Université de Montréal

Mobility, Vagabondage, and the Claiming of Modern African American Diasporic Identity

Par

Tarek Arkoun

Département de littératures et de langues du monde, Faculté Arts et Sciences Mémoire présenté en vue de l'obtention du grade de maîtrise en Études anglaises option mémoire

Août, 2023

Université de Montréal

Département de littératures et de langues du monde, Faculté des Arts et Sciences

Ce mémoire intitulé

Mobility, Vagabondage, and the Claiming of Modern African American Diasporic Identity

Présenté par

Tarek Arkoun

A été évalué par un jury composé des personnes suivantes

Lianne Moyes
Président-rapporteur

Caroline Brown
Directeur de recherche

Terry Cochran
Membre du jury

Résumé

La thèse intitulée "Mobility, Vagabondage, and the Claiming of Modern African American Diasporic Identity " ou en français " La Mobilité et le Vagabondage dans l'Affirmation de l'Identité Afro-Américaine et Diasporique Moderne " explore les concepts de Vagabond et de mobilité urbaine et sociale en lien avec la littérature et l'identité afro-américaines. Le concept de vagabondage, considéré comme un élément clé pour capturer la complexité de l'expérience noire au sein d'une époque d'urbanisation et de mobilité croissantes aux États-Unis, est appréhendé de manière plus profonde et adaptée aux deux protagonistes des romans sélectionnés. Ces personnages, issus des romans de Nella Larsen et James Weldon Johnson, offrent une base analytique idéale pour étudier les aspirations de l'identité afro-américaine et leur position dans la modernité, tout en s'inscrivant dans le cadre de l'inégalité sociale nourrie par diverses formes d'injustices. Cette recherche s'engage à analyser le rôle du vagabondage dans la quête de l'identité et de l'appartenance, tout en examinant comment les dynamiques de genre et la transgression sociale se manifestent entant que moyen d’affranchissement des normes établies.

Mots clés: race, dynamiques des genres, vagabondage, afro-américain, identité, appartenance, modernisme, mobilité

Abstract

"Vagabondage, and the Claiming of Modern African American Diasporic Identity" explores the concepts of the "vagabond" and "urban mobility" in James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and Nella Larsen's *Quicksand.* I rely on the concept of vagabondage in order to offer a refined representation of the complexity of blackness in an era of increased urbanization and mobility. Both characters depicted in the aforementioned novels serve as an ideal analytical foundation for investigating the diversity of African American identity in the modern era, particularly when read through the rubric of individual aspirations colliding with racism and social inequality. The research aims to analyze the role of vagabondage in the pursuit of identity and belonging. This will be achieved through my comparative study, which focuses on how social transgression is a form of liberation from sociocultural norms and how gender can both expand and limit this freedom.

Keywords: race, gender dynamics, vagabondage, African American, identity, belonging, modernism, mobility

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments

I express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Caroline Brown, for her unwavering support and commitment throughout this journey. Her valuable feedback and guidance significantly contributed to the realization of this work.

Additionally, I extend my heartfelt thanks to my friends, Parham and William, and everyone who inspired me during this process. Your encouragement and insights were crucial in the completion of this project.

Lastly, I dedicate this work to my beloved parents, without whom none of this would have been possible. Their love and support have been my driving force, and I am forever grateful for that.

I: Theoretical Framework & Historical Context

My thesis explores the concepts of the "vagabond" and "urban mobility" in relation to black diasporic literature with a focus on two African American novels, *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, by James Weldon Johnson, and *Quicksand*, by Nella Larsen. This thesis will investigate the role of social mobility and vagabondage in forming and articulating modern African American identity. By examining both texts, this project explores how social mobility and displacement have been used as concepts to resist and reclaim African American identity in the modern era, serving not only as new forms of expression but of routes to deeper cultural exploration and self-understanding. It engages in an analysis of how Johnson and Larsen present their characters in a state of flux, struggling to reconcile their identities as African Americans in a society that has intentionally alienated them from larger cultural systems and from themselves. The project is drawn from various theoretical frameworks, from double-consciousness and the objectification of the self to the concept of vagabondage. These theories are used to engage the complexity of blackness and African American identity in an era of increased urbanization and mobility. This thesis examines how mobility and displacement empowered African Americans to move towards a new sense of identity in the first decades of the twentieth century.

In this chapter, I intend to contextualize and examine the undeniable link between displacement and identity within the African American cultural context. I am interested in how displacement is used as a central determiner of identity for characters in both *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and *Quicksand*. Therefore, the chapter engages in a thorough historical and conceptual analysis of the social context in which African American identity emerged and had to adapt to a changing world. As suggested by Brent Hayes Edwards in *The Practice of Diaspora*,

the concept of vagabondage provides a theoretical starting point to analyze the impact of physical displacement on identity. The notional approach to vagabondage will be used and analyzed from my perspective, which will slightly differ from Hayes's.

