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Literary Regionalism and the Confinements of Class: A Revisionist Historical Reading of Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun*

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ABSTRACT

Jessie Fauset's 1929 novel *Plum Bun* has never achieved the level of notoriety and critical acclaim of major novels by her Harlem Renaissance colleagues such as Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston, and Langston Hughes. In fact, the novel has been derided at times by major voices in African American literary criticism such as Robert Bone and Barbara Christian. Fauset's use of a passing plot has been judged by some critics to be overly sentimental and unrepresentative of wider African American experiences, given the assumption that relatively few African Americans have the capability to pass for white. However, the novel has been treated more positively in the last two decades for several reasons, such as an increased interest in African American women's fiction (including renewed critical appreciation of marriage plots), and the recent influence of critical race studies, which complicates the assumption that any specific standpoint can genuinely "represent" African American experience. This essay adds a new perspective to the growing body of criticism on the text by highlighting the novel's compelling qualities as a work of literary regionalism. The novel's initial setting in a middle class African American enclave in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, provides an insightful historical treatment of race and class distinctions in that milieu. Because the protagonist, Angela Murray, moves from the historically

black middle-class community of Philadelphia to the bohemian, fine art-inflected culture of Greenwich Village in the 1920s, additional insights about race and class interactions in the era of the New Woman are provided for the reader. This essay notes that regionalism as a literary standpoint emerged later in African American literary history than it had in mainstream American literature, and the novel's treatment of regionalism illustrates the instability of racial identity even during the era of legal segregation.

KEY WORDS

American Literature, regionalism in literature, African American literature—women authors, feminism in literature, Harlem Renaissance—women authors

In Jessie Fauset's 1929 novel, *Plum Bun*, protagonist Angela Murray, a young bi-racial woman, moves from Philadelphia to New York City to escape the effects of race, gender, and class prejudice. The novel highlights social changes set in motion during a time of rapid cultural transformation in the United States: greater political freedom for women, interracial socializing, bohemian youth cultures in Greenwich Village and Harlem, a vast consumer marketplace, and accessibility of transatlantic travel. The novel bears the influences of the memorable closing years of the Harlem Renaissance, a period when realist aesthetics in literary fiction expanded the range of regional portraits of African American life; regionalism and realism competed with neo-primitivism as formal approaches in literature, visual art, and criticism. Regionalism is largely associated with late 19th and early 20th century American writers such as Frank Norris, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Theodore Dreiser, but it required several decades after the abolition of slavery for literary standpoints to emerge that illustrated regional differences in African American life and culture. The work of Fauset herself in her capacities as editor and author heralded a wider historical and sociological interest in the lives of African Americans.

This essay acknowledges and continues a broad recent critical reassessment of Fauset's *Plum Bun*, which has resulted in a partial restoration of Fauset's place as a pioneering figure among Harlem Renaissance authors. This critical reassessment is long in coming but nonetheless necessary as a repudiation of the disparaging views of Fauset and her work that emerged from a broad ideological range of critics. Critical reactions to *Plum Bun* have long been polarized based on how critics assess Angela Murray's decision to pass for white, and

based on a common claim that Angela's middle-class status makes her experience unrepresentative of most African Americans. Among several notable African American literary critics such as Robert Bone, Arthur Davis, and even Barbara Christian in more recent years, *Plum Bun*'s protagonist Angela Murray is described as a racially inauthentic and historically anachronistic "tragic mulatto." These critics also see her as an unsympathetically rendered character due to the combination of her race, gender, and class identity. Oft-noted examples of this opinion can be found in *From the Dark Tower: Afro-American Writers from 1900 to 1960*, where Arthur Davis writes that *Plum Bun* is concerned "almost entirely with the passing theme, which it overplays badly. Angela, the major character, is manipulated to show various situations in which passers find themselves and, as such, is more of a puppet than a personality" (93). In Robert Bone's text, *The Negro Novel in America*, the negative assessment of the novel is even more direct and personal, with Bone taking shots at Fauset's roots in the middle-class black community within Philadelphia: "An authentic old Philadelphian . . . she was never able to transcend the narrow limits of this sheltered world" (108). Barbara Christian, herself a feminist literary critic with a studied interest in recovering texts by black female author, writes as follows in an ironically titled chapter, "The Rise and Fall of the Proper Mulatta" in her landmark text, *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892–1976*:

> Her [Fauset's] novels insist that the upper-middle class Negro has the same values as the upper-class white. This indeed may be true, and a presentation of upper-class Negro life is certainly interesting material for fiction. The problem with Fauset's novels is that she gives us this particular Negro exclusively and as the representative of what the race is capable of doing. . . . Her Negroes become apologists for the race. (41)

Christian's commentary implicitly references racial authenticity as a standard by which literary characters may be judged; Christian also argues that Fauset's characters are meant to be representative of

African Americans more broadly, a claim I do not find supportable. And yet, through Fauset's effective historicism and thematics of place in *Plum Bun*, readers encounter incisive perspectives on black/white relations through the depiction of characters that I conceive of as regionally and historically specific, not universalizing representations of the race. The assumption of universality and that characters are not particular, but types, is a notion I challenge in this essay as I respond to previously published literature on *Plum Bun*.

