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Jessie Fauset's Not-So-New Negro Womanhood: The Harlem Renaissance, the Long Nineteenth Century, and Legacies of Feminine Representation

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Virtually all contemporary scholarship on Harlem Renaissance novelist Jessie Fauset contains an obligatory move in which critics respond to her stylistic and apparent social conservatism. These critics recuperate as subversive Fauset's ostensible failures in style and coherence and argue, as do Ann duCille and Jane Kuenz, that her apparent endorsement of conservative plot closures for women be read as self-consciously ironic.¹ Other scholars respond to the critical treatment of Fauset during her lifetime as retrograde by contextualizing her work in its own cultural moment. Such critics show, for example, how Fauset responds to a rising consumer culture that, in Jean Lutes's words, "paradoxically, both integrates and isolates women of color" (78).² Such redemptive readings work to counter a number of hostile charges. While the most famous of these critiques may be that of the mid-twentieth-century literary scholar Robert Bone, who claims that Fauset's third novel, *The Chinaberry Tree* (1931), "seems to be a novel about the first colored woman in New Jersey to wear lounging pajamas" (102), some of Fauset's contemporaries level equally damning, often class- and gender-based charges that marginalize her contributions to the literature of the period. Alain Locke, whose guest-edited March 1925 issue of *Survey Graphic* entitled "Harlem, Mecca of the New Negro" became the influential anthology *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, locates the problem of Fauset's work in its belatedness. Chiding her for her final novel, *Comedy: American Style* (1933), Locke claims in

the pages of the National Urban League journal, *Opportunity*, that the work is “too mid-Victorian for moving power today” (“Saving Grace” 222).³

Locke’s overdetermined phrasing illuminates tensions around class, gender, generation, and modernity that circulate through Harlem Renaissance discourse. Fauset’s literary career had begun much earlier, with several celebrated short stories in the late 1910s and her editorial work for *The Crisis* throughout the 1910s and early 1920s. The publication of her first novel, *There Is Confusion*, in 1924 seemed to usher in the new optimism of African American literary culture.⁴ While Fauset’s initial success coincided with popular enthusiasm for African American art, by 1933 the excitement of the Harlem Renaissance had given way to the economic realities of the Depression, when African American artists struggled with lost jobs and opportunities. “Too mid-Victorian” may have functioned as code for too middle-class, as a new cohort of Left intellectuals like Richard Wright and Dorothy West came to occupy the Harlem literary stage.⁵ Locke’s charge of mid-Victorianness was also gendered in its close identification of Fauset with the women writers who rose to prominence in the late nineteenth century. Such was the canon in which William Stanley Braithwaite situated Fauset in the same issue of *Opportunity* that featured Locke’s damning review. Braithwaite asserts, “I deliberately invite the objection of critical opinion when I add, that she stands in the front rank of American women novelists in general,” linking Fauset to a tradition that includes Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary Wilkins Freeman, Margaret Deland, Edith Wharton, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Willa Cather, Ellen Glasgow, Kathleen Norris, Gertrude Atherton, Julia Peterkin, and Zona Gale (49). In an era purportedly defined by the modern, urban, sexually active New Woman, Fauset became identified with the older regional women writers, turn-of-the-century novelists of manners, and even popular conservative fiction writers like Norris. Locke’s and Braithwaite’s opposing reviews placed Fauset in two completely

different critical categories: the first, of race writers of her moment; the second, of a long tradition of American women's writing. Failing in the first category, according to Locke, she was damned by her association with the second, despite Braithwaite's laudatory assessment of her writing.

By linking her with an earlier, seemingly outdated literary culture, Locke's sneering characterization of Fauset marks the efforts of Harlem Renaissance intellectuals to appropriate the modernist tropes of originality and novelty, the very tropes created by authors who wished to chart a break with the nineteenth-century past. As Ezra Pound charged his modernist compatriots to "[m]ake it new," Harlem Renaissance intellectuals posited a similar rupture with nineteenth-century culture, often cast in generational terms. Locke's *New Negro* anthology created a decisive split between the New (younger) and the "old Negro," whose mentality was rooted in the nineteenth-century legacies of the Civil War and Reconstruction (4); and *Fire!!*, the notorious 1926 publication edited by Wallace Thurman, billed itself as "devoted to the younger Negro artists" (qtd. in Lewis 194). In a climate that valorized youth, experimentation, and the modern, critics of Fauset's fiction chose to view 1920s and 1930s African American culture as a break from, rather than an extension of, the past.

Fauset's texts offer a repository of precisely what Locke labeled retrograde: seemingly outdated plotlines and tropes that draw upon multiple literary, historical, and popular cultural sources. This essay aims to change the way we read Fauset by excavating this literary archive and exploring how the literary "past" informs the landscape of Fauset's fiction. Rather than viewing Fauset's novels as deviations from or subversive instantiations of modernity, I view them as part of a long nineteenth-century tradition of gendered representation. Instead of claiming a subversiveness that Fauset might have rejected or a conservatism that fails to account

for the complexity of her writing, this essay takes the author's apparent anachronisms seriously in order to explore the light they shed on her modern urban heroines. Finally, avoiding the temptation to dismiss what may look like minor details, I aim to illuminate the aesthetic politics embedded in Fauset's at times baroque descriptiveness.

My analysis focuses on *Plum Bun: A Novel without a Moral* (1929) and Fauset's final novel, *Comedy: American Style* (1933). Although one might reasonably include her other two novels, *There Is Confusion* and *The Chinaberry Tree*, these works are explicitly concerned with the intergenerational transmission of black middle-class values and the intermingling of black and white in the familial past, much like such turn-of-the-century African American novels as Charles Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900); Frances E. W. Harper's *Iola Leroy; Or, Shadows Uplifted* (1892); and Pauline Hopkins's *Contending Forces* (1900).⁶ Published at the height of the Harlem Renaissance, *Plum Bun* addresses the possibilities that urban modernity seemed to offer African American women in the 1920s. In contrast, *Comedy: American Style*, which begins at the turn of the century, culminates in the Great Depression, and only tangentially engages with the urbanity of New York and Harlem, appears temporally and spatially distant from the more canonical work of 1920s Harlem. Although both novels involve African American heroines passing for white—Angela of *Plum Bun*, who passes out of both ambition and curiosity; Teresa Cary in *Comedy: American Style*, coerced to pass by her ambitious mother; and Olivia Cary, Teresa's mother, whose self-hatred drives her to live as white—these characters are not as fully motivated by the trope of racial concealment as their turn-of-the-century counterparts. Similarly, neither *Plum Bun* nor *Comedy: American Style* is driven by the convention of the family secret, as are *There Is Confusion* and *The Chinaberry Tree* (a white ancestor in the first, an incestuous union averted in the second).

