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This thesis examines two cultural productions of the Harlem Renaissance: Aaron Douglas’s mural series, *Aspects of Negro Life*, and Nella Larsen’s novel *Passing*. I read these works together because, more than their shared time period, they showcase an attention to the visual. Both Larsen and Douglas’s works are concerned with the power of the look, and, in turn, question who gets to look and how that look shapes new modes of thought for the viewer or reader.

Chapter one examines Douglas’s mural series, linking his artistic style to Orphism, an optics-centered art form popularized in Europe in the 1910s. I argue that Douglas’s adaptation of this art form allows him to articulate a combined focus on the optical and historical together. This combination works to unsettle essentialist ideas about race and to question a predominant strain of optimistic thinking about the role of historical narratives for African American racial advancement, exemplified by the work of Arthur Schomburg. The chapter briefly surveys Orphism and optical theory of the 1910s as a separate phenomenon from Douglas’s 1930s project. With this historical context in place, I read each of the four murals in the series to highlight the ways in
which the viewer’s eye is called to look across the canvas. By ruminating on the gaze as
Douglas invites us to, the chapter shows that sight is always interwoven with history.

Chapter two examines Nella Larsen’s Passing, exploring the ways that sight can
but does not always grant agency to the one who looks. I argue that Passing’s obsession
with sight functions as a key part of the novel’s larger question about the relationship
between agency and control. By presenting disparate narratives about the power of
vision, the novel undercuts a singular understanding of agency. In making this argument,
the chapter draws heavily from Frantz Fanon’s Black Skin, White Masks and bell hooks’
Black Looks. These two theorists chart a link between sight, agency, and control through
a theory of the gaze. Engaging their ideas, the chapter examines the complicated
iterations of the gaze throughout the text, with a primary focus on the looking
relationship between the novel’s protagonist, Irene Redfield, and her childhood friend,
Clare Kendry. Read together, the chapters highlight the varying conceptions of the gaze
during the Harlem Renaissance.
“Her Hypnotic Eyes”: Reading the Optical in Aaron Douglas’s Aspects of Negro Life and Nella Larsen’s Passing

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Charles K. Barkley, Author
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Introduction

“What is this thing called race? It is both more and less than biology or ideology. It yields its claim most forcefully and destructively in the realm of the visible, yet it designates and relies on the unseen.” – Anne Cheng, Second Skin

“All vital art discovers beauty and opens our eyes to that which previously we could not see.” – Alain Locke, “The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts”

The Harlem Renaissance has been characterized as an era fixated on the visual. Prominent thinkers of the time urged the public to see the visual arts as deeply significant. Acceptance and greater racial harmony could result from seeing in new ways. In Alain Locke’s famous essay “Enter the New Negro,” he emphasizes the value of sight by placing his hopes for African Americans in the visual arts. According to Locke, “hope rests in the revaluation by white and black alike of the Negro in terms of his artistic endowments and cultural contributions, past and prospective” (Survey Graphic 6). In an essay published shortly thereafter, “The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts,” which appears in the 1925 book, The New Negro, Locke calls for African Americans to produce a new type of art that builds on both African tradition and European modernism.

Locke’s call for a renewed artistic practice that depended on African tradition motivated artists and intellectuals to produce “consciously and representatively racial” art for the era (“Legacy” 267). As Locke calls for a new form of art, however, he also suggests the ineffectiveness of the viewer’s eye:

[African American] artists have too long been the victims of the academy tradition and shared the conventional blindness of the Caucasian eye with respect to the racial material at their immediate disposal. […] We ought and must have a school of Negro art, a local and racially representative
tradition. (“Legacy” 264-266, my emphasis)

Here, Locke suggests that black artists have been the victims of the white eye, an eye that has failed to recognize the value of African traditional art forms’ value in producing new, engaging, and socially relevant art. Black artists, too, have “shared the conventional blindness,” failing to recognize the value of traditional African art forms. I begin with this example because it provides a small glimpse into the way the eye and sight were conceived at the height of the Harlem Renaissance by one of the greatest thinkers of the New Negro era. For Locke, the eye can clearly be mistaken—a failure to see can result in overlooking a whole category of artwork that he suggests is key to social advancement.

Locke’s combined focus in this passage on visual art and the function of the eye provides a glimpse into the larger questions of my project. Throughout this project, I examine the complexities of looking, questioning the ways in which the gaze is entwined with race. In this project, I examine two significant works of the Harlem Renaissance, Nella Larsen’s 1929 novel *Passing* and Aaron Douglas’s 1934 mural series *Aspects of Negro Life*. I read these works in tandem because both are fundamentally preoccupied with the visual, yet present varying conclusions about the role of the visual during the time period. In this introduction, I first provide a basic summary of the major impulses of both works on a narrative level. From there, I pivot to the way current scholars have addressed these works. Finally, I situate my project in relation to the current critical work being done on Douglas and Larsen. The two chapters that follow this introduction are a close examination of the ways in which Aaron Douglas and Nella Larsen, two premier artists of the Harlem Renaissance, have articulated their vision for the function of sight with and against intellectuals of their time.
In chapter one, I examine Douglas’s four-part mural series, *Aspects of Negro Life*, which was composed under sponsorship of the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) during the Great Depression. Across four panels, Douglas narrates a history of African American experience, beginning with an idyllic vision of pre-slavery life in Africa and culminating with a triumphant scene of black people emerging into the urban workforce. The first panel, *The Negro in an African Setting*, shows what appears to be a scene of tribal Africans dancing around a central fetish object. In the second panel, *From Slavery Through Reconstruction*, black laborers work in the cotton fields under the looming threat of the Ku Klux Klan. The right side of the work presents a confident leader, pointing up towards the Capitol while newly freed men lift their hands in exultation at the reading of the Emancipation Proclamation. In the third panel, *An Idyll of the Deep South*, figures sing and dance around a centralized group of musicians. The excitement in the middle of the work is offset by the sobering detail of a lynched figure in the upper left of the painting. *Song of the Towers*, the fourth and final panel of the series, shows a saxophone player who rears his head back as he plays his horn in a skyscraper-lined cityscape. Consistent across all the panels is Douglas’s use of concentric circles, a visual motif that concentrates the viewer’s eye on specific areas of the mural. I read Douglas’s use of concentric circles in relation to the tradition of Orphist artists such as Robert Delaunay and Frantisek Kupka. I situate Douglas’s work as evolving from the tradition of Orphism—a style of painting premised on a concern for the way the viewer’s eye relates to the canvas. I argue that by combining the historical and the optical, Douglas unsettles essentialist ideas about race while causing the viewer to question his or her relationship to his or her own past. As we see in chapter one, this questioning goes against a strain of
optimistic thinking about the role the past should play in African American life set out by Arthur Schomburg. I contend that Douglas does not present the same degree of optimism about the role of history in shaping the future for African Americans, and instead offers a deliberate irresolution that intervenes in the then dominant view of the function of African American history.

In chapter two, I focus on Nella Larsen’s novel *Passing*, a text that shares Douglas’s concern for the effects of sight. *Passing* is the story of Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry, two African American women whose light skin allows them to “pass” as white in order to gain access to social settings from which they would have been excluded because of their race. Set during the height of the Harlem Renaissance in Chicago and New York, the novel is concerned with the failure of sight to confirm the racial status of any individual. The novel offers a complicated dynamic in sight’s role in granting personal agency. Time after time, characters fixate on one another through their gaze, so much so that the text offers a kind of meditation on the power of looking. I turn my attentions to this meditation, and in chapter two I argue that the novel remains deliberately unresolved in its conclusions about whether and how sight grants agency to the individual. Like Douglas, Larsen’s work opens up but does not resolve questions about the function and nature and power of sight. By presenting disparate narratives of the power of vision, the novel warns against a singular understanding of agency.

My research is indebted to a current vein of critical scholarship that emphasizes the role of aesthetic production by marginalized subjects. Anne Cheng’s *Second Skin* (2010), Cherene Sherrard-Johnson’s *Portraits of the New Negro Woman* (2007), and Miriam Thaggert’s *Images of Black Modernism* (2010) have shaped my understanding of
the complex ways that art and literature intersect in discussions of racialized bodies.
Though I do not directly invoke these scholars in my analysis of *Passing* and *Aspects of Negro Life*, except for a brief mention of Cheng’s work in chapter one, it is their methodologies that I have adopted, and their framework for thinking about race, art, and literature together that I employ. Anne Cheng’s work, in particular, set me thinking. Through the figure of Josephine Baker, Cheng traces the intersections of Modernism and Primitivism’s mutual obsession with “pure surface.” She moves from concentrated examination of the enigmatic Baker to readings of modern architecture, sculpture, and clothing. The movement between Baker’s skin-as-surface to a reading of other modernist aesthetic forms reveals a complex mixture of objecthood, subjecthood, fetish, and agency. In her introduction, Cheng poses a provocative question that shapes my reading of Larsen’s text and Douglas’s murals. She wonders what it was that made Josephine Baker so alluring for the modern audience.

So did those audiences see something different—or were they seeing differently? What interests me about revisiting the intimacy between Modernism and Primitivism is not what it can tell us about how we see racial difference, but about how racial difference teaches us to see. (Cheng 6)

The “audiences” Cheng refers to here are a collective of modern artists and architects who worked with and for Josephine Baker, including José Miguel Covarrubias, Fernand Léger, Le Corbusier, and Alexander Calder, to name only a few. Cheng’s question informs my work because it signals a primary concern with sight: she asks, how is it that these artists perceived Baker, and, further, what are the consequences of this perception? By thinking about the entanglements of Modernism and Primitivism together, Cheng
notes the resulting expansion in our understanding of how racial signification actually informs our seeing practices.

Cheng suggests that racial difference can educate, that it “teaches us to see.” Implicit in this comment is the value placed on sight and the possibilities it offers for cognition. Sight allows new modes of thinking. In my analysis of Aaron Douglas’s murals, I build from Cheng’s investment in sight in part by showing how Douglas deliberately moves his viewer’s eye through use of Orphist techniques. The subtle movement of the eye is then connected to larger questions about the role history plays in African American racial advancement and group belonging. Cheng’s work, of course, also informs my reading of Larsen’s text as the primacy of the sight and the visual set me thinking about the interactions between sight, agency, and control.

I also see my project as occupying a kind of structural link to Cheng’s work. She describes her process in *Second Skin* as follows: “In these essays, Baker appears, disappears, and reappears to allow into view the enigmas of visual experience that are rarely extended to racialized bodies which remain tied to ideas of visual certitude and readability” (Cheng 14). As Cheng does with her wide-ranging focus on Baker’s performances and other art forms, I place two works together that differ substantially in media. What links my analyses is a focus on the complexities of sight. For Douglas, sight is used to call into question the optimism about history’s role in shaping racial advancement. For Larsen, sight is a tricky business that cannot be trusted to grant or take away an individual’s agency.