Displacement and mobility can thereby be regarded as elements to reproduce identity and offer a new dimension to the African American social context. To understand my theoretical approach, it is crucial to investigate the matter from its origins. The development of early African American identity was inflected by the need of individuals to adapt to hostile surroundings. Displacement acts as a central determiner of this process because of the constant movement which characterizes it, from forced migration from Africa to the often illicit escape from bondage. In this sense, Katrina Powell links evolving identities with moving bodies. She considers identity as going through an everlasting process of change through its interaction with changing environmental factors. She declares:

> As displaced bodies move, the identities they inhabit also move. Complexities arise as identities interact and move across space and time as they are displaced from "home." The inextricable linking of bodies and language produced by and about the body is crucial in understanding how identities are constructed. As I have suggested elsewhere, identities are always already moving: "Persons in the process of being displaced are on the move—their individual and community identities are in the middle of enormous change. (Powell 11)

The previous passage applies to all kinds of displaced populations. Powell argues that movement systematically changes identity as it embodies the group's ability to adapt to its new environment. African Americans can be perceived as displaced bodies, considering that the first generations

were subject to forced deportation from Africa. In addition, the enslaved were subject to constant forms of relocation. Consequently, this has resulted in a complex and painful relationship to what constitutes "home," making it more complicated for them to regain a sense of identity and belonging. The adoption of the English language by black Americans to produce and reproduce culture can, however, be considered one of the elements illuminating how identity develops despite the challenging environment.

Before the Civil War, enslaved blacks were treated like possessions, stripped of their human rights and freedoms, and not considered citizens of the United States. Despite the assertion by the Declaration of Independence that all men are created equal, slavery denied African Americans their rights to life, liberty, and happiness, creating a double-standard and privileging some members of the population over others. During Reconstruction, the federal government passed the Thirteenth Amendment to end slavery and the Fourteenth Amendment to grant African Americans citizenship and the right to vote. Despite these efforts, African Americans faced institutionalized racism and regular verbal and physical attacks. The Reconstruction era did not improve their situation due to racial discrimination and segregation and the lack of implementation of civil rights. As a result, the lives of most African Americans had changed little despite the end of legalized bondage. White supremacy also prevented the implementation of their rights. Oppressive state measures under Jim Crow and the Black Codes aimed at limiting the newly granted freedoms of African Americans. These laws denied African Americans their civil rights and were supported by the local white populations and overlooked by the federal government. To escape these oppressive circumstances and gain access to better living conditions and opportunities, many African Americans began to migrate to the North. The Great Migration of the

early twentieth century marked a significant change in African American identity, as it gave shape to the Harlem Renaissance and modern civil rights movements.

The massive displacement of thousands of African Americans to the North has had notable positive and negative consequences on regional identities. In his article, "Parallels and Divergences: Assimilationist Strategies of Afro-American and Jewish Elites from 1910 to the Early 1930s," David Levering Lewis explores the social and economic changes faced by African Americans in the northern states as a direct consequence of the Great Migration. He argues that the Great Migration was not a positive event for all African Americans, as the existing elite was already relatively privileged in comparison with the blacks coming from the rural South. The significant growth of the African American population in the North created economic and residential competition as well as an increase in racism. The author explains that the latter led to the deterioration in the social position of the upper class and that many expressed a sense of nostalgia for the pre-migration days. Additionally, many northern African Americans felt that the new migrants, both from the South and Europe, were responsible for an increase in racism and were held accountable for the decline of their advantages. The Great Migration shows how identity can be impacted by displacement as it completely changed the face of African American life in the North, creating division and even conflict between the newcomers and the already established populations. Nevertheless, it allowed the majority of the community to come out of the shadows and develop a social presence within urbanized regions of the nation (Lewis 549-550).

Mobility and migration have been defining aspects of the African American experience in the United States. The slave trade, both Transatlantic and domestically, ruthlessly ripped apart millions of lives, depriving them of their freedom and forcing them to embark on a harrowing journey. The Great Migration of the twentieth century was a monumental turning point in the

struggle for emancipation, as millions of African Americans left the post-Reconstruction South to seek better lives in the cities of the North and West. Migration became a form of rebellion against these oppressive conditions and allowed the pursuit of freedom, opportunity, and dignity. The protagonists in both novels embody this spirit of change through their approach to travel.

Tim Creswell's analysis of mobility is very insightful in that it highlights the complexity of mobility as an interconnected set of elements, such as physical movement, representations, and practices, as well as its traceable histories and geographies. His construction emphasizes the importance of considering the politics of mobility and its varying speeds and rhythms (Cresswell 18). Through Creswell's theoretical framework, one can analyze how mobility is a form of freedom and rebellion for African Americans, as well as how certain narratives of worthiness, morality, and aesthetics are constructed around vagabondage and travel.

In this investigation, I am analyzing novels wherein the central characters engage in a complex voyage of self-discovery involving facets of physical, emotional, and intellectual mobility and vagabondage. I am thus interested in Creswell's claim that there are politics of mobility, in which questions of who moves furthest, fastest, and most often are important components to consider. This strengthens the idea that mobility is linked to liberty and progress, suggesting that it can be seen as a form of personal growth and emancipation from predefined social barriers. Ultimately, meanings of a person's mobility are shaped by the social, discursive, and physical context in which it takes place (Cresswell 21).

