“fish-lips,” and the slapstick of the fishmonger hitting his own head. Yet, while detailed, the passage remains cold and distanced. The telling of the scene is methodical—slow, even. Bertha scrubs, panics, and screams. The fishmonger laughs, kisses, and strikes. While we can almost feel the burr-like cling of the fish scales, there is a disconnect from Bertha’s horror.
The reader is all at once enthralled, amused, horrified, and at odds with this scene, and is thus motivated to consider as not just Bertha’s story, but the story of New York’s anonymous publics.

Indeed, the underlying horror of Bertha’s work experiences as illuminated by Hurst’s collage technique present *Lummox* as an activist work. Further representing the use of the novel as a reaction against certain civil rights issues are Hurst’s creation of characters Helga and Chita. For all of Bertha’s muteness, Helga is loquaciously opposed to the treatment of women laborers, acting as a voice of protest in the novel. Helga rants against her employer, Mrs. Farley: You give us dirty holes to live in and expect us to keep ‘em pink and perfumed like your boudoir. Some of the fine folks that come here to dinner oughtta get a look up here…they wouldn’t have such a good appetite…. I’m a working girl, but I got my spirit. There’s nothing right about the way the world’s run nohow. Those that got the drudgery to do get the hard beds to sleep on. Those whose bones are rested from easy living get the soft beds—where’s the right of it, I ask you?... If the men knew the way women treat women in this servant game, maybe it would help us to get decent living conditions. (30)

In Helga, Hurst does not shy away from the inequalities facing New York’s upper and lower classes. Interestingly, Helga proposes male homeowners the solution to the plight of the female houseworker; perhaps Hurst felt this to be true in the homes of her own acquaintances. Helga’s reappearance throughout the novel and her anger over her station in life work in sharp contrast against the silent, passive Bertha. Though Bertha’s muteness is itself a statement on the silencing of immigrants, women, and laborers, Helga’s relentless rants are another way Hurst reveals her ability to write regional dialogue.

As Helga’s character gives Hurst a way to voice protest against the treatment of women laborers, the young girl-laborer Chita is used by Hurst to advocate for children’s rights. Chita is
an abused child, “one of fourteen children living in a Minetta Lane tenement” (133). Descriptions of Chita are gruesome: “In winter her hands bled from chapping and her little nose was horrid and her eyes grew into great disks as her face became smaller under the pinch of cold” (133). Chita comes to work at Annie’s bruised: “blue and green bruises, burning there so sullenly along the tan little limbs of Chita,” repeating her father’s “favorite threat:” “‘I’ll brekka your leg’” (136). Chita’s bruises are enough to make stalwart Bertha—she who can clean stairs that make grown men vomit in disgust—“fold back in a quivering ejaculation of sickness” (136). Chita’s character also helps to maintain Hurst’s role as a sentimental “sob-sister” writer. In one moment, Chita and Bertha scrub the floors together. Chita, still characterized as the abused youth, has “savage-looking black and blue mark on her shoulder…Chita, a little stoic for the pain, started whimpering” (137). Bertha gathers Chita in her arms, and tells her a fairytale about a “good little girl like her” (139-40). When the tale ends, Chita’s “little bright eyes [shone] in amber tunnels like Jocko’s” (140). This comparison of Chita to Jocko, the monkey, is unsettling, forcing us immediately to reconcile the sentimentality of the scene—the caretaker role of Bertha to the abused, helpless Chita—with Hurst’s insistence on viewing Chita as a needy animal, reinforcing the status of household servants as subhuman.

Though Chita’s story contains elements of the sentimental, it is ultimately a statement on the potential of social welfare programs. When Bertha later attends a commencement at The Vocational Guidance House on Christie Street, she overhears a speech: “‘Chita Migulchi, I have the honor to award you the first honorable mention in your class and a diploma which registers you at our industrial bureau as a graduate milliner of the Christie Street Vocational Guidance School for Girls’” (242). Chita is now a “success story,” an example of the success of government programs for the needy. Though children’s rights are not as prominent in the novel
as immigration and labor rights, Hurst takes the opportunity to voice her support for social welfare programs that help the country’s youngest and most vulnerable citizens.

As with Chita’s story, sentimental vignettes are often parenthesized by more realist moments. Towards the end of the novel, we see Bertha struggling to pay a dollar a week to live in a room on Debrosses Street, again described in both realist and gothic style: “as black and as narrow as a flue and all day it drew in the heat and all night long breathed it out. The darkness seemed to embalm the heat. Dreadful furry thickness like the fuzz on the tongue of a fever patient” (310). Bertha, no longer youthful and strong, must suffer at the employment agencies as she is passed over for younger girls. The realist and gothic nature of this experience turns sentimental, as “Bertha sitting back in the frieze kept saying something that was her little prayer. ‘Please make him,’ she kept saying—‘please make him.’ …Please make him. Please make him. ‘You’re too old,’ he said finally [to Bertha], and turned to lay his hand on the Swedish girl’s hip” (311). The reader experiences Bertha’s distress as they see her now desperate, pleading for the opportunity to scrub filthy floors to make a living. In this brief moment, the reader recalls a younger Bertha at the beginning of the novel, her hips touched by the ice-delivery man: a poignant repetition. In butting the realist against the sentimental, Hurst’s writing demands a second look and imagines Bertha as one of the many immigrant women of the Lower East Side. Here, Hurst’s formal accomplishments compel the reader to consider the many homeless, voiceless, dislocated immigrant women of New York’s early twentieth-century.

The despair of this scene is contrasted just two pages later by Bertha’s unlikely encounter with the Meyerbogen family and their bakery. Mr. Meyerbogen is Bertha’s double: “enormous” and “white,” just like Bertha (313). Mr. Meyerbogen evokes the reader’s (and Bertha’s) sympathy: he is like a “great milk-fed baby,” on the verge of tears remembering his deceased
wife (316). This sentimentality is doubled when his youngest son enters: “Clank. Clank. One of the children wandered in. Oh, how your heart leaped back, wounded. He had a poor little leg in a brace that clanked. A dirty baby. Eggy. With a smeared and too-large little girl’s dress hung on him and horrid, dirt-ground underthings” (316). He was “adorable and made you want to pinch the dirty little cheek” (317). Like other instances in Lummox, the narrative voice is disorienting here: whose heart is leaping back? Bertha’s? The reader’s? The narrator’s? Who wants to pinch his dirty cheek? Narration aside, the scene juxtaposes the realist with the sentimental, and even the grotesque. Bertha, always maternal, “adopts” this family, as much as they adopt her. She turns the filthy, unkempt house into a fresh, vibrant home. She is beloved by the children and Mr. Meyerbogen, and they are beloved by her.

The most sentimental moment of the novel comes at the very end, with Petey’s addition of Bertha to the stick drawings of “The Meyerbogens” (pictured here in fig. 2, as in the novel, before the addition of Bertha) (318).

Hurst draws this final sentimental scene of Lummox then to a dizzying close, collaging together all the novel’s various genres: realist through “the sink drain pipe to be poked out,” and Meyerbogen’s dialect, “‘Bertha, is dot you….dot’s good’” (329); child-labor activist through not blaming Essie, “such a little girl,” who had been responsible for house-keeping but of course, could not perform because of her age; supernatural as we see Bertha’s all important feet again, as
she sits in the “wide, westering light with the flat, eager faces of the toes down tasting earth, the good earth, peasantly. Breathers. Suckers in of the little vibratory messages (329); and the surrealist ekphrasis of “the treble shrilling of the children,” and the final lines, “the tawny smell of the bread …” (329).

**Lines of Music and Classified Ads: Visual Collage**

Though Hurst used collage primarily as a way to react and protest against contemporary civil rights issues, she did also include more purely aesthetic elements that emphasize the visual side of collage. Details like the unforgettable repeated description of a head’s ellipsity that “was like putting an egg whole into your mouth and then feeling it slowly come out” (8), give the novel its uniquely visual prowess. Add to this moment the image tied to the above sentimental vignette, the inclusion of the stick drawing that includes Bertha (328), or the lines of musical composition from when Bertha attends her son’s concert (308-9) (fig. 3).

![Image from Lummox. Hurst illustrates the lines of music from Bertha’s son’s concert.](image-url)
Hurst’s experimental practice of including these real, visual elements of the artistic moments of *Lummox* make the novel a collage itself: not only does it verbally speak of sketches and music, it *is* sketches and music.

Furthermore, from within the greater collage of the novel as a whole emerges contained mini-collages; sections of text create their own discrete collages, such as the description of Rollo’s funeral procession. Leading directly from a straightforward narrative description, Hurst moves to addressing “you”:

Something rather sickening happened then and brought you back into the fringe of the onlookers. The bier was tilted into the hearse. It ran forward a little as if on casters, and two doors with silver handles closed and pinched your heart. The doors closing that way. Like shutting a dear book that had a filigree lock on it and turning the tiny key. The doors closing. The last line of a sonnet. (235)

The inclusion of “us,” the repetition of the “doors closing” and “hearts pinching,” and finally the description of this finality as the “last line of a sonnet” make this moment simultaneously real and surreal. This clashing together of real moments with imagined, of sustained metaphor of doors and death and passing, all in a moment are addressed to the reader by the detached narrative voice. Against a larger visual of the hearse are close-ups for silver handles, books, and a “tiny” lock and key. The poetic reference transforms “doors closing” into a figurative passing on. Hurst invokes visual, auditory and tactile senses to create a single collage canvas of the funeral procession.

Hurst’s contained collages are also manifest by her use of visual flashes: not full descriptions, but individual fragments grouped together in a paragraph to create a cohesive image, like when Bertha is “dusting [Rollo’s] small, book-lined study”:
Short lines leaving much of the paper white. Lines that rocked softly like a boat with a lateen sail. Rhythm. “Love. Rove.” “Pagan. Raven.” “Lyre. Desire.” Flash. Flash. Flash. A plunging opal horse and a jade terrific lion and a lapis lazuli centaur, riding round and round again into alternate view on the merry-go-round. She had dusted the wide-margined paper with the lick of flame color through the words. As if you opened and closed your eyes very rapidly. (9)

The visuals of that moment, the multi-textured image and the focus on the words are indicative of the surrealist repetition in *Lummox*. These types of passages also remind us of Bertha’s life beyond her labor, of her ability to perceive and desire the beautiful, of her fascination with (and limitation with) the English language, and both the immediacy and permanency of her situation. These types of scenes, collaged amongst one another, also reinforce the vague, always questioned (“Swedishly”) visual descriptions of Bertha.

Hurst gives more insight into Bertha when Mrs. Farley gives Bertha a cast-off opera cloak of sea-green chiffon; as Bertha contemplates this gift, the passage brings texture and color with words and surreal ekphrastic experience:

Bertha of strong sweat and hands that could entrail fowl at one tear, in sea-green chiffon. She never tried it on, it would have embarrassed her, but the green seemed to fill her attic room like sea Beautiful sea, that instead of rolling and hurting like a prisoner in her heart, was here on the outside where she could touch it. The delicate fabric clung to the roughness of her hands. In its way that chiffon was like the Polish national anthem which she could hear so poignantly with her heart, or like the word “Lyric” which she could feel with her teeth when she repeated it softly to herself….Satin, Velvet that was like a silence. (7-8)
Bertha’s relationship with words is another repeated motif of the collage, one that continuously reminds the reader through use of dialect, that Bertha is perceived as an immigrant (though she is not). Throughout the text, words are “waiting-to-be-born thoughts” (4), “‘J’s’ melt in [Bertha’s] throat” (10), and in one passage with Rollo: “Words darted through the branches with the brilliancy of flamingoes on wing. ‘Pagan.’ ‘Appassionata.’ Brooks of the frozen tears of her loneliness began to flow. She was bursting of music and the sound of the jeweled words and she wanted to run after him and help him somehow in the largo of the charmed forest of her heart” (13). Words are Hurst’s vehicle for reminding us of Bertha’s limitations, and her collaging of regional-realist language with the surreal, destabilizes and universalizes Bertha’s experience.

Hurst is not afraid to experiment with language in the novel. As above, Hurst includes musical language in the text as part of the prose. She plays with regional dialects as well as silencing as its own type of communication. She acknowledges the global influence on Lummox by including foreign languages within the novel (129 and 177) (fig. 4), and uses formatting to separate a newspaper announcement from the prose:

Figure 4. Image from Lummox. Hurst inserts foreign languages into the text and changes the formatting to illustrate a newspaper ad.
By incorporating these visual moments, Hurst breaks away from the prose of the novel and the reader considers what is “art” and what is “reality.” Though she uses them in a very measured amount here, we will see her embrace this technique in later novels, particularly *Anitra’s Dance*. Similar to the *Le Journal* headmast in Picasso’s famous collage, the signifying objects of visual arts and languages as prose serve to make *Lummox* a multilayered, collage novel.

These particular moments of collage, of fragmenting together disparate elements of experience, are recalled in the passage from *Anatomy of Me* included in this chapter’s beginning, when Hurst describes the genesis of *Lummox* as she “wandered” into that “dark basement” on the Lower East Side. Observing the “obviously Slavic” women sift through buttons, Hurst has an epiphany about seeking individuality in the anonymous public: “Picked up by the handful, they were just a mass. But selected separately, each one claimed its identity…. Faces in the crowd were no longer just faces melting like wax into one another. They had separateness” (275-6).

This passage is Bertha’s origin story. Of course there is the obvious reference to the “Slavic” women sitting in the open doorway, but more important is Hurst’s revelation about the buttons. Without her commitment to the “separateness” of each face in the crowd, perhaps it would never occur to Hurst to write the story of Bertha. As just another one of a multitude of faces, Bertha roved the back alleys and kitchens of New York, unseen and unheard. Hurst’s decision to write Bertha into being, and therefore representing the struggle of multitudes of men and women of the time, emerges from her ability to “sort” out each individual face from the crowd.

Hurst’s experience then brings together the collage aesthetic of *Lummox* in a most extraordinary way, collaging the fictional experiences of Bertha with Hurst’s activist agenda, while employing techniques from sentimental, regional-realist, gothic, and surrealist traditions. How do we, as readers, rectify the unreal with the real, when Hurst clearly signals to us that even
the most horrid, grotesque moments of *Lummox* are meant to reflect reality? Hurst said of her own experiences writing *Lummox*:

> I felt so completely awake writing *Lummox*. Too awake. I still do. So much to know about, to do, to feel, to see, to think about, care about, laugh about. Grieve about. That enormous waking up was as if the mind had been a house with most of the rooms closed off and, suddenly, new winds were rushing through the corridors, blowing open doors, revivifying dead air…. New awarenesses burst like skyrockets into my consciousness. (277)

Finally, these collaged moments of *Lummox* make the reader “wake up” too, forcing us to continually negotiate our standing as readers with Bertha’s reality, to recontextualize her experiences, and to re-evaluate our understanding of the Lower East Side immigrant experience and the “new consciousness” of the twentieth-century American experience. The reader, too, reacts and protests against the reality of Hurst’s characters, motivated by the active reader role necessitated by literary collage. Hurst’s use of the visual establishes her participation in a pattern used by other modernist writers who responded to the mingling artistry of the dynamic modernist period. So much more than a regional-realist report, *Lummox*, through its use of the collage aesthetic, becomes a work of reaction to and protest of political policy of 1920s New York, re-envisions modernist modes, and earns a space for Hurst amongst other experimental writers of the period.

**CONCLUSION**

During and after *Lummox* in the 1920s, Hurst’s writing continued to evolve. She focused on activist matters and writing about New York’s anonymous public. While she publicly
declared her distance from the high modernists and also against those writing for the popular crowd, Hurst’s novels weaved in and out of critical and popular success. She was an early champion for the rights of women, immigrants, children, and the lower class, as well as the union between art and politics. Undoubtedly, Hurst’s public involvement in these civil rights movements and her contributions in a public role as a politically motivated artist influenced American political culture and legislation.

On the literary front, identifying the collage aesthetic in Fannie Hurst’s short stories and novels, we see a great writer dedicated to formalist experimentation and practice across decades of writing. The collage holds a special place in modernist art as a response to the political and technological developments occurring around the time of European and American modernism. When adapted by the Harlem Renaissance, the collage only grew in aesthetic range and in possibility of speaking beyond works of visual art. Hurst’s interest in formal and narrative experimentation and her active and long-standing relationship with cinema makes her a natural fit for the implementation of the collage aesthetic in her work. As such, Hurst’s texts would serve as fine examples of great American women’s writing, in both public and critical contexts, in the first half of America’s twentieth century.

Yet, though public popularity may wane, what do we, as literary and cultural scholars, make of the academy’s near desertion of Hurst? Why do her novels, which could have a place in school curriculum ranging from social to political sciences, history, and the humanities, fail to appear in these classes? Why do we not value her works as great? Hurst’s call to “react and protest” serves as a model of how art can serve the public: how an artist can cross over into politics, policy, and social service. As Stephanie Lewis Thompson suggested, if there is no room for Fannie Hurst in the American modernist canon, then we must re-imagine the boundaries and
limits of the canon. Hurst’s work allows us to identify ways that regionalism and realism bled into modernism, and how modernist efforts could be furthered by a regional-realist underpinning. Hurst’s aesthetic innovation serves as one example of the way women’s experiences as an emerging part of the visible city are made into literary art; the subsequent chapters of this dissertation will explore the innovative techniques of two other women writers who successfully do the same: Edith Summers Kelley and Nella Larsen.
CHAPTER TWO

“A GREAT AND DEEP HUMANITY”: EDITH SUMMERS KELLEY AND THE EVERYDAY

If Fannie Hurst’s life was lived as a slow-burning but vibrant bonfire, Kelley’s life—her literary life, at any rate—was a lone spark. Kelley, briefly known and quickly forgotten by popular readers, never knew the success of Hurst or Nella Larsen. Compared to Hurst’s prodigious production of fiction, and Larsen’s quickly paced (though shorter lived) efforts, Kelley’s publication history succinctly illustrates the type of literary success she enjoyed during her lifetime: barely any. And yet Weeds, the only work of prose fiction Kelley published in her lifetime, remains an enduring American masterpiece. When it was rediscovered in 1974, a subsequent review in the New York Times proclaimed: “If there could be such a thing as a 21-gun salute for a novel fortuitously rescued from a 50-year oblivion, ‘Weeds’ richly merits it, for Edith Summers Kelley’s book is unquestionably a major work of American fiction.” The same glowing review concludes that the book “will astonish and enrich anyone who reads it. And anyone should be everyone” (Whitman “Kelley”). Critical praise for the novel on its 1923 release shared the same enthusiasm. Based on this critical acclaim, why does Kelley’s name fail to register in the literary imagination?

To hear Kelley’s side, neither the critics nor the public could appreciate her commitment to tell the story of the everyday people whom she encountered. According to an autobiographical note shared by her son Patrick, Kelley once wrote:

Quite evidently American readers do not want to know anything about my years of rich and varied experience among the poor. Indeed I am convinced that they do not want to know about anybody who is poor, with the exception of the poor
young girl who takes the eye of a millionaire and the poor young man who successfully makes love to his employer’s daughter. (Whitman “Novel”)

Kelley’s artistic voice emerged from a commitment to the everyday lives she lived and witnessed, which then served as inspiration for her fiction. Her capacity to observe, her deep compassion, and her enduring commitment to the stories of everyday lives drove her artistic endeavors.

Kelley was not alone in her desire to tell the stories of the communities she lived and traveled amongst. In reading Kelley’s works, I identify an artistic approach known as the documentary-aesthetic, which is also found in photography of the same marginalized agricultural communities in the early twentieth century. In this technique, artists seek a documentary-type aesthetic representation for their subjects—representation without exploitation. In a documentary-aesthetic approach, the artists take on a role as insider-outsider; while aware of their role as an outsider to the community that they seek to represent, they desire to approach the community with the same compassion and understanding that an insider would. The result is art that tells the stories of otherwise marginalized, exploited, and misunderstood communities.

To illustrate the documentary-aesthetic approach in Kelley’s work, I look to the techniques of photographers working in settings similar to Kelley’s novels, specifically the agricultural communities of Kentucky and California. The photographers chosen for this project, namely Walker Evans and Doris Ulmann, enact the documentary-aesthetic approach present in Kelley’s work and demonstrate a desire to approach their subjects as insider-outsiders. The inclusion of Ulmann is especially important as it raises questions of the female gaze during a time where women’s artistic voices were still marginalized. Like these contemporary photographers, Kelley approaches her characters with both “aesthetic and documentary impulses” (Casey 17) in order
to represent these remote agricultural communities, especially with respect to the lives of the community’s women.

Liminality underscores the experience of working with Kelley and informs her approach to her work as an insider-outsider. Her published oeuvre is exceedingly small: during her lifetime, only *Weeds* and a handful of her poems and narrative essays appeared in print; posthumously, two of her short stories were published, as well as her novel *The Devil’s Hand*. The remaining manuscripts—approximately sixteen short stories, one novella, three dramatic works, and multitudes of poetry, remain neglected in Southern Illinois University’s Special Collections Research Center at Morris Library. Despite the efforts of several scholars to write Kelley’s biography, no such cohesive document exists.¹⁸ However we are fortunate that a significant amount of Kelley’s life is documented and accounted for, either by Kelley herself by way of her non-fiction essays, or through her friends and family. Because of this, we are able to know many of the significant movements and developments of her life, and see the origins of her stories in her vast experiences in modern America. In particular, her essays “Helicon Hall: An Experiment in Living” and “We Went Back to the Land” provide insight into various times in Kelley’s life. An ample collection of available correspondence between Kelley, her first husband Allen Updegraff, her friend Sinclair Lewis, and her employer and friend Upton Sinclair provides us with the tenor of Kelley’s relationship with these literary giants, and reveals her own attitudes to her work. As recalled by Kelley’s son, Patrick: “[b]eing curious, [Kelley] loved to observe

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¹⁸ According to the Matthew Bruccoli archive of South Carolina University, Linda Sanders was working on a biography. Jane Weisman Stein indicates a biography manuscript in her letters to Matthew Bruccoli (Kelley papers, donor file); Kelley’s daughter Barbara (Updegraff) Boor also penned a memoir that has since been lost.
people to see how they acted and reacted” (Bruccoli 300). With each new experience, Kelley’s commitment to observation shaped how she represented these communities.

