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REVISIONING REALITY: NORMATIVE  
RESISTANCE IN THE CULTURAL WORKS  
OF THE LINCOLN MOTION PICTURE  
COMPANY, NELLA LARSEN, AND ALLAN  
ROHAN CRITE, 1915-1945

Andrea L. Mays

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**REVISIONING REALITY: NORMATIVE RESISTANCE IN  
THE CULTURAL WORKS OF THE LINCOLN MOTION  
PICTURE COMPANY, NELLA LARSEN, AND ALLAN  
ROHAN CRITE, 1915-1945**

by

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DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
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**Doctor of Philosophy  
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The University of New Mexico  
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## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the memory of my grandmother, Laura Louis and my mother Brenda Faye, who though they lived often in dim corners, always encouraged me to seek the light. Thank you Laura Louise for going North, Loving Willie Lee and making all of us possible.

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Revisioning Reality: Normative Resistance in the Cultural Works of The Lincoln Motion  
Picture Company, Nella Larsen, and Allan Rohan Crite, 1915-1945

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ABSTRACT

Despite the fact that nineteenth and twentieth century biologicistic and Social Darwinists theories of race have been dispelled, the social residue of white supremacist ideologies continue to have social and political implications throughout American society. America's racial hierarchy, and whiteness as a social and racial construct instantiated within it, against which every other group of people has been relationally situated, has helped not only to define non-white racial subjects in inferior terms, it has also guaranteed a perpetuation of race-based structural and social inequalities in United States of America.

African American Studies, Critical Race Theory, Whiteness Studies, and most recently a body of Normalcy scholarship have examined not only the immensity and reach of power that 'whiteness' has a construct in American society, but the ability of this construct to operate in society as an invisible and largely un-interrogated force. This is because of how whiteness is often represented as neutral, disinterested, and normal. This dissertation examines three early twentieth century African American cultural producers

who deployed representations of normativity as acts of artistic expression, political critique and social resistance.

This dissertation argues that The Lincoln Motion Picture Company (1916-1923), writer Nella Larsen (1891-1964), and painter Allan Rohan Crite (1910-2007) used narrative forms to construct ‘a politics of normativity’ through which they critiqued U.S. racial politics and challenged racist discourses aimed at African Americans in the early twentieth century. These artists deployed representations of ‘normativity’ as an antiracist strategy through which to respond to U.S. racial hierarchies in the public realm, which persistently represented African Americans as non-normative, inferior and social deviant subjects.

This dissertation joins ongoing discussions by scholars in the fields of American Studies, African American Studies, Women’s Studies, Cultural Studies and Visual Culture and Literary Studies investigating strategies of representations, as forms of resistance, and what these strategies reveal about social, cultural and political negotiations made by marginalized subjects in U.S. national culture.



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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

This dissertation locates the deployment of normative representations in African American cultural production in the first half of the twentieth century, and identifies the production of these representations as African American political strategies of resistance to the United States' racial hierarchies.<sup>1</sup> I argue that three cultural producers here considered used narrative art forms (cinema, prose literature, and scene painting) to construct representations of African American normativity in order to counter many early twentieth century political discourses, and representations, in U.S. national culture which characterized blacks as racially different and therefore inferior. These works by the artists below are engaged in a politics of normativity which refracted the ways U.S. racial politics, and its influence in national culture, were rooted in white supremacists ideology.

I have termed these representational critiques *normative disruptions* of American life. These representations of aspects of American life peopled with African Americans critically disrupt the meaning of normativity as a politically neutral concept, and American normativity specifically, by refracting the political biases inherent in U.S. racial, class and gender hierarchies. This work is distinct from much scholarship that

considers African American representational politics because it seeks to identify the terrain of ‘normativity’ as a contested space of critical politics.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore the artists considered largely functioned on the periphery of extant African American anti-oppression organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement for Colored People (NAACP), the Urban League or the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) which were influential organizations of the period.

The cultural producers considered here and the focus of their representations are The Lincoln Motion Picture Company’s (1916-1923) and African American disruptions of liberal ideology across the U.S. national landscape; Nella Larsen’s interracial disruptions of domesticity in the novels *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929); and, Allan Rohan Crite’s paintings of African Americans in decontaminated urban communities in the “Neighborhood Series” (1930-1945). Each of these cultural produces used narrative forms to create representations of African Americans which conformed to normative ideals of American identity circulating in U.S. national culture (political discourses, mass entertainment, and consumer culture) in the first decades of the twentieth century. I argue that these artists’ use of subjects of African descent in such representations provide narrative critiques about the ideological underpinnings of ‘normative American’ subjectivity and American life, as the privileged domain of white, domestic-born, heterosexual, rural, and middle-class people.

This work identifies and reads how these cultural producers’ representations repeat and revise America’s racializing discourses about people of African descent to counter ideologies which cast black people as racially different and socially and biologically inferior. The following are the overarching arguments I make about each

artist in the subsequent chapters: 1) At a time when U.S. political discourse marginalized blacks in Southern and urban landscapes, The Lincoln Motion Picture Company (TLMPC) valorized them as central figures in national geopolitics; 2) Where governmental and social discourses represented interracialism as a social and cultural threat to the health of American families and the nation, Larsen critiqued U.S. white supremacist ideology as a threat to the health of interracial families and she critiqued the domestic realm as a threat to women's physical and psychological health; and, 3) When social science and political discourses represented black people in urban spaces as deviants and social contaminants, Crite's paintings offered counter-narrative representations of normative African Americans in overtly sanitized urban spaces.

Finally, all of the representations considered here refract white supremacy as the central flaw and failing of U.S. conceptions of normativity, rather than creating representations of black people as a central social problem in U.S. society. These works illustrate the quandary people of African descent, and other non-white racial subjects faced, when confronted with attempting to ascribe to a prescription for normativity, and by extension status of belonging, which ideologically and fundamentally cast them as non-normative subjects.

These artists were in many ways 'outsiders' in relations to dominant African American cultural politics and liberation struggles. The biographical information in each of the chapters explains TLMPC, Larsen and Crite's 'outsider' status further in terms of their non-affiliation and disassociation with organized African American cultural politics and anti-oppression struggles. But, despite their geographical and ideological distance

from black movement politics, their work was generally aligned with these struggles to end the marginalization and oppression of African Americans in the United States.

Their critiques of America's white supremacist ideology often reveal concerns about the conditions and status of belonging for African Americans as citizens of the United States, which paralleled the concerns of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, The Urban League, and the United Negro Improvement Association. But, part of the strength of these 'outsiders' contributions as forms that resist dominant narratives in U.S. national culture about African Americans is that they were anti-essentialist critiques of African American belonging. However, their anti-essentialist representations had a cost.

The concept of *normative disruption* draws on Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s African American theory of literary criticism termed *signifying*, which is a form of African American cultural critique appropriate for the following analysis of narrative forms because it is grounded in both American and African literary traditions.<sup>3</sup> This research identifying normative disruptions of American life by African Americans claims these artists created by Gates' definition, standard [normative] representations of American identity and experiences "with the difference of blackness" (Gates 1988, *xxiii*). Signifying is a strategy in Black Vernacular Culture that references the homonym for signification. In Standard English, signification describes the relations between a term and the meaning that the term is intended to convey. Black Vernacular Culture (BVC) revises not only the meaning of signification as a term in the Standard English linguistic process, but it also revises the relations of power in the process of meaning-making. Instead of black people adhering to the formal use of terms in the relations of the

Standard English semantic order, BVC disrupts the Standard English semantic order so that their vernacular revisions control the process of meaning-making. Black peoples' revision/disruptions in the meaning associated with a term's Standard English use produces a critique of the English semantic order in linguistic relations, which also critiques those at the head of the overall power structures who decide relations of meaning-making. (see appendix A, Fig. 1-3)

The critique in these works occurs through what the visual and written narratives convey about relations of power in U.S. racial and gender hierarchies, and how the narratives refract what George Lipsitz has characterized as the 'prior histories' that shape contemporary relations in U.S. national culture (1990, 4). These normative disruptions are anti-racist and counter-narrative articulations of "both the possibilities and problems" of racial belonging in the United States of America as contingent on ideologies of white supremacy, and "testify to the importance of historical thinking as an organic and necessary way of understanding human experience" in the U.S. as a white supremacist racial order (4). The use of the term 'organic' here is meant to underscore these artists' lack of affiliation with formal, organized African American political movements, and it notes their independent impulse toward creative political expression supporting black anti-oppression struggles.

I identify these artists' works as narrative representations that are a distinct form of signifying, here specifically termed normative disruptions for the following reasons that adhere to Gates's definition of the term: Firstly, these works revise popular representations that problematized African Americans as non-normative subjects, and reproduce them as normative subjects in U.S. national culture. These revisions are

simultaneously engaged with African Americans' racial history and with contemporaneous U.S. national and cultural politics in the first half of the twentieth century. These revisions of black subjectivity in the U.S. contradict America's racial ideologies, and racial ideas of black identity in U.S. national culture between 1915-1945.

These narrative revisions in three distinct forms demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of the power of both narration and representation in American racialization processes, and articulate black artists' intentional deployment of them as a counter-narrative strategy for change. The history of characterizing non-white people as non-normative subjects in U.S. national culture was a crucial part of America's racializing projects, and has been thoroughly treated in a number of disciplines, including American and African American Studies scholarship by Susan Gubar in *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture* (1997), George Lipsitz in *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness* (2006), Robert G. Lee in *Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (1999), Eric Lott in *Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (1993), Richard Dyer in *A Matter of Images* (1993) and many others. These studies attest to the educational function and the practice of narrating national and racial ideology through representations in entertainment within the public sphere. These documented strategies are evidence that support Homi K. Bhabha's claim about the privileged political relationship between nation and narratives, and the interrelated functions they share in constructing national culture and shaping perceptions of the subjects within it. According to Bhabha,

Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye. Such an image of the nation—or narration—might seem impossibly romantic and excessively



metaphorical, but it is from those traditions of political thought and literary language that the nation emerges as a powerful historical idea in the west (1990).

These national ideologies that define American subjectivity, romantic and metaphorical, internalized and repeated by national narratives, are fundamental to constituting national identity, character and politics. In the U.S., these internalized and reproduced narratives about individualism, heteronormative family, and middle-class community, presuppose an investment in the nation's racialization processes, and are instantiated in the hierarchical arrangements of race and gender in U.S. national culture. This analysis is unique in that it implicates these three distinct cultural producers (TLMPC, Larsen, and Crite) in disruptive representational strategies, which counter America's racializing processes, and connect them in normative critiques which employ the black cultural tradition of signifying.

As a person of African descent, who is also the partner of a Cuban immigrant, the mother of an Anglo-Hispanic child, and a member of a queer community, the boundaries of belonging contingent on definitions of normativity confront me, and my family, nearly every day and at every level of society. Though I am a scholar and recognize the fictive nature of race, as a human being I (and my family) live with the enduring legacy and social reality of its potency to organize America's structures of power. For me, it is impossible to ignore how structures of American society are informed by this fiction, which for hundreds of years has shaped citizen's legitimacy and worth within the national context. Race is a factor which shapes how all subjects live and die. The reality of the race-based disparities in health, education, and mortality in this country are no less than

matters of life and death. The fact that unexamined discourses of normativity have, and continue, to hide these realities is of vital interest to us all.

This dissertation is an act of recovery and reconciliation. The works considered here have at times been characterized as A-political or banal failures in their turbulent political times as compared to the works of their contemporaries which have received more praise and notoriety in the studies on African American History, Art and Culture. This study makes a reassessment of TLMPC, Larsen, Crite's works by offering to reconcile their political significance through an alternative interpretation. This research illustrates the potential of normative representations of everyday life as a form of counter-narrative and anti-essentialists critique. This study re-examines the cultural works by TLMPC, writer Nella Larsen, and painter Allan Rohan Crite as normative critiques, and expands and updates the significance of their cultural and political contributions in the scholarly fields of African American Cinema, African American Literature, and African American Art. It also offers an opportunity to reapply and expand the use of Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s African American theory of literary criticism beyond the realm of literature, and into the realms of early African American Cinema and African American Fine Art.

The questions that frame the discussion of the subjects in this dissertation are:

1. How can representations of social, cultural and political normativity function as a productive frame of analysis for examining politically marginalized subjects?

2. How do non-white racial subjects, characterized as non-normative and placed in hegemonic representations, open up spaces to critique the false neutrality of whiteness inherent in constructs of normativity?

In order to discuss the central questions of this dissertation, the category of normative as an extension of the socio-historical term ‘whiteness’ requires definition. Though the origins of normalcy discourses abound in the formation of the U.S. nation state, we can safely identify a seminal moment in scholarship addressing normality in Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality* (1978). Foucault’s contribution of examining state strategies and discourses for determining the ‘fitness’ of embodied subjects in relationship to the state has been taken up by Gender Study and Queer Theory scholars, such as Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick, and others. This work intersects with Critical Race Studies and, particularly, Whiteness Studies pioneered by David R. Roediger which attempts to get at, and make visible, the complex and often elusive relationships of power between heterosexuality and whiteness that have helped to define normal subjectivity.

I define normative here based on social and political discourses of the period between 1915-1945. The first reference to which was an extension of President Theodore Roosevelt’s original term “100% Americanism” coined during his presidential campaign in The Progressive Era. This phrase privileged “native born, White, middle-class” subjects above all others (Bruenker and Kantowicz 1988). However, my use of normative is also attentive to historically based political sentiments of Nativism [distain for foreignness and racial, social, and cultural difference] and informed by U.S. racial ideologies of white supremacy which have evolved overtime, and which have been teased out by early African American Studies and later Whiteness Studies scholars. As David

Roediger points out in *How Race Survived U.S. History*, white supremacy was not just “a set of racial attitudes or prejudices” but a “social order” created in the seventeenth century (2008, 22). This was an ideological tenet in the United States during its formation, and an antecedent of European inheritance that was crystallized as a part America’s liberal democracy. White supremacy was the basis for the construction of notions of ‘normative’ humanity in contrast to those whom it was necessary to exploit, first Native peoples of the American continent, and later African slaves. Crucial here is the fact that the concept of normativity does not reference a numerical value of the population, but rather references the projection of ideology, which shifts with racial formations over time (Omi and Winant 1994).

For the purposes of this analysis, this definition of normative takes into account a matrix of racial, class and social standards in American society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, informed by the seventeenth century foundations of American racial politics. In the twentieth century, an important contributor to America’s modern racial ideology was the burgeoning field of twentieth century family sociology, which also influenced Progressive Era politics (Howard 1981). All of which produced discourses which foremost affirmed the racial category of whiteness as the ‘norm or standard’ of American identity, and the preferred category for American belonging (American Heritage Collegiate Dictionary 930).

The evolution of the construct of normative American subjectivity is affirmed in Judith E. Smith’s case study that examines the role of normative representations in U.S. national culture, and how they have shaped perceptions of non-white racial subjects, *Visions of Belonging* (2004). Smith references how her use of the term *the ordinary* was

intended “to call attention to the rhetorical and normative claims embedded in the term” (Smith 329). Smith’s study examines how the demand for popular entertainment in the post-World War II era opened up opportunities for women and people of color to produce entertainment which included them as ordinary Americans and articulated alternate visions of American citizenship and belonging that obscured histories of discrimination (4). My use of the word normative as a descriptive term calls into consideration all the dominant claims/conceptions of what it meant to be American at various periods in the U.S. between 1915-1946. Whereby, first among the characteristic of normative was the racial category of whiteness.

Furthermore, this work of interrogating the use of normativity as a neutral term calls attention to the oppositional use of this term to define non-white racial subjects as non-normative, and therefore inferior. This was one among numerous rhetorical and ideological strategies through which people of African descent were socially constructed outside of what was considered *ordinary* or *normative* categories of humanity. Within the context of this dissertation then, normative is intended to function as shorthand for the embodiment of standard American qualities, for which ‘white’ was the central characteristic, in a similar way that ideal is defined as “an ultimate form or standard of perfection or excellence.” To the category of whiteness, as normative during this period, the field of family sociology also included middle-class, patriarchal, and rurally situated (Howard 17-20).

Whiteness is an ideological formation closely associated with racial dominance and white supremacy. White supremacy references the concept that there is a racial order, and that whites are understood as normative subjects, who are racially superior and

dominant in that order. Despite the fact that whiteness as an identity category, as George Lipsitz has written in *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness* is “a delusion, a scientific and cultural fiction that like all racial identities has no valid foundation in biology or anthropology...[w]hiteness is however, a social fact, an identity created and continued with all-too-real consequences for the distribution of wealth, prestige, and opportunity” (vii 2006).

White was the dominant and preferable identity category for the distribution of power, opportunity, wealth and prestige, and ultimately as a criteria for U.S. immigration and belonging in the early twentieth century. Whites were the dominant population and the normative standard of the American subject. It was also an empirical category to which few people of African descent could assimilate. African Americans and others attempted to situate themselves as near to the cultural and social practices associated with this standard category as possible. The ultimate goal of which was to create better lives and greater opportunities for themselves and their families. The aspirations of assimilation were felt across society and had particular saliency for artists.

This reconsideration of the works by TLMPC, Larsen, and Crite is informed as much by the similarities in the critical evaluations of these artists’ contributions in their respective fields, as it is by their similar tactical use of narrative forms during politically contentious periods between African American cultural politics and U.S. national politics. Plainly put, these artists’ works intersect in a place of normative representational critique, and in their use of narratives within feature length film, modern literature and twentieth century scene painting.

This dissertation examines these subjects using narrative analysis because it is a form appropriate to the subject matter. But equally important is the fact that narrative is one of four key modes of communication, and an effective approach to creating and reading meaning in relations between peoples, power, action, and their contexts when examining these three artistic forms. Narration, the act of telling a story, is also one of four major modes of discourse through which humans communicate and make meaning of their worlds (Morner & Rausch 1998, 144).

There is a historical connection for African Americans between narrative literature, representational politics, and visual culture which extends from slave narratives of the seventeenth century through to early twentieth century film. Historically African Americans have employed narrative approaches in their resistance to racial subjugation and oppression. Among the earliest form employed in the U.S. have been slave narratives.

Among the most high-profile slave narrative autobiographies were those produced by Frederic Douglass and Harriet Jacobs. These early narratives were also literary performances within which escaped slaves raised questions about American identity by challenging the character of a country that would allow such a brutally exploitative economic practice. These creative cultural productions spoke to the dimensions of African American subjectivity and blacks' experiences in bondage in America in ways American laws, which allowed and tacitly condoned slavery, did not. Slave narratives were used in abolitionist propaganda to protest the immorality of slavery were expedient mediums between often illiterate slaves and their white abolitionist allies. The narratives were stylistically written to cohere to the values of their audiences and easily decimated

in the public realm. These literary performances allowed African Americans and their white allies to raise questions about the nature of, and criteria for America identity, and human liberty, using a common sympathetic standard of discourse.

The use of narrative as a vehicle to represent African Americans' experiences on the American continent is obvious considering the fact that one of the main goals of African American cultural production has been to re-write the stories written about them which have disabused them of humanity, dignity, and decency. Issues of representation stood at the center of questions of belonging in U.S. national culture for African slaves during the Abolitionist Movement and continue today. Scholars have attempted to address the political significance of black representation in narrative form in a number of ways that have considered its potential for political transformation, and its limits as a realm reliant on over-determined visual symbols. In *Black Cultural Traffic* (2005) African American cultural studies scholar Tricia Rose has considered slave narratives as a particular kind of cultural representation by African Americans that was trafficked between America and Europe for political purposes. Rose writes, "In 1850 America and parts of Europe had a well-developed black cultural traffic devoted to the eradication of slavery," which Rose identifies as the "trans-Atlantic lecture circuit, rallies, newspapers, speeches and even songs" aimed at U.S. national culture for the purposes of changing hearts and minds (Rose 2). The goal of these discourses was political liberation. However, the form they took was confined to prescriptive performances by the writers/orators where the slaves were required to articulate both moments of 'slavery' and 'liberation'. Slave narratives were the earliest counter-discourses, both political and literary, to have a significant impact in the liberation struggles of African peoples in the



Americas. These narratives were a particular political form of public address meant to evoke sympathy for those suffering under the yoke of slavery, and incite others to join the struggle.

I suggest that in these exchanges we can perhaps identify the origins of where blacks found themselves confronted with questions about performances of racial authenticity and national normativity, which continue to today. However, there was within such performances the demand that blacks articulate their racial distinctiveness in conditions and circumstance which also required a rhetorical distancing from U.S. national and therefore normative identity. In authenticating their wretched condition in slavery, and their subjugated humanity, their racial distinctiveness in this condition forestalled their national identity. Rose writes,

Racial ideologies undergirding the historical trade of bodies on which black cultural traffics are based have ensnared interpreters of black cultures in an endless paradox: black culture has been both an enduring symbol of unchanging purity, in full complete opposition to white western normalcy and yet a highly celebrated example of cutting edged change, dynamism, and innovation. Forever “new,” “exotic” and always “black”... (Rose vii).

This paradigm helped established the meaning and understanding of other African American cultural production meant to express black peoples’ particular identity, and articulate aspects of their unique experiences in America. Two contemporary and universally accepted examples of musical and narrative expressions of African American subjectivity include American Jazz and Blues songs. These forms are viewed as being

uniquely informed by African origins, while also being authentically American. African American art forms, one must concede, are always at some level engaged in a dialog with the nation over its social and political treatment of black people as subjects of the state. Therefore, when looking at the early twentieth century cultural producers like TLMPC, Larsen, and Crite one must acknowledge as Rose suggests, “We do not invest in culture randomly; cultural exchanges, desires, appropriations, and affinities always speak to already existing relationships conscious and otherwise—those we want to reinforce, transform, deny, [and] embrace” (Rose viii).

It is only appropriate that a study about African American representational politics and belonging in the first half of the twentieth century should include a discussion of some of the social and political forces influencing the criteria for belonging in the United States of America. There was a great deal at stake in the U.S. in the early twentieth century. Global power shifts and new power consolidations driven by the spread of Socialism and Communism in Europe, Russia, Asia and colonial Africa spilled over into America’s industrial and political interest. While the U.S. sought to distance itself from its European past and colonial empire for political reasons, it also asserted its authority as a relatively new global power and an exceptional nation in light of evolving neocolonial relations. The domestic project and priority of establishing barriers around and defining national identity and national belonging was meant to guard against currents of political unrest and fractiousness from abroad. The restrictive effects of this process were also acutely felt at home. For instance, belonging defined by the following basic criteria as the condition where people are recognized and accepted as “proper and suitable [to] fit in naturally” in America (The American Heritage College Dictionary

1993, 126) was increasingly narrowed to exclude not only blacks, who were legal citizens, but newly arriving immigrants.

U.S. leaders were determined to establish a coherent, galvanized national identity, but America's own racial ideology and policies threatened its reputation abroad as an inclusive nation and experiment in democracy. Amy Kaplan's *The Anarchy of Empire* (2002) illustrates how U.S. neo-colonial projects in Puerto Rico created a quandary over its racial politics at home when U.S. forces allied with Afro-Puerto Rican troops against Spain. Kaplan's reading of the racial politics on the battlefield, where Teddy Roosevelt was forced to acknowledge Afro-Puerto Rican officers' authority to command troops, when similar rights were being denied to African American soldiers on the same battlefield. Kaplan reads the scene as one that undermined the image of American exceptionalism and U.S. racial policies as hypocritical. Other attempts to define 'American' criteria for belonging were most legible in U.S. immigration law which clearly revealed a tightening of restrictions, and greater limitations on non-white racial subjects, being allowed to immigrate to the United States. Howard Zinn illustrated this point in *A Peoples History of the United States* (2005) when he wrote, "Congress, in the twenties, put an end to the dangerous, turbulent flood of immigrants...by passing laws setting immigration quotas: the quotas favored Anglo-Saxons, kept out black and yellow people, limited severely the coming of Latins, Slavs, Jews" (382).

These struggles over a definition and restrictive category of American identity in U.S. national culture were vitally important to establishing and maintaining America's racial agenda which was crucial to its cultural politics. National culture is the location most easily accessible to the broadest swath of citizenry where one learns the values and

ideologies shaping the national agenda. It is in this space that citizens learn what they should think and believe about the country. They also learn their placement in society, and what they should think or believe about the placement of their fellow citizens in the arrangement of hierarchal relations that white supremacist capitalism demands. Though citizenship is an important criteria that measures a degree of one's belonging in a nation, it is not the sole measure. Belonging is also contingent on other criteria within the nation that take place in the public realm.

American Studies scholar Lisa Lowe identifies the realm of U.S. national culture as a crucial space for acceptance within national boundaries, beyond simply obtaining legal citizenship for the following reasons. Lowe writes, "Citizens inhabit the space of the nation [national culture], a space that is at once juridically legislated, territorially situated, and culturally inhabited." (1996, 2). This very symbolically driven space of nation, or national culture, has a crucial hegemonic function in creating cohesive and loyal relations between national subjects, and functions as part of the overarching national institution. This is the space where immigrants obtain an understanding of the country's political ideology, symbols and it is where they learn their place in the context of the national family.

This dissertation's arguments are influenced by a number of factors related to national demographic shifts resulting from immigration, industrialization and South/North migration. The following scholars' works, including but not limited to: Patricia Hill Collins *Black Sexual Politics* (2004); Farrah Jasmine Griffith's *Who Set You Flowing?* (1995); George Hutchinson's *The Harlem Renaissance* (1995); Kimberley Phillip's *Alabama North* (1999); and, Robin D.G. Kelley's *Hammer and the Hoe* (1990),

have variously treated African American experiences related to migration and industrialization in the first decades of the twentieth century. These works have particularly considered how African American cultural production reflected black peoples' struggles for national belonging and inclusion, despite their persistent social and political marginalization.

Further related to these experiences was the field of sociology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which was dominated by social Darwinists' theories that contributed to racist hysteria, and an atmosphere of biologicistic perspectives in the field which limited advancement on studies of race in America (Omi and Winant 10). Later in the 1920s, ethnicity theories replaced the social Darwinists paradigm when Chicago sociologists, Robert E. Parks' *race-relations cycle* came to prominence. Its four key stages—contact, conflict, accommodation, and assimilation—did not apply to African Americans as the primary assumption was “that there was no long-term difference” between different ethnic groups and the dominant groups in American society (Omi and Winant 11). Ultimately, sociologists abandoned ethnicity theory because its foundational assumption was that America had a commitment to equality and social justice to racial minorities, which has not proven to be the case for African Americans (Omi and Winant 12).

