QUIET REVISIONISTS:
IDENTITY RECONCILIATION AND THE TROPE OF MARRIAGE IN THE
FICTION OF DOROTHY WEST AND NELLA LARSEN

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By

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To my maternal grandmother, Pauline Beach Bullock, the epitome of elegance, dignity, and wisdom. Her support was beyond measure. She encouraged educational advancement, taught me the importance of forgiveness, and gave me the gift of love.

To my paternal grandmother, Pearl Mullins Miles, who introduced me to my purpose. She embraced me in the arms of family and community, of faith and confidence. Our conversations are forever imprinted on my heart.

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INTRODUCTION
Fragments and Intersections: The Black Middle Class Woman

“Race, class, and gender represent the three systems of oppression that most heavily affect African-American women.”

Patricia Hill Collins, “Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment”

The middle class identity of the African American woman is complicated by the intersectionality of race, class, and gender. Economic stability cannot protect her from society’s marginalization of black womanhood. Her ability to access racially specific white spaces creates a persistent awareness of her social and political realities. Regardless of her income level, she is positioned at the bottom of the social order, objectified by white patriarchy and displaced by her equally disempowered black male counterparts. Because of the history of racism in the United States, economic status does not alleviate black middle class women from enduring the debilitating and self conflicting images of black womanhood. However, black middle class women attempt to confront the misrepresentations of identity, often constructed against the bourgeois image of white female virtue and gentility. Stereotypes and misrepresentations have encouraged middle class black women’s desires for social legitimacy and value by embracing bourgeois ideals and standards. Responding to stereotypes and misrepresentations, middle class black women desire social legitimacy and value and
embrace bourgeois ideals and standards in order to rehabilitate society’s perception of black women.

Ann duCille considers the social position and representation of black women in her study, *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women’s Fiction* (1993). Tracing the literary history of the African American woman’s novel in terms of the institution of marriage, duCille suggests that at the center of the black woman’s novel are gender issues—critiques of marriage and family, and representations of feminine virtue struggling for control “against the forces of patriarchal (dis)order” (4). duCille explores how these depictions and critiques of marriage are considered through the lens of race, gender, and class. In thesis paper, I will consider Ann duCille’s coupling theme in order to explore the convention of marriage as a method in reconstructing black womanhood and reconciling the fragmented layers of identity for black middle class women.

**Constructing a Black Middle Class**

Bart Landry explains that there is no concrete definition or assignment of the black middle class. In his book, *The New Black Middle Class* (1988), Landry illustrates characteristics, signifiers, and the history connecting this group. The complicated social position for middle class African Americans was not solely based on income level; thus, they are not comparable to middle class white Americans. Landry begins by explaining the difference between status and class designations. He argues that status is a subjective and communal designation, and class has an objective function in
relation to economic standing. Landry’s specifications are important, because historically, African Americans were not afforded the citizenship essential for class distinction and self definition. Landry contends that the early black middle class, or the “old black elite,” consisted of mulattoes from emancipation in 1865 to 1915. Landry writes, “Membership in the early black elite depended less on economic means or occupation than on such characteristics as family background, particularly white ancestry, skin color, and manners and morals patterned after middle and upper-class whites” (Landry 29). Thus, as he proffers, economic standing for African Americans was related to whiteness. Furthermore, the plantation offered status divisions based upon specialized work or ability, separating enslaved persons working in the house from the enslaved working in the field. Landry argues that the “new black elite” emerged after the old mulatto elite group lost connection with white society in early twentieth century. The new members of the elite began obtaining entrepreneurial occupations that “[served] the black community exclusively” (37-38), providing their services to the blacks restricted from white-owned establishments during that time period. By the 1960s, the new members of the black elite were products of the Civil Rights Movement, who had benefitted from equality initiatives such as Brown v. Board of Education, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and affirmative action.

Famed sociologist Andrew Billingsley provides a socioeconomic location for America’s black middle class in his book, Black Families in White America (1968). He constructs a chart to reflect social status and social class within the black community.
Billingsley begins with the upper classes, old and new. He contends that the “old,” a product of early twentieth century, consists of “families headed by men and women whose parents before them were upper or middle class. The families of negro judges, physicians, dentists, high government officials, educated ministers of large congregations, college presidents, and wealthy businessmen, particularly insurance company business men, are prominent among the old upper class” (Billingsley 124). Benefiting from the advantages of their parents and grandparents, their ancestors were either free or privileged slaves, “house slaves or artisans instead of field slaves” (124) who inherited money or property or were educated by their masters. This is not to suggest that all enslaved African Americans with access to personal spaces and the lives of white Americans benefitted, rather, this example shows how the distribution of wealth and resources is fundamentally influenced by race, class, and gender. The “new” upper class, a product of mid-twentieth century, is likely to have advanced in one generation due to a “large measure to their own talent and good fortune” (125). These are the celebrities, the entertainers, and the athletes who become both influential and highly prestigious within the community. Gamblers and other hustlers are considered members of this group, yet Billingsley admits, “the hustlers are only a small segment of the upper class” (125). In other words, money is not the only indicator of class status for African Americans.

More recently, the black middle class has a similar legacy to the new upper class families; however, they consist of “families headed by persons in minor
professions which require college education but do not rank in prestige and status with the major old line professions” (131). They are teachers, social workers, accountants, technicians, attorneys who have not yet established themselves, and ministers of small congregations. These occupations, requiring education and specialized training, administered and serviced the black community. The distinction between the black upper class and the black middle class is rather fluid, and Billingsley makes an interesting assertion. He contends that “for many purposes the two groups may be viewed as one. Since the majority of Negro families are considerably lower in social status than these two groups, one tends sometimes to lump both of them together” (132). I agree with Billingsley’s contention. Often times, the larger society fails to either acknowledge or emphasize black progress and mobility. Clouded by media representations of the black community as impoverished and disadvantaged, some members of American society are unaware of black affluence. While poverty afflicts many members of black America, the black middle class provides an alternative picture to the commercialization of these harsh realities. Therefore, for all of these reasons, it is appropriate to consider the terms black middle class, black elite, and black bourgeoisie as interchangeable identifiers. For the purpose of this thesis, I will refer to all three.

Bart Landry’s defining exploration forces him to consider a very provocative and underlining question: “How did middle-class blacks cope with the dilemma of their position in American society?” (57) The black community, but the black middle
class specifically, is faced with a dilemma, one that both questions and disrupts their existence in American society. W.E.B. DuBois’ groundbreaking sociological work, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), addresses the psychological phenomenon of double consciousness in the African American community. The black middle class is a personification of this concept. DuBois’ considers double consciousness a sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness—An American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, to unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, --this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost” (DuBois 695).

The experience of double consciousness is the experience of perpetual self-consciousness. Black Americans are required to consider themselves through the lens of the larger society, and they are conscious representatives of ‘one dark body.’ The struggle to reconcile and merge ideals from both ends of their binary duality is the struggle to reconstruct and reestablish a cohesive and functional self perspective. Following this powerful assertion, DuBois maintains that “he would not Africanize America for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach
his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world” (696). Here, DuBois acknowledges the concern for the preservation of the national identity, but he is also aware of the detrimental influence American society can have on African American culture. He implores African Americans to preserve their own communal identity. Landry identifies this complex dilemma with regards to members of the black bourgeoisie residing in northern cities prior to the Civil Rights Movement. No longer confined to the violent limitations and restrictions of Jim Crow in post-integration, middle class blacks integrated white spaces. Landry argues that the black middle class had a fixed, subordinate status because of their race, but they were free to compete within educational settings earning degrees, and professional settings practicing medicine or law (58).