**EDITH SUMMERS KELLEY: WOMAN ACROSS AMERICA**

Looking through Kelley’s biography reveals that she lived much of her life as an insider-outsider. Though Kelley lived her entire adult life in the United States, she was in fact Canadian-born, moving only to New York City after her graduation from the University of Toronto. In New York, she fell easily into the urban scene of the early 1900s, living on Bank Street and becoming friends with Upton Sinclair, Sinclair Lewis, Susan Glaspell, Orrick Johns, and other artists and writers. Her first position was in the editorial department of Funk and Wagnalls. While this position afforded her access to a circle of writers, the working conditions ruined her eyesight. This condition would plague her for the rest of her life; Kelley often wrote that she could not work on her novels because she could no longer see (Kelley to McWilliams). Sinclair would soon hire her as his personal secretary, bringing her to Princeton, New Jersey. Around this time, Sinclair Lewis proposed to Kelley, but the engagement was called off.  

However the three—Sinclair, Lewis, and Kelley—would join Sinclair’s Helicon Hall group living experiment. There was one glowing time in Kelley’s life where she felt like a true insider: her time at Helicon Hall. Situated in a failed boarding school, the communal living was Kelley’s utopia. Twenty-seven years after the house burned down, Kelley reflected on it as one of her “beauty spots of the past” (Kelley “Helicon” 1). The experiment was meant to “simplify the routine

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19 A note from Upon Sinclair in the Morris Library SCRC Kelley Collection (40/1/5) indicates that Kelley and Lewis were engaged during their time at Helicon Hall. A letter from Lewis biographer to Philip Allan Friedman to C.F. Kelley of October 25, 1957 suggests that Lewis broke away from the engagement.
details of living for people who wished to give themselves to other things than routine detail” (2). Her enthusiastic appreciation of this break from the necessities of routine detail foreshadows Kelley’s eventual critique of the role of repetition in women’s lives, working against the trope of presumed circularity and cyclical nature of women’s stories; we will see evidence of this critique in both of her novels. Also of particular interest is Kelley’s reflection on the separation of children and adults at the Hall, where children had their own play and meal spaces: “The children had their world and we had ours and the two went on side by side but not interfering with each other. How many and many a harassed (sic) mother has sighed in vain for just such an arrangement as that” (11). Though Helicon Hall burned down before Kelley had a chance to be a mother there, it is clear from her later letters that the responsibilities of child-rearing interfered with her ability to finish any of her works in progress. In fact, Kelley wrote to her publishers in 1923 that she identifies with her Weeds protagonist Judith, who relinquishes her artistic talent in order to care for her children (Goodman 360).

Kelley’s personal life after the early demise of Helicon Hall sheds light on her viewpoints on marriage and children. Kelley married Lewis’ friend Allan Updegraff, a successful poet with whom she would have two children. Kelley had their first child Barbara in late 1911. Letters written to Kelley from Updegraff at this time indicate that Kelley spent an extended period of time in Toronto, Canada with her sister, and that she delivered Barbara there. Kelley does not mention this period of time in her personal recollections, much as she omits her marriage to Updegraff in the first place. The letters reveal a somewhat unconventional attitude towards the birth of a child: Updegraff indicates that Kelley wrote she would not praise “the brat” too much, as to prevent Updegraff from being too disappointed when he finally meets “it” (Updegraff). A few days later, he wrote: “It is highly interesting to your Mub to notice the sudden gradations of
your interest in, and love for, that brat—pardon me—baby!” Updegraff voices concerns about how Kelley has changed since her pregnancy: “I’ve never seen you, as a matter of fact. You have some of the traits, features and experiences of my bug—but you’re quite another person! You began being another person about eight months ago.” Later in the letter he claimed that “Mub and Chub have ceased to exist,” and that they both must evolve into new people to become parents. Updegraff’s letters illuminate his and Kelley’s shared concerns about the role of children in their marriage, and Janet Casey effectively reads “Billy’s Birth” in Weeds as Kelley’s “response” to Updegraff’s concerns (Casey 132).

Another detail mentioned in the same letter is a previous failed childbirth: “Tell your Mub about some of those sufferings. Were they a great deal worse than when nature and Dr. Barnhardt decreed the removal of the first embryo?” (Updegraff). We cannot know if Updegraff refers to an abortion, miscarriage, still-birth or other scenario, but Kelley’s personal experiences with “embryo removal” may shed light on her ability to, or willingness to, approach the biological, parasitic nature of embryonic development, particularly in Weeds. The marriage, though short lived, ended amicably in divorce. Kelley chooses not to recall her first marriage in later autobiographical sketches,20 though her short stories reveal that she is largely in favor of divorce.21

After her divorce from Updegraff, Kelley would never call New York her home again. Soon after the divorce, in about 1914, Kelley partnered with, but never legally married, the sculptor C. Fred Kelley. Together they traveled across the United States in search of rural adventure, continually becoming insider-outsiders to these far flung agricultural communities

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20 See article by Mary Elizabeth Irwin.
21 “A Door Opens—And Closes,” “The Weaker Vessel” (Kelley papers).
until they finally settled into suburban California. Along the way, Kelley wrote a critically acclaimed novel, drafted another, and produced two dramas, twelve short stories, one novella, and three personal essays and an uncountable amount of poetry—not to mention raised three children and worked alongside C. Fred to manage an ever-rotating series of agricultural, rural, and suburban households. Kelley’s personal narrative “We Went Back to the Land” documents the Kelleys’ adventures in Kentucky, New Jersey, and finally California. “Back to the Land” and the letters from this time provide insight into the many modes of life the Kelleys experienced, which is particularly helpful in understanding how a woman, raised in the suburbs and having moved from an urban environment, is able to write about rural life so vividly and compellingly. Letters from this time reveal Kelley’s inspiration, especially in *The Devil’s Hand*, as she states that two women she met while farming in the Imperial Valley served as the models for the novel’s main characters Kate and Rhoda (Goodman 359). This incident serves to evidence the dual “documentary-aesthetic” impulse mirrored in rural photography of the time.

Kelley’s documented memories from this time reveal how her biography impacts her novels, particularly with regard to the demands of an agricultural lifestyle. She details her struggle to keep up with her work given the responsibilities of raising three children (Barbara and Ivor, from Edith’s marriage to Updegraff, and Patrick, the son she had with C. Fred) and household maintenance (Goodman 360). Increasingly, her failing eyesight will prove detrimental to her literary production (Bruccoli 295). The demands of childbirth and childrearing will play a major role in the struggles of the protagonist of *Weeds*. Furthermore, the letters reveal the sense of experimentation and exploration that inspired Kelley’s greatest works: *Weeds* and *The Devil’s Hand*.
The lives of women living in agricultural communities in the early twentieth century did not exactly inflame public interest. These women were far from city centers where women’s rights and lives were evolving by the day; therefore, they were left to the margins to accept their lots in life as farmer’s wives, following the same cycle as their mothers and grandmothers. Of course, women were writing stories of pioneer or farm-land America—Willa Cather, Sara Orne Jewett, and Susan Glaspell to name a few—and few of these women could be considered part of the mainstream American literary imagination. However, when Kelley settled into the farming communities she came across, she looked beyond the constricting atmospheres and limited world views, embracing the humanity that ran across and within the people she met. Her ability to relate to the people she met, despite her outsider status, illuminates her novels. Given the choice to embrace or exploit the people she met and the communities she came across, Kelley consistently exercised a deep capacity for observation, understanding, and commitment to portraying her stories in a way that cut across geographical lines. In *Weeds* and *The Devil’s Hand*, Kelley illustrates her commitment to the insider-outsider documentary aesthetic.

Kelley invokes this aesthetic in *Weeds* by crafting an entire community of players surrounding protagonist Judith Pippinger. The novel follows the girlhood, adolescence, and adulthood of Pippinger, born and raised to a tobacco tenant farming family in Scott County, Kentucky. Judith is a “poppy among weeds” (89), and through her unconventional character we explore the burden of tradition set upon her and her community. Judith, like Kelley, is an artist with an adventurous spirit, whose independence combats against her role as wife, mother, and

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22 Cather is the obvious exception here, but I would mention her acknowledged dedication to a masculine style and preference for male narrators to place her in a different category than Kelley.
caretaker. In 1923, Mary Elizabeth Irwin of the San Diego Union called Weeds “the best novel [she’s] ever read by an American woman.” The Toronto Mail and Empire proclaimed Weeds amongst the top novels of 1923, and a Boston Transcript review calls it an “epic of tobacco-land.” Like Fannie Hurst, Kelley was praised for her relationship with the emerging form of photography and cinematography, citing her “photographic realism of detail” (Jacobs).23

It was by happenstance, then, that literary scholar Matthew Bruccoli, who came across a 1923 printing of the novel in a used bookstore, rediscovered Weeds.24 Bruccoli persuaded Southern Illinois University to reissue the novel in 1972, serving as the pilot novel to a new series, Lost American Fiction. In 1973, Alden Whitman wrote in the New York Times that Weeds is “a masterpiece . . . that will astonish and enrich anyone who reads it. And anyone should be everyone.” Bruccoli was able to locate one living heir of Kelley: her third child, Patrick. Patrick Kelley was delighted by the renewed interest in his mother’s works, and eagerly shared with Bruccoli his mother’s unpublished manuscripts, which included the manuscript of The Devil’s Hand.

Unlike Weeds, the protagonist of The Devil’s Hand Rhoda Malone, is an east coast native who responds to a call in the paper to travel west to the Imperial Valley, with the promise of a new, lucrative life as a farmer. Rhoda is then, like Kelley, an “outsider” to a new world. Unlike Judith who is unable to escape from her Scott County community, Rhoda must seek acceptance and community in the Imperial Valley. As mentioned, Kelley writes that the inspiration for Rhoda and her companion Kate were two women she met in the Imperial Valley who were

23 While the critical community heralded Weeds, it was a commercial failure and Kelley even owed Harcourt Brace money on her $500 advance. Despite the praise from critics, Kelley was unable to successfully publish another fiction work in her lifetime.

24 See Bruccoli’s afterword to the Southern Illinois University’s 1972 publication of Weeds for the full story.
farming and fending for themselves. Through Rhoda, we navigate the boundaries of farming communities and culture. In *Hand*, Kelley broadens her circles of experience, figuring the Imperial Valley as a place with great diversity; there is class disparity, and Mexicans, “Japs” and “Hindus” populate the town alongside genteel dairy farmers, smooth city businessmen, and vagabonds. Seeing the Imperial Valley through Rhoda’s experience, especially when contrasted against her “would-be” life in Philadelphia, allows for a different vision than Judith’s home-grown inculcation to Scott County. Additionally, while *Weeds* spans decades of Judith’s life, *Hand* covers no more than a few years of Rhoda and Kate’s time in the Imperial Valley.

Though *Hand* was released as part of SIU’s Lost American Fiction series, it garnered little critical acclaim and did little to reposition Kelley in the American literary imagination. However, Kelley’s works remain enduringly relevant to American fiction. Though her protagonist in *Weeds* is an insider, and an outsider in *Hand*, Kelley’s documentary-aesthetic approach to Scott County and the Imperial Valley reveals a desire to sympathetically convey the realities of American agricultural living in the 1920s, much like the work of photographer Doris Ulmann, and Agee and Evan’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. In fact, it was Kelley’s desire to portray the community of Scott County as a living, breathing entity that was one of her two primary disagreements with her publisher. Harcourt suggests that “While the stage is being set, a person will read description; but once set he will skip to find out what’s happening to Judith” and the cuts “would be mostly descriptions and scenes which though good in themselves are not an essential part of the story” (Harcourt). These editorial comments demonstrate that while *Weeds* was about all of Scott County, the editors felt the novel only tends to Judith. Kelley’s

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25 The other is the inclusion of the chapter “Billy’s Birth Scene,” which I’ll return to later in the chapter.
impulse towards the descriptive aligns with the identified aesthetics of perspective, framing, and repetition, which are identifiable with photography techniques. In reading Kelley alongside contemporary rural and agricultural photography, we illuminate Kelley’s techniques in representing women’s experiences.

Kelley’s work also speaks to a gap in scholarship created by an acknowledged distance between the rural and the modern. Recent works, such as Mark Storey’s 2013 *Rural Fictions, Urban Realities: A Geography of Gilded Age American Literature*, reveal that scholars are still working to understand how commonly conceived literary movements manifest differently in rural settings. One work that begins to answer the question of rural modernity is Janet Galligani Casey’s *A New Heartland: Women, Modernity, and the Agrarian Ideal in America*, which theorizes the dual-marginalization of women rural writers. She claims that the “affiliation between rurality and modernity have been largely overlooked” (4). Casey’s work is an authorizing example of this chapter’s inter-art reading, suggesting that connections between rural literary modernism and rural photography are understudied. Casey gives due credit to Cather, Faulkner and Steinbeck, but moves beyond these canonical ideals and seeks to define “rurality as both a lived experience and iconographic sign occup[ying] a solid position in modern perspectives” (5). Casey also addresses the reality that by the 1920s, more than half the American population lived in urban settings, yet the popularity of columns like “Ideas of a Plain Country Woman” in *Ladies Home Journal* prove the sustained interest in rural living (7). This

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26 Including her chapter on rural camerawork in Paul Hansom’s *Literary Modernism and Photography*.
27 For interested readers, I recommend Casey’s introduction as comprehensive introduction to current studies of the rural and modern, as well as her chapter 3, “Women, the Farm, and the Best-seller,” which explores the popular, best-selling literary margins to Cather, Faulkner and Steinbeck’s modernist center.
interest is demonstrable also in projects like *Fortune’s Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, which will be discussed later in the chapter.

Casey’s reading of *Weeds* claims that Kelley’s “investment in hyperbole and excess, especially where the female body is concerned” gives the “women characters a heightened corporeality that exceeds even the insistently physical dimensions of their everyday lives in barns, fields, and kitchens” (127).²⁸ This reading draws connections between naturalism, and specially Kelley as a naturalism, and the possibilities of modernism. Casey then draws connections to the heavily gendered genre of melodrama, particularly Peter Brooks’ definition that melodrama “insists that the ordinary may be the place for the instauration of significance” (Brooks quoted in Casey 128). The concept that the “ordinary” could motivate the “significant” emphasizes the need to attend to the everyday experiences of women as part of our cultural history. This claim is similar to Amy Kaplan’s conclusion that considerations of the everyday are what allow us to “position realism within, rather than against the grain of modernism” (quoted in Casey 13). Kelley’s focus on the everyday experience, while an important literary move in and of itself, also adds weight to the provocation of a women’s modernism, increasingly sought for by new modernisms.

**The Insider- Outsider Perspective: Kelley, Walker Evans, and Doris Ulmann**

Kelley’s impulse to both document and aestheticize setting extends to the creation of her characters, and is an impulse shared with the rural photographers commissioned by the Farm Securities Administration. Can we imagine Kelley as enacting the same goals and techniques as

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²⁸ To be clear, this argument applies for Casey to the three authors under study in the chapter—Kelley, along with Olive Tilford Dargan and Josephine Johnson.
the photographers of the FSA, who in 1935 began efforts to document the everyday lives of tenant farmers in southern and western America? Reading Kelley through one of the projects resulting from the Farm Securities Administration, Walker Evans and James Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, illuminates both projects. Photography allowed these artists, and others, to enact modernist photography techniques in the rural South, a region often elided from considerations of “modernist” America (Casey 157). In this way, agricultural America begins to occupy a space in the modernist imaginary. Like Kelley, Evans and Agee were outsiders to the communities they documented. *Famous* is generally considered as an aestheticized documentary portrayal of the people of the agrarian South. In contrast, another similarly motivated project, Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White’s *You have Seen Their Faces*, is generally classified as exploitative propaganda. Though many useful comparisons abound in the works, let us look at portraits of single women from each work (figs. 5 and 6). On the left, a woman photographed by Evans; on the right, by Bourke-White.

Figure 5. *Untitled*, Walker Evans. Printed in *Let Us Now*.

Figure 6. *McDaniel, Georgia*, Margaret Bourke-White. Printed in *You Have Seen*.

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29 For a fuller sense of this argument, Casey’s chapter 5 in *A New Heartland* is useful, as well as Part I of Paul Hansom’s *Literary Modernism and Photography*.

30 While Mark Durden’s chapter on *Famous* and Hansom’s chapter on *Famous* and *Faces* in Hansom’s *Literary Modernism* speak to the modernist accomplishments and techniques of *Famous*. 
Objectively, these photos could be of the same subject. Both have dark hair, pinned back to a degree. They share thin eyebrows and wide-set, narrow eyes, which are in contrast to their more pronounced noses. Both women wear patterned, but otherwise unadorned, collared tops. However, the resulting images from the photographers reveal the contradicting approaches to portraiture. Let us acknowledge the dignity afforded to the woman on the left. Though not particularly styled, her solitary pose against a fixed background, frank engagement with the camera, and pulled back-hair result in a respectful study of a woman who is participating with the photographic project. The frame allows for space around the woman’s face and torso, aligning the portrait with more formal portraiture where the subject is afforded the primary space in the work, free from distraction. The paneling she stands in front of appears clean and well-maintained. On the right, however, this woman is afforded no such dignity. She seems caught off-guard, as she pulls away from the small child she holds in her arms. Her hair appears to be in motion, as if in addition to pulling away from the child she is mid-step. The background is happenstance. The frame is pulled tight around her face; so tight it cuts off the child she holds and the top of her head. The lighting reveals every crevasse and cranny on her weathered face, and her expression reads of slight annoyance and confusion. In this representation, the woman’s space feels violated and disrespected, with little care given to her role as a portrait subject. Given the contrasting aims of the two above portraits and the results, I align Kelley with the aesthetic of Evans, the photographer for Let Us Now. Despite their outsider status to the communities they enter, they desire to portray the communities with respect and care. They do not stylize their subjects, but they do not exploit them, either. In the aesthetic choices like framing, lighting, perspective, and styling, the representations of the subjects and their communities are drastically different.
It is clear from Kelley’s correspondence with Harcourt and Harcourt’s edited version of *Weeds* that Kelley desired to include many more scenes of the community in order to most fully bring these spaces to life, but was encouraged over and over again to shorten the novel (Harcourt). A manuscript of *Weeds* in her archive reveals about thirty type-written pages that demonstrate Kelley’s desire to portray Scott County as a community of people. The impulse was pointedly not to choose one vibrant character (Judith) and use her precociousness to parody the rest of Scott County. These pages, eliminated by Harcourt from the published version of *Weeds*, offer insight into Scott County in a variety of ways. First, there is a lengthy description of the Scott County school graduation ceremony. Kelley writes that the Pippinger girls spent the morning grooming themselves and laid out their “gala” clothes (61). The narration proceeds to outline how the whole County has turned out for this event, women in their “black funeral clothes and little white aprons as on all state occasions; and the men had on their Sunday best, which in many cases meant only clean overalls” (63). Kelley uses the graduation scene as way of introducing the significant minor characters of the novel: Jabez Morehouse, a respected, wise, and friendly figure;31 Aunt Sally and Uncle Sam, jovial yet meddling characters, and others. Later in the cut pages, Kelley writes the background story of Ezra Pettit, owner of much of the tenant farming land, and his dealings with the American Tobacco Company (58a). While Harcourt has written “cut” over all the pages, and in many places drawn black Xs over the

31 In a review by George Townsend, he writes that Kelley told him that Morehouse was “a composite character, compounded of two remarkable old men she had known, one a Kentuckian, the other a New Jersey man.” This supports this chapter’s reading of Kelley as invested in accurately portraying the lives and experiences of the people she met in her travels. The clipping is undated and the publisher is unclear, but it is available in full in [40/2/18] in the Edith Summers Kelley Collection.
entirety of the page, a reader of the novel regrets lacking these pages in the finished product, for they usefully convey the atmosphere, hardships, and prides of Scott County.

Nevertheless, Kelley was praised by critics for her incorporation of so much of the “feeling” of Scott County. Her friend Upton Sinclair wrote that:

The author of this novel lived for many years in a remote part of Kentucky, and you can see how she watched the people with affectionate interest; she has made a minute and faithful study of their environment, and has drawn a picture which will certainly win her a place among our worthwhile novelists.

In the *Philadelphia Ledger*, a reviewer, employing photographic language, notices that Kelley “has set down a series of close ups of farm scenes and conversations” (Leof) and another that *Weeds* fills the gap of “American literature of the soil,” and writes “of the backbone and sinews of the land of which we live” (Fielding).

Clearly, despite Harcourt’s major cuts to *Weeds*, Kelley successfully creates Scott County as a viable community. One way Kelley does this is by featuring both the “close-ups” commented on in the *Philadelphia Ledger* and concise sweeping overviews. For example, in the novel’s opening pages we are introduced to Judith’s father, Bill Pippinger: “The main trouble with Bill was that along with nine-tenths of the rest of humanity, he had missed his calling. He was by nature a villager, not a farmer, and the great regret of his life was that he had not been a blacksmith” (5). Despite the geographic specificity and remote setting of a tobacco farm in Kentucky, Bill is made immediately relatable. In the tight frame on Bill, so much of his life is made transparent and we commiserate with Bill. Like Ulmann, Kelley desired to “reveal the ‘great and deep humanity’ of her subjects” (Casey 165). A few pages later, Kelley widens her frame to encapsulate the whole of the Pippinger’s experience: “A radius of some eight or ten
miles about the farm formed their entire world” (8). By describing one day of outing within this eight or ten-mile radius, where “it was not considered necessary to warn relatives that on such and such a day” they would have visitors, and that “there was no sin greater than the sin of being stingy with your time, your food, or your work” (9), Kelley sketches out the customs of Scott County and its people.

In addition to photographing the people of America’s unexplored farmlands, Evans also documented their homes (figure 7), capturing sentiments similar to those expressed in Weeds. Through the tight framing, we are forced to imagine the landscape that lay beyond this solitary structure. The house is plain and practical, but well maintained. It is not remarkable in size, shape, or design. The figures on the front porch—a family, seemingly—confront the camera plainly, but from a distance. The close cropping around the house makes it appear larger than it may otherwise be, drawing us toward the front door, and contrasting with the implied open land around the house. The lens of the camera serves as the focal point of the residents; they watch us approaching as we watch them at home.
This type of hospitality typifies Scott County throughout *Weeds*, and serves to contrast the rural life with the urban lifestyles. Kelley does this out rightly when describing the schoolchildren of Scott County:

mostly inbred and undernourished children, brought up from infancy on skim milk, sowbelly, and cornmeal cakes, and living on lonely farms where they had no chance to develop infantile mob spirit. They were pallid, long-faced, adenoidal little creatures, who were too tired after the long walk to school to give the teacher much trouble. The slang, rag, and jazz, which standardize vulgarity in the towns and cities, penetrated to this out-of-the-way corner only as faint, scarcely-heard echoes. (12)

I include here an image from *Let Us Now* (fig. 8), depicting a mother and her children; in their faces we see the people inhabiting the “out-of-the-way corner[s]” of Kelley’s novels.