African American social scientists and intellectuals of the early twentieth century argued similarly that the race-based structural inequality is what rested at the heart of American inequality. Here, I am speaking specifically about the three most influential African American thinkers of the period: W.E.B. DuBois, Marcus Garvey, and Booker T. Washington. Since the early twentieth century, voices in the field of family sociology

examining urban life in America, and black urban life in particular, included Gunnar Myrdal's and Daniel Patrick Moynihan. Moynihan's civil rights era study, *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action* (1965) plainly stated that one of America's failing was its participation in racial slavery. Furthermore, he named the nation subsequent inhumane and persistently racist treatment of blacks as at the root of America's continuing racial problems.

Many of these contemporary scholars and political voices acknowledged America's foundations in white supremacy as the penultimate cause of deeply-set and ongoing challenges to unresolved problems confronting African Americans in the United States. Moynihan's report offered an optimistic projection of progress for blacks due to The Civil Rights Movement, but he also aptly acknowledged the need for the country to honestly confront a dismal racist history for any resolution to occur. Moynihan writes,

The Negro American revolution holds forth the prospect that the American Republic, which at birth was flawed by the institution of Negro slavery, and which throughout its history has been marred by the unequal treatment of Negro citizens, will at last redeem the full promise of the Declaration of Independence (Yancy 1967, 47).

Black people's struggles for belonging have evolved necessarily from their very particular and persistent experiences of exclusion, an exclusion based on social constructions of them as racially different and by extension irreversibly non-normative.

During the last hundred years, African Americans have sought a number of corrective measures to deal with America's white supremacist ideologies and their

manifestations in social and economic inequality, and Jim Crow segregation. These efforts have sought both resolution with the past and inclusion in a diverse national future. W.E.B. DuBois' radical Pan-Africanist politics and Marcus Garvey's UNIA separatism have been among the earliest and more visible templates for opposing racial oppression in the United States, and global oppression in general, in the first half of the twentieth century. Often these political strategies have privileged black cultural nationalism here defined according to Smethurst as "a minority group with a particular if a disputed, national culture...[which] often entails some notion of the development of recovery of a true national culture that is linked to an already existing folk or popular culture" (2005, 17).

The subjects of this study make no claim to cultural nationalism beyond the borders of the United States of America. This dissertation argues the political significances of cultural expression from the position of American cultural nationalism in the works of three cultural producers in the first half of the twentieth century. These are African American narratives of belonging which deploy the strategic use of normative critique, rather than racial essentialism or cultural nationalism reliant on African continental expression. The works produced by The Lincoln Motion Picture Company (1915-1921); writer Nella Larsen (1891-1964) and painter Allan Rohan Crite (1910-2007) comprise an interesting case for understanding how African Americans have adopted creative strategies of resistance within the limits of prescribed representational standards in U.S. national culture. Furthermore they have done this work while remaining outside of organized political and cultural movements.

As subjects of study, they have no direct affiliations and the time-frames of their cultural contributions do not overlap. The Lincoln Motion Picture Company dissolved long before the publication of Larsen's short-stories or novels. Allan Rohan Crite's neighborhood series began in the 1930s long after the dissolution of The Lincoln Motion Picture Company, and two years after Larsen disappeared from public life following a plagiarism scandal. Furthermore, their professional bases of operation were hundreds, even thousands of miles apart in Los Angeles California (TLMPC), New York (Larsen) and Boston (Crite). But their representations operate along the same political continuum within the realm of normativity.

Though these artists lacked and sometimes disavowed political affiliations, they used narrative forms employing aspects of the black cultural tradition of signifying on normativity in American national culture to disrupt discourses about African American racial difference and inferiority in the public realm. The works examined here were produced between in 1915, the fiftieth anniversary of the Civil War, and continued to be produced through the end of World War II in 1946. This important time of American History was a period when the United States was deeply invested in politically defining itself on a national and global scale as an exceptional nation distinct from its European antecedents, allies and adversaries. These artists articulate a political desire to include African Americans in that definition, or at the very least interrogate their contemporaneous absence and hold the nation accountable for what W.E.B. DuBois later identified as the color line. Though these cultural producers were not overtly or famously political, their critiques of normativity were heavily informed by contemporaneous African American politics, creative and intellectual movements, and public discourses



about people of African descent as non-normative subjects in national culture. As marginal and frequently unrecognized political actors, they deserve our attention.

### **Situating These Subjects in Secondary Literature**

The scholars who have discussed early twentieth century African American social justice and liberation struggles, and the creative and cultural politics that emerged from them, have done so largely within a framework of ‘movements politics’ such as The Harlem Renaissance, The New Negro Movement, Garveyism or Marcus Garvey’s UNIA, The Black Arts Movement, The Black Power Movement, and Hip-Hop. These are understandable and fruitful analytic approaches because movements are both more legible within the historical record, and often more easily comparable for analytic purposes. However, because of the generalizing nature of movement frameworks important discontinuities, complexities and divergences can be overlooked. Some recent scholarship in African American Studies that attempt to complicate previous simplifications of ‘movement politics frameworks’ of African American arts movements and radical political projects are Cynthia Young’s *Soul Power* (2006) and James Edward Smethhurst’s *The Black Arts Movement* (2005).

The previous scholars attempts to connect and reframe First and Third World anti-racist and anti-colonial, political alliances, and re-contextualize U.S. domestic understandings of Left and black Left politics without Communist centrality, are simultaneously attendant to convergent goals and divergent political ideals. In particular, Smethhurst’s reconceptualization of black nationalisms through a lens perceptive of Cold War currents break through essentialisms that flatten the complexities between official

U.S. and American Left political relationships and alliances abroad. Rebecca M. Schreiber astutely takes up these issues of anti-essentialist alliances between African American artists and writers in Mexico in *Cold War Exiles in Mexico* (2008). These types of analyses disrupt ‘movement politics frameworks’ which have long narrowly defined the politics of such movements as The Harlem Renaissance, The Black Power Movement, and The Black Arts Movement as exclusively black or oppositional movements, even in relation to other politically aligned projects. Such new analytical frameworks are inclined to correct blind-spots that are only recently being addressed through inter-disciplinary approaches. The use of ‘movement politics’ frames in the past have often failed to recognize what George Hutchinson, Paul Gilroy, and Brent Hayes Edwards have identified as cross cultural/racial/regional flows and exchanges that must and do occur in periods of radical social and political revolution. These important complexities demand our attention.

Though TLMPC, Larsen, and Crite produced work within the U.S. one gets a distinct impression, particularly from Larsen and TLMPC, of political critiques which hold in tension U.S. racial politics with the politics in Europe and Mexico. More importantly, if these complexities within the ‘movement politics framework’ are overlooked in the homogenous characterizations of political affiliations, it’s easy to imagine that there are those who get lost outside of the frame. The cultural producers considered here are such allies in the cause for African American belonging and racial justice. Their work has been largely overlooked and excluded from important social and political analysis in the hindsight of history. The Lincoln Motion Picture Company, Nella Larsen, and Allan Rohan Crite are absent from ‘movement politics frameworks’ in their

respective fields. These artists are neither part of the Old Left Communist or the black nationalist radicalism, nor, should they be. However, they should also not be stripped of their critical legacy and their political significance.

### **Artists at the Right Time, In the Right Place, and For the Right Reasons**

The Lincoln Motion Picture Company emerges as a part of a general backlash from African Americans against D.W. Griffith's film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) specifically, but also as a corrective to white filmmakers using cutting edge filmmaking technology to defame blacks at the dawning of the twentieth century. Film as a new medium drew on existing literature to create representations of America's national citizenry, which is one of the ways racial representation and film and literature are linked as cultural forms. The claim made here is that TLMPC's use normative disruptions, embrace aspects of American cultural nationalism, rather than black cultural politics like Oscar Micheaux, as a strategy of political critique. Because they embrace normative representations of American identity, as the foundation of their critiques, their works acknowledge what Stuart Hall has called the "prior ideological orientation" and "institutional expression" of the United States to challenge and shape perceptions of people of African descent whose subjectivities are the basis against which normativity was defined (Hall 1996).

Given the political backdrop of Jim Crow segregation, lynching, and black political marginalization in the first two decades of the twentieth century, these artists' choice to critique normativity using people of African descent as normative subjects was a politically significant act. Though TLMPC is included in Black Cinema History texts

by Donald Bogle, Thomas Cripps, Cedric Robinson, Daniel Leab and others, the company is a marginal figure categorized as having little or no political significance in shaping black anti-oppression struggles, or impact through cinema outside of producing decent quality films. Cedric Robinson characterizes them as engaging in a 'Black Saxonism' which he characterizes as race films with moral middle-class blacks who are not distinct from whites, and who because of this fact are blacks who are entitled to better treatment. Robinson perhaps understates an important fact. There is little, if any, difference between black and white people. We are all people. The difference between us lies in our positioning within white supremacist racial structures. What closer readings of the narratives contained in TLMPC films reveals is that one need not be organizationally affiliated to articulate anti-oppression politics that critique or condemn such structures. Subtle acts can have quiet and far reaching impacts, particularly if the critiques are aimed at the pillars of a society.

Writer Nella Larsen emerges several years after the dissolution of TLMPC, in 1926 with the publication of her short story, *The Wrong Man* in *Young's Magazine*. Much later Larsen publishes two novels, *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929) that are accepted as part of the canon of African American modernist literature. This period is the end of what most scholars have periodized as The Harlem Renaissance, The Great Migration, and the start of The Great Depression. The focus of scholarship on Larsen has centered on her artistry in the form of 'passing' literature at a period when many mixed-race African Americans were believed to have literally passed over into white society as they moved from Southern rural areas to Northern cities (Summerville 2000).

Larsen's short stories and novels focusing on race, family and sexuality have been interpreted as radical discourses on these topics by scholars Judith Butler, Hazel Carby and Cheryl A. Wall. In this and other scholarship, Larsen has been tangentially situated in relation to other Harlem Renaissance writers Jessie Redmond Faucet and Zora Neale Hurston, though largely as a self-segregated artist (Wall 1995). Many of these scholars have rightfully focused on Larsen's skill as a transgressive writer [the way she used subtext to infer sexual, racial, and other differences] and the skill with which she orchestrated stories about women dealing with issues of interracialism and sexuality through the 'tragic mullato figure'. This was first a popular trope in early American literature, and later in race films (Sollors 2000). Though African American leaders and her peers of the period celebrated her talent, Larsen's critiques of black cultural politics in the public record, and in her literature, likely presented a challenge for them (George Hutchinson 2006).

The previously mentioned scholars' assessments of Larsen's work are valid and greatly insightful. However, because these are often close readings of her literature, and how it deals with particular issues of identity [race or sexuality], I suggest that the overall scope of the significance of what Larsen's cannon contributes politically to African American Literature has been missed. Namely, that Larsen's literature offers critiques of the sacredly regarded realm of domesticity. Larsen's subject matter, the domestic realm and family relationships, are potent locations of representational politics in U.S. history and culture in the 1920s. Both, because the domestic realm was perceived as under threat, as a result of women earning the right to vote and also because of women's increasing presences in the work place and in public leisure culture (Peiss 1986). However, this

critique of Larsen's work acknowledges the realm of domesticity, marriage and family as a privileged location of normality discourse as has been argued by Julian B. Carter in *The Heart of Whiteness* (2007). Larsen offered normative disruptions of domestic life as a secure, homogenous location and critiqued normative representations of American values as troubled by white supremacist ideology.

The final subject of this study, painter Allan Rohan Crite has been marginalized in the world of American Art, American Art History and African American Art. His stark absence from important collections and discussions of Fine Art Painting are perhaps more telling than what has been written about him, particularly in terms of informing the casual observer about the significance of his work. Crite does not fit easily into popular frames of analysis for African American artists of his period. Crite's location in Boston, MA and his choice to avoid prescribed cultural politics in his art, placed him outside the usual modes of consideration for African American painters. Though Crite's paintings have earned him the moniker *Reporter of the African American Community* by some because of his choice to focus on the 'everyday lives' of African Americans, his choice to narrate this existence in normative terms was likely anything but reportorial. Crite's aesthetic choices, which place African American subjects in the urban genre of American Scene Painting as normative, middle-class, hardworking people, troubled contemporaneous and popular notions of urban spaces, people of African descent and conceptions of normative American subjectivity. Crite's paintings are normative disruptions of racist discourses about blacks in urban communities. The paintings of "The Neighborhood Series" provide a counter-discourse to the images of blacks in U.S. national culture that promoted the

danger and contamination of cities as polluted spaces largely resulting from black peoples' South/North migrations.

This dissertation is organized as follows: Chapter 2. The Lincoln Motion Picture Company's Signifying Critiques of Normativity Across U.S. Geographies and Ideology; Chapter 3. Nella Larsen: 'Normative Critiques' and Domestic Disruptions in American Family Life; Chapter 4. Allan Rohan Crite: Urban Critique in the Cool Light of Day; and, Chapter 5. Conclusion and Future Applications.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **The Lincoln Motion Picture Company's Signifying Critique of Normativity Across U.S. Geographies and Ideologies**

The Roosevelt, Renaissance, Gem, Alhambra:  
Harlem laughing in all the wrong places  
at the crocodile tears  
of crocodile art  
that you know  
in your heart  
is crocodile:

(Hollywood  
laughs at me,  
black—  
so I laugh  
back.)

Langston Hughes

The previous poem by Langston Hughes identifies cinema as an important location of racial politics. It also mentions two strategies people of African descent have used to deal with their social marginalization in mainstream U.S. culture: laughter and irony. But, not all black people seeing motion picture representations of themselves in the early days of cinema restricted their protests to ironical laughter, or accepted this form of resistance or 'outsider critique' as the most effective strategy for dealing with defaming images of themselves in cinema. Many African Americans, particularly after the release and celebration of D.W. Griffith's film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), went into the motion picture business.



The release and subsequent critical and financial success of D.W. Griffith's film *The Birth of a Nation*, on the fiftieth anniversary of the American Civil War marked for African Americans a moment of political urgency. The movie demanded an answer, not only to disrupt its white supremacist representations of African Americans, but also because the film appeared on the precipice of a new modern era of U.S. racial politics, in the infancy of the twentieth century. Despite the fiftieth anniversary of the end of slavery, in *The Birth of a Nation* Griffith posited that the success and survival of the United States of America still depended on white supremacy.<sup>4</sup> Not only had Griffith's film shown blacks boozing, sleeping and carousing in positions of public service at the head of the U.S. government, the film showcased a range of racially derogatory myths such as black hyper-masculinity and brutality, black female licentiousness and black social and moral inferiority. Griffith's representations of blacks were a national statement on African Americans as unruly, nearly ungovernable, and incapable of governing the nation. These assertions went largely unchallenged in mainstream national culture.

While President Woodrow Wilson celebrated the film as a stirring reproduction of history, African American political organizations, and others, responded in protests, editorials, and W.E.B. DuBois and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People organized a national boycott of the film (Cripps 1993). The range of responses attested to both the stature of *The Birth of a Nation* in popular culture and acknowledged the political potential of film as a potent and instructive entertainment form in the public realm (Kellner 1984; Bruenkner et al 1988). The most politically strategic leaders were concerned about the film's potential impact on existing black anti-oppression struggles. Black leaders had gleaned the fact, to quote Manthia Diawara, that

the “racial conflict in *The Birth of a Nation* [would become] Hollywood’s only way of talking about black people” and that whenever black people appeared on Hollywood’s silver screens they would be represented as “a thorn in White America’s Heel” (1993, 3). More specifically, *The Birth of a Nation* had in metaphorical terms situated African Americans as an ailment in the U.S. national body, thus crystallizing a seminal moment of representational conflation in the medium of film, and the immutable fact of black deviance and inferiority, in the American cultural consciousness.

Scholars of early twentieth century African American culture and politics have documented the various ways early twentieth century blacks resisted defaming images in U.S. national culture in general, and opposed Griffith’s film in particular, as an overt attempt to rewrite U.S. History by revitalizing and reinforcing racial slavery’s white supremacist assumptions.<sup>5</sup> The most logical and obvious way for some African Americans to respond was by producing movies called “race films” (Bogle 2001; Cripps 1993; Yearwood 2000). These films for segregated black audiences, with black casts, produced largely by black companies, were an important political and cultural contribution in African American life specifically, and they also marked a significant moment in an expanding age of leisure culture for the entire country.<sup>6</sup>

I position The Lincoln Motion Picture Company (1916-1923) films as counter-narrative responses to D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* for three important reasons that illustrate a correlative relationship between *The Birth of a Nation* as a landmark cinematic moment in U.S. History, and as the commemorative moment of U.S. racial politics marked by the fiftieth anniversary of the Civil War. First, the stature and cultural importance of *The Birth of a Nation* as a feature length film about race was nationally

significant, and warranted and drew national response. Second, The Lincoln Motion Picture Company's (TLMPC) narratives with normative representations of African Americans clearly functioned as oppositional responses to the socially and sexually deviant representations of blacks in Griffith's film. Third and lastly, because Griffith's representations of blacks, though sensationalist, reflected broadly held feelings by mainstream white Americans toward blacks at the time that *The Birth of a Nation* was released.

The LMPC used narrative as a vehicle through which to critique and attempt to change U.S. racial politics. The films produced by TLMPC are noteworthy as critiques about U.S. racial politics, and they underscore the ideological problem of white supremacy in U.S. racial politics at the dawning of cinema and the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> These normative representations of black people were clearly part of a broader long-term project to transform representations, and therefore the status of African Americans.<sup>8</sup> This work adds to a body of scholarship by African American film scholars including Thomas Cripps (1993), Daniel J. Leab (1975), Jane Gaines (1993) and others who have chronicled efforts by both black and interracial film producers to respond to *The Birth of a Nation*.

While my analysis of TLMPC seeks to expand existing understandings of the film company as a cultural and political actor answering the claims of *The Birth of a Nation* and its political overtures of white supremacy, more importantly, I wish to re-introduce and expand the cultural significance of this group of African American filmmakers. In its day, TLMPC was respected and distinguished for the quality of its productions and is widely known as a marginally successful black film company of the early twentieth century (Cripps 1993; Bogle 2006; Robinson 2007). It represented black people as

Americans in a manner consistent with the dignity afforded white Americans, i.e. ‘normative Americans’, in mainstream cinema in the early twentieth century.<sup>9</sup> Though TLMPC is recognized among the first successful black film companies, much previous scholarship does not extend celebration of this fact about the company beyond assessing their films as bourgeois, middle-class, ‘talented tenth’ propaganda.<sup>10</sup> While this accurately characterizes some of the messages of TLMPC’s films, it does not fully capture the company’s cinematic contribution, or the company’s political significance to early black film as an instrument of black anti-oppression politics. This analysis expands existing assessments of TLMPC films, and updates their films’ significance beyond concerns with bourgeois racial uplift politics.

This chapter argues that TLMPC articulated a politics of normativity about black people as a strategy of political resistance in the wake of D.W. Griffith’s film, *The Birth of a Nation* and other representations of blacks in U.S. national culture, which presented African Americans as non-normative racial subjects. Through the deployment of normative representations of black people in feature-length films, TLMPC created narrative critiques of U.S. racial politics that refracted and critiqued white supremacist assumptions. These assumptions were key ideological influences in legitimating black racial oppression in the United States. Following the release of *The Birth of a Nation* dozens of African American film companies emerged to test the new medium and to answer the film’s assertions about African Americans. The LMPC is worthy of distinction, and is presented here as a case study that illustrates how their race films effectively intervened in dominant, white supremacist messages about black people in the United States.<sup>11</sup>

This chapter is organized as follows: 1) a note of the political significance and traditions of narrative and storytelling as a legacy in African American anti-oppression struggles; 2) a summary of my archive, methods, analysis and research questions; 3) a brief history of the founders of The Lincoln Motion Picture Company; 4) A look at the historical intersection of cinema and the political drive to consolidate a homogeneous American national identity in the early twentieth century; 5) conclusion.

### **Narratives and Storytelling**

The black cultural practice of employing narrative or storytelling in anti-oppression struggles has a long history in African American political expression, which extends back to African continental culture. In the U.S. this form was deployed during slavery and in the Abolitionist Movement through slave narratives, and continues today in several creative forms such as Hip Hop and Slam Poetry (Stuckey 1987, 77-79; Gates 1988; Yearwood 2000). The LMPC's film narratives sit on this continuum with other black cultural forms that utilized narrative for black liberation politics, which are motivated by shaping perceptions, conditions and by extension futures, of African Americans in the U.S. (Gates 1982; H. Grey 1985; G. Lipsitz 1990). Benedict Anderson has written that citizens of a nation constitute an "imagined community" within which they understand themselves belonging to and invested in a shared [and in this case racially differentiated] political identity (Anderson 1983, 6-7). The shared political identity America's citizens were encouraged to imagine themselves belonging to in the early twentieth century was politically interested in, and ideologically informed by social, cultural and legal discourses which constructed a narrative that placed African Americans

at the bottom of the U.S. racial hierarchy, and excluded them from the U.S. national community.

U.S national culture, as American Studies scholars Lisa Lowe (1999), Robert Lee (2000) and others have argued, is a location where ideas are promoted from the most powerful institutional forces to the most marginalized subjects in society. It is where national meaning making takes place. But national culture is also a constantly contested space that can be used to transform and critique cultural and political identities in the face of institutional and ideological forces. The LMPC film narratives made visible how U.S. definitions of normativity articulated an “impossible unity” for *all* American people because the foundation of this liberal unity was constituted with patriarchal white supremacist ideology (Bhabha 1990, 1). The LMPC contested the normalized state of unequal race-based power relations in the U.S., troubling their white supremacist assumptions.

This project draws on primary source material about the TLMPC which includes: scripts, film synopses and promotional materials from the George P. Johnson Negro Film Collection at University of California Los Angeles. As none of TLMPC’s films remain intact, it has been a fruitful endeavor to read the existing archive of the TLMPC’s film narratives, and their related production materials, collectively as one text to glean information about the content and intent of the films. However, what remains of these films, and is under consideration throughout this analysis, are written texts which literally ‘spell-out’ the intended message of the films. Though this analysis acknowledges that there is an obvious difference between how meaning is made in visual vs. written texts, I heavily weigh the relevance of written texts (scripts, story summaries, advertisements) as

sources of information for what the original creative and political goals of the films were. Reviews and audiences' letters responding to the films provide valid evidence of how these films were received by the public.

Methodologically, this analysis of the content and intent of the narratives originally presented to audiences through the medium of film must be adapted to accommodate the fundamental restriction that TLMPC films no longer exist. This analysis of the primary source archive draws on the cultural studies methods of narrative and textual analysis to extrapolate meaning from what once existed as visual media which now remains as a written record. The narrative analysis here closely reads stories in the archive, comprised of the film storylines and their components, i.e. the ordering and significance of events, and how these storylines were promoted in the service of a central message. Though I do not use the theoretical framework of narratology in this analysis, I do borrow from it one of its precepts, that groups of people who comprise a collective to tell a single story, and I characterize TLMPC as a collective speaking with one voice (Bal and Boheemen 2009). This textual analysis of the archive, informed by particular attention to America's social and political context, and tactics used in the black cultural tradition of signifying, assumes that the events and the characters in TLMPC narratives, offer points of identification and recognition between the narrators and the audiences about how white supremacy shaped the conditions of their lives. It is in locating these moments that we illuminate not only content, but intent by the producers. This is the very nature of African American cultural critique that signifying facilitates. The LMPC as African Americans narrators also create conditions where America's

hegemonic (as white supremacist) standards of behavior and experience are transformed by the presence of people of African descent.

Research Questions:

- 1) What critical and potentially transformative possibilities exist in hegemonic or normative representations produced by marginalized peoples, in this case African Americans?
- 2) How do representations of non-white, and therefore “so called” non-normative racial subjects, trouble white supremacist political assumptions of normativity instantiated in liberal narratives when they unfold across landscapes with white supremacist histories?

### **A Brief History on the Founders of The Lincoln Motion Picture Company**

The Lincoln Motion Picture Company was founded unofficially with the release of their first film *Realization of a Negro's Ambition* (1916) in Los Angeles, California. Four other films followed, contributing to the company's stature and reputation as a quality production company.<sup>12</sup> There are two names listed on the company's documents of incorporation. The most prominent founder, and person key to the early popularity of TLMPC films, was Noble Johnson, a racially ambiguous African American stunt rider originally from Omaha, Nebraska. Prior to TLMPC, Johnson worked for Universal Studios as a 'type' actor, make-up artist, and horseman in a number of notable productions.<sup>13</sup> At the company's start Johnson served as president and principal male star of TLMPC's first two successful films *Realization of a Negro's Ambition* and *Trooper of Troop K* (1917). As a character actor who had been steadily employed by Universal



Studios playing the racial stereotypes of swarthy villains and exotics, Johnson did his own make-up in a highly stylized and exoticized fashion.<sup>14</sup> Johnson's reputation at Universal Studios, his experience as an actor, and his connections with industry professionals in the film business allowed him to recruit the crew for TLMPC's first productions.<sup>15</sup> Though Johnson's early involvement with the company had been crucial to its success, he ultimately resigned as president and star of TLMPC at the behest of Universal Studios, who thereafter placed him under contract. Johnson was replaced in 1918 by Clarence Brooks, another popular African American matinee idol with a smaller but loyal following. Brooks joined TLMPC co-founder, Dr. J. Thomas Smith, an African American pharmacist, and sometimes casting agent for black talent for the motion picture business in California, to fill both the talent and administrative role that Noble Johnson left vacant (Anderson 2003, 129).

After the release and celebratory reviews of *Realization of a Negro's Ambition*, the company's first film, Noble Johnson's younger brother George P. Johnson joined the organization as a part-time promoter and booker, and helped place their films in theatres. Also contributing to the success of the company was George Johnson's connections as a former member of the Negro press in Nebraska. Once George Johnson established a relationship with Tony Langston, a *Chicago Defender* reporter, Langston's access to numerous African American communities across the country facilitated theatre placements and screenings for the films.<sup>16</sup>

Before joining TLMPC in Los Angeles, George P. Johnson held a position as a postal worker in Omaha, Nebraska.<sup>17</sup> The company's success and positive reception of its second film, *Trooper of Troop K*, precipitated George Johnson joining the company in

California where his duties were expanded to general booking manager, script writer, and other duties necessary to the company's success.<sup>18</sup> George Johnson's autobiographical sketch in the archive credits him with authorship of a photoplay titled *The Birthmark*, which would eventually be released as the film titled *By Right of Birth* (1921).<sup>19</sup> *By Right of Birth*'s narrative is perhaps the most overarching story of America's interracial history, and its white supremacist racial hierarchy, produced by the company. As TLMPC continued, George Johnson became an increasingly important figure behind the scenes, contributing not only to the films' placement in theatres, but also to their content, promotion and the overall longevity of the company.<sup>20</sup> Though there have certainly been more high-profile and economically successful African American filmmakers in the early decades of the twentieth century, notably Oscar Micheau (1884-1951), the narratives produced by TLMPC are worthy of cultural and political merit not only because of the documented affect they had on black audiences, but also as I will argue here, they produced films that were signifying representations. Their representations used American norms to create a critical black politics which made visible the problem of America's unreconciled white supremacist ideologies, and their impact on the lives of African Americans.