Struggling day to day for progressive entrance into white society while still functioning as members of the black community, middle class blacks straddle the margins of acceptability and respectability. They are faced with two options: segregate or integrate, and both segregation and integration maintain destructive effects to their social and self-consciousness. I will consider double consciousness with regards to black womanhood as well as how black women writers and their subjects utilize their middle class experience to emancipate themselves from marginalization and misrepresentation.
Constructing the Black Female Identity

In their attempt to fasten together the fragments of their identity, middle class black women employ the institution of marriage as a means to reconstruct their image within American culture and remove themselves from the margins. In *The Coupling Convention*, Ann duCille considers the trope of marriage and the coupling theme a strategy writers use to (re)construct the black feminine ego and a black feminist consciousness (duCille, 4). She argues that the novels seek to “reclaim and resexualize the black female body” (4). Like duCille, I contend that black women writers have expelled various restorative meanings behind the trope of marriage within their works. Unlike duCille, I argue that black women writers’ efforts to revise black womanhood is analogous to black middle class women’s attempt to situate their lives within American middle class life and the African American community. As a result, black middle class women embrace bourgeois American values and perceptions of womanhood to universalize and to legitimize themselves within society. Harlem Renaissance writers Dorothy West and Nella Larsen illustrate this provocative concept within their respective works by exploring the social ramifications surrounding middle class black women. Within their novels, the trope of marriage functions as a unique mechanism to address double consciousness and identity formation.

Dorothy West writes her first novel, *The Living Is Easy* (1948), depicting Cleo, a poor Southern migrant who transitions North for opportunities including social advancement. Her means for social advancement primarily resides in her marriage to
Bart Judson, a character West models after her own father (Jones 119). Cleo’s essential goal is to gain entrance in Boston’s exclusive black middle class community. A schemer and manipulator, Cleo devises a plan to move into the Irish neighborhood of Brookline. In doing so, she must open the house to boarders in order to assist in household expenses and to supplement her husband’s income, subtracting money on the side for herself. She decides to persuade, misleadingly, her sisters to leave their husbands and live with her in Boston. Cleo’s attempt to secure middle class life leaves her overcome with self hatred and a fragmented identity.

In her last novel, *The Wedding* (1995), West situates her domestic discussion around Shelby, a young woman approaching marriage to a white jazz musician. Shelby’s indecisiveness with regards to her impending wedding to Meade reflects the duality she experiences within black and white spaces. Her decision is further complicated when she considers the unions of her parents and grandparents, whose marriages are reflections of misguided bourgeois ideals, marrying for appearance and social obligation rather than for love.

Nella Larsen locates her coupling conversation around the image of the tragic mulatta, a figure who represents the illegitimacy blacks endure as a result of slavery’s practices. Post-slavery, the mulatta continues to signal the ‘warring ideals’ struggling to reconcile. The daughter of a Danish mother and Negro father, Helga is the literal representative of this liminal state in Larsen’s *Quicksand* (1928). Helga exists on the margins of black elitist circles as a teacher at the historically black Naxos. However, as
she journeys toward self discovery, she relentlessly avoids destructive functions of marriage addressed in West’s *Living*. In *Passing* (1929), Larsen’s second novella, Clare elects to ‘pass’ and marry a white man in her effort to obtain social legitimacy, while Irene’s marriage affirms her social standing and assists her in her own racially dualistic performance of poise and gentility.

Ann duCille explores marriage’s function in resexualizing the black female body; however, I consider it with respect to identity formation and self perception. My aim is to identify the different strategies of the marriage convention in West and Larsen’s work. For some characters, marriage is debilitating and destructive, while at other times, the trope seeks to emancipate them from bourgeois constraints, and elevate their position in society, enabling them to achieve citizenship and social legitimacy. Regardless of the motivations and incentives for marriage, West and Larsen employ this trope to critique the exclusivity of the black middle class, to revise the gender constructions restricting black womanhood, and to resolve the conflict of double consciousness.
CHAPTER I

“The Eyes of Others”:

Gender Constructions and the Harlem Audience

In her study, *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire* (1992), Claudia Tate contends that black women’s misrepresentation was directly linked to their service in the domestic space as housekeepers, maids, and as wet nurses for their owner’s offspring. Primarily, these constructions were established during slavery and were based from black women’s exploited labor and sexuality. As a result, the mammy image emerges. And, as media representations developed, the conflicted image of the loyal and robust black female servant was cemented in the minds of mainstream America. Additionally, the objectification of black women’s bodies furthered the misconception of African American womanhood. As chattel, they were regarded much like livestock: their primary function to breed and reproduce, their monetary value weighed heavily on this capability. Furthermore, as property, slaveholders claimed ownership over every facet of their lives. For example, black women endured rape and other sexual violations. While society struggled to preserve the very limited social status of white womanhood, the falsification of black womanhood stood in shadowy juxtaposition against this racially imagined gender construction.

In *Pushed Back to Strength* (1993), Gloria Wade-Gayles considers her personal, and more recent, encounters with misrepresentations of black female
sexuality as a civil rights activist. She reflects, “I also remember the obscenity of the white jailers. In their eyes we were sexually talented because we were black and should be sexually available because we were black. I recalled stories my grandmother had told me about black women sleeping with white men, some of them by choice and many by force” (Gayles 145). And Pamela Peden Sanders also considers these limiting gender spheres and conflicting dichotomies of black womanhood in her critical analysis of West’s *The Living Is Easy*. She, in union with Tate, describes black women’s literary stereotyping as two-fold: they were depicted as “‘Mammies—portly, single black women with no families of their won who serve as a combination nanny/maid to a white family –or as non-maternal, highly sexual ‘Jezebels,’ who are usually destroyed by their level of sexuality” (Sanders 436). And Sanders acknowledges the effort of the black female writer to overcome these dichotomies because of their limiting and debilitating effect on the black female identity.

As active participants in the famous Harlem Renaissance Movement, and as representatives of Locke’s New Negro, both West and Larsen were conscious of the commercial attention their work garnered within that culturally aesthetic atmosphere. In his article, “‘All Dressed Up But No Place to Go’: The Black Writer and His Audience During the Harlem Renaissance,” Charles Scruggs contemplates the dilemma the New Negro artist faced in the production of his/her work. He compares the inverse affects of appeasing two very different racial audiences, stating, “if the black writer fulfilled the expectations of the white audience, he outraged the black
audience; if he satisfied the black audience, he bored the white audience” (544).

Positioned between appealing sensationally to white America or representing a positive image of the African American community, the black artist is conflicted and completely submerged between “two warring ideals in one dark body,” to quote DuBois. James Weldon Johnson, an artist in this cultural moment, also identifies the dilemma of the artist in that some blacks didn’t agree with some of the stereotypical portrayals set forth by some Harlem Renaissance contributors. Without these illustrations, the white audience, which included patrons and publishers, would become bored because it lacked the exotic excitement that they craved. Johnson attempts to reconcile the dual conflict of the artist by suggesting that the black writer “create art and worry less about how he appeared to both black and white audiences” (544).

Scruggs continues his argument by maintaining that the Black readers’ opinion was very difficult for the black artists to grasp, encouraging the black artist’s insecurity and self-consciousness about his own community reception. Often times black artists felt more comfortable with white publishers and readers because black artists knew exactly what their white readership wanted. Unfortunately, often what white society wanted was not the reality of black culture. Scruggs concludes by deeming the black artist a cultural conservator responsible for uplifting the political consciousness of their community, a community in need of comprehension to the “grim economic realities—which had made [their] people a nation within a nation” (563). The black artist’s primary concern was to reflect the realities of racial oppression and economic hardship.
of black culture in their work, realities that strengthened, motivated, and unified the black community.