Cherene Sherrard-Johnson’s *Portraits of the New Negro Woman* and Miriam Thaggert’s *Images of Black Modernism* have influenced my thinking about visual art and
literature in tandem. In *Portraits*, Sherrard-Johnson reads the paintings of Harlem Renaissance artist Archibald Motley, Jr. together with a variety of texts by Harlem Renaissance authors in order to better understand the mulatta, a continually contested figure in black literary and visual culture (Sherrard-Johnson 3). By providing a “painterly rather than writerly reading” of various Renaissance texts, Sherrard-Johnson identifies “a protagonist who cannot be pinned down solely by pen, paintbrush, or lens” (3). Sherrard-Johnson’s beautiful close readings of mulatta iconography in the art and literature of the Harlem Renaissance helped me see the value of my interdisciplinary project, that careful observation of art and literature together provides a more rounded portrait of the function of sight during the Harlem Renaissance. In *Images of Black Modernism*, Miriam Thaggert addresses questions raised in the February 1926 issue of *Crisis* which asked about the role of art and literature in promoting racial uplift (Thaggert 2). By focusing on the image in multiple forms—verbal, mental, and visual—Thaggert contends that black American modernism is typified by high level of experimentation in the visual and verbal techniques for narrating blackness (4). Reading word and image together, Thaggert’s study works to destabilize fixed and stable notions of identity (4).

Cheng, Thaggert, and Sherrard-Johnson provide the undergirding for my project, but I rely most heavily and directly on the work of Frantz Fanon and bell hooks, two thinkers who have theorized the role sight can play in shaping a person’s subjectivity. In Frantz Fanon’s influential text, *Black Skin, White Masks*, published in French in 1952 and translated to English in 1967, Fanon describes the destructive power of the white male gaze to stifle the black man, forcing him to reckon with the gazer’s conception of his own identity. For Fanon, the suppression of the black male through the white look, voiced
through the phrase “Look, a Negro!,” results in a destruction of self, shifting the black man from subject to object (Fanon 109). In her chapter “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators,” bell hooks suggests the resulting destruction of the white male gaze that Fanon articulates can be resisted through an “oppositional look.” For hooks, looking back and resisting the gaze grants agency to those who do it, and is a method of empowerment. Fanon articulates a problem—the destructive potential of the gaze on the black man—and hooks proposes a solution. By meeting gaze with gaze, hooks suggests that individuals can retain their individual subjectivity. “Even in the worst circumstances of domination,” hooks writes, “the ability to manipulate one’s gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency” (Black Looks 116). Fanon and hooks’ formulations about the power of sight as either a destructive force or an empowering action feature prominently in my discussion of the function of sight across Douglas and Larsen’s works. I use their work as a foundation for my own questions about the role of sight in the process of individuation and agency. How can sight grant or take away agency from a person? How can theories of vision be used to challenge ideas of the value of historical narratives? If vision does not offer certainty—and Larsen quickly teaches us of the failure of vision to confirm racial status—how might we remain with sight’s irresolution?

The chapters that follow respond these questions. In chapter one I situate Douglas’s Aspects of Negro Life as a response to the claims of history set out by prominent Harlem Renaissance writer and activist, Arthur Schomburg. I venture into the murky waters of optical theory to position Douglas as working within a tradition of Orphist artists. Although scholars have noted Douglas’s influence by the Orphists, studies
so far have not addressed the complexities of this relationship. Finally, I suggest that Douglas’s specific use of Orphist technique allows him offer a rebuttal to Schomburg’s claims that an optimistic vision of African American history is the best method for social advancement. In chapter two, I read Larsen’s text with hooks’ theory of the “oppositional gaze,” as others have before me, adding to this discussion by suggesting that the gaze in Larsen’s text is more complex than hooks’ schema suggests. The chapter focuses on a key tension in the novel between Irene’s desire for control as her marriage begins to crumble before her and her underlying fear that perhaps individuals have no agency at all, and that outcomes are predetermined. I examine this tension through analysis of many scenes where Irene Redfield is transfixed by the look.

Nella Larsen begins *Passing* with an epigraph from Countee Cullen, and, following her lead, I present Countee Cullen’s poem “Tableau,” which gives an account of what life might be like if unhindered by the fixity of the gaze. In the poem, a black and white boy walk together down the street, arm in arm.

Locked arm in arm they cross the way
The black boy and the white,
The golden splendor of the day
The sable pride of night.

From lowered blinds the dark folk stare
And here the fair folk talk,
Indignant that these two should dare
In unison to walk.

Oblivious to look and word
They pass, and see no wonder
That lightning brilliant as a sword
Should blaze the path of thunder.

Against the stasis that the title suggests, Cullen’s poem proposes progression and
movement as the boys walk on, “oblivious to the look.” But like so much concerning the
gaze, Cullen’s poem suggests irresolution. While the boys chart a positive path of both
cultural and sexual freedom, their “oblivious[ness] to look and word” may come at the cost
of their exclusion from society. The poem resonates in particular with *Passing*, a text that
also explores the perplexing combination of agency and the gaze. In this spirit, Cullen’s
poem is a celebration of the boys’ decidedly ambivalent identity; indeed, “they pass.” It is
my hope that in reading Aaron Douglas’s murals together with Nella Larsen’s novel, we
can more fully understand the varying conceptions of the importance of the look during
the Harlem Renaissance. As Cullen’s poem invites us to consider here, I ask how the
visual, sight, and agency come to bear on one another.
Chapter 1

Bridging the Historical and the Optical: Orphism in Aaron Douglas’s *Aspects of Negro Life*

The 1925 special issue of *Survey Graphic* profoundly influenced renowned Harlem Renaissance artist Aaron Douglas. For Douglas, the magazine was “the most cogent single factor that eventually turned my face to New York” (Douglas quoted in Kirschke 13). Alain Locke edited the magazine and in it appears his famous essay “Enter the New Negro” which he would later expand into the book *The New Negro*. The significance of *Survey Graphic* to black artists, writers, and intellectuals was extraordinary. The magazine’s contributors provide a complex view of Harlem as the nexus for black cultural life. As Locke says to his readers, “The pulse of the Negro world has begun to beat in Harlem” (Locke 5). The allure of the city was strong, and Aaron Douglas, a Kansas native, took up Locke’s call and moved from Kansas City to New York.

In the same magazine issue that brought Douglas to the east coast, historian and prominent Harlem Renaissance intellectual Arthur Schomburg calls upon African Americans to reclaim the past in order heal the wounds of slavery. In his essay “The Negro Digs Up His Past,” Schomburg argues that African and African-American history has largely been disregarded and undervalued. For Schomburg, a return to history offers greater opportunity for personal and social development. “Already the Negro sees himself against a reclaimed background, in a perspective that will give pride and self respect and ample scope, and make history yield for him the same values that the treasured past of any people affords” (672). For Schomburg, history has power to remake the individual
and equalize the races. His call is simple and direct: “The American Negro must remake his past in order to remake his future” (670).

Aaron Douglas’s four-part mural series *Aspects of Negro Life* engages African American history by narrating the experience of black Americans from an idyllic, pre-slavery life in Africa through to the Great Migration to New York City. The series is considered by many critics to be the most accomplished work of his career and was composed under sponsorship of the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP). Douglas’s work was completed in 1934 for the Countee Cullen Library in Harlem, which stands today as the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, a branch of the New York public library. It is a fitting coincidence that the building housing Douglas’s murals was renamed in Arthur Schomburg’s honor as Douglas’s works respond in part to Schomburg’s call to look backward towards history. Unlike Schomburg who sees progress as the inevitable outcome of looking to the past, I argue that in *Aspects of Negro Life*, Douglas articulates a paradoxical relationship between past, present, and future that intervenes in the politics of uplift and respectability in African American history.

Perhaps surprisingly, one of the primary methods by which Douglas intervenes in Schomburg’s view of history is through use of Orphism, a theory of art that was articulated by French poet, Guillaume Apollinaire in 1912. The term “Orphism” is used to describe the work of avant-garde European artists Robert Delaunay, Sonia Delaunay, Frantisek Kupka, Fernand Léger, Francis Picabia, and, for a time, Marcel Duchamp. The link between Douglas’s works and Orphism has been noted by critics, but never explored in detail. I argue that Douglas’s strategic use of Orphism invites the spectator to participate in a kind of viewing that strikes an ambiguous relationship between surface
and depth, a tension that resonates on multiple levels. Viewers engage this tension in the fluctuation between the literal flatness of canvas and perceived depth beneath as the eye breaks through the picture plane and moves into the composition. Neither pure surface nor pure depth, the pressure of in-between, as we will come to discover, has greater ramifications for the viewing subject as Douglas’s work calls into question essentialist paradigms.

Art historian Gordon Hughes has articulated the way in which Orphism creates tension between the viewer’s perception and the “reality” of physical objects before them. “Pure optical information as it is registered on the concave surface of the retina is completely two-dimensional […] In sum, optical information is understood by modern optical theory to be fundamentally unlike what we actually see” (310). In including an art form that is particularly optical, meaning it fixates on the viewer’s sight, Douglas invites viewers on the one hand to see things as they “actually are”—in two-dimensional form that corresponds to the way our eye and brain make sense of visual stimuli—and on the other hand to think about how sight itself is, as Hughes states, “fundamentally unlike what we actually see” (310). Seeing Aspects of Negro Life, then, demands a paradoxical relationship to the image, a paradox that questions essentialist thinking. Each canvas invites the viewer to perform an essentialist reading of the forms on the canvas, to see things “as they actually are,” yet then calls the viewer to undermine that very reading by troubling the “truth” of that viewing of the canvas with the viewer’s understanding of the world.

In combining orphism with a narrative of African American people from pre-slavery life in Africa through to emancipation in the United States, Douglas takes
Orphism and mediates it through historical narrative. In combining these efforts—that is, the historical and the optical—Douglas unsettles essentialist ideas about race while causing the viewer to question his or her own relationship to the own past. In her essay “Visual Narrative and the Harlem Renaissance,” art historian Tania Costa Tribe suggests that Douglas’s use of historical narrative fully coincides with Arthur Schomburg’s assertion that in order for African Americans to improve socially and economically, they should reclaim their history. Tribe argues that “the creation of the boundaries or codes needed for structuring a story or a visual narrative provides the medium through which ideology can make itself manifest, and Aaron Douglas’s and Jacob Lawrence’s choice of history painting as a favoured artistic strategy enabled them to uphold not only Schomburg’s views but also the call made by W.E.B. Du Bois for ‘art as propaganda’” (392). Alternatively, I contend that Douglas does not present the same type of optimism about the role of history in shaping the future for African Americans, but rather provides unsettled conclusions that intervene in the dominant view of African American history.

In *Aaron Douglas: Art, Race, and the Harlem Renaissance* (1995), Amy Kirschke contends that Douglas was influenced by famous French Orphist painter, Robert Delaunay.

During his period of experimentation Douglas was also influenced by Orphism, especially works such as Robert Delaunay’s *Simultaneous Contrasts: Sun and Moon* of 1913, which, although they had to reference in observed nature, provided a context for a series of intersecting circles and disks. Delaunay’s fragmented images, a series of geometric shapes in works such as *Windows on the City No. 3* (1911-12), could well have influenced the cubist-like ray-intersected Douglas compositions. (Kirschke 126).
The visual similarities between Douglas’s mural series and Delaunay’s works are striking, especially the shared use of concentric circles. Alain Locke may have set the precedent for Douglas’s interest in Orphism. In Locke’s essay, “The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts,” which appears in his famous book *The New Negro*, he cites Guillaume Apollinaire and Blaise Cendrars as two European visionaries who “have attempted artistic re-expression of African idioms in poetic symbols and verse forms” (Locke 261). Locke praises Apollinaire and Cendrars, a move that is significant because they were the two to formally codify “Orphism” as a movement. In an effort to better address the similarities between Douglas’s artistic practice and the Orphists’, and in order to contextualize the movement, I will depart from Douglas temporarily. In what follows, I track the development of Orphism in order to understand the emergence of this art form in France at the beginning of the twentieth century.