### **American vs. African American National Politics in the Twentieth Century**

Scholars George Hutchinson, Cedric Robinson and others have noted that historians of early twentieth century U.S. History have the tendency of "comporting with the conventional differentiation of American from African American culture, the exclusion of blackness from definitions of American-ness" (Hutchinson 1995). While there was some interracial political organizing in the early twentieth century high ranking

white political institutions and organizations, and African Americans, were focusing on different priorities. The consolidation of the distinctions between these priorities occurred in the late nineteenth, and the first decades of the twentieth century through U.S. politics and policy and in national culture. Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson undertook the mission of promoting the U.S. as an emerging imperial power, which required galvanizing and asserting a universal national identity to promote confidence in domestic economic interests, and to stave off criticism of U.S. imperial overtures in the Philippines and the Caribbean (Robinson 1992, xx). However, the expediency of asserting a globally powerful national identity required that the U.S. put off addressing domestic racial hierarchies and the inequalities they produced. Nikhil Pal Singh notes that for the U.S. in the early twentieth century, “Racism and the reproduction of racial hierarchy” remained blind spots for liberal democracy in the service of consolidating U.S. nationhood (2004, 23).

Therefore, addressing old race-based injustices such as Indian removal, the slave trade, Chinese exclusion, and the systematic annexation of land from Mexico took a back seat to consolidating cultural nationalism (Singh 29). Not only was justice for these non-white racial groups within the country marginalized, so was their inclusion in the formulation of a definition of American-ness of the twentieth century.<sup>21</sup> In truth, the project of equating white and U.S. national identity began in America’s founding documents: *The Declaration of Independence*<sup>22</sup> and *The Constitution of the United States of America*<sup>23</sup> that set in motion a discourse of equality which attempted to rhetorically and politically exempt the U.S. from the historical epistemologies of colonialism

responsible for determining class division, racial difference, and other social hierarchies (Roediger 2008).

In the second decade of the twentieth century, national anxiety over the Bolshevik revolution, the spread of Communism and World War I increased Nativism and anti-immigrant sentiment, and intensified both the consolidation of, and parameters around, conceptions of American identity. What little inroads toward acceptance had been made by blacks in interracial Leftist labor unions and progressive politics in Northern cities, began to wane as political tempers and resources came up short (Foley 2003; Gilmore 2008). The economic forces of Capitalism, the political forces of Jim Crow, and anti-Communist fear surrounding World War I were key factors shaping political alliances and constructing and perpetuating racial difference during this period (Robinson 2007, 241). Except for small Leftist political organizations, nationalism and national politics, were largely a segregated affair (Gilmore 2008).

African Americans who had experienced only marginal gains through labor unions before the war, after the war experienced not only racial, but political suspicion of national disloyalty as well. The most high profile black political organization existed on an ideological continuum of conservative approaches that focused on assimilation and adherence as much as possible to American cultural hegemony, while others adopted radical approaches that included exodus and exile from the U.S. Interracial organizations seeking remedial approaches to racism included The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People [NAACP] (1910), which would eventually be headed by W.E.B. DuBois. The Urban League, consistent with other Reform Era social welfare programs, helped working class blacks find employment, housing and other resources

and get settled in urban areas. On the more radical end of the spectrum, the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), headed and founded by Marcus Garvey in Jamaica in 1914, recognized the issue of racism against blacks as a global problem. Garveyism advocated separate and independent financial and governmental institutions for blacks and sought to return blacks to Africa (Tolbert 1975, 223-253).

The conception of racial justice as a global struggle would eventually also be adopted by DuBois through his work with the Pan African Congress. However, in the early 1920s, the Red Scare caused NAACP leaders to be conscious not to assert too radical a stance while fighting domestic injustice and oppression. African American Studies Scholars like Henry Louis Gates Jr., Arnold Rampersan and Levering Lewis have speculated that caution over perceptions of Communist leanings was largely the reason why The Harlem Renaissance was framed as an innovative literary, rather than a radical political movement. Despite whatever differences existed between these largely distinct African American political organizations, they agreed that no matter what political strategies were employed, they needed to focus on improving the lives of African Americans within the United States in the increasingly hostile racial climate (Rabaka, 2003, 399-449). The unequal effects of Jim Crow were felt at every level of American life, and the release of *The Birth of a Nation* and President Woodrow Wilson's characterization of the film as "History written in lightning" was perhaps all black people could stand added to their political alienation within the country. Based on these realities, there was no denying that African Americans were doomed to be perpetually cast as "domestic foreigners, and non-normative subjects" in contrast to a consolidated American identity (Flores and Benmayor 1997, 9).

This was perhaps why TLMPC and other African American cultural producers began to fight back in the medium that Griffith used to ruthlessly attack them. The five films produced by TLMPC used normative representations of black people to launch signifying critiques of America's social and political investment in white supremacy at a national level in the following three ways: 1) TLMPC film narratives illustrate the instantiation of white supremacy in liberal democracy; 2) TLMPC film narratives show white supremacy as a national political problem, rather than a social problem of regional significance—hence these narratives function as racial critiques of the whole nation; and, 3) TLMPC film narratives illustrate the ideological tenets of white supremacy as part of America's past which is continually in dialogue with black people's contemporaneous lives and U.S. political projects.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, these films signify nationally on the contemporaneous and historical struggles African American face living under America's liberal democratic ideals.

The synopsis of the first film released by TLMPC, *Realization of a Negro's Ambition*, addresses the influences of white supremacist ideology on U.S. racial politics as chief among the filmmakers concerns. The film's narrative highlighted the race-based inequality in U.S. social and economic life by offering a story that refracted both anti-black racism, and the nativist sentiments of the Americanization Movement, which at the time dominated American politics and challenged the status of belonging for African Americans as well as immigrants (Buenke and Kantowicz 1988, 17). Leading up to and through World War I and The Red Scare, the Americanization Movement grew politically because its followers believed that immigrants, and other so-called hyphenated Americans, namely blacks, could not be trusted and posed a threat to the war effort and

the nation (Foley 2008, 12-13). Under the looming threat of war, and America's tenuous economic climate, progressive era radicals and America's liberal leaders were not prepared to deal boldly with America's entrenched racial hierarchy, or the material inequalities it produced.

The following examples illustrate how TLMPC films took on this mantle in their stories deploying the principles of liberalism within the narrative of *Realization of a Negro's Ambition* to refract U.S. white supremacist ideology as commensurate with U.S. nationalism.<sup>25</sup> The examples under discussion here refract liberalism in basic terms digestible to general black movie audiences, who would have previously been exposed to these ideas in U.S. national culture. The four tenets of liberalism signified on through their films are: 1) Individualism; 2) negative intrusion of the state into private lives rather than participation of the state in the establishment of equality; 3) protection of private property as central to the state; and, 4) tolerance of political difference [not racial difference] (Perusek 410).

*Realization of a Negro's Ambition*, is a tale that privileges individualism. The synopsis opens with the film's main character, James Burton (Nobel Johnson), as he leaves his family's farm in the Midwest to seek his fortune in California's oil fields. Burton, the hero, is an individual acting alone. The film's critique rests in how the story illustrates liberalism's failure to distinguish between racial and national subjectivity, and how this failure of privileging individuals generally, does not account for those distinctly situated in relation to the state based on the state's various ideological hierarchies. For example, upon Burton's arrival at the jobsite in California, his ambitions for employment are thwarted when the oil field manager rejects his request for work "because of his

nationality.”<sup>26</sup> Since the synopsis for this film acknowledges at the outset that Burton is an African American from the Midwest, this story signifies on this racist articulation by allowing one to see Burton’s rejection from the nation take place at two levels. First, he is denied employment, a livelihood, as an individual due to discriminatory U.S. employment practices. Secondly, Burton is narratively denied U.S. Citizenship through rejection for employment. The conflation of race and nation in this bootstraps story, and how it situates Burton as a foreigner and a rejected man in a privileged location associated with the American character, the Western Frontier, suggests a self-consciousness in this content’s significance. Rather than celebrating Burton’s individualism, this story shows how race limits his individualism and opportunity.

The second tenet of liberalism evident in this story is an acknowledgment of the state’s privileging of individual property rights. The first example of this occurs with the mention of Burton leaving his family’s farm, private property, to seek his own fortune out West. But, the privileging of individual property rights is also clearly articulated at the job site where Burton petitions for work. The oil field is private property, belonging to the white owner and manager, who avails himself of the right to discriminate based on race, though it is referenced as ‘nationality’. Furthermore, liberalism champions political difference. This narrative twist underscores the belief that Burton should not expect remediation from the state for the discrimination he encounters as such an act violates the (white) oil rig owner’s rights. Burton does not expect, nor receive, any remediation from his experience of discrimination which then upholds liberalism’s tenet of negative intrusion of the state into matters of private property.



Twentieth century liberalism privileged the rights of the individual to do what he would with his property and the narrative accepts this claim, but it also critiques racial hierarchies within it. The story allows Burton to obtain a job on the oil field through his own devices: Burton rescues the property owner's daughter from a runaway horse carriage and wins over the oil well owner. The story continues, showing Burton's ingenuity on the job and his ultimate success when after learning the trade he strikes oil on his family's land back in the Midwest. The synopsis ends, "The last scene shows James in later years, with ambition realized, home and family, a nice country to live in and nice people to live and enjoy it with."<sup>27</sup> Though Burton's success was realized through his individual ambitions and initiative, and was literally rooted in his family property, audiences also witnessed Burton's raced-based obstacles.

Liberalism's white supremacist assumptions, American anti-black racism, and political Nativism at the start of the twentieth century were the hegemonic forces compelling this story as a normative representation of American political culture. *Realization of a Negro's Ambition* is a classic bootstraps tale of one man's success and individual liberty, which are quintessential American values rooted in liberalism (Perusek 410). Though Burton's is ultimately a success story, the political critique in this narrative takes place in the subtle illustration of the initial limits of Burton's authority as an individual, who is also an African American. Within the narrative, audiences were shown how nineteenth century liberalism's assumption that the normative national subject, the individual, a white male, initially failed to recognize Burton as a citizen (Perusek 410). Burton's bootstraps story and liberalism's racial assumptions are disrupted by his racial subjectivity. Additionally, the fact that race and nation are conflated in this narrative, and

the issue of national belonging is raised a second time at the end of the synopsis, underscores this narrative's self-consciousness about race and national belonging remaining key questions for African Americans. This is a signifying critique of white supremacy at a national level having a delimiting effect on black people's potential within the United States. The film's assessment of black people's subjectivity in the United States as a "separate and unequal" class of people is consistent with the Kerner Commission's Report of Civil Disorders that appeared forty years later illustrating both TLMPC's forethought, and political understanding of America's racial hierarchy.<sup>28</sup>

In TLMPC's second film, *Trooper of Troop K*, we find another story set in a Western landscape that signifies on the contours of U.S. white supremacy and imperialism in U.S. racial politics. This film's narrative emphasis is the protection of national borders by African American subjects. There are three ways that *Trooper of Troop K* signifies on America's white supremacist ideologies. First, it deploys the soldier, the most patriotic of figures, to illustrate U.S. racial hierarchy within the military as a national institution. Secondly, the narrative highlights the irony of black soldiers protecting U.S. national borders against other non-white colonial subjects. Finally, this film appears to directly contradict Griffith's assertion in *The Birth of a Nation* that white Southerners and segregationists are the only hope as guardians of the nation.

Noble Johnson stars in *Trooper of Troop K* as the anti-hero 'Shiftless Joe', "unkempt [sic] and careless of dress" who is persuaded by his friend Clara Holmes (Beulah Hall) that the "Army with its regularity, discipline and training" might be a way for him to turn his life around after he loses the last in a series of jobs.<sup>29</sup> Joe joins the 10<sup>th</sup> Calvary where he becomes part of the Negro regiment, Troop K. Though Joe does not

make an immediate turn-a-round, he remains disheveled and slovenly, his assignment as a caretaker for a white regiment Captain's horse is one at which he excels, earning the captain's affection.<sup>30</sup> It's worth noting that 'shiftlessness' was a trait often attributed to African Americans as a way to characterize them as non-normative. By deploying this stereotype in a narrative of heroism and industry, the LMPC takes an opportunity to rehabilitate its meaning.

Sometime after Joe [perhaps a reference to an 'average Joe'] finds himself on duty with Troop K "Near Cassa Grandes, Mexico [sic]" they are "drawn into a fight with Mexican troops at Carrizal."<sup>31</sup> Though the regiment is ultimately out-gunned, and slaughtered in the conflict, Joe distinguishes himself through his heroic deeds during the fight. The most important narrative twist in this story is that Joe rescues his "wounded [white] Captain" and secures "their good escape."<sup>32</sup> Joe gets promoted, and returns home to Clara to be received "with open arms."<sup>33</sup>

This narrative indexes white supremacist structures of power operating at a national level, both domestically and transnationally, between the U.S. and Mexico. This story follows the impact of World War I and its hegemonic and consolidating influence on American subjectivity, and reveals an example of Amy Kaplan's assessment that "international struggles for domination abroad profoundly shape representations of American national identity at home, and [...] cultural phenomena we think of as domestic or particularly national are forged in the crucible of foreign relations" (Kaplan 2002, 1). Though the U.S. West was not without racial tension and difficulties, extending from the fallout of Western Expansion, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, and Native American resettlement, African Americans were significantly less troubling in the West as a result

of their insignificant population (Manchaca 215). The racial politics during this era, which Martha Manchaca terms “the liberal phase in U.S. racial history” between 1865-1989, before the backlash of *dejure* segregation was extended to Mexican Americans as well as blacks (Manchaca 277). More important to my argument, is the fact that TLMPC recognized these connections, and created representations that deployed African Americans in locations which diffused the black/white binary, and critiqued various and broader U.S. racial relationships.

*Trooper of Troop K* offers an important signifying critique through its deployment of the iconic figure considered the embodiment of national will and force, the American soldier. The difference in this film is that the soldier, a figure embodying loyalty and national pride, is a black man. The issue of black soldiers in U.S. Armed Forces was a hotly contested issue and a subject of political debate when *Trooper of Troop K* premiered. The U.S. Military remained a segregated institution which treated and deployed African Americans as inferior units in service. The military was important because African American political leaders actively targeted military service as a location where blacks should press their case for national inclusion and acceptance. W.E.B. DuBois supported World War I and urged African Americans to serve. He even used the occasion of the war to push for the establishment of training camps for black officers (Carr, ABC-CLIO, 2003, Web. 7 June 2013). However, at the end of World War I, and a year after *Trooper of Troop K* premiered, DuBois recognized his war endorsement strategy had failed, and he wrote his famous post-war announcement to emphasize the fact that blacks had not yet achieved recognition for their service in the U.S. Military. In the May 1918 issue of *Crisis*, the NAACP’s magazine, DuBois wrote, “We return. We

return from fighting. We return fighting.” Meaning, that despite African Americans’ participation in the war defending the nation, blacks had returned to a predicament where they still had to fight domestic oppression at home for the same rights they fought to achieve for others abroad.

*Trooper of Troop K* was also an important film because of its blending of fact and fiction. The film’s narrative recounted actual events involving the black troops of the celebrated 10<sup>th</sup> Calvary stationed along the U.S. Mexico Border at Carrizal, who had been killed in conflict (Fredriksen, ABC-CLIO, 2013, Web. 7 June 2013). The LMPC recognized the importance of this factual element and promoted the film using the verisimilitude of these facts as a selling point on its advertisement of the film, as seen below,

Because of the recent crisis in our relationship with Mexico and the consequent universal interest in the massacre of the Negro Troopers of the famous 10<sup>th</sup> Calvary, a thrilling picturization of the CARRIZAL FIGHT, is well named the most timely production of the year. It is a very realistic production of the historical incident featuring in detail mowing down of the charging troopers ranks by the deadly machine gun fire and the heroic rescue of Cap. Lewis S. Morey by the unknown and honored Trooper of Troop K.<sup>34</sup>

This film’s narrative acknowledges the loss of black life in the service of defending the nation, but it also showcases the U.S. military as a segregated institution. The story’s nonchalant handling of segregation illustrates that it was a broadly accepted fact of American life, even though blacks demonstrated national loyalty and invested in the nation with their lives. Though the film does not directly deal with the fact that many

blacks from Southern states who had served in the military suffered retribution for doing so, it does reference the fact that the actual heroic African American that rescued Captain Lewis S. Morey has gone unrecognized because he, unlike the captain, remains unknown. This reference in the film is a subtle statement that attempts to remedy black marginality in the U.S. Armed Forces.

The LMPC names the hero ‘Shiftless Joe’, and he is at first an unexceptional (black) guy, but given the opportunity to prove his valor he rises to the occasion. Joe’s exhibition of bravery, courage under fire, and heroism in rescuing his white captain for the greater good of the nation, is a statement that directly refutes D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* wherein unruly black soldiers attempt to rape white women. Instead, *Trooper of Troop K* is a statement about the necessity to recognize the true and universal inclusion of African Americans in order to preserve the nation, and secure its future survival. The film is a critique of the absurdity of social, economic, political and military segregation and the classification of African Americans as non-normative racial subjects.

This was also an important film for TLMPC, because the company attempted to use the film to cross over into white venues to reach white audiences because of its patriotic content. A message about the valor of black men in military service would have also informed mainstream white audiences about the heroic actions of unsung blacks serving in the military as a part of the campaign for racial equality. A news article titled “Breaks New Ground” in the New Orleans *Argus* on February 19, 1917 advertising *Trooper of Troop K* reads,

After playing every “mixed theatre in this city, the local manager of The Lincoln Motion Picture Company went one better by booking the great feature into a

theater which plays to “white” people only! For the first time in history a solid [segregated] White audience in the south has sat through and applauded a race feature, the work of Noble M. Johnson and his capable company have created a distinct sensation”<sup>35</sup>

Though this article takes a rather zealous approach to celebrating what by current standards is a minor accomplishment toward integration, the message it conveys also underscores the dangers of merely suggesting any progress toward desegregation. The advertisement conceals the name of the theatre, the address and its owner, referencing it only as a “No Name” theatre “Located at Canal Street, the Broadway of the South.”<sup>36</sup> While U.S. soldiers were iconic representations of normative American masculinity, easily identified with by broad audiences, the fact that this film deploys a black man in a fact based performance of heroism and military masculinity is ambitious. In the telling of this nationally important story, there is also a narrative critique of U.S. white supremacy, which subverts the legitimacy of its segregationist policy in the national institutions of armed service.

Of the five films produced by TLMPC, the one that offers the most comprehensive signifying critique of U.S. racial politics across America’s geopolitical landscape is *By Right of Birth* (1921). Interestingly, this was also the final feature produced by the company. *By Right of Birth* followed the release of two melodramas, *Law of Nature* (1918) and *A Man’s Full Duty* (1919), which marked not only the absence of Noble Johnson from the company’s films as the headlining star (replaced by Clarence Brooks), but a shift in genre for the company from action and adventure films to melodramas.<sup>37</sup> In *Forgeries of Memory & Meaning* by Cedric Robinson has written that

race film companies, including TLMPC, produced “hegemonic...melodramas” as an indication of “complete assimilation to Anglo-Saxon identity and culture” (2007, 241). While this may have certainly been the case with the previous two films, TLMPC returned to their original political mission of critiquing U.S. national politics, and white supremacist racial ideologies, with the release of their final film, *By Right of Birth*.

*By Right of Birth* is the story of Juanita Cooper (Anita Thompson), an orphan of African and Native American descent. Her Freedmen parents die in a car accident when they migrate with Juanita as an infant from Oklahoma. Juanita’s eventual adoptive parents, the Childers, discover her in the wreckage, but her parents by that time have washed away in the river where the accident occurred. The Childers, “White retired farmers from Iowa” who were also relocating to California, take Juanita from the wreckage and raise her as their own, as a white child.<sup>38</sup> However, when the first Mrs. Childers dies and the widower remarries, he marries a woman of “low character” who gambles and eventually gets into trouble with gambling debts. This second Mrs. Childers also resents her husband’s affection for Juanita. Rummaging through papers, one day she discovers the truth about Juanita’s ancestors and blackmails her into leaving so she’ll have more control over Mr. Childers and his finances. She also discovers Juanita’s real identity and her claim to some property, which Mrs. Childers schemes to defraud her of with the help of her Mexican American partner in crime, Romero.<sup>39</sup> However, young Phil Jones, (Clarence Brooks), who has affections for Juanita, uncovers the plot. Meanwhile, Juanita has left home and taken a room in a boarding house where she is attended by “a kindly old woman,” who she later discovers is her long lost mother. The culmination of events ends with Juanita discovering her mother, and being reunited with her adoptive



father. She also marries young Phil Jones. Juanita reclaims the land owed her 'by right of birth' through her African and Native American ancestors.

Cedric Robinson, among others, have classified TLMPC among a cadre of other interracial and black film companies that were not involved in black anti-oppression politics. Robinson claimed that TLMPC left the racist realities "outside of the movie frame" and that they "quarantined their black subjects" from the race-based political, economic, and social struggles with which most African Americans were embroiled (241). Daniel Leab in his article, "All Colored—But Not Much Different" makes a similar case about the company and black film's in general produced between 1913-1928. Despite the previous critiques, *By Right of Birth*'s narrative counts as nothing if not politically motivated. It is a story that brings together America's racial history and its racist legacies, in a signifying critique that has white supremacy as the guilty specter in America's braided racial sagas. This film's signifying critique functions, in my view, as one comparable to and a precursor for that in director John Sayles film *Lone Star* (1993), taking both interracial histories, and the U.S. Western landscape as its primary subjects.

*By Right of Birth* is a unique, contemporaneously self-conscious, and politically forward-thinking project that exploits the poly-vocal functions of the terms nation and family as metaphorical and interchangeable. This story constructs a nuclear family which illustrates the complexity of a historically problematized, white supremacist, U.S. national family. The histories of Native American resettlement, African American emancipation, and then existing tensions with Mexico (Romero is an unequivocal villain) come together as a metaphor for America's interracial history.

The narrative takes place at the apex of shifting national demographics resulting from internal migration in the U.S. The LMPC tells a story of Native, African American and white people migrating West, to the perilous frontier. The tragedy of this story unfolds across America's Western landscape, a context with a history of genocide and disrupted familial relations for Native peoples. Juanita, a descendent of these histories is abandoned in the wreckage. From these tragic events, a Midwestern white couple reconstitutes the normative American family model by adopting her and covering up her past (with one that is white, middle-class, and rural). However, through an imprudent re-marriage, family secrets and racial legacies disrupt the normative family until these histories can be confronted, and inheritances (a land grant to say the least) can be reclaimed.

*By Right of Birth* offers the normative American family, with the difference of being informed by U.S. racial history and its constitutive racial hierarchies. While the story depends on conventions of resolution typical of melodrama, it also provides fact based accounts of the lives of people who had been deemed non-normative by the U.S. Government. Script notes for the story line reads, "In the old Indian Territory, now Oklahoma the Negro slaves of the Indians, when freed were given by the Government the same number of acres of land that each Indian received, the number of acres varying according to the tribes of Indians; the Creeks getting 160 acres; the Cherokee 80 acres..."<sup>40</sup> The production notes make a clear case for their being an awareness and intent to convey through these stories as entertainment, some facts as well as some criticisms of America's racial history, and the ideologies that undergirded the nation's interracial history.

## Conclusion

Despite the fact the TLMC has largely been relegated to the footnotes of U.S. cinema and African American cinema history, the company's films offered black audiences uplifting representations of themselves, which simultaneously took advantage of narrative cinema and representations of social and political normativity, to create incisive critiques of U.S. racial politics. The LMPC's tales of adventure, prosperity, and love set against America's Western landscape, challenged audiences across racial lines to re-imagine the place of African Americans within U.S. national culture. They certainly challenged the racial assertions of D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* which helped inspire the organization and production of a number of race film companies. These films also challenged the representations of African Americans and America's racial hierarchy which largely subjugated, vilified, and marginalized them socially, politically and economically in American society.

The LMPC's production of representation of African Americans informed by ideas of normativity—often assigned to whites in America—refracted their racist assumptions in narratives where blacks were shown being hindered by various structures of oppression, be it employment, in the military, or in their rightful inheritance based on past injustices. By drawing on historical events, and referencing contemporaneous social and political realities in the lives of African Americans, filmmakers Noble Johnson, George P. Johnson, Clarence Brook and Dr. J. Thomas Smith made films, which also functioned as critiques about the dictates of American national subjectivity, and the limits of the nation as a liberal democracy. The Lincoln Motion Picture Company, as often happens with visionary creative enterprises, has been misread. It is my hope that these re-

readings of their films as signifying critiques begin to situate them in their rightful place among their more frequently recognized and highly celebrated peers.

## CHAPTER THREE

### **Nella Larsen: Normative Critiques and Domestic Disruptions in American Family Life**

“This institution...requiring public promises of one’s intention to fulfil [sic] a private obligation...requiring all one’s criminal ingenuity to avoid.”

*The Marriage*, Marianne Moore (1887-1972)

Two years prior to the publication of her novel *Quicksand* (1928), author Nella Larsen published two short stories, “The Wrong Man” and “Freedom,” in *Young’s Magazine*. Both stories were published under the male pseudonym Allen Semi (for her married name Nella Imes). Though these stories are not cornerstones in what has come to be understood as Larsen’s small literary canon, they are insightful about her work because they tell us that domesticity, in the form of family, marriage, and maternity were from the beginning foremost among Larsen’s narrative and political concerns. The fact that these stories were published under a pseudonym also cues us to Larsen’s predisposition for misdirection and withholding where issues of identity were concerned. These stories are significant to this dissertation because they provide a point of entry to discuss Larsen’s novels and reveal the narrative foundations on which her subsequent,

and more substantial works, which critique normative family relations within U.S. racial structures of white supremacy, are built.<sup>41</sup> These stories as well, offer a glimpse of the lived and imagined dysfunction that exists behind the scenes in American domestic life, and particularly in the lives of mixed-race women of African descent.