Langston Hughes also considers the dilemma of the black artist in his essay, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.” Hughes considers this artist a product of the black middle class, and explores the dualistic conflict the artist experiences in mirroring white literary production rather than honoring his own aesthetic. Hughes pictures this conflict in the image of the Racial Mountain. He writes, “But this mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America – this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible” (Hughes 55). This racial barrier, or mountain as Hughes suggests, is essentially the black artist’s struggle to maintain their identity and cultural authenticity while influenced by white standards of literary production. Intensely aware of the demand of his white audience and patrons, the artist is required to conform to the literary and artistic standards of American society. Hughes’ essay is essentially his call to the black artist. He encourages the artist to embrace the reality of his community and his culture, and in doing so, find freedom within himself.

Like the black artist in his essay, Hughes experienced the conflict of the racial mountain first hand. Perhaps the most infamous patron of the moment, Mrs. Charlotte Osgood Mason, or “Godmother” as she liked to be called, was an avid supporter of Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston. Mason encouraged them to write in a style
attractive to the white audience, a style representing blacks as primitive. Osgood’s pressure and demands presented a problem for both Hurston and Hughes. Overwhelmed by Mason’s demands, both Hurston and Hughes ultimately severed their ties with Mason after they realized how much her encouragement commercialized their work.

In compiling a collection of folkloric tales, Hurston performed as the same resistant trickster illustrated in the stories of Mules and Men. Although she was aware of her financial and academic commitment with Dr. Franz Boas and Mrs. Mason, she was also conscious of their outsider influence, and their support of the stereotypical misrepresentations of her community. In her introduction to Mules and Men, Hurston graciously acknowledges Mrs. R. Osgood Mason, referring to her as “Great Soul,” “the world’s gallant woman” (4). However, in her narratological approach, Hurston resists Mason’s insistence that she locate only “primitivism” in black culture (Meisenhelder 268). Her engagement in folkloric tradition not only unveiled Mason’s threatening commodification, but also addressed the wounds of oppression and marginalization inflicted by American society.

This is social and political climate influencing West and Larsen’s literary production. The commodification of black expression within the artistic space of the Harlem Renaissance furthered the misrepresented picture of black culture created during slavery. Dorothy West responds with her own aesthetic revision. And in this revision, West becomes a quiet revolutionary.
CHAPTER II

Destruction and Emancipation:

Dorothy West’s Dual Exploration of Marriage

Like Nella Larsen, Dorothy West was member of the black middle class. As a member of this community, West wrote about what was familiar. Mirroring the central characters after her mother and father, West was well equipped to engage in first hand discussion and analysis of the black middle class values and the social condition of African Americans. Critics have considered West’s work a simple exploration of the black middle class community and lifestyle. However, West initiated an imperative examination of self denial coupled with bourgeois American aspirations.

By picturing her social and cultural discussion behind a black middle class landscape and mirroring it in the image of her economically progressive parents, West may have experienced self denial and conflicted double vision. West’s fictional constructions of real-life family experiences suggest her own self awareness and reevaluation of the effect her family and their social position had on her identity. Sharon Jones writes, “West’s parents influenced her life and writing greatly, and the fusion of folk and bourgeois aspects of her background enabled her to view the world in dualistic terms” (Jones 119). West, perhaps, employed personal experiences in order to reconcile the conflicting fragmentations of the black middle class psyche, and reveal
the connection the entire black community has to the southern region and its culture. Cleo and Bart Judson’s transition North reflects black America’s struggle to obtain wealth, success, and prosperity, but also West’s effort to reposition the essence of black culture back to the South. During the Great Migration, African Americans, searching for northern possibilities, disconnected themselves from their southern upbringings once they achieved economic stability and opportunity. Jones argues that it is elitism and materialism that has encouraged middle class blacks to deny their humble beginnings. Ultimately, West’s location of the black middle class’ southern roots enables her to resist successfully the stereotypical imaging of black people as “primitive, exotic, or other” (Jones 133). And as Jones asserts, West’s function as a revisionist becomes evident as she presents a multiplicity of perspectives within the African American cultural experience.

Alternative Womanhood and Destructive Marriage

In her illustration of Cleo Judson, West creates an unconventional woman, one who is resistant of the constraints of domestic duties and wifely expectations. In her essay, “The Feminism of Dorothy West’s ‘The Living Is Easy’: A Critique of the Limitations of the Female Sphere through Performative Gender Roles,” Pamela Paden Sanders identifies West strategic usage of Cleo as a means to revise the patriarchal gender dynamics between men and women. She asserts that Cleo is a representation of the reversal of performative gender roles. However, as Sanders argues, Cleo as woman is problematized by portraying characteristics and attributes positive to men, while the
same characteristics performed by a woman are considered “‘manipulative, domineering, and unscrupulous’” (Sanders 436). A man bestowed with these same qualities would be considered upstanding, intelligent, and clever. Ann duCille also considers Cleo’s paradigm for the gender role reversal, stating, “Cleo is trapped in the wrong body and locked into the wrong sex/gender role, as much a victim of biology and sociology” (duCille 114). Although I do not read Cleo as a transgendered spirit inhabiting the wrong body, I consider her an alternative female, an alternative necessary in the reconstruction of black womanhood. Nevertheless, West proves her function as a revisionist by complicating Cleo’s feminine persona with performative male gender roles in order to trouble submissiveness and domesticity assigned to women.

Undoubtedly, West avoids Cleo’s misrepresentation as mammy or jezebel, enabling her to resist dominant patriarchal social constructions that reduce black women to the limiting spheres of Patricia Hill Collins’s term, “matrix of domination” (Collins 31). As a child, Cleo is a free spirit, an unconventional Southern girl. She is daring, adventurous, and challenging. As an adult, her childhood innocence and desire for liberation become complicated with societal pressures and demands because, as her southern culture suggests, “the wildness of the child might turn to wantonness in the girl” (West 24). Cleo is sent North to preserve her ‘womanhood.’ Her introduction to northern culture invites an unrelenting desire for entrance into black elite circles, and a new, misguided sense of self, entangles with her old, childhood free-spirit. West
writes, “Cleo’s time, between her easy chores, was spent training her tongue to a northern twist, in learning to laugh with a minimum show of teeth, and in memorizing a new word in the dictionary every day. The things that Cleo never had been taught were how to hold her head high, how to scorn sin with men, and how to keep her left hand from knowing what her right hand was doing” (West 25). In her journey toward northern socialization, Cleo develops a need for legitimacy, becoming intensely aware of the social disadvantages of her southern upbringing as a sharecropper’s daughter.