In her examination of the novel's status as precursor to contemporary middle-class African American women's writing, Cherene Sherrard-Johnson notes that, "while *Comedy: American Style* may not be Fauset's unsung masterpiece, it does represent the culmination of her narrative and stylistic experimentation" (xxxvi). Sherrard-Johnson locates Fauset's "experimentation" in her depiction of urban geography (xxxvi). However, I find that Fauset challenges conventional narrative strategies even more assertively in her efforts to glean from the recent past, through the literary tropes I mention above, a sampling that evokes Mikhail Bakhtin's characterization of the heteroglossia of the novel form itself. Fauset's use of multiple levels of discourse recalls Bakhtin's characterization of novels as reaching outward beyond the "stylistics of 'private craftsmanship'" ("Discourse in the Novel" 269), an aesthetic model best associated with authors like Henry James. With their multiple minor characters, ever-expanding plot lines, and seemingly throwaway scenes and episodes, Fauset's novels try to account not only for a range of African American experience but also for a broad range of cultural experiences of women across race and generation. Such capaciousness, especially in contrast to Nella Larsen's elegant prose or the vernacular experiments of Zora Neale Hurston, makes the work challenging to read, which helps to account for the exclusion of Fauset's novels from the Harlem modernist canon.

Fauset's characters establish themselves not so much as members of a 1920s cultural vanguard but as inheritors of a cultural history that lay only a few decades in the past: the Reconstruction era, African American migration to Northern cities, and the entrance of black women into the labor market. In rooting the problems of modern urban black women in the late-nineteenth-century past, Fauset's novels help us critique the trope of the "Harlem Renaissance," which, as Caroline Gebhard and Barbara McCaskill have suggested, denies the recursive and

ongoing nature of African Americans' struggle for justice and equality in the United States (7).⁷ My reading of *Plum Bun* demonstrates that the novel's three principal representatives of the supposed New Negro generation—passing heroine Angela Murray, her brown-skinned sister Virginia, and Angela's eventual lover, the light-skinned Anthony Cruz—are similarly haunted by their maternal legacies, cultural and personal inheritances that ground Fauset's characters in a long nineteenth-century history of gendered and racial representations. Mattie Murray's stories and Angela's projections onto her mother's life do not simply justify Angela's decision to pass as white. Rather, such aspects reframe Fauset's fiction as feminist engagements with histories not only of African American women but also of feminine representation itself, looking back just as critically to gendered mores of the previous generation as they comment skeptically on race and gender in their present day. In both *Plum Bun* and *Comedy: American Style*, Fauset anchors the problems of her contemporary New Negro Women in the previous generation's gender ideals as well as in the racial ideologies and conflicts with which her characters must contend. Fauset's flashbacks depict the transmission of these outmoded gender ideals along the female line, passed down by other women rather than solely by figures of patriarchal authority.

For these reasons, I view the story of Mattie Murray, Angela and Virginia's mother, as a crucial element in the novel's narrative strategy. We know that Angela has learned to pass at her mother's side when the two strolled Philadelphia's exclusive Walnut Street seeking leisure-class consumer pleasures. Yet Fauset takes care to ground Mattie's behavior in her early experience of economic deprivation and her venture into the workforce in the early years of the twentieth century. In a flashback characteristic of *Plum Bun*'s narrative strategy, Fauset reminds us that Mattie was "old enough to remember a day when poverty for a coloured girl connoted one of three things: going out to service, working as a ladies' maid, or taking a genteel but poorly paid

position as seamstress” for rich families in downtown Philadelphia or one of its “numerous impeccable, aristocratic suburbs” (27). The novel quickly demonstrates the unacceptability of the first and third options for Mattie: the degrading and exhausting nature of domestic service, especially laundering, is matched by the “precarious” nature of Mattie’s employment as a seamstress, in which she is subject to the poverty of her independent “clientele . . . who either did their own dressmaking or could afford to pay only the merest trifle for her really exquisite and meticulous work” (28).⁸ Either position defines Mattie by her relation to clothes, whether through the production of her own artisanal goods or the preservation of others. As historian Wendy Gamber has demonstrated, before the rise of ready-to-wear and the urban department stores where it was marketed, women of all classes were likely to employ seamstresses, who were exploited in turn by consumers with little economic clout of their own. Mattie’s clients would have made only slightly more money than she, as handmade goods were an important sign of taste even for less affluent women. It is unlikely that Mattie, as a craftswoman in a competitive urban market, would ever exercise any real power in the marketplace.⁹

Having eliminated the dependency of domestic service or the economic precariousness of contract work as professional options, Fauset traces the origins of Mattie’s performance of femininity through her work as a ladies’ maid, a privileged form of domestic service that nonetheless makes her uniquely vulnerable to sexual predation. Mattie and her actress employer, Madame Sylvio, are positioned as inverse parallels on the level of the sentence: “Mattie was young, pretty and innocent; the actress was young, beautiful, and sophisticated” (28-29). Evoking the imagined link between actresses and prostitutes, Fauset characterizes the twice-married actress as prone to social scandal and thus dependent on African American servants for protection, “for hers was a carelessly conducted household, and she felt dimly that all coloured

people [were] thickly streaked with immorality” (29). From the beginning of Mattie’s employment in Madame Sylvio’s home, Fauset emphasizes Mattie’s metonymic links to the actress as she serves as a messenger to Haynes Brokinaw, Madame Sylvio’s politician lover, and as a beard for their affair. When Mattie expresses fear about going to the politician’s house alone at night, the actress projects her own immorality onto Mattie, announcing, “And anyway, if I don’t care, why should you? . . . I hire you to do what I want, not to do as you want” (29). After staving off the drunken politician’s advances, Mattie tearfully confesses her fears to Junius, Madame Sylvio’s coachman. Junius offers himself as her protector, and the two promptly quit the actress’s household and marry. These origins of the Murray family form a necessary precursor to the novel’s plot.