Through these first stories of anti-utopian domesticity, Larsen signifies on domestic relations and refracts the troubling nature of the limited choices available to middle-class women, and in particular, women of color in the early twentieth century. These stories construct what look like placid normative domestic arrangements as spaces of confinement which simmer discontent. The short stories, “Freedom” and “The Wrong Man”, both less than six pages, offer incisive critiques of the limited choices and bleak circumstances women face in marriage in the early twentieth century. For Larsen’s mixed-race heroines, American domesticity and the attending white supremacist and heteronormative ideologies undergirding the institutions of family, marriage and maternity, portend sometimes social, sometimes literal, and nearly always metaphoric death.

In the short story “Freedom” a nameless, race-less, middle-class man abandons his wife after a business trip, during which he has imagined that she has cheated him of his liberty and autonomy by trapping him into marrying her. He calls her a “sybarite!” and “A parasite too!” (Larsen 14). Rather than returning home from the business trip after this realization, the man embarks on a year of travel around the globe, rejoicing in his newly recovered freedom. Near the end of the year, news reaches him that his wife, and child, both died in childbirth. He had not known of her pregnancy and becomes despairing of his actions. He returns home where he is consumed with guilt and

ultimately leaps from his study window to his death. “Freedom’s” portrait of estranged marriage, and strained gender relations, is a tragic foreshadowing of narrative themes explored in more depth in Larsen’s novels. For Larsen’s characters, marriage is a joint venture of isolated experiences held together with deception and resentment.

In “The Wrong Man” Larsen gives the characters names and racial identities, at least by way of description, but again she offers a narrative of domestic discontent. The story’s protagonist is socialite Julie Romley, who claims to be ecstatically happy in her marriage, and with the social position marriage provides her. That is until she is introduced to her husband’s college friend, Ralph Taylor, at a party. Taylor is a “tall browned man...who looks like an Indian chief” (Larsen 5-6). Through Julie’s narration, the reader discovers that before Julie’s marriage, Taylor was actually Julie’s lover who financially supported her. Julie agonizes at the prospect of Taylor blackmailing her and decides to preempt this threat. She arranges to meet Taylor in a summerhouse and confides her willingness to do anything for him if he will keep their secret. After her confession to Taylor, she realizes that she has mistaken Taylor’s identity. He was not after all her ex-lover. Narratively, Julie is at the mercy of men’s discretion in marriage, and in her history of sexual impropriety. Both revelations in the story risk Julie’s social life and social death.

In these stories of anti-utopian domesticity Larsen, as in her later novels, offers overt attempts to subvert racial and gender binaries on the page, which were of the utmost importance in early twentieth century American social and political life. Layered on to the message of sexual and relational inequality within marriage, Larsen’s novels demonstrate that race is the supreme factor shaping the lives of her characters’ as mixed

race women of African descent. Race determines the quality of her characters' family, social, political, cultural, and spiritual lives though her characters seem determined to operate outside of the social limits that define race.

For Larsen the author, the choice of withholding her own racial identity, gender identity, and name from the publication of these early works was a strategic choice that gestures toward autonomy and the liberatory function that literature served in her life. Literature, allowed her to escape racial and gender constraints prescribed for her by society. Narrative literature presented Larsen with opportunities to tell tales of family, marriage, and maternity with some authorial distance from the social categories that would likely have predisposed her readers to see her political motivations, and perhaps their personal connections to her work. Scholars previously examining Larsen's work have focused on her novels as racial 'passing' literature. Which is clearly the case with the novel of the same name, *Passing* (1929). Though race is at the foundation of Larsen's literature, it is by no means the only significant concern at issue in the lives of her characters.

I argue that Larsen's novels *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929) are engaged in signifying critiques of normativity in the realm of domesticity, which refract the flaws of contemporaneous U.S. racial and gender politics. My argument classifies Larsen as a signifying writer who used narrative literature, and normative family structures, as literary devices to protest social inequalities faced by women, and particularly mixed-race women of African descent, in American life in the 1920s. These literary disruptions of gender roles and racial categories, within normative family life offered a critical assessment of the domestic realm, and the roles women were supposed to fulfill within



marriage. This argument is supported by specific examples within Larsen's novels, and existing scholarship in the fields of African American Literature, Gender Studies, and Critical Race Studies.

In this chapter, I offer a new perspective borne up by the literature by first situating Larsen in the literature of African American Literary and Gender Studies and explain my intervention in analyzing her work. This is followed by a note on the analytical approach and method of examining her work, and a summary of the novels, their major themes and my critical reading of them in the context of the historical currents. This chapter ends with a more in-depth discussion of how Larsen specifically disrupts notions of family, marriage, and maternity in her novels, the American family in black and white. Followed by the conclusion.

### **A New Perspective on Nella Larsen Born Up by the Literature**

Though in her time Larsen did achieve some measure or recognition in African American cultural and creative circles, the political richness of her novels went largely unrecognized by her peers and scholars of the period. I assert that the major reason for this was that Larsen's creative and political strategies predated the critical instruments best able to characterize her literary contribution. It is to Larsen's credit as a nuanced and elegant story teller that the politics of her novels were not accurately classified as politically engaged protest literature, and were initially regarded as complicit in constructing uncritical representations of black middle-class society, which mirrored those in the white American mainstream. Such stories were classified as pot-boilers, melodramas, and romances of her day.

During the past thirty years scholars of African American literature and culture have read Larsen more closely, and uncovered a range of political statements in her work. These critical observations run a gamut: from her unconventional overt and subtle use of the tragic mulatto figure (Carby 1989) to her subversive gender representations [McDowell (1986) Blackmore (1992) and Butler (1993)]. The underlying assumptions in the previous works adopt racial liminality and gender subversion as sometimes parallel and intersecting concerns in the social construction of mixed-race identity in the United States (Somerville 2000, 76). These categories in Larsen's work, articulated in the domestic realm, and in marriage in particular, are the very public institutions where the ideologies supporting normative gender and racial categories come undone.

Because Larsen was herself a mixed-race person of African descent with troubled family relations, historians and biographers who have examined her biographical record have justifiably read glimpses of her personal life in the lives of her characters (Hutchinson 2006; Davis 1994). While all of these studies open Larsen's work to worthy critical consideration in rich intellectual terrains, I submit that the above mentioned assessments of Larsen's work are all pieces of a larger, previously overlooked, literary project which I undertake to illuminate here. This more overarching project was that her literature was *signifying* on normative sexual and gender roles within the American domestic realm through an intersectional lens (multi-racial, class conscious, and attentive to patriarchal gender roles) that uncovered the complexities of America's race, class, and gender hierarchies and showed the difficulties women of African descent found adhering to them (Collins 2000, 66-67).

Larsen's novels thematically comprise the scope of concerns held by African Americans within the U.S. domestic realm, as they were compelled to consider their place in national and therefore interracial U.S. relations. However, she simultaneously calls out the gender and class relations African American women traveled within the racial hierarchies, and hierarchies of complexion politics, within African American communities which were similarly perilous. Therefore, Larsen's novels functioned as a literary canvas upon which she painted a picture of the social tensions and anxieties about racial difference, and gender subjugation, cultivated and maintained at the foundation of U.S. relations; the domestic family, between white, African American, and mixed race subjects. In these works the relationships between her characters, signify on the ideologies of American racial, sexual, and social politics refracting their unreconciled histories and contemporaneous anxieties.

Larsen deploys three specific concepts: marriage, maternity, and family in ways that critique normative constructions of these institutions based on U.S. political ideologies. Larsen used her literary skills to construct a realm of domesticity that illustrated racial, class, and gender critiques in normative domestic life. By using mixed-race black subjects or strategically racialized subjects, deployed in normative domestic relations, Larsen allows the narratives to refract the prior histories, and uneven contemporary relations of power, in the domestic realm. She also indexes the social tensions in U.S. national culture resulting from shifts in racial and gender relations at the turn of the twentieth century.

Larsen's critique of normativity occurs at the conceptual level by engaging the practice of signifying in the following two ways: First, Larsen deploys the Euro-

American antecedents of these concepts in narrative language in her novels. The marriages these women seek, avoid and are bound in, traditional middle-class, patriarchal, monogamous marriages. Secondly, Larsen narratively ‘troubles’ or ‘complicates’ these marriages, families, and experiences of maternity understood as normative by white middle-class people, by illustrating the frustrations people of African descent experience within the remaining white supremacist power relations of America’s interracial families. While her characters operate in a middle-class milieu, replete with lip-service to the respective social mores, their narrative journeys and the choices available to them as people of African descent, reveal their historical and contemporary circumstance of being labelled as racially, socially and sexually inferior.

Larsen’s critical strategy assumes aspects of, but does not entirely adopt, black vernacular culture. Her critical assault takes place within the discourse of what Cedric Robinson has termed “Blacksaxonism” (2007, 241). This is a black upper-middle class sensibility rooted in cultural and racial associations with Anglo-Saxon heritage and values. However, what Larsen’s novels provide readers are examples of self-conscious, black female narrative expressions, of a double-voiced nature [both black and female] which are critical of the sacredness of marriage, family, and maternity in U.S. culture and politics. I agree with African American literary scholar Hazel Carby’s claim that Larsen’s novels offer us an embodiment of the ‘crisis of representation’ of The Harlem Renaissance period. This was a period when black people were attempting to redefine themselves and their politics in the public realm (1987; 169). The ‘crisis’ Carby speaks of is essentially the response people of African descent had to being torn between acknowledging the social and cultural freight of their past in the United States as

commodities of labor, which were embodied in folk culture and traditions, and the social strategies of national belonging which championed assimilation to the ways of middle class and, or more harshly put, the racial ‘mimicry’ of whites (169). This approach to reading Larsen allows us opportunities to see, as Carby suggests, that Larsen’s characters are complexly created and multiply-determined. Viewing these works through lenses [intersectional in approach] that articulate racial, gender and class, a multiplicity of identities, which these women represent are more complicated and potent political statements about the lives of African American women in America.

Larsen as a signifying writer offers anti-essentialist representations of blacks and women during a period when many important African American leaders hailed the deployment of African Continental expression. Furthermore, Larsen also demonstrated women’s strivings beyond the realm of domesticity when public discourses in the media and from the government attempted to restrict women’s contribution to the domestic realm (Carby 1987, 169; Kaplan 2002, 23).

The over-arching significance of Larsen’s novels is that her characters and narrators function as both symbols and witnesses to black women’s dissatisfactions. They live the untenable situations black women of the early twentieth century faced attempting to exert self-determination in the multitude of contexts which sought to limit them. Through narratives of these women’s lives, Larsen quite capably implicates and exposes the disparate power relations of racist heteropatriarchy which have defined non-white, non-male, and non-heterosexual beings as non-normative.

My readings approach Larsen's novels as an act of *re-visioning* as outlined in Adrienne Rich's essay, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as RE-Vision (1971)." In this essay, thematically linked to Henrik Ibsen's play, *A Doll's House* (1879), Rich considers the "use male artist[s] and thinker[s]—in the process of creating culture as we know it—has[ve] made of women lives (Rich 34; 1979). She asks women artists and thinkers to reconsider the significance of women's art and work for alternative meanings to those initially assigned to it. Rich defines this practice of Re-visioning as an act of women awakening,

the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction...it is [for women] an act of survival...a radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse [which] would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us, how the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative, and how we [in the case of Larsen's characters, women of African descent] can begin to see and name—and therefore live afresh (1979, 35).

I look back at Larsen's literary contribution and suggest that she, through her novels, was attempting to challenge domestic ideals and demonstrate that she understood the limitations and the impact these universally celebrated social and political institutions in American society had on women's lives. Furthermore, she understood how these institutions acutely shaped middle-class family, marriage, and maternal relations for mixed-race person of African descent. Larsen's demonstrates through her heroines, Helga Crane (*Quicksand*) and Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry (*Passing*) an impulse for

subversions of normative domesticity because of its destructive capacity for women in general, and for women who are non-white racial subjects in particular. These characters show us the narrow social and political visions that categorized women of African descent, not only as different, but as unworthy to fulfill the normative female roles in U.S. national culture. They also show us, as will be demonstrated below, how these women subverted normative standards to seek their own visions of themselves, and the prices they paid for doing so. Larsen's literature is feminist in its goals to offer intersectional examinations of women's lives within larger social and political structures (Collins 2000).

Larsen's characters embody a range of struggles [racism, sexism, heterosexism, economic inequality] but the domestic realm was a very timely and practical location within which she tackled the problematic concepts of familial normativity, both nuclear and national. Her novels expose the struggles black people, particularly women, face/d constructing an identity within an American society that only accepted a 'mythical' national normativity which did not include them except by contrast. Her work names and interrogates a non-white racial identity as an ostracized particularity central to the country's political, economic, and social formation. What is more important here is that Larsen's women are the eyes through which we see these contradictions, for U.S. citizens, not only as untenable, but destructive as they function on both national (macro) and nuclear (micro) levels through family, marriage, and maternity. These are very important institutions in the first part of the twentieth century, which were charged with the construction and maintenance of national health. Julian B. Carter's work in *The Heart of Whiteness* (2007), notes the rise and dominance, in the late nineteenth and early

twentieth century of normalcy discourse as a way to “forge an ostensibly mutual and objective politically innocent connection between whiteness, and reproductive marital heterosexuality, and modern American civilization.” (7) However, Larsen charges these very goals and institutions with a range of maladies rooted in America’s racial, class, and gender hierarchies.

### **Summary of the Novels**

The following analysis specifically addresses Larsen’s novels summarized below:

Larsen’s first novel *Quicksand* (1928) is the story of Helga Crane, a woman who evades three marriage proposals before succumbing to marriage and madness. Crane is a mixed-raced woman and instructor at a black Southern racial uplift college in the fictional town of Naxos. She is engaged to a fellow teacher, James Vayle, when she decides to end the engagement and leave the school because she finds she is at odds with the schools’ Southern segregationist and provincial politics. She leaves Naxos and goes to Chicago where she asks financial assistance from her deceased mother’s brother, Uncle Peter Nilssen. He is her deceased mother’s only brother, and her only white American relative, who had educated her upon her mother’s death. When Crane is unable to get immediately in touch with Uncle Peter, she goes to New York where she finds work and lodgings as the roommate of Anne Grey in an upper middle-class black community. Crane rejects the racial politics of the African American middle-class. After a time, Uncle Peter forwards her an early inheritance and insists that she does not contact him again. At which time she arranges to visit her mother’s other sister and her husband The Dahls in Denmark. Crane is socially objectified in Denmark by her relatives, and an artist Axel Olsen, who asked



her first to be his lover, then his wife. Crane rejects both offers. Crane's rejection of this marriage precipitates her relatives' puzzlement at her plans in Denmark. Crane returns to the U.S., and to New York where she again encounters James Vayle at a club in Harlem. He hints to her that he wishes to ask her to marry her again. She rejects Vayle's second proposal of marriage. She drifts aimlessly for a while on the brink of sexual indiscretion, then finds religion and marries a Southern minister, Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green, who is visiting a Harlem church. In her marriage to Reverend Green, Crane returns South, ultimately suffers a mental breakdown, and dies from a seemingly endless cycle pregnancies. In Larsen's story, marriage and maternity are fatal terrains.

In *Passing* (1929) the heroine, Clare Kendry has married into upper-middle class life across racial lines, as a mixed-race person of African descent, from a working class background. The novel opens with a letter from Kendry to her friend and rival Irene Redfield, seeking to reconnect with an African American community. Redfield is also a mixed-race woman of African descent, but she comes from a squarely upper middle-class family in black society and is invested in maintaining class lines, within her intra-racial community. The rekindling of Redfield and Kendry's friendship allow Redfield to see the extent of Kendry's social deception about her racial identity, revealing that not even Kendry's husband, Jack Bellew, knows that she is a person of African descent. Once Kendry hints that she may be ready to leave her marriage, Redfield is threatened that Kendry's is after her husband Brian. Near the end of the novel, Kendry's husband Bellew figures out her deception and follows her to a party where he confronts her, resulting in her mysterious fall to her death from the rooftop. In Clare Kendry's death, all plots are resolved. Irene keeps her marriage intact and Jack Kendry can presumably maintain the

secret of his interracial marriage. Through Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield, readers are offered a range of social perspectives on marriage subverted.

Perhaps more daring, Larsen's characters also offer a scathing critique of African American culture and politics, class fiefdoms, complexion politics, and 'Negro leaders' who appear inept to the task of remedying black people's social and political predicament of subjugation in the United States. Larsen's work, as does the work of Critical Race Study scholars, seems to demand that leaders call into account foundational problems that situate blacks within historically informed, race-based social, and political limits.<sup>42</sup>

### **Larsen a Writer of Contradictions in Progressive Era Backlash**

Nella Larsen (1891-1964) was an African American writer of Danish-Caribbean descent whose life and work encapsulated the fissures and contradictions of the political times in which she was published. Larsen was the mixed-race daughter of white-Danish and Afro-Caribbean working class immigrants. Her first short story, "Scandinavian Games" was published in *The Brownies Book* June issue in 1920. This publication marked the start of her writing career in one of the most famous decades and locations for African American cultural production in the twentieth century—The Harlem Renaissance.<sup>43</sup> In Larsen's stories one recognizes not only the unique voice of an artist seeking self-definition, but an astute critic of the contradictory cultural and political currents surrounding her, and the problematic institutions which sought to define her.

The 1920s was a flashpoint decade of narrative contradictions in twentieth century American politics and culture. In global politics the U.S. had achieved elevated stature and economic growth as a provider of World War I loans to European nations

(Rosenzweig, Lichtenstein, et. al.; Zinn 2005). The dominant national narrative was that the American military went to war abroad to champion liberty in the face of tyranny. The victory over the Kaiser and the Bolsheviks consolidated America's image as an influential liberal democracy which had halted Communism's Red Tide and Germany's bid for military domination in Europe. In this light the United States was truly a land of liberty.

However, on the U.S. domestic front, the story was one where racial and ethnic tyranny remained largely unchallenged. Domestic politics were marked by contested possibilities for African Americans, immigrants and women (Goldberg 1999). The social and political conditions of the U.S. domestic sphere tested proclamations of America as a liberal democracy, and the narrative that the promise of the American Dream was available to all of the country's domestic subjects. African Americans as long-time residents and citizens who had supported and served in several of America's war efforts found their national status still contested in the wake of World War I.

Middle class white women, who had fought the previous three decades for political recognition and to earn enfranchisement, found their status as women with political influence socially hampered by assertions that their new found autonomy, and influence at the ballot box were threats to the family and therefore the nation (Kaplan 2002). Middle class black women who had also fought for suffrage, found themselves balancing the strictures of mainstream middle class gender politics, with the fact that their struggle for rights included an anti-racism component allying them with black men who were still being lynched in the South, and poorer classes of black men with whom they were naturally allied by race and geography in urban areas (Collins 2004). This

confluence of race, gender, and class based political tensions were addressed through various public discourses, which designated 'separate spheres' for men and women and, for blacks and whites, and outlined prescriptive gender roles and preferred American subjectivities, while simultaneously normativizing them (Kaplan 24).<sup>44</sup> The threat women felt toward intensified efforts to control them surfaced in Larsen's anti-utopian vision of domesticity.

American Studies Scholars Micheal Denning, Cathy Peiss, Penny Von Echen to name a few, recognize the post-World War I political climate as a period of backlash against Progressive Era (1890-1920) reform politics, which had galvanized disparate immigrant and racial groups despite political and ideological differences.<sup>45</sup> Though the colorline was firmly in place between black and white women's women civic organizations, black women sought involvement in race-based political advocacy for women and children. Black women founded their own sex and gender based organizations such as the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) to improve the lives and access to healthcare for black women and children (Bruekner and Kantowicz 154). Additionally, black women remained involved in ongoing anti-racism struggles with their male counterparts in local, regional, and national politics. The most high-profile and notable among these women for her work in the anti-lynching cause was Ida B. Wells-Barnett.

The fight for suffrage and women's subsequent political gains from it had effectively let the genie out of the bottle, and ushered middle-class women out of the domestic realm and into the public sphere. Additionally, as Kathy Peiss' study, *Cheap Amusements* (1986), of working women and leisure time at the turn of the twentieth

century observes, nineteenth century ideals about domesticity had come under strain by the twentieth century because the realities of women's lives had changed: <sup>46</sup>

Women's movement into employment, higher education, and political activism expanded the notions of women's place. While few were ready to abandon the notion of sexual difference, the force of feminist demands for greater political rights and economic opportunities challenged the division of power in America... In popular culture, the emergent ideal was the "New Woman" imbued with women's activity in the public domain with a new sense of female self, a woman who was independent, athletic, sexual and modern." (7)

The fact that women crossed over from the domestic realm and into the public realm at the same time blacks were crossing over from rural Southern into Northern cosmopolitan areas, against the backdrop of prohibition, portended a social and sexual collision in the public consciousness. It was moral reformers' concerns for the unintended consequences of prohibition, and the proliferation of vice activity, that forced an ongoing public discourse about the role of women and the health the American family. These concerns come together nicely in Larsen's work, in which she challenges the discourses of normativity which attempted to contain this cauldron of national domestic, racial, and sexual anxieties.

Though Larsen's novels *Quicksand* and *Passing* focus on the lives of upper middle-class mixed-race people of African descent, the heightened sense of danger she creates in these narratives related to her characters' interracial identities and interracial interactions reflect the cultural and political times in which they were written. In the

wake of World War I, the U.S. was still a racially segregated nation. The Great Migration of 1 million African Americans to the North and Midwest fleeing the racial violence, poverty, and segregated conditions of the South had reached its peak by 1920. Southern blacks arriving in Northern cities experienced a greater sense of safety, and a broader range of economic opportunities. But these opportunities were often tempered with the reality of still segregated living conditions and discrimination by employers and labor unions whose memberships were dominated by a white ethnic workforce (Rosenzweig, Lichtenstein et al 2008). Furthermore, the Klu Klux Klan had been revived and spread into the Northern states boasting a membership of 14.5 million by 1924 (Zinn 2005, 381-385).

Though blacks in the U.S. were American citizens, and an important part of the American story, they were socially and politically without the realization of full-citizenship status or legal rights. This nationally vulnerable predicament pitted blacks against defensive white immigrants who were under attack from the Americanization Movement that originated during World War I. Its followers categorized immigrants as ‘hyphenated’ rather than authentic Americans, a sentiment that intensified during the Red Scare of 1919-1920 (Buenker and Kantowicz 1988; 17). Furthermore, given the climate of paranoia toward the spread of Communism following the war, blacks were viewed with racial contempt as well as political suspicion as a faction of society highly susceptible to adopting Communist ideology (Foley 2003). Regardless of the legitimacy of these claims, perceptions of blacks embracing Communism was a political liability to their dreams of belonging and ultimate goal of social and political inclusion.

Meanwhile, politicians at the highest levels of the U.S. Government began to define American-ness and national belonging in more exclusively Nativist terms, both rhetorically and through immigration policy. The phrase ‘100% Americanism’ coined by President Theodore Roosevelt in his 1919 political campaign represented a wave of normativising rhetoric which narrated the American populous as exclusively “white, native-born, middle-class” citizens (Buenker, Kantowicz 1998, 17). It is also worth noting here that this definition subscribes to a heteronormative ideal of gender roles inscribed in the nineteenth century moral reformers prescriptions for the healthy family environment (Howard 1981). For those who occupied the corridors of power, this definition of American was meant to be understood as normative. U.S. residents situated outside of these parameters by race, place of origin or economic status were viewed as justifiably excludable from the American family. Despite this definition’s obvious limitations, and failure to take into account the reality of shifting national demographics, many excluded American residents determinedly made a case for belonging in a context where the criteria for belonging was increasingly a moving target<sup>47</sup>.

### **The American Family in Black and White**

That Larsen put the family at the center of her literary agenda was logical based on the times, and practical as an important institution of social critique. The domestic realm has long been established as the proven and pre-eminent domain for women writers in the U.S. (Beecher Stowe, Perkins Gilman, Redmond Fawcett). In the nineteenth century the concept of ‘family’ was an instrumental and poly-vocal concept utilized by political leaders anxious to see women return to the domestic sphere, and away from politics in public life following The Progressive Era. For U.S. political leaders, the goal

of articulating and shoring up national identity through the trope of family was also an effective strategy for eliminating political divisions within its borders (Howard 1985; Kaplan 2002, Smith 2004; Bederman 1995). The trope of family allowed national leaders to speak broadly to its disparate citizens eliciting allegiance, while providing opportunities to define conditions of national belonging in very personal terms. It also provided opportunities to unite opposing factions around the universally recognizable and worthy cause of family, believed foundational to national health (Howard 64-66).

The burgeoning fields of social work and sociology contributed to the rhetorical potency over the preservation of America's 'families' during Progressive Era politics. Investigations into the quality of family life by nineteenth century social workers were inspired by the rapid social and environmental changes in the U.S. as it made the shift from a predominantly rural agricultural economy to an urban industrial one (Howard 11). Despite the fact that during this period the health and welfare of American families (micro) collided with economic, political, and industrial interests of the national American family (macro), concern for the preservation of family appeared to prevail over the interest of business. The American "family [micro] was viewed both as an object of reform and as a topic of scholarly interest" (Howard 39). Julian B. Carter has also discussed the heteronormative family as the frame through which the white middle-class later during World War II began to articulate white supremacy as normativity without directly having to confront racial and gender hierarchy (5-7).

Though this debate about the health of America's families included the voices of a variety of social, political and moral leaders, "The most common prescriptive condition for healthy family life was a rural environment. The city was believed to be a destroyer of



families and the locus for most of the evils that threatened the family.”(Howard 18) With this assertion, another preferred category emerged and was added to national prescriptions for American subjectivity. The definition for normative, and therefore the measure of national belonging, now also included rural among white, middle-class and domestic born.

Those who took a stand to protect the families in urban spaces comprised alliances between social scientists, clergy, unions, Leftist labor movements, Cult of Domesticity women’s civic organizations and Suffragists.<sup>48</sup> These unlikely political bedfellows, under an umbrella of Progressive Era reforms, were guided by the experiences of social workers, and were extremely effective at exposing trends like child delinquency, child neglect, and sub-standard family living conditions, and placing corrective measures to address them at the top of America’s domestic policy agenda.<sup>49</sup> White social reformers, like Jane Adams of Hull House in Chicago and others began to address some of the side-effects of industrialization and urbanization by organizing settlement houses and communities in order to support immigrant families as they transitioned into urban areas (Buenker and Kantowicz).<sup>50</sup> Settlement houses, which sprung up as centralized social welfare organization, were also institutions that provided another vehicle through which “social welfare workers and business elites embarked on a vigorous program of Americanization” (Phillips 1999,154).