In a vein similar to Barbara Christian, critics often remark about the rarity of such a figure as *Plum Bun*'s Angela Murray during this historical period and the triviality of her concerns compared to the mass experience of African Americans, most of whom faced more fundamental economic and social struggles. Similar critical judgments can be found excoriating Fauset's other novels. In "The Face of America: Performing Race and Nation in Jessie Fauset's *There is Confusion*," Jane Kuenz aptly summarizes the critical disparagement of Fauset that preceded the recent feminist reassessment:

> Routinely slighted even among her admirers, Fauset emerges in portraits and histories of the Harlem Renaissance as the hard-working and prolific, but essentially untalented and politically misdirected literary editor for *The Crisis* and author of four "uniformly sophomoric, trivial, and dull novels. (89)

More positive assessments of this novel emerge in the 1980s and 1990s, after the decline of mass social movements in African American communities and a more pluralist understanding of race, class, and gender politics takes hold among many contemporary critics. Black feminist literary critics were central to the revival of scholarly interest in the novel. Writing in *Women of the Harlem Renaissance,* Cheryl Wall notes that the figure of Angela Murray represents a trope in African American women's fiction that, considering the historical moment, was well worthy of deployment:

> Among the images of black women presented in fiction before the

> Harlem Renaissance, the tragic mulatto was the least degrading and the most attractive, which partly explains its prominence in Jessie Fauset's novels and in those of her predecessors dating back to Harriet Wilson and Frances Watkins Harper. (132)

Wall observes that the passing plot remained a viable device for narrating the lives of black women during the 1920s. After all, the alternative tropes and imagery used to represent black femininity during the era was no less stereotypical. Illustrators as skilled as Aaron Douglas preferred the rapturous poses of seemingly exotic, African derived black females, with many covers of NAACP's literary magazine *Crisis* conveying these images. And yet, the decades following the Harlem Renaissance demonstrate how difficult it would become to represent black women without exoticism and charged sexuality, as imagery emphasizing black female hypersexuality would persist in aesthetic movements and mass media as well.

The period's practice of representing black women as hypersexed and exotic is addressed thoughtfully by Nina Miller, writing in *African American Review*. Miller argues that the omnipresence of exoticism is exemplified by

> the primitive African American (or African) woman—sensual, often regal, and generally mute—in whose rapturous barbaric dance was embodied the mystery of the racial past and the vitality of the racial future. Ubiquitous in the pages (and especially the poetry) of Renaissance literary journals, this figure satisfied the call for a trope of racial essence, a call which issued equally from an exoticizing white public and from Renaissance artists seeking to define a truly Negro art. (207)

With the trope of exoticism so common in the period, it is understandable that a novel like Fauset's would represent black female sensibility in a more refined—and realist—way.

Another key voice in the novel's reassessment has been Deborah McDowell, who sees *Plum Bun* as a complex treatment of themes

related to gender, racial heritage, and cultural power. In her introduction to the 1990 reprinting of the text, McDowell argues that the complexity and craft of the novel provides a richness far beyond the surface theme of passing and its personal costs: ". . . the passing plot constitutes just one thread, albeit an important one, woven into the novel's overarching frame—that of the *bildungsroman* or novel of development" (McDowell in Fauset xv). McDowell comments further that the *bildungsroman* theme provides a cogent structure for the author to comment on multiple jeopardy due particularly to race and gender identity:

> Combining passing and marriage as dual plots in a novel of female development serves to underline Fauset's prevailing theme: the unequal power relationships in American society. These two plots could not be more appropriate in a narrative about power, for both passing and marriage are attempts—at times naïve and fantasy-ridden—by blacks and women to overcome the structural inequalities that disempower them. Both marriage and passing are means by which these two disenfranchised groups hope to gain access to power. (xvi)

McDowell refers implicitly to class when she mentions "the unequal power relationships in American society." After all, it is the relative privilege of their class status that leads Angela Murray and her mother Mattie to pass for white in the novel.

In a related discussion in *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction*, Ann duCille argues convincingly in favor of marriage as an historical and fictional trope that is thoughtfully chosen to depict Angela's dilemmas. According to duCille, the marriage plot "is not a transhistorical bourgeois ideal or a linear literary convention but a sign of the times that shifts with the times, the place, and the people" (4)—that is, marriage has an historically significant meaning in this novel. And, it is also a sign of the times that before the novel concludes with the promise of marriage, Angela investigates several options for a fulfilling personal life and

endures experiences that shake her faith in marriage—particularly marriage as a means toward upward mobility. But Angela's participation in the emerging marketplaces for consumer products, ideas, and lovers is not simply a false consciousness. Her exploration is central to her discovery of a larger truth—that the bourgeois pleasures of a Ford car, a fancy restaurant, and a tastefully decorated apartment are not sufficient for living ethically and well.

Of course, if one believes that a folk sensibility is the true essence of African American experience, dismissing what Langston Hughes called a "Nordicized Negro Intelligentsia" (58)—a group that might well have included Fauset, who worked as both editor and writer during the Harlem Renaissance—then one is not likely to admit that economic security, even wealth, can be starting points for self-discovery and deep insight. To offer a plot that implies tolerance for the middle class and that also suggests, even temporarily, that one may reject a socially imposed racial identity has proven too much for many critics. Moreover, this combination of thematics in *Plum Bun* produces volatile reactions not only from critics but also from predominantly white college students in my classrooms, who are often irate that Angela Murray denies "who she really is" by passing for white.