Initially, marriage is a necessity for Cleo as her means for survival and resistance to the violating advances of Miss Boorum’s nephew. West writes, “He, too, had heard about Negroes. He had heard mostly about Negro women, and the information was correct. Desire was growing in his loins and there was nothing he could do to stop it. All he could do was try to keep it from spreading to his heart” (29). Here, West acknowledges the debilitating jezebel stereotype and its imposition on black female representation. Marriage solves this dilemma, a dilemma infringing upon Cleo selfhood. Cleo considers, “The minds of men shouted whore as she passed, because they knew she was not. The women’s thoughts hurled Miss White Lady at her because they could not bear to admit that she could walk with dignity and still be colored” (99). Black womanhood’s limiting construction and white womanhood’s signifying purity and validity invade Cleo’s consciousness. Like many black women writers, West provides her black female revision a dignified walk of assurance and confidence, revamping the gender constructions impeding her self perception.
Cleo’s response to marriage is explicit, and she is direct in her intentions behind the union, “When she found herself in the marriage bed, she let him know straightaway that she had no intention of renouncing her maidenhood for one man if she had married to preserve it from another” (West 35). From this moment, Cleo and Bart Judson’s marriage is unconventional, as Cleo does not marry Bart for love, intimacy, and companionship. For the Judsons, marriage functions as an unconventional necessity in Cleo’s identity reconciliation and West’s quiet revision of black women, allowing West to engage in her own middle class black female voice and inward perception. Because it is a necessity for advancement and redefinition, Cleo is resentful of marriage, believing the institution to be “the same thing as being a man’s slave” (71). In No Crystal Stair (1997), Gayles contends that Cleo accepts the marriage institution as a cultural obligation; however, she “attempts to make the best of a necessary evil: she functions in the role of wife, but she uses that role to chart her own destiny and the destiny of her daughter” (Gayles 141). She is unable to exhibit emotion and affection for her other half. Instead, she refuses to consider herself a helpmate, but rather a rival to Mr. Judson’s role as the male provider. Ironically, Cleo is resentful of Mr. Judson’s means of income, the same income she employs to disguise her common background. Although she attempts to embody dignity and assuredness, she is subconsciously overcome by self hatred, looking down on fellow Southern immigrants and their “ordinary” dialectic drawl, the same drawl she maintained in girlhood.
Bart Judson reinforces Cleo’s self denial and, as Sharon Jones argues, the black middle class’ disconnect from their southern heritage. Although he produces and performs alongside Boston’s socially prestigious and financially liberated African American community, his humble beginnings situate him on the outside of black elite circles. Nonetheless, Bart’s hardworking and self made attainment of wealth demonstrates the bourgeois principles moving and commanding American society. Born a slave, his beginnings and his wealth are founded on an industry of labor. West writes, “He took his first step out of bondage that night, and walked without faltering straight to the shining object his mother held out to him. It was a piece of silver money that she had found the year before. She closed his tiny fist over it, and counseled him to treasure it, for money was the measure of independence” (57). Bart’s foundation is based upon capitalistic notions, but those same notions encourage self autonomy, and release him from socioeconomic oppression. As a result, Bart embraces patriarchal male gender constructions, stating “‘you know it’s my pride to be a good provider’” (85). He attempts to be a loving husband, and he successfully is a loving father, valuing his role as breadwinner.

Cleo and Bart Judson’s opposing marriage perspective becomes plainly obvious in a key bedroom scene. Cleo is painfully disgusted with sharing her marital quarters with her husband. Justifying her lack of intimacy, she subconsciously acknowledges, “He was not a companion. He was a good provider” (146). However, Bart counters with his own perspective on marriage. He expresses, “A man has to talk to his wife. A
man has to trust his wife or he’s lost. God joined a man and woman together. If they go flying off in different directions, they might as well never have married. You must work with me, Cleo” (147). Bart implores Cleo to maintain traditional spousal duties, to submit, trust and honor him as her husband. He encourages her to function as his better half. The thought is deafening to Cleo, and she continues to regard wifely submission as enslavement. Furthermore, Cleo is not a woman deserving of her husband’s trust. Her ability to manipulate and persuade becomes evident as she fabricates the cost of rent for the boarding house she pressures Judson to purchase. Despite Sanders’ claim, it is difficult to read Cleo as a woman performing positive male gender roles. In this, her initial manipulation, Cleo is a social climber possessing a dangerous desire to gain entrance in the bourgeois community.

As Cleo struggles desperately for entrance into Boston’s exclusive black community through the manipulation of her sisters, the marriage “arrangement” Cleo has maintained with Mr. Judson begins to decay at a rapid rate. Bart becomes a marginalized member of his own household, even though his income helps to sustain what is left of the Judson home. When Bart discusses death, Cleo is forced to consider life without him, “His sisters and the children were within call, but the completeness she had felt all day slowly began to crumble away until Mr. Judson returned to the house, where she had no place for him, to restore it.” (231). Here Cleo, the resistant, alternative, self denying female, becomes silently aware of her husband’s purpose. For a moment, she begins to understand the impact her union with Bart has had on her life
and her fragmented identity. It has provided her with safety and security, validation and legitimacy, ideals essential to obtaining entrance and class stratification.

In illustrating Cleo and Mr. Judson’s dynamic, West does not deem marriage the only outlet for black middle class women, nor does she function as an advocate for the institution. Ultimately, through the character of Cleo, West explores negative approaches to the marriage convention, and its destruction on middle class women disconnected with themselves and their heritage. For Cleo, marriage is a vehicle for entrance and preservation. However, in the midst of her fragmented identity and self denial, it aids in her downfall and self destruction. As she imposes her marital philosophy on her family and friends, she encourages in the destruction of their own marriages.

When considering Cleo’s influence on her sisters’ unions, duCille asserts, “She rules the weaker family members precisely because they are weak and to a certain extent need her strength. They feed on her vitality; she thrives on their foibles” (duCille 114). Indeed, Cleo and her sisters share an inverse dependency. Even as a child, Cleo’s strength is located in her liberated and unconventional makeup. She is daring and takes risks, while her sisters choose to safely accept their social condition. Unlike their sister, Charity, Lily, and Serena are emotionally fragile and easy to persuade, revealing their own identity fragmentation.

Cleo’s conflict with men is evident in her indirect interaction with her brother-in-laws. As males, they are Cleo’s competition, and as Southerners, they are the root of
her self denial. They impede Cleo’s effort to construct the ideal residence, female headed and female centered household of “easy living” (West 235). As males, they hold little value in Cleo’s journey toward validation and social prestige, and unlike Mr. Judson, they are unable to provide the financial stability required for entrance. Ultimately, Cleo must replace her brothers-in-law as providers and care-givers to her unsuspecting sisters, a role she has tried desperately to attain in her own union. duCille states, “West’s portrait is not simply that of a matriarch. Cleo would be king, not mother” (144). Within the female centered household she has manipulated, Cleo freely performs the patriarchal role as king or ruler, and is enabled to achieve self autonomy.

Ridding her sisters of their marital commitments, Cleo further encourages their decay and destruction. Without husbands and the security of marriage, her sisters are overwhelmed with insecurity and self loss. Charity explains,

‘It ain’t just the loving in the night. That part’s the heaven part, like nothing on earth. But there’s the living part that’s maybe harder to do without. It’s the sight of your man across the table, the sound of him washing his face in the basin; it’s hearing your child call him ‘Daddy,’ knowing ‘twas him put her in your body; it’s watching him turn in his sleep on Sunday morning’ (177).

Charity considers marriage and motherhood “easy living,” as opposed to social position and social legitimacy. However, Charity’s self awareness is evident. Although she asserts, “You married money. I married love” (177), she locates value in her
married. Charity’s sense of self is reinforced by the stability marriage provides.
Without it, Charity has little purpose, and she responds to her instability and insecurity
by over-eating. West is clearly critical of Cleo’s engagement in marriage, but she is
also critical of Charity’s as well. For both women, both avenues are self destructive.

Cleo’s continued manipulation and her sister’s absence begin to affect the
husbands’ self perception. They are dependent on their wives. Charity’s Ben declares,
“You think I wasn’t half a man the way she messes in my family business” (159) while
Lily’s Victor, aggravated by his color consciousness, internalizes his wife’s “white
skin” (182). Unlike Bart, the men cannot stomach Cleo’s emasculation. What they
have already endured has sought to destroy not only their marriages, but what is left of
their fragmented identities.