**A Brief Foray into Orphism and Optical Theory**

In “Envisioning Abstraction: The Simultaneity of Robert Delaunay’s *First Disk,*” Gordon Hughes argues that Delaunay’s orphism occupies a unique space in art history, presenting twentieth-century modernism with “a stubborn radicality that it doesn’t know what to do with” (306). Hughes contends that this distinctive style corresponds to a shift in the way modern people actually understood perception. Hughes argues that Delaunay’s work “stands in response not simply to an altered mode of seeing wrought by modernity but to a historical change in the actual *understanding* of perception—a change, that is, in the understanding of the internal, psycho-physiological mechanics of perception” (309). As we will see, Delaunay’s work responds not only to the frenetic pace of modern viewing, but is fundamentally concerned with the way the eye receives light.
Hughes’s argument shifts to a discussion of modern optical theory, which I summarize briefly in order to articulate the modified understanding of perception that Delaunay expresses in his works. Drawing from Jonathan Crary’s *Techniques of the Observer*, Hughes argues that the camera obscura was the dominant model of vision from the 1500s through the late 1700s (309). This model of vision ended previous debates about the eye as both transmitting and receiving light. “Stripped of its active function of emission, the eye became instead a totally passive transparent receptor of light and the optical information it carried” (310). Hughes’ comment suggests that there is no longer a reciprocal relationship between the seer and the seen. Instead, this relationship is asymmetrical. However, in this very separation there is still a process of individuation. “At the same time that the mechanism of the camera obscura separates the user from others,” Hughes continues, “it also separates the user from the external world. The camera obscura thus became a kind of technological analog to the Cartesian separation of the viewing subject (*res cognitans*) from the world (*res extensa*)” (310). As Crary contends, the effect of this type of vision is to “sunder the act of seeing from the physical body of the observer, to decorporealize vision…. The body then is a problem the camera could never solve except by marginalizing it into a phantom to establish the space of reason” (Crary quoted in Hughes 310).

In contrast to this decorporealized vision, modern optical theory offers a “heterogeneous regime of vision, one that is grounded, above all else, by the insertion of the body into optical discourses” (Hughes 310). As scientists began to better understand the physiology of sight in the late 19th century, they recognized that pressure on the eyeball and other physical conditions such as drug use produced differing internal
sensations that fundamentally altered the way the subject saw (310). According to Hughes, “visual perception becomes irrefutably conditioned by the body” (310). Further, “Once the physiological intervention of the body is foregrounded in the perceptual process, the previous stability of a clearly demarcated ‘inside’ (the projected image inside the camera obscura, the *res cogitans*) and ‘outside’ (the world, *res extensa*) becomes untenable. As a result, color and light lose their prior bond to an externally stable and unified visual field” (310). Hughes argues that Delaunay’s work offers a new mode of pictorial realism that corresponds to a modern understanding of optics and how we see. Sight and the viewer’s body are no longer thought to operate separately. With a modern understanding of vision, clear lines between the seer and the seen dissipate. Unlike the camera obscura model of vision, which was dominant from the late 1500s through to the late 19th century, a modern understanding of vision and optics is one of subjectivity, heterogeneity, and corporealization.

To achieve this fundamentally different form of opticality, Delaunay uses a technique of placing colors side by side in a technique called “simultaneous contrast.” This color principle had been developed in the latter half of the nineteenth century by French chemist Michel Chevreul. Hughes draws from Blaise Cendrars to describe the effect of this technique in Delaunay’s paintings: “A color isn’t a color unto itself. It is only a color in contrast with one or more colors. A blue is only blue in contrast with a red, a green, an orange, a grey and all the other colors” (Cendrars quoted in Hughes 312). Here, Cendrars describes the relationality of color in Delaunay’s works. With simultaneous contrast, the colors relate to one another and draw a relation between the viewing subject and the painting. As Hughes explains, “The colors we see in Delaunay’s
Windows are thus located *simultaneously* and *indeterminately* between the pure, physiologically produced colors of the eye—devoid of form and internal to the body—and the material colors of the paint, inextricably bound to its tactile form and ground, external to the body” (Hughes 313). Delaunay’s *First Disk* (1912) illustrates the tension between color as produced within the eye and existing outside of it. Creating an analog between the viewer’s eye and the concentric rings of the piece, the goal of composition is to spark the viewer into awareness that sight is as much a product of sensation and immediacy as it is a process of thinking.

Engaging rigorously with the structure of perception as claimed through modern optical theory—a structure premised on the double role of cognition *and* sensation—Delaunay’s paintings emphasize the role of the mind in the act of vision. And in so doing, Delaunay’s paintings develop a new model of visual realism—a visual realism in which painting serves to bridge the body of the viewer with its ground in the world. (Hughes 312)

Many viewers have missed the double function of Delaunay’s works to show how perception is a process of both cognition and sensation. The Cubists denigrated Delaunay’s works and accused him of “retinalism” (Hughes 312). Seeking to break from the “superficial realism” of Impressionism, the Cubists felt that Orphism was an art form too interested in optical mechanics (312). Hughes summarizes Rosalind Krauss’s argument on what Delaunay’s work sought to accomplish: “Delaunay’s paintings establish a visual homology between the surface of the canvas and the surface of the retina. For Krauss, this ‘retinalism’ eliminates the role of the mind, stripping vision of its conceptual depth” (313). Further, Krauss suggests that this lack of cognitive function corresponds with the quickness that the viewer is supposed to engage with the work.
Delaunay’s paintings, in Krauss’ view, are meant to explain the frenetic pace of modern life through the rapidity with which the eye views the subject. I agree with Hughes, however, that there is more going on than a one to one correspondence between eye and canvas. Hughes offers a final rebuttal to Krauss’ interpretation: “Consistent with modern optical theory, Delaunay’s concern is to move beyond the two-dimensional surface of the retina and into the depth of visual perception. Knowledge works in tandem with the senses to create spatial perception such that, as Delaunay writes, ‘We live in depth, we travel in depth, I am there. The senses are there, And the mind!!’” (qtd in Hughes 313). Delaunay’s purpose is twofold: first, to recognize the immediacy of sight and visual sensation, and, second, to cause the viewer to think about the way perception happens.

* * *

In the analysis that follows, I contend that Douglas, like Delaunay before him, interrogates the act of perception in modern life. Douglas adds to Delaunay’s work by moving beyond the strictly optical to address the historical. Aspects of Negro Life invites thinking of the optical and historical together. The first panel in Douglas’s mural series, The Negro in an African Setting is expansive at 6x6 feet. The mural shows Africans dancing and playing drums while surrounded by broad-leafed jungle plants that frame the composition. Warriors stand upright, fading into the distance. Douglas uses the structural motif of Orphist concentric circles to frame the viewer’s gaze. The mural calls the viewer to recognize and categorize the subject immediately, and then to pause and question that seemingly stable categorization. This happens in multiple ways, but is most evident though the use of light and through the Orphist concentric rings. Light works to destabilize seemingly firm racial signifiers. Rather than have the most direct light source
correspond to the lightest values in hues, there is no direct relationship between light source and that subject of that light. Take, for example, the darkest hues in the image, which we see on the seated drummer in the lower right corner of the work. The most direct light shines on this figure and therefore, that section would presumably be the lightest. However, in direct contrast to naturalistic lighting, we see the darkest values of the composition. The lack of correspondence between light source and the subject calls into question the “fixed” nature of color, and, in turn, race. It works to question the validity of the optical and of human desire to categorize based solely on what is seen.

The concentric rings call the viewer to revel in the tension between immediate recognition and slower perception. We see this most evidently in the middle of the work, with rings centered on a fetish object. Like Delaunay’s works, the actual rings themselves can be understood as analogous to the human eye. Through signaling of eye to eye, the viewer is directly invited to look into the work. What happens when viewing the image, however, is the paradoxical effect of Douglas’s image: the Orphist rings that mimic the human eye invite the viewer to look into the canvas at the same time as they invite the viewer to look at the canvas. Invoking Orphist practice through use of the concentric rings, Douglas’s viewer is called to focus on two things at once: the flatness of the picture plane and the recession into depth that lies beneath. One of the key ways we get access into this oscillation between surface and depth is through the fetish object. Positioned in the center of the work, the fetish occupies an indeterminate relationship between foreground and background.

The fetish object is also significant in its relationship to history. Anne Cheng describes the severing of fetish objects from their original contexts through the example
of Picasso’s trip to the Trocadéro Museum. Cheng quotes Picasso’s own description of his first encounter with fetish objects in the museum:

> When I went for the first time... to the Trocadéro museum, the smell of dampness and rot stuck there in my throat. It depressed me so much... but I stayed... men had made those masks and other objects... as a kind of mediation between themselves and the unknown hostile forces that surround them.... At that moment I realized what painting was all about... a way of seizing power by giving form to our terrors as well as our desires. (Picasso quoted in Cheng 18)

Cheng describes Picasso’s depressive reaction to the museum as being a moment of recognition between himself and the colonized who suffered at the hands of European conquerors (18). “What nauseates Picasso,” Cheng writes, “may not be disavowal but its failure. In other words, it may be identification, rather than disidentification, that grips Picasso by the throat (18). In slowing down the viewer’s perception of the fetish object in *Negro in an African Setting*, Douglas asks his audience to reflect on a process that nauseates Picasso.

The indeterminacy of the fetish object in its ambivalent relationship between foreground and background mirrors the paradox of Delaunay’s *Windows* and use of simultaneous contrast. Hughes contends, “The effect of simultaneous contrast [...] allows for a seemingly impossible and paradoxical expression of color, in which [color] is simultaneously both *separated from* and *bound to* tactile form” (Hughes 314). In other words, the color of the paint is at once a strictly internally visual phenomenon and, at the same time, also about the *actual* pigment and colors on the page. The fetish object functions similarly. It is both *apart from* the history that it is attached to and, simultaneously and paradoxically, *bound to* that very history. We can see this
indeterminacy further in the lack of viewing of the object by the actual subjects of the composition. While the dancers and drummers and standing warriors all work compositionally to surround the object, their activities are fully independent of the object. Although the figures could be looking toward the object, it remains uncertain where the figures are looking.

The indeterminate relationship of the fetish object to the foreground and background has further ramifications for the process of essentialist thinking, suggesting both how it happens and its simultaneous disavowal. Fanon describes the destructive power of the white male gaze to capture the individual and force a person to reckon with the gazer’s conception of his or her identity. Fanon’s describes his own objectification and corresponding destruction of self that is initiated by sight and verbal command. A white man looks at him and cries, “Look, a Negro!” which seals him into objecthood (Fanon 109). The man calls out quickly and immediately categorizes him. For Fanon, this experience has no positive outcome. The look decenters Fanon from the world, tearing his consciousness from his body. “And then the occasion arose when I had to meet the white man’s eyes. An unfamiliar weight burdened me. […] In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. […] The body is surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty” (Fanon 111). In _The Negro in an African Setting_, Douglas articulates something akin to Fanon’s “certain uncertainty” (Fanon 111). The work calls the viewer to immediate response—“Look, a fetish!”—yet then destabilizes that response through spatial indeterminacy.