Larsen’s novel *Passing* addresses African American women’s engagement with these broader national politics in ways that are socially and politically intertwined with issues of race related to The Great Migration. At the same time white middle-class reformers like Jane Adams attempted to address the social forces assaulting American

working class families. On the other side of the colorline, the black urban middle-class, through the black Baptists Church and the black Women's Club Movement, also took on the mission of preserving family from a different angle. The black middle-class assumed the role to police the social morality of newly arriving Southerners with their own settlement houses and a "politics of respectability" (Collins; 2004, 71). The focus on rescuing black families was channeled through rescuing the reputations of black women in particular from urban ills and association with historically based constructions of sexual licentiousness and promiscuity.

Several of the characters in Larsen's novels are the embodiments of black women as the sexual threat in urban areas as well as the social welfare workers attempting to rescue them from themselves. In *Passing*, Irene Redfield makes much of her volunteerism and charity for the 'race.' Her outlets for political involvement are the church, and a black women's club where she organizes a fundraiser for the poor. Larsen's use of the occasion of Irene's women's club fundraiser as the place where Clare Kendry makes her return debut to the African American community situates these women as contrasting figures in the politics of respectability.

This scene is Larsen's politically charged statement about the limits of white supremacist politics and their attempts to control human beings, particularly bodies perceived as non-normative racialized and sexually defined bodies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in U.S. national culture (Somerville 2000). This is also a signifying moment because it is at this moment in Larsen's narrative that we come to understand Kendry as a threat to Redfield's marriage, and her upstanding middle-class life. But more importantly, we come to understand Kendry as a representative figure of

the social threat women of color presented in urban areas more broadly. Kendry is the figure that demanded policing by both the black and the white middle-class. She respects neither the boundaries of contemporaneous racial nor sexual propriety. Kendry as a mixed-race figure of African descent disrupts the white heteronormative ideal of marriage first by passing for white and marrying a white man. She also disrupts the normal Caucasian family construct. But, it is clear to Redfield that Kendry plans to go further. Redfield thinks that if Kendry leaves her husbands, she will be a threat to Redfield's marriage as well. If Kendry becomes single, no marriage is safe.<sup>51</sup> These social and political concerns around single black women in urban spaces are also reflected in the narrative of *Quicksand*. Helga Crane's move from the fictional Southern college community of Naxos, to Chicago and then to New York, underscores the rural-urban migration pattern many blacks charted during The Great Migration. Crane's status as a single young women of African descent bears the stigmatization of black women in urban areas.

However, the most radical critique Larsen offers in *Quicksand* is in Crane's repeated rejection of marriage which begins with Crane's denouncement of her engagement to James Vayle for something better that she perceives as located outside of the boundaries of marriage and provincial Southern life. True to the negative stigma of urban life, New York is the location where Crane begins her descent into moral decay by engaging in out-of-wedlock sex, first with her roommate's fiancé, then with a traveling minister she ultimately marries. In these narrative turns, Larsen links Crane's rejection of marriage and social respectability to post-emancipation mythology about black people's, specifically black women's, hypersexuality<sup>52</sup>.

The shifting demographics caused by migration exacerbated the lore around one of the most significant trends of urbanization, and the most impactful one on African American families, which was the migration of black single women to Northern cities where they found new lives free of the expectation of church membership and perpetual childbearing (Collins 2004, 70). The migration of African Americans into urban areas such as Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit and New York in the 1920s also occurs in a pivotal period of political organizing and community development in African American communities “characterized by ideological, political, and cultural contestation between an emergent black bourgeoisie and an emerging black working class,” (Carby 1992; Collins 2004, 70; Phillips 1999). Kendry and Redfield in *Passing* are these contested ideological positions. Helga Crane in her move from the country as a single woman, and back from the city to the country as a married woman, is both.

Patricia Hill Collins argues in *Black Sexual Politics* (2004) that “urbanization [in the 1920s] enabled formerly submerged black subpopulations to emerge and fostered the visibility of a preexisting black heterogeneity concerning gender, sexuality, class, and immigrant status.”(70) It is this heterogeneity of the black population along with expanding interracialism in social, political and leisure culture that are at the front of Americans’ minds, which is why they make such a potent statement in Larsen’s fiction. Larsen’s novels offers fictional scenes of what American Studies scholar Kevin Mumford’s *Interzones* (1997) captures in fact. Larsen’s stories are articulations of the imagined and concrete potential for interracial behavior in urban spaces to rupture the boundaries of normative social and sexual arrangements, and normative prescriptions for gender roles and family relations.

Larsen takes great pain to show us an inside look at the social and political perils of interracial families. A closer look at the interpersonal relations in the lives of Larsen's characters offer us a glimpse at the intricate perils of the interracial family as refracted through a lens of white supremacy. Larsen's novels do not offer us examples of ideal family relations but rather normative disruptions of family through the subversion of the ideal of American domesticity. This was a daring position for an artist and member of the black intellectual elite to take on in an era when this kind of expression was contrary to the goals of black leaders, who at the time sought to align themselves as assimilationists with mainstream political projects.<sup>53</sup> Larsen's women do not find fulfillment in family. Larsen's heroines do not experience the family ideal as an institution threatened by the modern influences of urbanization, which dominated the discussion within the public sphere among progressive politicians and social workers during the period. Her intervention is that she signifies on the family ideal by illustrating the problematic dynamics experienced by people of African descent seeking to achieve the ideal, who were thwarted by historical and contemporaneous hierarchal structures of U.S. race relations no matter where they live in the United States.

As a signifying writer, Larsen constantly holds in tension her characters antecedents (racial histories) as mixed-race persons of African descent, with their antecedents as persons of European ancestry. She places the ideals of family conceived by the American power brokers at the period immediately following the Progressive Era, and championed as the foundation of American social bedrock<sup>54</sup>, in tension with the undeniable experiences people of African descent survived in racial slavery, and continued to navigate during early twentieth century segregation.<sup>55</sup>

In *Quicksand* and *Passing* Larsen's uses her characters, Helga Crane and Clare Kendry respectively, to illustrate the central importance of family status and connections in the United States to establish one's sense of belonging. However, in Larsen's novels the American ideal of family is subordinate to U.S. racial ideology, and how it has been manifested in subsequent racial relations which brought about the laws of hypodescent and racial integrity acts.

It has been argued numerous times about Larsen's novels that her characters subvert racial meaning using mixed-race figures, which is consistent in the genre of passing literature. However, these characters more significantly subvert the idea of racially homogeneous normative American families. She relies on the oppositional construct between normative whiteness and non-normative black racial difference, as a grounds for disrupting the image of the normative American family. In *Quicksand* Larsen, through Helga Crane, provides specific examples of family dynamics by describing Crane's limited familial support and relations once she decides to leave her employment at Naxos. Throughout this novel, Larsen repeatedly shows Crane negating the importance of her family, and denying that she has family connections at all, though she repeatedly calls on them throughout the story for assistance. This contradiction underscores Crane's ambivalent predicament in her family as one of estrangement and dependence. The difficulty for Crane is not that she does not have a family, it is that the remaining members of her family are white. Thus, Crane's familial reality is incommensurate with contemporary laws and social norms governing America's racial hierarchy, and the American family ideal. Crane's family is not normative, therefore, it is not legible.

Rather than romanticized notions of family bonds, the words Larsen provides for Crane to generally define her family circumstances are hatred, fear, and contempt. When Crane decides to leave Naxos and turns to her mother's white brother, Uncle Peter, for help she explains that it is because he is the "one relative who thought kindly, or even calmly of her...her stepbrothers, and sisters, and the numerous cousins could not remotely be considered ...[because] they feared and hated her." (41) But, immediately after this statement the reader discovers that her Uncle Peter is far less sympathetic.

One sees from Crane's reflections on Uncle Peter another layer of her troubling reality of family. Uncle Peter's reasons for helping Crane and his feelings toward her as his "favorite sister's" child are not governed by affection or family responsibility, but by his racist views. According to Crane, Uncle Peter "would be more likely to help her because her need would strengthen his oft repeated conviction that because of her Negro blood, she would never amount to anything." (Larsen 41) Crane's understanding of her family demonstrates that blood ties do not dictate family connections. Quite the contrary in Crane's case; blood ties, particularly her interracial ones, insure the subversion of normative family relations. Despite the fact that Crane is Uncle Peter's niece, she is Negro, and according to the "one drop rule" she must be denied a place on her mother's family tree.

Uncle Peter's wife states the case aptly when Crane pays them a surprise visit seeking financial assistance upon her arrival to Chicago. Uncle Peter's wife turns Crane away declaring, "Mr. Nilssen has been very kind to you, supported you, sent you to school. But you mustn't expect anything else... And please remember that my husband is not your uncle. No Indeed! Why, that, that would make me your aunt! He's not--" (61).

Why is he not? Because though this family construct is a reality, it is not socially permissible. This racial boundary around family, which the reader often witnesses through Crane's experiences, illustrates how family ties to black people limit her possibilities as a mixed race person. But it also illustrates how blackness, and in her case interracialism, is a natural disqualification for belonging in a white normative family model. But this revelation offers something more ironic about the American family ideal. It shows in Crane's white relative's reaction to her the limits white people place around the ideal of family. In so much as the moral high ground rested on ideologies of white supremacy in the public realm in 1920, it also abandoned, as did slavery, the bonds of family for peoples of African descent.

Another example illustrating Crane's ambivalence toward family is reflected in her attitude toward the family of James Vayle. Once Crane resolves to end her engagement to Vayle, she is foremost concerned about how breaking the connection will impact her social status. Crane laments the loss of her potential in-laws, an African American "first family" and sees her choice to end the engagement as "social suicide [...]" Negro society she had learned was as complicated and as rigid in its ramifications as the highest strata of white society. If you couldn't prove your ancestry and connections, you were tolerated, but you didn't belong." (43)

Larsen allowing us to see Crane's comments here also allows us insight into the absurdities she is up against seeking acceptance according to the social arrangement of persons under the ideology of Black Saxonism which largely mimicked Anglo-Saxonism.

<sup>56</sup> Despite the social and economic particularities ascribed to the term in Cedric Robinson's definition, it is a historically empty and racially impossible nomenclature



largely because of what it occludes. The historical ruptures and breaks in black peoples' ancestral connections incurred during the Middle-Passage, plantation slavery in the U.S., and due to illicit interracial sex and rape, are recessed in favor of ascribing to them a racial history of black and Northern European ancestry neglecting their pasts in America as African slaves. Black Saxonism in reality is an empty set—though it represents the reality of social striving. The issue of social striving and transcending race and class barriers by any means is at the center of passing.

In *Passing*, issues of family also sit at the heart of Larsen's narrative. Larsen continues focusing on ruptured family relationships, however she provides a larger variety of family models on which to signify how America's racial hierarchy, class and gender arrangements simultaneously construct and erode the American family ideal. The families Larsen presents in this novel are threatened, but again it is not urbanization or vice which threatens them. The biggest threat to family is America's racial hierarchy. Critical analysis of *Passing* has often identified Irene Redfield as the novel's central heroine. Perhaps this is because she functions as the novel's narrator. I suggest that is because, barring Redfield's African American ancestry and urban residency, she is the middle-class ideal of Black Saxonism, and a most strict replica of the normative ideal of domestic womanhood. Redfield, the character, is a foil through which Larsen allows readers to see on display a broad range of societal fears and concerns about the boundaries of race, class and sexuality as necessary to protect the family ideal. But the odd fact is that Redfield's ideal marriage is full of secrets and complexion politics, where both partners are apparently lonely and alienated from each other.

Through Redfield's eyes as narrator, and gatekeeper for the normative ideal family, we are told the story of Clare Kendry. Redfield reveals Kendry's parents as unfit and her childhood as desperate and neglected. Kendry is the interracial illegitimate child of a white janitor who was a drunk, and a black woman who is absent. Redfield remembers her from their teen years as "a pale 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." (172) His anger stemming from the fact that Kendry had used some of the money she earned to help support the family to buy fabric for a dress to wear to the Sunday school picnic (172).

In many ways, Clare Kendry's family relations mirror those of Helga Crane's in *Quicksand*. There is the judgmental positioning of these characters in relation to their white families which they must often and ultimately deny. However, in *Passing*, through Clare Kendry's family relations a greater historical significance is visited upon the reader about interracial sexual desire as a non-normative impulse. Both Kendry's father and husband are white men who father children with women of African descent. Larsen reintroduces an Antebellum antecedent if you will, of white paternity on America's plantations which connected interracial sex and property. The original set of circumstance in which it became socially acceptable to ignore the reality of interracial family connections. Not the issue of offspring as property, but of illicit interracial sex as a threat to the normative American family model which women of African descent came to represent in the early twentieth century as they flooded into urban areas.

Literature and Gender Studies Scholars such as Judith Butler, Hazel Carby, Cherly Wall, Deborah McDowell, and Thadious Davis, have examined Larsen's novels

for their literary and political significance, and focused on their significance at the intersections of race, class, and gender to rightly expand the relevance of Larsen's writing beyond genre of passing literature. I submit that these readings of Larsen's novels, and the racial, gender and sexual disruptions that they have identified comprise a broader signifying discourse on marriage. One function of this signifying critique of marriage defines it as the location wherein non-normative sexual desire (I am including interracial sex here in a temporal context) and gender and racial subversion, are shrouded in the normative institutional structure of marriage.

The case of Redfield's and Kendry's friend Gertrude is an example where Gertrude normative heterosexual marriage is a foil for interracial sexuality. Gertrude is a character in the existing analysis of *Passing* who rarely gets attention, with the exception of references within the novel where Larsen lets the reader see her lower-class positionality in contrast to Kendry and Redfield. Unlike Kendry, who married for money and to escape racial and class boundaries, or Redfield who married to maintain them, Gertrude actually married her white husband for love. As a married couple they knowingly violate interracial marriage restrictions, and racial integrity laws, to live together in wedlock. Gertrude's passing as legal subversion also violates the conventional motivations of passing which are often to transcend class boundaries. She does not marry a rich man, but a working class butcher whom she loves. Gertrude and her husbands are supported in their deception by their families, who are complicit in maintaining their secret in order to support them. Their marriage places their interracial union above the strictures of society and the demands of the law. The integrity of their relationship is sanctioned by them, not the state.

For the women in Larsen's novels motherhood is among the greatest threats to their autonomy and mortality. In *Quicksand* motherhood is a fatal consequence of a lustful and dead-end marriage. In the final act of the novel Helga Crane, after having accepted marriage as her only option, finds herself in an endless cycle of pregnancies which zap her vitality and leave her isolated in a Southern rural black community. It is the fate she rejected when she broke her engagement to James Vayle. This fate becomes her inevitable doom in the marriage to the Reverend Pleasant Green. Crane literally goes mad and we are left to assume, dies on one end or the other of the birthing bed.

Conversely, in *Passing* Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry both bare children, but reject to varying degrees, the role of mothering. Irene's husband Brian is the primary care-giver for their two sons while her attitude is one of indifference towards them. The children seal her connection to Brian, but she shows them little warmth and attention. They are consistently an afterthought.

Clare Kendry's feelings toward her daughter are shaded by Bellew as an overt racist. The reader is first introduced to Kendry's feelings toward her daughter in her description of the panic she felt that her daughter might be born phenotypically black. For Kendry, motherhood threatened to unravel her carefully constructed family lie, which for both parties seems dependent on a racial masquerade. Kendry's own mother's early death, which left her in the care of a drunken white father, and two racist aunts, is the only example of parenting she has as a model and it provides no comfort. One of the main sociological and political arguments against interracialism was the potential harmful effects it could have on the children of racially mixed marriages. This was the reasoning invoked by the prosecution forty years after this novel was published in the

Supreme Court case, *Loving v. Virginia*, which legalized interracial marriage in the U.S. These novels about two mixed-race women of African-descent do not focus on these women's childhood as experiences of the tragedy of not belonging. They do not even focus on the main character's children. They focus on these women's yearnings and strivings to reach beyond the unsatisfactory choices of what America's white supremacist, and sexually oppressive conditions, compelled them to which seem to begin and end with marriage and maternity.

### **Conclusion**

In both *Quicksand* and *Passing* Nella Larsen provided a smorgasbord of domestic disasters tabled with a variety of U.S. racial politics, intersecting at the crossroad of race, class, and gender within the United States. Larsen's women as middle class, mixed-race subjects with independent desires and personal ambitions, face marginal existence. America has prescribed for them a life within the limits of a domestic realm that demands marriage, motherhood, and the race-based class restrictions informed by America's racial ideology. Domesticity is utilitarian and motherhood portends death, either socially, or literally.

The 1920s was a period when the institution of marriage and the realm of domesticity were the most acceptable outlets for women to assert themselves. This was also a hotly contested space in the face of significant shifts in both U.S. racial and sexual politics and demographic shifts throughout the country. Through narratives that deploy mixed-raced women of African descent in normative family relations, Nella Larsen successfully critiques American domesticity and how the lives of people of color are

shaped by American white supremacist racial ideology within the domestic realm. Larsen refashions the domestic realm to provide anti-utopian visions of marriage, family and maternity first decades of the twentieth century. Larsen's vision of marital confinement, and inter and intra-racial gender inequality, offer bleak assessment of the domestic lives of middle-class women of African descent.

The heroines in Larsen's novels and short stories, undertake journeys through complex narratives that illuminate and critique societal restrictions faced by women with marginalized gender and racial identities. Larsen disrupts dominant racial, gender, and class narratives within U.S. national culture to create astute political critiques which neither shy away from the harsh realities of the white supremacist assumptions and ideologies of U.S. racial politics, nor adhere to the limitations of black cultural and nationalist political movements. Her writing about the domestic realm was a complex, corrosive, uncompromising, estimation of black women's lives. Larsen left public life shortly after the publication of *Passing* in 1929, and never published again. She was found alone dead in her apartment in 1964. Her life having ended in a way she might have written it, without a husband, without children, and without ceremony.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **Allan Rohan Crite: Urban Critique in the Cool Light of Day**

“Darkness cannot drown out darkness, only light can”

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

If there were ever a painter dedicated to a politics of blackness without darkness, it is African American Painter Allan Rohan Crite (1910-2007). Crite focused on the light. Not only in the choice of bright vibrant colors that dominate his scene paintings of Boston’s Roxbury neighborhood, but most importantly because he chose to stay away from both the darker and grittier sides of human nature, and urban life. These elements come to symbolize black people’s living conditions in the first half of the twentieth century. The Jazz and Blues aesthetics, pool halls and dance club scenes filled with black people rapt in the syncopated rhythms of drums and trumpets, which had become synonymous with African Americans’ cultural contribution to American life, are absent from Allan Rohan Crite’s paintings. Instead, Crite focused on black people’s dignity, reserve and unassuming grace. These are qualities which spoke to the inherent light and promise of a people. His focus on the light is so intense that his paintings avoid night-time scenes altogether. Stopping just short of evening with a scene of children playing jump rope supervised by their mothers in *The Last Game at Dusk* (1939) (see appendix B, Fig. 1), or show a child urging an elder down the sidewalk on a late snowy afternoon in

*Come on, Gramps* (1940) (see appendix B, Fig. 2). Perhaps Crite, like my mother, believed that “devilish deeds happen in the dark, and serve no good purpose in the light of day.” Or, he more likely thought that the information most readily available about black people in U.S. national culture in the first decades of the twentieth century, had become too shaded by the bleakness and insecurity of the times. To Crite, black people’s beauty, grace, dignity, elegance, and innocence needed a clearer seeing in the light of day, and since few seemed willing to provide it, Crite provided it himself.

As some of the most popular elements of African American cultural politics are conspicuously absent from Crite’s paintings, so too is Crite conspicuously absent from many bodies of scholarship on American and African American artists in the early twentieth century. There is a paucity of scholarship on his work and often an outright absence of any discussion of Crite’s artistic contribution to African American Art or American Art traditions where his African American contemporaries Jacob Lawrence, Archibald J. Motley Jr. and Palmer Hayden are nearly always present and considered. Scholarship in the large survey texts integrated here for the purpose of critically examining Crite in an art historical context include: Frances K. Polh’s *Framing American Art* (2002), Sharon F. Patton’s comprehensive and thorough social history *African American Art* (1998) and *Reading American Art* (1998) edited by Marianne Doezema and Elizabeth Milloy. These collections make no mention of Allan Rohan Crite. Only the recently released, *African American Art* (2012) by Richard J. Powell and Virginia M. Mecklenburg, published by the Smithsonian Institution, includes a brief summary on Crite’s life and art, along with a print of his painting *School’s Out* (1936) (see appendix B, Fig. 3) produced during his brief stint with the Works Progress Administration. The



only book dedicated entirely to Crite as a subject is the exhibit catalogue published to accompany Crite's final show in 1998, hosted by the Frye Art Museum in Seattle Washington, titled, *Allan Rohan Crite: Artist-Reporter of the African American Community*, which was published in 2001. The catalog, like this chapter, is dedicated to Crite's "Neighborhood Series" paintings which he is perhaps most known for. This exhibit catalog is a welcome contribution to the dearth of references on Crite in American Art scholarship, and includes valuable essays by three scholars and curators considered foremost experts on his work: Julie Levin Caro, Edmond Barry Gaither and Barbara Earl Thomas. However, this is still a humble and well overdue scholarly installment for a career spanning nearly eighty years.

This chapter argues that Allan Rohan Crite's paintings are signifying representations of black urban communities, which narrate a distinct story about black people in Northern cities, and within the nation in the 1930s. The "Neighborhood Series" paintings offer counter narratives to national discourses of racialization and those of social science which focused on the negative impacts of urban areas and increasing black populations resulting from The Great Migration and urban industrialization. This chapter sets the narrative content in Crite's paintings against the contemporary political backdrop of the post 1920s Prohibition/Jazz Age, the black cultural politics of The Harlem Renaissance, and The Great Depression to argue the reasons why and how Crite's painterly narratives articulated a politics of normativity for African Americans in the 1930s.

This chapter identifies Allan Rohan Crite's "Neighborhood Series", created between 1930-1945, as engaged in a critical politics of normativity termed normative

disruptions.<sup>57</sup> As previously stated, this term asserts the claim that African American cultural producers used narrative and normative representations of African Americans to refract America's white supremacist ideologies, and their influence on characterizing African Americans as non-normative subjects in U.S. national culture. This creative deployment of black subjects in normative disruptions functions to counter public discourses that constructed people of African descent as non-normative subjects, and therefore inferior racial subjects, and thus 'justifiably' marginalized in U.S. politics and culture. By reproducing images of black subjects in urban spaces absent of the common themes of black people as social contaminants then prominent in national discourses, and Jazz Age aesthetics in African American cultural politics, Crite refracted white supremacist assumptions about black people in U.S. culture and politics.

This work refutes Crite's categorization as a marginal figure in the worlds of both African American and American Fine Art Painting. Above, are enumerated instances where Crite's work has been left out of major survey texts of American and African American Art, and critical discussions about American Art produced between 1930-1945. This may be related to the fact that Crite's paintings appear to offer nothing controversial in the way of content, save for the fact that his subjects are almost exclusively black. This work justifies why Crite should be known beyond a small circle of art historians, critics and collectors, if only as an alternative to the African American painterly voices of his contemporaries.

Though some art historians have characterized Crite's *oeuvre* as his community, which is a subject matter he painted his entire life, Crite's subject matter and style were actually quite diverse. Crite's works include liturgical art, murals, landscapes of Asia, not

to mention portraits and spiritual illustrations (Smithsonian Interviewer: Robert Brown, Jan. 16, 1979). Some of these works have been destroyed. For example, the mural he painted for St. Augustine's Church in Brooklyn is no longer in existence. Crite's paintings are included in various national collections and museums, such as the Smithsonian Institution. Other significant bodies of his works are at the National Center of Afro-American Artists in Boston, MA. Crite himself donated several works to the Boston Athenaeum in Massachusetts. Crite produced paintings and sketches from the age of six until his death in 2007 at the age of ninety-eight. It is my assertion that a career of such length and productivity deserves much examination, in the face of such an absence from the historical record.

The organization of this chapter is as follows: 1) Brief explanation of methods of analysis of comparing signifying to Crite's Fine Art Painting; 2) Research questions of this project; 3) Allan Rohan Crite: The Man Behind the Art; 4) The "Neighborhood Series"; 5) Crite in the Scholarship; 6) Crite's Scene Paintings and the National Form; and, 6) Conclusion.

The concept of signifying is employed here in that I assert Crite's paintings create stories focused on normative gender roles in African American communities. Crite's African American communities narrate a black experience engaged in everyday activities: children playing, mothers caring for children, men working. Black people engaged in these activities are representations of American normativity. I employ reading approaches from Cultural Studies and Art History to locate the significance of these images and their engagement with national political, racial, and social influences outside of the frame of the paintings. These paintings will be considered through the lenses of

U.S. national politics and dominant black cultural and political movements, but the paintings focus on African American urban communities.

The primary questions asked here about Crite's art as signifying counter-narratives are:

- 1) How are Crite's paintings in the "Neighborhood Series" political by focusing on particular kinds of "normative" representations of urban scenes?
- 2) What do Crite's paintings in the "Neighborhood Series" seek to correct about how people of African descent are understood in the public realm?

The interpretation and evaluation of Crite's "Neighborhood Series" paintings will be attentive to conventional American Art History and African American Art History's scholarly methods, as well as those employed in American Studies scholarship. These paintings are read as text. Within the context of this overall dissertation, this chapter seeks to address what art historian Lisa Gail Collins, and cultural critic Michelle Wallace before her, have termed the "problem of the visual" in the analysis of African American cultural politics (Collins 2002, 1). This is a problem both scholars have identified as one of irony, which according to Collins "manifest itself in various entangled ways: as a heightened interest in issues of visibility; as an uneasiness with seeing, particularly situations where race collides with gender; and as a disavowal of the work of Black visual artists" (1).

In the previous chapters I have discussed representations as narratives, in one case in the visual medium of film, relying wholly on written texts. This discussion of Crite's work allows me to re-visit some of the previous and continuing themes, such as representations of black women, the significance of geographical contexts to racial

meaning in the U.S., and some of the limits of movement politics paradigms in African American representational politics, through the visual medium of Fine Art Painting. This chapter on Crite's "Neighborhood Series" allows me to, as Collins suggests, correct or at least address the practice of "disregarding visual artists" in a broader discussion of representational politics. Thus, I begin with the artist's life as a source of genesis, inspiration, and influence on his work in addition to the cultural and political history that helped shape these works produced by Crite.