Beyond Angela Murray's characterization, however, the task remains of asserting Fauset's importance not merely as a literary "midwife" for the Harlem Renaissance (as Langston Hughes famously described her), but as a leading artist and intellectual of this period whose regionalist approach in *Plum Bun* calls for a revised historical look at African American cultural politics of the 1920s. To counter the dismissive thread in previously published criticism and to join the critical voices reassessing novel and author, I suggest we read *Plum Bun* as a regionally-inflected, historically-situated representation of the dilemmas of race, gender, and class at a pivotal moment in the African American cultural past. I want to move past the narrow lenses derived from identity politics as a method of reading this novel and towards regionalism, which as Emily Toth has stated, appears only sporadically as a method of reading black women's fiction. Toth expressed frustration with the lack of such studies in her text, after including no

such studies in a collection she edited, *Regionalism and the Female Imagination*:

> . . . editors are limited to what they receive, and women of color are, unfortunately, slighted. I can only hope that future writers will be analyzing and celebrating the contributions of women regionalists who are also Asian-American, Hispanic, or Black. (10–11)

Beyond merely filling a critical gap, however, recognizing the characteristics of regionalism in this novel leads us to recognize how contested notions of racial authenticity have been not only in our era but during the 1920s. Strikingly, it is within a specific historical and regional setting—the urban Northeast—that Fauset identifies and names multiple black identities and competing political ideologies among characters. Being born in the middle-class enclave of black Philadelphia, most of the novel's African American characters have no direct experience of Southern racism, agricultural life, African American traditional folk culture, an African-derived consciousness, or any of the familiar tropes used to represent African Americans within and without the Harlem Renaissance. Without accounting for the novel's regional and historical setting and relying instead on broad notions of racial authenticity, we are more tempted to reject the premises of the novel for their unreality. Therefore, a regionalist understanding of the novel helps us identify how deeply and customarily notions of racial authenticity and caste are embedded in African American cultural imaginary. In a similar way, the novel's details of place help illustrate how African American life and culture is situated within the larger historical setting of 1920s America. After shifting lenses from racial essentialism to regionalism and historicism, we may read distinctive qualities of Fauset's novel—such as its setting among middle-class African Americans, its lack of folk dialect, its embracing of economic security and high art—not as flawed stylistics or inauthentic representation, but as hallmarks of an incisive novelistic argument offered at a pivotal moment of African American cultural history. *Plum Bun*, then, can be understood richly against the backdrop

of 1920s African American cultural politics, one of many notable efforts to represent an African American population that, in the words of Alain Locke, "is no longer exclusively or even predominantly Southern" (23).

With its seemingly esoteric passing plot but compelling characterizations of race, sex, and class dilemmas, *Plum Bun* engages with contemporaneous debates over race and representation, reminding us that by the time of the Harlem Renaissance, the question of how best to represent black life and culture *authentically* was widely contested among writers and critics. As is well known, Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston favored black folk culture, for instance, in their most celebrated novelistic and critical work of the period, under the assumption that among the poor and working class could be found the most authentic and compelling expressions of African American life and culture (Hughes 56; Kraut 432). Writing from a feminist standpoint that has a special concern for historicism, however, Ann duCille dissents a bit from the prevailing belief that Hurston is the most crucial and authentic writer of her period narrating the experience of black women, noting not only Fauset's importance but adding that "Hurston's work is unmistakably pivotal . . . but it does not exist in isolation" (duCille 81). With regard to the era's critical disputes over the role of the "folk" and the role of professional classes in cultural and political activism, the perspectives of W. E. B. DuBois are salient, with the famously articulated notion of a "talented tenth" suggesting that through cultural and educational achievement a cadre of leaders could aid African Americans in their quest for social justice (*Autobiography* 236). As his career took shape less than a decade after the disintegration of the Harlem Renaissance, Richard Wright would join DuBois in asserting that strategic aims should dictate how African American life and culture should be represented in literature. Wright's penetrating early fiction documented the human cost of racism as both realism and a strategic move toward gaining cross-racial empathy.

In a move towards a revised literary historicism that can assist in reading Fauset, critics should exercise due diligence by giving sufficient weight to these contestations over questions of racial

authenticity and literary representation in the 1920s. Regionalist and historicist critics such as Jeff Karem and Ann duCille argue convincingly that texts are not merely aesthetic but historical artifacts, and only a fuller understanding of historical context can help us recognize the notion of racial authenticity as a debate among contested positions, not a settled conclusion. Conceiving of racial authenticity as an historically-situated debate helps us read the passing plot of *Plum Bun* in a nuanced way. Indeed, some African Americans did pass for white in this era where social segregation remained entrenched, and if one surveys the generally positive reception of James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, we know that characters choosing to pass for white can be treated sympathetically in African American literature. Differences in critical perceptions of the novels by Johnson and Fauset turn on how one assesses stylistic achievement, the degree of sympathy elicited by the character, and the novels' reinforcement (as well as repudiation) of common historical assumptions about African American cultural identity. Greater attention, then, to regional, economic, and ideological diversity among African Americans can enrich the critical discourse on *Plum Bun.*

Toward that end, one must grant the simple fact that not all notable fiction by African American novels must be set in predominantly African American communities or singularly depict lives of poverty. One might validly conceive of the Harlem Renaissance as a whole as an examination of regional influences over African American life, including major novels set in the rural Midwest (Langston Hughes, *Not Without Laughter*) and the rural South (Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*) along with many fictional treatments of black life in the urban Northeast. With these assumptions in mind, a critical reader can well understand the passing plot of *Plum Bun* as a unique depiction of dilemmas faced by the African American middle class of Philadelphia during the 1920s. This historic community was barred from full participation in the academic and social life of the era, whether or not they had the means to purchase a Ford automobile, a key symbol of financial success during this era, or to send their daughter to a college. When the protagonist Angela

Murray moves to New York City, readers encounter the changing social climate of the New Woman Era, including a youth culture that embraced freer sexual mores and a deep appreciation of artistic expression.