In her description of _The Negro in an African Setting_, Kirschke has also noted the importance of Douglas’s use of concentric circles. “Rays of light and concentric circles
are again employed as a highlighting motif. Douglas used the circles to show and
heighten different areas of action by varying the degrees of light within progressively
enlarging concentric circles, taking care always to maintain a constant relation between
the figure and background within each circle” (Kirschke 121). It is this “constant
relation” that I am most interested in. Kirschke uses the phrase here to describe Douglas’s
prescribed and methodical use of color. “Where two circles of light intersected,”
Kirschke explains, “the area bounded by the intersecting circles, as well as all the objects
within the circle, became lighter” (121). But systematic use of color is precisely in
opposition to the spatial indeterminacy of the fetish object. Where Douglas uses color in
a deliberate and formulaic way—in a “constant relation”—he undercuts that stability
through the fetish object’s unresolved place between foreground and background. The
relation that is upheld, then, is one of mixture; the viewer is pulled between systematic
use of color and oscillation between foreground and background. If we situate Douglas’s
use of the concentric rings within Orphist tradition, we recognize that the planar disk
creates an analog between the disk and the viewer’s eye. Further, and as Hughes reminds
us of Delaunay’s work, Orphist paintings attempt slow down the act of perception: “Far
from expressing a naïve retinalism that is optically immersed in the speed of modern life,
Delaunay’s paintings [...] are at pains to slow the gaze of the viewer, while at the same
time coupling vision with experiential knowledge” (Hughes 313). Douglas’s murals
invite a similar movement between methodical rumination on history and its immediate
categorization.

Douglas’s uses the oscillation between immediate and delayed cognition to
unsettle firm ideas about the role of history in shaping a positive African American
future. The orphist rings call the viewer to instantly perceive the subject—to place this mythical African setting within the context of rapid modern life—and also to slow down and revel in African history. In centering the eye on the fetish object, the viewer is called to understand the fetish in a kind of synechdochic relation of part to whole. The rings then operate to sever the fetish from its context. The painting also invites viewers to consider history through its basic content. Pharaoh-like headdresses appear on many of the figures. These headdresses create a rather simple link to an African tradition—it readily recalls Egypt through use of familiar iconography. Stylistically, the link to an Egyptian artistic tradition works to foreground the tension between surface and depth that we have previously examined. The characters rendered in profile invokes an over five-thousand-year-old tradition of Egyptian relief sculpture, where figures were similarly pictured in profile. Like so much of Douglas’s work, which is premised on irresolution and destabilization, even the seemingly stable profiles shift in use throughout the composition. The seated drummer in the lower right of the work, for instance, achieves a greater degree of three-dimensionality through the foreshortening of his left arm and the relative roundedness of his hand. In contrast, the spear holders in the upper register of the work, more closely follow the patterns of typical Egyptian reliefs. This subtle shift between two- and three-dimensionality is significant because it in part represents Douglas’s deliberate method of irresolution that we see throughout the series.

What appears to be an overwhelmingly positive image is not fully so as The Negro in an African Setting occupies two histories at once. Through concentric rings, the viewer is called to examine their place in history—to contend with the “retinalism” that coincides with the frenetic pace of modern life, but that is, at the same time, a type of
viewing that quickly categorizes, that “seal[s]” people into “crushing objecthood” (Fanon 109). Against this tendency, the panel equally calls the viewer to recognize that the fetish belongs to a contextualized historical moment of which viewers see only a part in the composition. This movement between the fetish object as a stand-in for African history and at the same time as only a part among many has broader implications for Douglas’s understanding of history in general. Artist and art critic Stephen Maine as suggested of *Aspects of Negro Life* that it is a “bittersweet celebration of black identity and collective cultural memory” and, further, that it “proposes four major phases in the trajectory of African-American experience by the themes of music and labor” (Maine 156). Through the example of the fetish object, Douglas conflates history itself with the optical, suggesting that like the gaze, history itself cannot be fully trusted. Douglas’s assertion here is purposefully paradoxical as, of course, the series itself is composed of four discrete sections that mark significant, yet abstract, moments in African and African American history.

In the second panel, *From Slavery Through Reconstruction*, Douglas complicates his call for the viewer’s sight through use of multiple concentric rings, a tall, prominent central figure, and the destructive gaze of hooded Klansmen on the left side of the composition. The concentric rings again functions as a mirror to the viewer’s eye. If viewed in progression, the viewer has already been called to both immediately perceive the image and its inherent properties through the echoed Orphist technique of simultaneous contrast. Unlike the first panel, however, it is impossible to view *From Slavery Through Reconstruction* all at once. Where in *The Negro in an African Setting* there is one single concentric band that functions as an analog to the viewer’s eye, this
panel present three separate rings. With varying rings to guide the eye, we can consider this work to be even more concerned with “slow[ing] the gaze of the viewer” (Hughes 313). Unlike Delaunay’s works which pursue the coupling of vision with knowledge as a kind of abstract artistic principle, Douglas works to slow the viewer’s perception through overlap of the concentric bands with historical moments. Immediately, the viewer’s eye is drawn to the center of the composition where the largest figure in the panel holds up a piece of paper and points into the background of the image towards a silhouette of the Capitol building (Kirschke 122). On the right side of the image is a figure who reads from a scroll and looks towards a crowd of figures whose hands are raised in the air in exultation. Concentric rings encircle the scroll and give it visual prominence. According to Tania Tribe who uses Douglas’s own writing about the panel, the scroll may represent the Emancipation Proclamation (396). On the left side of the image, concentric rings highlight a fallen figure who lies in a cotton field beneath three hooded Klansmen wielding clubs.

The overall effect of the multiple concentric rings is to move the viewer’s eye between immediate perception and recognition and slower and historical effects that undercut that immediacy of sight. Scanning the image from right to left (which the viewer is invited to do since the plants on the right side of the work mirror those found in the first panel and so connect it to the previous scene) the viewer quickly sees three things: Emancipation Proclamation, tall figure holding a ballot/piece of paper, and, on the left side of the work the fallen figure. Douglas calls for far more than immediate perception. Each of these three scenes is interwoven on the same register with further details. The viewer’s own eye is guided by the workers’ looks. One figure looks upwards
to the prominent, central figure, while another looks over his shoulder to the Klansmen looming above. Though the viewer’s eye is unable to view each critical point demarcated by the concentric rings at the same time, the figures in between the central foci pull the compositional sections together. In this way, Douglas weaves the narrative threads of abuse at the hands of the KKK together with the importance of voting and the freeing of the slaves.

A significant shift between *The Negro in an African Setting* and *From Slavery Through Reconstruction* is that the figures in the second panel engage in a process of viewing. The leader who stands in the middle of the composition, who Kirschke argues symbolizes the careers of significant black leaders of the time, “urge[s] freedmen to deposit their ballots in a box before him” (122). The leader further urges the crowd to look upward toward the Capitol by pointing up to the hill. The field workers follow the figure’s lead, turning their heads away from their work to look. This invitation to look is significant because it offers another method for the audience to see. As bell hooks notes in her essay “The Oppositional Gaze,” slaves were often denied the right to gaze (308). The field workers teach the viewer a new mode of seeing. By mirroring the process of the workers’ look, the viewer, too, learns to look with an eye toward progress.

The left side of the composition presents one of the most difficult moments of the series. Hooded Ku Klux Klansmen ride on horses, wielding clubs high in the air. As viewers, we encounter the scene just after the action: a fieldworker lies beneath the Klansmen, presumably struck down by their blows. The gaze functions here in a multivalent way. The fieldworkers are pulled between looking towards KKK members and the man in the center of the composition. The leader encourages a new mode of sight
that operates as a visual counter to the reductive and destructive gaze of the robed Klansmen. The Klansmen’s eyes are stylistically different than any of the other eyes pictured across the series. Rather than leave the hoods blank, Douglas draws attention to the gaze of the horsemen through difference in color between the oval cutouts and the cloth of the hood. The cutout holes, which we read as eyes, are white and operate in the image as the worst end of the white gaze. Resisting this gaze is a figure who, much like the fetish object, occupies an in-between space in the paintings register between foreground and background. Placed in between the field workers and the Klansmen, a single figure meets the eyes of the hooded men.

In *From Slavery Through Reconstruction*, we see a transformation from the first panel in the depiction of time and history. There is a notable shift in Douglas’s mural from the stated goals of Delaunay’s works. The mural, by its very nature as a large-scale composition, challenges Hughes’ contention that simultaneous contrast provokes a shift from vision as diachronic to vision as synchronic (Hughes 312). *From Slavery Through Reconstruction*, for example, uses three separate sets of concentric circles and, compositionally, the mural is divided into three narrative scenes that blend into one another. The blend of narrative from one scene into the next is, in Hughes’ words, a “progressive succession,” and is therefore diachronic (312). By situating his art across multiple time frames, Douglas deliberately reworks the Orphist relationship between viewer and canvas, and in so doing works to obscure firm historical narratives. We see a distinct transformation here from the idyllic vision of *The Negro in an African Setting* and its use of a single concentric ring to frame the composition. Multiple histories collapse into one another as radiating rings merge.
The panel also achieves an effect of seeming stability and that stability’s simultaneous dissolution. The left half of the composition is particularly instructive in this regard, as it offers multiple models of sight. One of the difficult parts of this series is the movement between seemingly discrete scenes and the fluidity of these scenes as they merge with one another. As discussed before, the field workers exemplify this push and pull as they are called to look in multiple places at once and are situated between two of concentric rings. By presenting multiple instances of African American history, Douglas at first seems to be responding quite directly to Arthur Schomburg’s imperative to “remake [the] past in order to remake [the] future” (Schomburg 670). Yet, for Douglas, the link between a remade past and a positive future remains uncertain. Douglas’s figures are unsure where to look and where to place their faith. They are pulled between meeting and resisting the gaze of the Klansmen and turning away from this horror to look toward the progress represented by the Capitol. This confusion of where to look is shared by the viewer, who is equally called to look in multiple places at once. Multiple concentric rings demand the viewer’s attention at the same time.

In the third mural, An Idyll of the Deep South, Douglas presents a forest scene with figures pictured dancing and playing music in the center of the work. On the right side of the panel, field workers till the soil. The repeated band of earth creates a visual link between this panel and the previous one. The revelry in the central parts of the panel is set against the somber tone of the left side of the work. A lynched figure hangs from a tree in the upper left portion of the composition. Like the two previous panels, this mural invites the viewer to engage in a multilayered process of spectatorship. Douglas achieves this through use of the concentric ring and through the diagonal band of light that bisects
the image. He outlines the process of looking primarily through the kneeling figure on the left side of the work who looks towards North star. Looking upward toward the star that casts a radiant beam of light across the composition, the viewer recognizes that sight has the potential to save as much as it does to condemn. The man’s upward gaze suggests hope and possibility, which is confirmed by the figure’s strong, determined, and upright pose. The path of the viewer’s sight works in tandem with the beam of light that divides the composition. Through this beam, the kneeling figure is linked to the spectral figures that read as the ghostly presence of the kneeling mourner who bends his head in sorrow beneath the lynched figure. The link between the spectral figure and the kneeling man suggests that although sight has redemptive possibilities, it cannot operate without historical awareness.

Douglas controls the viewer’s experience in two ways, through the central concentric rings and through the diagonal beam of light that bisects the image. By presenting these two modes at once, Douglas places the viewer in conflict. Should I look towards the playful musical scene in the middle of the work? Or, alternatively, should I focus my sight on progress mediated through sorrow by following the stare of the kneeling figure? Arthur Schomburg implores African American artists to look back toward history as inspiration for social advancement. “When we consider the facts,” he writes, “certain chapters of American history will have to be reopened” (Schomburg 671). Yet the chapters of history Schomburg deems worthy of revisiting are those that focus on positive conceptions of African Americans, not on the terrible losses suffered through slavery and after. By inviting the viewer to share the kneeling figure’s stare—a
stare the sees the promise of the North Star, but also looks upon the spectral figures surrounding a lynched body—Douglas provides an alternative to Schomburg’s views.