Yet such compression obscures Fauset’s manipulation of the details. Mattie’s employment has been in a household controlled by the most successful unmarried woman in the novel: an autonomous, sexually self-determining, female professional. With Mattie’s departure from that environment, which the novel depicts as degrading, Fauset reestablishes a patriarchal order dominated by aspirational African American men: Junius now exerts control over Mattie. When the actress tries to give Mattie a hundred dollars, it is Junius who refuses: ““She is to have only what she earned,’ he said in stern refusal. He hated Madame Sylvio for having thrown the girl in the way of Haynes Brokinaw” (32). Although this episode underscores Junius’s dignity and economic independence—he and Mattie buy the “little house on Opal Street” immediately afterwards—it also reduces Mattie’s sojourn in the actress’s household to a simple act of exchange. Mattie can no longer determine her own worth or accept a gift that might compensate for her labor (32). Fauset thus destabilizes the threat of a professionally successful woman like

Madame Sylvio by ensuring that her money will not flow into the burgeoning black middle class symbolized by the house on Opal Street and its occupants.

This flashback within a flashback—we are told that Mattie’s memories surface as she begins the laundry rituals of Monday morning—strategically de-emphasizes what are likely Mattie’s real traumas, those of a working-class, light-skinned African American woman born in the late nineteenth century. The novel refrains from showing us how Mattie arrived in Philadelphia; whether a southern migrant or a native, she lacks the family protection that would insulate her from a life of domestic service. In a novel concerned with genealogy, Fauset shows us nothing of Mattie’s parentage save the insinuation that her father may be white: as Brokinaw drunkenly ogles her, he urges her to “[s]it here and tell me all about your mother,—and your father. Do—do you remember him?” (30). As might be expected for a woman without means, Mattie’s light skin has brought her “only insult and trouble”; Brokinaw’s predatory behavior reminds us that the privileges her color might offer are qualified and transient at best (31). When the narrative suggests that “poverty for a coloured girl” meant “one of three things,” we are to understand that the fourth term would have been prostitution, which Mattie has narrowly averted through her marriage (27).¹⁰ Mattie’s exclamation that “My girls shall never come through my experiences” conveys only a murky understanding of her experiences to her daughters (33). Mattie’s passing serves as a compensatory strategy for the memories she implicitly carries of a painful and relatively recent past. Having developed the ability to practice “certain winning usages of smile and voice” at the actress’s side, Mattie charms her husband into excusing her consumer habits, which propel her to pass for white. We learn that Junius has a particular “weakness” for the “qualities known as ‘essentially feminine,’” yet, as Fauset’s scare quotes therein suggest, there is nothing essential about this brand of femininity (15). Rather, Fauset

emphasizes the performative nature of Mattie's feminine behavior and, through Angela's subsequent actions, demonstrates how the performative apparatus of gender is reproduced in the next generation.

In her depiction of Mattie's decline and eventual death, Fauset continues to draw upon the rhetoric of female performance. Structurally, the death of Angela and Virginia's parents may be required to offer them the financial assets they need to leave Philadelphia. However, Fauset stages this episode carefully, first depicting the degree of Mattie's dependence on Junius, then framing this dependence with the tropes of Victorian self-sacrifice and the beautiful death. Junius dies in the role of Mattie's protector, developing pneumonia while waiting for her outside the hospital where she is taken after collapsing on a shopping excursion (60-61); in Mattie's collapse, Fauset replays her evasion of the drunken politician, in which Junius comes to the rescue of a frail, frightened woman. Despite her collapse, however, Mattie recovers from her illness quickly, "more happy than ever in the reflorescence of love and tenderness" that springs up between herself and her husband (62). In suggesting that "love and tenderness" have been revived through Mattie's illness and frailty, Fauset suggests that the balance between Mattie and Junius depends on their mutual performance of traditional gender roles; as Mattie plays the weak party, Junius steps into the role of protector. Mattie, whose former financial independence was qualified and precarious, now depends fully on her husband. If her independent passing forays with Angela—and perhaps even the family's acquisition of modern conveniences like a washing machine that make her less dependent on Junius's physical strength to manage the household—threaten to destabilize the gender norms of her marriage, Mattie's appropriation of the sick role to reestablish those norms emerges as a trope that, as we will see, is characteristic of Fauset's vulnerable heroines (33).¹¹

After Junius's death, Mattie's acquiescence to the role of fragile dependent causes her to will her own death, in which, I would suggest, the daughters become complicit. Subsequently, both daughters—but Angela in particular—are driven to reproduce the frailty that drew Junius to Mattie's side. Traumatized by the loss of her father, Angela struggles to “endure this aching, formless pain of bereavement” (61). While Angela vows to leave, Virginia begs for her mother's support: “let me put you to bed, darling. You're going to sleep with me, you know. You're going to comfort your little girl, aren't you, Mummy?” Then, as there was no response, “Darling, you'll make yourself ill” (62). Unable to rebound to protect her daughters, Mattie slips into suicidal depression instead:

Her mother sat up suddenly. “Yes, that's what I want to do. Oh, Jinny, do you think I can make myself ill enough to follow him soon? My daughter, try to forgive me, but I must go to him. I can't live without him. I don't deserve a daughter like you, but,--don't let them hold me back. I want to die, I must die. Say you forgive me,--”

“Darling,” and it was as though the husband rather than her daughter spoke, “whatever you want is what I want.” By a supreme effort she held back her tears, but it was years before she forgot the picture of her mother sitting back in the old Morris chair, composing herself for death. (62)

In underscoring the effect of Mattie's death on both daughters, Fauset establishes a sense of loss that informs the loneliness and depression Angela will experience later in life. A cynical reading of this passage might suggest that, given her melodramatic pleas to follow her husband to the grave, Mattie has learned more than one thing from her education with the actress. Evoking the

nineteenth-century trope of the beautiful death, Fauset frames Mattie in the “old Morris chair,” as she “compos[es]” or stages her impending demise.¹² And similarly, as Virginia ventriloquizes her father—“it was as if the father rather than the daughter spoke”—she reveals how thoroughly the family assimilated the patriarchal value of feminine frailty (62). The ambiguous dash after Mattie begs Virginia’s forgiveness leaves the daughter’s acceptance of her mother’s wishes unclear, yet we know that she cannot forget her mother’s preparation for death, rendered as a tableau. As Junius legitimates Mattie’s passing for white by viewing it as charmingly feminine, Virginia arguably hastens her death by viewing her through the prism of beautiful female victim. In an Oedipal reenactment of their mother’s legacy, both women claim Mattie Murray’s space; while Virginia playfully climbs into her father’s lap at the dinner table (50), Angela, perhaps more troublingly, moves into her mother’s bedroom after Mattie dies. In different ways, both women reenact Mattie’s performance of female frailty in their own efforts to live independently and forge relationships with men. In contrast, the novel’s most economically and sexually autonomous women, like the actress in Mattie’s generation and the New Woman Paulette Lister in Angela’s, are excised from the novel as the tendrils of Fauset’s plots expand, rendering the smaller leaves at their ends invisible.