### **Allan Rohan Crite: The Man Behind the Art**

Allan Rohan Crite was born in 1910 in Plainfield, PA, the only child of Oscar William and Annamae Palmer Crite. When Crite was still an infant the family moved to Boston where Crite spent his entire adult life (Thomas 2001, 11). Crite's mother, Annamae, was a poet who encouraged Crite's artistic tendencies, and was perhaps for him a role model for involvement in one's community. Annamae worked at Shaw House, a settlement house, where she was part of a mother's club when Crite was a child. Crite's father, Oscar William Crite started college as a medical student, but eventually dropped out to become one of the first African American electrical engineers licensed in Boston, MA. Crite's father was debilitated by a stroke, leaving Crite and his mother to care for him and his son as a key source of economic support for the family when Crite was still a youngster. Oscar William Crite died when Crite was a young man (Smithsonian Interviewer: Robert Brown, Jan. 16, 1979).

Crite was nineteen when he began his professional career as an artist. He dedicated his life to art. When he could not make a living from his painting, he worked as a drafter in the Boston Naval Yard where he practiced and honed a very technical aspect

of his artistic skill, which came into play in the geometrical detail so clearly evident in his paintings. Crite's craftsmanship, care and the seriousness with which he approached his art are evidenced not only in his work, but by his pursuit of education and training to perfect his craft. Crite obtained formal training as an artist and graduated from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in 1936, and continued his education in the libraries, galleries, and museums all over Boston (Thomas 2001, 11). He graduated from Harvard Extension School in 1968 with a Bachelor's Degree in Liberal Arts.

The technical and creative aptitudes of Crite's parents appear to come together nicely in their son's artistic talents, which have a poetic directness and are technically detailed. Crite's works in the "Neighborhood Series" are vibrant, universal, and human glimpses of a Boston community that are clearly infused with his personal values as a man of faith who spent much of his artistic talent committed to the place where he lived. The "Neighborhood Series" paintings capture the daily lives of black people going to work, school, church, and children playing games in their neighborhood streets. These narratives about community, a community's value of family and commitment to faith clearly seen in *Cambridge Sunday Morning* (1934) (see appendix B, Fig. 4) which captures well-dressed upright Africa Americans strolling up the sidewalk to church on a crisp Sunday morning. The spirit of the painting is both reverent and somber. The people appear pleasant and peaceful as they pass and acknowledge one another. Couples walk arm-in-arm and children stroll behind their mothers. The perspective of the painting betrays Crite as an observer of this scene, but also as an admirer of a decent, forthright, moral group of people. These people are not exotics, radicals or new arrivals to Boston. They are very much American, and they belong to the community, the nation, and to each

other. In a national moment when there were competing stories about who belonged in the nation, and what it meant to be American, a story of ordinary church-going people is a story Crite chose to tell. This is a story of observation about his community, and a biographical note of his own priorities, as a devout Catholic man. These Crite paintings are in stark contrast to images such as those produced by Archibald J. Motley, Jr., the previous decade, *Stomp* (1927), and *Blues* (1929) (see appendix B, Figs. 5-6).

### **The “Neighborhood Series”**

Allan Rohan Crite’s “Neighborhood Series” painted from The Great Depression through World War II avoids the darkness of racial animosity and wartime anxiety prevalent in the country at the time the works were painted. There is something significant about an African American artist focusing on the lighter aspects of the human character in the 1930s, which should not be readily overlooked given the major racial and national events in U.S. society. Their conspicuous absence from Crite’s art is noteworthy. Historian Barbara Rose has written that the 1930s were “crucial years...a decisive decade for American Art, if not for American Culture” because the nation faced unparalleled economic and social challenges brought about by The Great Depression, and the impending second world war (1975, 93). Amidst these challenges, this was also a time of great optimism about the national policy changes generating from President Roosevelt’s New Deal, which showed the government’s two-fold commitment of to helping its’ citizens and redefining itself. Crite’s paintings register this undercurrent of national optimism, and an awareness that in a time of national redefinition, African Americans would particularly benefit from being recast as national subjects. Crite banishes characterizations of blacks as non-normative subjects and social problems within the

national landscape from his paintings. By excluding the grime of urban life and The Depression, he represents an enhanced image of black life in a context that often excluded blacks. Crite's images mediate between The Depression Era living conditions and national art projects intended to support both public art and starving artists while consolidating images of American identity.

Allan Rohan Crite participated in President Roosevelt's Public Works of Art Project (PWPA), which employed 3,700 artists, and eventually became the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the Federal Arts Projects (FPA) between 1935-1943. These were programs that provided crucial opportunities to African American artists (Messinger 2003, 4). These sweeping U.S. Government sponsored projects supported the production of American Art, by and for Americans. American Scene Painting, Crite's medium for the "Neighborhood Series", contained narrative imagery typical of the works produced in these programs because it was accessible and popular with the public. Such imagery also fulfilled an important promotional function for the U.S. Government in helping it to crystallize American identity in a time of social and economic crisis (Messinger 2-14; Pohl 2002, 364). The political asset of American Scene Painting was that it referenced, and often smoothed over, domestic political concerns and helped promote a unified national front. This was not a medium through which one could overtly protest national politics but rather it was necessary to appear to celebrate them.

The roughly 35 paintings in Crite's "Neighborhood Series" of urban scenes with African Americans adhere to the WPA's mission of art for Americans. But, they also function as vehicles of African American political statements about black national subjectivity by presenting images of African American normativity and belonging



through public art. These paintings conspicuously elide socially and politically troubling stories about African Americans in U.S. national culture, and what were then promoted as problematic aspects of African American cultural life. The major stories these paintings absent are the effects of The Great Depression, The Dustbowl, the lynching of blacks in their Southern homelands, black and white soldiers dying in the trenches of war abroad in Europe, and the racial disparities in black life as a result of America's white supremacist racial ideologies. Additionally, because Crite was in many ways an outsider of African American cultural movement politics in the 1930s, also absent from Crite's paintings are the 'Dark Continent' imagery and references to *Primitivism* which had been the previous decade's celebrated source of inspiration for African American artists (Locke 1925; L.G. Collins 2002, 2-4; Archer-Shaw 2002, 23-59). In a time when African Americans lived in Jim Crow segregation in the South, under suspicion in urban areas as migrants, and under legal assault in Scottsborough, Alabama; Allan Rohan Crite produced urban communities with wholesome values through normative representations (Kellner 1984, 80; Kneebone 1985, 80-81; Kelley 1996, 110). Crite gave his audiences blackness, without bleakness. This on several levels reveals the areas of African American life which were perceived most detrimental to the nation and to African American people.

Crite's South End/Roxbury community as seen in the "Neighborhood Series" focuses nearly entirely on African American subjects who are working to middle-class, family oriented people who are religiously observant, and devout. The community reproduced by Crite on canvass does not reflect black people as the urban contaminants. These painting also do not depict the grit of urban living frequently seen in some paintings and in the photographs of Modernists in the first third of the twentieth century,

who felt compelled to reproduce urban grittiness as an aesthetic of modernity. Nor do they show black life experiences as ‘Harlem glamorous’ like James Van Der Zee presented them in his copious and often orchestrated photographs (Pohl 317, 357). Additionally, the women in Crite’s paintings are for the most part depicted in traditional domestic roles, or as guardians of the community and the children. These representations of urban settings starkly contradict broad conceptions of urban dwelling, and particularly the ways African American women living in modern U.S. cities were primarily portrayed in in the 1930s and 1940s.

Crite’s paintings are in conversation with, and weighing in on, black cultural politics because of how their political subtlety in the period stands in contrast to extant black political movements. African American Studies Hazel V. Carby has pointed out in *Cultures in Babylon: Black Britain and African America* (1999), the decades of the 1920s on through the second World War constituted a watershed period for Northern black urban communities as a period of “ideological, political, and cultural contestation between an emergent Black bourgeoisie and an emerging Black working class,” (22-39). In the “Neighborhood Series” Crite, through his subject matter and the stories he chose to tell, chose the middle ground.

### **Crite in Scholarship**

Critics and scholars who have examined Crite’s work have focused on his work’s reportorial distinctiveness and simplicity (Julie Levin Caro, Edmond Barry Gaither, Barbara Earl Thomas). Because Crite captured the landscape as well as daily moments in the lives of people living in his community, some of his paintings now serve as part of the historical record of Boston in the 1930s and 1940s because they include landmarks that

have since been destroyed (Powell and Micklenberg 2012, 61-63). Though the buildings and neighborhoods in Crite's paintings seem to faithfully capture his community, we cannot accept all that he portrayed as part of the historical record, or as factual or empirically accurate. Such readings can mislead the viewer and give a problematic perception of reality. Particularly given that Crite admitted that part of his creative and personal agenda was to correct perceptions of African Americans circulating in U.S. national culture leading up to World War II. Other than perhaps many of the buildings, Crite's reproductions of community convey his visions and dreams for his community, but they are not an accurate account of history in fact or the conditions of history lived by most people of African descent in America and likely not those living in Boston at the time he painted the "Neighborhood Series". Crite's "Neighborhood Series" paintings, like all art forms, are interpretive endeavors. These paintings were shaped by Crite's perspective of life and politics. Furthermore, it is the very nature of American Scene painting to hide these facts.

Art Historian Elizabeth Johns has suggested in *American Genre Painting: The Politics of Every Day Life* that genre paintings hide the "artificiality or contingency of their subjects with a realistic mode" (1991, *xii*). Crite's streets scenes fit this description. In the realistic mode of urban Scene Painting, Crite gives us artificial images that sanitize black life on urban streets, absent of the social and political conditions which actually belied the contingent and hyphenated existence of African Americans in real life in America.

Some scholars' critical assessments of his paintings, and their acceptance of his work as journalistic or reportorial, elide the political context Crite may have been

responding to in his paintings. Though Crite's paintings do not reflect Alain Locke's call to include African Continental aesthetics, or elements of African American Folk culture, Crite is an artist who is clearly conscious of these trends. Crite intuited both the necessity and the potential of deploying the universal image, broadly understood as normative, to reframe an understanding of African Americans.

This was indeed what he stated was absent from paintings depicting African Americans in the 1930s and 1940s, which he described as dominated by Jazz and Folk aesthetics. Understandably then, there are also no visual references to African Continental, Folk or Jazz aesthetics in Crite's work. These highly celebrated elements incorporated in African American Art to portray black people extend from the first decades of the twentieth century through the end of War World II.

We can then regard the absence of these aesthetics in Crite's paintings as the result of his conscious choice to exclude them. Crite wished to convey a different message about people of African descent in America, and as Americans, through his painterly voice. A voice that his paintings reveal is at once unique and universal. It is perhaps for these reasons that Crite's art has not drawn the attention or consideration of some of his contemporaries, despite the fact that "his work is in 105 public collections, including the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Chicago Art Institute, and Washington's Phillips Collection (Rachel Linner, *National Catholic Reporter*, December 14, 2007).

Though American artists often focused on urban settings in the 1930s, Crite's illustration of urban spaces in the "Neighborhood Series" are distinct in several ways. Crite's urban spaces contain the basic elements of a city: factory buildings, public transit,

and tenement-styled apartments. The stories they tell about the lives of black people in this context are distinctly provincial in subject matter, avoiding the seedier aspects of city life. For example, Crite's painting *Car Stop* (1932) (see appendix B, Fig. 7) is devoid of urban grime. It is a painting depicting what its title conveys, a Boston trolley car stop during what appears to be rush hour. Trolley cars, buses and trucks crowd the middle of the picture plane, and a passing train on elevated rails partially blocks a building in the background. An interracial crowd of people are fore-grounded in the frame at the entrance of a trolley car: people line up to board as others exit. Everyone appears to be dressed for work in 1930's business attire carrying newspapers, briefcases and groceries. People of African descent are five of the thirteen visible faces in the foreground. The buildings are mostly obscured, and there is no evidence of bars, nightclubs or people pan-handling. The interracial crowd in this painting is obviously a working middle-class group of ordinary people, within which African Americans are clearly integrated. Absent from this scene is any effort to reference social segregation or Boston's racial animosities, evident in newspapers of the era which reveal public clashes (Helene Ragovin, *Tufts Journal*, 2001). The fact that the "Neighborhood Series" paintings depict scenes in daylight hours reveals Crite's obvious intention to eliminate associations or innuendo of illicit or interracial sex in urban spaces often a concern expressed by both white and African American women's clubs (Collins 2004; Mumford 1997).

These are not Archibald Motley's Jazz scenes as portrayed in *Saturday Night Street Scene* (1935) (see appendix B, Fig. 8) of black people reeling in the rhythms of music and booze, or Palmer Hayden's pool and card players in *Nous Quartre a Paris* (1935). Crite's subject matter is normative and unproblematic, showcasing people moving

to everyday rhythms of life. The element that makes these standards of acceptable behavior controversial is that the subjects are black. This is a normative disruption. These stories of black life challenge the popularized stories in Carl Van Vecten's narratives of *Nigger Heaven* (1926).

Crite himself explained that the dominant use of African American figures in his paintings was because "during this particular period, I was making studies of black people just as ordinary human beings, because the usual picture that one had—at least that's my impression—was that the artist was strongly influenced by, you might say, the jazz person up in Harlem, or the sharecropper in the deep South" (Allan Rohan Crite to Smithsonian Interviewer Robert Brown: June 29, 1979). Crite saw U.S. racial ideology and understood the negative sociological and cultural values that had been assigned to African Americans through it, so he deployed African Americans in stories that defied white supremacist racist assumptions in a very public arena to shape perceptions of African Americans in the public realm.

Crite also uses white subjects to integrate urban spaces and diffuse the racists assumption about the impact of black people crowding and disrupting them. Crite's painting *Saint Paul Cathedral* (1936) (see appendix B, Figure 9) offers a similar exterior scene to *Cambridge Sunday Morning* of people filing along the side-walk in front of Boston's St. Paul's Cathedral. In this case, all but two of the roughly thirty pedestrians are clearly white. The mostly female crowd in their dresses and hats allude to these women having attended Sunday services in their best attire. Again, Crite has integrated a crowd revealing no distinction between its members in class or station in life through their positioning in the frame or their pursuit of the common activity of worship. Crite's

images of spiritual practice are not infused with African American or African Continental aesthetics as is the case with Aaron Douglas' *Crucifixion* (1927) (see appendix B, Fig. 10). The fact that the crowd in *Saint Paul's Cathedral* is mostly female underscores another important aspect of Crite's work, which is his focus on women as an important presence to spiritual and social life in African American communities.

Women and children figure prominently in Crite's images of community. This was the case in many of the paintings produced during the 1930s, and may have been due to a number of factors, not the least of which is the fact that women were the focus of much modern art produced by both white and African American artists. With a few exceptions, the women in the "Neighborhood Series" paintings are portrayed in traditional gender roles, caring for children. While other painters of the times represented women, who had earned the vote a decade earlier, in ways that reflected women's changing roles in society. American Art historian Frances K. Pohl writes that

Women often appear in urban settings as highly sexualized entertainers or clerks in the relatively small number of images that dealt with female wage-earners in the 1930s...Depictions of working women were thus closely aligned with the development of cities and the spaces of modernity, and also with changes in sexual mores commonly associated with the *New Women* (2002, 399).

While American painters like Edward Hopper painted women in the workplace in moral peril in such paintings as *Office at Night* (1940), where a woman in tight fitting clothing is working late, alone with her boss, Crite offers no such modern images of women. Though the black women that Crite portrays are not servants or domestics, a popular profession of the era for black women, Crite's African American women are not

necessarily working or professional women. Rather, they care for children on pristine streets such as in *Last Game at Dusk* (1939) (see appendix B, Fig. 11). In this painting the subjects are all African American and predominately female. In the scene, all the women wear dresses or skirts as they gather on the sidewalk and street. Images of women and their children, African American mothers and their daughters, conservatively, even modestly dressed suggest an attempt to recuperate black women from salacious stereotypes and contemporaneous and historical characterizations of them as sexually licentious. Such constructions of black women as sexually available remained long after slavery, and were behind fears about single black women relocating to cities with the spread of urbanization. In *Black Sexual Politics*, Patricia Hill Collins addresses the realities and the wide-spread fears associated with black women who migrated from the South to Northern cities being centered around three issues: “(1) rampant and uncontrolled female sexuality; (2) fear of miscegenation; and, (3) independent Black female desire.” (2004). Given these concerns it is understandable that the paintings *Late Afternoon* (1934), *Last Game at Dusk* (1934) *Street Scene* (1943), *A Maternity Club* (1940), and *Girls Playing on My Street* (1940) all portray women of African descent in traditional maternal roles supervising children.

In the paintings *Maternity Club*, *Girls Playing on My Street*, and *Sunlight and Shadow*, Crite creates scenes of single sex subjects which remove men from social interactions. This is not to say that Crite eliminates men and boys from the community in his paintings, they are present. However, in Crite’s “Neighborhood Series”, men are not seen in nighttime leisure activities. Crite represented men as industrious and hard at work, as in *End of the Night Shift* (1943) where Crite shows men leaving a factory with



grim, fatigued faces or in *Workmen* (1940) where Crite depicts two men standing beside what appears to be a construction storage structure with shovels. Such single-sex work scenes continue in *33B In Action* (1940) with two men operating a crane in a snowstorm. In *The Handy Street Bridge* (1939) two young boys haul what appear to be wooden boards on a wagon. These images are a long way from constructions of black men as shiftless Negroes or even of unemployed men seeking work in the midst of high unemployment during The Depression.

### **Crite's Scene Paintings and the National Form**

In the introduction to this dissertation I laid out the practical relationship between the narrative as a mode of expression in the work produced by the artists considered here, and narratives as an integral part of national identity formation. This relationship between narrative and Fine Art Painting and its function as part of national identity formation has been variously treated. Scholars of American Art have addressed the subject of national identity formation, and belonging, through the production of art. Julia B. Rosenbaum's examination of *New England Art: and the Making of American Identity* (2006) looks at late eighteenth and early nineteenth century New England art saturating the art world between 1890-1920 as a cultural force defining the American landscape, as well as the people who belonged to it. Additionally, Rosenbaum establishes the preeminent influences of New England, Boston included, as a key location where art helped shape U.S. national identity. In *Picturing a Nation: Art and Social Change in Nineteenth Century America* (1994), David M. Lubin examined "how various groups of nineteenth century Americans picture themselves in their art...and in so doing they pictured their nation—either as they thought it was or thought it should be" (x). Given the historical

relationship between Fine Art as a site of national identity formation, and its tendency to connect landscape to people in politically symbolic ways, it is no wonder then that Crite should consider it important to copiously paint his urban landscape, and the people within it, in ways he thought it should be, and most importantly in the ways he thought the nation should understand it. We, as observers of Crite's art, ought to recognize the inherent social and racial politics of his choices.

This foundation of political representation taken up in Crite's "Neighborhood Series" fits within the legacy of narrative representational politics that have been a crucial medium through which African Americans have attempted to assert their legal rights and rights of belonging in the U.S. long before the twentieth century. Crite is an artist engaged with the national racial politics that fit within the continuum of efforts by cultural producers in the first decades of the twentieth century. This crucial period of American identity formation on the eve of World War II, was a chapter in U.S. History when America was grappling with the job of narrating the story of itself. Furthermore, the 1930s was a period when America was producing propaganda to help define itself in very particular nationalist terms related to its most pressing international problems. One of the issues of foremost concern in this chapter of American History was America's racial politics and the geographical, racially informed biases that undergirded America's shifting demographics due to industrialization, immigration, and black migration.

Crite's work narrates America's domestic struggles over the definition of American national identity and black people's attempts to be included in that definition. Furthermore, Crite is attentive in his painterly choices to reproduce African Americans adherent to the goals of an idealized national character, despite social and political claims

that black people's racial difference excluded them from the core values and character of the nation. In the catalogue for Crite's last exhibit, *Allan Rohan Crite: Artist Reporter of the African American Community*, African American Art writer and Director of Boston's The Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists, Edmond Barry Gaither describes Crite's work in the following way, "His art, marked by narrative and documentary characteristics, retains a simple beauty, simply presented" (2001, 23). This is clearly evident in Crite's painting *Street Scene* (1934). The simple symmetrical precision of the angles of red brick buildings, and pristine streets and sidewalks frame a scene in which seven little girls play jump rope. As if to say, 'there is nothing here but innocence guarded from the larger world and lovingly monitored by mother figures. This painting is marked by precision and simplistic themes, but it is narratively complex. Crite's brush created an ideal world where children were allowed to simply 'be children' and were lovingly cared for by attentive adults. But, I also suggest here that there is room for an understanding of Crite's paintings as more complex stories. After all, these are not only reportorial stories of a single community. They are also stories of a community of people within a nation. These images were strategically created to offer a sense of dignity, acceptance and inclusion to people under the hostile scrutiny of a U.S. national culture and politics, determined to implicate them in their own national rejection.

Crite's choice to focus on the innocence of African American children at play supervised and protected, from the unknown forces on the other side of a fence, by black women speak volumes to political concerns about urban life in the 1930s. The previously discussed political concerns foreground reasons for the need to portray innocent, mostly mono-racial scenes on pristinely kept streets. These scenes are a disruption of the most

popular narratives of urban life, African American women, and city living conditions. Crite began painting his “Neighborhood Series” at an intersection of several important artistic and political moments in the United States. The 1930s, as the first decade after the Jazz Age began, was still a decade in the middle of America’s Great Migration, when hundreds of thousands of African Americans moved from Southern rural areas, to urban industrial centers. The Roaring Twenties had been defined by American prohibition of alcohol, and the underground crime businesses that sprung up to fill the void left by legal alcohol distribution, and alcohol related entertainment (Mumford 1997: 28, 33, 132-156).<sup>58</sup>

Though it has dominated early twentieth century discussions of African American politics and culture, The Harlem Renaissance as a single frame of analysis for understanding the production of African American expression from the twenties into the thirties is arguably insufficient. It has narrowed the parameters for understanding the political influences on art produced by blacks, and may be one of the reasons that Crite’s work has been eclipsed by the more sensational images of his high profile contemporaries.

Though Archibald J. Motley, Jr. had not been raised poor or in the bleak urban setting of Chicago’s South Side, the people and the conditions of these people’s lives dominated his paintings in the 1930s (Rafferty 2002). Motley’s work stands as a dramatic contrast to Crite’s more placid form of racial critique. Motley played up the nightlife and the more dubious characters in urban settings. He focused on pool halls, dance clubs, and gambling houses. Or he focused on the black elite at garden parties and at picnics. Where Crite held the middle ground, Motley played up the highs and lows (Moody 2004).

Jacob Lawrence and Palmer Haden's work, on the other hand, took up highly charged political events like The Great Migration and lynching respectively. Growing racial tension related to the Scottsboro Case (1930-1933), where nine black boys were falsely accused of raping two white girls and sentenced to die, captured artists' imagination across a number of arts forms. The obvious injustice of the case and the flaws in the prosecution and procedure were characterized by writer John Dos Passos, as sparking a 'world-wide' outcry from the Left which included Albert Einstein, Thomas Mann and George Bernard Shaw in addition to the NAACP (Kellner 320). The subject of lynching, which was a major social concern for blacks both in the North and South during the time of The Great Migration, was being treated more directly by Jacob Lawrence and Aaron Douglas, where Crite's images had contributed no response.<sup>59</sup> Because African American Scene painters were more directly treating the social issues related to racial injustice in the South and poverty and in urban areas, Crite's subtle responses to how blacks were being nationally vilified as urban contaminants understandably went unrecognized.

Crite's priority was not African American cultural nationalism or Folk Art, but to use American Scene Painting as a response to national discourses and write a point-by-point counter narrative to national concerns about black people in urban areas. We see similar strivings in paintings by other regionalist Scene Painters of the period. They attempt to define regional experiences in common nationalistic terms.

Art Historian Sharon F. Patton classified American Scene Painting as the twentieth century's attempt at "a sincere national art" that "represented American artists' attempts to create a native American style" (135). This form was particularly popular in

the United States in the 1930s, partially because it was being subsidized by the government through The New Deal. These paintings often expressed regionalist concerns and subject matter. For example, artists in the Midwest painted in the rural genre of Scene Paintings which often focused on farms, crops and other pastoral imagery. Among the most prominent artists painting in this style in the 1930s were Edward Hopper, Alexander Hogue, and most famous was Grant Wood (Pohl 2002, 404).

Pohl suggests that while some of these works expressed an idealized image of life in rural America, others were more starkly political and confronted the lives of farmers who were losing their farms to drought, like Alexander Hogue's painting *Mother Earth Laid Bare* (1938). Hogue's painting illustrates the earth with mounds of land shaped into a woman's form, on her back and drought-stricken. Next to her there is an abandoned plow. In the background, a farmhouse is seen as diminutive in scale. This literally references the drought of the dustbowl, but metaphorically it seems to portend the death of a way of life. There are no people in the scene save for the image of Earth represented as a woman. Hogue focuses on the politics of the U.S. landscape and how its state is impacting the people of the nation. The statement about the inextricable relationship between the people and the landscape is clear. This a relationship slightly altered in representation in Grant Wood's most famous painting, *American Gothic* (1930). Instead Wood focuses on rural life by zeroing in on the people, rather than the land.

Zeroing in on the people is also Crite's strategy of narrating a critique of not only the geographical, but also the national political landscape for African Americans. But where Woods is recognized as an icon in the American art world, Crite remains a marginal figure. In *American Gothic*, a grim-faced farm couple stands in front of a home,

the husband with pitchfork in his hand. Francis K. Pohl characterizes these people as “prototypes—the Midwestern man and woman” (407). But, as ‘prototypes’ of American life, these white, rural subjects convey a particularly grim story about the condition of rural life in the 1930s, and the racial hierarchy in America. As Crite’s contemporaries and American Scene painters of the rural genre, these artists provide examples of the importance of both people and place in Scene Paintings as subjects of representational politics, and vehicles for political critique.