![Figure 8. Untitled, Walker Evans. Printed in Let Us Now.](image)

Without wanting to literally apply Kelley’s description to the children in the image, there are undeniable crossovers. The children, admittedly pallid and long-faced, seem to embody the spirit
of Kelley’s school-children. Though engaging with the camera, they seem distanced, still perhaps wary of the presence of an outsider in their community. Most of the children who gaze directly at the camera do so with suspicion, if not full-on hesitation. The young child in front looks on innocently, and the second child from the left has the most open-face, one expressing curiosity and interest in the camera—or cameraman. The older ones look wearied and all the children look, to state it bluntly, dirty, maybe from hours walking to school or hours working on the farm or in the house. Yet, in both Kelley’s words and Evans’ image, we might classify the representation as critical but blameless. To deny their dirtiness, their lethargy, would be untrue. However to fault them, to represent their lives as some type of unworthiness, would be unfair. As practitioners of an inside-outsider documentary aesthetic, Kelley and Evans reveal to us what is there, in a way of carefully measured compassion. In these descriptions, Kelley uses specific moments and characters alongside broader sketches to create Scott County. As readers, we begin to involve ourselves in a real, viable place with living, breathing people who have hopes, dreams, disappointments and accomplishments: the payoff being that the rural immediately seems less othered and more familiar.

The opening pages of Hand will also ask its reader to consider the multitudes of lives living in rural America. Rhoda Malone and Kate Baxter, two single women in their early thirties from the east coast, travel by train to the Imperial Valley where they plan to buy and run a farm together. As they travel along, Rhoda contemplates:

it was hard to believe that each one of these dismal little towns, whizzed by and left behind in a second, formed the whole environment of hundreds of human beings, that under the roofs of these few drably weatherboarded houses lay all
their ambitions, their loves, their jealousies, their angers, their despairs, everything that made up their lives. (1)

As if Rhoda was whizzing past Scott County itself, constituting the whole of Weeds, Kelley reminds her readers that every place we know of is just one of multitudes, and the “jealousies, angers and despairs” of our own community are not unique; rather, it is the experiences of these singular communities that offer the possibility of making other communities known. When they arrive at their destination, El Centro, Rhoda finds herself caught between the impulse of wanting what she knows and desiring the unknown: “Here there were none of these things, no beauty, no charm as she had known beauty and charm… And yet the strange place beckoned to her with a compelling fascination” (25). Kelley acknowledges the outsider status of Rhoda and presumably the reader, encouraging us to open perspectives to the potential of “the other.” To a significant degree, Hand will consider the role of the other within community.

In the first third of Hand, Kelley carefully constructs Rhoda’s dual position as insider-outsider to the Imperial Valley. Echoing the documentary-aesthetic impulse of Weeds, and supporting my argument of Kelley as creating a project like Agee and Evans’ Let Us Now, Kelley creates a protagonist that approaches her new surroundings as an ally—not as an outsider exploiting her new community for personal amusement. Admittedly though, at first exposure, Rhoda gawks at and essentializes the “other” community of the Imperial Valley. Cowboys “strode by under their big hats,” “Mexicans loafed and loitered,” and “a little brown Japanese in a white paper hat trotted with the crowd” (15). Emphasizing her sheltered, east-coast roots, Rhoda has little experience with diversity. Alongside the white families Rhoda will meet, the cultural groups all exist to portray the diverse community of the Imperial Valley and help trace Rhoda’s evolving understanding of the “other.”
After settling in to the Valley, Rhoda’s feelings to the others begins to change and Rhoda begins to experience a sympathy for the groups originally foreign to her: curious as to the lives of the Japs, Hindus, Mexicans, yet aware of the “wall of racial difference,” Rhoda feels “hopeless of ever bridging the gulf of race which separated them but wondering curiously what had been their lives before they came here and what were their lives now, what they thought about, what they hoped for” (49). While on her way to another farm one day, Rhoda finds herself in the middle of a Mexican cantaloupe farm, where “all day long under the searing sun these dark, silent figures moved about” (51). In a reflective moment, Rhoda wonders, “When the rich people back East eat those melons if they ever think how much those poor fellows have to sweat to produce them?” (51), thereby removing herself from one of the people “back East” who eat the cantaloupe without any sense of its brutal origins. In this moment, Rhoda begins a transition into a sympathetic insider-outsider in the Valley, serving as exemplar of Kelley’s documentary aesthetic impulse.

The transition to being an insider at Imperial Valley continues the next time Rhoda sees one of the Hindus she spotted in town at her first arrival. Unlike her initial stereotypical visual inventory, this second portrait is much more revealing and calls to mind the softly blurred portraits of Doris Ulmann:

Riding breeches, leather puttees, a soft hat, an old sun-faded coat that drew across his broad shoulders. Under the hat a handsome, shaven face, full but not coarse lips which never smiled, and the luminous dark eyes of his race. She found herself fascinated by his hands: long, slim, dark hands, flexible, reposeful and self-contained…. She had never seen hands which radiated such complete self-possession. (43)
Other than the passing references to the Hindu’s darkness, the portrait remains neutral but evokes elements of modernist primitivism. Rhoda imparts a measure of interiority to the man through the visual description: “lips which never smiled,” hands which “radiated” “self-possession.” Her admiring tone is evident through his description of his clothes, broad shoulders, and capable hands. The admiring tone encourages us to think back to Ulmann’s portraits (fig. 9):

![Figure 9](image)

*Figure 9. Untitled, Doris Ulmann. Printed in *The Darkness and the Light.*

This solitary portrait highlights the same two elements evinced from Kelley’s written portrait: the face and the hands. In particular, his “long, slim, dark hands” call our attention, both hands placed prominently in the portrait. One rest on his lap, and we see the full length of his fingers. The other rests on a cane, a tool that at once emphasizes his age and his commitment to independence. The man’s face is thoughtful, somewhat detached. He is with us, and the photographer, but also absorbed in a world of his own, not unlike the Hindu of *Hand.* Like Ulmann, Kelley is able to draw out an individual’s humanity with carefully selected features, presented in a clear but casual, almost imprecise way.

Shortly after, Rhoda begins to identify with the Hindu, the “other,” so much that she sees the world through his eyes: “she found herself looking at these passing people with cool,
detached appraisal as if she were the Hindu who slouched there smoking negligently in the big battered car” (63). This moment is a pivotal one that reveals Kelley’s documentary-aesthetic impulse. As Rhoda sees the town center through the eyes of the Hindu, she paradoxically takes on the role of the male gaze. Rhoda sees a litany of townspeople, “pool room loiterers with coarse mouths and blotchy faces” women who “waddled, tottered, plunged, limped painfully or minced along with precise little steps with bespoke tight shoes, and “sleek, well-dressed men with white hands and fat, shaven necks and knew they were pampered, gluttonous and full of money lust.” (63) Seeing through the eyes of the Hindu places Rhoda into an insider Valley role. The male gaze resonates with male-dominated modernist traditions; as a result, Rhoda is empowered by her momentary wearing of the male gaze. She accurately sees the truth of the visions before her—the looming dangers of sloth, failed attempts at beautification, and the gluttony of the businessmen. In her mind, the people of the Center (the town point of the Imperial Valley) are outsiders to the true farming communities in the Valley itself.

A sideline to the documentary-aesthetic of photography that Kelley enacts in her writing, and that has already been surfacing in this chapter, is her use of the grotesque. Defined by James Goodwin, the grotesque is “invoked through the presence of strange, misshaped or intimidating forms, and in these in turn often reflect anxiety over an encounter with ‘foreign’ or ‘alien’ elements” (Connelly 18). Kelley relies on the grotesque at times to navigate the spaces of self-and-other and to amplify Rhoda’s transition from an east-coast outsider to a member of the Imperial Valley community. Rhoda’s observation above includes “strange, misshaped forms”—the blotchy mouths, the waddling women in too-tight shoes, the bloated, skin-stretched white necks of the businessmen, reflect her anxiety at her place in the Valley: “As she looked at the hard, dead faces of these people…she felt herself pervaded with a sense of restlessness, of
confusion, of futility, of cruel greed for something worthless and empty, of intense and deeply selfish striving for something not worth striving for.” (64) While approaching insider status in the Valley, Rhoda’s experiences with the other and the grotesque force her to consider her own place in the Imperial Valley, and that which she is “striving for.”

While the use of the foreign other helps Kelley depict the community of the Valley, it is important to note the presence of three other families: Ruby Peterson, the Prue tts, and the Crosbys. While these three families are white, and therefore not othered, they represent opposite ends of the class spectrum. Ruby is an impoverished, single-mother to a brood of sickly children, reminiscent of the schoolchildren of Scott County, and the Pruett and Crosby families are well-to-do farmers and ranchers who host Rhoda and Kate for Sunday dinner. The presence of these families, along with the Japanese, Mexicans, and Hindus, creates the dynamic community of the Valley. Through Rhoda, an insider-outsider like Kelley herself, Kelley successfully creates the Imperial Valley in the documentary-aesthetic style. As readers, we follow Rhoda as she negotiates her space in the Imperial Valley.

WRITING WOMEN: FEMALE FRAMING, GAZING, AND REPETITION

Though Kelley’s novels desire to position the woman in relation to their communities, Kelley also wants to represent the interior struggles of the women she represents. Heralded especially by the success of Kate Chopin’s The Awakening in 1899, women’s interiority emerged as a space of study in American literature, furthered of course by the emerging presence of women as literary artists. Similarly, technological developments in the early 1900s of photography allowed more and more women to participate in photography: “Women became interested in photography for ‘archival or expressive reasons,’ and the developing lightness of
equipment made it a feasible enterprise” (Casey 158). By placing women writers and photographers at the eye of the camera (both literal and metaphorical), the opportunity arises to view the world through the perspective of women. Casey’s description of the female rural modern photographer could easily translate to the modern writer; in a sense, this argument applies photographic techniques as methodology:

   As wielders of a gaze, then, as framers of an alternative space and place, these female photographers…assumed potent roles as cultural interpreters, negotiating and shaping relations between modernity’s centers and margins. In the process they positioned themselves as firmly modern and entered into developing discourses of ethnography and aesthetics, including controversies over the role of photography itself as either an evidentiary tool or an artistic medium. (158)

The photographer/ writer uses framing and perspective to capture the everyday and the ordinary, and to make them significant. As a result, the emphasis remains on the descriptive powers of the work and not with formal experimentation, as generally demanded by modernism. Doris Ulmann, whose legacy is that of soft, almost blurry portraits of people of the south, “hoped through her artistic efforts to reveal the ‘great and deep humanity’ of her subjects” (165). Ulmann “wished her photographs to ‘serve some social purpose’” (165), classifying her work then not merely as documentarian and aestheticized, but also activist. Ulmann’s deep involvement with her subjects reveals a new conception of how we see and the view the women she photographed, much like how Kelley’s novels uncover unseen women’s stories.
In this image from Ulmann (fig. 10), a young woman is photographed at work but outside of the home. Similar to the the portrait by Evans included earlier in this chapter, this young woman is in consent with Ulmann and it appears as if she has even been posed for the photograph. Her direct gaze back to Ulmann activates the viewer-viewed relationship and provides agency to the subject. The soft lighting is sympathetic to the woman’s appearance and clothing, and highlights the domestic work she performs. Despite the posed nature of this piece, the way Ulmann shows the young woman in a typical every day setting, slightly aestheticized, embodies the documentary-aesthetic approach. Like Evans and Kelley, Ulmann is invested in dignifying her subjects while portraying them in their everyday moments. A second portrait by Ulmann raises the question of repetition in daily work (fig. 11):
This subject, who also makes direct eye contact with her viewer, embodies the domestic, indoor labor demanded from many women in the agricultural lifestyle. In this image, which is gently framed to include the breadth of the woman’s bent elbow and her work space, we see a woman at work. Her frank eye contact does not interrupt the movement of the iron across the fabric and indicates to us that this task is second-nature to her—in fact, likely a literal representation of her everyday experience. There is an implied repetition to the work; she does not need to pause in her movement as her body knows exactly what and how to do this task. There is no sense of violation by the photographer’s presence but rather that of resignation: this is her life, day in, day out.

Complicating the perspective that domestic space is women’s territory, both Judith and Rhoda are troubled by their need to work inside the home and by the repetition that is demanded of them by their everyday work. Jennifer Fleissner argues in *Women, Compulsion, Modernity* that repetition and circularity are germane to women’s experience. This representation is reinforced by Ulmann’s ironing woman, yet for Judith and Rhoda, the cyclical demands of their lifestyles leads to depletion. Judith in particular finds the indoors troubling: “She had always
disliked the insides of houses. The gloom of little-windowed rooms, the dead chill or the heavy heat as the fire smouldered or blazed, the prim, set look of tables and cupboards that stood always in the same places engaged in the never ending occupation of collecting dust both above and beneath: these things stifled and depressed her” (116). Unlike her more conventional sisters, Judith finds no joy in maintaining the home, noting that the “insides of houses” both “stifle” and “depress” her. Judith in fact so desires outdoor spaces that she reconstructs the landscape inside her home. A would-be artist, Judith was always sketching. After she marries Jerry and is confined to her home, she “drew the view from the little kitchen window as it appeared from every position in the room…all the pictures had one thing in common: the sweep of hilltop lining itself against the sky. She amused herself by piecing these pictures together and making the whole line of hills that bordered the hollow on the window side” (161). Effectively, Judith makes a collage of the outside inside of the home to find solace.

With the onset of her first pregnancy, a signifier of the fundamental circular design of women’s lives, the house increasingly repulses Judith: “she particularly loathed the sights and smells of the kitchen and fled from them as often as she could. The odor of frying fat…sent her reeling to the outside. There she gulped great draughts of the pure air, and as she grew calmer, breathed long and deep until her nausea had subsided” (142). With the burdens of maternity threatening, Judith becomes even more dependent on the escape of the outdoors. Judith finds some relief when she and Jerry move to a new house, which has “dark rooms and the bare surroundings” but “it was open to the wind and sky” and “at the end of day the sunset filled the house like a presence.” (244) To Judith, the bare, dark rooms were inconsequential, superseded by the house’s ability to integrate the indoors with the outdoors. She longs for the open air and
sky and her loneliness is revealed by her perception of the sunset as a “presence” that comes to her at the end of the day. She is literally disgusted by the indoor spaces that confine her.

The despair Judith feels inside the stifling walls of her home is amplified by her dread of her repetitious daily routine: she “plodded through the round of her daily tasks like an automaton. Even to the lifting of an eyelid, she made no motion that was not necessary. Her feet dragged, her eyes seemed as if covered by a film and her face wore a heavy, sullen expression” (189-190). Kelley is clear that this not an uncommon condition. It is likely that Kelley experienced the same burdens of repetition, ones she directly references in her fond reflection of Helicon Hall, where the Hall’s communal living was able to “simplify the routine details of living for people who wished to give themselves to other things than routine detail” (2). In a continual desire to make the story of Weeds encompass Scott County as a whole, Kelley expands Judith’s condition to the women of the county:

For Judith Blackford and the rest of the women in the solitude of their isolated shanties life moved on as stagnantly as usual…. For them there was no such thing as change nor anything even vaguely resembling a holiday season. Families must be fed after some fashion or other and dishes washed three times a day, three hundred and sixty-five days in the year. Babies must be fed and washed and dressed and “changed” and rocked when they cried and watched and kept out of mischief and danger. … Floors must be swept and scrubbed and stoves cleaned and a never ending war waged against the constant encroaches of dust, grease, stable manure, flies, spiders, rats, mice, ants and all the other breeders of filth that are continually at work in country households. These activities, with the occasional variation of Sunday visiting, made up the life of the women, a life that
was virtually the same every day of the year, except when their help was needed in the field to set tobacco or shuck corn, or when fruit canning, hog killing, or house cleaning crowded the routine. (194-5)

The circularity of the women’s experience is Kelley’s main point in this passage. Despite their physical isolation, the women actually participate communally in “the life of the women,” one that allows for no respite, relief, or change. The women become mediators between the outdoors and indoors as the violation of “all other breeders of filth” become their responsibility, or when they must manage their daily routine while also lending a hand in the tobacco fields. The length alone of the passage and its repetition of the type of daily duties administered to by the mother-wife reflects on the never-ending, cyclical nature of the day. Disregarding any individual desires or interests of the women, they are managers of a home, represented by Kelley here as replicated, reproducible woman, each in their own isolated little shanty; by extension, Kelley reflects on the experience of the American women at large.

As Judith’s pregnancies proliferate, she increasingly longs for the outdoors, reframing the space where we expect women’s empowerment: “Sometimes she would sit for a long time abstractedly looking out of the window at the sweep of hillside lined against the sky” and lose herself in the landscape. At some point her hypnosis would break and she “would rouse herself with a start, as though shaking something from her, and go on about her sweeping or washing or whatever she had to do” (197). When the baby arrives, Judith is only further exhausted by its presence: “More and more mechanically she dragged through the days. As she hung over the washtub or plunged the dasher up and down in the ancient oaken churn or stood by the stove frying three time a day the endlessly recurring corn cakes, her body moved with the dead automatic rhythm of old habit” (246). Judith becomes pregnant again, and yet again, buried
deeper and deeper into the responsibilities of domesticity and motherhood. After her third pregnancy, Kelley refers to Judith’s home as “her prison” (250). Judith will never be free, damned like her mother, and her young daughters, to a cyclical existence.

The arrival of an outsider to Scott County shakes up Judith’s everyday. An unnamed traveling minister arrives in town, and Judith’s desperate search for an identity outside of her prison-home spur an affair between the two. The first sense of Judith’s sexuality in the entire novel come when Judith and the minister meet after a sermon: seeing his “smoldering eyes,” Judith could do no more than “[drop] her gaze to the floor” (272). After, “in the darkness of the summer night he overtook her on the way home. All the way she had been listening for him…. With an ecstasy transcending anything that she had ever felt in her life, she yielded herself to this passion” (272). In the public, outdoor spaces, Judith is most allowed to be and express and know herself and her desires:

    Her body, well broken to the household routine, went forward by itself without guidance of the mind…. Always she was intensely conscious of her body, delicious aware of the roundness of her arms, the softness and whiteness of her breasts, the slim grace of her ankles… Now the beauty of her body and lived and moved with her continually, a part of her consciousness. (272)

In her affair with the minister—a man entirely other to Scott County—Judith discovers a sexuality that has been lost to the demands of her domestic cycles. She sees herself as a sexual being, to the point that she leaves “the mind” behind and allows “the beauty of her body” to overtake her consciousness. The affair takes places only in outdoor spaces; they use the cover of the blackberry patch—“they ranged far searching for the luscious fruit” (268)—as their meeting location.
The realities of the body also dictate the next series of incidents in Judith’s life, which is when she falls pregnant (by the minister) and tries to abort the baby. The numbness of her domestic life shadows the former excitement of her affair, and as she rides bareback on the family mule, she wonders, “What real difference did it make after all whether the baby was born and lived to be a hundred or died in the womb?” (286). After this effort’s failure, Kelley continues to surround Judith’s abortion attempts with domestic tools: like the kitchens versus the countryside of Judith’s ride, the next measure involves a knitting needle that Judith discards at “the first stab of pain” (285). The knitting needle, symbolic of female domesticity, fails Judith, and she next turns to an herbal cocktail, bringing us back into the space of the kitchen. The mixture of “pennyroyal and tansy and other noxious herbs” (286) also fails. Finally, Judith, in the middle of a rainy night and wearing nothing more than a night slip, eagerly throws herself into a pond, which is too shallow to prove dangerous. Despite the failure of her efforts, Judith feels empowered by this encounter: “Even above humiliation and despair there rose in her a sense of power and triumph as she realized that she was master of the water” (287).32 In Judith’s desperate attempts to break the cycle of reproduction and childbearing, of her resigned realization that it makes “no difference” if her fetus comes to life or not, Kelley tells the story of women across America and indeed, the world; Judith is not one figure alone but rather a protagonist by which Kelley conveys the stories of the American female experience.33

Like Judith, Rhoda will experience depletion by the confinement repetition of domestic responsibilities, and liberation and sexual empowerment afforded by an “other.” Referenced

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32 This scene is one of many that Linda Kornasky uses to illustrate the connections between Weeds and Kate Chopin’s The Awakening.
33 B.W. Capo and Meg Gillette include Weeds in their accounts of early-twentieth century birth control and abortion narratives.
earlier in this chapter is Rhoda’s trip on the train from her Philadelphia home to the Imperial Valley, as she gazes out the window to assess the many small towns that dot the landscape. This exposure to the open spaces makes Rhoda regret the time she spent in the city:

She wished that during the war she had not stuck to her stuffy office routine but had gone out like Kate and driven a truck and in summer hired herself out on a farm and learned to drive horses, pitch hay and do all sorts of bold physical things with the sun and wind for her companions. Ever since that unforgettable morning when the sleeper blind had snapped upward and revealed to her the great sky and the limitless stretches of the West she had felt constantly within her a restless, driving urge to do something, be something different from anything she had ever been or done before. (30)

Like Judith, Rhoda is invigorated by the possibilities of the outdoors, and felt stifled working in indoor spaces. Rhoda feels thankful to Kate for bringing “her here to this new land, this new life. She was born again and she was glad” (49). In the Imperial Valley, Rhoda is “born again,” a new woman, who after three months working the farm, bears “little resemblance to the girl who rode in on the train” (39).