If Mattie’s story draws upon archetypes of feminine representation to depict one aspect of black women’s cultural history, the legacy of domestic service, then Fauset deploys the maternal legacy of Anthony Cruz, who will later become Angela’s lover, to elucidate another aspect of late-nineteenth-century black cultural history: lynching. Just as Fauset has earlier emphasized that the New Negro Woman is not really new, here she demonstrates that modern African American men like Anthony are similarly entangled in a previous generation’s traumatic history, namely racial violence. Significantly, this flashback, which provides necessary insight into

Anthony's character, is almost fully absent from criticism of *Plum Bun*. The narrator reminds us that Anthony's narrative is simply an "old story" in a "new setting," emphasizing the fluid boundary between past and present and underscoring that the 1920s—the peak years of Harlem Renaissance intellectual culture—was simultaneously an era of brutal racial violence, most particularly aimed at black men (286).¹³ Forging connections between "post-bellum, pre-Harlem" texts like Chesnut's *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) and James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1912, 1927), both of whose black male protagonists witness and absorb the horror of lynching, Fauset demonstrates how, despite temporal and spatial distance, the trauma of racial violence exerts a shadowy imprint onto the urban Northern generation of the 1920s.

Anthony, we learn, is the child of the "sailor and rover" John Hall and the Brazilian Maria Cruz, who was "apparently white" but "with the blood of many races in her veins" (286, 287). Anthony Hall, Anthony's grandfather, was a successful farmer who during Reconstruction became wealthier than many of the surrounding whites in their small Georgia town. Local whites, who resented not only Anthony Hall's success but also his son's marriage to a white-appearing woman, murdered and symbolically castrated the son, taking body parts for trophies. Anthony, a small child at the time, was unable to protect his mother, who became like a "madwoman . . . haunted by a terrible fear" (290). This family tragedy drove Anthony to leave the South, pass for white, and take his mother's surname as his own (291).

While lynching was often justified as an effort to protect white womanhood when it was in fact a retaliation for black men's economic success, Fauset reveals lynching as also an expression of white anxieties about black female sexuality coupled with resentment of black male achievement. Significantly, *Plum Bun* locates white resentment against the Hall family in

not just one but two generations earlier in Reconstruction: “John’s father was a well-known and capable farmer who had stayed in his little town [after Emancipation] and slowly amassed what seemed a fortune to the poor and mostly ignorant whites by whom he was surrounded” (286). Economic resentment in the early Reconstruction period filters into the next generation and resurfaces as hostility toward miscegenation that provokes the attack on John Hall. Importantly, though, ideologies of feminine weakness and vanity pervade this episode: Fauset goes so far as to characterize Maria as Anthony’s “silly trusting mother” (288). The beautiful Maria Cruz serves as catalyst to the attack on John Hall by leaving the family home despite her husband’s warnings and the evidence of threats to their safety. In a repetition of Mattie’s feminine vanity, we learn that Maria appreciates the male attention she receives outside the home: “an infrequent visit to the little store was imperative and she did not mind an occasional admiring glance. Indeed she attributed her husband’s admonitions to his not unwelcome jealousy” (288). Maria’s naiveté, given her status as a mixed-race woman in the Reconstruction-era South, strains credulity; Fauset emphasizes the role of women’s susceptibility to flattery, which drives Maria to pique her husband’s interest by cultivating other men’s attentions.

The scene in which Maria’s public display sets the murder of her husband in motion depends on the trope of beautiful mother and child, a convention that ignites powerful emotions in *Comedy: American Style* as well. Maria attracts the attention of the white magistrate’s son, Tom Haley, when she bends “with great solicitude over” little Anthony, who has cut his finger; mother and child “ma[k]e a picture too charming, too challenging, to be overlooked” (288). Haley, realizing that Maria is not white, visits her house and propositions her the next day; when Maria strikes him in anger, she inadvertently facilitates the attack on her husband. In a repetition of Mattie’s weakness in the face of loss, Maria suffers a breakdown after John Hall’s death.

Telling her son that “women were poor, weak creatures; they must take protection where they could find it,” Maria passes her melancholy on to Anthony, who has failed in the Oedipal mandate to be his mother’s “constant guardian” (290, 288). Transferring his assumptions of female weakness and male protectorship to his own relations with women, he characterizes Virginia as “like a little weak kitten, like a lost sheep, like a baby,” while Angela remains “beautiful, charming, magnetic” (301, 295). Virginia is hardly as weak as Anthony believes her to be, while Angela needs more support than Anthony is able to acknowledge. Anthony’s clouded perceptions, I would suggest, are fixed in the notions of feminine weakness he endorsed through his child’s perspective. In representing him as taking his mother’s last name and sharing her “brooding countenance,” Fauset burdens this character with a supremely “tragic, searing past” (280, 292).

Readers interpret Anthony and Angela’s tentative union that ends the novel in multiple ways: Fauset unites two artist-outsiders; two light-skinned, mixed-race Americans; and two would-be expatriates. But she also brings together two characters with similarly traumatic maternal legacies. Fauset prompts readers to consider this maternal legacy not simply through female authorship, as several generations of feminist scholarship have now done, but also through tropes of feminine representation and textual imprints of maternal figures. Viewing *Plum Bun* as a text reaching back through, rather than rejecting, a series of maternal tropes from the nineteenth century emphasizes the connections between the Harlem Renaissance and its literary precursors. Fauset reminds us that, as eager as they may have been to play the role of the New Negro, many young Harlemites like Angela, Virginia, and Anthony were heirs to similarly painful family narratives. Owing its title to a nursery rhyme, *Plum Bun* evokes the language

learned at a mother's knee—a fitting metaphor for the legacies of female representation that Fauset's characters intuit and reproduce in the novel's "new" present.