Art Historian Wanda Corn has read the painting and Wood’s goals differently as an American painter of the period. Corn refutes that Wood attempted to create subjects who were meant to be representatives of Americans in the 1930s. Instead, she suggest that the aesthetic choices in the painting reflect Wood’s celebration of the antiques of the previous century in what was a period after World War I when America had begun to take “new pride in American things and in national history” after emerging as a “world power from World War I” (Dozema and Milroy 1998, 395). Corn also suggest, that Wood’s “interest in clean lines and patterns reflect the modernism of the period” (397). But the most important point Corn makes related to my analysis of Crite is that she situates Wood’s art both in the cultural politics of the period and connects it to regional literary trends. She acknowledges the relationship between painting and literature as narrative forms that do sometimes share aesthetics. Corn writes that

It was East Coast critics who first compared Wood’s work to that of Sinclair Lewis. [who Woods himself credited with inspiring in him a “yearning after the arts in the corn-and-beef belt.] Local Iowans knew better; the literary parallels they drew were to contemporary Iowan writers, most particularly Jay Sigmund

and Ruth Suckow. Wood, they said, was doing in paint what Sigmund and Suckow for some years had been doing in words: creating significant art out of regional materials. (Corn 398-399)

Wood was also commenting on nineteenth century photographic techniques, specifically with respect to how the subjects were posed in the painting as was the custom of documentary photographers in the 1930s (Patton 156). But most importantly, Corn's speculations about the painter's intentions offer credible reasons to question the images Wood created as literal translations of the imagery of rural life. It was the artist's interpretations and preoccupations, despite the photographic or realistic nature of the painting, that undergird the image. These are cultural references to, rather than a literal translation of, the quaintness of American rural life.

There is a similarity here between the work Wood does on the subjects of rural life, and those created by Crite of black people in urban settings. In the following passage from *American Genre Painting: The Politics of Everyday Life* (1993) Elizabeth Johns describes the function of genre painting, and in so doing offers a point of caution against taking this realistic mode literally. She writes

Genre paintings hide the artificiality and contingency of their subjects with a realistic mode. One major effect of the realistic painting is that as its viewpoint seems to be perfectly neutral—that is, reportorial—the viewer tends to accept the ideological underpinnings of the painting in the very process of looking at, and coming under the spell of, the picture (xii, 1993).

Frances Pohl credits some of the greatest challenges to images of “an idyllic rural America” to the paintings of Jacob Lawrence and one can clearly see this in his treatment



of lynching and his Great Migration series. Though Lawrence was from the Midwest, he directly confronted lynching and poverty in his paintings of rural America (408). Pohl writes that “While [lynching] victims included women and children, most were men. And while Native Americans and Italians, Mexican, and Chinese nationals were among ...the nearly 5,000 recorded victims” in the 1930s, 72.7% were African American (410). These statistics offer a different image of America and a clearer idea of the violent articulations of America’s white supremacist ideology than the paintings produced by Crite. Though Crite does not challenge “idyllic rural America” he does challenge problematized urban life, and the questions of regional, as well as national belonging for African Americans in urban contexts by presenting what on the surface appear to be an ‘idyllic urban America’.

Crite’s paintings reproduce stories of American life using normative, often idealized black subjects [what Crite calls ordinary people] to refract the social and racial disparities inherent in America’s white supremacist social and political structure. Crite produces new, disrupting visual standards about African Americans in urban American life. These visual narratives are Crite’s line of defense against, and attempt to protect, people of African descent from what he indicated was an onslaught of images in the art world, and in national culture, attempting to defame them. Crite’s paintings are signifying images because they reproduce idealized images of American life in an urban setting with the difference of blackness and are his attempt to lessen the load of the cultural freight of racial difference.

Crite’s deployment of both race and location are important because representations of black men and women as hyper-sexual beings have been instrumental in asserting, and reinforcing the myths of black racial difference in the U.S. from the

period of slavery through the twentieth century. Lisa Gail Collins writes of the myth of the Black Jezebel that it was “an abstraction, a strategic creation, which slavery’s defenders worked to attach to the young black women’s bodies...to neutralize rape” (2002,12). These ideas of reified black sexuality were certainly not restricted to the U.S, but were also widely circulated throughout Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. One of the most widely known locations where such mythology about blacks existed, and remained into the twentieth century, was Paris, France. Though the French deployed this reification in a flattering, and even celebratory tone, which masked subtler more perverse racism rooted in white interracial desire, it was none-the-less there. In the decade that predated Crite’s “Neighborhood Series” Paris had been celebrated by African Americans and others as an important international location for travel and creative freedom. Patrine Archer-Shaw’s study *Negrophilia: Avant-Garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s* effectively argues the complex, and not completely altruistic motives behind why the Parisian *avant-garde* in the 1920s embraced black art and culture. Foremost, black culture challenged bourgeois values. Archer-Shaw uses advertisements, paintings, sculpture, photography, popular music, dance and theatre, literature, journalism, furniture, design, fashion and *objets d’art* –all are scrutinized to see how black forms were appropriated, adapted and vulgarized by whites...(9).

Those who celebrated or revered black culture in Paris during the 1920s earned the moniker *negrophilie* which translated to *nigger lover*. To be called a *negrophile* had negative implications associated with liberal attitudes toward slavery, and most relevant here was an accusation which implied “deviant sexual appetite for blacks, thereby placing

[whites who held] them outside “civilized” society’s moral boundaries” (Shaw 9).

Despite widespread U.S. segregation and racial inequality, Americans during the 1920s also took up the fascination with black cultural forms, but the term *nigger lover* actually held more overwhelming negative connotations.

I suggest that because Crite was aware of the sexual over-determination of black subjects in the previous decades, his paintings in the “Neighborhood Series” represent men and women together in sexually neutral terms to convey a statement of sexual propriety as the standard for the larger community. Three of Crite’s paintings that clearly illustrate this are, *A Class in Music Appreciation* (1940), *At Peace with the World* (1940) and one of Crite’s most recognizable paintings, *Leon and Harriet* (1941) (see appendix B, Fig. 12). These three paintings show men and women in social relations, but they do not, as had been the custom, reference black sexuality. Rather they seem to avoid it altogether.

Central to *Leon and Harriet* (1941) are the strikingly solemn features, along with Crite’s use of daylight and stillness, and an obvious attempt to show an independent dignity. This is a painting that resembles Wood’s *American Gothic* on a number of levels. Though this painting is clearly a street scene, it shares qualities with portraits. Edmond Barry Gaither has said that this painting based on real people, Architect Leon Bailey and Harriett Jackson, “demonstrate[s] the hegemony that they hold over themselves, setting their own agendas and pursuing their own ends. They do not care to entertain us; they do not require our aggrandizement” (23). While these two subjects appear to be unconcerned with our gaze, Crite takes great pains to make us aware that the painter’s esteem, and by extension ours for them, is important. He places two children in the left

center of the picture plane looking at them in a gaze of respect and admiration and throwing the focus from left to right lending it a literary quality. The children's perspective directs our attention, and reveals the obvious admiration felt by the artist. *Leon and Herriet* in their upright dignity and austere indifference to on-lookers represent an ideal in U.S. national culture at the opposite end of the spectrum of imagined coupling by Africa Americans in urban locations during this period. Though the children do not appear to be those of *Leon and Herriet*, they stand-in representationally to complete an ideal family of four, and possibly as part of a community for which they will be the next generation.

This metaphorical representation of an ideal black family is both contemporaneously and historically important. Crite's context is urban and Northeastern, therefore rich in political significance to those who understand the context in the 1930s and 40s and the historical context of Fine Art Painting in America. Crite's visual representations, like the growing population of the new urban poor and working-class blacks, are problematic figures for social scientists at this juncture in American history and culture. This period marks growing interest in the study of family sociology, which considered the problems of urbanization one of national significance, and focused on the habits and conditions of racialized working class laborers in urban centers in an attempt of resolve the ills of urbanization (Howard 1981; Herring 2003; Vert Willie and Reddick 2003). Among these ills were crowding, poverty, family disruption, and last but not least interracialism. These concerns have been discussed in the context of social and political debates surrounding the creation of the works produced by TLMPC and Nella Larsen and were of central concern nationally from the eve of World War I through World War II.

At first glance to some, Crite's work appears to be closer in subject matter, and focus, to Norman Rockwell, than to the works painted by some of the most high profile African American artists of the day. Though he used an urban setting, Crite wholly ignored the negative experiences often associated with migration, such as culture shock, discrimination, and experiences his parents and he himself may have had moving from Pennsylvania to Boston, MA (Griffin 1995). The fact that Crite sets himself apart from artists creating images that hue closer to experiences of migration or Blues and Jazz representations of African Americans, is the reason that we should pay close attention to the work that he was doing, particularly in relation to what he claims to have been doing, and how he has been assessed as a mere 'reporter' of his community.<sup>60</sup>

The politics in Crite's works are subtle. But they are none the less there. Crite's "Neighborhood Series" paintings offer us the community of African American people in the United States by providing images of his very own community. These images, as those of respectable, innocent, upright, and law abiding citizens, as African Americans standing in for all Americans, are controversial in their time because people of African descent did not occupy this space in the national imaginary, particularly in urban spaces. Just as Crite has said of his liturgical paintings of *Jesus Christ* and *The Virgin Mary* that as black people they are meant to represent a universal understanding of the religious figures, Crite's images of black people in the "Neighborhood Series" are meant to represent universal, normative narratives of American life (Smithsonian Interview 1979).

Crite has said that he doesn't see race, he accepts people as people. But most of the people in his paintings, and certainly all of the people in certain paintings, are black people. Furthermore, Crite's paintings offer a variety of shades of people of African

descent. Not only are they black people, but they are variously complexioned black people and white people who share community. Crite's paintings that include whites are paintings of interracial scenes. Despite the fact that there was little intermingling between the races in the public sphere due to segregation, Crite's paintings from the "Neighborhood Series" offer an intimate look at a community from the perspective of what seems to be an observer with insider status, who functions as a mediator of perceptions of black people in U.S. national culture.

### **Conclusion**

Crite himself characterizes his "Neighborhood Series" paintings as "studies of black people in ordinary life." I would suggest that an aspect of this intent was also to construct African Americans as ordinary people not as deviant social threats. I have argued that Crite's paintings construct a politic of normativity which critique America's white supremacist racial hierarchy and African American as social deviants.

Crite normative representations are a strategy to intervene in the public understanding of African Americans, and the political and cultural significance he is attempting to influence in response to those who shaped the cultural and sociological perceptions of African Americans before and during the period he painted. Different from the Jazz, Blues or Migration images of African Americans, offered by other African American Fine Art painters, Crite's images are those we would expect to find in mainstream America. They offer representations of standard pastimes and practices broadly recognizable to the rest of America. This is art which focuses on and captures a level of wholesomeness and morality about African Americans that includes them in projections of what it means to be American. This is an America where marbles,

horseshoes and church are among the national pastimes. There is a conspicuous containment of sex, sexuality, and alcohol entirely. Crite gives us not only the norms of his community as ordinary people, but also the national norms, or what were perceived as the activities of national norms for communities in American society. But, given the times it can be argued that perhaps these images are normative to a fault. Normative to the point of excluding fact because of what, except for a few instances, they neglect to convey about what was or may have really been occurring in American society at the time that Crite was painting. The 1930s was a period of depression in American society, and for however poorly formerly middle class white Americans may have been doing, blacks were doing even worse.

Crite in many ways was an artistic anomaly. He was arguably one of the most prolific African American painters to produce American Scene paintings of the urban genre in the 1930s and 1940s, though he is largely unknown and unrecognized for his artistic contribution. Crite's paintings documented African American life in a style consistent with several other popular styles of the period, among them social realism, which was practiced by his more celebrated fellow African American contemporaries Jacob Lawrence and Archibald J. Motley, Jr. But as one looks at Crite's images in relation to those by Lawrence, Motley, and Palmer Haden, one finds a similarity in subject matter, but Crite's work lacks an audible 'African' accent. Though his subjects are black, his aesthetics are not as defined by the dictates of black cultural politics. This may perhaps be why Crite is rarely placed in these artists' company in critical discussions of their work.<sup>61</sup> *Facing History: the Black Image in American Art 1710-1940*, a comprehensive study of African American images edited by Christophe C. French closes

with a discussion of Motley and his painting *Barbecue* (1935), and two images from Lawrence's migration series (1990). While Lawrence's painting *Ironers* opens the collection, Crite is absent. Though it would be convenient to blame Crite's absence from art scholarship of the 1930s and 1940s on what some have hinted at as his photographic neutrality, or the lack of overt political intent in Crite's work, this may not be the only reason for his absence. Perhaps, it is simply that Crite's politics ran counter to the popular and prescribed aesthetics for African American artists. His subject matter was deeply steeped in the Boston's South End community surrounding him, and more clearly directed at capturing an American rather than a reified African American cultural nationalism. Crite's politics are visible if one is willing to look closely at his work and consider it through the artist's own statements on his intent relative to that of his contemporaries and their representational politics.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### **Conclusion and Future Application**

Paul Gilroy has written, “Themes of nationality, exile, and cultural affiliation accentuate the inescapable fragmentation and differentiation of the black subject” (1993, 35). Allan Rohan Crite, like The Lincoln Motion Picture Company (TLMPC) and Nella Larsen, comprise a contingency of African American artists who construct a narrative tapestry across these themes. They told stories about what it was to be black in America through representations of normative American subjects, who happened to be people of African descent. But in this particular, seemingly matter-of-fact gesture, Crite’s narratives, like those of Larsen and TLMPC, create normative disruptions to the representations in U.S. national culture which socially and politically constructed black people as racially different and socially inferior, and which supported their marginalized legal and social status in America.

The Lincoln Motion Picture Company produced normative themed narratives in cinema against broad national landscapes which refracted the white supremacists foundations, and the geopolitical complexities of liberal democracy. Larsen, through prose narratives, used the intimate spaces and relations of domesticity to refract the inequalities of America’s racial and gender politics. Crite produced paintings of black people in his urban community of Boston in ‘everyday experiences’ in an effort to

counter the onslaught of images contributing to black peoples' social construction as racially different, and socially deviant. In Crite's paintings, black people's lives were free from segregation, racial oppression, urban dislocation, social contamination, and sexual misconduct because this was necessary to make a case for their belonging in the country.

Framing the works of TLMPC, Nella Larsen and Allan Rohan Crite through the critical lens of signifying affirms both the possibilities and continuing relevance of Gates' African American theory of literary criticism, and the importance and value of Adrienne Rich's concept of revisioning, re-entering an old text from a new critical direction. Together, these approaches offer promising starting points to re-examine the cultural work of artists who have been relegated to the margins of national, or just outside of, cultural-based political movement politics. Most importantly, considering the ways that normativity is used as a vehicle of resistance, and critique, is the most fertile ground to plow as we enter more fractious and divisive domestic politics in the United States.

Furthermore, applying signifying critiques to the representations of people, conditions, and behaviors which are societally constructed as 'normative' opens the door to a wide range of interrogative possibilities, which can reveal the ideologically underpinnings of representations in U.S. national culture. Because cultural production from any society is a repository for the social and political currents of the times, it inherently contains both hegemonic and resistant elements. The LMPC, Larsen and Crite's particular contributions are that they index, subvert, and critique the instantiated political power of normative roles and identity constructions in American society in the first half of the twentieth century. They find resistant possibilities in representations,

within accepted frameworks, despite the near perpetual encouragement and celebration of the most exotic and radical performances in cultural production.

These creative outsiders, marginalized as cultural producers, rejected both national and cultural essentialisms that attempted to define them. They challenged America's white supremacist assumptions and avoided the presumptions of African American cultural politics. Their work exemplifies what Lisa Lowe reminds us, "it is often in cultural forms and practices, broadly defined, that we find the most powerful articulations of...complex subjectivity and through those forms and practices that alternative politicization of the subject is mediated" (Lowe 1996, 158).

The Lincoln Motion Picture Company answered the call to rearticulate the meaning of African American subjectivity on the U.S. national landscape at time of commemoration that threatened to representationally lock black people in dynamics of subjugated relations of the past. The LMPC produced counter-narratives that articulated an embattled present, in the service of a more promising future. Nella Larsen critiqued and disrupted normative arrangements of marriage, family, and maternity and disrupted racial and gender relations of power within the domestic realm. These strategic practices allowed these artists to produce representations of quiet, but lasting resistance by narrating the stories which called into question the legitimacy of racist social and political representation of African Americans in U.S. national culture. These counter-narratives to U.S. normativity, which touted a successful liberal democracy, and demarcated societal prescriptions for normative racial and sexual subjectivity in the twentieth century, make imminently traceable America's ideological contradictions. They also make visible the nation's failure to deal with all of its citizens according to its own national declarations of

equality and promises of justice. These artists' works were "self-consciously engaged in a dialectical relationship with the official norms and ideology of U.S. nationalism" on various levels critiquing and making visible these failings (Singh 44).

The work of this dissertation fits squarely into the scholarship of race and the representational politics in the early twentieth century in the fields of American Studies, African American Art, American Art, Film and Literary Studies. It contributes to these fields a relevant and potentially fruitful approach to uncovering ideological underpinnings of racist politics through so-called normative contemporary representations in a time when many pundits and culture warriors wish to proclaim this a post-racial moment. The chapters on each of these subjects has attempted to complicate, and explicate, previous understanding of the artists' intents, and their critical assessments of hierarchies of race, class, and gender. There was clearly more to the stories these cultural producers told than has been previously suggested. Additionally, comparing the ways these distinct artists used the same mode of communication, narrative, in three distinct forms: cinema, literature and Fine Art Painting, to create signifying critiques is encouraging for the possibilities of applying similar critical strategies to articulations of politics across creative forms.

For future study, investigating 'normative' identity constructions to locate the underpinnings of racial representations and complicate their meanings is also fertile ground. This is the case not only for creative representations of national, gender, and racial subjectivity, but also for locating how marginalized groups are presently deploying constructions of normativity in political battles for social recognition, and in human rights and social justice struggles.

Furthermore, it might also be useful to examine how these critiques can be applied to contemporary discussions and political debates and strategies about immigration. We could perhaps ask how are national discourses on immigration framed around notions of normative subjectivity? What assumptions do campaigns make about immigrants as non-normative subjects? How are other non-white racial subjects being politically positioned against immigrant communities using normative representations that assert racist messages? For example, the conservative think-tank, NumbersUSA.org, released an advertisement (2014) in which they deployed a clearly middle-class African American family to denounce immigration from Mexico. The advertisement was clearly directed at creating a wedge between African Americans and Latinos by having an African American family deployed as the gatekeeper of U.S. citizenship. Similar to how TLMPC deployed black troops at the U.S. / Mexico Border to defend it against Mexico in the film *Trooper of Troop K*. This advertisement illustrated, as did *Trooper of Troop K*, blacks rights of belonging and allegiance to the nation. However, what the NumbersUSA.org advertisement occludes the continued troubled status of African Americans in the U.S. apparent in the increasingly hostile domestic attitudes towards blacks that have given way recently to legal cases like the Trayvon Martin trial and voter suppression in largely black urban communities like Detroit, Michigan.

It would also be worthwhile to consider how pro-immigration reform organizations have responded to demonizing depictions of ‘illegals’ crossing the U.S. / Mexico Border. The term ‘illegal’ contains the underlying assumptions of deviance and outlaw. Because normative disruptions are attentive to conditions of race, class, gender and geographical location, this frame would be useful in re-examining not only racial

representations, but these other circumstances in which subjects are situated in popular and political media discourses.

Queer Studies scholars have questioned whether the goal of marriage, as traditionally conceived, is a useful or appropriate framework through which to legitimized queer relationships and families. Investigating representations of normativity in current Queer Rights organizations' articulation of parenting and family, and how they challenge the ideological underpinnings of marriage and family historically conceived, could also be a productive study. Such an investigation into the ways normative representations of Queer families trouble the historically based definition of marriage and contemporary politics around the issue would also be useful. A question we can ask is, in what way is the historically based, normative, legal contract of marriage troubled by the inclusion of Queer unions? Constructions of normativity began, as Michel Foucault ascertained, with constructions of deviance. By investigating these contrasting relationships as contingent, we find the ideological underpinnings of normativity and deviance and by extension we uncover the political work they do in structuring national subjectivity in society.

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ENDNOTES –

Chapter 1

<sup>1</sup> This definition of normative makes reference to The Americanization Movement which was originally used by Teddy Roosevelt during The Progressive Era to address the first wave of American Nativism on the eve of the First World War to help galvanize the public against immigration. The phrase was “100% Americanism” in his 1919 political campaign which defined the ideal American populous as exclusively “White, native-born, middle-class” citizens (Buenker and Kantowicz 1998, 17). This previous definition also subscribes to patriarchal ideals of gender roles inscribed in the nineteenth century moral reformers prescriptions for healthy family life and the best environment to produce the most worthy candidates for citizenship which also included rural upbringing (Howard 1981, 17-19). The programs evolving during the Progressive era that focused on the health of families were developed to help indoctrinate immigrants who settled in urban areas into American life. They sought to teach English, hygiene, etc. *The Progressive Era Dictionary*. This grass-roots settlement house reform was an important institution for learning about U.S. national culture. Similarly, African American women’s clubs created similar institutions to help southern migrants integrate into urban life in northern cities.

<sup>2</sup> I am defining politics here as the expressed and shrewd resistance by these African Americans, through their cultural production, of responding to governmental, social and legal disparities in society that were created due to racial hierarchies which cast black people as racially different and nationally inferior. In these cases, the politics of normativity is aimed challenging constructions of African Americans as non-normative subjects. For a discussion of literature on normativity or normalcy see Julian B. Carter’s *The Heart of Whiteness* (2007).

<sup>3</sup> The use of signifying as a critical and analytic framework through which to examine cultural production occurs across a range of disciplines, and has generated a significant body of scholarship. Though the originally intended use of the theory was Afro-American literary criticism, scholars have since applied Gate’s framework to Anthropology, Music Studies, Religious Studies, Semiotics, Feminist Studies, as well as a number of other disciplines, including but not limited to, Film Studies and African American Art, as I apply it here. These broad applications of signifying attest to its durability and continued relevance as a critical framework. This work is informed by Gate’s original Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism, which is interested in the dynamics of meaning making as acts of resistance in vernacular culture, but I examine the application of these dynamics across a range of fields. For discussions of signifying in film see: Warren Buckland’s *Film as specific signifying practice: A rational reconstruction of Stephen Heath’s ‘On screen, in frame: Film and ideology’*. *Semiotica* 2011, no. 187 (October 2011): 49-81. Gladstone L. Yearwood’s *Black Film as a Signifying Practice*. Africa World Press, Inc. 2000. For recent discussion of signifying in literature see: Laurie Champion’s *True Stories Are Lies: Postmodern Signifying in John Edgar Wideman’s Short Fiction*. *Short Story* 19, no. 2 (Fall 2012 2011): 60-80. Joanna Penn Cooper’s *Gothic Signifying in Charles Chesnut’s Mandy Oxendine*. *MELUS: The Journal Of The Society For The Study Of The Multi-Ethnic Literature Of The United States* 34, no. 4 (Winter 2009): 119-144. Annette Debo’s “CRITICAL READINGS: Signifying Afrika: Gwendolyn Brooks’s Later Poetry.” In *Critical Insights: Gwendolyn Brooks*, 277-298. Salem Press, 2010. For discussions of signifying in Fine Art: Penelope Ingram’s *The signifying body [electronic resource] : toward an ethics of sexual and racial difference*. Albany: State University of New York Press, c2008., 2008. King-Hammond Leslie’s “16 Texture, Text, and Testament: Reading Sacred Symbols/Signifying Imagery in American Visual Culture.” In *Theorizing Scriptures : New Critical Orientations to a Cultural Phenomenon*, 167. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008. Marjorie Welish’s *Signifying art : essays on art after 1960*. Cambridge, U.K. ; New York : Cambridge University Press, 1999., 1999. For general discussion on signifying see: Cindy Lee Zeiher’s “Between the Subject and the Social: Signifying Images of Desire and Ideological Subjectivities.” *International Journal Of Zizek Studies* 6, no. 2 (December 2012): 1-26. R.S. Perinbanayagam’s *Signifying acts : structure and meaning in everyday life*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, c1985., 1985. Joyce A. Joyce’s “A Tinkers Damn: Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and “The Signifying Monkey” Twenty Years Later.” *Callaloo*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Spring 2008), pp. 370-380.

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<sup>4</sup> Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* was based on Thomas Dixon's novel *The Clansman* published in 1905 as a historical romance of the Klu Klux Klan. The novel recast the Klan as heroes in the preservation of Southern life and national order.

### Chapter Two

<sup>5</sup> Firstly, there are a number of bodies of scholarship that have addressed white supremacist ideology in the works of U.S. Founding Fathers and the inhuman characterization of African Americans for the purpose of justifying slavery. Among the most relevant here are the works by Critical Race Studies scholars who have charted white supremacy in the founding legal documents of the U.S. Constitution, which characterized persons of African descent as 3/5 human beings. The Bill of Rights and subsequent laws directed at restricting the rights of blacks to vote, own property, and receive equal treatment under the law. Thomas Cripps in *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film 1900-1942* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), dedicates chapter 2 to the historical and political responses to *The Birth of a Nation* which locates it as a cultural phenomenon and pivotal factor in disseminating an understanding of race relations in the public realm. The chapter, "The Year of The Birth of a Nation" attests to the cultural and political significance of Griffith's film, and the national political response to it as white supremacist from a range of opposing leadership factions. While former professional scholar, historian, and then U.S. President Woodrow Wilson "praised the film's fidelity to the sad days of The Civil War and Reconstruction" the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People channeled their "outrage" over the film's racist representations of blacks as savage, socially corrupt, and sexually licentious to spark a "a half-century career of lobbying in Hollywood studies." (41-43). *The Cambridge African American Literary Guide* actually sites *The Birth of a Nation* and the favorable response to it by those in high office in the U.S. Government as inspirational to the Harlem Renaissance (264) Additionally, African American and early feminist poet and playwright Angelina Weld Grimké wrote the play *Rachel*, first produced in 1916 in Washington DC, in direct response and opposition to the racist representations of African Americans in *The Birth of a Nation*. Rita Dove, *The Penguin Anthology of 20<sup>th</sup> Century American Poetry* (New York: Penguin Group, 2011), 38. *The Birth of a Nation* is also named as a pivot point in Cedric Robinson's material analysis of racial representations of African Americans in *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning* (2007) and Barbara Foley's *Spectres of 1919: Class & nation in the Making of the New Negro* (2008).

<sup>6</sup> 1) Overall, race films provided black entertainment to segregated black audiences; 2) Race films allowed more sympathetic representations of blacks with whom their black audiences could identify; 3) Race films were venues where black performers could find employment; 4) And perhaps most importantly, race films allowed blacks an avenue through which they could control new, and shape existing, representational propaganda about themselves.