An additional point of reference for examining Fauset's regionalist, anti-essentialist unpacking of African American identity may be Anna Julia Cooper, a writer whose text *A Voice of the South from a Black Woman of the South* (1892) is an indisputable classic of black feminism. Cooper, like DuBois, was interested both in the regional life of African Americans and in larger social structures that affected the lives of African American women. In this text, Cooper wrote as follows about the peculiar position of African American women, highlighting their multiple identities and ambiguous social status:

> The colored woman of to-day occupies, one might say, a unique position in this country. In a period of itself transitional and unsettled, her status seems one of the least ascertainable and definitive of all the forces which make for our civilization. She is confronted by both a woman question and a race problem, and is as yet an unknown or an unacknowledged factor in both. (Cooper in Guy-Sheftall 45)

Preceding DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk* by eleven years, Cooper's text is prescient in its challenge to racial essentialism, decades before it became common knowledge in academic settings that African American identity is multiple, inflected by region and gender, socially constructed, and subjective. Thus, even in the late 19th century some scholars contest the assumption that African Americans all have similar cultural identities and political interests. In decades to come, the case against biological race as a human essence would be proven without dispute through research findings from the fields of anthropology and genetic science to cultural studies, but a significant amount of discursive argument continues surrounding questions of essentialism: for instance, can racial essentialism be deployed

strategically, inspiring future progressive social movements similar to the Harlem Renaissance, Civil Rights, and Black Arts Movement of past decades. Judging by the work of Cooper, DuBois, and Fauset, there is significant support for both recognizing distinct sensibilities among African Americans and avoiding broad judgments of any specific race, sex, or class among them. For my part, then, I share Allison Stone's conviction that all essentialisms make "descriptive claim(s) about social reality" (142) that are unsupportable; they naturalize membership in "racial" by assuming that all or most within that group have similar interests to one another but different interests from other "racial" groups. Who is qualified to police the borders between such groups—and who will insist on progressive action to support the common humanity of all? Can we achieve support across humanity for issues that rival racial inequality in our long list of social problems requiring immediate, creative, effective action: global warming, nuclear proliferation, water shortages, AIDS, and avian flu, to name four—or do we need broader understandings of human commonality and difference historically and in the present to help us identify common interests?

Looking back at Fauset's era, then, is a reminder that black cultural activists of the time encouraged a broad audience to unthink racial essentialism and to conceive of the black literary subject within a wider social framework. DuBois, Fauset, and Cooper called particular attention to the historical shifts in racial identity that resulted from new generational standpoints as well as social and cultural changes in race relations. A first and second generation of African Americans with no personal memory of slavery had come of age by the time of Fauset, and early texts of critical race theory engaged in conversation with the neo-primitivist and realist aesthetics favored in high modernist and Harlem Renaissance art. In addition, it bears mentioning that Fauset was certainly not the first author to depict successful African Americans engaged in the cultural life of a defined region. Prosperous middle-class characters play prominent roles in African American modernist literature from the start of the 20th century through the Harlem Renaissance. Examples include Pauline Hopkins' *Contending*

Forces, James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, and the aforementioned Langston Hughes's *Not Without Laughter* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Collectively these novels provide diverse regional and historical perspectives on the emerging black middle class.

While within a single essay I cannot trace broadly the construct of regionalism as a genre within African American literary studies, I will suggest some further ways that regionalism as articulated in the wider discourse of American literary studies can be helpful for addressing the issues of race, gender and class (collectively, caste) in *Plum Bun*. Assessing what seems to be a fading emphasis on regional perspectives in American literature, James Maguire argues that "the regional is always an element in any literary judgment," for several key reasons, including the function of individual and collective memory as a repository of "whatever is associated with the *places* closest and most important to us" (649; emphasis mine). Maguire also points out that regional literature is often taken to be inferior literature (650), worthy of study for historical interest, but not for the power of the texts' aesthetic quality. I have to concur that several widely read American regionalists such as Rebecca Davis, Hamlin Garland, and Mary Freeman have not consistently been conceived of as "major" writers, perhaps because of stylistic slips into sentimentality and because the affairs of coal miners, Wisconsin dairy farmers, and overworked pioneer women are prioritized rather lowly among topics for literary expression. However, there are clear qualities that I find revelatory in the work of these writers: the seeming obscurity of their subjects, their ability to de-center the most common narratives and ideologies about a given historical period, and their ability to convey a sense of *place* in view of the distinctiveness of their experience and their argument for why their particular story is relevant for all of us. Encountering 19th century and early 20th century perspectives on household politics and economic life from West Virginia (Rebecca Davis), Wisconsin (Garland), and New England (Freeman) illuminates American experiences that one will not find in the more celebrated work of Mark Twain, Theodore Dreiser, or Sarah Jewett.