If *Plum Bun* explores maternal legacies of feminine ideals like frailty and their consequences for its modern heroines, *Comedy: American Style* rotates around the destructive maternal legacy of Olivia Blanchard, a light-skinned middle-class woman dedicated not only to her own passing for white but also to ensuring the whiteness of her family in the next generation. Olivia's obsession with whiteness ruins the life of her daughter, Teresa; damages her light-skinned husband and son, Christopher and Christopher junior; and, most dramatically, causes the suicide of her dark-skinned child, Oliver. Yet readers should note that, perhaps more than any other in Fauset's corpus, this novel not only considers her female characters' failure to live up to the ideals of New Womanhood but also anchors their problems in linguistic and textual constructs that define women in certain roles and outworn modes of behavior and through literary and cultural tropes and clichés that impose false consciousness. Such tropes complicate our understanding of the Blanchard-Cary family line, in which constructions of ideal femininity constrain the actions of women and men alike. In the penultimate section of the book, Fauset offers a qualified alternative, allowing the character of Phebe Grant, Teresa's friend and the novel's model of a working female professional, to parody the tropes of femininity she has imbibed from popular culture, constructing a pastiche that avoids the traps of representation into which the other female characters fall.

The slender body of scholarship on *Comedy: American Style* focuses unitarily on Olivia Blanchard's racist self-hatred and the tragic legacy she passes on to her children. Such a reading exemplifies how critics continue to make generalizations about Fauset's plotlines rather than explore her language with the nuance to which she herself aspired. To complicate a simplistic

demonization of Olivia Blanchard Cary, I examine the character's self-hatred as a product of her childhood, due not simply to her early experiences of racism but also to her treatment by her parents, particularly her mother Janet. If Fauset deploys in *Plum Bun* a series of tropes that become lenses through which to view her female characters, here she offers a series of prescriptive ideologies of both childhood and womanhood and demonstrates the effect on those who resist, or simply fail to respond to, normalizing ideologies of gender.

In the brief narrative of Olivia's parents, the middle-class Lee Blanchard and his wife, Janet, Fauset emphasizes the "engross[ing]" nature of their "perfect companionship," to which their daughter Olivia seems primarily a distraction (10). Fauset suggests that Janet's ideas of maternal affection are prescriptive constructs: when Janet imagines developing feelings for her daughter, she notes that "perhaps between them there would spring something of the affection *of which one reads* between mother and child" (9; emphasis added). Especially pained when she sees a little girl runs up to her mother, calling "Oh, Moth! . . . Oh, Moth!," Janet views Olivia not only through linguistic conventions, but also through clichés touting normative child-parent relationships: "the sweet intimacy of the abbreviation had almost brought the tears to Janet's eyes" (11). If Janet measures Olivia against stereotypes of effusive children and emotive mothers, then her suspicions of Olivia's failure to play the child role are only confirmed by the "little text-book on psychology" she begins to study after her husband's death (14). As her reading soon convinces her, Olivia is a "case . . . her meager knowledge was unable to gauge" (14). Both scientific and popular cultural discourses, it seems, leave no place for a child who violates the norms of familial affection.

While Janet relegates Olivia to the category of bad seed, Fauset does not, emphasizing instead that Olivia's reserve derives from Janet's maternal legacy. As a light-skinned African

American forewoman in the immigrant-dominated mills of turn-of-the-century Massachusetts, Janet has a stake in maintaining her own distance; her “aloofness, coupled with a certain innate refinement, obtained for her respect and at length a measure of appreciation” (12-13). Fauset might be more sympathetic to Janet’s coldness, which ensures her protection in an economically and socially precarious climate; however, she makes clear that Janet and Olivia share both their reserve and their marital ambitions. Janet’s ambition is evident in her relocation to Cambridge, a move calculated to help her catch an educated and implicitly light-skinned husband. Coldness, a necessary means of protection for Janet, becomes for Olivia a means of attracting young men, who are drawn by the “lure and provocativeness of [her] extreme aloofness” (22). This air of ladylike repression soon attracts medical student Christopher Cary. However, just as in *Plum Bun*, maternal figures bestow these ideologies of gender; here we learn that Christopher has learned the ideals of femininity to which Olivia corresponds from his own mother, “a staunch ‘old Philadelphian’ twice removed from Charleston” (23). Marked with class privilege within the nineteenth-century African American community, Christopher’s mother inculcates ideals of female propriety and reserve (“A really nice girl never lets a man know she likes him”), virginity (“A good woman comes to her husband entirely ignorant”), and repression (“You can always tell a good woman because she is so cold”) (23). Reiterating the nineteenth-century ideology of passionlessness, which cast women as the moral superiors to male carnality, Christopher passes these ideas to his son, Christopher junior.¹⁴ As he and his sister Teresa discuss the vital Marise Davies, the younger Christopher, “an advocate of conservative sisters,” cautions Teresa, “[Y]ou don’t want to be like Marise . . .¹⁰⁰ she’s a great girl, but not the kind of girl I’d like you to be” (44).¹⁵

¹⁰⁰ To the press: this ellipsis is in the original and so should remain three periods; similarly, “she’s” should not be capitalized.

Teresa's frailty bears witness to Olivia's maternal dominance: we are told early on that she "usually presented something of the personality, if not the appearance, of a mouse" (45). One might easily read Teresa as a late-stage tragic mulatta; at first passing and enjoying the privileges of the white world, she later fails to defy her mother to marry the man she loves and ultimately accepts a loveless marriage to the racist Frenchman, Aristide Pailleron. Fauset also uses Teresa to limn the possibilities of a college-educated, middle-class African American woman of her day. More than any other character, Teresa is tagged as a New Woman of the late-nineteenth-century vein, enjoying the "cool sexlessness of [life in a girls' school] with its quota of sports and games, of lessons, of self-imposed scholastic tasks, of endless debates on what she felt were 'real things'" (58). In contrast to the passivity that defines her at her mother's hands, Teresa blossoms in the conspicuously homosocial prep school environment, "feeling almost that she had never known any other existence, so intensely vivid did she find this" (62). This admittedly interstitial narrative element, which not only introduces Teresa to her fiancé but also offers her an intellectual alternative to her home's stultifying atmosphere, is the novel's only space in which Teresa functions free of ideologies of female dependence.

After Teresa's engagement to Henry Bates, however, the novel allows her to relapse into dependency. Enrolled at Smith College and hiding her engagement, Teresa views her college years as "merely an interim . . . until the great moment of her life should be reached" (85). As readers of the novel know, Teresa's view of college education as an "interim" proves tragically misguided: Henry leaves her when Olivia discovers them and Teresa suggests that he pass as a Mexican. Teresa's disinterest in education, we learn, derives from her adherence to domestic stereotype: "Where other girls had chosen a profession, a calling which should absorb their interest, which would always offer them shelter in a time of stress and storm, she had banked her

all on making a home for herself and Henry and Oliver, a home in which she could be real” (108). In a moment of chiasmic logic, Fauset characterizes meaningful work for women as a form of home and, indeed, an alternative to marriage—“shelter in a time of stress and storm,” whereas Teresa views homemaking as her only real profession (108). Teresa’s assertion that domestic life is “real” refers not only to the freedom she would attain from Olivia’s pressure on her to pass but also to the social legitimacy conferred by marriage and maternity.