<sup>7</sup> Daniel Leab chronicles some of the more high-profiled responses to *The Birth of a Nation* which includes some productions by African American showman William Foster who wrote a column for the black press. Leab notes that Foster produced a number of short films portraying what some at the time called "real Negro life." Leab also names Emmett J. Scott, who served as Booker T. Washington's secretary as a major driving force behind the production of a film called *Lincoln's Dream*, which generated a mixed response, and whose group was behind *Birth of Race* which was widely panned and failed at the box office. "'All-Colored'—But Not Much Different: Films Made For Negro Ghetto Audiences, 1913-1928" (*Phylon*, Vol. 36, no. 3 [3<sup>rd</sup> Qtr. 1975], 326-328)

<sup>8</sup> See discussion of Howard Winnant's conditions of a theory of racial formations.

<sup>9</sup> In Daniel J. Leab's "All Colored"---But Not Much Different: Films Made for Negro Ghetto Audiences, 1913-1928 he ranks TLMPC among the top, first rate black film companies of its time for showcasing black talent of African American audiences (*Phylon*, Vol. 36, No. 3 [3<sup>rd</sup> Qtr. 1975], 326-327).

<sup>10</sup> Talented Tenth is referenced in W.E.B. DuBois' autobiography, *A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of its First Century* (1968) as a early twentieth century political prescription that the African Americans should draw from the top ten percent of their population with high educational attainment, likely of the upper-classes, and creatively gifted for their leadership to help advance the condition of the race and therefore not be reliant on white leadership which might not provide either the best guidance or have their best interest at heart (DuBois 1968, 296). Cedric Robinson material analysis of the company in *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning* (2007) also supports this assessment of the company's social and political message.



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<sup>11</sup> The Lincoln Motion Picture Company was officially incorporated in 1917 and issued \$75,000 worth of stock at \$10 per share. This issue of stock was meant to support the continued production of films, which was often stalled by lack of funds. There is nothing in the archive to indicate that even half of its stock was sold. During its operation, TLMPC produced and released six films on shoe-string budgets. Despite seeking private investors, opportunities to merge with other black film companies, and chasing U.S. Government contracts to produce propaganda films, the company collapsed after five years in business (George P. Johnson Negro Film Collection, Charles E. Young Special Collections, UCLA).

<sup>12</sup> Included in the George P. Johnson's Collection are a assortment of letters from audience members and broadsides used in advertising labeled "Unsolicited Commendations" from African American newspapers, business people and audience members throughout the country praising the quality of the films. George P. Johnson Negro Film Collection, UCLA Charles E. Young Special Collections.

<sup>13</sup> 'Type' actor here refers to actors who are racially ambiguous and who on screen can represent a multitude of racial and ethnic types. Images of Noble Johnson in the archive show him dressed as an American Indian Chief, a Chinese Cooley, A Chinese Nobleman, and a Mexican Bandit to name a few. George P. Johnson Negro Film Collection, UCLA.

<sup>14</sup> Nobel Johnson stature was of such note for playing 'racial others' that he was listed in the credits by name in "The Thief of Bagdad" starring Douglas Fairbanks as *The Indian Prince*, and a December issue of *Motion Picture Weekly* (Vol. I, No. 18, Dec. 15<sup>th</sup> 1917) referred to him as "one of the biggest heavies in the whole Universal camp." George P. Johnson Negro Film Collection, UCLA

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> It is worth noting here that filmmaker Oscar Micheaux some years after this film was produced also released a film whose narrative also hinged on racial identity and kinship revealed through a shared birthmark (Cripps).

<sup>20</sup> This fact is apparent not only from the amount of correspondence addressed to George P. Johnson in the archive, but also from the fact that the entire history of the company ultimately fell to his responsibility and is named for him at the Charles E. Young Special Collections in UCLA.

<sup>21</sup> The liberal foundation of U.S. racial politics was inherently disinterested in racial equality and these sentiments were socially encouraged and exacerbated by the 1896 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* which codified Jim Crow segregation and upheld separate and unequal civil and social accommodations.

<sup>22</sup> *The Declaration of Independence* states, "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal, they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." But this pertained to property holding, free, white men.

<sup>23</sup> *Constitution of the United States*, Amendment XIV; Section I, "No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.

<sup>24</sup> The category 'normative' defined here is imbued with white supremacist racial meaning undergirded by various politically motivated racial projects at work in in the first two decades of the twentieth century. These projects include the Americanization Movement which held and promoted anti-immigrant sentiments leading up to and through World War I. Its followers denounced what it called hyphenated citizens as untrustworthy to the war effort, and their sentiments intensified through the Red Scare from 1919-1920. The Americanization Movement believed that Blacks more so than immigrants, and racial diversity in general posed a threat to the country a notion of "100% Americanism" (Buenke and Kantowicz 1988, 17). The burgeoning field of Social Work, and subsequently American Sociology, emerging during this period to address the conditions of growing populations of the working classes in urban areas as a result of industrialization, and The Great Migration of blacks to urban areas. Social workers are charged with helping to define acceptable standards of family living, which end up being "white, rural, middle-class and heteronormative" (Howard 1981). This is a concept of normative American is consistent with the 'ideal' American citizen in the early twentieth century defined by Eugenics' as a "typical" America who was white, domestic born, and middle class. These are the representation that would continue to be promoted in the public realm and be on display in county fairs through the 1930s (Smith 2004, 1).

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<sup>25</sup> Here I'm drawing specifically from the following four characteristics: 1. Individualism; 2. Negative liberty, freedom defined by minimal intrusion of the state into private lives, rather than participation in the affairs of state; 3. Dedication to a limited state: The protection of private property is the central aim of the state; 4. Toleration of political difference in Glenn Perusek's "Shifting Terrain: Styles of Liberalism, Periodization, and Levels of Analysis" *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Spring, 2002), pp. 405-426). I suggest that Lockeanism allowance of political differences among subjects also allows for the blind spot of unequal property relations, and racial and social oppressions as a necessary condition of property inequality. I must also underscore the historical fact that since it is under the ideological tenets of Lockeanism that African Americans were categorized as property, in fact the major form of property in the early years of American democracy, that white supremacy is an inherent element of all U.S. social political culture.

<sup>26</sup> George P. Johnson Negro Film Collection, UCLA.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (Kerner Commission), Report (New York: Bantam, 1968).

<sup>29</sup> Film Synopsis for *Trooper of Troop K* in the George P. Johnson Negro Film Collection UCLA.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> This is the text of an ad promoting the film. Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> George P. Johnson Negro Film Collection, UCLA

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Both of the last films produced by LMPC, *A Man's Duty* (1919) and *Law of Nature* (1918) are melodramas of manners, which illustrate some of the pitfalls of urban life, and scenarios of people of African descent overcoming them. Unlike the previous three motion pictures, they deal head-on with race-based social constructions of morality in U.S. national culture. In *A Man's Duty*, we find Richard Beverly (Clarence Brooks), described as "a young vigorous out-door athletic fellow" from a "Midwestern family." Beverly's initial love interest is Miss Myra Lewis, a debutant who is primarily described as 'spoiled.' During a fundraising event, for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Beverly is sabotaged and disgraced by unknowingly drinking alcohol-spiked punch, made by Herbert Gordon, his rival for Myra's affections. A confrontation over these events follows the next day at tennis courts, resulting in a fight during which Beverly believes he has killed Gordon. He flees his hometown in disgrace. Beverly is shown some time later, an outcast from his community, being befriended and taken in by Mirriam, the single mother of an illegitimate daughter. Mirriam teaches Beverly how to survive outside the luxuries of his middle-class home and social circles. The two eventually fall in love, but there is no expression of it as Beverly's problems in his hometown remain unresolved and it seems inappropriate to pursue other relations, before resolving the first. Eventually, news from home reaches Beverly that Gordon did not die after all, and that in his absence Gordon has married Myra. Beverly returns home to his family where he tells them about his plans to marry Mirriam. He invites her to meet his parents and introduces her, and they accept her as their future daughter-in-law. George P. Johnson Negro Film Collections, UCLA.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid

<sup>39</sup> Ibid

<sup>40</sup> Ibid

### Chapter Three

<sup>41</sup> In the forward of *Critical Race Theory* (1995) Cornel West defines the this theoretical works as a "comprehensive movement in thought and life—created primarily, though not exclusively, by progressive intellectuals of color—compels us to confront critically the most explosive issue in American civilization: the historical centrality of law in upholding white supremacy (and concomitant hierarchies of gender, class, and sexual orientation." (ix, 1995) Eds., Kimberle Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas.

<sup>42</sup> Here I am particularly referencing Kimberlee Crenshaw's article "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color" and Neil Gotanda's "A Critique

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Of “Our Constitution Is Color-Blind” in *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement* (1995). These works implicate founding U.S. documents, U.S. racial histories, and the limits of identity politics as key factors prohibiting effective approaches to addressing social manifestations of American racism.

<sup>43</sup> The Harlem Renaissance is an African American cultural and creative movement taking place in Harlem, New York during the 1920s. Though the social and political goals and achievements of the movement are continually contested, it has been established as an important geopolitical moment in American History because of the contributions of African American artists and intellectuals. Despite the fact that Black artists from a variety of creative mediums comprised this creative community, it is widely accepted as a primarily literary movement formally established as such with the publication of Alain Locke’s essay “Enter the New Negro” in *Survey Graphic*, May 1925.

<sup>44</sup> I am using the term normativizing here to underscore that there was an ideological claim in state, social and political discourse that these were the standard and most acceptable and preferable characteristics for U.S. subjects therefore understood as normal.

<sup>45</sup> According to the *Historical Dictionary of the Progressive Era 1890-1920* this period has been characterized in the following ways, “a response to a status revolution, a search for order by newly emerging elites, a search for social justice by altruistic intellectuals” but the most relevant to this argument is the fact that this era produced significant reforms in U.S. domestic policy aimed at improving the lives and work conditions of its polity in the face of a growing and powerful economic force of industrialism.

<sup>46</sup> Among the most significant Peiss considers in an extensive body of literature: Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood* (New Haven, Conn., 1977); Katherine Kish Skalar, *Catherine Beecher: A Study of American Domesticity* (New Haven, Conn., 1973); Carroll Smith Rosenberg, “Beauty, and Beast and the Militant Woman: A Case Study in Sex Roles and Social Stress in Jacksonian America,” *American Quarterly* 23 (Oct 1971)

<sup>47</sup> Politicians also used the momentum of this anti-immigrant rhetoric as a pretext for passing the Emergency Quota Act in 1922 to stop flow of immigrants into the United States. Additional immigration policies framed in nationalistic, anti-communist and racialist language followed through the first half of the 1920s. (Rosenzweig, Lichtenstein, et al. 2008). These federal laws favored the admission of Anglo-Saxons, while excluding blacks and Asians. They also severely limited the entrance of Jews, Latinos, and Slavs who were perceived as logical threats to the national family (Zinn 2005, 382).

<sup>48</sup> Kathy Peiss in *Cheap Amusements: Working Women Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* notes, “cultural elaboration of “women’s sphere” in the nineteenth century, as an emergent market economy and industrialization heightened the sexual division of labor. Affirming segregated spatial and social and social worlds for bourgeois women and men, the ideology of true womanhood, with its precepts of domestic, moral guardianship and sexual purity, made a moral and social duty out of the traditional tasks of housework and child care (7).

<sup>49</sup> Despite the evident impact of industrialization observed by social workers, charity workers and studied by those in the burgeoning field of family sociology, white moral reformers believed that the domestic family was a threatened institution and that its biggest threat was divorce (Howard 1981). These reformers, many of which were largely religious leaders like Samuel Warren Dike, who founded the National Divorce League, lobbied for restrictive legal measures on divorce. They defended marriage as a scriptural sanction by God and the church, and understood their cause as a moral and religious mandate. Sociologist largely wanted to leave God out of this discussion. Furthermore, progressive activists and religious leaders connected the family’s moral authority to civic responsibility because they recognized and promoted the family as the most important influence on children for imparting desirable qualities that serve community and citizenry as an extension of national responsibility.

<sup>50</sup> A U.S. social settlement house founded in 1889 which was a experiment in neighborliness which provided preschool, playgrounds, kindergarten, theatre, music lessons evening school for 26 ethnic groups and an apartment building for singly working women. Through Hull House social reforms became grounded in a place. It became a model for American settlement houses which embodied democracy in action for the protection of women, children, the retarded and mentally ill and the eradication of poverty (Buenker and Kantowicz, 207).

<sup>51</sup> Howard’s review of the sociology literature in *A Social History of Family Sociology* (1981) notes a dramatic shift in sociology and social psychology to concerns for the family as bound up in a larger network of external social relations. Instrumental texts reinforcing this point include John M. Gillette’s

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textbook *The Family and Society* and William I Thomas and Florian W. Znaniecki's study, *The Polish Peasants* which looked at the deteriorating effects of urbanization and industrialization on Polish peasant immigrants. These scholars identify the main cause of deterioration for urban families as "social disorganization" which was defined as "a decrease of the influence of existing rules of the group upon individual members of the group." (52) This study was later used as a model for E. Franklin Frazier's study on the Negro Family.

<sup>52</sup> In *Black Sexual Politics* Patricia Hill Collins notes three fears in the twentieth century that were threatening the social order in Northern cities, and which the blacks middle class assumed responsibility for policing, and for which the progress of black communities were measure included: "1) rampant and uncontrolled female sexuality; 2) fear of miscegenation; and 3) independent black female desire" (71).

<sup>53</sup> It is useful to consider a basic definition of family offered by the *American Heritage College Dictionary*, which identifies exactly how Larsen's use of the term is a contradictory and *Signifying* deployment of the concept: Fam-i-ly: *noun*, a. 1. a. fundamental social group in society consisting of parents and their offspring. b. Two or more people who share goals and values, have commitments to one another, and reside usually in the same place. 2. All the members of a household under one roof. 3. A group of persons sharing common ancestry. (493)

<sup>54</sup> Here I am referencing the 'Cult of Domesticity' discourse of the period which was carried over from the nineteenth century and that encouraged women to take and maintain the home and family as their primary sphere of concern. Amy Kaplan makes an exceptional argument about it in *Anarchy of Empire and the Making of U.S. Culture* (2002).

<sup>55</sup> Again, the popular definition used in politics and prescribed by social workers was patriarchal, white, middle-class, and rural.

<sup>56</sup> Cedric Robinson notes in *Forgeries of Memory & Meaning* (2007) "The hegemonic call of the race film melodramas was for complete assimilation into Anglo-Saxon identity and culture. Black Saxonism was imagined and cinematically realized as the ideal status in American society. In both private and public spheres, race melodramas presented characters entirely fluent with conventions governing white middle class, whether it be in profession, lifestyles, family, or intimate relations." (241)

#### Chapter Four

<sup>57</sup> I am defining Crite's "Neighborhood Series" as the series of paintings Crite produced which focus on the people in Roxbury/South End Boston Community between 1930-1945. Though the exhibit of these works which produced an exhibit catalog entitled *Allan Rohan Crite: Reporter of the African American Community* actually includes several works painted in 1971, which do not focus on community, but rather are paintings of a religious nature.

<sup>58</sup> In *Seeing Mary Plain: A Life of Mary McCarthy* biographer Frances Kiernan discusses the influence on Left intellectual communities, "Prohibition had made drinking glamorous and had given rise to a whole cornucopia of libations, a veritable soda parlor of mixed drinks" (2000, 95). Kiernan discusses how residences became the unofficial locations to drink heavily and behave rudely. Kevin Mumford's *Interzones: black/white sex districts in New York and Chicago* (1997) thoroughly discusses the subjects of interracial and homosexual sex as an ancillary manifestation of the social restrictions of Prohibition.

<sup>59</sup> This assessment of major issues on the minds of African Americans during the Great Migration is informed by two articles: E.M. Beck and Stewart E. Tolnay's article "Black Flight: Lethal Violence and the Great Migration, 1900-1930" in *Social Science History*, Vol. 14, No. 3. (Autumn, 1990), pp. 347-370 and their subsequent article including the first decade of the twentieth century "Racial Violence and Black Migration in the American South, 1910 to 1930" in the *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 57, No. 1 (Feb., 1992), pp. 103-116.

<sup>60</sup> Here I am reference the titles of Crite's last exhibit on the "Neighborhood Series" as well as the assessments of his work in the exhibit catalog by Julie Levin Caro, Edmund-Barry Gaither, and Barbara Earl Thomas. Additionally, I am addressing journalist acceptance of this characterization in Barbara Rizza Mellin article "Allan Rohan Crite" published in *The New Crisis* (Sep/Oct. 1999): Issue 5, p 46. and Leigh Montgomery's piece "An Artist Reporter looks at Boston in the 1930s, '40s" published in *The Christian Science Monitor* 10/22/97, Vol. 89, Issue 229, p16.

<sup>61</sup> In art historian Lisa Mintz Messinger's Introduction to *African American Artists, 1929-1945: Prints, Drawings and Paintings in The Metropolitan Museum of Art* she discusses the impact of WPA funding on the careers of African American artists and their ability to reach larger audiences and make successful

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careers. Among them, Messinger includes Romare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence, and notes that they were able to create long-term successful careers because “their styles were unique and compelling and had universal appeal that transcended racial lines” (2003; 16). Crite is not included as a transcendent figure though his paintings dealt less directly, in an obvious way, with racial themes than Lawrence, who has come to be widely recognized for his epic African American Migration series.

## APPENDIX A

### ▶ Signifyin(g)

- Henry Louis Gates, Jr., 1988
- Reproduces the 'standard English language' with the difference of Blackness as a mode of critique



Figure 1

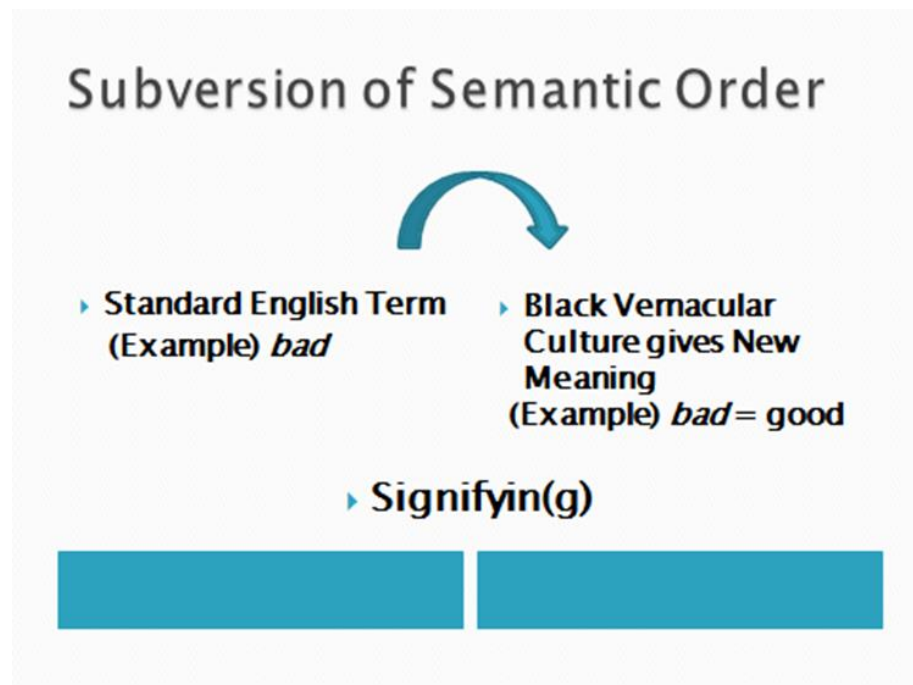


Figure 2

## Signifying on Reality


- ▶ Gates originally locates Signifyin(g) at the level of language
  - ▶ My dissertation expands the use of the term to representations in narrative modes of creative expression
- 



Figure 3

## APPENDIX B

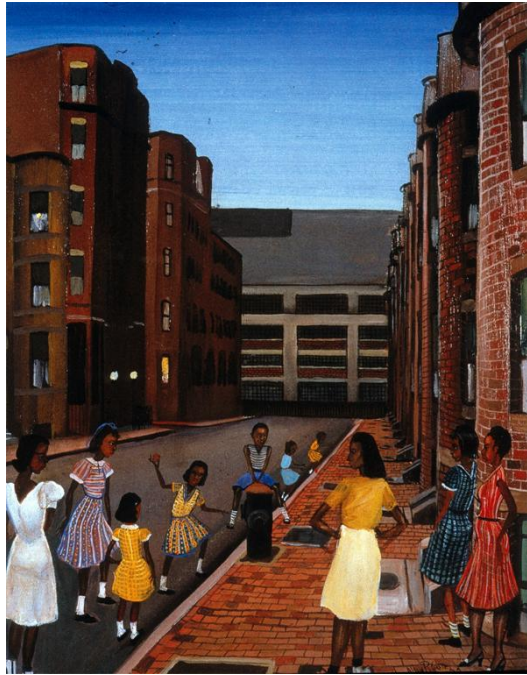


Figure 1, *Last Game at Dusk* (Allan Rohan Crite, 1939, Boston Athenaeum, Boston, MA)



Figure 2, *Come On, Cramps* (Rohan Allan Crite, 1940, Boston Athenaeum, Boston, MA)



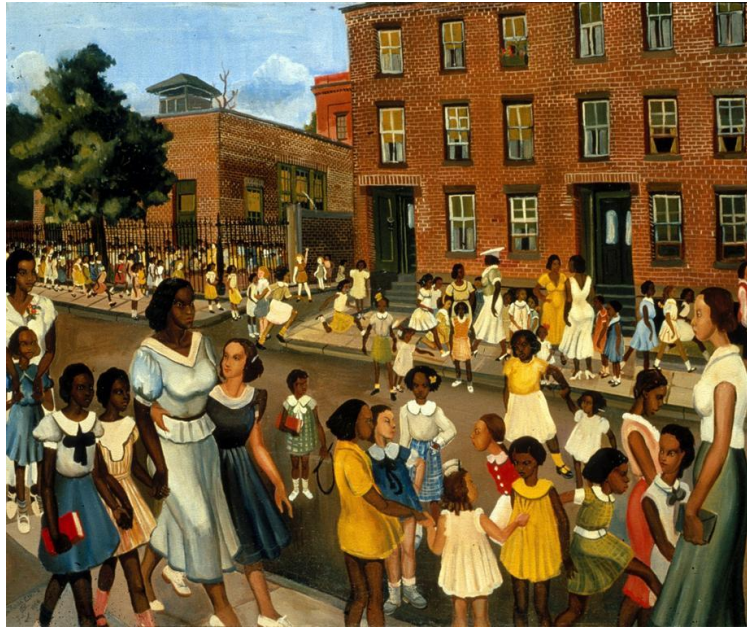


Figure 3, *School's Out* (Allan Rohan Crite, 1936, National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.)



Figure 4, *Cambridge Sunday Morning* (Allan Rohan Crite, 1934, Boston Athenaeum, Boston, MA)



Figure 5, *Stomp* (Archibald John, Jr. Motley, 1927, Private Collection)

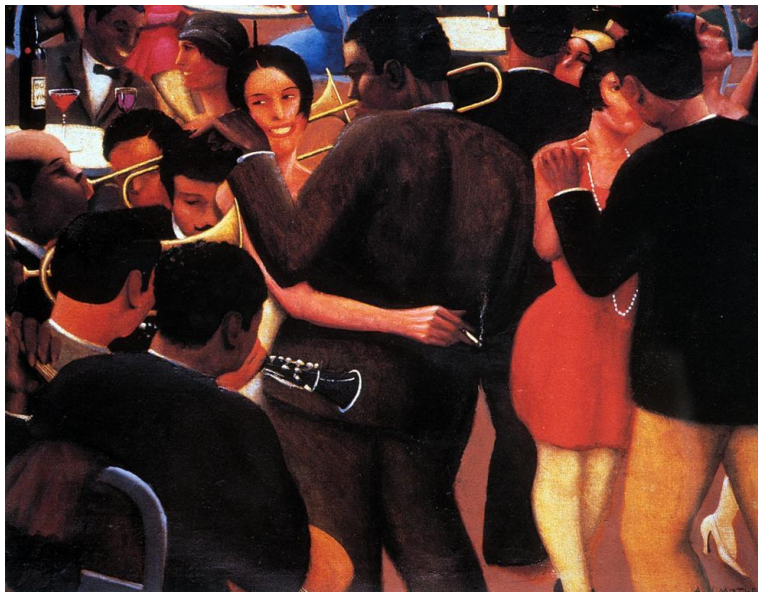


Figure 6, *Blues* (Archibald John, Jr. Motley, 1929, Private Collection)





Figure 7, *Car Stop* (Allan Rohan Crite, 1932, Boston Athenaeum, Boston, MA)



Figure 8, *Saturday Night Street Scene* (Archibald John, Jr. Motley, 1936, Private Collection)



Figure 9, *Saint Paul's Cathedral* (Allan Rohan Crite, 1936, Boston Athenaeum, Boston, MA)



Figure 10, *Crucifixion* (Aaron Douglas, 1927, Private Collection)



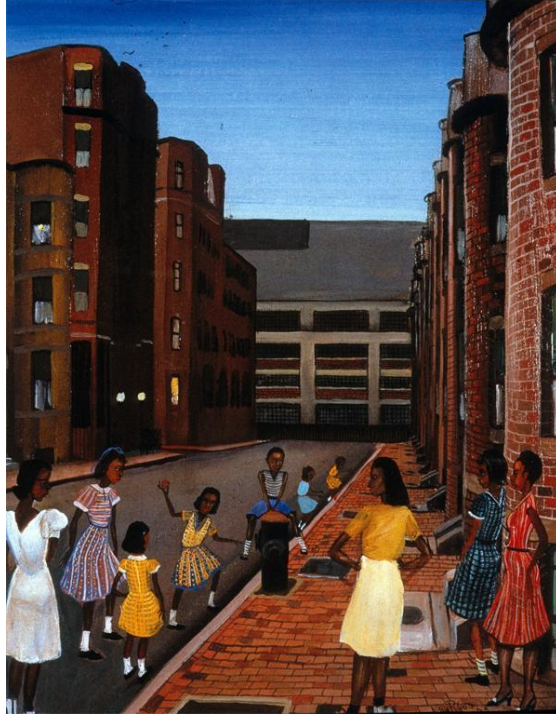


Figure 11, *Last Game at Dusk* (Allan Rohan Crite, 1939, Boston Athenaeum, Boston, MA)



Figure 12, *Leon and Herriet* (Allan Rohan Crite, 1941, Boston Athenaeum, Boston, MA)

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