Furthermore, my approach is built around the shaping concepts of double-consciousness and the color line proposed by W.E.B. Du Bois. These notions fittingly align with the challenges of belonging encountered by Helga Crane and the Ex-Colored Man as they engage in their

vagabondage, seeking to uncover the complex layers of their ambiguous racial identities. In the first chapter of *The Souls of Black Folks,* W.E.B Du Bois articulates the concepts of the invisible veil and African American double-consciousness after in-depth psychoanalysis of black life. Through these concepts, he acknowledges the psychological effects of racism and alienation and their impact on identity. He also explores the internal struggle of embodying a divergent racial identity while trying to fit into a white, hegemonic culture. Du Bois writes:

> The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil and gifted with second sight in this American world, — a world which yields him no true self-consciousness but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. (Du Bois 8)

The term "seventh son" typically refers to someone endowed with exceptional abilities, and by linking African Americans with this expression, the author implies that they possess a metaphorical veil. This veil is depicted as a psychological barrier that isolates people of color from the rest of American society, inhibiting their ability to attain the same level of success enjoyed by white individuals. The author contends that the cumulative impact of injustice and racism has led African Americans to develop a unique worldview not shared by their white counterparts. In the passage, the author skillfully introduces this concept by illustrating the experiences of his community within a segregated and oppressive society that deprives them of self-consciousness. Instead, he describes a double-consciousness, which entails perpetually viewing oneself through the lens of the dominant culture. The notion of double-consciousness serves as a powerful tool for examining the profound psychological trauma endured by African Americans. It underscores the

often-conflicting identities they grapple with, resulting in feelings of ambivalence and estrangement from their surroundings as they persistently attempt to reconcile these discordant aspects of their identity. My interest in Du Bois's theories stems from the psychological struggles shared by the main characters. Despite their apparent adeptness in navigating between the white and black communities, both characters find themselves unable to authentically belong because of their ambivalence about their identities. This complex form of dispossession creates a longing for each to explore their identity in a nuanced and meaningful way.

In the context of the veil, Du Bois introduces the dilemma of duality and alienation, which also signifies the lack of belonging and internal torment experienced by the larger community: "An American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (Du Bois 14). The excerpt highlights the struggle of personifying dual identities, especially when they conflict with one another. Du Bois argues that the African American is torn between two distinct thoughts that represent the two alternatives, either to assimilate or dissociate from white society. Assimilation suggests adapting to the environment and accepting the norms and values imposed by the hegemonic culture, while separation would seek to preserve an authentic black identity and culture and reject mainstream standards. The capacity of the New Negro to combine the two identities demonstrates the resilience of African Americans to embody both cultures in their own identities despite the social pressure to assimilate.

Drawing upon the preceding observations, one can contend that modern African American identity was tough to define by the elite, as it involved a variety of groups scattered in a large geographic territory, each of which adapted differently to their social challenges. Among the academic conversations that emerged in an attempt to define a modern racial identity, Brian

Thomas argues that the use of the term African to refer to black Americans was often subject to debate and even contested by some African Americans themselves. He states:

> This debate over names illustrates how hotly contested identity can be and that it cannot be separated from broader social struggles. Black leaders during the nineteenth century who rejected the labels "Africa" and "African" did so not because they failed to recognize an African cultural heritage among blacks. Instead, they rejected the appellation because they saw it as inimical to their efforts to advance the political and economic lives of African Americans. (Thomas 147)

The main reasons for rejecting the African appellation could have had a variety of motives. The first, mentioned earlier in the paragraphs above, refers to the colonial tradition and the negative associations linked to the African continent, including the supposed savageness and backwardness of the continent and its people. In addition, the usage of the term too often refers to a diverse group of people with a wide diversity of backgrounds, experiences, and identities. This misnaming can be used to obliterate the complex histories and experiences of individual African American people who have been in America for centuries[1].

Another essential aspect considered in this analysis is how the twentieth century was marked by a surge of economic growth, which facilitated local and international mobility among the African American community. This trend encompassed both voluntary and involuntary migrations that played an instrumental role in the formation of modern African American identity

[1] The article also points out that some people feel that the term is reductive and perpetuates the idea that all African Americans are the same and hence should remain in their unchanged positions. On the other hand, another part of the African American elite views the term as the best way to reclaim and celebrate their heritage and preserve the memory of their ancestors.

and which is portrayed in both the Ex-Colored Man and Helga Crane. In *The Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy examines the impact of international movement and displacement on the construction of African American identity. He draws attention to the fact that vagrancy has been an integral part of African American existence in the period of slavery, pointing to the example of Phyllis Wheatley, the first African American author to be published in the United States, who traveled to various European cities, including Paris, London, and Amsterdam, to promote her writing and poetry. Her journey mirrors The Ex-Colored Man's efforts to promote ragtime and African American music abroad. Moreover, the author alludes to the experience of the radical journalist and political organizer Ida B. Wells, who described her stay in England as "being born again in a new condition" (Gilory 17). Here, Gilroy suggests that traveling serves as a form of intentional displacement, which has a major influence on the development of African American identity. To support this claim, he proclaims: "It would appear that there are large questions raised about the direction and character of black culture and art if we take the powerful effects of even temporary experiences of exile, relocation, and displacement into account." (Gilory 17).