From my regionalist standpoint, in fact, I note the irony that despite a broadly expressed interest among most literary critics in identifying writers that democratize critical conversations, a small range of writers is likely to receive close and wide critical attention in a given historical period, becoming canonical. This canonization occurs even though aesthetics, as we know, are themselves historically constructed. This observation is reinforced as I page through several texts close at hand on regional writers, with William Faulkner, Richard Wright, Toni Morrison, and Ernest Gaines being the African American writers receiving priority critical treatment as regionalists. In this way, African American literature as a genre is characterized by similar discursive practices that have pervaded so-called "mainstream" 20th century literary studies—predominant critical attention directed toward a small number of texts that, putatively, have a transcendent aesthetic value. Speaking broadly about the problems inherent in specifying such a select list of works based on aesthetics, Fuery and Mansfield have argued that critical judgments about a text are rooted in the cultural logic of a given era, not from the text itself, which remains constant as our ideological lenses shift:

> Adherence to the canonical ideal means that works themselves must be seen to have an intrinsic quality that makes them "good" or "art." There are three major problems with such an idea: first, this line of argument fails to recognize that any work becomes canonical not for what it is or does, but through external forces that define it as such; second, works drift in and out of the canon, but nothing in the works themselves has changed—in other words, forming the canon is a political, cultural, and social act, rather than the aesthetic one it purports to be; and third, the very terms of the debate, "good" and bad," are impossibilities in themselves. How is it possible, for example, to speak of a "good film"? What is the criteria for good? What, or who, is it good for? (19)

I support Fuery and Mansfield on these points, recognizing the volatility of critical opinion and foregrounding the question of what we

can learn—what we gain—if we prioritize historical knowledge over aesthetic judgment in a critical discussion of *Plum Bun*. It is indisputably the case that literary texts fall in and out of favor based on critical ideology and interest at any given time, and this is particularly true among regionalist writers—as in the falling out of favor of John Greenleaf Whittier, for instance, and the rise in attention to Kate Chopin and Charlotte Gilman reflecting greater interest in feminist standpoints and lesser interest in the genteel American literary tradition. Among African American critics, the revival of interest in African American women writers is particularly notable—including the aforementioned Zora Neale Hurston, Pauline Hopkins, Fauset herself, and a wider range of 19th century African American writers such as Frances Harper, Harriet Jacobs, Charlotte Grimke, Emma Dunham Kelly, and others. And yet, it required a repudiation of prevalent sexism affecting the reception of women-centered narratives and an embracing of the need for diverse historical perspectives on African American life and culture to bring these authors into wider current readership. In our early 21st century context, after the legitimizing of feminist literary criticism and challenges to racial authenticity through critical race studies and post-identity cultural politics—critics are better positioned to examine *Plum Bun* for the perspectives of revisionist history and regionalism.

So, based on close reflection on *Plum Bun*'s critical reception in African American literary criticism, it becomes clear that ideological assumptions about racial and cultural authenticity are often in conflict with the more particular and individual notions of place that emerge from regionalism generally and Fauset's text in particular. Regional texts require us to appreciate historical particulars, to reject the assumption that there is core consistency in cultural identity that crosses over distinct historical and geographical settings. We must bear in mind that literary characters exist as authorial constructions in any case, and we might best respond to them as arguments and symbols rather than literal embodiments of everyday cultural identities. More generally, we must disengage from broad notions about cultural/national/racial identities in order to read effectively through a

regional lens, particularly when our protagonist is marginalized even within a racial group that itself is relegated to caste status within the social context of early 20th century America. Writing about the difficulties inherent in critically examining the work of writers from the cultural margins in *The Romance of Authenticity: The Cultural Politics of Regional and Ethnic Literature*, Jeff Karem observes that "many marginal authors' best and most challenging aesthetic and cultural work can only be illuminated when one jettisons the narrow paradigms of authenticity that have limited prior dissemination and interpretation of their texts" (15). Karem's observations apply to Fauset and *Plum Bun* in several respects, perhaps most clearly in the persistent description of Fauset as a "literary midwife," a phrase later applied to Fauset—derisively and otherwise—with remarkable consistency. Karem also observes that a lack of regional perspectives leads to wholesale exclusions of key texts even within an established writer's body of work. Richard Wright can serve as an example, in that his work probing labor relations and racism internationally has been disparaged by some of his contemporaries and is often ignored in current criticism due to a shift in focus from urban black experience. Another example is Ernest Gaines, whose 1960s work was widely regarded by Black Aesthetics critics as "outmoded pastoral" in an age where the urban black imaginary was predominant (14). A third consequence of the decades-long focus on the urban black imaginary is the relative invisibility of rural Southern life in contemporary African American fiction, aside from historical novels by such authors as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Bebe Moore Campbell. A broader understanding of the range of African American life and culture in our time can only come from renewed critical attention given to regionalism as a theme in black literature, past and present. Appropriately enough, then, we now sharpen our focus on the regional context, historical context, and textual qualities of Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun*.

The novel *Plum Bun* was published in 1929, in an American social climate marked by nativism and lynching, a largely unregulated economy, expanded use of credit amid a broadening consumer economy, and the contradictions of Prohibition, bootlegging, and the

Jazz Age; in short, the era is marked by cultural tension between social and economic freedom and confinement in class systems due to wealth inequality, racism, sexism, and ethnocentricity. With the logic of the assembly line reshaping industry and capturing the public imagination, debates about the human impact of automation raged in art circles and in the political left; films ranging from Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) to Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936) convey the public's uneasiness about the impact of human/machine interaction in the new economy. European immigration to the United States also reached historic peaks during the first two decades of the 20th century, with the end of legal racism nowhere in sight and vigilante justice a grim possibility in the South and North alike. Race riots in East St. Louis, Chicago and Tulsa among other places, a triple lynching in Duluth, Minnesota, and the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan are a few reminders of the risks and human costs of mob law.