Rhoda continues to flourish in the Imperial Valley, and her growth and satisfaction are magnified by her relationship with two lovers: the unnamed Hindu and the vagabond, Andy Blake. Like Judith, these trysts take place out-of-doors, emphasizing the role of the outdoor, public space in both women’s liberation: “she stole at strange, delightful hours to the ditch bank to meet her lover, her heart fluttering with a tremulous joy…Sometimes, too, in the hot blaze of noonday they met behind a feathery screen of arrowweed and lingered in the strong sunshine, pacing the path beside the ditch” (128). Rhoda finds her sexual liberation invigorating: “She
carried through [the days] on a triumphant wave of stimulation” (125). Rhoda pities those who are going through their everyday routines without the secret trysts she has with her lover. At this point Kelley has made it clear that like Judith, Rhoda experiences extreme difficulty performing repetitive duties. In particular, the work that entails sedentary or indoor work is draining to Rhoda. For example, her additional work milking cows: “sitting at the cow’s flank milking, milking, milking until all thought all sensation was numbed and she was nothing but a machine” (168). Rhoda relies on her covert affairs to remain stimulated, alive, and attentive to life.

Domestic routines also drain Rhoda, resulting in an unkempt house, similar to Judith’s: “[Rhoda and Kate] slept, and slept and slept. … They let the drinking water stand in the olla for days until a strong stench and a fetid taste of decay forced them to scrub out the jar…But sunk in the slumber of exhaustion they did not smell it. The weeds grew thick and tall among Rhoda’s chrysanthemums” (258). In the dreariness of this repetition, Rhoda, like Judith, contemplates suicide by drowning:

standing over the deep, slow-moving yellow water of the big main ditch, she lingered and hesitated, telling herself how soon it would all be over if only she would make one plunge…. Yet always she turned away, wondering at and despising herself that she had no courage to let the water take her, she who was so sure that life held nothing more for her. (256)

In Rhoda, we have a female protagonist who yearns for the liberation of the outdoor landscape in order to know herself. As such, she partakes in sexual trysts and works in a position she finds gratifying and fulfilling. Through Rhoda’s lens, we see the spaces of the rural Imperial Valley as insider-outsiders: those who are not native to the area, but who sympathize and wish to document but not exploit the truths of the way of life there. Much like rural photographers, Kelley’s
documentary-aesthetic impulse reveals to us a vibrant, active community with its own conflicts and joys. Her female gaze offers new challenges to the use of framing and repetition in women’s lives, broadening the consideration of these tropes in telling women’s stories.

The Grotesque

While a commitment to a documentary-aesthetic technique motivates Kelley’s storytelling, her novels undeniably reveal an interest in another artistic technique: the grotesque. For the mainstream American public, the far-flung agricultural world of Kelley’s novels is, in a sense, the grotesque, where we define the grotesque as a “world totally different from the familiar” (Kayser 21)—a world that simultaneously produces “laughter, horror, disgust” (151). The criticism of Frances Connelly and James Goodwin assists in identifying the grotesque in literary and visual works. Connelly argues that the grotesque is “defined by what it does to boundaries, transgressing, merging, overflowing, destabilizing them” (4), and that it is “in constant struggle with boundaries of the known, the conventional, the understood” (5). The realities of the everyday rural south would seem “worlds different” than the “known, the conventional, the understood” of the urban north. Connelly’s definition of the grotesque dovetails with Goodwin’s, who concludes that in modernist American literature, “the grotesque is commonly invoked through the presence of strange, misshaped or intimidating forms, and these in turn often reflect anxiety over an encounter with “foreign” or “alien” elements,” (18) which will become an issue in a mixed-race love affair in Kelley’s Hand.

We could imagine that Kelley’s interest in the grotesque stems directly from her negotiation of the insider-outsider dynamic. Instead of representing the approach of a new community as a “different” and essentialized other, invoking the grotesque allows Kelley to
indulge in the strangeness of the encounter with the other, to illustrate its potentially eerie isolation of what one has always known, and what is now new and undeniably there. This is made evident when Rhoda begins to settle into her farm in the Imperial Valley:

In the cool of the evening when work was done….behind the screens of arrowweed which changed with the swift-falling twilight from sage green to gray and from gray to black they seemed to her fancy to flit by furtively and stealthily like villains in a melodrama, like phantoms, like spirits. She had a feeling that all about her, to the very edge of the little ranch, there stirred a strange and alien life, a life silent, inscrutable and apart. She had small hope of ever bridging the gulf that lay between that life and hers, yet it allured, tantalized, beckoned with silent, provocative finger. (54)

The unknown, “strange and alien life” appeals to Rhoda, yet it is decidedly apart from her. Despite her transition to an insider in the Imperial Valley, there still lay a “gulf” between “that life and hers.” Kelley’s grappling with the transition of Rhoda from outsider to insider allows for the aestheticization of this strange, new world that Rhoda finds herself in. Kelley uses the same technique when Rhoda visits the Hindu’s farm: “the blue smoke wreaths from the cigarettes, the white turbans, the black beards, the dark, slumberous faces. Once more Rhoda had the illusion of being transported into the Arabian Nights” (76). There is a joy, an excitement, in Rhoda when she transgresses the assumed boundaries between her world and that of the Imperial Valley and its others. Kelley uses the grotesque to illustrate an embrace of those differences.

To use the definition liberally, and perhaps a bit contentiously, Rhoda’s affair with the Hindu could itself be considered grotesque. By this, I suggest that as a white woman in the early twentieth century, a sexual relationship with a Hindu man would have been boundary-
transgressing; this challenges the reader’s understanding of conventional relationships. Kelley is not unaware of the complications of Rhoda’s relationship. No one else in the novel learns of her affair, and there is no resolution to their coupling. Kelley does, however, emphasize the otherness of the Hindu, especially compared to Rhoda’s other paramour, the white, sandy-haired Andy Blake. The other obvious modernist convention at work is that of primitivism and orientalism—white, western fascination with and fetishization of the other (see, for example, Paul Gauguin’s Tahitian paintings). I do not intend to conflate the grotesque with primitivism but rather suggest another way Kelley converses with modernist strategies. The spiritual, provocative nature of the Hindu references an awakening of primitive desire from Rhoda for the other. Even while dreaming of Andy Blake, bloodied and bruised as she first encountered him, Blake himself transforms into the Hindu, projecting Rhoda’s fetishization of the primitive other onto the more traditional white figure:

A man…came toward her, and as he approached she saw that his features were swollen and discolored… But when next he came near his features were neither swollen nor discolored; they were long, slim, oriental features calm as if chiseled from ivory. (105-6)

But the grotesque does not only function in Kelley’s novel as a way to bridge the self-and-other. In order to really tell the stories of Scott County and the Imperial Valley, Kelley must reckon with the challenge of representing agricultural work in a way that would intrigue, and not simply repel, the reader. To do so, she engages the “laughter, horror, disgust” (Kayser 151) allowed for by the grotesque in scenes of farm work. One such passage from Hand illustrates this mastery. Rhoda and Kate, in dire financial straits, must immediately sell off their chickens. Kelley describes the women preparing the chickens for sale:
From time to time [Rhoda] edged a little further away, trying to avoid the nauseating smell of fresh blood and the stench of the scalded feathers… As the afternoon wore on the pool of blood by the execution block grew horribly thick and began to stink in the intense heat. The block itself was a mass of clotted gore and blood-soaked feathers… Kate’s shirt and overalls were smeared with blood. Blood stiffened in her hair, streaked her face and ran red on her hands as on a butcher’s…. 

As time marches on in the passage, so does the intensity of the blood, first from a pool into a “mass of clotted gore;” the blood is in their clothing and hair and face. We have been in motion with the scene, and the visceral details have now begun to crawl onto our bodies as the blood does for the characters, intensifying the horror of the scene. The passage continues:

To Rhoda doggedly plucking away it seemed as if there was nothing left in the world but clotted and spattered blood, the smell of scalding feathers, the wings, legs, backs, breasts and rumps of half-plucked chickens, and worst all the long limp necks horrible with clammy, blood-soaked feathers, and the gory head at the end from the open beak of which hung a dark blob of coagulated blood. Her knees trembled with weariness and she could hardly keep upon her feet, but she kept plucking away at the undersides of wings, at breasts, backs, rumps, legs, and at long, slimy, dangling necks with a bloody, open-beaked heat at the end. (261-2)

The repetition here hammers in the grotesqueness of this passage. The repeated image of the feathers, and the repeated listing of the body parts make every inch of the dead chickens real to us, in vision and scent and touch, even into Rhoda’s trembling knees. Kelley will rework the image of limp, dangling necks in both her objects, signifying a powerlessness, a surrender to the moment of the grotesque. Though readers cannot help but be horrified and disgusted by the
scene, Kelley’s out-and-out engagement with the other-worldliness of it, of asking her reader to visualize blood on clothes, in hair, smeared on faces, while more blood dripped and congealed at the mouths of the dead-chickens, has her reader hanging on every word.

While the preceding scene ensures the “horror” and “disgust” of Kayser’s definition, the following passage reveals the “laughter” element, while recycling an image from *Weeds*, which I will turn to next:

Rhoda took out the chickens and for a moment the power seemed to go out of her body. She stood with her arms hanging at her sides feeling as limp and flaccid as the dead fowl that dangled from her hands, their bleached combs dragging in the dust of the road at the end of their long, slimpsy necks. The maid stared at this apparition of a woman in soldier’s clothes peddling chickens and gave a little half smothered giggle. (264)

Despite the disgusting horror of Rhoda as she peddles, as limp as the chickens, door-to-door, the maid who opens the door gives a “half smothered giggle.” In this moment, Kelley transports us out of the blood-ridden, feathery, death-soaked drama of the chicken slaughter, and into a reality where east-coast Kate, struggling to make ends meet, is laughed at as she seeks resolution to their desperate acts. The mingling of death and life in this passage is one of Kelley’s favored ways of enacting the grotesque: this binary is the most primal consideration of transgressing worlds. This near-death pose was likely inspired by a moment in *Weeds* in which Judith, enveloped in a grotesque world of her own, is figured similarly. In fact, the image of Rhoda’s arms “hanging at her sides as limp and flaccid as the dead fowl” is repeated twice in *Weeds*, both times directly related to Judith’s exhaustion at child-bearing and rearing.
Indeed, in *Weeds*, much of the grotesque is figured as the transgression of borders between the living and the dead, intimating a gothic grotesque. As Mary Russo suggests in *The Female Grotesque*, "the grotesque cave tends to look like the cavernous anatomical female body"; the "cavernous" creator of life holds all the "detritus of the body:" "blood, tears, vomit" (1-2) (the same detritus of Rhoda’s scenes with the chickens). And of course, the cavernous female is meant to be filled with and empty out new life in a cycle of childbearing which, in *Weeds*, is aligned with death:

She lay back in the old rocking chair in which Uncle Nat Carberry had died, breathing heavily, her black hair dropping in a long, tousled wisp over the side of the chair, her features pale and drawn, her arms hanging limply, the long hands dangling from the ends like dead things. 340

Had Kelley produced the novel she desired, this moment would precede a later moment where the same image is repeated. Jerry returns from a day of work to find Judith, exhausted from the demands of the baby, “sitting slackly in the old rocking chair, her long hands hanging limp like dead things” (157).

The acme of the grotesque in *Weeds* is in a chapter known as “Billy’s Birth Scene.” This chapter, contentiously deemed unnecessary and cut by the Harcourt editors at the first printing of *Weeds*, is included in later editions. Here, Judith transgresses borders and engages in morphology, the blending of two disparate elements, by turning into an animal during labor: The veins in her forehead were purple and swollen. The muscles of her cheeks stood out tense and hard. Her eyes, wide open, stared at the ceiling with the look of eyes that see nothing; and her gums were fleshed in the snarl like the gums of an angry wolf. Her hands were clenched into
iron balls, her whole body rigid and straining heavily downward. As she gave vent to this prolonged, wolfish noise, she held her breath. He watched in helpless, horrified suspense.” (344) While this moment covers the grotesque’s requirement of horror and disgust, Jerry’s following thought adds the potential for laughter: “If she’d been a caow, she’d a been dead long ago,” he muttered; then started violently, shocked at his own comparison… To Jerry, she was no longer Judith; she was something superhuman, immense and overpowering” (346). Judith’s well-meaning husband first imagines his wife as a cow, then realizes she was no longer something of this earth—she is in the realm of the grotesque: a world totally different from the familiar.

Judith will fall pregnant multiple times during Weeds, and Kelley invokes the horrifying, disgusting grotesque, again using the visceral reality of animal slaughter—death—to learn of the burgeoning of new life. Judith realizes she is pregnant with her second child on pig-slaughtering day: “The bluish viscera, bubbling up in innumerable little rounded blogs, filled it almost to overflowing. Bloody fragments emerged along with the masses of intestines” (238). Death will continue through the novel to serve as a dramatic counterpoint to the multiple young lives Judith finds herself caring for. In a gothic, transgressive comparison, Kelley writes of Judith putting the babies to bed:

As she wept the baby’s babblings ceased and she fell into the sleep that in puny children seems closely akin to death. Toward morning Judith, too, fell mercifully asleep, pale from tears and bitter thoughts; and when the ghostlike dawn peered into the little window it saw them all three lying stretched out stark and pallid like corpses. (281)

The use of the grotesque underscores the constraints of life for the protagonists. To compare the flesh and blood of Judith as “akin” to death and the bodies of all three—the lifegiver, and the
new lives—to the dead, reinforces the thin line drawn by Kelley between the bodies of mother and children, and life and death.

Ultimately though, the grotesque services Kelley as a meditator between the inside and the outside. Her negotiations of strangeness and otherness via the grotesque allows for Rhoda’s slow transition into an insider-outsider in the Imperial Valley. The grotesque allows Kelley to maintain an artistic upper-hand while emphasizing Rhoda’s difference from those around her. For the sake of her readers, Kelley uses the grotesque aesthetic to familiarize the very unfamiliar realities of agricultural work and at the same time, as a tool to unify the experience of the depleting and conversely, reproducing, female body. Both within the narrative itself and outside it as a bridge to readers, the grotesque serves Kelley’s desire to cross the gulf of insiders and outsiders, much as does the insider-outsider documentary aesthetic. In recognizing and acknowledging our differences, Kelley dissolves them.

**BEYOND THE NOVEL: THE WOMEN OF KELLEY’S SHORT STORIES**

The American public has not yet experienced the full breadth of Kelley’s talents. Lacking a publisher to nourish and support her, Kelley never published again after *Weeds*. It is our good fortune, then, that Kelley never stopped writing anyway, and that her son was able to maintain her collection of manuscripts and generously gave them to Southern Illinois University. This collection reveals that Kelley was not only committed to telling the stories of agricultural lifestyles like Judith’s and Rhoda’s, but of women’s experiences across America. The breadth of Kelley’s stories is significant as her works traverse city centers, suburbs and the outlaying lands of America in the first half of the twentieth century, just as Kelley herself did. Though these
short stories depart from the spaces of *Weeds* and *Hand*, Kelley employs the same insider-outsider aesthetic to connect with the lives of the women and families that she tells.

In the approximately sixteen stories found in Kelley’s manuscript, about a third are set in places similar to *Weeds* and *Hand*: rural, agricultural spaces with tight-knit communities. Unlike the novels, three of these stories (“The Death in the Farm House,” “Jerry’s Son” and “His House to Himself”) have a male protagonist. However, two of the stories, “The Joke” and “In Our Town,” pick up on a theme of the novels, specifically the repressed sexuality of a married woman in a too-small town. In both of these stories, the young, married, female protagonists take up affairs with their husband’s best friend or neighbors (the reverse of Judith’s husband having an affair with their neighbor, Hat, in *Weeds*). “The Joke” in particular seems preparatory for several moments in *Weeds* where Judith will recognize herself as a sexual being outside of her marriage.\(^34\) It is clear that in these short stories, Kelley worked through the dynamics of female sexuality in a confined, close-knit agricultural community with little space for individual expression, while acknowledging and encouraging female sexuality outside of marriage.

Kelley’s consideration of the restraints placed on women but also their desire for liberation is present in her city-based stories. In “The Weaker Vessel,” a divorced woman has found great professional success as a play writer on Broadway. The story veers into sentimentalism as the woman visits the restaurant where she and her ex-husband had their first anniversary, and imagine her surprise as it turns out that the ex-husband had the same idea. However, the story remains fresh as Kelley gives the woman the upper hand in rejecting her ex-husband’s attempts to win her heart back. In “A Door Opens- and Closes,” alternatively named

\(^{34}\) However, the ending of “Joke” calls to mind a different work in its climactic end, and that is Edith Wharton’s *Ethan Frome*. 
in drafts as “Again the Triangle,” the female narrator finds out her husband is cheating on her and begins to feel a great sense of possibility—only to find that it was a miscommunication, the “wrong” Walter Gage. Though not as dramatic as the conclusion of Kate Chopin’s “The Story of an Hour,” Kelley meditates on what independence and freedom could mean to the modern woman of the 1920s—the types of freedom and possibilities, the type of life, she could have as a single woman: “Never a new love and a new trail to blaze” (Kelley papers).

Many of Kelley’s short stories are exemplary in their meditation on women’s interiority. One such story takes a more psychological approach to a married women’s repression, a theme now evidenced in her novels and other works. Similar to Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper,” “The Old House”35 ruminates on the psychological entrapment of a married woman without a room of her own and without access to a community. The story takes place at a couple’s summer home in the Berkshires, where Kelley and Updegraff also summered. As the husband delays their return to the city, the wife becomes increasingly desperate. At the story’s climax, the woman—first saving her husband’s work—burns the house down, forcing their return to the city. Though an application of this storyline to Kelley and Updegraff’s divorce would be overdetermined, we can see the basis for the artist manqué storyline that emerges in Weeds36 and later in Kelley’s frustration as household responsibilities overtake her time to write. We also see her working through the type of drastic measures women would take in order to relocate a sense of self within marriage.

35 “The Old House” was one of Kelley’s only short stories to be published, posthumously or otherwise: Women’s Studies (1983): 66, and was introduced by Charlotte Margolis Goodman. (The other appears only to be “His House to Himself,” published by Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine in July of 1974.)
36 See also Charlotte Goodman, “Portraits of the ‘Artists Manqué’ by Three Women Novelists.”
But Kelley was not only invested in undoing the marriage plot,\textsuperscript{37} with several stories and a dramatic work that exist outside of those conventions. In her novella, “Heart of April,” Kelley develops a character who could be Hand’s Rhoda had she decided to stay in the city instead of embarking on her rural adventure. “Heart” explores the life of an unmarried writer living in New York City. She returns regularly to her hometown, and her recurring run-ins with her high-school sweetheart serve as the backdrop to what her life could have otherwise been had she never left. The protagonist has had many lovers outside of marriage, and has found success outside of any marriage plot. The ending is modern as it remains open-ended, reflective but not sentimental, and the novella is enormously successful in painting a portrait of “what could have been” while also telling us “what was.” While Kelley uses this short story to ruminate on the consequences of exploring the life “less traveled” for the young modern woman, she explores in an untitled city-based play the issue of what is “too modern.” The play’s young female protagonist becomes pregnant out of wedlock and luxuriates in her independence as a successful interior designer. While this is presented as something of an accomplishment, the plot becomes “too modern” when the girl passes off the child as a nephew to a potential suitor. Kelley reveals her own ruminations on what is still “within boundaries” of an evolving conception of social norms under a new modern social order.

Beyond social issues, Kelley also plays around with class issues, and writes the tongue-in-cheek “Adventures of a Charwoman,” a revealing account of working in the homes of the upper- and middle-class women. While Bruccoli suggests that Kelley took to housework for equal parts financial necessity and “curiosity,” (296), the latter half of the claim is

\textsuperscript{37} Indeed, both novels directly disparage literature that relies on the traditional marriage plot (\textit{Weeds} 120) or the hero-heroine love story (\textit{Devil’s} 52).
unsubstantiated. The unnamed protagonist of “charwoman” is the antithesis of Hurst’s 
*Lummo*—her work seems to be little more than an inconvenience to her, she has *too* many 
employment opportunities, and gamely becomes confidante to the women she works for. The 
story reveals from a new perspective the demands of the domestic space and interrogates who 
attends to these demands in a suburban, upper-class structure versus the lower-class agricultural 
women Kelley writes about in her novels.

In Kelley’s short stories, there are strains of Flannery O’Connor, Kate Chopin, William 
Faulkner, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. As Kelley’s library was not maintained, and since she 
has no living heirs, we will never know what works she was acquainted with in her lifetime. 
However, it is clear that Kelley’s novels remain quite different from the commonly conceived-of 
rural or even suburban modernist novels. Faulkner’s novels conjure a setting most similar to 
Kelley’s works, and critics comment on the similar representations of class systems in the novels 
(Orr). However, the focus on the everyday lives of female figures in Kelley’s novels demands a 
radically different focus than those of Faulkner. Additionally, while Faulkner is known for his 
formal experimentation, Kelley’s experimentation comes in a descriptive mode, one that 
experiments with modes of storytelling. Similarly, though O’Connor’s stories focus on the south 
and exemplify the southern gothic aesthetic, her central figures and ensemble casts result in 
stories with different emphases than Kelley’s. These comparisons serve to evidence that Kelley

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38 Linda Kornasky’s 2011 article in *Studies in American Naturalism* draws an explicit 
connection between Chopin’s *The Awakening* and *Weeds*. Interestingly enough, she extends 
*Weeds’ influence, then, to Nella Larsen, a point I will return to in the final chapter.
Economies” 2014.
40 Early critics of Kelley compare her *Weeds* to Sinclair’s *Main Street* liberally, citing 
that she may have done for rural literature what Sinclair did for suburban literature (Kelley 
Papers, clippings from Madelin Leof, December 22, 1923, M. Becker, *NY Post*, October 20, 
was not producing work in a vacuum but rather participating in a variety of conversations and movements in literary America while focusing on telling the stories of women’s lives across the country.

CONCLUSION

Let us remember that Kelley herself was a woman who experienced life across America. First in New York’s vibrant literary scene, then through several “back to the land” adventures, and finally, in suburban North San Diego, California, settling into a suburban life of familial and financial security. Though while living Kelley never published again after *Weeds*, it would seem that she lived a very happy life. On April 10, 1940 she writes to Carey McWilliams, who had requested her biography in order to write an article on in her *Saturday Night*: “My husband and I have had quite a bit of fun out of life.” Despite a lifetime of publisher rejections, Kelley found great satisfaction in fictionalizing many of her own life experiences and lives she encountered during her many travels. This worldly experience, though it may not have the exotic appeal of Zora Neale Hurston’s explorations, the global exposures of Hemingway and Fitzgerald, nor the expatriate perspective of Wharton, allowed Kelley to write about the many ways life was being experienced as the changes of modernity washed over America in the first decades of the twentieth century. Kelley uses her novels as vehicles to offer alternative possibilities to America’s women.