The importance of Europe is stressed, as it represented a place of freedom and opportunities for African Americans, providing them with a physical and imaginary source of inspiration to escape their oppressive reality. For some of the travelers mentioned previously, the temporary exile to a foreign setting allowed them to approach the world from new perspectives. Their relative freedom abroad from American forms of apartheid pushed many to reconsider their views of the United States and stand against racial domination and social inequality. Gilroy's insightful approach to Europe is particularly pertinent, as it illuminates this geographical realm as an integral component of the transformative experiences undergone by both the Ex-Colored Man and Helga Crane.

Moreover, the protagonists' deliberate choice to adopt a vagabond lifestyle is also examined as a means of embracing their cosmopolitan identities and the diverse influences encapsulated within African American heritage. Ifeoma Nwankwo identifies cosmopolitanism as the definition of oneself through the world beyond one's own origins and stresses the fact that it is a crucial element of modernity. The concept rejects the notion that identity is tied to a particular place, race, or nation and instead suggests that identity is formed through a combination of influences from multiple cultures and experiences (Nwankwo 8). This means that one's identity can indeed be constantly evolving and changing depending on the experiences and interactions encountered throughout this process of movement. Cosmopolitanism allows individuals to embrace the diversity and richness of the world around them and incorporate it within their own unique identity.

The displacement of African Americans has always been associated with forced migration being continually imposed on them by oppressive forces. As discussed earlier, slavery destroyed African Americans' links to their ancestral homeland, often creating a sense of rootlessness and alienation in their new environment. The Great Migration can also enter into the frame of forced relocation as people were obliged to leave in an attempt to escape their precarious situation. The latter exodus once again uprooted African Americans and obliterated the communities they had created within it. Nevertheless, in the case of the Great Migration, it can be argued that African Americans used their right to mobility rather than the idea of forced displacement to challenge racial segregation and establish their sense of belonging away from the unfavorable environment of the Southern states. Consequently, I would like to suggest that cosmopolitanism and mobility represented the only recourse for African Americans to build a sentiment of attachment to the places they inhabited. The historical experiences of African Americans as slaves and later as a

disadvantaged collective have subjected them to a perpetually shifting environment, which has sometimes made them unable to establish a sense of belonging to their physical spaces. The hostile nature of the hegemonic society further encourages this disconnection by constantly dispossessing them of their rights as citizens. Nonetheless, the mobility that made urbanization and cosmopolitanism possible has allowed the development and transformation of cultural identity.

In the book *Black Cosmopolitanism*, Nwankwo Ifeoma Kiddoe analyzes the relationship between displacement and the emergence of modern African American identity, specifically by examining the idea of the "cosmopolite" and whether it is possible for slaves to "travel," define themselves through the places they move to, and be considered cosmopolitan. She states that the history of slavery has sought to control the movements of people of African descent, and yet they were able to find ways to move between physical and/or geographical sites and to construct ideologies and identities that transcended traditional boundaries (Nwankwo 14).

One can argue that Nwankwo challenges the definition of cosmopolitanism and points out African Americans' complex and multifaceted history with travel and movement. She argues that the notion of the cosmopolitan in relation to the black Atlantic experience must be re-examined as it has never been a choice or a privilege for this population to be displaced but rather a constraint. Her analysis of the term cosmopolitan uncovers a more nuanced interpretation, which seeks to acknowledge the agency and resistance of people of African descent and the impact of their forced cosmopolitan life on their identity.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon appears to embrace a vagabond lifestyle akin to the Ex-Colored Man, thereby establishing a textual and contextual connection with Johnson's novel. Fanon endorses the idea of endlessly creating oneself through wandering across the world. The

term "vagabondage" refers to the practice of wandering away from one's homeland and engaging in a nomadic lifestyle with no specific destination or place to call home. Zygmunt Bauman dissociates the vagabond from the tourist and states that tourists move because they find the world within their global reach irresistibly attractive and travel out of their own choice. On the other hand, the vagabond moves because he finds the world within his local reach unbearably inhospitable, which makes his movement a recourse to escape rather than leisure. Michael Chaney and Zygmunt Bauman both agree that the concept of "home" is lacking for vagabonds because of the fact that they lack the stability and security that come with having a physical place to call one's own. Chaney suggests that this is due to a detachment from the setting as vagabonds fail to develop a feeling of belonging each time they move. Bauman, however, argues that vagabonds are compelled to move along due to their subjection to a global economy, thus replacing the idea of "home" with the need to keep traveling in order to culturally exist and survive in a changing society. It is plausible to assert that vagabondage is not a perpetual wandering, as stated by the previous arguments, but rather a quest for a lost identity and a place where belonging is possible. I argue that vagabondage serves as a process where identity is pursued rather than rejected. Vagabonds seek to find themselves along the way, a process that ultimately defines home as the site of acknowledgment and acceptance (Chaney 55-56).