We can also think of Douglas’s parallel demands to focus on the center and left side of the work within the context of Orphist painting. In Virginia Spate’s influential analysis of Orphism, she argues that one of the primary goals of these painters was to express “Simultanism,” or, “the mind’s grasp of the simultaneous existence of an infinitude of interrelated states of being” (Spate 3). The Orphists were concerned with consciousness and the operations of the mind. Spate contends, “all Orphic painters believed that it was through exploring their own consciousness in the act of painting that they could approach the modes of consciousness that were meaningful for others” (5). By responding to Arthur Schomburg’s imperative to revisit the African past in his art, Douglas shows an investment in questions of consciousness. Specifically, by drawing the viewer’s eye towards the banjo in this scene but then placing this against the surrounding context of hard work and loss suggested in the surroundings, An Idyll of the Deep South suggests that sight and the truth of site is always mediated.

*An Idyll of the Deep South* is also significant in its increased use of color. Douglas creates a clear contrast between black, brown, and white bodies—all of which read as African American bodies because they are stylized in the same manner as the African bodies in the previous two panels. By presenting a confluence of differently colored African bodies, Douglas unsettles essentialist thinking about the alignment of color and race. Through the heavily stylized bodies, however, his work still retains a commitment to an Africanized form. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon provides a personal story that shows how sight often functions to condemn individuals to essential characteristics. In
Fanon’s personal account, a child calls out: “Mama, see the Negro. I’m frightened!” (112). This call dissolves Fanon’s understanding of the body from being intact at one moment, to being a fully racialized in the next. “I could no longer laugh, because I already knew that there were legends, stories, history, and above all historicity, which I had learned about from Jaspers. Then, assailed at various points, the corporeal schema crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema” (Fanon 112). Fanon’s comment here shows that history, when coupled with the child’s sight, produces a shift in his own understanding of being. Like Fanon’s story, *An Idyll of the Deep South* suggests that history and sight are bound to one another. For Douglas, however, this is not strictly negative; through the kneeling figure we recognize that the possibilities of hope, signaled by the star in the upper left of the work, still requires recognition of loss and hardship. This concept is articulated in visual form in the previous panel, *From Slavery Through Reconstruction*. In contrast, *An Idyll of the Deep South* shows a similar tethering of history with sight, yet the possibilities are reversed.

The final panel in *Aspects of Negro Life* is *Song of the Towers*. In the panel, a saxophonist triumphantly plays his horn on top of a cog of industry. Despite the positivity of this single figure, the tone of the panel is overwhelmingly negative. Bright green spectral hands reach out towards figures from the lower left and right of the image, grasping toward other figures who try to protect themselves by covering their heads with their limbs. Gas pours from the tops of chimney stacks in the lower right of the image. A green ribbon of gas bisects the scene horizontally. The green color repeats in the ghastly hands that reach out to terrorize the figures. Amy Kirschke reads the overwhelming negativity of the painting as a reflection of the difficult conditions of the Depression. In
my view, this negativity can also be read as Douglas’s final statement about the lack of optimism in what the past can do for shaping a positive African American future. In contrast, Tania Costa Tribe reads the scene encouragingly, suggesting the work presents a “timeless vision of America’s glorious mythical future” (Tribe 396). While I am most convinced by Kirschke’s interpretation of the work, that the mural is representative of the struggles of the Depression, the lack of agreement between Kirschke and Tribe about the emotional tone of the work is indicative of Douglas’s deliberate tension between positive and negative depictions of history.

In both tone and style, Song of the Towers departs from the first three panels. There are similarities of course: the framing device of the orphic ring remains consistent, used again to focus the viewer’s eye, this time on the saxophone. Yet Douglas departs markedly from the previous panels by using three-dimensional forms where previously he uses only two dimensions. In the cog at the bottom of the painting as while as in the tall skyscrapers that loom over the composition, Douglas creates three-dimensional space through use of shading. Perhaps we are to read Douglas’s turn to three-dimensionality positively, a stylistic shift functioning as a kind of analog to a new era of fullness. A new history has been ushered in, and Douglas invites his viewers to look directly toward that vision through his focused orphic rings. Equally important, then, is the saxophone as a symbol for the artistic potential of individuals and the promise artistry provides to heal wounds. Read in this way, the final panel represents the positivity of Locke’s claims about the value of art in the era of the New Negro: “Much of this reopening of intellectual contacts has centered in New York and has been richly fruitful not merely in the enlarging of personal experience, but in the definite enrichment of American art and
letters and in the clarifying of our common vision of the social tasks ahead” (Locke 3). 

As the site of artistic inspiration and development, New York offers as “common vision,” a new mode of seeing. This transformation is apparent in Douglas’s turn to three-dimensionality at the end of the series.

Yet, as Kirschke and Tribe’s debate indicates, Douglas oscillates between a positive and negative future outlook. Off in the distance is the Statue of Liberty, a visual whose indeterminacy recalls the fetish object in the first panel. If we read the fetish as representative of African history, then the Statue of Liberty provides a kind of visual counterbalance, and exists as a stand-in for American history broadly. The two histories merge together. Given the troubling history of fetish objects being removed from their native contexts, which we learned about through Anne Cheng’s account of Picasso at the Trocadéro, the conflation of these two statues suggests that liberty, too, has been severed from its original circumstance.

The tension between the exultation of the central figure in Song of the Towers and the fear and dejection of the other figures is furthered in the work’s direct relationship to audience. Like the other panels, the orphic rings function to invite the viewer’s gaze on the work and in so doing establish a relationship between the viewer and the painting. That relationship is changed through the inclusion of the spectral hands at the lower left and right of the work. In a kind of suffusion of the viewer’s body into the work, the viewer is implicated in the fear the workers portray through their cowering. In incriminating the viewer in this way, Douglas leaves the series with a word of warning to the viewer of the power of the gaze to frighten, to suppress, and to condemn.
In her essay “Visual Narrative and the Harlem Renaissance,” Tania Costa Tribe argues for the value that historical narratives played during the Harlem Renaissance in healing the wounds of slavery. “By re-inscribing their remembered episodes of pain and struggle into the American historical account, they were able to make such memories available for critical scrutiny and reassessment, and thus transformed painful episodes into resonating myths of origin” (Tribe 391). I include Tribe’s comments here because they suggest something of the remarkable quality of Douglas’s art to both engage with history and to enact change. I want to add that Douglas’s engagement with history is inextricably bound to his articulation of sight. Throughout *Aspects of Negro Life*, Douglas positions the historical and the optical as interwoven. Through utilization of Orphist technique, seen especially in the use of color and the concentric rings, Douglas calls of viewers to slow their gaze. The process Douglas calls for is deliberately paradoxical. On one level Douglas asks his viewers to immediately recognize the subject through the mirroring of the eye and its function to rapidly accept and interpret information. On another level, Douglas calls for a slowing down of thought that works to reject immediate objectification and categorization. By ruminating on the gaze through adaptation of Orphist technique and inviting viewers to do the same, Douglas suggests that sight is always interwoven with history.
Chapter 2

“And the Eyes Were Magnificent!”: Sight and Agency in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*

Nella Larsen’s 1929 novel *Passing* continues to be celebrated for its engagement with black femininity and sexuality. Scholarship on Larsen’s work has often discussed the psychological complexities of the characters and the homoerotic subtext of the novel. More recent scholarship has been concerned with the visual elements of the novel, whether that is the clothing the women wear at social functions and their etiquette at social events or the painterly aspects of the novel.¹ In examining *Passing*, I build upon this concern with the visual elements of the novel by looking at the ways the novel invites us to see. I argue that *Passing*’s obsession with sight functions as a key part of the novel’s larger question about the relationship between agency and the gaze. The novel remains deliberately unresolved in its conclusions about what sight can do for granting agency to the individual. By presenting disparate narratives of the power of vision, the novel warns against a singular understanding of agency.

The question of agency is the question of who has the ability to act and of how those actions affect others. By articulating sight as a key component of agency while refusing to chart a clear link between these two phenomena, Larsen cautions against any one singular way of vying for agency in the world. Larsen’s unresolved theory of agency is especially significant when considering the historical context of the novel. The novel is the story of African American women in the late 1920s who “pass” as white in order to gain access to social settings from which they were commonly excluded. In this light, a

¹ Miriam Thaggert covers the social etiquette at Harlem Renaissance-era social functions in *Images of Black Modernism*. Cherene Sherrard-Johnson offers a “painterly reading” of Larsen’s work in her book *Portraits of the New Negro Woman*. 
narrative about agency is of course significant as it could serve to provide black women who were assigned a subordinated status with pathways towards positive individuation and subjectivity. Contemporary scholars continue to think about the relationship between agency and the gaze. In *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, bell hooks suggests that black women can gain agency by returning the gaze. Yet nothing is quite so easy in Larsen’s text; where at times sight and vision succeed in providing Irene and Clare with agency, at other times the reverse is true and the gaze results in paralyzing objectification. By presenting this polarity and many iterations in between, Larsen’s text comes to the disquieting conclusion that sight is not a reliable pathway towards agency.

The narrative is one of Irene’s quest for agency and control in the face of her greatest fear, that people are ultimately powerless to make their own decisions. For its short length at just over one hundred pages, the novel is a surprisingly dense meditation on sight and what it means to look, how the look offers either moments of control or is reduced to being ineffective. The moments of sight stand in contrast to the repetitious actions of the characters or the seeming inevitability of outcomes. The question of whether people have freedom of choice in action or whether all outcomes are set and predetermined is a growing concern for Irene as the novel develops.

A chance encounter on the top floor of the Drayton Hotel on a hot summer day in Chicago gives the reader a glimpse of the significance of the eyes and the look. Irene Redfield goes to the top of the hotel to escape the summer heat only to run into her childhood friend, Clare Kendry, who she has not seen in years. After recognizing her friend, Irene continues to stare, even beginning to classify her friend’s features based on their aesthetic qualities.
Her lips, painted a brilliant geranium red, were sweet and sensitive and a little obstinate. A tempting mouth. […] And the eyes were magnificent! Dark, sometimes absolutely black, always luminous, and set in long, black lashes. Arresting eyes, slow and mesmeric, and with, for all their warmth, something withdrawn and secret about them. Ah! Surely! They were Negro eyes! Mysterious and concealing. And set in that ivory face under that bright hair, there was about them something exotic. (*Passing* 191)

Irene begins to trace the unresolved qualities of Clare’s eyes—their power to “arrest,” and “mesmerize” yet, at the same time, the information that is concealed beneath them. This moment begins to chart an obsession with eyes and sight that only continues as the novel develops, but also suggests that agency and sight are thought to operate in tandem. It is Irene in this instance who looks and categorizes here, noting the intricate details of her friend’s face. She remains fully focused on Clare’s features and on *Clare’s* ability to have agency through her powerful eyes. It is Clare’s vision that has the power to arrest and mesmerize, not Irene’s. This early scene immediately charts two possibilities for sight. Clare’s vision contains depth, history, and knowledge, and has the power to act. Irene’s gaze, for all her concentrated staring, is ineffectual. Although she starts to objectify Clare, to reduce her to a list of formal and aesthetic features, this comes with no corresponding feeling of objectification from Clare. Rather, Clare’s stare is warm and caressing. “Standing there under the appeal, the caress, of her eyes, Irene had the desire, the hope, that this parting wouldn’t be the last” (*Passing* 191). Clare’s vision only grows in strength as it works to grab hold of Irene.