Indeed, from her archival stories of empowered, independent working women living in New York City to the women of her novels—entrapped and isolated in farmland America—Kelley’s work tells women’s stories of “great and deep humanity” across America’s early twentieth century. From the dismal repetition of domestic life and childbearing, to the great
adventure of cross-country travel, to women’s sexual liberation and experimentation, to women’s personal and professional successes and failures, Kelley speaks across geographic, social, and class boundaries to give voice to marginalized realities. Kelley was, despite the dearth of a cultural or literary legacy, an accomplished writer. One reason Kelley is so successful in telling her stories is through her documentary-aesthetic approach, one which we also recognize in contemporary photography. In its dual attempts at documenting but also aestheticizing its subject, this approach makes the other accessible, more alive, to its readers and viewers. Kelley’s keen powers of observation, her “compelling fascination” with the country she spent her life traveling across and exploring, have resulted in Kelley’s expansive body of work. Through her use of photographic techniques, like framing, perspective, and repetition, and aided by the grotesque, Kelley’s characters and communities become accessible to us in the same way as the work of Walker Evans and Doris Ulmann. Along with the other women writers of this dissertation, Kelley allows us to consider other manifestations of literary modernist exploration. Kelley’s contributions also ask us to redeem her from the lost annals of American literature and place her into our collective literary imagination. As with Hurst and Larsen, it is our work to illuminate their artistry for enduring academic contexts.
Despite a reasonable measure of critical and academic attention, Nella Larsen remains ensconced in a veil. Larsen shined like a star during her ascent to literary and cultural popularity in 1920s New York, but her flame fizzled abruptly. Described as an invisible artist by biographer George Hutchinson, Larsen has become akin to her notorious Clare Kendry: “a little mysterious and strange” (Hutchinson 239). Larsen’s fall from fame was rather precipitous, not unlike the demise of Passing’s Clare. Nella Larsen herself is a study in contrasts, and it is her use of this dynamic in her short stories and novels that makes her an artist of enduring importance. In comparison to the other writers discussed in this dissertation, Larsen’s presence in critical academia is the most sustained. The contrast of what is seen and unseen in Larsen’s works—the visible and invisible—guides my approach to Larsen and her meditated creation of subjective female protagonists in her fiction. Analyzing her works alongside those of Archibald Motley, a contemporary painter who also engaged with questions of the subjective female protagonist, reveals aesthetic techniques employed by Larsen in her literary works.

Questions of visibility and invisibility loom in Nella Larsen’s second novel Passing. One such scene considers how our inability to see what is in front of us informs what we then think we know, despite evidence to the contrary. Larsen situates Irene and Clare, the novel’s dual protagonists, and a third friend in Clare’s parlor. Through all three women can pass as white, only Clare does. Despite this, Clare’s husband explains that he calls Clare “nig” because, as he

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This pairing was first made by Cherene Sherrard-Johnson in an article in 2004 and is featured as the first chapter of her 2007 book, Portraits of the New Negro Woman; Sherrard-Johnson’s primary focus is the mulatta as a racial icon and the mulatta’s political role within modernism and the New Negro movement, as represented by Larsen, Motley, and other artists.
says, “When we were first married, she was as white as—as—well, as white as a lily. But I declare she’s getting’ darker and darker.” He continues: “You can get as black as you please as far as I’m concerned, since I know you’re no nigger. I draw the line at that. No niggers in my family” (201). The conversation ambles along, with the irony that Jack, who “hates” “black scrimy devils,” is entertaining two black women along with this black wife. Jack’s unwillingness to see what is clearly in front of him foreshadows the novel’s dramatic finale. In its final scenes, the narrator says: “what happened next, Irene Redfield never afterwards allowed herself to remember. Never clearly. One moment Clare had been there, a vital glowing thing, like a flame of red and gold. The next she was gone” (271). Despite her visibility as a “vital glowing thing,” her demise is cemented by the phenomena of unseeing, unknowing. A glow, after all, is only ephemeral, and cannot be held. The same could be said of Larsen’s own descent from her literary career.

These moments from the 1929 novel demonstrate one of the central issues in Larsen’s novels; specifically, when and how are the protagonists of *Passing* and her other novel *Quicksand* seen? What dynamics dictate their visibility or invisibility, and what does it mean to know the women as they are? In 1929, at the height of *Passing*’s popularity, grappling with the same issue in her personal life, Nella Larsen writes to Carl van Vechten that as she is escorted throughout the spectacular spaces of New York, “places like the Ritz, the Roosevelt and the Pennsylvania and Biltmore roofs,” she is tired of being “seen.” “I’m about fed up on it. That is I’m awfully tired of being stared at” (Hutchinson 322). This chapter considers both the way visibility and invisibility function as developers of identity in Larsen’s novels, as well as the aesthetic innovations in her work which allow for such developments. In doing so, the work also demonstrates Larsen’s suitability as a new modernist writer. This chapter uses the work of
painter Archibald Motley to consider interart applications of visibility, invisibility, and formal experimentation alongside Larsen’s work. Approaching this study from the perspective of a cultural historian allows for questions of what may be gained by the examination of these contemporary artists in tandem.

THE UNKNOWABLE NELLA LARSEN

In his *In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line*, George Hutchinson suggests that Larsen created protagonists who could be “seen” (1) in order to overcome her own invisibility. First published in 2006, a few decades after the renewed critical interest in Larsen’s work, Hutchinson’s careful biography of Larsen—and the spaces and people around which she worked—is the only biography that accurately contextualizes the arc of Larsen’s career and gives visibility to her life and her accomplishments. Unlike previous biographer Thadious M. Davis, or critic Charles Larson, whose cursory research supported the early idea that Larsen fabricated elements of her biography (particularly travel to Denmark and completion of a library sciences degree), Hutchinson culled archive after archive for his research on Larsen. By reaching out to Denmark’s Immigration Services and deep into Columbia University’s files, Hutchinson uncovered evidence revealing that Larsen’s claims about her personal and professional life up to the publication of *Quicksand* were in fact true (6-8). Most importantly, Hutchinson confirms the difficult circumstances Larsen was raised in: born into a mixed race immigrant family, and abandoned by her black father in childhood, Larsen spent her youth and early adulthood navigating worlds where her body never quite belonged. Her trip to Denmark was clearly one that greatly influenced her own understanding of her identity, and it plays an equally significant role in *Quicksand*. Indeed, the difficulty experienced by her biographers in uncovering Larsen’s
truths is a reflection on her inscrutability. From her youth, Larsen struggled with the invisibility brought upon her by her difference. In her short stories and novels, she grapples with issues of being seen, being known, and with the (in)visibility of the female body.

Larsen found an ally in her friend Carl Van Vechten, whose diaries allowed Hutchinson to reconstruct Larsen’s activities throughout the 1920s. With Van Vechten, Larsen partook in a very particular scene in New York, one that embraced a pluralistic approach towards the “race issue” and specifically consisted of a group that felt “interracial relationships were necessary and more ‘modern’ than more segregated social functions” (164). This alignment may also “explain her limited involvement with Jessie Fauset’s black, female, intellectual circle,” (164) from whose teas and lunches Larsen was often excluded.42 Larsen was an active supporter of the production of black arts, evidenced by her participation in the inauguration of the Opportunity literary competition and her work with the Negro Literary and Historical Society (189). In facing issues of her own visibility and invisibility in New York, Larsen created a similar tension for the protagonists in her novels.

Larsen’s well-timed arrival and imminent literary career flourished in an environment where the world of black and white and artistic medium were interrelated in unprecedented ways. Her arrival to New York in 1920 coincides with an outpouring of cultural expression in music, dance, literature and the arts. The advent of the The Jazz Age dovetailed perfectly with the artistic developments of the Harlem Renaissance. Much attention is paid to this alignment by Ann Douglas in her book Mongrel Manhattan, an account of the artistic movement crossing racial lines in modern New York, where creative arts, across regional and racial boundaries,

42 Hutchinson believes that Larsen may have even modeled Crane’s droll tea scene in Denmark after one of Fauset’s teas—“don’t they have anything else to talk about?” (165).
influenced one another like never before. In 1928, “Vanity Fair’s January cover featured a
collage-like illustration inspired by ‘Harlem’ entertainment… The Negro was in vogue, as
Langston Hughes would later famously recall, and partly as a consequence of the vogue Larsen
was being catapulted from obscurity right over her social betters in black New York” (268).
Larsen also merited attention from James L. Allen, a young photographer working on a
portrait series of “prominent intellectuals and artists” (260). His portraits of Larsen are
considered among his best work and one was featured in the January 1929 edition of Opportunity
alongside Alain Locke’s essay, “1928: A Retrospective Review.” The portraits reveal a layered
woman, who “wears her hair in a bun, a few stray hairs feathering her soft face, which appears
meditative, reposed, far away, and in the other, her face is half-turned, strikingly attractive,
young and bright; and her eyes gaze intelligently straight into the camera” (260): a woman with
depth, interiority. Coincidentally, as reviews of Quicksand were coming out, Larsen’s portrait
was included in an exhibit at the 135th Street library, alongside portraits of other Harlem
luminaries such as Paul Robeson, Edna Thomas, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Alain
Locke, and Carl Van Vechten (276). Riding high on the success of her short stories and novels,
Larsen was celebrated throughout the 1920s and became a fixture at prominent social events in
New York City; versions of these events will appear in Larsen’s novels.

Two nights in particular stand out as prescient of moments in Larsen’s novels: first, the
NAACP Women’s Auxiliary’s Third Annual Spring Dance in late March 1925 at the Manhattan

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43 The cover depicted a black chorus line, a banjo player in a tuxedo, and sheet music for
“Nigger Heaven Blues.” (268)
44 At the same library, Larsen herself had organized an exhibit of “Negro art” in 1921, a
show thought to lay the framework for the many artistic media that would later emerge from the
Harlem Renaissance (Hutchinson 8).
Casino: “it was one of the signature benefit functions of the Negro Renaissance, and...hundreds of people showed up in evening dress ready for a grand evening of entertainment” (179). It was at this ball that:

anyone listening...was hearing the emergence of a new conception of jazz...[and Louis] Armstrong was giving New York an education in swing. A bluesy, overpowering arc of sound made people stop and listen as his driving solos soared over the clipped, mechanical syncopation of the popular style and the musicians around him strove to enter the gates he opened up. (180)

Hutchinson names this night as the “epitome” of the “crucial features” of the Harlem Renaissance, and a night that “helps explain” Larsen’s emerging visibility (180). With this account, we know Larsen knows not only the importance of being “on scene” at history-making moments like this, but what the experience—from the space itself, to the attendees, to the music—feels like and represents, and what it means to partake in those events as a visible participant, a long way away from her impoverished beginnings in the immigrant neighborhoods of Chicago. Larsen would use the aesthetics of music in her novels to consider how it can encourage inclusion or exclusion in a public space.

The second night to have a clear influence on Larsen’s novels was Carnegie Hall’s premiere of George Antheil’s Jazz Symphony and the Ballet Mécanique on April 10, 1927. This performance revealed the influences of Stravinsky, Man Ray, Pound, Joyce, Picasso and Picabia. In Europe, the Ballet caused riots; in New York, where Larsen was in attendance, it was not

45 The Manhattan Casino was “one of the largest and most elaborate dance halls in Harlem” established in 1910 at 280 West 155th St” (Hutchinson 179).
well-received by contemporary critics (but would later be lauded as a success).\(^{46}\) However, the night remains consequential as it reveals Larsen’s engagement with New York’s modern scene at large. By attending, Larsen is present in a way that she will play with her characters being “present” at social scenes. In placing Larsen at the site of modern experimentation, we echo Edith Wharton’s experience at the Paris premiere of *The Rite of Spring* and draw connections between two women who rode on the opposite ends of the modern wave. Both women’s participation in the evolving modernity of the early 1900s places them at scenes of creation, enabling them to imbibe the cross-media creative act, and produce it in their novels. While Wharton’s novels demonstrate canonical representations of the New Woman figure, Larsen’s seeks to further questions of the visibility of women in society.

Contemporary critics of Larsen agree that in *Quicksand* she was responding to the developing aesthetics of modernism, particularly regarding the existential crisis of identity formation.\(^{47}\) Hutchinson draws significant connections between *Quicksand* and the “landmarks of the Scandinavian “modern breakthrough” such as Ibsen’s dramas and Jacobsen’s Marie

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\(^{46}\) As per Hutchinson’s description: “Ten grand pianos stood in a great horseshoe led by one mechanical piano. Two great tables held mechanical devices to imitate factory whistles, roaring elevated trains, canning machinery, and the like. There were two airplane propellers, four bass drums, and eight xylophones, all conducted by Eugene Goossens, an acquaintance of the Imeses. Max Ewing and Colin McPhee, two of Nella’s other friends, were featured pianists. (Aaron Copland was another)” (247).

\(^{47}\) There was “general praise for the writing, but [it was considered] “melodramatic” and [Helga] a character with undefined motives, also complicated by the reviewer’s personal feelings towards the race problem. Du Bois gives a wholly positive review\(^{47}\)” (283). Hutchinson himself feels that “Helga’s personality lacks unity and coherence — it lacks identity. This common judgment is only a more intense expression of the sense that at any point in her life, if not for a perverse flaw in her personality, Helga might have settled into one of the social niches offered her — in Naxos, in Copenhagen, in Harlem, even in the rural South. She might, that is, have made the adjustments that bring identity and recognition. Instead, she disappears.” (224-5)
Grubbe; Hutchinson points to John Galsworthy’s Forsythe Saga, quite possibly her favorite fiction at the time” in both “theme and method,” as demonstrating a “strong impact on Larsen’s general aesthetic sensibility.” Like the Scandinavian artists, “she used an essentially dramatic technique of narrative development and revelation of character …much of the interest resides in what might be called the drama of perception filtered through the consciousness of Helga Crane” (230). Arne Lunde and Anna Westerstahl-Stenport’s ”Helga Crane’s Copenhagen” continues Hutchinson’s work in identifying Larsen’s novels as part of the Scandinavian Modern Breakthrough, and suggests the Scandinavian-American tradition glaringly dismisses Larsen’s work as part of their own tradition.

The title of Passing also represents the critical choice of the novel’s protagonists: to pass or not to pass. Irene’s blackness is visibly performed, whereas Clare shields herself, makes her blackness invisible, and therefore can never really be seen. Critics have envisioned racial passing as a modernist trope itself; Pamela L. Caughie writes of passing as a modernist social practice: “Passing—actual and imaginary, conscious and unconscious—at once produced profound shifts in thinking about the boundaries of identity and aroused ambivalence about those shifting, unstable borders” (387). While we may envision Clare Kendry as embodying many of Larsen’s personal values, we must also acknowledge the depth of her mysteriousness and how

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48 “The theme of a passionate woman’s inability to fulfill her nature, and that of a marriage based on a lie, pervaded Ibsen’s most famous plays as well as Jacobsen’s and Galsworthy’s masterpieces… Jacobsen’s practice of leaving out narrative linkages between scenes and minimizing dependence on action apparently influenced her” (Hutchinson 226).

49 Miriam Thaggert suggests passing as a type of Black modernism: “Amy Robinson’s argument highlights just how intertwined the spectatorial and ontological positions are in relation to those women of color who do not pass…By subtly referring to [the Rhinelander trial,] one of the most sensational trials that took place during the Harlem Renaissance, Passing dramatizes racial and social performance and demonstrates how to stage the body to convey or deny a particular reading—all while uncovering some of the elements of black modernism” (71).

50 See Hutchinson 294 for evidence.
impassable her “shifting” boundaries are to the reader. After all, *Passing* is Irene’s story, and as Hutchinson accurately criticizes, Clare “[lacks] reference to the world around her” (296), making Larsen’s writing of Clare itself modern: a competing protagonist around whom the story circulates, but of whom we know precious little: who is very much seen but through her own choices, remains invisible. Despite, or perhaps because of, the many unanswered questions of the novel, critical reception was positive: “By late May a number of reviews had come out, largely favorable, and for the most part more insightful than those of *Quicksand*.”

In agreement with the critical reception, I contend that Larsen’s novels are important modernist contributions in their questioning of identity formation and developing subjectivity.

The novels put forth the question of whether the body is made visible or invisible by the women themselves or those with whom they interact. Much of the current scholarship on the aesthetics of Larsen speaks to issues of the racialized, sexualized body, which is a successful but limited interpretation of the aesthetics of the novels. Important work that challenges the limited boundaries of Larsen’s influence has been done by Miriam Thaggert, Meredith Goldsmith, Lauren Berlant and Judith Butler. These critics approach Larsen through materiality, affect theory, as modernists, as feminist critics, and through issues of the body and sexuality. This chapter contributes another lens to view Larsen, through her aesthetic creation of and questioning of the female subject, a study aided by viewing her alongside Motley. I must credit Cherene Sherrard-Johnson’s 2004 work on the “iconography of the mulatta” for introducing the

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51 The favorable reception may have had something to do with the “supreme amount of publicity” done for *Passing* by Knopf at the urging of Larsen’s friend and champion, Carl Van Vechten. For a further review of the criticism, please see Hutchinson 328-331. Knopf’s Publicity Department also gave a special tea for Larsen to make the publication of the novel, attended by Fannie Hurst, Sinclair Lewis, Miguel Covarrubias, and of course Van Vechten, and others (Hutchinson 320).

52 For a recent overview, see Harrison-Kahan “Blues” endnote 5.
interart exploration that initially brings Larsen and Motley together, work she continued in her 2007 *Portraits of the New Negro Woman: Visual and Literary Culture in the Harlem Renaissance*. As Sherrard-Johnsons says in *Portraits*, her study of representations of the mulatta, the work of Larsen and Motley “endeavors to portray both the psyche and the facade of their subjects” (44). The present analysis expands upon Sherrard-Johnson’s work in its analysis of Larsen’s and Motley’s aesthetics.

In January 2014, The Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University opened a retrospective of Motley’s art that spans forty years of his production, naming Motley “so modern, he’s contemporary.” The exhibition catalogue considers Motley as not only a “black” modernist painter, but as participative with mainstream modernism. It is within this argument that the aim of Motley’s critics resonates with my own goal for this project. In his essay “Becoming Motley. Becoming Modern,” Powell defines four techniques that define Motley as a modernist:

1. exploring an existential mentality within the urban landscape; 2. incorporating an African American-derived ‘blues aesthetic’ into contemporary scenographies; 3. introducing the theme of the ‘transgressive vernacular’ into African American imagery; and 4. utilizing intense, artificially illuminated color effects within paintings. (113)

As stated, what I most value about Powell’s rubric is its basis upon generalized modernism to establish Motley’s modernism: Powell’s work acknowledges roots in the Harlem Renaissance but still allies the artist’s aesthetics with the modernist experimentation that justifies entry into the new modernist sphere. For the purposes of this chapter, I translate Powell’s lines of investigation into two overarching queries, both concerning issues of modernism. The first: how questions of women’s visibility and invisibility inform their representation, and the payoffs of
experimentation with representation. The second line of inquiry is the evidence of the aesthetic techniques that speak to the broad demand of modernism to “make it new.” Powell and the other essayists of the catalogue define color, music, and the grotesque as Motley’s modernist interventions. This interart reading will locate the same aesthetic innovations within Larsen’s work and ask how both artists used these techniques to render the (in)visibility of their female characters.

**EXISTENTIAL SELVES, (IN)VISIBLE BODIES**

Larsen’s negotiation of her identity—black, white, wife, artist, friend, loner— informs all of her literature. Her sustained meditation on how people saw her, and spaces where she was rendered visible and invisible, underwrite many of the scenes in her novels. Abandoned by her black father and rendered invisible by her mother’s family, Larsen’s difference made her at once highly visible and yet, not seen. From her earliest works, Larsen engages with existential considerations of modern life and identity, considerations which were made personal to her by her internal struggles.

In Larsen’s first published short story, “Freedom” (1926), the protagonist internally struggles with the commitment to one’s own happiness, or the happiness of others. As the unnamed male protagonist narrates through the third-person limited point of view, the reader learns that he has just abandoned his pregnant wife and is unable to celebrate because he feels that he should return to her. However, the reader also learns—though the man does not—that the pregnant wife has died during childbirth, rendering his child an orphan. The pregnant wife is a specter in the story—we hear and see nothing of her. The man is disembodied too, and the story takes place outside of any particular place or time. The focus of the story remains on
responsibilities felt but not wanted, desires unmet, life, love and loss. “Freedom” is perhaps the most efficient example of Larsen’s capacity to engage with these questions and challenges, particularly of the relationship between oneself and others. As Hutchinson writes, “we often are told not what the man directly ‘thinks’ or ‘wants’ but rather what he thinks he wants to think or imagines he had once felt…. Larsen is experimenting with ways of representing suppressed desire and psychic disavowal, scapegoating as self-defense” (200). In other words, Larsen’s early works reveal an engagement between what is seen, known, and felt, and how even internally to themselves, characters are invisible in their unknowability.

As a partner to “Freedom,” let us consider Motley’s 1933 Self-Portrait (Myself at Work) (fig. 12): blank eyes address us, a sad self-assurance, but also a questioning: where is my place in the world? The self-portrait is accented by a painting-in-progress, a woman rendered nude and silent at the portraitist’s side. The scene is accessorized with details: a cross, an elephant, a Greek statuette and an elevated bust. Reading the items symbolically, Motley gestures towards issues of religion, both mainstream and “exotic” (reading the elephant as a gesture to Hindu religion), classical versus modern art, and living man versus memorialized figure. Like the narrator of “Freedom,” the real story of the portrait is the internal struggle of the central male protagonist.

Figure 12. Self-Portrait (Myself at Work), Archibald Motley. Printed in Jazz Age.
Considering the important role of women to the artists, what can we make of the invisibility of the woman from this short story and the passiveness of the female portrait-inside-the-portrait in *Self*? Both women merely exist as creations of the man, in the story marked in the man’s mind in a forever-impregnated state: a permanent pregnant pause echoed by her inability to voice herself into the man’s memories; in the portrait, as eternally unfinished. This is the only known work of Larsen that chooses to reveal a man’s interiority; perhaps Larsen (who published this story in her married name, reversed: Allen Semi) felt the open betrayal of marriage and childbirth would be more acceptable to readers if it came from a male standpoint. The story successfully demonstrates Larsen’s early engagement with the psychological complexity of man’s “not-knowing,” a hallmark of modernism’s isolation. The man’s abandonment means he orphans his child, foreshadowing Larsen’s theme of absent or strained parenthood. The orphan child represents a child who, like Larsen, will grow up with uncertain lineage, haunted by their invisible parents.