Meanwhile, engineer and entrepreneur Henry Ford came to symbolize the national character for many Americans, seeming to embody a spirit of ingenuity and small town values while producing quality automobiles that would transform the nation. Ford's unprecedented $5/day pay plan was initiated in 1914 and continued into the 1920s, though his workers were subject to dismissal if they failed to heed demands to lead a moral life or, for immigrants, to "Americanize" (Baldwin 36–39). The company retained a staff of investigators in the Sociological Department to enforce these policies. Ford's anti-Semitic world view, expressed famously in the *Dearborn Independent*, found significant support on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean.

Despite Ford's execrable views on labor relations and the so-called "Jewish question," however, Ford's company provided a means by which significant numbers of workers, including African Americans, were able to earn a family wage and to become consumers of manufactured goods as well as producers. The impact of Ford's company was evident in the growth of Detroit in size and importance. Home to a growing black middle class, a thriving nightlife, and an economy strong enough to attract migrating families from the South,

Detroit gained stature as a center of both American industry and black cultural life, rivaling Washington D.C., Philadelphia, Atlanta, and Harlem as desirable places for African Americans to live and work. The success of Ford in Detroit, in fact, had a secondary regional influence on the lives of middle-class African Americans in other urban landscapes, including the city of Philadelphia, where the fictional Junius and Mattie Murray first earn a comfortable living.

Through its depiction of the Murray family, *Plum Bun* heralded the possibility of improved economic status for African Americans through social and political change, and the text considers the personal dilemmas that result from such changes in social and cultural identity. Jessie Fauset's novel builds on the work of late 19th century African American writers who had laid an interdisciplinary foundation for the critical race and gender studies, including several major critical and literary statements that are familiar to many readers. Such statements include W. E. B. DuBois's description of black double consciousness as "two warring ideas in one dark body" (5) and Paul Laurence Dunbar's poetic claim that African Americans wear "a mask that grins and lies," "a debt we pay to human guile," a necessary disguise for physical survival.

In a key early passage from *Plum Bun*, a Ford automobile functions symbolically as a sign of rising status for the Murray family. The passage highlights the idealized family life that economic progress appears to make possible, with the transformation of an African American family into middle-class consumers being treated without irony:

> Sunday was still a happy day. Already an air of prosperity, of having arrived beyond the striving point, had settled over the family. . . . The Ford, a little four-seater coupe, compact and sturdy, had changed hands. Its former owner came around on Sunday to give Junius a lesson. The entire household piled in, for both girls were possessed of the modern slenderness. . . . They came back laughing and happy and pardonably proud. (51–52)

The happiness of this moment did not last long. Soon, the death of Junius Murray leaves the family with monetary means but personal uncertainty. As the text proceeds, Angela, the oldest and often dissatisfied daughter of Junius and Mattie Murray, experiences emotions that are not consistent with this early idealism about family. Living in a predominantly black Philadelphia neighborhood, specifically on Opal Street, Angela becomes weary of continual discussions among her peers on how they can "improve" the race; instead, Angela is discouraged by the physical and psychological barriers she faces due to dehumanizing logic of racial discrimination. The narration illustrates Angela's discontented mood in contrast to her darker-skinned younger sister Jinny, particularly as she and her mother continue a long-established habit of "passing" in order to gain geographic mobility and experiences of refinement that are consistent with their perceived class status:

> . . . she [Angela] was seeing enough of a larger, freer world to make her chafe less at the restrictions which somehow seemed to bind in her own group . . . she was young, and life would somehow twist and shape itself to her subconscious yearnings, just as it had done for her mother, she thought, following Mattie in and out of shops, delivering opinions and lending herself to all the exigencies which shopping imposed. It was not an occupation which she particularly enjoyed, but, like her mother, she adored the atmosphere and its accompaniment of well-dressed and luxuriously stationed women. No one could tell, no one would have thought for a moment that she and her mother had come from tiny Opal Street; no one could have dreamed of their racial connections. (57–58)

Compared to her sister Virginia, Angela could not ignore or minimize the social limitations imposed by an African American identity. Like her mother Mattie, Angela is light-skinned, and as a child she genuinely enjoyed the exclusive shopping and dining she could experience on the days that Mattie chose to pass, and her contentment results specifically from the difference in cultural geography between Opal Street and the

exclusive shopping districts of Philadelphia. A reader may well question how sympathetic Angela appears in this desire to embrace finery and to escape caste entrapment due to her socially assigned race, class, and gender identity, but indisputably, Fauset uses characterization and plot devices effectively in *Plum Bun* to highlight the emotional intensity of Angela's dilemma.

Plum Bun turns, in fact, on Angela's decision to pass for white, after the death of Mattie Murray and a long period of reflection before making that choice. An encounter with racism in Philadelphia seemed to suggest that passing was a better option than enduring humiliation and lack of opportunity. On an evening date with Matthew Henson, a suitor whom she secretly does not favor, he is denied admission to a movie theater, the manager suggesting that the "young lady" is welcome, but not the darker skinned Matt. Angela throws the ticket to the ground and rides home with Matt on the streetcar, filled with pity for him if not deep affection. In the narrator's words, upon getting home "she lifted her delicate face to his, so stricken and freckled and woebegone, and kissed him, lifted her hand and actually stroked his reddish, stiff, 'bad' hair" (76), the narrator at that point bringing external and internalized racism to the surface as it shapes Angela's reaction to Matt's physique.