The scene atop the Drayton begins to trace the novel’s obsession with the visual, the way sight comes to confirm or deny agency. Equally important, though, is the narrative counterpoint to this impulse, which is the possibility that there is no freedom of
choice in action. This lack of agency is a growing concern for Irene as the novel develops. Cherene Sherrard-Johnson has suggested that a few key lines foreshadow Clare’s death, lines which I’ll argue also show Irene’s growing concern that all outcomes are predetermined. At the end of the novel Clare has fallen from a sixth-floor window to her death on the ground below. For Sherrard-Johnson, “the reader immediately conjures a spectacular picture of Clare’s death throes, reinforced […] by three foreshadowings of her fall and its presumably gruesome aftermath” (Sherrard-Johnson 45-47). The three passages read as follows:

Irene finished her cigarette and threw it out, watching the tiny sparks drop slowly down to the white ground below.

One the floor at her feet lay the shattered cup. Dark stains dotted the bright rug. Spread. The chatter stopped. Went on. Before her, Zulena gathered up the white fragments.

[Irene] tore the offending letter into tiny ragged squares that fluttered down and made a small heap in her black crepe de Chine lap. The destruction completed […] she dropped them over the [train’s] railing and watched them scatter, on tracks, on cinders, on forlorn grass, in rills of dirty water.

(Sherrard-Johnson 47, my emphasis)

As Sherrard-Johnson tells us, “in each of these scenes Irene rehearses an active role in Clare’s symbolic destruction” (47). Importantly, Irene’s “active role” here is bound to sight. Each passage indicates Irene’s active process of viewing, a process that suggests both Irene’s agency and the ability of static objects to work on her. In the first and third example, Irene “watch[es]” Clare’s symbolic destruction before her. In the second scene, the rather gruesome parallel of the dark stain to Clare’s bleeding body has the power to stop the conversation and, more importantly to limit Irene’s narration to short, choppy sentences. In this light, the foreshadowing suggests both agency and a lack thereof, that
even Clare’s death—which may or may not have been at the hands of Irene—is a preset outcome.

The novel begins to trace the subtle connections between sight and its function to produce or prevent agency. In contradistinction to this impulse, it alternatively suggests that questions of agency are ultimately inconsequential because things are predetermined. Irene articulates her frustrations with this in her conversations with her husband about why racial passing happens. According to Brian, passing is simply a result of evolutionary outcomes: “Instinct of the race to survive and expand” (*Passing* 216). In Brian’s view, everything is directed by biology as a singular external force. Irene, however, does not accept this. “Rot! Everything can’t be explained by some general biological phrase” (*Passing* 216). Yet despite Irene articulating her counterargument, she recognizes the “futility of attempting to combat Brian” in the matter (217). This moment is deeply wrapped in questions of agency and control. It firstly shows Irene articulating her own agency by building a counterargument against Brian but finally letting go of her own narrative because of the seeming “futility” of the endeavor. Not only is this moment a struggle for control of their family and marriage, but it also questions who will control the narratives of what race is and what it means. Further, it suggests a range of implications for how race and agency operate together. In Brian’s vision, race and agency are not parts of the same conversation. Irene, in contrast, finds Brian’s comments preposterous and wants instead to believe that agency and race can coexist.

I have so far tried to suggest that the novel is fundamentally concerned with sight and the effects of the gaze. Further, that Larsen’s text questions the way agency and sight operate together. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Frantz Fanon also explores the
way the gaze functions to produce individual subjectivity and feelings of objectification. I reintroduce Fanon here in order to better address where Larsen’s theories of sight and agency align with this critical thinker of these categories, and where her ideas chart an alternative path. In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), Fanon describes the destructive power of the gaze to capture the individual and force a person to reckon with the gazer’s conception of their own identity. Fanon illustrates the debilitating results of the gaze when someone looks at him and cries out, “Look, a Negro!” (Fanon 111). He tethers this moment to another example, a child’s call to her mother: “Mama, see the Negro! I’m frightened” (112). What first had “amused” Fanon in the original call no longer does. “I had made up my mind to laugh myself to tears, but laughter had become impossible” (112). Fanon further describes the mental and emotional impact of the white gaze on the black man.

> I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects. Sealed into that crushing objecthood, I turned beseechingly to others. […] I was indignant; I demanded an explanation. Nothing happened. I burst apart. Now the fragments have been put together again by another self. (Fanon 109)

Here Fanon describes the way in which a person’s gaze can rob a person of his or her own subjectivity and fully objectify them. Even worse, this objectification results in a kind of self-destruction.

*Passing* predominantly shows the interactions between black bourgeois characters in Harlem and, because of this, does not often offer many moments that directly coincide with Fanon’s formulation of the gaze, which specifically addresses the ways in which
white people gaze upon black people. For Fanon, the fragmentation of self is the direct consequence of the white male gaze. In *Passing* we see moments of the gaze but with a difference, a gaze between black subjects. There is, however, one moment in the text that conforms most closely to Fanon’s articulation. Out shopping with her friend Felise Freeland, Irene is approached by Jack Bellew, Clare Kendry’s husband who at this point in the novel does not know that Irene or his own wife are of African origin.

He had, Irene knew, become conscious of Felise, golden, with curly black Negro hair, whose arm was still linked in her own. She was sure, now, of the understanding in his face, as he looked at her again and then back at Felise. And displeasure.

He didn’t, however, withdraw his outstretched hand. Not at once.

But Irene didn’t take it. Instinctively, in the first glance of recognition, her face had become a mask. Now she turned on him a totally uncomprehending look, a bit questioning. (*Passing* 259)

This moment corresponds quite closely to Fanon’s description and shows how the gaze can result in paralysis and objectification. At first Jack Bellew recognizes Irene as an acquaintance, and he happily calls out, “Mrs. Redfield!” (259). What begins as a kind gesture, however, transforms into something nefarious and akin to Fanon’s description. As “the understanding in his face” grows, Jack Bellew implicitly cries out, “Look, a Negro!” The result of Bellew’s unstated call but unwavering gaze is Irene’s immediate objectification: “In the first glance of recognition, her face had become a mask” (259).

At the same time that this moment reduces Irene to the state of the mask, it also is a moment where she conveys her own agency. The final line, “Now she turned on him a totally uncomprehending look, a bit questioning,” shows Irene’s resistance to Bellew’s gaze. His gaze causes her transformation into a mask, but it also initiates Irene’s
oppositional look. “Seeing that he still stood with his outstretched hand,” the passage continues, “she gave him a cool appraising stare which she reserved for mashers, and drew Felise on” (*Passing* 259). What seemed at first to be a moment of full objectification for Irene transforms into a moment of agency and a moment of resistance. Irene stares back at Jack Bellew to confront his objectifying gaze.

In her chapter, “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators,” bell hooks theorizes a form of resistance through sight where women look back at the gazer to resist objectification. As slaves were denied the right to gaze, the questions of who gets to look and how they do it is significant to the lived experience and politics of black people (hooks 115). A tactic of colonial resistance that upends the power dynamics of slave-owner to slave, the gaze can be utilized as a method of subversion. “The ‘gaze,’” hooks contends, “has been and is a site of resistance for colonized black people globally” (116). Yet hooks admits to the fairly limited scholarship surrounding the gaze; discussions of the gaze have often been male-centric. Black men, she argues, could disavow racist portrayals of black people on TV, but often these critiques offered little concern for gender (118). The oppositional gaze is a type of looking that overturns the “phallocentric gaze of desire and possession” and deconstructs the binary of “woman as image, man as bearer of the look” (123).

A significant part of hooks’ theorization of the oppositional gaze is that it grants agency to those who look back to challenge the gazer. “By courageously looking, we defiantly declared: ‘Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality.’ Even in the worst circumstances of domination, the ability to manipulate one’s gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency” (hooks
We can see this agency when Irene stares back at Jack Bellew. She creates her own agency back looking back toward him, meeting his determining and identifying gaze with her own “uncomprehending look” (Passing 259).

Where at times the novel presents sight, resistance, and agency working together in the way hooks describes, at other times Passing presents challenges to our ease of understanding. Brian Redfield, Irene’s husband, complicates our understanding of the gaze. This complication suggests that the gaze is more comprehensive than hooks’ or Fanon’s schemas suggest. The third and final section of the novel, “Finale,” begins with Irene’s irritation at the weather failing to conform to appropriate seasonal behavior and continues into a discussion of Irene’s depression. “And for all her trying,” Irene admits to herself, “she couldn’t be free of what dull, indefinite misery which with increasing tenaciousness had laid hold of her” (Passing 246). This relatively minor example illustrates the novel’s constant questioning of the link between agency and control. Irene can’t stand the weather failing to conform to her demands. At this point in the novel, readers are not surprised by Irene’s displeasure or her desire to control. Yet the weather is only a minor irritation when compared to Irene’s inability to understand Brian because of his recently changing behaviors (246-247). In this scene, Brian gazes at Irene, but not in the typical way of identification or resistance that we have examined previously.

Brian didn’t speak. He continued to stand beside the bed, seeming to look at nothing in particular. Certainly not at her. True, his gaze was on her, but in it there was some quality that made her feel that at that moment she was no more to him than a pane of glass through which he stared. At what? She didn’t know, couldn’t guess. And this made her uncomfortable. Piqued her. (Passing 248)
An initial glance at Brian’s gaze suggests that it fits Fanon’s description. It transforms Irene into a material object, a pane of glass, that might have all the chance to “burst apart” and “fragment” as Fanon does in his own description (Fanon 109). But Brian’s vision is complicated, and it is unclear to Irene whether he is even looking at her in the first place. Further, for all its transforming potential, we see that Irene does not burst apart but instead is “piqued” and “uncomfortable” because she cannot guess at the meaning behind Brian’s stare. His gaze unsettles Irene precisely because it is not clear whether he is looking at her at all. In much the same way as the couple’s argument over the biology of race that we examined previously, this passage demonstrates that struggles for control are always at the heart of Irene and Brian’s relationship. This scene shows more about the minor possibilities of the gaze than Fanon’s theory suggests. Instead of leading to a full destruction of self, Brian’s gaze produces in Irene the minor emotions of discomfort and annoyance.

Like hooks’ schema, Brian’s gaze certainly produces questions about agency and control. Irene is upset by her inability to comprehend her husband’s stare. “At what [does he stare]? She didn’t know, couldn’t guess” (248). The immediate result of her lack of comprehension is annoyance—it “piqued her”—but, in the larger narrative arc, this moment initiates Irene’s belief that Brian has cheated on her with Clare Kendry. This scene shows that Irene’s incomprehension of Brian’s gaze produces a desire for control. Though ultimately Irene’s conclusions rest in uncertainty, Brian’s gaze lead to Irene’s agency in determining the narrative of her husband’s infidelity. Just a page later in the novel, and after a short conversation between the two, Irene admits the situation to herself: “Clare Kendy! So that was it! Impossible. It couldn’t be” (Passing 249).
In “Her ‘Nig’: Returning the Gaze of Nella Larsen’s *Passing*,” Lori Harrison-Kahan discusses the significance of the gaze during the Harlem Renaissance. She argues, “through the figure of Irene, Larsen has given her black subject an oppositional gaze that reverses the scenario of white voyeurism” (Harrison-Kahan 120). She also examines Brian’s gaze in the scene recorded above and admits that Larsen’s use of the gaze may be more complicated than a simple reversal of white voyeurism. “If the power of the male gaze is to constitute the woman as object,” she concludes, “Brian’s unseeing gaze fails to do this; in contrast to Clare’s look, which made Irene overly conscious of her body earlier, Brian’s gaze renders her invisible” (Harrison-Kahan 133). Harrison-Kahan’s comments admit to the complicated and intricate workings of the gaze in Larsen’s text. She admits to the slippages of the gaze as not always being a look of full objectification, or, the reverse, a resisting gaze that creates the subject. However, Harrison-Kahan does not pursue this further. Brian’s gaze gives a momentary glimpse into the ineffectiveness of the look and shows where it “works” and where it does not. Larsen presents a complex understanding of the gaze in this single instance that, on one level shows the gaze’s function to deny agency to the individual and, on another, to grant agency to that person. In this particular case, the gaze functions to restrict agency by failing to see Irene as either subject or object. Paradoxically, Brian’s “unseeing eyes” may actually lead to Irene’s awakening to the problems in their marriage. This scene initiates her understanding of the illicit affair between her husband and her friend.