Questions of visibility, invisibility, and knowing will continue in her second published short story, “The Wrong Man.” Just as “Freedom” anticipated issues of marriage and child-rearing in her novels, “Wrong” is an early example of Larsen’s use of color and music to explore issues of visibility and invisibility. “Wrong” examines what is at stake when a shroud of invisibility dissolves, revealing the visible self. Main character Julia Romley is in the midst of a swinging dance party, when she sees a man who she feels she owes a confession to; she does so, only to discover that it was “the wrong man.” As readers, we are both relieved that Romley’s true self remains invisible to the “right” man, yet discomforted in her new vulnerability to the “wrong” man. By making her confession in a liminal space of the party, Romley raises questions of the veritableness of what passes in unseen spaces—when what can be visible remains.
invisible. The same existential questions are presented by Motley’s party scenes, for example, *Stomp* (fig. 13).\(^{53}\) While *Stomp* draws our eyes to the suited man in the focal center of the canvas, there are multitudes of storylines taking place on the perimeters of the paintings: couples we can only half-see, faces shaded into darkness, phantom limbs, all alluding to the unknown potential for the “other” happenings of the scene. Romley uses these dark, liminal spaces to make her confession to the “wrong man”—they can hardly see one another, and the audience cannot see them. After her confession, when her “true self” is revealed, she reverts to a state of “social exclusion and solitary distance” (113) within the crowd, much like the suited seated central figure in *Stomp*. The message from both artists is that even with what we think we see and know, even with what seems to lie plainly before us, reality is layered with things visible and invisible, secrets laid bare and kept away.

![Stomp, Archibald Motley. Printed in Jazz Age.](image)

Hutchinson notes that in “Wrong,” Larsen “[blends] the ‘real’ adult world with the realm of fairy stories and raw chance,” revealing her “[fascination with] the way different dimensions

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\(^{53}\) *Stomp* is particularly important to Powell’s analysis as it connects Motley to Henri Toulouse-Lautrec’s 1892 *At the Moulin Rouge* in its incorporation of the ghoulish, out-of-place participant in the world of spectacle. Powell will continue to connect Motley’s work to established modernist artists.
of experience occasionally overlap, threatening a sudden dissolution of boundaries or a fatal transformation” (199): the layers of visibility and invisibility that surround her figures. This is another commonality with Motley, who “captured a black surreality, a community strolling at a pace somewhere between the steady march of accurate documentation and the light speed of a dream state” (Baldwin 48), reinforcing the fairy-tale, dream-like state both artists capture in some of their works.

Like Larsen, Motley experiments with the way women are rendered visible and invisible. As Amy M. Mooney’s essay on “The Portraits of Archibald Motley and the Visualization of Black Modern Subjectivity” details: in Motley’s portraits of women he “presents a modern subjectivity that encompasses the very process of identity formation through which we can come to know ourselves and others” (20). Mooney agrees that understanding the modern value of Motley’s work necessitates drawing ties to the “larger discursive skein on what it means to be modern,” positing that “modernism, in all its myriad forms, relies on three central components: change, conflict, and a conscious search for identity” (20). I believe both artists work through these components in their visions of their modern woman, using private scenes of portraiture and public scenes of spectacle to explore the tension of change, conflict and identity formation. Carrying out the subjective visions of the women into a spectacle-spectator dynamic highlights how the forces of change, conflict and identity formation work against the women’s visibility.

Mooney’s close reading of Motley’s portraits exemplifies the function of the gaze. In his 1931 Brown Girl After a Bath (fig. 14):

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54 It is worth noting that Mooney’s close readings resonate strongly with Sherrard-Johnson’s in her 2004 article on Motley and Larsen.
the sitter does not use the mirror to look at herself, following the mode of classical vanitas. Instead, she uses the mirror to look at the viewers as they look at her. The mirror provides a space for the contemplation of how we see and how this seeing is constructed through aesthetic and social conventions. Unlike traditional nudes, she is not passive, subject to the gaze; rather, it is her looking that activates and directs the exchange… Instead of idealized objectification, there are signs to be read through the physical experience of an ordinary body—breasts that lie on the torso and shift to the side, a soft belly, a tuft of pubic hair—all of which call upon the viewer’s ability to empathize with the subject. (19-20)

In this moment of isolation, the portrait’s subject is wholly visible to the viewer; by this I mean in addition to seeing her body, we also actively engage with her as a person. Her body is in fact doubled for the viewer, and significantly, so is her gaze. She sees us seeing her, and not only do we as viewers “empathize with the subject,” but it seems in part that due to this honest, visible exchange, she empathizes with us as well.
This relationship between seeing and viewing emerges in the first pages of Larsen’s 1928 novel *Quicksand*. In the opening pages, “Helga Crane [sits] alone in her room” (35), modeling as the women of Motley’s portraits do; the room serves as stage where Helga awaits her viewers—us, the readers. The room is in “soft gloom,” paradoxically soothing and dreary. She is surrounded by signifying objects, alluding to a rich inner life:

A single reading lamp, dimmed by a great black and red shade, made a pool of light on the blue Chinese carpet on the bright covers of the books which she had taken down from their long shelves, on the white pages of the opened one selected, on the shining brass bowl crowded with many-colored nasturtiums beside her on the low table, and on the oriental silk which covered the stool at her slim feet. (35)

Larsen reveals a woman at “rest, this intentional isolation for a short while in the evening, this little time in her own attractive room with her own books” (36). However, Larsen also reveals that this woman is always in a way on view: “an observer would have thought her well fitted to that framing of light and shade” (36), the narrator confesses, implicitly acknowledging our participation in this scene. Larsen proceeds:

A slight girl of twenty-two years, with narrow, sloping shoulders and delicate but well-turned arms and legs, she had, none the less, an air of radiant, careless health. In vivid green and gold negligee and glistening brocaded mules, deep sunk in the big high-backed chair, against whose dark tapestry her sharply cut face, with skin like yellow satin, was distinctly outlined, she was—to use a hackneyed word—attractive.” (36)
Helga is born American yet her yellow satin-like skin and vaguely ethnic name associate her with outsider status; Sherrard-Johnson reads the “orientalist” features as a way to “distinguish Helga from the race women at Naxos and in Harlem” (*Portraits* 53). The green, gold, and yellow play off of the reds, blacks, and blues of the opening by demonstrating the full colors which pervade the room. By contrasting her “yellow” skin against the “dark” tapestry, Larsen emphasizes that Helga herself is not dark and suggests Helga as object: one fabric against another. In Larsen’s description, we see Helga as another object in this carefully arranged room: her skin is like “satin,” she is outlined by tapestry; after all, Helga is labeled “attractive,” the same adjective deployed to describe the room itself in the opening description.

Two of Motley’s portraits allow us to consider how we see women in their staged portrait settings and to reflect on *Quicksand*’s Helga Crane: *Mulatress with Figurine and Dutch Seascape* (fig. 15) and *Octoroon Girl* (fig. 16). These portraits exemplify the significance of the gaze, but both also stage important “scenes of being” for the women. Like Helga, *Mulatress* is set carefully with tasteful jewels, a plaster cast of classical sculpture, and books, “modeling awareness of art and culture and conveying a confident demeanor through her gaze” (30).

![Figure 15. Mulatress with Figurine and Dutch Seascape, Archibald Motley. Printed in Jazz Age.](image1)

![Figure 16. The Octoroon Girl, Archibald Motley. Printed in Jazz Age.](image2)
Larsen focuses in on Helga’s countenance:

Black, very broad brows over soft yet penetrating dark eyes, and a pretty mouth, whose sensitive and sensuous lips had a slight questioning petulance and a tiny dissatisfied droop, were the features on which the observer’s attention would fasten; though her nose was good, her ears delicate chiseled, and her curly blue-black hair plentiful and always straying in a little wayward, delightful way. Just then it was tumbled, falling unrestrained about her face and onto her shoulders.

(36)

Her clearly defined features bring to mind Motley’s refined, poised *Octoaroon Girl*. The darkness is where the “observer’s attention” would fixate. Her hair, though a “little wayward,” tumbles out delightfully here, showing another contrast to the otherwise precisely painted Helga. Formally, this description evokes both the Petrarchan blazon but more relevant here, the modernist technique of listing, of breaking apart a whole into its many parts and brings to mind the collage aesthetic, where the reader is responsible for piecing individual elements into a whole.

Like Motley’s, Larsen’s description includes elements that encourage us to connect the exterior with the interior, inviting us as readers to engage with Helga in totality in order to make her visible to her reader: her eyes are “penetrating,” and her “mouth” (the vehicle for communication) has a “slight questioning petulance and a tiny dissatisfied droop,” suggesting that this woman is not an object for consumption, but rather a subject with her own powers of observation and speech. The final gesture in this scene to Helga’s visibility is her ability to manipulate the lighting of the room: the “soft gloom” so suitable to her is within her control: the room is “flooded with Southern sun in the day, but shadowy just then” because she has drawn the
curtains” (36). At the end of this extended scene, she “[rises] abruptly and pressed the electric switch with determined firmness, flooding suddenly the shadowy room with a white glare of light” (36). Helga’s choice to draw the curtains is to exclude the outside world from her inner one, reinforcing her chosen isolation. She chooses the modern (electric lights) over the past (drawing the curtains) and in doing so takes control over her visibility to the outside world.

After leaving Naxos, Helga continues to seek spaces against which she is appropriately staged. When invited to stay at the home of Anne Gray in New York, Helga gladly agrees because Gray’s home “was in complete accord with what she designated as her ‘aesthetic sense’,” (76) the appropriate background against which to be seen. Crane is able to assess the furnishings of the home with surprising acumen:

- tables that might be by Duncan Phyfe, rare spindle-legged chairs…These historic things mingled harmoniously and comfortably with brass-bound Chinese tea sets,
- luxurious deep chairs and davenports, tiny tables of gay color, a lacquered jade-green settee with gleaming black sating cushions, lustrous Eastern rugs, ancient copper, Japanese prints, some fine etchings, a profusion of precious bric-a-brac, and endless shelves filled with books. (76)

Gray’s house is, like Helga herself, a conglomeration of collected experiences, one that comes together to create a rather enormously pleasing result. Her familiarity with Duncan Phyfe reveals an engagement with craftsmanship and the arts on a level superior to her hodge-podge Naxos room. Being in Harlem is at first healing for Helga: “Gradually in the charm of this new and delightful pattern of her life she lost that tantalizing oppression of loneliness and isolation which always, it seemed, had been a part of her existence” (77).
However, when Crane’s search for fulfillment leads her to Copenhagen, she is recast in a new setting, one that will render her simultaneously visible and invisible. Soon after her arrival, Helga’s Aunt Katrina asserts authority over Helga’s body, insisting that Helga must wear “bright things to set off the color of [her] lovely brown skin. Striking things, exotic things. [She] must make an impression” (99). Helga, though she loves attention, hesitates over her aunt’s choices: “Certainly she loved color with a passion that perhaps only Negros and Gypsies know. But she had a deep faith in the perfection of her own taste, and had no mind to be bedecked in flaunting flashing things” (99). Helga no longer controls the way she is seen; she becomes invisible under the costumes and yet paradoxically ultra-visible to the people of Copenhagen: “Helga felt like a veritable savage as they made their leisurely way across the pavement…. This feeling was intensified by the many pedestrians who stopped to stare at the queer dark creature” (100).

The same paradox of visibility and invisibility continues at tea: “Helga herself felt nothing so much as some new and strange species of pet dog being proudly exhibited….but she felt the massed curiosity and interest, so discreetly hidden under the polite greetings. The very atmosphere was tense with it, ‘As if I had horns, or three legs,’ she thought” (100). Not knowing the language well “she had only to bow and look pleasant” (100), referencing her mysterious silent mouth from the opening pages of the novel. Though she is seen almost to excess by the women, she remains dually invisible to them. In this scene, she approximates the “sideline” women of Motley’s paintings: the woman in a white dress and pearls in Stomp, for example. She serves to accessorize and decorate, rather than participate as subjective being.

Leaving the tea, Helga feels “in spite of the mental strain, she had enjoyed her prominence” (100). She feels she has “acquitted herself well in the first skirmish.” This phrasing and the resulting “enjoyment” are complicated: tea was a “skirmish” for Helga, a fight she
needed to overcome “mentally,” and even though her agency is entirely removed, she “enjoyed” her acquiescence. Perhaps Larsen, addressing the necessary “change and conflict” of modernity, addresses the treatment of women as objects such as it relieves the burden of performance for women. This juxtaposition of being seen and unseen continues that evening, where Helga wears her aunt’s “prized green velvet” dress, cut down by the maid until it was “practically nothing but a skirt” (100). Though “no other woman in the stately pale blue room was so greatly exposed,” Helga likes the attention she gathers and “the compliments in the men’s eyes as they bent over her hand.” However, Helga remains oblivious to or willfully ignorant that the women felt no need for jealousy because “this girl…was not to be reckoned seriously in their scheme of things. True, she was attractive, unusual, in an exotic, almost savage way, but she wasn’t one of them. She didn’t at all count.” (100). Despite her intense visibility, her immaterial existence renders her ultimately invisible.

We can imagine Helga as the central figure of *Bronzeville at Night* (fig. 17). The woman, in her red dress (a color of great significance for Larsen), arrests the scene. She’s shapely, feminine, and draws our gaze. She emanates out of the painting, yet we know so little of her, as the people of Denmark know so little of Helga, all while she is so vulnerably visible. While the woman’s subjectivity is hinted at by her posturing towards the viewer, her potentiality is limited by her equation with the red car in the background and the red stop-light, both suggesting woman as a mechanistic creation: a robot, an object, much like the likening of Helga to “attractive satin” in the opening pages.
Helga’s troubling visibility is amplified by the arrival of Axel Olsen, famed painter. Larsen writes that Helga is “effectively posed on a red satin sofa, the center of an admiring group,” (100) the way you might share a new piece of artwork with friends. After a word-less introduction, he looks at her for an “incredibly rude length of time” and declares, “Yes, you’re right. She’s amazing. Marvelous.” In this encounter, Helga is silenced while Olsen recounts her physically significant elements, most hauntingly, her “neck column.” The professional artist has come to appraise Helga. She need not speak: she is not participating, but rather is put on as spectacle, an objective woman both intensely seen but invisible as a person. Her aunt’s earlier words haunt her: “‘You’re young and a foreigner and—and different.’ Did it mean that the difference was to be stressed, accented?” (102). Helga is to be “looked” after by her aunt and uncle, emphasizing their care as purely (or at least, primarily), visual. Larsen alludes to speech patterns (“stressed, accented”) in this reflection, reminding the reader that Helga has been effectively silenced since her arrival to Copenhagen.

Helga as “difference” echoes the appropriation of the eastern and primitive worlds by modernist artists, both verbal and written: for example, Gauguin in his painting and Pound’s adoption of Chinese calligraphy and writing in his poetry. Larsen, despite allowing an interior
subjectivity for Helga, creates her as object in spectacle. Although staring so closely at her, Olsen is unable to see Helga as the *Octoroon Girl*, rather more like the beautiful but blank central attraction of *Bronzeville*.

Olsen’s objectification of Helga manifests itself in his portrait of “the true Helga Crane,” though Helga’s assessment is that “it wasn’t…herself at all, but some disgusting sensual creature with her features” (118). Although critically praised, those who seem to *know* Helga, and not merely *see* Helga, agree with her: “Herr and Fru Dahl had not exactly liked it either,” and her maid hesitantly offers: “I know Herr Olsen is a great artist, but no, I don’t like that picture. It looks bad, wicked.” Helga has been portrayed by Olsen as a purely sexual object. While Olsen’s work is portraiture, it is in sharp contrast to the thoughtful, subjective portraits of Motley’s women. However, Motley does on occasion reduce women to their purely physical attributes, like in *Between Acts* (fig. 18). These works are significantly not portraits, but take advantage of behind-the-scenes moments to highlight women’s sexual, subservient attributes and the dominating male gaze. The woman’s bodies are visible to us but as subjects, they remain invisible. Significantly, all of the figures’ eyes are shielded from the viewer, and they do not engage one another. The seated woman gazes on an image while another man gazes at her and the other woman from the open doorway. He stands there suited, covered chin to heel, unabashedly taking in the women’s naked bodies, their luminous, smooth skin, ample curves and perky, fantasy breasts. The women are oblivious to the man and likely, as implied by the title, used to being visually devoured, and accustomed to this false sense of visibility: seen by their audiences and yet entirely invisible as people in and of themselves.

55 Sherrard-Johnson compares the portrait to Manet’s *Olympia* (57). Goldsmith reads Olsen’s portrait as Helga refigured as an African woman in a Picasso painting—as such, both here and in the minstrelsy moment, Crane’s race is read “in terms of sexuality” (274).
Back in Copenhagen, Helga slowly reclaims ownership over the way she is seen in the city: “when she had become a little familiar with the city, and its inhabitants a little used to her,” she can begin to be seen with less fanfare. The sights of the city are described by Larsen as an idyllic impressionist view: “the long bridge which spanned the placid lakes…the long, low-lying Exchange, a picturesque structure in picturesque surroundings, skirting as it did the great canal, which always is alive with many small boats…” (105-6). Larsen paints Helga into the scenes of Copenhagen: she is a “picturesque structure in picturesque surroundings.” Even though the city has become somewhat accustomed to her, her “appearance always roused lively and audible, but friendly, interest” (106). This gain of agency is fundamental to charting Helga’s arc over the course of Quicksand. Over time, she is able to redeem a sense of control over her visibility. This control was foreshadowed in the opening scene in Naxos, where Larsen refers to the curtain that Helga can open or close to conceal or reveal herself.

Larsen’s most overt meditation on how Helga is seen takes place in the liminal space of the Atlantic Ocean as Helga sails back to America. She splits her life into the binaries of the physical and spiritual:
this knowledge, this certainty of the division of her life into two parts in two lands, into physical freedom in Europe and spiritual freedom in America, was unfortunate, inconvenient, expensive. It was, too, as she was uncomfortably aware, even a trifle ridiculous, and mentally she caricatured herself moving shuttlelike from continent to continent. From the prejudiced restrictions of the New World to the easy formality of the Old, from the pale calm of Copenhagen to the colorful lure of Harlem. (125)

On this journey, in the outer lands of the sea, Helga is most fully conceived. Though she is “uncomfortably aware” of her otherness, the awareness itself seems to bring Helga a measure of resolution in accepting herself as eternally divided. Ultimately, on land, Larsen will not find a way to reconcile the spiritual, invisible elements of Helga with her visible, exterior appearance.

Similarly, no peaceful resolution will come to Clare Kendry, the debatable second protagonist, or first antagonist, of *Passing*. Larsen’s introduction of Kendry recalls that of Helga Crane:

Clare Kendry was still leaning back in the tall chair, her sloping shoulders against the carved top. She sat with an air of indifferent assurance, as if arranged for, desired… she’d always had that pale gold hair, which, unsheared still, was drawn loosely back from a broad brow, partly hidden by the small close hat. Her lips, painted a brilliant geranium red, were sweet and sensitive and a little obstinate. A tempting mouth. The face across the forehead and cheeks was a trifle too wide, but the ivory skin had a peculiar soft luster.... Arresting eyes, slow and mesmeric, and with, for all their warmth, something withdrawn and secret about them. Ah!
Surely! They were Negro eyes! Mysterious and concealing. And set in that ivory face under that bright hair, there was about them something exotic. (191)

Crane is positioned for viewing: her shoulders echo the shape of the chair, as if “arranged for.” There are allusions to what can and cannot be seen, particularly the “Negro eyes,” which are “withdrawn and secret…mysterious and concealing.” Yet all along there is an implied viewer, one who finds the mouth “tempting” and the eyes “mesmeric.” So for all that we can see of Clare, she remains mysterious and exotic to the reader-viewer.

Recalling the scenes of Helga at tea in Denmark, Clare is also invisibly visible at dinner in Harlem:

[Clare] wasn’t, however, in spite of her poise and air of worldliness, the ideal dinner-party guest. Beyond the aesthetic pleasure one got from watching her, she contributed little, sitting for the most part silent, an odd dreaming look in her hypnotic eyes. … She was generally liked…. And, no matter how often she came among them, she still remained someone apart, a little mysterious and strange, someone to wonder about and to admire and to pity. (239)

Like Helga, Clare is “othered” at these dinner parties, somehow seen as being “apart,” her luminous eyes turned “hypnotic” in the dreaming. Also like Helga, she is voluntarily non-verbal (remember that Helga could have participated more in the dinner conversations, despite the initial language barrier, but chooses not to). Clare’s real value is in what the guests can see—their “aesthetic pleasure”—similar to a living, breathing centerpiece for the table. As with Helga’s tea in Denmark, it is noteworthy that these scenes are not sexualized. The aesthetic pleasure is not a sexual pleasure, rather it is on the level of objective appreciation of a beautiful object.
Throughout *Quicksand* and *Passing*, Larsen meditates on the female body as subject and object. By presenting the woman in isolated portraits, or situated within crowds, Larsen considers their vacillation between invisibility and visibility to themselves and others, and what both the readers and the other characters see and do not see in the women. Given Larsen’s biography, it is likely that she also needed to negotiate her anxiety as a mixed race woman in the many spaces she would call “home” throughout her lifetime. Bringing Motley’s paintings into the conversation illuminates the decision to represent women differently when they are isolated in portraiture or amongst crowds.

**Aesthetic Innovations: Rendering (in)visibility**

Larsen’s ability to render her female protagonists (in)visible was aided by her use of other aesthetic forms and experimentations; the same forms and experimentations helped Motley create the vivid spaces of his paintings and his female figures. Looking back towards Richard Powell’s rubric for Motley’s modernity, the use of music, color and the grotesque demonstrates Larsen’s mastery of interdisciplinary aesthetics and both artists’ creation of the spaces and places where their stories transpire. Motley brought his real-life home, Jazz Age Chicago, to life for his paintings. Motley’s Bronzeville was a divisive space for the African-American community. As Harlem becomes a complicated backdrop for Helga and Clare’s search for unmitigated visibility, Motley’s works depict “how much the Stroll itself was a representation, an ideal,” and “a work and play space of grand ambition, resting in the bosom of despair, a realm of elevated expectation for a black community forging its own unique sense of modernity within a physical
landscape of choice and constraint” (Baldwin 55); this dynamic is seen in Motley’s Black Belt.\textsuperscript{56} However, the paintings also depict the tensions between communities within these spaces, with community organizers like Ida B. Wells’ urging people away from the Stroll and into more organized, formal activities, like religious gatherings and afternoon tea.