After Henry abandons her, Teresa succumbs to a breakdown, “a sort of delirium in which for a brief while she was mercifully unaware of her thoughts” (109). Fauset uses this episode to critique the male preserve of turn-of-the-century medicine, especially psychiatry. As her father examines Teresa privately before calling in a specialist, he interprets her “case” as one of “old-fashioned brain fever” (109). Recalling how Janet developed ideas of normative child behavior from her psychology text (which, interestingly enough, she inherited from her husband), we should not be surprised that so many of Fauset’s middle-class black men—Lee Blanchard, the senior and junior Christopher Carys, and Nicholas Campbell, Phebe Grant’s first paramour—are doctors or medical students. While some might interpret this as one of Fauset’s alleged promotions of black professionalism, *Comedy: American Style* shows how medical men intuit and reproduce conservative misreadings of women’s behavior, which, for example, interpret Teresa’s breakdown as hysteria and Olivia’s frigidity as a form of female superiority to the male sex drive. Even the dashing Nicholas Campbell subscribes to an unsustainable valorization of female purity: his first sexual experience, “half-thrust on him, half-invited[,] . . . permeated him with an ineluctable disgust. From that season on, he was never able to indulge himself too freely in his *petits amours*” (178). Raised in the city where Silas Weir Mitchell developed the concepts of neurasthenia and the rest cure, and educated in an all-male medical milieu, all three characters

subscribe to ideals of female purity and repression and their obverse, the hysteric: Christopher senior has been taught to fear women who are overly demanding or sexual, while Nicholas cannot “consider a nice girl too lightly” (178). As Fauset invokes the connection between late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century ideologies of female normalcy, she emphasizes how tied the novel’s modern male characters are to these long-standing perceptions of women.

Yet Teresa manipulates the trope of the hysteric to her own advantage, donning the sick role as a source of power: refusing against her mother’s wishes to return to college, Teresa avers that “she would never again be placed under the strain to which Olivia had so unrelentingly exposed her. She was sick, with a deathly sickness, of her sorry rôle. In her weakness she had discovered a new weapon. She might easily, she felt, lie there and will herself to a perpetual invalidism. . . . She would do it too if she could not have her way” (110). Teresa’s theatrical language evokes the notion of hysteria as a performance, and she performs the role—much as Mattie learned the ways of femininity at the actress’s side—to reestablish the household position that she has sacrificed under Olivia’s dominance. “Her father yielded immediately” to Teresa’s insistence that she remain in the home; Fauset writes: “He was glad to have his daughter home, this dear, soft, tender creature, to whom he was always welcome. In the morning before he went on his rounds hers was the last room he visited; on his return he came rushing home with a book, a paper, a posy” (110). We should note that Teresa’s illness, echoing the Oedipal family logic of *Plum Bun*, allows her father to visit his “dear, soft, tender” daughter’s bedroom daily and to shower her with gifts. Appropriating the role of hysteric allows Teresa to replace her mother in her father’s affections, simultaneously restoring the patriarchal structure of the home.¹⁶

As readers of *Comedy: American Style* can attest, however, any power Teresa achieves is painfully qualified. In contrast, the narrative of Phebe Grant, the final New Woman story in the

novel, offers the only—if only partial—empowering alternative for young African American middle-class women. If the novel offers any empowering New Negro Woman example, it would appear to be Phebe: despite her origins as the illegitimate child of an interracial union, she demonstrates genuine race pride, succeeds in her profession, and exhibits the romantic autonomy Teresa lacks. Whereas Fauset demonstrates earlier in the novel how linguistic and cultural constructs restrict women to a series of confining roles, Phebe gains a modicum of self-determination through the playful manipulation of popular cultural images and representations. Owing to its place in the novel's denouement, "Phebe's Act" and its protagonist receive the least attention in the novel's already scant criticism. While the New Woman embodied in characters like Teresa is not really new, the genuine newness of Phebe Grant inheres in the pastiche Fauset creates of film, advertising, and popular fiction in her construction of this character. Published just three years before Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Comedy: American Style* demonstrates how subjects come to see themselves and be seen through the lens of popular cultural production.

Phebe's courtship by the white aristocrat, Llewellyn Nash, draws upon a compendium of these tropes. Fauset makes Phebe and Nash slyly self-conscious of the roles they play: "If I were a hero in an English novel," he muses, "I should be calling her 'a little milliner'" (167). Joking that his aristocratic name "is not for the likes of [her] to be bandying about," Phebe calls Nash "your worship" (169) and "my lord" (197). While Fauset renders their relationship legible through clichés, she also shows how the couple views themselves through the language of commodity advertising: Phebe "trip[s] along the street like some girl in the pictured advertisement of the perfect shoe" (168), and Nash takes her out in the kind of car "they call 'rakish' in the novels" (197). Nash's first attempt to pick up Phebe explicitly evokes Hollywood

film: after she introduces herself as Phebe Grant, Nash remarks: “Any relation to the Grant of screen fame?” Phebe tartly replies, “Not a bit. . . . I’m thinking of having a card printed to that effect to hand to young men like you” (230). Like Nash’s used pick-up line and the card Phebe longs to offer in reply, the allusion to Cary Grant evokes a culture of mass production in which tropes of women, commodities, and romance can be endlessly recycled and redistributed.

Subjecting the character to one broken engagement, two marriage proposals, and two extramarital propositions in fewer than one hundred pages, Fauset uses Phebe’s plotline to reiterate questions around the codes of marital and sexual behavior. “[D]ancing her way straight down a line of eager suitors” as the narrative moves toward closure, Phebe and her story lack the resonance of a traumatic past (199). As Fauset displaces Phebe’s origins onto the self-consciously anachronistic and classed language of milliner and lord, such a legacy is made palpable only through cultural representations—like Cary Grant movies—that make it available to a contemporary audience.