Brent Hayes Edwards proposes a different theory. He defines "vagabonding" in *The Practice of Diaspora* as not being the irresponsible evasion of proletarian normalcy but instead a necessary recourse allowing people of color to survive socially. The author thus considers vagabondage as a mobile form of existence that challenges the established order of the nation-state built on the foundations of capitalism. The vagabond life invokes for the black diaspora a new space in which it can remain both rooted and uprooted, allowing the vagabond to negotiate and

engage in transnational relationships with other diasporic communities and establish a form of detached connection with the world to define his (and more infrequently her) own identity (Edwards 198-204).

The concept of the vagabond is also closely related to cosmopolitanism. Indeed, urbanization allowed black people to increase mobility, and it completely redefined identity with all the influences of globalization. Unlike Hayes Edwards, I am not considering vagabonding and urban mobility as a form of social fatalism but rather as an attempt to use the means of modernity in order for these individuals to find their place in society. As a result, I reject the concept of vagabondage as being a perpetual wandering but rather a temporary quest for racial identity and social recognition that does not necessarily lead to an affirmation of the self.

While Edwards argues that vagabondage constitutes a core element of identity itself, I believe that it is just a means to get to it, corresponding to a journey that ultimately ends when travelers find themselves along the way or settle down in their own reality. Additionally, my approach to the role of vagabondage in defining African American identity meets Creswell's theory, which emphasizes the idea that mobility is not only an individual experience but also a collective one. Drawing on the historical figure of the 15th-century vagabond, Creswell argues that mobility has always been part of the collective experience of human culture. Mobility, according to him, is a collective expression of identity and agency, and it encompasses not just physical movement but also representations and practices (Cresswell 29).

This chapter has provided a context in which to understand the complexities of displacement and identity within the African American cultural context. From their forced displacements during the transatlantic slave trade to the Great Migration, every displacement has

contributed to the development of a unique culture and identity. Cosmopolitanism played a central role in enabling the New Negro to rise as it provided them access to a globalized setting with diverse interactions and opportunities. Vagabondage, which can be considered as another form of displacement, is a multifaceted concept that has provided a sense of identity and belonging for the African American diaspora. It is not an identity in itself but rather a means through which identity can develop and thrive. International vagabondage has allowed the New Negro to reconsider the social order and reform it, and in a sense, exploit the concept of globalization in a positive manner. In conclusion, this chapter has linked displacement and identity in defining modern African American culture. It also demonstrated, through a theoretical and social approach, the various ways in which displacement, through the prism of the social environment, has been used as a determiner of identity. Through this chapter, I also provided an understanding of the complexity of displacement and its relationship to the evolution of African American identity through time. In the following chapters, I will demonstrate how displacement can be considered an essential marker of identity and how it shaped the African American experience through the works of Johnson and Larsen.

II: *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*: A Journey of Identity and Self-Discovery

Identity encompasses the profound connection an individual establishes within themselves, intertwining their personal history, community heritage, and the anticipation of a future shaped by cultural inheritance passed on to forthcoming generations. According to Erik Erikson, identity signifies a collection of "all-encompassing achievements that individuals must derive from their pre-adult encounters, enabling them to embark on the challenges of adulthood." Furthermore, Erikson emphasizes that identity not only defines individuals as members of a collective but also determines their ability to navigate the complexities of their past, present, and future circumstances (Burt 2).

The pursuit of African American identity took various forms during the Harlem Renaissance as individuals aimed to revive their silenced heritage within a dominant white supremacist society. Emblematical figures sought to rebrand their cultural heritage and reclaim their place in society through musical innovation, artistic creativity, and fashion. In his essay "The Conversation of Races," W.E.B. Du Bois pleads for the recognition and respect of African Americans in their society, highlighting their unique contributions. Du Bois asserts that African Americans are the first fruits of this new nation and the trigger for a more inclusive future. He emphasizes the importance of preserving physical abilities, intellectual capabilities, and spiritual ideals within the race. Du Bois calls for race organization, solidarity, and unity to achieve a broader humanity that recognizes differences but rejects inequality in development opportunities (Du Bois 184). The narrator of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* embodies the African American community's pursuit of a sense of self untainted by the need to assimilate to harmful alien cultural ideals.

In an era of segregation, blacks faced significant challenges in defining their identity and connecting with the larger nation, which was openly hostile and antagonistic. This struggle to establish an African American identity generated abundant discussions and debates during the Harlem Renaissance. Through his color line concept, W.E.B. Du Bois portrays the bleak reality faced by his community, emphasizing the detrimental effects of race-based prejudices. Du Bois highlights the prevailing notion that education, aspiration, and cultural development are privileges reserved for white people while blacks are limited to a survival-focused mentality (Du Bois 67). This oppressive sociocultural environment prevented the African American community from realizing their full potential and cultivating a strong sense of identity as fully empowered Americans. As a result, many individuals struggled to adjust their aspirations with the racist and constrained social surroundings, impacting the development of a fully actualized African American self.