As Jesse Fauset advocated for a society aside from the scandalous nightlife in Harlem, Wells started the “Negro Fellowship League” in Chicago, offering a “leisure solution for many settlement homes and clubwoman [in offering] card parties, musicals, luncheons, and charity balls for themselves, while hosting youth clubs, dances, picnics, and other recreations” (57-58), a scene Motley depicts in his 1926 Cocktails. In Larsen’s Harlem, “the rise of the nightclub and cabaret in the early Twenties brought Black music and dancing into respectable society as never before. It brought about and was symptomatic of a relaxing of social boundaries in the arts and a mixing of classes, races, sexes, ethnic groups unseen since the 1840s, if ever” (Hutchinson 180). While this “relaxing” of social norms made social organizers like Fauset and Wells anxious, artists like Larsen and Motley embraced these new social scenes as spaces of being for their literary and visual figures.

Blues was a standby of the nightlife scenes in both Harlem and Bronzeville, and Larsen and Motley incorporated musical aesthetics to set scenes for their work. Powell’s second exemplar of Motley as modernist is in his “incorporating [of] an African American-derived ‘blues aesthetic’ into contemporary scenographies” (113), and he offers Motley’s Hot Rhythm (fig. 19) to demonstrate “Motley’s multiplicity of compositional elements, their interruption and reintroduction, in Blues were not unlike the ‘riffs’ and ‘stop-time’ of musical relative Louis

\footnotesize\textsuperscript{56} As detailed in Davarian L. Baldwin’s “Midnight was like day”: Strolling through Archibald Motley’s Bronzeville.”
Armstrong” (120). In the painting, musicians break the rhythm of the dancers, bodies are interrupted by patterns, and a raised high-heeled foot is disconnected from any body. The scene is bustling, alive, immediate and frenzied, just as it will be written by Larsen.

![Image](image.png)

**Figure 19.** *Hot Rhythm*, Archibald Motley. Printed in *Jazz Age*.

The influence of jazz in literature, according to Lori Harrison-Kahan, is most commonly thought of as a post-modern, post-1945 phenomena. Harrison-Kahan’s recent work on “Blues and Jazz Aesthetics in the Fiction of Nella Larsen” corrects what she sees as an oversight by critics Ryan Jerving and Angela Davis, who identify Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston as incorporating the jazz aesthetics prior to 1945 (268). Citing Sherrard-Johnson’s article on the relationship to Larsen’s work and “visual culture,” Harrison-Kahan desires to “[expand] on this understanding of how Larsen’s fiction participates in the modernist projects of transgressing boundaries between different media” (269), just as this project does. Broadly speaking, Harrison-Kahan identifies the structure of *Passing*, with its three sections, to model itself off of a blues song, and how the content of each part models the same structure.

Larsen’s use of the blues technique creates spectacle in her short story “The Wrong Man:” “the orchestra blared into something wild and impressionistic, with a primitive staccato understrain of jazz. The buzz of conversation died, strangled by the savage strains of the music.
The crowd stirred, broke, coalesced into twos, and became a whirling mass” (4). Larsen nods directly to modern painting here with the “impressionistic” music and makes direct reference to the “primitive” and “savage,” alluding to the primitivist art movement. Just as in *Rhythm*, Larsen aestheticizes her writing: combined clauses replace traditional sentence structure, creating a sense of the “whirling mass.” The music seizes the partyers, creating violence, breaking and whirling them about as they lose control. Larsen lists the party’s attendees: “young men, old men, young women, older women, slim girls, fat women, thin men, stout men, glided by” (4), a line she will use again in *Passing* at the Hugh Wentworth party scene. In the short story, the people of the crowd are only given visibility through the music as we connect with them, and they with one another.

In *Quicksand*, the blues aesthetic returns as both form and content; while Harrison-Kahan’s article should be reviewed for its overview of the call-and-response structure of the story and Helga’s configuration as a blues character, I will rely on her reading of Helga’s night out in Harlem to illuminate the blues aesthetic in the prose. Larsen writes: “Clanging trolley bells, quarreling cats, cackling phonographs, raucous laughter, complaining motor horns, low singing, mingled in the familiar medley that is Harlem. Black figures, white figures, little forms, big forms, small groups, large groups, sauntered, or hurried by.” (89) Harrison-Kahan convincingly reads these two lines as follows:

> the repetitive use of hard “c” sounds…reproduces the cacophony of city noise. By the end of the lick, however, the disparate, diachronic sounds have rearranged themselves, combining to form a more unified, polyrhythmic effect, “mingl[ing]” in the “medley that is Harlem”—an analogy that directly compares the city to music. The repetitive “ing” sound in clanging, quarreling, cackling, complaining,
singing, and mingle operates contrapuntally with the harsher “c,” and the
resonance of the participle produces the flowing movement associated with jazz.
This movement is sustained through the following sentence, which uses the
effects of balanced repetition (“black figures, white figures, little forms, big
forms, small groups, large groups”) and alternating speed (“sauntered, or
hurried”) to replicate instrumental effects. (“Blues” 282)

Yet within the medley of the city, we return to the existential questions of self, as Larsen writes:
“It was gay, grotesque, and a little weird. Helga Crane felt singularly apart from it all” (89). Like
the central figures in Stomp and Bronzeville, she is both a part of and apart from the scene.

Within the club itself, the aesthetics of flow, repetition, polyphony and improvisation
continue:

A glare of light struck her eyes, a blare of jazz split her ears…. They danced,
ambling lazily to a crooning melody, or violently twisting their bodies, like
whirling leaves, to a sudden streaming rhythm, or shaking themselves ecstatically
to a thumping of unseen tomtoms. For the while Helga was oblivious of the reek
of flesh, smoke and alcohol, oblivious of the other gyrating pairs, oblivious of the
color, the noise, and the grand distorted childishness of it all. She was drugged,
lifted, sustained by the extraordinary music, blown out, ripped out, beaten out, by
the joyous, wild, murky orchestra. The essence of life seemed bodily motion. And
when suddenly the music died, she dragged herself back to the present with a
conscious effort; and a shameful certainty that not only had she been in the jungle,
but that she had enjoyed it, began to taunt her. (89-90)
This dynamic scene, also highlighted by Harrison-Kahan, is where the music takes hold of Helga. She is obliterated, blown out, ripped out, taken to the jungle and back, and ashamed of her participation in this crowd, how each person is “oblivious” to the other. By becoming invisible to the people around her, Helga is able to become lost in the “wild, murky orchestra.” On the dance floor where she is surely visible to those around her, Helga is paradoxically empowered by moments of invisibility. Helga brings to mind several figures of Motley’s paintings, particularly the woman in red in *Saturday Night* (fig. 20). Her body is engaged with the music: arms overhead appearing to clap along with the rhythm, mouth agape as she cheers or sings along, eyes closed as she experiences something entirely sensorial, the music and the rhythm engaging full body and mind.

![Figure 20. Saturday Night, Archibald Motley. Printed in Jazz Age.](image)

These two scenes (Helga in the club and *Saturday*) contrast with Helga’s time in Denmark where she was vulnerably visible to the people around her yet remained invisible to them. In these scenes, Helga and the women in red are part of the crowd around them—in sync with the movements and music of the others. She is not gazed upon or rendered vulnerable, despite being scantily clad in the midst of a room full of suited, seated men. The power of the music allows Helga to express elements of the “spiritual” longing she felt on her trip across the Atlantic while inhabiting a free physical space as well.
Part of an essay of another unmet friend bears undeniable similarities to the dancing excerpt discussed above. Zora Neale Hurston’s “How it Feels to be Colored Me,” originally published in 1928, explores her identity as a colored woman. In discussing race relations at a Harlem nightclub, Hurston reveals that the orchestra in her club also takes hold of her body: “it constricts the thorax and splits the heart;” as she is taken over by the orchestra she is sure that she is “in the jungle and living in the jungle way” (154). Hurston ends the scene with the abrupt ending of the song when she “creep[s] back slowly to the veneer we call civilization” (154). The conceit in both paragraphs is the orchestra’s music as an all-consuming force, it inhabits and controls the women’s bodies. Once inside, it brings the women to the jungle, alluding to primitiveness and incivility. Both pieces were published in the same year; it is remarkable how closely they bear resemblance and we wonder what literary friendship Larsen and Hurston may have formed. May they have both been reacting to what they saw and experienced in Harlem nightclubs? Did a mutual friend describe an experience to them that they sought to represent in literature? Most compellingly, both writers’ choice to conceive the dance floor as a return to the jungle informs the way the nightclub was perceived as a social space in Harlem in the 1920s.

While music is one way the artists address issues of identity formation, they are perhaps both better known for their innovative uses of color in their works. For critic Amy Mooney, Motley’s Portrait of a Cultured Lady, where the purple of the sitter’s dress imbues the entire scene, hallmarks his innovative use of single-saturation color. The portrait also reveals his “career-long preoccupation with the range of skin colors within the African American population and his inventive translation in oil pigments of these chromatic variations” (Powell 142). Meredith Goldsmith identifies Larsen’s vast “color vocabulary” as a way to challenge “the racist aesthetic coded into the binary of white and black [in her creation of] a multihued spectrum of
racial coloration” (268). In working beyond the color line, color takes on a significant role in the development of Larsen and Motley’s aesthetic experimentation.

Powell traces Motley’s use of color to the “Bronze Age,” termed so by James Gentry after the headquarters for the Chicago Bee, a newspaper serving the African American population of Chicago. The building, “which radiated an iridescent glow and, in various lights and atmospheric conditions, flashed golden brown, burnt sienna, copper, or ochre—sprang from an optimism about the urban enterprise and a desire to reconstruct black Chicago’s public perception, from desultory and troubled, to ambitious and glowing” (138). However, Motley also harnessed a wide range of color beyond alloy tones, revealing an aesthetic of color and energy that went hand-in-hand with the presence of music in his paintings:

- a virtual rainbow, each colored component redolent with psychological important and/ or aesthetic meaning. This kaleidoscopic overlay onto Bronzeville’s fashionable population and its brick-and-mortar infrastructure unequivocally manifested itself in Black Belt, a painting that, for all its apparent verity regarding the Stroll’s oft-described busy thoroughfares and kinetic energy, revealed Motley’s compositional and chromatic imprint on an observed reality. (138)

Experimentation with color emerged for Motley through his “preoccupation with the range of skin colors…and his inventive translation in oil pigments.” Powell attributes Motley’s “chromatic departures” not to a desire to catalogue the “discernible colors” of skin tone, but rather to a “part-cerebral, part-affective impulse to visualize the black Metropolis, in all of its

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57 We see this also in Motley’s Gettin’ Religion, 1948, which Powell compares to George Grosz’s Dedication to Oskar Panizza, 1917, as Powell continues to put Motley in conversation with established modernist artists.
splendor and phantasma” (142). Larsen works with the same preoccupation and harnesses color for the same purposes as Motley: to release the “kinetic energy” of her scenes, and to visualize the myriad of bodies in the modern world around her. Larsen’s aesthetic of listing is comparable to Motley’s obsessive incorporation of the color palette in his works.

Larsen’s use of color is visible from her early short story “The Wrong Man.” From the opening line, “The room blazed with color,” we enter Larsen’s world of deeply colored visual scenes. She continues:

It seemed that the gorgeous things which the women were wearing had for this once managed to subdue the strident tones of the inevitable black and white of the men’s costume. Tonight they lent just enough of preciseness to add interest to the riotously hued scene. The place was crowded but cool, for a gentle breeze blew from the Sound through the large open windows and doors, now and then stirring some group of flowers. (3)

Her protagonist’s introduction will anticipate that of Helga and Clare: “Julia Romley, in spite of the smoke-colored chiffon gown (ordered specially for the occasion) which she was wearing, seemed even more flamingly clad than the rest. The pale indefinite gray but increased the flaming mop of her hair; scarlet, a poet had called it. The satiny texture of her skin seemed also to reflect in her cheeks a cozy tinge of that red mass” (3-4). Her scarlet hair foreshadows the significant role reds will play for Larsen. Like her other women, Romley is itemized and reduced to material with her “satiny” skin. The colors of the dresse however, overpower the “black and white” of the men, making the room “riotously” alive. Though an outdoor scene, the blues, reds, yellows, and greens of Motley’s Black Belt have the similar effect of bringing the scene to “riotous” life.
As shown in “Wrong,” Larsen’s aesthetic drive towards color oft manifests in her personal obsession with clothing. As Hutchinson notes, Larsen was asked to leave her private school because “she was involved in a student rebellion against dress codes and social restrictions on girls,” (6) intimating her life-long interest in design, clothing and fashion.\textsuperscript{58}

Echoing this tension, Helga Crane’s embrace of color serves to isolate her in Naxos:

Drab colors, mostly navy blue, black, brown, unrelieved, save for a scrap of white or tan about the hands and necks. Fragments of a speech made by the dean of women floated through her thoughts—“Bright colors are vulgar”—“Black, gray, brown and navy blue are the most becoming colors for colored people”—“Dark-complected people shouldn’t wear yellow, or green or red.”—The dean was a woman from one of the “first families”—a great “race” woman; she, Helga Crane, a despised mulatto; but something intuitive, some unanalyzed driving spirit of loyalty to the inherent racial need for gorgeousness told her that bright colors were fitting and that dark-complexioned people should wear yellow, green, or red.

…Why, she wondered, didn’t someone write \textit{A Plea for Color}? (51)

Like Motley, Larsen reveals through the narrator that color itself is fundamental to the human experience; Crane laments that “these people yapped loudly of race, of race consciousness, of race pride, and yet suppressed its most delightful manifestations, love of color, joy of rhythmic motion, naïve, spontaneous laughter” (51-2). We could criticize Crane’s desire to wear kaleidoscopic colors and the race’s alleged “love of color” and “joy of rhythmic motion,” as

\textsuperscript{58} Nella and Fania (Marinoff, wife of Carl Van Vechten) were both dressmakers, seamstresses, and interested in high fashion: “They had similar tastes in fashion, to the extent that Marinoff modeled at one point for the artist Mary Mackinnon in one of Nella’s high-fashion dresses called the ‘Golden Forest,’ designed by Paul Poiret, the avant-garde Parisian couturier credited with ending the reign of the corset” (Hutchinson 213).
Larsen essentializing racist stereotypes. However, this use of color points to another line of thinking for race relations, one where difference is to be celebrated, not hidden. The decision to wear bright hues is an act of knowing oneself, a claim on their own visibility.

The use of color to perpetuate the “joy of rhythmic motion” is challenged when Helga is shown the dresses purchased for her by Axel Olsen and her aunt:

There were batik dresses in which mingled indigo, orange, green, vermilion, and black; dresses of velvet and chiffon in screaming colors, blood red, sulphur yellow, sea green; and one black and white thing in striking combination. There was a black Manila shawl strewn with great scarlet and lemon flowers, a leopard-skin coat, a glittering opera cape. There were turbanlike hats of metallic silks, feathers, and furs, strange jewelry, enameled or set with odd semiprecious stones, a nauseous Eastern perfume, shoes with dangerously high heels. (103)

This scene conjures images of Wharton’s Undine Spragg in Custom of the Country as she views the room full of clothes arranged for her return to “going round” in New York. The clothes remind Undine of everything she could be, could have done, if not for falling pregnant. For Larsen, as for Wharton, the clothes symbolize the woman’s role in society as a visible, circulating body. Here, though, with the consumer capabilities out of her hand, the power of color has been poisoned by the over-indulgent, primitive impulse of Olsen and her aunt: the colors are “screaming” in “striking combination,” both nauseating and dangerous (Goldsmith 273). Though the clothes will make Helga ostentatiously visible, they will also render her as invisible to those who see a woman but do not see Helga. This listing of dress colors also mocks the listing of skin tones from just a few pages prior; in doing so, Larsen equates the complexities of complexion with the physicality of fabric, interrogating the fundamental role skin color plays
in identity and echoing Helga’s introduction at the novel’s opening. As with Motley, the colors express the “kinetic energy” of the scene, a cacophony of colors and textures to bring the “screaming” dresses alive.

While both Motley and Larsen employed specific color to bring scenes to life, they both also used kaleidoscopic colors and the alloy palate to embrace the multi-hued worlds around them. In a scene that could be a verbal rendering of Motley’s *Black Belt*, Helga walks the sidewalks of New York upon her first arrival in Harlem, in the “warmth of the sun [that had] kissed the street into marvelous light and color…Helga was all the time seeing its soft shining brightness on the buildings along its sides or on the gleaming bronze, gold, and copper faces of its promenaders” (83). However, despite the vivid colors and bright sun which pervade this scene, Helga is struck by the vision of Anderson’s “level gray eyes set down in a brown face” (83). Unlike the “dark eyes” of her imagined children or the “bronze, gold, and copper” complexions she sees, Anderson is “gray” and “brown,” muted, devoid of color, and reminiscent of the colors the new-negro vision would have Helga don. The contrasting gray eyes of Anderson and the alloy colors of Harlem energize the scene. The dichotomy alludes to Helga’s position from the institutional tyranny of Naxos to the multi-hued possibilities of Harlem, charting her increased control over how and where she is seen.

Larsen’s most famous use of a kaleidoscope of colors comes at Helga’s arrival to a Harlem nightclub:

> For the hundredth time she marveled at the gradations within this oppressed race of hers. A dozen shades slid by. There was sooty black, shiny black, taupe, mahogany, bronze, copper, gold, orange, yellow, peach, ivory, pinky white, pasty white. There was yellow hair, brown hair, black hair; straight hair, straightened
hair, curly hair, crinkly hair, wooly hair. She saw black eyes in white faces, brown eyes in yellow faces, gray eyes in brown faces, blue eyes in tan faces. Africa, Europe, perhaps with a pinch of Asia, in a fantastic motley of ugliness and beauty, semibarbaric, sophisticated, exotic, were here. (90)

The scene encompasses the visual, and in the listing of all the colors, form meets content. We not only “read” colors here but “see colors,” as our minds contemplate the differences between “copper and gold” skin, “curly, crinkly, or wooly hair,” or the contrast of “brown eyes in yellow faces,” detailing a kaleidoscope of beings. Motley’s kaleidoscopic vision corresponds to Larsen’s scene; perhaps we can place Helga in Blues (fig. 21), with the couple dancing, she amber-toned and he a rich brown, or Stomp, where the party-goers range from pale whites and yellows to shadowy chestnuts.

A scene from Passing demonstrates this kaleidoscopic use of color to question Clare’s visibility. In the novel, Clare attends Irene’s Negro Welfare League event (likely modeled after the successful NAACP’s Women’s Auxiliary’s Spring Dance that took place in March 1925), and is spectacularly frocked: “exquisite, golden, fragrant, flaunting, in a stately gown of shining black taffeta, whose long, full skirt lay in graceful folds about her slim golden feet; her glistening hair drawn back into a small twist at the nape of her neck; her eyes sparkling like dark jewels”
(233). Amongst the crowds on the dance floor—“young men, old men, white men, black men; youthful women, older women, pink women, golden women; fat men, thin men, tall men, short men; stout women, slim women, stately women, small women,” Clare catches the eye of one of the guests of honor. He confides to Irene, “what I’m trying to find out is the name, status and race of the blond beauty out of the fairy tale… Nice study in contrasts, that.” Of course, it is Clare: “fair and golden, like a sunlit day. [Her dancing partner] dark, with gleaming eyes, like a moonlit night” (235). Like the dancing couple in Blues, Clare is “a study in contrasts”: golds and blacks, cast against the colors and sizes of the people around her. However, therein lies part of the problem: she is again a “study,” as we might say of a statue or a painting, not of a person.

The aesthetics of music and color reveal Motley and Larsen’s formal aesthetic experimentation, with the extra payoff of allowing us to consider how these aesthetics relate to the (in)visibility of their female figures. The “transgressive vernacular” (Powell 112), more generally known as the grotesque, is a final technique employed by Larsen and Motley that will help us to understand the extra-sensorial elements of Motley’s work as well as help us understand the complicated endings of Quicksand and Passing. Both artists depart from reality to create liminal spaces for their principal female figures. Additionally, transgression asks us to consider the art of the grotesque and how its approach to surreality adds to our acceptance of the unreal worlds created by both artists. As seen in The Argument (fig. 22) and Tongues (Holy Rollers) (fig. 23), “Motley seems more and more fascinated by the grotesqueries and oddities of

59 Use of the vernacular is also named by Baker as an important epistemological element of the relationship between black and white modernism (see 17-23 for details), and reflects the technique of racial masking prominent in white modernist texts (specifically Stein’s Melanctha). The vernacular and racial masking also inform Larsen’s allegedly plagiarized short story “Sanctuary” (see Hoeller, Hildegard, “Race, Modernism, and Plagiarism: the Case of Nella Larsen’s ‘Sanctuary’” for fuller detail).
Negro Life” (Locke quoted in Powell 127). Motley takes scenes of everyday life and infuses them with the grotesque, the uncanny, the undesirable; this subversion serves as apt description of the ending of both of Larsen’s novels. What makes Tongues of particular importance is the critical role the house of worship plays to African American communities, as well as its similarity to the space of Helga’s conversion.

A work like 1940’s The Argument reveals Motley’s desire to transgress the everyday in secular spaces as well: outside this seemingly-pleasant suburban home, men with grotesque, oversized, crudely drawn mouths “argue,” their eyes vacant white spaces. One man appears with a growth on his face, while others appear with simply no faces at all. The overall effect is eerie, isolating, and disturbing. In bringing her protagonists’ stories to a close, Larsen employs the same grotesque aesthetics and enacts ultimately surreal endings for both women, who will in essence disappear, much as Larsen did before her death.

However, before Quicksand’s end, Larsen writes transgressive scenes that question Helga’s visibility. Helga accompanies Olsen to a could-be minstrelsy show that ends with two black Americans “prancing” on stage to ragtime: “how the singers danced, pounding their thighs, slapping their hands together, twisting their legs, waving their abnormally long arms, throwing

Figure 22. The Argument, Archibald Motley. Printed in Jazz Age.
their bodies about with a loose ease!” (112). This dancing is contrasted with the scene at the Harlem club, which was slow, seductive, immersive, impossibly cool but veiled with restraint. At the minstrelsy show, the dancers are excessively punctuated, pounding, slapping, twisting: gruesome in their self-inflicted violence and surreal bodies. They “throw” themselves about with a “loose ease,” unlike the Harlem dancers who “whirled” to a “streaming rhythm” (90).