Yet the novel, driven by resolution of the marriage plot, does not allow Phebe to maintain her ironic distance toward a narrative of what Fauset here terms “essential womanhood” (195). As Marise rejects Chris, Phebe declines Nash’s offer to become his mistress, and Nick rejects Phebe because of her light skin, Phebe accepts a proposal from Christopher Cary, who seeks “someone who loves her home, who wants children, who wants to love and accept love” (214). The conventionality Christopher imposes on Phebe produces a “nightmare” vision of the first year of marriage, in which she assumes financial support of the entire Cary family, which has lost its money in the Depression, and in which her father-in-law suffers a breakdown. Fauset demonstrates here how prescriptive roles and norms of gender inform women’s decisions. Having accepted her role as Christopher’s helpmeet, Phebe rejects a potential affair with

Nicholas Campbell on the basis of her anticipatory self-construction as an adulteress. As she alights at the apartment where their assignation has been arranged, “[t]he large staring windows looked at her with weary cynicism. ‘So here you are too,’ they seemed to signal her” (224).

Although *Comedy: American Style* seems to offer a conservative closure for its young New Negro Woman, careful close reading complicates its ostensible happy ending. While Teresa’s depression and unhappy marriage suggest that the female strand of the Cary line will end in France, Phebe and Christopher’s union emerges as the only reproductive one in the book, with Phebe’s working-class bloodline poised to reinvigorate the dissipated Cary clan (227). Even as Phebe sobs with relief in her husband’s arms, the future the author projects for her is not wholly optimistic: “Pretty soon you’re going to leave that dress shop too,” Chris tells her, “if we have a lot of little Carys” (227). While the couple compromises on three children, Christopher counters the general trajectory of women’s entrance into the workforce and the increased use of contraception among African American women. Indeed, all the families in the Cary generation are relatively small: only the Carys are siblings, while Nicholas, Phebe, and Marise are only children. As the Cary clan moves into the 1930s, when the birth rate continued to drop, Phebe—the novel’s resident independent professional woman—is poised to leave the workplace and become the mother of a large family.¹⁷ Christopher’s endorsement of this position provides another instance of the repetition of Victorian medical views in the modern era. With his name inscribed immediately below his father’s on their shared doctors’ shingle, Christopher dispenses increasingly outmoded nineteenth-century ideologies of the family. Fauset’s qualified happy ending suggests views that were at odds with the economic and personal needs of many modern African American women.

Comedy: American Style and *Plum Bun* have two distinct but interrelated narrative strategies: whereas *Plum Bun* roots its characters' behavior in a legacy of gendered representation, including visual and literary conventions of mother and child and the beautiful death, *Comedy: American Style* bursts with tropes inherited from science, literature, and popular culture that reveal the origins of its characters' ideas about femininity. Fauset challenges her readers to interrogate those sources, and while critics have responded by exploring her complex networks of literary allusions, they have made less of the tropes and clichés that populate her characters' imaginations. Taking the novels at face value in terms of their apparent happy endings and oversimplifying their all-too-abundant complexities, Fauset's first generation of critics found it too easy to support Locke's damning characterization of her work, while the most recent generation argued equally forcefully against it. In contrast to both views, I suggest that Fauset's fiction reveals just how "mid-Victorian" American culture in the early twentieth century still was.

Returning to the archive of early-twentieth-century black literary criticism, Braithwaite's reading offers an unexpectedly apposite approach to Fauset's fiction. Braithwaite locates Fauset's literary production not only in relationship to an American women's literary tradition, but also as part of a long nineteenth century. Because his work is so infrequently cited, I quote his discussion at length:

The "gay nineties" was a tragic era, the "mauve decade," of the critical fancy, was a jaundiced vision, where the Negro was concerned; and in them, the Negro was a passionate root, that sent its first fragile stems above the aesthetic soil along the borderlands of the old and the new century.

There was a girlhood at this time whose wistful dreams must have sent her bright brown eyes staring in the direction of far horizons, where lay hidden the secrets of a peoples' [sic] pride of spirit, secrets that were miraculously endowed with *beauty*; a girlhood that was to grow into womanhood; a searcher after the lure whose priceless possession made her a bright, enchanting blossom on the literary plant that has grown so magically in the last decade. (48)

In striking contrast to Locke, Braithwaite locates the origins of contemporary African American literature in the 1890s, despite the “tragic” aspects of the period for African Americans. Braithwaite first ironizes fin de siècle literary culture, emphasizing that clichés such as the “gay nineties” and the “mauve decade” did not apply to African Americans facing Southern peonage, Northern poverty, and the horrors of lynching. However, within that literary culture, African American art nonetheless found its “passionate root.” Whereas Locke views New Negro art and literature as a repudiation of the weakness and privation of the past, Braithwaite locates the origins of black art and literature of his day in the “aesthetic soil” of the turn of the century, a borderland where the literary and cultural conventions of the nineteenth century intermingled with emergent modernity.

With its “passionate root” and “fragile stems,” Braithwaite’s image of the African American artist is also strikingly bisexual. When Braithwaite locates Fauset’s work in this aestheticized, gendered, and queer soil, he links her to a tradition characterized as powerfully by Oscar Wilde and Sigmund Freud as by Charles Chesnutt and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. In other words, Braithwaite opens up Fauset’s work by locating her with

respect to late-nineteenth-century discourses of gender and sexuality, refusing to confine her work to the African American literary-historical archive. For Braithwaite, Fauset's "girl[ish]" vision and aesthetic sensibility exemplify the resonances of the 1890s in the 1920s and 1930s. Braithwaite, who named his children after Keats and Rossetti and wrote a literary biography of the Brontë family, maintained a distinct notion of periodization and of African American literary development, one that illuminates the work of writers like Countee Cullen as well as Fauset. The critical history of Fauset's work even during her lifetime suggests a shift not only away from the novel of manners to modernism, but also from the valorization of the 1890s and its sensibility to the effort to negate the power of this "tragic era" for African Americans. Simultaneously, this critical history embodies a move from an aesthetic narrative of origins to a political one. While Braithwaite's characterization of Fauset's writing seems more accurate than Locke's, Locke's interpretation eclipsed Braithwaite's and established the subsequent critical discourse on early-twentieth-century African American literature.

Despite Locke's efforts to characterize Fauset's work as retrograde, literary representations migrate effortlessly across temporal boundaries, causing us to question the boundaries of the period Locke and others wished to define as stable. For Fauset, the novel as a genre charts the contours of what Bakhtin calls an "inconclusive present" ("Epic and Novel" 27), forcing the reader to acknowledge the many sites where the literary and cultural past exert a shadowy, at times almost impalpable influence upon the present. In our examination of Fauset's not-so-new Negro women and their antecedents, we glimpse a past that had only partially faded from view at the time of her writing. Jessie Fauset's heroines and the novels they occupy

illuminate the uneven development of African American women's writing from a long nineteenth century as it emerged into modernity.