In *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, James Weldon Johnson presents a character experiencing the alienation and social limitations faced by African Americans. The protagonist's identity crisis, rooted in his mixed-race heritage, follows him throughout his wanderings as segregation constrains his aspirations. This chapter examines the Ex-Colored Man's relationship with his environment and how his choices shape his identity and ultimate legacy within his family and cultural community. Mobility and vagabondage play crucial roles as the protagonist navigates between conforming to white hegemonic culture and advancing his sense of black identity. His journey of self-exploration between these two realities reflects his pursuit of identity. The Ex-Colored Man's mixed-race background provides him with a particular privilege. However, his decision to pass as white can be considered selfish—a means of setting himself apart from the struggle of the black community. Vagabondage further muddles the Ex-Colored Man's identity as

he continually moves and adapts to different environments. Examining the protagonist's experiences can reveal the complex relationship between individual choices, racial identity, and societal expectations.

James Weldon Johnson's novel brilliantly captures the ubiquitous influence of a hegemonic society on the collective psyche of a marginalized social group. In particular, the Ex-Colored Man is a striking illustration of an individual victimized by racial ideology. From an early age, the protagonist is entangled in the web of racist perspectives imposed upon him by societal norms. Masami Sugimori makes a noteworthy point about how ideology imposes itself on the Ex-Colored Man's psyche and inflects his lived identity:

> The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man utilizes the narrator's same belief—and his resulting self-identification as passing-white, that is, deviation from real, pure whiteness—to show how white hegemony reproduces itself by limiting one's ability to speak outside of the white/black binary opposition. In other words, Johnson configures the text so that, while the Ex-Colored Man's white body can put the idea of whiteness into question, the character-narrator fails to convey this subversive potential because the white-dominant system of order and hierarchy controls his approach not only to race but also to storytelling itself. (Sugimori 38)

The Ex-Colored Man's identity is profoundly influenced by his approach to life, in which he becomes the embodiment of a normative whiteness as male and well-heeled. Sugimori cleverly argues that even within the African American community, hegemonic norms perpetuate white supremacy, ensuring that the status quo remains intact. As a young child, the Ex-Colored Man

serves as an effective symbol that exposes the oppressive nature of racism and the pervasive discriminatory forces that dominate the American socio-political landscape. Despite his phenotypical whiteness, society categorizes the narrator as black, denying any alternative perception. His portrayal of himself can be seen as cynical or delusional, as he internalizes the dominant racial ideologies that promote European social standards, despite not being white. This becomes particularly evident in the Ex-Colored Man's constant anxiety over the potential exposure of his hidden identity. At every stage of his development, the hegemonic culture shapes his sense of self, instilling a set of negative beliefs and stereotypes about blackness within his subconscious.

Childhood is a crucial phase in shaping an individual's identity and psychological development. In *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, the protagonist's early experiences at school mark a turning point in his life. Robert Stepto describes the protagonist's realization of his black identity as a "displacement from the African American genius loci" (Stepto 114). The protagonist's experience of public humiliation, when he is called out for not being white, can be acknowledged as a negative interpellation by the dominant ideology. This incident has a deep psychological impact on him; he appears to be unaware of his African origins and rules based on white racial purity[2], instead absorbing hegemonic ideals in his representation of himself. Therefore, he is consequently confused and unable to understand the situation when he is called out for being black. The racial discrimination he immediately faces after his identity is exposed confuses him even more (Johnson 55). The protagonist's experience of discovering his black

[2] Racial ideologies historically imposed strict standards of purity centered around lineage, functioning as mechanisms to sustain the hegemony of white supremacy. Within this framework, Christine Hickman elucidates the concept of the one-drop rule. This ideological construct posits that even the smallest trace of African ancestry—symbolically represented as a single drop of Black blood—qualifies an individual as Black in the sociocultural context (Hickman 1163).

identity and facing racism at an early age contributes to shaping his understanding of himself and his society.

The narrator illuminates the desire of American society to force the black community to perceive itself from the perspective of the dominant white culture, suppressing other standards and cultural ideals. In "The Formation of Identity: The Importance of Ideals," the authors suggest that the desired identity for every individual consists of ideal images of whom a person would like to be. Divided into three clusters, these images can be categorized by: the emulation of the characteristics of another person or culture; the achievement of an ideal status or situation; and the goal of possessing certain traits. The article provides a few examples of these forms of idolization, including a situation in which a person has admiration for a social, political, or religious figure and believes there is an intimate relationship between them, despite the fact that there may, in fact, be millions of other admirers. Additionally, one can define their ideal identity in terms of ideal personal situations, ideal character traits, and virtues. These ideals are shaped by social and communal environments, as well as individual roles and aspirations specific to one's own circumstances (De Ruyter 512-513).

The article also discusses the factors influencing the development of identity. It is argued that in order to ensure that these ideals are truly desired, individuals must evaluate their desires and aspirations critically and assess them. Eventually, a genuine ideal is one that matches the identity and fully satisfies the individual. The authors argue that ideal identity can only be achieved through assistance with developing one's own evaluative capacities. This implies that education on ideal identity should consider both the presentation of ideals and the development of evaluative capacities. To contextualize this theoretical argument, one can argue that the Ex-Colored Man evolves in a white-oriented society that glorifies European traits and values. African American

identity was notably affected by the biases of hegemonic white culture, whereby African Americans were often subjected to humiliating cultural representations and oppressive circumstances. Consequently, blacks had to critically assess their own desires and aspirations in order to form an identity that dominant values might have in part informed but that were not necessarily rigidly aligned with them. The representation of ideals within the African American context can be a complex endeavor, as it frequently exposes the influence of hegemonic standards and values. This dynamic portrayal highlights the potential compromise of an individual's evaluative capacities when they might subconsciously idealize white traits and culture, thereby detrimentally impacting their own racial identity (De Ruyter 515).