Cleo’s imposing marital ideals also influence the Duchess’s marriage to
Simeon Binney. She functions as matchmaker to their union, encouraging both parties
to marry for the benefit of themselves. For the Duchess, marriage provides her with the
respectable Binney name and the social legitimacy she lacks as the illegitimate
daughter of a white Bostonian socialite. In her attempt to reconcile her fragmentation,
the Duchess finds solace in religion. Furthermore, in managing a gambling house, the
Duchess is provided a sort of back door entrance into Boston’s black elite circles. She
admits, “These were the men who would make their wives receive me in return for my
silence concerning their activities here” (115).
Simeon, on the other hand, agrees to marriage in order to sustain finances for his depleting paper, The Clarion. Publication of his paper via marriage to the Duchess is Simeon’s attempt to reconcile the fragments of his double consciousness. Brought up within the black elite circle and American bourgeois standards, the Binneys “represented the best in the colored race,” behaving as if they were white (120). Simeon excelled in white spaces, but he was constantly reminded of his inequality. West writes, “He was their charge, whom they were honour-bound to treat with charity. They never knew whether they liked him or not. They only knew it was some what of a bother to be with him, for the feelings of a colored boy had to be coddled” (125). Simeon feels “amused contempt and pity” from his white counterparts, and a huge resentment surfaces. He responds by developing a disdain for whites and establishes a commitment to the concerns of the black community, publishing an activist newspaper. Simeon’s conflict with Boston’s racialized society ignites his race consciousness. As Jones contends, “Simeon serves as the embodiment of the proletarian aesthetic in The Living Is Easy through his egalitarian views” (Jones 138). The same young boys who coddled him, reminding him of his inequalities, disrupt his five-year-old innocence, inquiring whether or not the brown on his hand comes off. Simeon is eternally marked by this childhood memory, and for the rest of his life he is aware of his difference. Marriage and the Duchess’ money indirectly alleviate Simeon’s conflicting duality. Ultimately, Simeon’s inability to love and his
consumption of the Duchess assets lead to the Duchess prevailing decay, and subsequent death.

Althea Binney’s union with Cole Hartnett is a direct reflection of West’s effort to satirize black middle class lifestyle and values. Like her brother, Althea represents the “best of the race,” adorning the Binney name and elite blood line. And much like the Binneys, Cole’s ancestry and family background admitted him into black Bostonian society, as “the Hartnetts had been freemen for five generation, and no one of them in those hundred years had been born or schooled outside of Boston” (111). In marriage, Althea functions as a trophy wife, an accessory to Cole bourgeois performance of gentility and refinement. Although his family’s wealth is lost, Cole is an idealized man in Bostonian society. While Bart Judson is Cleo’s involuntary competitor unable to perform as her marital companion, Cole is Cleo’s male counterpart. West constructs Cole and Cleo as foils, evident the rearrangement of their names. By performing male gender roles, Cleo deconstructs Cole’s idealistic representation of male patriarchy. Her encouragement and support of bourgeois ideals is evident in her encouragement and intrusion in Althea’s union to Cole, and she is indirectly responsible for the destruction of their marriage.

Certainly, Cleo can be considered a revolutionary female heroine and a product of West’s revisionist efforts. Through Cleo, West demands society’s reconceptualization of male/female dynamics, but furthermore, through her own personal middle class lens and duality, West requires her mainstream audience to
trouble the image of African American women. Cleo’s perspective on marriage as a means for social validity, legitimacy and entrance reveals West’s commentary and critique of black middle class values. In the midst of her representation, Cleo possesses an urgent and severe desire to elevate her Bostonian social standing. She is entangled in contradiction, as she depends on Mr. Judson’s southern connectivity and patriarchal function as the family’s financial ‘provider.’ Ultimately, Cleo’s employment of marriage and her irreconciled double vision assists not only in the destruction of her own marriage, but also the marriages around her. Cleo’s destructive approach to marriage and her inverse performance of male gender roles function as West’s quiet revision to the constructions of black womanhood.

Love and Emancipation: Marrying to Reconcile

West’s *The Wedding* (1995) illustrates a different picture from Cleo’s ‘alternative’ woman. However, West continues to critique the black middle class’ disconnect from the South, and to revise black womanhood and resolve the conflict double consciousness through the marriage convention. Shelby Coles initiates West’s revision by exhibiting the quintessential female characteristics, as she is pictured in the reflection of white womanhood, “the image of Gram…with rose-pink skin, golden hair, and dusk-blue eyes” (West 4). By illustrating Shelby in this light, West deconstructs the restrictive bourgeois constructions of womanhood by representing those characteristics and ideals in the image of an African American woman.
When vacationing on the island’s Oval, the small community of affluent African Americans, Shelby Cole has always been the most eligible and sought after young lady. In the summer of 1953, Shelby is very much at the center, and her approaching marriage to Meade, a white jazz musician, awakens the same marriage and identity based themes discussed in *The Living Is Easy*. Shelby’s reluctance to marry reflects her double consciousness, as she considers her family and her community’s perspective on her marriage to a white man. Marriage to a poor musician could disrupt her affluent status and position on the elitist Oval. Additionally, Shelby considers the racism and discrimination she will endure once married to a white man, especially when Meade’s family refuses to attend the highly anticipated event. Shelby’s duality is evident again and she is forced to consider herself through the eyes of her white in-laws. Similar to Cleo in *Living*, Shelby’s marriage dilemma is the novel’s nucleus. However, Shelby’s marital perspective does not seek to destroy the marriages of others around her; rather, Shelby’s decision to marry for love reflects the reconciliation process the Coles’ family undergoes in piecing together the fragments of their collective familial identity.

Similar to *The Living Is Easy*, West’s middle class commentary reconnects black middle class northerners to their southern roots and reinforces the need for a strong African American identity. However, West feared that her work’s bourgeois centered discourse would be misinterpreted as unauthentic and
regressive in the midst of the Black Nationalist Movement and its call for black liberation against “social, political, and economic oppression” (Jones 118). As a result, West deferred the publication of *The Wedding*. West’s fear of misinterpretation and community backlash reflects her double consciousness and identity conflict as a member of the black middle class questioning the black community’s reception of her literary expression. By engaging in a bourgeois American discourse during that sociopolitical period, West undoubtedly performs as a quiet revisionist. She writes to reconnect the African American community to their southern past and critiques bourgeois notions despite nationalistic perceptions of the black aesthetic.

West’s effort to reconnect the black middle class to their folk heritage is evident in her consideration of the Coles’s familial past. Shelby’s marriage dilemma is inherited. For generations, marriage decisions have problematically influenced the family’s collective identity, beginning with Shelby’s maternal grandparents, Josephine and Hannibal. Josephine functions to preserve her mother’s southern memory of aristocracy and social value. The daughter of Colonel Lance Shelby, Gram maintains her self-worth in the family’s heritage of grandeur and pride lost in the ruins of the Civil War, and clings to the idea of passing this legacy on to her daughter. Josephine is born into the expectation of perpetuating this legacy. With broken the southern economy and unavailability of southern aristocratic men, Josephine is threatened by spinsterhood and isolation.
As a result, Josephine responds hastily and desperately in accepting Hannibal’s marriage proposal. Like Josephine, Hannibal is the product of his mother’s expectations. He is able to receive educational opportunities and edification unattainable to his mother, once formally enslaved. Melisse’s expectations of her son reflect the community’s collective desire for racial uplift, and Hannibal embraces the social responsibility he has to his mother and his community. Upon his mother’s death, Hannibal proposes to Josephine out of impulse. However, his proposal is also a reflection of his double vision. West writes,

> Half of it a letter of reference, stating his age, in case it was forgotten, his state of health, excellent, his occupation, his present salary, his chances of improving that salary, and the other half his solemn avowal of his unworthiness to woo so fair a lady, plus his fervent assertion that the whole of his life depended on her answer (41).