Harrison-Kahan’s project is also significant to my own as she teases out the complex dynamics of subject formation between Clare and Irene. Specifically, she argues that Clare’s nickname for Irene—’Rene—removes the “I” from the name and thus marks
a removal by Clare of Irene’s subjectivity (110). I agree with Harrison-Kahan here and want to add that this removal can also be thought of as a removal of Irene’s “eye”—her objectifying gaze. Readers immediately notice Irene’s use of the gaze in her time atop the Drayton Hotel, which we have in part examined earlier.

A closer look at Irene and Clare’s meeting in the Drayton shows how Clare uses her own eyes to rob Irene of her objectifying gaze. Irene is sitting alone in the Drayton Hotel, looking for relief from a hot summer day in Chicago when an unknown woman enters the room. The woman’s eyes immediately strike Irene. “An attractive-looking woman, was Irene’s opinion, with those dark, almost black, eyes and that wide mouth like a scarlet flower against the ivory of her skin. […] Then, conscious that she had been staring, she looked quickly away” (Passing 177). Irene is drawn to this woman, who we soon after learn is Clare Kendry, and appreciates her beauty. Rather than working to objectify this woman through her stare, Irene is almost compelled to stare to begin with. It is only because of social etiquette, her being “conscious that she had been staring,” that she stops continuing to gaze. Afraid of being impolite, “[Irene’s] mind returned to her own affairs” (177).

What begins as Irene staring at another beautiful woman becomes more complicated as she is simultaneously compelled to look and, bound through etiquette, obliged to look away. Despite her efforts to look away, Irene is drawn again to Clare Kendry: “The dress decided, her thoughts had gone back to the snag of Ted’s book, her unseeing eyes far away on the lake, when by some sixth sense she was acutely aware that someone was watching her” (177-178, my emphasis). This passage suggests a complicated relationship to sight where the eyes are “unseeing.” It further suggests the
power of the gaze when someone is put under scrutiny; Irene is aware that Clare is watching her even thought she does not see Clare doing so.

As the passage continues, Irene and Clare lock eyes and look away in a scene that illustrates the movement between agency and objectification.

Very slowly [Irene] looked around, and into the dark eyes of the woman in the green frock at the next table. But she evidently failed to realize that such intense interest as she was showing might be embarrassing, and continued to stare. […] Instead, it was Irene who was put out. Feeling her color heighten under the continued inspection, she slid her eyes down. (Passing 178)

This passage indicates Irene’s desire for control and order, her investment in a social etiquette that would obligate this woman to politely avert her eyes. Yet that is not what Irene gets, and, though she is also staring back at Clare, she ends up having to avert her own eyes. We of course learn later that Clare Kendry is staring at Irene because she recognizes her as her childhood friend, but at this moment Irene “feels her color heighten” and she momentarily wonders if this woman may recognize that she is passing as white. Clare’s stare only continues.

Again she looked up, and for a moment her brown eyes politely returned the star of the other’s black ones, which never for an instant fell or wavered. […] Oh well, let her look! […] She stole another glance. Still looking. What strange languorous eyes she had! (Passing 178)

Irene’s description of Clare’s eyes suggests stasis and solidity, a kind of preserved immobility. Her description of Clare’s eyes becomes a bit more bizarre in her description of them as “strange” and “languorous” (178). “Langourous” denotes indolence and inertia, suggesting a lack of movement and laziness to Clare’s look. Even though Irene classifies Clare’s eyes in this way, her own inability to continually meet Clare’s gaze
suggests that Clare’s perceived immobility might actually be read as agency: Clare’s look causes Irene to avert her eyes.

Irene and Clare’s time at the Drayton illustrates the complexities of the gaze as a personal form of action. Equally, the scene highlights the way the gaze produces actions from others. An undercurrent to these statements about the gaze is a questioning of the veracity of sight. As Aaron Douglas emphasizes in his mural paintings, color is not a trustworthy marker of race. We see this particularly in Irene’s language that marks the indeterminacy of color. “An attractive-looking woman, was Irene’s opinion, with those dark, almost black, eyes…” (*Passing* 177). In describing Clare’s eyes as “dark, almost black,” Irene admits a level of uncertainty in her analysis. That the eyes are *almost* black could simply mean that they are nearly black in color, but it also suggests a degree of uncertainty and untrustworthiness about what color Irene is seeing. One of the important features of the scene which Harrison-Kahan has astutely pointed out, is it is built on misperception. Harrison-Kahan notes the irony here, that “while Irene faults white people for their inability to identify blacks, she herself has failed to detect the visual signs that might identify Clare” (119). That this scene is built on misperception adds yet another subtle layer to the complex questions surrounding the gaze and agency. Since Irene assumes Clare is a white woman at their initial moment of encounter, in one respect her looking back toward Clare is an oppositional look. Irene gains agency looking back toward Clare in an act of defiance: “But she looked, boldly this time, back into the eyes still frankly intent upon her” (*Passing* 179). But with this scene being built on misperception, it questions whether Irene really has any agency at all as the foundation for her defiance is built on misinformation. Although Irene may be “seized by a desire to
outstare the rude observer,” the observer is actually her friend. In this complex arrangement of agency, sight, and misperception, the text provokes questions of the link between agency and (mis)perception. If our actions are based on mistruths or misperceptions, does this limit our agency? If our ability to act and create change in the world rests on unstable footing, does that reduce the efficacy of our resulting actions?

As exemplified by the Drayton Hotel scene, Larsen presents a multivalent examination of sight and agency. Another way the text gets at the questions of agency is through the recollection of past events, always narrated through Irene’s perspective. One example of this is Clare Kendry’s childhood, which we learn about in the opening pages of the novel. It is important to recognize that our understanding of Clare is from Irene’s perspective, as this colors our understanding of who controls the narrative of biography. At the beginning of the novel Irene receives a letter from Clare that causes Irene to reflect on Clare’s past.

And for a swift moment Irene Redfield seemed to see a pale and small girl sitting on a ragged blue sofa, sewing pieces of bright red cloth together. While her drunken father, a tall, powerfully built man, raged threateningly up and down the shabby room, bellowing curses and making spasmodic lunges at her which were not the less frightening because they were, for the most part, ineffectual. Sometimes he did manage to reach her. But only the fact that the child had edged herself and her poor sewing over the farthermost corner of the sofa suggested that she was in any way perturbed by this menace to herself and to her work. (Passing 172)

Compared to the active lunges and bellowing of her father, Clare is relatively immobile. Irene’s initial description of Clare suggests only the slightest degree of agency that Clare has against her belligerent father. But what at first seems to be a lack of agency actually indicates some degree of it. Clare has had agency enough to remove herself from her
father’s mostly ineffectual rage. In her “immobility” Clare carves out a space for herself away from her father’s antagonism.

Rather than feel empathy towards Clare for being raised under such difficult circumstances, this fleeting memory leads Irene to describe Clare under opposing theories:

There had been, even in those days, nothing sacrificial in Clare Kendry’s idea of life, no allegiance beyond her own immediate desire. She was selfish, cold, and hard. And yet she had, too, a strange capacity of transforming warmth and passing, verging sometimes on almost theatrical heroics. (Passing 172)

On the one hand, Clare’s “cold and hard” nature make her appear like an object. Her agency seems limited to the realization of her own passing desires. Yet at the same time Irene admits to Clare’s peculiar transforming potential. This early example is significant because it foretells Irene’s desire to control, and, however negative, to articulate her own agency in doing so. Further, such control allows Irene to pronounce her own subjectivity by way of declaring what she, herself, is not. This scene provides a small instance in Irene’s greater characterization, her desperate desire to control the narrative of Clare’s life.

The passage also has greater resonance later in the novel. It tells us more about Irene’s fear of fate as the counterpoint to agency and control. Clare’s childhood scene actually recalls the final scene of the novel when Jack Bellew enters the party to discover that Clare has been passing as white. Jack Bellew bursts into the room and cries out to Clare. “‘So you’re a nigger, a damned dirty nigger!’ His voice was a snarl and a moan, an expression of rage and of pain” (Passing 271). As Bellew bursts into the scene, one
recalls the scene from Clare’s childhood. Clare has essentially married her father here, but rather than “ineffectual spasmodic lunges,” Bellew’s (whose name reminds us of “bellows” in the early passage) anger may be related to her death. By linking the story of Clare’s childhood to Jack Bellew’s enraged entrance at the end of the novel, the text invites readers to consider the antithesis of agency, that all outcomes are predetermined.

In Irene’s description of the childhood of Clare Kendry, we get a glimpse at the way in which Irene is determined to control the narrative of her friend’s life. Irene’s desire to control repeats itself throughout the novel, and we see it most often exemplified in her attempts to reduce Clare to the status of an aesthetic object. Despite Irene’s attempts to fully objectify Clare, to diminish her to stasis, Irene is unable to do so. She discovers that even objects have agency, that they produce particular emotional responses from those who view them. We see this at the Negro Welfare League dance, which Irene has worked hard to organize. Brian, who she is beginning to suspect is having an affair with Clare, has undermined her authority by inviting Clare to the event. Startled by Clare’s dazzling beauty, Irene gives a “little choked exclamation of admiration” as she stares towards Clare (Passing 233).

Clare, exquisite, golden, fragrant, flaunting, in a stately gown of shining black taffeta, whose long, full skirt lay in graceful folds about her slim golden feet; her glistening hair drawn smoothly back into a small twist at the nape of her neck; her eyes sparkling like dark jewels. (Passing 233)

Irene is stunned by Clare’s beauty. Through this passage, which we associate with Irene’s own perspective, we recognize that she has carefully catalogued each of the intricate details of Clare’s outfit and her impressive look. Irene’s cataloging of the intimate details of Clare’s outfit objectifies Clare by creating a metaphorical link between her look and
physical objects. Her human features—skin and eyes—are described as “golden” and “sparkling […] dark jewels,” making her seem more like an ornate statue than a human being (233). But despite Irene’s attempt to classify Clare in this manner, her efforts are belied by the way in which the very object she has created still works against her. Clare has the power to produce in Irene that “little choked exclamation.” Even more, Irene immediately begins to compare herself with Clare, and, after describing her own, ordinary gown, she “felt dowdy and commonplace” (234).