Accordingly, identity can be influenced by individual aspirations and modulated by specific sets of values and principles. During the childhood stage, children often hope to become like their parents, whom they consider to be their inspirational figures. Nevertheless, the Ex-Colored Man seems to completely ignore his ties to his African American identity, although his mother, representing the only consistent parental figure in his narrative, is noticeably of African descent. This observation should have logically impacted the way in which he sees himself and identifies with different groups in society, but he is instead affected by the dominant racial ideology. The stigma created around identity is so deeply rooted in society that it even pushes the mother to conceal her heritage from her son in order for her child to develop a white American identity, which she believes could thus protect him. The following passage demonstrates the innocent yet transformative confrontation of the young narrator with the evasions of his mother:

> "Tell me, mother, am I a nigger?" There were tears in her eyes, and I could see that she was suffering for me. And then it was that I looked at her critically for

> the first time. I had thought of her in a childish way only as the most beautiful woman in the world; now, I looked at her, searching for defects. (Johnson 11)

The Ex-Colored Man reflects on a moment in his childhood when his mother revealed the truth about his racial identity. He further noticed the differences in his mother's appearance compared to the other women who visited her business. This represents one of the first racial interpellations witnessed by the protagonist, as it is clearly shown that the race of his mother never had any importance to him before his experience at school. His mother tries to reassure him by telling him that he is as good as anyone and not to pay attention to anyone who calls him racist slurs. However, the narrator further inquired if his mother was white, to which she tearfully replied no, but that his father was a great man with the best blood of the South. The dialogue reveals that white supremacist ideology has a profound impact on his mother. Thus when the child inquires if he is black, she responds that he is not and that he is "as good as anybody." Her diction implies that she does not view black people, including herself, in a positive light and even encourages her son to ignore anyone who identifies him as such; this can be considered a denial of his racial background. As the mother admits that she is not white and does not encourage the Ex-Colored Man to embrace his biracial identity, she instead attempts to assert his whiteness by citing his "pure" white-blooded father. This suggests that she is distancing her son from his biological and cultural heritage, potentially to protect him from the one-drop racial rule, which dictates that anyone with even a slight amount of African American ancestry is fully black.

The sudden shift in identity completely changes the way in which the Ex-Colored Man approaches people and life. He declares that this event pushes him to be more reserved and paranoid, even though the way his friends and teachers treat him does not change. The character withdraws into himself, which therefore causes him to grow lonelier. He later explains that he

prefers to be solitary instead of being associated with the other black children of his school. The racial hierarchy dominating social interactions causes him to distance himself from both his black and white peers very early in the novel.

Vagabondage and displacement represent a way in which the Ex-Colored Man escapes his reality and seeks to find an identity that feels more authentic. He relies on wandering to escape his reality. This is evident in his strong affinity for literature and music, which serve as metaphysical forms of movement. Through imagination, he finds refuge and allows his steps to be guided. Notably, his connection with music becomes obvious early on. Playing the piano allows him to express his inner emotions and frustrations; thereafter, he becomes deeply immersed in music. It is a moment where his soul and body align, and he experiences a sense of completeness. The beauty of the works he plays may trigger his intense emotional reactions, or it could be the feeling of security and wholeness that music provides (Johnson 62). Music acts as a temporary vagabondage, transporting the character to a timeless and neutral realm where his body and spirit merge to create what he finds a more genuine, apposite identity.

The importance given to music becomes increasingly prominent throughout the novel. As a traveling musician, the protagonist depends on playing ragtime to move from one place to another, which allows him to investigate his identity further. John Connell's book, *Soundtrack,* undertakes a meticulous exploration of the profound relationship between music, displacement, and identity within the realm of popular culture. With acute insight, Connell artfully exposes the paramount significance of music and its bonds with African American identity. This passage, in particular, perfectly summarizes the importance of music and its relationship with African American identity:

> African American history exemplifies the manner in which music and ethnicity may combine to convey experiences of slavery, forced displacement, and continued survival in the face of marginality: '[music] demonstrates the aesthetic fruits of pain and suffering and has a special significance because musicians have played a disproportionate part in the long struggle to represent black creativity, innovation and excellence. (Connell 138)

Music has historically been a way for the black diaspora to connect with its racial identity and preserve its cultural heritage. It is a particularly powerful tool for conveying the collective experiences of oppression and injustice faced by the black community throughout the history of their presence in the United States. Through music, African Americans have been able to simultaneously share their experiences, express their feelings of pain, and provide a testimony to the struggles of the past and the present. However, music as an artistic vehicle was not only a vector for grief and sorrow. It is noteworthy to underscore the prevalence of the aesthetics, beauty, and celebratory aspects of this form of expression. This is accomplished through unique styles like blues, ragtime, and jazz, which capture the essence of the collective struggle. These experiences, in turn, convey a powerful message to the listener. Music has also served as a source of comfort and support, providing a means of catharsis and a way to heal the wounds of the past. In this way, music acts as a bridge between cultures, allowing African Americans to communicate their shared experiences with the world. *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* also celebrates blackness and its music, but instead of focusing on jazz and blues, which are considered the emblematic styles of the Harlem Renaissance, James Weldon Johnson introduces the readers to the lesser-known ragtime. The choice of a less celebrated musical form can be interpreted as the author's

desire to showcase the diverse array of African American cultural innovations that were fundamental elements to the construction of black identity in the United States.