Hannibal is a newly educated black man, whose accomplishments provide him with a false sense of legitimacy against bourgeois standards of success. Although the union of Josephine and Hannibal is based on a loss and a lack of social legitimacy, it is their racial difference that causes its decay. Jones explains that, “Hannibal and Josephine’s union represents a marriage of the folk and the bourgeois class, as he provides her with the economic security” (141). Although of Hannibal provides Josephine with financial security, Josephine becomes socially
and physically disabled by her husband’s racial difference. West writes, “Josephine, who had made herself his equal in bed, from that same bed now acted like his better” (47). In order to preserve his sense of self, Hannibal detaches himself from his wife and mother-in-laws’ social fears, and focuses intensely on professional development and his cultural responsibility to progress his race. As professor, and then president of a black institution, Hannibal reflects DuBois’ Talented Tenth notion, functioning a member of the select ten percent capable of “[guiding] the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races” (DuBois 33). Hannibal delves into his own accomplishments as a means to preserve his sense of self from the ignorant grasps of Josephine and Gram, who are “left with the bitter legacy of living colored” (West 49).

Like Hannibal, Shelby’s maternal grandfather, Isaac, is the product of communal expectations for success and racial progress. Isaac is encouraged and motivated by his mother and father who are both products of miscegenation and racial oppression.

That would be the beginning of the Coles family line. They were a strange mix, maybe, one a self-appointed preacher and the other a washerwoman, one with a father he barely knew, the other with a father he called Old Sir. Both were illiterate and uniformed, their intelligence never having been tested, but the wan was the man’s
inspiration because of her cleanliness, and the man was the
woman’s inspiration because of his godliness (123).

West’s illustration of Isaac’s parents, and literary translation of the phrase
‘cleanliness is next to godliness,’ reflects her encouragement of black middle class
to reconnect their to southern roots and the foundation of their African American
identity.

Desiring both success and prosperity, Isaac fails to engage in marriage in
the same fashion as his parents. Instead, he marries a young schoolteacher, “fair
skinned, graceful, and from an impeachable family” (153), to satisfy his obligation
to bourgeois ideals and appearances. Much like Althea Binney, the school teacher
is a trophy wife, a social accessory to Isaac’s acceptance of bourgeois standards.
The schoolteacher answers to the same kind of social obligation as her husband.
However, she throws herself in her own public and professional agenda, crossing
the racial barrier of the club movements and developing her own franchise as a
slum lord. Isaac and the schoolteacher maintain an inverse relationship reflected in
their individual professions. Isaac is overwhelmed in his work to heal those
afflicted by their oppressive and debilitating living conditions, while his wife
becomes wealthy and locates monetary value in the continued mental and physical
oppression of her tenants. Their marriage remains on unequal footing until the
very end. Isaac alleviates the schoolteacher’s loneliness and displacement of self

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worth, but he must die in order to reconcile their marriage, and subsequently, the
fragments of their identity.

Shelby is marked by the misguided unions of her maternal and paternal
grandparents; however, she inherits directly the marital apprehension of her
mother and father. Corrine’s promise of marriage is essential to Gram, who asserts
influence over her granddaughter, fashioning Corrine in the picture of white
womanhood. “Corrine walked in virtue, but everything in her walk, and her voice,
and in her eyes was a promise of pleasure to come” (108). Gram hopes her
influence will salvage the racial and social stain she experiences and relegate
her position in society. West’s construction of Corinne is, again, her quiet
resistance against the binary gender construction black women endure. Ultimately,
Gram’s racial misgivings influence Corrine’s marital perspective, reflecting
West’s black middle class critique. “While she knew that Corinne could never
marry white, she allowed herself to hope against hope that she’d never marry
colored either” (107) For Gram, colored is more than just skin pigmentation and
‘racial biology.’ Colored is marked by class and social implications. As a result,
Gram actively asserts her influence over her granddaughter’s companions. Corrine
subconsciously resists Gram’s martial influence, and is innately attracted to the
‘colored’ men her grandmother so desperately wants her to avoid. Liz concludes,
“I was following my heart and marrying a dark man, something she herself never
had the guts to do, and never will…But I can’t blame her—she had Gram and her
Clark is aware that he has not provided a positive example of a healthy and functional marriage for his daughter. He understands his own familial legacy of disconnect and fragmentation, more importantly, he realizes that Shelby’s decision to marry for love can reconcile the Cole family’s collective identity. Nevertheless,
Clark fears that Shelby has embraced the same bourgeois obligations of appearance which he and Corrine have fallen victim.

Although they are not a couple in the novel, Rachel and Lute’s conception of marriage is heavily position in the need for social validity. Rachel and Lute are outsiders to the exclusivity of the Oval’s black elite because of their complexion and familial background. They remain moved and influenced by bourgeois values due their close connectivity to that culture and way of life. Rachel experiences the pampering and privilege of the bourgeois lifestyle on her yearly two-week trips with Clark. Like Josephine, spinsterhood is impending, and Rachel is confronted with her own marriage dilemma. She writes, “I need a wife’s sense of security” (190). Although she is situated on the outside of the exclusive black middle class circles, she still regards marriage as a social necessity, locating her own sense of value in its achievement. Lute McNeil has endured biological illegitimacy and a fatherless upbringing. His marriage to a series of white women reflects his own double consciousness. He marries them in order to give his children the paternal legitimacy he lacks. Lute locates his value in social acceptance. Marrying Shelby would provide Lute admittance into the elite circles inaccessible to him because of his humble beginnings and lack of education.

As the novel’s nucleus, Shelby Coles embodies her supporting characters’ social philosophies and desires. Unlike Cleo, Shelby functions to restore their conflicted sense of self. Her marriage perspective, that is her decision to marry for
love, does not destroy and decay the marriages surrounding her; rather, it revitalizes them and reconciles the double vision she has inherited. Although her fear of social and communal rejection deferred the completion and subsequent publication of the novel, *The Wedding* still functions as West’s longing for black progress and productivity and her desire to preserve the community’s collective identity.
Chapter III

Black, White, and the Grey of Double Consciousness:
Nella Larsen Interrogates Identity, Integration and Isolation

While Dorothy West reveals the destructive and emancipating affects of marriage on the fragmented identity of black middle class women, Nella Larsen engages in a similar discourse; however, she interrogates the psychology of marriage and identity, inviting her readers to survey the psychological scars of integration and isolation. Upon completing her novellas, Larsen received acclaim for her complex discourse on issues of marginality and cultural dualism (Wall 97). Harlem Renaissance contemporaries, like Claude McKay and Jean Toomer, praised Larsen for her strategic ability to engage and illustrate the frustrated psyche of double consciousness. *Quicksand*, Larsen’s first novella, introduces American literature and culture to the disruptive and internal conflict of black women, or as Cheryl Wall puts it, “the psychic dilemmas confronting certain black women,” and Wall asserts that Larsen designs her black female characters as “atypical from the extreme (97).” Marked by their appearance, education and social class, their literary representation serves as Larsen’s initiating resistance of gender constructions.
Helga Crane is indeed atypical from the norm, and as readers, we are given more than a first person narration of the black woman’s social dilemma. Instead of just reading dialogue, we read Helga’s internal and personal thoughts, the space where she is the most vulnerable, and ironically, the most pure. Larsen is innovative, as one of the first to situate her audience inside the mind of a black woman.