Soon after this incident, she decides to move from Philadelphia to New York, where she is unknown and can successfully pass for white, being "sick, sick, sick of seeing what I want dangled right before my eyes and then . . . snatched away from me and all of it through no fault of my own" (77). I suspect that Angela's desire to have racial barriers removed is understandable to most readers, though given her class and ambiguous racial status, critics have struggled to grant her legitimacy in lamenting racial barriers and end running around them. Being born squarely on the color line and thus having the ability to change her identity and pass for white, and she uses that privilege to her advantage—not just for economic gain, but for educational gain and cultivation of personal taste. Cheryl Wall's comments in *Women of the Harlem Renaissance* underscore the symbolic and thematic importance of her decision to pass for white: "In contrast to the narrow, drab streets

of her childhood, Angela determines to seek 'paths which led to broad thoroughfares, large bright houses, delicate niceties of existence.' Predictably, she is later awed by the grand streets of Manhattan: by the 'canyon' of Fifth Avenue and 'the broad bosomed river' of Fourteenth Street" (76). The connections between place (Opal Street and Fourteenth Street) and caste (African American, female, middle class) come to the surface as we witness more and more of the partitioning of the American landscape due to one's cultural identity.

In New York, Angela is admitted to art school, secures friends in the bohemian Greenwich Village culture of the era, finds romance with a young white man of means, and learns that being female and lacking a family name around to a caste entrapment to a degree nearly equal to that of her racial identity. This section of the novel remains underappreciated in the critical literature, especially the dramatic depictions of both a communitarian black consciousness through a black sociologist, Van Meier (a novelistic double of W. E. B. DuBois) and an emerging feminist sensibility amid the New Woman atmosphere. The era's emergent feminist urban culture is evoked by the words of Angela's friend Paulette Lister: ". . . a woman is a fool who lets her femininity stand in the way of what she wants" (105). Taking some of her behavioral cues from Paulette Lister's passion for pleasure and Martha Burden's earnest enthusiasm for "the movement," Angela seeks the most effective means available of succeeding in her trade and finding satisfaction in sex and relationships, though Fauset outlines the continuing presence of race, sex, and class discrimination in the particular forms it takes in the regional context of 1920s New York. Having lived out the possibilities and limitations herself of a Cornell education, international travel, and rare ability, Fauset was uniquely positioned to depict how earned and unearned class privilege did not neutralize the effects of racial and sexual discrimination on the consciousness of middle-class black women.

In this historical context, Angela remains aware of the limitations imposed by her putatively true race and the logic of the art market, recognizing that as a portrait painter, her livelihood would depend on "fearfully placating and flattering possible patrons." Influenced by

modernist notions of anthropological primitivism and abnormal psychology, Angela wonders if her artistic calling is to paint some of the "rusty specimens of mankind" she sees in a park at Union Square; she considers the name "Fourteenth Street Types" for the painting (89). Rejecting Paulette's belief that passionate affairs rather than marriage are the most alluring choices for the shorter term, Angela settles on the goal of a white husband to gain "position, power, wealth" (111). After all, she remarks, "marriage is the easiest way for a woman to get those things, and white men have them" (112). Angela continues to enjoy the company of Martha Burden and the other supporters of radical causes, but in her youthful naivete, marriage seems to Angela to be the most effective pathway to both economic security and fuller personhood.

In this way, the influences of the New Woman in the wake of the suffragist movement, an expanding consumer marketplace, primitivism in high modernist art, and the construction of an African American consciousness are all reflected in Fauset's characterization of Angela Murray. The author also reminds us that Angela's circumspect freedom entails contradictions as well as advantages. In one powerful scene, Angela and her white suitor Roger are dining at a fine restaurant when they spotted three black diners there. With a self-righteousness that reveals his true character, Roger demands that the restaurant staff expel the black diners from the restaurant, and head waiter assents. The diners file proudly past Angela's table before Roger returns, full of a white supremacist's pride:

> Well, I put a spoke in the wheel of those "coons"! They forgot themselves so quickly, coming in her spoiling white people's appetites. I told that manager if they brought one of their damn suits I'd be responsible. I wasn't going to have them here with you, Angele. I could tell that night at Martha Burden's by the way you looked at that girl that you had no time for darkies. I'll bet you'd never been that near to one before in your life, had you? (133)

This scene is melodramatic but complex, crafted for dramatic effect and to bear out the human costs and insoluble dilemmas of race

even in progressive social circles. This scene reminds both Angela and the reader of the illogic of a white supremacist order where privileges can be gained or lost depending on one's immediate surroundings, the whims of individuals in power, accidents of birth, and whether or not others are aware of one's racial background. A later scene, when Roger appears at the train station while Angela is waiting for her sister Virginia, heightens the reader's awareness of the hard choices Angela must make in order to pass. Indeed, the novel as a whole does not endorse passing as a viable response to institutional racism, but the novel does demonstrate that a racial self is constructed, not essential, and that there is little support under legal racism for black alterity, even if that alterity is simply cultivated taste.