The visibility of the black figures as spectacle has the effect of making Helga also feel vulnerably visible:

she felt shamed, betrayed, as if these pale pink and white people among whom she lived had suddenly been invited to look upon something in her which she had hidden away and wanted to forget…. But later, when she was alone, it became quite clear to her that all along they had divined its presence, had known that in her was something, some characteristic, different from any that they themselves possessed. Else why had they decked her out as they had…. And they hadn’t despised it. No, they had admired it, rated it as a precious thing, a thing to be enhanced, preserved. (113)

Masochistically, Helga returns to the club, “always alone, gazing intently and solemnly at the gesticulating black figures, an ironical and silently speculative spectator. For she knew that into her plan for her life had thrust itself a suspensive conflict in which were fused doubts, rebellion, expediency, and urgent longings” (113). This transgression of black culture for a white audience borders on the grotesque and the sexual, laying bare the ugly colonial histories of both America and Denmark; it also forces Helga to confront her own issues with her (in)visibility.

Upon her return to Harlem from Copenhagen and moving towards the novel’s close, Helga finds herself contemplating death in a treacherous rain storm when she is thrust into
redemption: entranced by the singing, Helga is lured into a congregation, and becomes a thing to be preyed upon. She releases herself into the music of the congregation, “unaware that the grotesque ebony figure at her side had begun gently to pat her arm to the rhythm of the singing,” (140) and involuntarily “wriggling out of the wet coat when she could not loosen the crazed creature’s hold,” revealing “bare arms and neck growing out of the clinging red dress” (141). The parishioners perceive Helga to be a prostitute—bare arms, red dress, and the congregation turns chaotic:

the performance took on an almost Bacchic vehemence. Behind her, before her, beside her, the frenzied women gesticulated, screamed, wept, and tottered to the praying or the preacher. …there crept upon her an indistinct horror of an unknown world. She felt herself in the presence of a nameless people, observing rites of a remote obscure origin. The faces of the men and women took on the aspect of a dim vision….she remained motionless, watching, as if she lacked the strength to leave the place—foul, vile, and terrible, with its mixture of breaths, its contact of bodies, its concerted convulsions, all in wild appeal for a single soul. Her soul.

(141)

While Helga at first resists, she is soon “possessed” to join the congregation: “gradually a curious influence penetrated her; she felt an echo of the weird orgy resound in her own heart; she felt herself possessed by the same madness; she too felt a brutal desire to shout and to sling herself about” (142). This erotic take-over—penetration, orgy, brutal desire—echoes the dance scene of the Harlem Club: uncontrolled slinging about of the body to a rhythm, a music, that overtakes you. “Arms were stretched toward her with savage frenzy. The women dragged themselves upon their knees or crawled over the floor like reptiles, sobbing and pulling their hair
and tearing off their clothing. Those who succeeded in getting near to her leaned forward to encourage the unfortunate sister, dropping hot tears and beads of sweat upon her bare arms and neck” (142). She cannot see any of these people, their faces taking on a “dim vision,” yet they all see her and overtake her.

We can envision Helga as a hybrid of two Motley figures: an alternately-clad version of the female subject of *Tongues (Holy Rollers)* (fig. 23) and the similarly red-frocked woman of *Saturday Night*. Like the woman of *Tongues*, she takes center-stage in a room of impassioned parishioners, her arms flung overhead in both a miming of the reverend but also as a signal of her total abandon to the crowds. The on-lookers all sway with her body, leaning into her or arching back with her, their faces grotesque and malformed, dressed in dark tones to contrast the bright, reflecting white of the central figure. The woman of *Saturday Night* dances with an equitable abandon. Unlike the conservatively dressed *Holy Roller*, her red dress is barely there, hardly covering—in fact, seemingly serving to amplify—her breasts and genitalia, her bare limbs are splayed in every direction, and one lithe arm serves to cover the woman’s eyes from us: we cannot see her, she cannot see us. Both women seem, as Helga, “possessed by the same madness, a transgressive grotesqueness on the arts of the everyday”: the artists use the diverse spaces of churches and nightclubs to challenge the visibility of their female figures.

![Image of Helga and parishioners from *Tongues (Holy Rollers)*](image)

*Figure 23. Tongues (Holy Rollers), Archibald Motley. Printed in Jazz Age.*
Helga’s conversion is the height of transgression: animalistic, homosexual, bestial takeover: savage frenzy, women tearing off of their clothing, dropping bodily fluids onto Helga’s exposed skin. Larsen’s erotic, religious scene is borderline bizarre, highly sexually charged, and somehow one which also releases Helga into “a supreme aspiration toward regaining of simple happiness.” This scene could be read as a twisted reenactment of Helga’s reflections during her boat ride, as she struggles to ally her physical and mental selves. Here, surrendering her physical agency to the crowd results in a supposed mental calm. However, Helga’s ensuing choices (to marry Reverend Green, move to Alabama, and live a near-death existence through excessive maternity) reflect that this “simple happiness” is not in line with that of a fulfilled woman. In essence, she simply disappears from the places where she once found happiness—Denmark and Harlem—to exist quietly and invisibly in the disconnected, otherworldly South.

In its embrace of the grotesque, the sexual, and the otherworldly transgression from reality, this scene foreshadows Passing’s famously cryptic end, mentioned at this chapter’s beginning. When Jack finds Clare in a room of black friends, she remains as composed as ever, “unaware of any danger or uncaring. There was even a faint smile on her full red lips and in her shining eyes.” Finally, Jack has truly seen Clare as the black friends reflect onto Clare, making her for the first time visible. Returning to Larsen’s use of color in the novel, Clare’s “shining red gown” (265) resonates with the red-dressed woman of Motley’s Saturday Night. Upon seeing Clare, Irene is filled with a “primitive, paralyzing dread,” the primitivism echoing the bold red of the dress against Clare’s affirmatively “black” skin (266). As in Saturday, the dress of this scene pervades the space; the entire party is touched by Clare’s red dress, infusing the party with a particularly painted frenetic energy: at this moment, everyone sees Clare. Yet the great mystery
of the novel unfolds here as Clare becomes suddenly invisible: “what happened next, Irene Redfield never afterwards allowed herself to remember. Never clearly. One moment Clare had been there, a vital glowing thing, like a flame of red and gold. The next she was gone” (271).

Irene is not struck by the loss of a friend, but rather the vision Clare left behind: “The soft white face, the bright hair, the disturbing scarlet mouth, the dreaming eyes, the caressing smile, the whole torturing loveliness that had been Clare Kendry” (272). It is the visual, visible Clare, her “flame of red and gold” that Irene will miss. “She felt nauseated, as much at the idea of the glorious body mutilated as from fear” (273). It is truly “unknowable” what transpired between Clare and Irene, but we do know that sexual energy existed between Clare, her husband, and Clare and Irene, and this sense of betrayal between Clare and her husband—that she purposefully manipulated her husband into penetrating, entering, a thing which he despised, but her “faint smile” upon him discovering this, is grotesque in its antipathy and almost unbelievable in Clare’s lack of fear or surprise. In the moments of her demise, Irene reflects on Clare’s “glorious body mutilated,” her “disturbing scarlet mouth,” all painting Clare as if she were a gruesome being at the party, destined to death because of her “torturing loveliness.” In her final moments, Clare goes from vibrantly visible to immediately invisible. At the close of both *Quicksand* and *Passing*, Larsen has her protagonist disappear, unable to write them a resolution suitable to their conflicted selves.

**CONCLUSION**

The invisibility that marks the novels’ ends reflects back to Larsen’s own felt invisibility: “Her ‘invisibility,’ or mysteriousness, is a precise marker of unresolved contradictions, of moral, political, and imaginative failures endemic to American society”
(Hutchinson 10). It is clear that Larsen was not interested in the fairy-tale endings offered by her contemporary, Jessie Redmon Fauset—either in her novels, or in her own life. Perhaps Larsen was exposed to Willa Cather’s *My Mortal Enemy*, where the protagonist’s seaside death evokes Chopin’s *Awakening*, and Larsen desired to interrogate the (accidental) suicide trope offered by those works for Clare’s death. And maybe Ellen Glasgow’s *Barren Ground*, a gender twist on Wharton’s *Frome*, offered a liminal space dependent on fertility and reproduction suited to Helga’s *Quicksand* demise—one that we also saw in *Weeds*, whose publication predates *Quicksand* by a handful of years. Larsen’s surrender to invisibility, then, is just another proposition to the resolution of a woman’s life when she is unable to find fulfillment in any mainstream way: in and of itself, an experimental suggestion. The erasure of her protagonists from the public space eerily foreshadows Larsen’s own choice to do the same years later; her novels, then, mirror Larsen’s own experiences with visibility and invisibility in both life and death, disappearing from literary circles until her critical rediscovery in the final decades of the twentieth century.

Both on and beyond the color line, Larsen’s careful meditations on being a whole woman, of maintaining physical and spiritual control, made visible the psychological dilemmas increasingly faced by emerging generations of women, especially mixed-race or “othered” people, a category both ever broadening and narrowing. Her refusal to provide the fairy-tale ending is an implicit acknowledgment that for so many—Larsen included—there was no such thing. Working through the experimental idea of visibility versus invisibility and the aesthetics of music, color, and the grotesque enabled Larsen to experiment with the worlds her women lived in, ultimately knowing the world would fail them. Aligning Larsen with Motley embodies the spirit of the Jazz Age and the Harlem Renaissance, a time spirited by cultural advances across
 mediums, and encourages us as critics to consider aesthetic developments across fields. In doing so, we reignite Larsen’s flame for generations of readers and writers to come.
Afterword

“Women catch courage from the women whose lives and readings they read, and women call the bearer of that courage friend.”
Carolyn Heilbrun, Last Gift of Time

Ultimately, though my scholarship has been ushered in on the waves of new modernism and the critical work of emerging feminist scholars, the courage to write has come from the women studied in this dissertation. They are, as Heilbrun calls them in her essay of the same name, my “unmet friends.” Hurst, Kelley and Larsen were decidedly unmet friends as well. I like to think that the courage they caught from one another is part of the fuel that kept their flames going, years ago when they were writing; today, the illumination of one author onto the next keeps their flames alive. The opportunity to study, deeply, in a reverie of one’s own magical reality, is a rare, privileged one. To have done so in a way where my imaginative literary constructs touch on the past lives of these unmet friends and could eventually result in a more equitable imaging of our cultural and literary history has been satisfying beyond measure.

All along the writing of this project, and really, throughout my graduate studies career, I have thought about what it would mean to bring the marginalized women writers whom I engage with into the classes where they belong. Thinking specifically of the three works that have inspired this project—Lummox, Weeds, Quicksand—any of them would enrich a high-school or college-level course on American history. Ultimately, these stories are the stories of American lives. Through them, we hear the other story of America, the story where citizens fought to be recognized as such, and women fought for control over their own bodies—a fight that, astonishingly, continues to this day. Though the lives and writing of Fannie Hurst, Edith Summers Kelley, and Nella Larsen may seem distant, the three women lived and wrote assiduously until the times of their deaths—as recently as 1968, in the case of Fannie Hurst. But,
as this dissertation shows, their legacies have been largely misremembered and misconstrued. Attending to their final years and their final works pays tribute to this trio of unmet friends.

Common knowledge claims that Nella Larsen “disappeared” in the early 1930s, but this version of the story leaves out the fact that Larsen chose to return to her nursing career. Prompting her disappearance from literary circles was a plagiarism scandal and the rejection of the novel she wrote during her Guggenheim Fellowship. Though the full novel manuscript no longer exists, the editor’s review of *Mirage* speaks volumes about the type of portrayals of female characters that Knopf found acceptable. According to reviewer C. Abbott, Larsen was unable to create a compelling character like Clare Kendry, Irene Redfield, or Helga Crane. The success of a novel about a wronged second wife who pursues her estranged husband and ultimately murders another man would, in the reviewer’s mind, depend upon allegiance to the protagonist. The review calls the protagonist “very impulsive, jealous, and stupid,” and that “the sex-mad wife…deserves nothing but derision as she exists” (Abbot). Presumably dissuaded by the scathing response to a character who may have in part embodied Larsen’s own frustrations with a failed marriage, who suggested a kind of woman who would not disappear like Helga Crane or Clare Kendry, Larsen abandoned *Mirage* and sought a new beginning across town, only miles but worlds away from Harlem.

In the early 1930s, Nella Larsen, RN, became a fixture at Gouverneur Hospital. Gouverneur Hospital was in New York’s Lower East Side, and served the laboring, working-class, immigrant and tenant families of the neighborhood, the types of families Hurst would write about in her novels. At the hospital, Larsen made many new friends and had an active social life, and she increasingly distanced herself from any connections to the literary world, including good friend Carl Van Vechten. Larsen lived on the corner of 2nd Avenue and 18th Street in two
different apartment buildings—a far cry from any en vogue address of her past. After thirty years in a successful career that satisfied her personally and professionally, Larsen would die alone in 1964 in one of these buildings, 315 Second Avenue. Days would pass before any colleagues realized she was missing (Hutchinson 454). By the time authorities got to Larsen’s apartment, the place had been ransacked. Any papers that remained went to a good friend, Alice Carper, who would give Larsen’s eulogy, mentioning only in passing her career as a writer. Larsen’s body would be put to rest in an unmarked grave along with Carper’s family. Larsen’s exodus from her literary career, her failed marriage, her estrangement from her family, and superficial friendships paint the portrait of a conflicted woman, one who—much like her characters—was never quite at home anywhere in the world. Her obituary in the *New York Times*—a newspaper that used to cover her social life and career success—was a mere note in the “Deaths” column (480). Perhaps Larsen would have preferred to go the way of Clare Kendry—there one minute, gone the next—her slow fade out from her friendships, especially with Van Vechten, and relationships in the literary world and in Harlem, are rather like a slow burning fire, dying without the oxygen to sustain its life force.

Though this dissertation may be one of the only works to bring them together critically, Fannie Hurst and Nella Larsen did overlap during their time in New York. In addition to both being close friends with Carl Van Vechten, they were considered important contemporary literary figures. Hurst was invited to a tea in 1929 given by Blanche Knopf, in honor of *Passing*

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60 Carper would later lose the papers she acquired from Larsen, which may be the reason no comprehensive archive exists. Letters by Larsen may be found in the James Weldon Johnson Collection in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, the Schomburg Center, and the Carl van Vechten Collection, New York Public Library, Rare Book and Manuscript Division.

61 Hutchinson’s biography details Larsen’s difficult relationship with her husband, family, and friends.
In 1935, they both signed the same petition on behalf of the Writer’s League against Lynching (438). And, Hurst spoke at a reception given for James Weldon Johnson in 1942, which Larsen did attend but even then she spoke to no one. These networks, these sites of belonging, tenuous and nearly invisible, brought these unmet friends together. And, like Larsen, Hurst would also fade from the spotlight after years (in Hurst’s case, decades) as a literary celebrity. In fact, many who lived during her heyday might have a difficult time comprehending the solitude she found herself in at the end of her life. By the time of her death in 1968, her marriage had ended with Jacques’ death fourteen years prior, she was without family, and her once-wide social circle had dwindled. Her solitude had become such that in her last papers, she asked the then-President of Brandeis University, Abram Leon Sachar, to deliver the memorial at her funeral. Sachar and Hurst had met by chance when Hurst was vacationing alone only a few months before her final passing; by all accounts, Sachar was surprised at both the request that he speak at the service and by the large endowment left to Brandeis University by Hurst.

After years of literary success, it seemed that Hurst’s social work and general celebrity was more of the public interest than her novels. She was an important figure to Eleanor and Franklin D. Roosevelt, and chaired the National Housing Commission and Committee on Worker’s Compensation. She grew increasingly at odds with mainstream modernist literature, a stance she first took in the representation of Lummox’s Rollo Farley. Her death, however, was headline news, appearing on the first page of February 24th, 1968’s edition of The New York Times. The obituary, which harps on Hurst’s skill as a “storyteller” and the “sob-sister” “love

62 In Sachar’s account, he and his wife Thelma met Hurst in the summer of 1964, and she passed “a few months” after their meeting (Sachar 89). Hurst passed in 1968, so Sachar either misremembered the year of their meeting or more time passed between the meeting and her passing, though neither instance substantively alters their relationship.
stories that were read under every hair-dryer in America” also decided that her relationship with Danielson was “the greatest Fannie Hurst love story” (“Fannie Hurst”). The obituary devotes equal time to her marriage to Danielson, her youth, her activism and to her literature.

Hurst’s literary legacy followed the path it began towards the end of Hurst’s life. Almost all of her seventeen novels are out of print and are difficult to find. When copies are found, they are often in research libraries and must only be handled within the institution. In fact, there are only two copies of Hurst’s arguably best known novel, *Imitation of Life*, in the New York Public Library system. One is the 1933 version, not available for circulation. The copy is stored in a special box that prevents the already decaying book from falling to literal pieces. Her short stories, too, exist primarily in periodical archives and in long-ago published collections. The loan record of the CUNY copy of Hurst’s *Appassionata*, a first-edition copy that circulates in the system, reflects Hurst’s dramatic rise and fall from popularity: there are countless loans initiated in turn in the 1920s, 30s and 40s, however, after a February 1948 loan, no date appears again until 1992. Hurst did continue to write into her final years, publishing her last novel, *Fool—Be Still*, in 1964, four years before her death in 1968. The novel is similar to Larsen’s *Mirage*—it is set in the suburbs, and the protagonist is a once-married middle-aged woman now in steady pursuit of a male suitor. Funnily enough, the protagonist of *Fool* is named Nella. Like *Mirage*, *Fool* was also critically panned. Its focus on suburban female sexuality confirmed for one reviewer that “the female heart has two main arteries—through one flows mother love and through the other passion, with neither pumping any oxygen to the brain” (“Review”). The anonymous reviewer of Fannie “urst”’s novel, her surname forever memorialized without it’s “H,” calls it a “dead end” (“Review”). Though Hurst’s novel was published without trouble by
Doubleday, the reviewer had the same distaste in their mouth as Abbott did reviewing Larsen’s *Mirage*—desperate women characters with sexual desires need not apply.

Of the final years of life of the authors, it would appear that Edith Summers Kelley was the most idyllic. Living her last decades in suburban bliss with her husband and three children, Kelley continued to write, though not publish. Kelley’s final works, like Larsen and Hurst’s, also focus on suburban living. In Kelley’s case, some of her short stories are fictionalized versions of her new experiences. In two stories in particular from her later years, Kelley writes, tongue-in-cheek, about the type of women her stories avoided—the suburban, upper-middle class ladies who lunch; the kind of lady that, it is quite possible, Kelley herself became at this time in her life. In “Adventures of a Charwoman,” Kelley’s first-person narrator is a housekeeper or extra set of hands at upper-middle class suburban women’s homes. Though the narrator is quick to comment on and trivialize the needs of her employers, Kelley’s sympathetic, compassionate observation persists, and the employers are both ridiculed and humanized in the story. Kelley scholar Matthew Bruccoli reports in his Afterword to *The Devil’s Hand* that Kelley took work as a charwoman to help financially and to research for her literature. If she was playing at the suburbs, she also would have visited a ladies luncheon group, and recounts the story in “Culture on the Pac Coast,” where literary women gather to discuss the general demise of American morality and reflect on the beginning of a new year, where one woman “read a poem on the California climate, that never failing source of self congratulation” (“Culture”). The bulk of the meeting, though, consists of women sharing aloud the “reading of manuscripts that had been accepted into magazines during the month” and Kelley recounts the poems, short stories, and articles accepted for publication by this group of refined women. And then, “After that there was tea and cakes—delicious tea and lovely cakes” (“Culture”).
It would seem that Kelley herself had become a member of the “Society of Penwomen” or else has created this society from the local writer women she encounters in town. The story seems to reveal Kelley’s ongoing complicated relationship with literature. Kelley had moderate success earlier on in life publishing a few poems, as does one woman in the Society. However, the only short story that is published is the type Kelley actively voices against, the unlikely romance plot where a poor, small-town girl visits the big city, only to meet a rich, handsome man who falls in love with her on sight. The sharing of writing accomplishments is punctuated by the banality of suburban life: opening chatter and closing tea and cakes. In creating this meeting, Kelley reveals that writing, and sharing her writing, is still important to her at this later stage in life. At the same time, she seems to feel her writing and celebrations of her writing may only take place within this small circle, where her literary-minded peers come together to reflect on the best corset-maker in town. In any case, Kelley persists to the end in fictionalizing the worlds she finds herself in, carefully observing and documenting the people she encounters, all along negotiating her own relationship with them.

Kelley died of renal failure in 1956. Matthew Bruccoli’s accidental rediscovery of Weeds in the 1970s may be the only reason Weeds was republished and The Devil’s Hand was published for the first time. The discovery also led to Kelley’s son donating her papers to Southern Illinois University. These accidental findings have breathed new energies into Weeds, in particular, a novel consistently critically acclaimed but never finding a public audience. Yet, as the archive reveals, Kelley remained true to herself until the end, writing and writing, as her life evolved from New York City girl to farm wife and mother finally to suburban writer-who-lunches. Her last known address, in the small California town of Saratoga, about an hour south of San
Francisco, reflects a beautiful neighborhood and part of the world where, indeed, she and her husband “managed to have quite a bit of fun out of life” (Kelley to McWilliams).

It seems fitting to end the study of Fannie Hurst’s, Edith Summer’s Kelley, and Nella Larsen’s literature with a study of their lives. After all, their literature was a reflection of their lived experiences. Due to the scholarship of dedicated academics, Hurst, Kelley and Larsen have all received some type of lasting critical attention, though I believe it is safe to say that for Hurst and Kelley, their legacies have not endured in a way that they deserve. This study, positioning itself as a new modernist feminist study, revealing modes of modernism in their work and claiming space for them in literary study, wants to keep their flames alive. To make their literature the vital, glowing things it is for generations of readers to come, generations who will benefit from the varied and vivid representations of women’s lives, of lives of the other half, of lives of those who do not belong. And from this well-lit space of burning flames, we can truly see.
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