In this instance Irene’s look presents a much different dynamic than what we see in either hooks’ work or Fanon’s. Irene has no power to “shatter” Clare here as she might in Fanon’s formulation. Instead, Irene’s look produces her own inner turmoil. In this respect, Larsen presents us with the consequences of the look, that an attempt to reduce others to an objectified status may cause personal anguish. As an object by Irene’s own making, Clare only continues to work on Irene, continuing to draw her attentions back toward Clare. After the Negro Welfare League dance, the Redfields see more of Clare at Harlem social gatherings. Irene informs us that Clare, “in spite of her poise and air of worldliness,” is not “the ideal dinner party guest” (*Passing* 239). Much like before, Irene attempts to classify Clare as a static object:

> Beyond the aesthetic pleasure one got from watching her, she contributed little, sitting for the most part silent, an odd dreaming look in her hypnotic eyes. Though she could for some purpose of her own—the desire to be included in some party being made up to go cabareting, or an invitation to a dance or a tea—talk fluently and entertainingly. (239)

This passage shows Irene’s desire to contain and restrict Clare as well as the impossibility of doing so. Readers detect the jealousy in Irene’s comments here; when Clare *does*
decide to speak “for some purpose of her own,” Irene implies that it is only for frivolous purposes, concluding that Clare only speaks to get invited to cabarets or dances. By relegating Clare’s discussion to the frivolous and locating power in her eyes but not her voice, Irene attempts rather hopelessly to limit Clare’s agency. But much like at the Negro Welfare League dance, Clare resists this limitation. Clare, with “an odd dreaming look in her hypnotic eyes,” has a paradoxical effect on those who view her. Although she may be distanced from the routine cultural life Irene so desperately wants to control, Clare’s eyes also contain within them the power of hypnosis: they arrest other viewers and demand their focus back on her.

Irene’s desire to constrain and objectify Clare is given precedence earlier in the novel. Much like the previous example, these moments highlight the unresolved tendencies of Clare’s features. Irene is constantly examining Clare’s face, and in it she finds a perplexing ambiguity. After their initial encounter at the Drayton Hotel, Irene is invited to tea at Clare’s house. After tea, Irene tries to understand a look on Clare’s face.

Partly mocking, it had seemed, and partly menacing. And something else for which she could find no name. For an instant a recrudescence of that sensation of fear which she had had while looking into Clare’s eyes that afternoon touched her. A slight shiver ran over her. (Passing 206)

In this early passage, Irene is not quite so skilled at finding the language of objects to classify Clare. Still, this passage shows the inability of Irene to categorize Clare in a singular fashion. Further, it illustrates the effect the look has in eliciting emotions, this time fear.

Soon after, Irene attaches the language of objects onto her descriptions of Clare’s features: “About her there was some quality, hard and persistent, with the strength and
endurance of rock, that would not be beaten or ignored” (233). As we learn, Irene’s desire to control Clare’s agency through her description of her biography and her attempt to reduce Clare’s agency by comparing her to an object never succeeds as fully as Irene hopes. Instead, Irene’s futile attempts show the failures of the gaze to fully take away agency. Yet Irene’s attempts to classify Clare only continue. In these attempts, we recognize Irene’s decreasing ability to carefully categorize. While Irene attempts to categorize Clare, her ability to do exactly that is compromised.

Clare’s ivory face was what it always was, beautiful and caressing. Or maybe today a little masked. Unrevealing. Unaltered and undisturbed by emotion within or without. Brian’s seemed to be pitifully bare. Or was it too as it always was? That half-effaced seeking look, did he always have that? […] And when she turned towards them again, she thought that the look on his face was the most melancholy and yet the most scoffing the she had ever seen upon it. (253)

Irene has shifted toward uncertainty in her attempt to read Clare and Brian’s faces. This uncertainty works in tandem with her equally unsure ideas about the status of her marriage, whether Brian is having an affair with Clare or not. By gazing towards Clare and Brian, Irene attempts to assign specific emotions and ideas to each respective person. What she finds, however, is a distinct inability to do that, a total loss of control.

In “Finale,” the final section of the novel, Clare falls through the window of a high-rise apartment to her death on the ground below. Whether her husband or Irene pushed her, or whether she tripped and fell out of the window or even jumped of her own accord remains uncertain. What does remain consistent, however, is Irene’s inability to categorize when dealing with Clare. “What happened next, Irene Redfield never afterwards allowed herself to remember. Never clearly. […] A frenzied rush of feet down
long flights of stairs. The slamming of distant doors. Voices. Irene stayed behind. She sat down and remained quite still, staring at a ridiculous Japanese print on the wall across the room” (271-272). Even in the moment of Clare’s death, Irene continues her gaze though she shifts it from Clare, who she’s has failed to reduce to a material object, to an actual object, the Japanese print. Replacing Clare for an object she might have an easier time classifying, Irene continues her gaze, merely replacing one object for another.

The novel concludes with an invitation to look, to look again at the scene of Clare’s death. In the final lines Irene tries to make sense of what has happened and in doing so falls unconscious until she is revived by the other partygoers.

Her quaking knees gave way under her. She moaned and sank down, moaned again. Through the great heaviness that submerged and drowned her she was dimly conscious of strong arms lifting her up. Then everything was dark.

Centuries after, she heard the strange men saying: “Death by misadventure, I’m inclined to believe. Let’s go up and have another look at that window.” (Passing 275)

In these moments, Irene has fully lost her sight. She moves outside of the temporal world into a drowning scene that verges on death. In this realm, everything is dark, there is no light for the eye to see. The line “centuries after” is firstly read as an exaggeration meant to show that the great span of time between Irene’s loss of consciousness and her waking up. That said, that the novel ends with “centuries after” moves the novel outside of strictly linear progression and suggests that even hundreds of years later, people are still concerned with the way the eye sees and its predictive and equally elusive qualities. “Death by misadventure,” is the official verdict for Clare, but, just in case, they call for another look.
Obsessed with the consequences of the look, *Passing* shows that sight is not a reliable pathway towards agency. Where at times sight can grant agency to the individual—in looking back to meet the gazer with an oppositional gaze, as hooks suggests—the text also illustrates the failure of the gaze to grant this kind of agency. Although Irene attempts to affect others through her look, her constant classification of Clare more often results in her own inner turmoil. As the novel concludes with repetition—“Let’s go up and have another look”—it ends with a kind of purposeful irresolution. This repetition is yet another articulation of Irene’s fears that past actions predict future outcomes, that there may be no correct pathway toward agency in the first place. While the novel remains uncertain in this regard, it more confidently concludes that sight should not be trusted as a route toward action, influence, or individuation. Where Clare’s “hypnotic eyes” may have the power to draw others in, to captivate and enchant them, they equally might lull that same audience to sleep.
Conclusion

Throughout this thesis I have suggested that Larsen’s text and Douglas’s murals pair well together because of a shared preoccupation with the visual. Both works are ultimately concerned with how different types of vision enable or stifle an individual’s power. We see this in Douglas’s invitation to the viewer into the mural through the concentric rings as much as we do through the varied looks of characters throughout the panels. In Larsen’s text, readers are asked to contemplate many iterations of the gaze, to look again at sight through the novel’s recursive process. But as I have suggested most directly in chapter one, the significance of Douglas’s visual project is that it intervenes in the dominant narrative about the role of history during the Harlem Renaissance. In turn, the focus of chapter two has been to showcase the ways in which Larsen presents disparate scenes of vision in order to unsettle a singular understanding of agency. But, tethered to that goal, I also want to draw out how this connects to ideas of history during the Harlem Renaissance. In this light, I bring Nella Larsen’s *Passing* together with Aaron Douglas’s *Aspects of Negro Life* because both works are concerned with history. *Passing* and *Aspects of Negro Life* both provide a counterbalance to prominent views of history as always equated with progress.

In the introduction I ask how theories of vision can be used to challenge ideas of the value of historical narratives. Prominent activists and intellectuals including Arthur Schomburg and Alain Locke, for instance, professed a belief in the direct role history plays in promoting racial uplift. Yet in *Passing* and *Aspects of Negro Life* we instead see a deliberate obfuscation in the link between history and a more accepting future. *Passing* focuses on particular, personal histories and in so doing dismantles broad sweeping
statements about the value of history that we learn from thinkers like Locke and Schomburg. We see a shared theoretical impulse in Douglas’s work.

Aaron Douglas’s panels move the viewer through hundreds of years of history. Even the second panel’s name “From Slavery Through Reconstruction” suggests movement along a straightforward path between two historical moments. In contrast, Larsen’s text is comparatively narrow in its historical scope. The novel focuses on the elite black bourgeoisie circles of Harlem. Nella Larsen was herself a part of this literary and intellectual elite. As Charles Larson reminds us in his introduction to the novel, Larsen was “clearly in the eye of the storm—the explosion in black artistic creativity that created what Alain Locke, in 1925, called the New Negro. Parties, cabarets, literary soirees. Harlem was the place to be, and Nella was very much a part of it” (Passing xii). Larsen places her characters “in the eye of the storm,” so to speak, and in many ways we might understand Irene Redfield as a kind of prototype of the ideal race woman. In what might now be considered typical of Larsen’s style, however, she decidedly does not allow Irene to stand as a singular model for African American women. As Cherene Sherrard-Johnson tells us, “Irene is a chic, modern race woman whose well-ordered life is interrupted by a chance meeting with a childhood friend, Clare, who has been passing for white. […] Through Irene’s turmoil, Larsen reveals the consequences of subscribing to the race-woman ideal” (Sherrard-Johnson 35-36). In the social situations of the novel, we see Irene heralded as a gracious host, an eager participant on the Negro Welfare League committee, and as a dutiful member of her race. This is in contrast to Clare Kendry who, as Irene puts it, “cared nothing for the race” but “only belonged to it” (Passing 213). In comparison, Irene feels obligated to keep Clare’s secret of racial passing safe because of
the “ties of race” (213). Yet Irene’s outward appearance as a race-proud woman is perplexingly juxtaposed with her interior, turbulent emotional life. In this way, Larsen’s text focuses on the personal as a narrative choice for the novel but, in so doing, sets the text against broader, sweeping gestures about pathways towards agency in African American culture. Against the rhetorical impulses of others in the Harlem elite who professed comparatively clear solutions for racial uplift, Larsen’s text revels in ambiguity.

In my primary analysis of *Passing* in chapter two, I focus less on the historical aspects of the novel than I do on the concentrated mix of agency and the gaze. However, it is important to consider Larsen’s cyclical text as engaged with history because of its questioning of the narrative of progress. The book’s carefully composed sections, “Encounter,” “Re-encounter,” and “Finale” are telling of the novel’s recursive nature and of Irene’s unsuccessful search for a clear link between agency and predetermined action. As personal histories play back on themselves, Larsen unwinds ideas of a linearly progressive history. We see a similar preoccupation in Douglas’s murals. In their current location at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York, the murals hang from interior, second-story walls that look down onto the open first floor below. In this way, first-floor viewers look up towards Douglas’s panels, each panel hanging on its own interior wall. A potential viewer might encounter any of the panels first. This is significant because it works to unsettle firm notions of history or of linear historical progress.

Through circularity and recursion, Aaron Douglas’s *Aspects of Negro Life* and Nella Larsen’s *Passing* intervene in the then dominant view of African American history
as offering a specific and reliable pathway towards agency. Larsen mediates this narrative through a meditative focus on the gaze and its constant slippages. Douglas provides an alternative to the narrative of history as progress by bridging the historical and the optical in his transformed use of Orphism. Ultimately, my reading of Douglas’s work together with Larsen’s presents a different side to the Harlem Renaissance, one where elite artists such as these two present questioning and irresolution as a form of critique.
Works Consulted