The novel concludes with a sentimental resolution of Angela's dilemmas with her courting of Anthony Cross, whose class status is humble despite his personal sophistication— and who has also been passing for white. Angela returns to Opal Street at the end, a closing of the novel's character-driven frame with a symbolic acknowledgement of the importance of place to her identity. In her commentary on the novel's conclusion, Cheryl Wall notes that "at the close of the novel, Angela and Anthony reunite in Paris. But when and wherever they establish a home, the novel seems to assure, it will be one in which social conventions are observed and in which societal conventions such as racism are not confronted but kept at bay" (78). I see the closing episodes of the novel as being more ambiguous, however, in their focus on an enduring sense of place, and the contradictions between racial identity as publicly understood and as privately experienced. These ideas are reinforced upon Angela's first physical return to Opal Street:

> Opal Street came into her vision, a line, a mere shadow of a street falling upon the steadfastness of Jefferson. Her heart quickened, tears came into her eyes as she turned that corner which she had turned so often, that corner which she had once left behind her forever in order to taste and know life. (362)

She walks to her childhood home in rapt appreciation of how much this

setting has meant to her family and to her developing consciousness. As she stands looking closer at the house, fantasizing about entering, an African American woman emerges and confronts her. After a brief exchange, with Angela struggling to ask if she can view the inside of her childhood home, the woman declares that she wants "nothing to do with poor white trash" (363). Angela becomes distraught, even when she receives the comfort of Matthew Henson's company; Matthew, despite being capped with "that thatch of thick bad hair," had transformed himself through grooming and manners into "a quintessence of kindliness and gravity and comprehending" (364).

Indeed, the novel closes with coupling as we anticipate the marriage of Angela and Antony, but a reader may reasonably assume that continuing life on the borderline between whiteness and blackness, whether in urban New England or another region of the United States, will produce future moments of sudden public discomfort over their perceived racial identity. Anthony Cross and Angela Murray, both light-skinned, they will continue to face dilemmas of whether or not to pass if denied opportunity due to race, just as Mattie Murray did. In one sense, I agree with Cheryl Wall's assertion that "the [new] life she envisions replicates her mother's" (78), but that new life may be equally beset with conflicts over racial identity and the legacy of racial essentialism.

Moving to the present day—the belief persists in many critical and public quarters that racial identity is essential and to identify as a racial other is a transgression, and yet the task remains of inscribing the consistent and effective contestation of essentialist discourse into literary and social history. After all, the influence of racial and sexual essentialism remains in canonical modernist literary texts such as Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Eugene O'Neill's *Emperor Jones* and in multiple expressions of African American art via the Harlem Renaissance, Pan-Africanism, the Black Arts Movement, and Afrocentricity. On the other hand, in an era that has rejected "tragic mulatto" in favor of "bi-racial," an era marked by multiculturalism and the mapping of the human genome, it also seems that the policing of racial borders is not as widespread as the politics of racial identity have

become more pluralist. Nevertheless, critics must continue to examine and catalogue historical challenges to essentialism, including Fauset's novel, as we consider how and where African American literary expressions enter into and shape our understanding of American history more broadly. Moreover, under a social structure that still represents racial identity too literally much of the time (i.e. Dave Chapelle *and* Ward Connerly), literature that demonstrates the deterministic and interlocking qualities of all oppression remains useful. *Plum Bun* remains significant for reminding us that similar to our own time, the periods of historical realism, regionalism, and the Harlem Renaissance are marked by both a determination to "confine black identity to the authentic and primitive 'black body'" (Monks 543) and to resist fixed racial identities by any means necessary.

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文學地域主義與階級的限制：佛塞特《葡萄乾麵包》的修正歷史解讀

摘 要

佛塞特 (Jessie Fauset) 1929 年的小說《葡萄乾麵包》從來沒有像她同時的哈林文藝復興的作家—麥凱 (Claude McKay)，赫斯頓 (Zora Neale Hurston)，休斯 (Lanston Hughes)—所達到的大好大壞的地步。事實上這本小說有時還受到非裔美國文學批評的主要聲音如波恩 (Robert Bone) 及克莉絲汀 (Barbara Christian) 的嘲諷。佛塞特使用的冒充白人的情節一直被批評家認為過於濫情，無法代表廣大非裔美國人的經驗，因為只有非常少數的非裔美國人能夠冒充白人。但是近二十年來有幾個原因使該小說受到比較正面的處理，例如對非裔美國女性小說的興趣 (包含批評家對婚姻情節重新引起的興趣)，及晚近批判性種族研究的影響，這些研究使任何特定觀點足以真正「代表」非裔美國經驗的假設更為複雜。本文強調該小說作為文學地域主義作品之有力特性，為該文本日益增加之批評再添加新的觀點。小說之原背景設於賓州費城一個中產階級、非裔美國人的獨立社群中，這種背景為那種環境裡種族及階級的區隔提供了有深刻見解的歷史處理方式。因為主角安吉拉莫瑞在 1920 年代時，從歷史上說來是費城黑人中產階級的社區搬到格林威治村的波斯米亞的、受藝術影響的文化區，讀者獲得了在新女性時代有關種族與階級互動的額外洞察力。本文指出地域主義在非裔美國文學史上出現的時間晚於主流美國文學，而該小說對於地域主義的處理說明了在法定隔離的年代裡種族認同的不穩定性。

關鍵字：美國文學，文學中的地域主義，非裔美國文學—女性作家，文學中的女性主義，哈林文藝復興—女性作家