The child of a Danish mother and African American father, Helga’s biracial ethnicity results in her identity conflict. As Helga confronts three different marriage prospects, her dilemma becomes even more apparent. While in Naxos, a historically black institution Larsen models after Tuskegee Institute (Wall 98), Helga engages in voluntary isolation as a faculty member on the margins of the institution’s inner circle. Naxos reflects the exclusivity and elitism of the black middle class. Jacquelyn McLendon asserts that “[Helga’s] complaints about Naxos are, in effect, her complaints about society, and even though much of what Helga suffers is a result of her race and gender, Larsen demonstrates the ways bourgeois class values compound her problems…at Naxos she is subjected to the ‘paring process,’ as are all members of her class” (McLendon 77). Larsen’s voice and social perspective resonate through Helga’s discontent with the Naxos way of life. In the midst of her own duality conflicts, Helga considers Naxos “a machine,” a space “in the black belt, exemplification of the white man’s magnanimity, refutation of the black man’s inefficiency” (Larsen 4). Ironically, Helga criticizes
Naxos’ benefits from white patronage, its mirroring of bourgeois social standards, and its political complacency.

James Vayle is the personification of the institution and its ideals. This is evident as James rationalizes his social perspective, declaring,

If all Negroes would only take a leaf out of the book of Naxos and conduct themselves in the manner of the Naxos products, there would be no race problem, because Naxos Negroes knew what is expected of them (Larsen 3).

Wall argues that Larsen employs Dubois’ veil metaphor in James’ surname to further illustrate the institutions “shrouded” and masked social representation.

Vayle’s bourgeois family background reminds Helga of her social and biological illegitimacy. “Her own lack of family disconcerted them…Negro society, she had learned, was as complicated and as rigid in its ramifications as the highest strata of white society. If you couldn’t prove your ancestry and connections, you were tolerated, but you didn’t ‘belong’” (8). Larsen locates James Vayle at the center of Helga’s identity conflict. Vayle reminds Helga of her difference and what she lacks, reinforcing her duality. Helga’s prospective marriage to James Vayle is synonymous with Simeon Binney’s childhood race consciousness and perpetually conflicted double consciousness. By marrying James Vayle, Helga would forever feel the “amused contempt and pity” her duality and her inability to attain social legitimacy against bourgeois American standards. Helga flees from Naxos in her
effort to resist bourgeois values and the patriarchal constructions of womanhood, evidence of Larsen’s resistance of the tragic mulatta stereotype. Wall contends, “Larsen’s protagonists attempt to fashion a sense of self free of both suffocating restrictions of ladyhood and fantasies of the exotic female Other,” and she continues by stating that Helga’s battles with school authorities are reflections her personal struggle to define herself (Wall 98). Helga’s flight from Naxos and, subsequently, her engagement break from James reflect her inability to reconcile her conflicted identity in a space where the communal identity is already disrupted.

Helga’s continued journey toward self discovery and identity reconciliation leads her to her mother’s family in Denmark. Since James Vayle’s family background affords him social worth, Helga reconnects with her family in order to establish the same thing. Initially, life in Denmark is charmed by acceptance and belonging. However, Helga soon realizes that she has misinterpreted social acceptance, and is once again reminded of her racial difference. Larsen writes, “Helga felt like a veritable savage...this feeling intensified by the many pedestrians who stopped to stare at the dark creature, strange to their city” (Larsen 69). Helga begins to consider herself through the objective lens of Denmark’s gaze, and her double consciousness is reignited. In this textual moment, duCille considers Helga a “black objet d’art, perpetually displayed for white consumption. She comes face to face with the consequences of having participated in her own
objectification” (95). Indeed, Helga is the victim of her own objectification by locating self worth in the acceptance and attention gained as an exoticized Other.

When Axel Olsen, the second of Helga’s proposed significant others, accuses of Helga of contradiction and self-prostitution, Helga is reduced to the sexually limiting subjectivity of the stereotypical Jezebel. Upon his accusation, Axel proposes marriage to Helga, and she rejects him stating, “I’m not for sale. Not to you. Not to any white man, I don’t at all care to be owned. Even by you” (Larsen 87). Larsen is strategic in this literary illustration. She recreates the master/slave dynamic, revising its outcome. In Helga’s resistance of marriage to Axel, Larsen emancipates black women from their sexual subjectivity and objectification, releasing them from the silenced margins, and ultimately revising both historical and social constructions imprisoning black womanhood.

Helga resists her marriage prospects to avoid furthered disruption of her already conflicted sense of self. Her self awareness enables her to consider the restrictive effect both marriages would have on her self progression. In both cases, Helga’s double consciousness complicates her marriage possibility. However, the demand of identity reconciliation still motivates Helga, and again, she flees toward self discovery. Ironically, Helga finds distraction on her path, and becomes insecure and complacent in her journey for self discovery. Helga begins to embrace the bourgeois notions of happiness and success, and eventually submits to the gender constructions she initially tries to avoid. Helga’s personal journey has
given her disappointment and instability, while marriage to Reverend Green alleviates this insecurity. She admits,

It was a chance at stability, at permanent happiness, that she meant to take. She had let so many other things, other chances, escape her...she clutched the hope, the desire to believe she had found some One, some Power, who was interested in her. Would help her (117).

Here, Larsen likens Reverend Green’s companionship to spiritual salvation. Although Helga has convinced herself to embrace and accept bourgeois ideals of happiness, stability and success, her double consciousness requires that she engage in an endless process of self discovery and identity resolution.

Although Helga tries to avoid marriage with Vayle and Olsen due to value and identity conflicts, she revisits similar difficulties in her marriage to Reverend Green. McLendon writes, “Helga is no less sexualized and objectified by Green than by Vayle or Olsen…Helga’s identity is directly connected with her role as ‘wife of the preacher’ the one reason why she is considered ‘a person of relative importance. Only relative’” (92). Helga is consumed by her commitment as wife and mother, and feels objectified in that domestic role. Furthermore, Helga’s social position as ‘first lady’ is not beneficial to her search for self definition, as her social importance and value is marked by her marital relationship.
Unable to successfully obtain stability and happiness, Helga finds herself trapped in gendered performativity. She is now restricted in her search for selfhood. By embracing bourgeois ideals, she is unable to solve the continual conflict of her double consciousness. In the past, Helga is resistant of gender misrepresentations, but by conforming to the marriage convention for the purpose of stability, she is ultimately victimized by the same gender dynamics she resists.

In her second novella, *Passing*, Larsen again addresses the difficulty of double consciousness in her depiction of the black elite in Harlem and Chicago circles. Both Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield endure the effects of class and race consciousness; however, Clare reflects a literal struggle to gain acceptance by white standards in her efforts to pass as white, while Irene figuratively represents the black middle class community’s struggle to gain acceptance in a racialized society. Collectively, the two women represent the intersectional identity conflicts of black middle class women.

Clare’s character actively passes, and like Helga, stands as the literal representation of assimilation and double consciousness. In the beginning of the novel, it is evident that Clare exists as an outsider in her middle class Chicago community. Although Clare’s father attended college, he worked as a janitor, alienating both he and his daughter from black middle class society. Upon her father’s death in a saloon brawl, Clare must go to live with her white aunts. In that environment, Clare experiences directly marginality and alienation from the white
community. With the encouragement of her aunts, her only means for entrance and validation is to pass for white.

Passing provides her a life of privilege and an escape from the restrictions of her social and racial outcast. She states, “I used almost to hate all of you. You had all the things I wanted and never had had. It made me all the more determined to get them, and others” (Larsen, 159). By constructing a character that passes for white, one who gains entrance and social legitimacy in marrying a white man, Larsen is again revising the historical and social circumstances for African American women. Lori Harrison-Kahan argues that “racial passing is not only about the performance of whiteness: it also offers the opportunity for spectatorship. African Americans who passed into the white world were able to gaze upon whites in the reversal of the typical Harlem Renaissance scenario where white sought out the spectacle of black life” (111). Harrison-Kahn’s argument is crucial because it identifies Larsen’s revisionist strategy. As a member of the Harlem Renaissance community, Larsen is conscious of the commodification and othering of black cultural expression. In her response to the exoticizing of black cultural aesthetic, Larsen constructs a black female protagonist who is a spectator of white spaces, consuming white privilege and autonomy.