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Notes

¹ As duCille has argued regarding Fauset's form, "Fauset is indeed writing neither realism nor naturalism; nor is she falling back on pure romanticism. She is interrogating old forms and inventing something new" (100). While duCille, whose work remains some of the best on Fauset, confines her argument to Fauset's exploration of tropes of love, romance, and marriage, Kuenz makes a similar argument about *There Is Confusion*, writing that "Fauset's much derided style is the key to her project" (90). Focusing on moments of strained credulity in Fauset's narrative of marriage, Kuenz concludes that the "family and romance plot produces radical and unbelievable moments of abdication or incoherence which must be managed or covered over in the text" (91).

² See also Tomlinson, who explores the role of consumer culture in *The Chinaberry Tree* (1931) and casts Fauset's African American middle-class characters as elite consumers as well as artisan producers.

³ Claude McKay offers another famous class- and gender-based critique, suggesting that "Miss Fauset is prim and dainty as a primrose, and her novels are quite as fastidious and precious" (qtd. in Sylvander 62).

⁴ For a description of the famous Civic Club dinner in which *There Is Confusion* was introduced by publisher Horace Liveright, see Lewis 93-94. Ironically, Liveright predicted that *There Is Confusion* would sell better than Jean Toomer's *Cane*, also brought out by Boni & Liveright (Lewis 124). Today, *Cane* is heralded as a modernist masterpiece of the Harlem Renaissance and is published in a Norton Critical teaching edition, while *There Is Confusion* is not currently in print.

⁵ Significantly, Locke did not view the Depression as a damper on the quality of literature produced during the period. As he remarked in the same essay where his comments on Fauset

appeared, “a year of material stress and depression has not adversely affected the literature of the Negro. . . . Indeed it may be the at the deepening sobriety and poise of the books that have appeared is in part due to the absence of printing press pressure before and high-pressure salesmanship after the literary event” (“Saving Grace” 225). Written ten years after the successful launch of *There Is Confusion*, this statement too could be interpreted as a jab at Fauset, given the promotional machinery that been deployed on the novel’s behalf.

⁶ See Peterson for a related argument.

⁷ In locating the difficulties of Fauset’s heroines in their family’s recent past, I dispute the argument of Carby, who claims that “unlike other female novelists, Fauset did not consider the aftermath of slavery and the failure of Reconstruction as a sufficient source of echoes and foreshadowings. . . . Fauset represented this new history [that of the emergent black middle-class] through a generational difference, a recognition figured as the need of the protagonists to revise the irrelevant history of their parents” (167). Carby claims that “Fauset of necessity had to sever the ties with the past” (167). As my reading demonstrates, the parental history of Fauset’s characters—rooted not only in Reconstruction but also in the experience of black women in public space—is fully relevant to her characters’ lives and drives much of their behavior. The sweeping narrative of the emergence of black women’s fiction that Carby charts in her work—a critical intervention in African Americanist feminist literary criticism—discourages close reading, which I believe essential to reclaiming the complexity of Fauset’s writing.

⁸ A fear of the deleterious effects of laundry haunts even the 1920s Greenwich Village women of *Plum Bun*. Angela, offered the opportunity to become Roger’s mistress, imagines a conventional marriage in which laundry is as much a defining force as reproduction: “Oh, it wasn’t decent for women to have to scrub and work and slave and bear children and sacrifice their looks and their

pretty hands—she saw her mother’s hands as they had always looked on wash day, they had a white, boiled appearance” (142). When Angela’s upstairs neighbor, Rachel, looks ahead to her prospective marriage, she emphasizes her rejection of laundry despite her embrace of other domestic tasks: “I won’t wash and iron, for that is heart-breaking work, and I want to keep myself dainty and pretty for him, so that when we do become better off he won’t have to be ashamed of me” (214).

⁹ See Gamber 97.

¹⁰On black women’s labor in the early twentieth century, see Jones. Mattie’s limited work opportunities and the manipulation she suffers at her employer’s hands accord with Jones’s description as the typical treatment of black women in domestic service. However, Jones mentions that African American women in service at least had the opportunity to resist their employers, which factory workers—the other urban employment option for black working-class women—would have lacked: “domestics had potential power over their employers because they controlled the quality of their own labor and, either individually or collectively, the supply of that labor” (133).

¹¹ Wall makes a similar argument about this section, arguing that the Murray family is “drawn from the pages of nineteenth-century fiction” (77). Wall evokes nineteenth-century novels as a way of judging Fauset’s fiction by the modernist benchmarks of contemporaneity and originality. I would suggest that such lenses limit, rather than expand, our ability to view Fauset’s work in its complexity.

¹² On the trope of the beautiful death and its prevalence in nineteenth-century culture, see Bronfen.

¹³ On the rise of spectacle lynching in early-twentieth-century American history and literature, see Goldsby.

¹⁴ On the rhetoric of female passionlessness in the nineteenth century, see Cott, who argues that the belief that women lacked sexual desires may have served many women well because it allowed them to focus on other pursuits. In this case, the older generation uses passionlessness to follow their own interests, much as Olivia participates in women's welfare work and activism as a means of securing her pass. For Teresa's generation, however, passionlessness serves as a sign of an anomie from which the heroine cannot escape.

¹⁵ As in Fauset's first novel, *There Is Confusion* (1924), middle-class African American men are cast as the protectors of their virginal, bourgeois sisters. Despite Philip Marshall's attraction to the light-skinned, declassée Maggie Ellersley, he counsels his sisters that "Maggie can go with men that my sisters can't afford to associate with" (70). The trope of fraternal protection fails in *Comedy: American Style*, as Chris cannot suppress his attraction to Marise or keep his sister in the home.

¹⁶ Smith-Rosenberg offers a similar discussion of how women diagnosed with hysteria claimed power within their households, as Teresa does: "Taking to one's bed . . . might also have functioned as a mode of passive aggression, especially in a milieu in which weakness was rewarded and in which women had since childhood been taught not to express overt aggression" (209).

¹⁷ On African American women's use of contraception during the period, see Simmons (277) and Rodrique (141). As Rodrique argues, contraception was part of a conscious economic strategy for many early-twentieth-century African American families. The majority of families in Fauset's novels are modestly sized, and Nick and Marise, the middle-class singletons in *Comedy*:

American Style, suggest African American couples' efforts to limit family size even earlier than the 1920s.