In her integrated white space, Clare’s submission to white standardizations is evident as she admits that her physical appearance enabled her to move into an alternative racial society, and that she attributes her light complexion as “not bad
Looking” (Larsen 159). In addition, Clare’s self hatred, in response to her duality, is evident when she discusses her fear of having a dark baby. “I nearly died of terror the whole nine months before Margery was born for fear she might be dark. Thank goodness, she turned out all right” (168). Color and complexion are validating mechanisms. The child’s dark complexion could threaten to relinquish her secret, but it also would mean a lifetime of struggle, labor, and inherited outcast.

For Clare, marriage functions in several ways. Marriage affords Clare social stratification inaccessible to a janitor’s daughter and it also provides citizenship and autonomy. Claudia Tate discusses this in Domestic Allegories, she argues,

Marriage has tremendous social value and utility as well as cultural interpretive significance. Exercising the civil right to marry, I am arguing, was as important to the recently freed black population as exercising another civil right, inscribed in the Constitution as the Fifteenth Amendment in 1879—Negro suffrage. For black people, the importance of marrying in the private sphere of domestic affairs may have paralleled that of voting in the public sphere. For voting and marrying were signs of the race’s ascent to high civilization. To vote and to marry, then, were two civil responsibilities that nineteenth
century black people elected to perform, twin indices for measuring how black people collectively valued their civil liberties (Tate 92).

Tate situates her argument in the post-Reconstruction era, and considers turn-of-the-century bourgeois values of success and gentility replications of the social ideals of Victorian England. The same can be said for the historical moment which Larsen contributes. Clare’s marriage, and subsequently, her passing afford her the freedom to move between black and white spaces. She gains access to the rights of American citizens, even though she must disguise herself as a white woman in order to do so.

Irene’s character also reflects Tate’s assertion, but rather, her reflection pertains specially to the social experience of black middle class women. As a member of the black bourgeois community, the convention of marriage is a necessary practice in order to cement African American, and namely black middle class, citizenship. Like education and income, marriage performs as a signifier for middle class blacks, as Irene experiences socioeconomic comfort as the wife of a physician and a member of Harlem’s elite.

Irene considers she and Clare “strangers even in their racial consciousness” (192); however, the two women share more in common than Irene would like to imagine. Though she does not permanently pass for white, she passes from convenience, admitting that it enables her to secretly integrate segregated spaces, providing her with expedient entrance into restaurants, theaters, and recreational
enjoyment. Irene’s rationale isn’t at all different from Clare’s. Often times, convenience translates to privilege and advantage, and both women enjoy material and social benefit from passing.

Irene’s self hatred and duality are first apparent in interaction with Bellew, Clare’s white husband. In this scene, Bellew’s prejudice is evident as he makes outlandish and racial remarks, igniting Irene’s self-consciousness. As Bellew’s remarks become more and more bigoted, Irene is painfully uncomfortable in her racial difference, and as a result, begins to look at herself through Bellew’s racist gaze. Like Helga, Irene is overwhelmingly and psychologically consumed with self hating double consciousness. She angrily questions her racial allegiance and further reflects her duality. Larsen writes,

She was caught between two allegiances, different, yet the same. Herself. Her race. Race! The thing that bound and suffocated her. Whatever steps she took, or if she took none at all, something would be crushed. A person or the race. Clare, herself, or the race. Or, it might be, all three. Nothing, she imagined, was ever more completely sardonic…Irene Redfield wished for the first time in her life, that she had not been born a Negro. For the first time she suffered and rebelled because she was unable to disregard the burden of race. It was, she cried silently, enough to suffer as a woman, an individual, on one’s own account without having to
suffer for the race as well. It was a brutality and undeserved. 
Surely, no other people so cursed as Ham’s dark children” (Larsen, 225)

Echoing DuBois’ explanatory definition his concept, Irene’s identity is split
between loyalty to her race and the pain of racial difference, and she is resentful of
this conflict.

Irene’s marriage to Brian Redfield is reminiscent of the schoolteacher’s
union with Isaac in West’s *The Wedding*. As duCille asserts, their marriage is
“largely passionless” and like Isaac and his wife, they sleep in separate bedrooms
(105). Her marriage to Brian supports Tate’s argument. She has married out of
social obligation, and while she doesn’t require the same social legitimacy as
Clare, Irene utilizes marriage to construct a bourgeois façade of gentility and
refinement while at high society parties, much like *The Wedding’s* schoolteacher.
Similar to Isaac, Brian exhibits more self awareness than his wife. However, he
too is influenced by his double vision. A brown complexioned man, Brian is
constantly reminded of his difference within color conscious black middle class
circles and within the larger society. When his son wonders why only colored
people are lynched, Brian asserts, “Because they hate ‘em, son” (Larsen 231).
Brian is straight forward with his children regarding hatred and racism, while
Irene, suffering from self hatred, wants to preserve and protect her children’s race
consciousness, and avoid inflicting them with the same pain of double
consciousness she experiences.

While both Irene and Clare marry men from alternate ends of the racial
spectrum, they both rely on marriage as a means to achieve social validation and
legitimacy. Clare relies on the institution for the purposes of privilege and
accessibility to a comfortable life, yet, Irene employs marriage in her efforts to
secure citizenship and fulfill her social obligation as a member of the black elite.
Both women experience conflicting duality in their American identity represented
in through marriages and Larsen pictures the two protagonists in the image of
black middle class womanhood, revising these misrepresentations. By the end of
the novel, Irene and Clare are symbols of an intersectional American identity and a
troubling duality, a strategy she maintains from her work with Quicksand. In the
end, Clare’s death and Irene’s jealous irrationality teach a very important lesson:
marriage with incentive and without love cannot reconcile, rather it further
complicates one’s identity.
CONCLUSION

In their respective works, Dorothy West and Nella Larsen revise gender constructions by engaging in the marriage convention. West illustrates Cleo, an alternative woman whose gender performance enables the reader to reconceptualize the constructions of black womanhood and reconsider the national picture of ladyhood and femininity. Although Cleo’s marital employment and perspective is certainly destructive, it functions as West’s commentary on the black middle class collective identity loss and disconnect from the root of black culture, the South. In *The Wedding*, West situates her marriage commentary in Shelby. Her decision to marry for love and against social obligation emancipates her family from their legacy of self-neglect and self-hatred, and attempts to reconcile their collective and inherent duality. Larsen’s psychoanalytic approach delves into the heart, or rather head, of the double consciousness phenomenon. She reconstructs the stereotypical tragic mulatta heroine, and strategically rewrites the historical and social constructions imprisoning black womanhood.

Much like the characters of their novels, Dorothy West and Nella Larsen are the paradigm for DuBois’ theory. West, a member of Boston’s black elite and one of the first families to own a house on Martha’s Vineyard (Graham 154) and Larsen, librarian and wife of a “socially prominent” physics professor (duCille 78), are the paradigm for DuBois’ theory. They are his Talented Tenth, and through literary
expression and thought, they uplift and motivate a race of people disenfranchised and marginalized from white society. In their commitment to presenting an alternate image in the middle class black woman, they upset the misrepresented and misinformed picture of black society and culture, a reflection of the duality they endure as members of “one dark body” (DuBois 695). Ironically, or perhaps strategically, West and Larsen rely on their own experiences growing up in similar communities and environments, patterning Cleo and Helga’s parentage after their own. Their stories speak for the voiceless and fragmented, and awaken imperative themes in American literary discourse. Yes, they are indeed DuBois’ Talented, speaking for a community, writing to revise, and writing to reconcile.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