The Ex-Colored Man's quest for his lost identity also leads him to explore American history through literature and reading. He criticizes the biased depiction of history, especially regarding the American Civil War. By reading a variety of literary works, including *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, he develops a critical mindset and considers things from a multiplicity of perspectives. This literary vagabondage allows him to uncover new knowledge, expand his understanding, and distance himself from the influence of the hegemonic culture. The protagonist's reading of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* prompts a shift in his perception of African American identity as it highlights the enduring impact of slavery and exposes the oppression faced by African Americans and mixed-race individuals. The protagonist identifies with the characters who face the dehumanizing effects of slavery, paralleling his own experiences with theirs (Johnson 70). Through this realization, he embraces his African American heritage, becomes more comfortable with his racial identity, and seeks to learn more about it. His reading choices shift to works that celebrate blackness and African identity, symbolizing a rejection of white hegemony and a fostering of his previously unappreciated heritage.

After graduating from high school and experiencing the death of his mother, the Ex-Colored Man undergoes his first physical travel. The mother's attempt to shield him from the weight of his African ancestry impedes his journey of self-discovery. Consequently, he is left isolated in a hostile society, compelled to forge his own understanding of this community. The combination of his mother's death and the revelations garnered from his readings initiated a longing to reconcile with his black identity. His choice of vagabondage is an extension of his previous metaphysical displacements. Through his decision to study in Atlanta during college,

despite the harsh treatment of people of color in the South, One might posit that his decision to go to college in Atlanta, despite the overt racism experienced by black Southerners, is influenced by a peculiar fascination that has been cultivated by his prior readings and constructed assumptions about the region. Furthermore, the fact that his father is a white Southerner adds another layer of significance, as Atlanta becomes linked with his own sense of identity. The Ex-Colored Man ventures to manifest and actualize the ideas cultivated within his imagination and readings. Choosing the South can be interpreted as a means of reconnecting with the roots of both identities.

During his journey to Atlanta, the protagonist goes through a transformative experience of vagabondage, immersing himself in the deep South and gaining a new perspective on his country and its people. As he distances himself from the North, his disappointment grows, and he characterizes Atlanta as a lackluster city devoid of urbanization and infrastructure development, describing it as a "big dull, red town" (Johnson 77). This form of vagabondage grants the Ex-Colored Man more nuanced insights into black Southern identity. The concept of vagabondage serves as an appropriate representation of the protagonist's transformative journey as it captures both the unstable nature of his circumstances and his deliberate choice to deviate from social standards. At a crucial juncture in his life, the protagonist's naivety and trusting disposition lead to the unfortunate theft of the funds allotted for his university education. This unforeseen turn of events compels him to embrace vagabondage, which in the meantime, engages him into a path of self-discovery and unconventional traveling. This becomes evident during his visit to what his friend labels as "the best place in town where a colored man could get a meal" (Johnson 79). His disillusionment and disgust are palpable as he enters the neglected establishment, observing its dusty surroundings, repulsive odors, and dirty dishes. He wonders if there exists a better place for blacks to dine (Johnson 79). However, his friend unveils the stark reality of the segregation and

economic precarity plaguing the local black community. Motivated by his desire to explore his African American identity, the Ex-Colored Man chooses at first to reject the option of passing as white and instead fully embraces the lived experience of being a black individual, even if it has not yet provided him with immediate enjoyment.

The protagonist's rejection of conformity and traditional expectations is epitomized by his choice of vagabondage, which represents a central theme in this decision. By following his instincts and intuition, he consciously liberates himself from societal constraints. Embracing the uncertainty inherent in his spontaneous wanderings, he willingly takes risks, abandoning predetermined plans or destinations. This reflects his desire for independence and a genuine exploration of the world, unburdened by social conventions and unrealistic expectations. Through entirely embracing vagabondage and rejecting the ability to pass, the protagonist embarks on an authentic journey of self-discovery. This transformative experience allows him to forge a closer connection with his community and deepen his quest for self-understanding. In doing so, he develops a profound appreciation for his African American identity and the multiplicity it represents.

The Ex-Colored Man's true experience of vagabondage and displacement begins early in the novel when his money is stolen, leaving him without any resources. Instead of returning to Connecticut, his determination to explore his identity drives him further south in search of opportunities. Upon reaching Jacksonville, he embarks on another uncertain journey by following a stranger in pursuit of housing. However, his attempt to secure employment at a recommended hotel fails, forcing him to find an alternative source of income. He chooses to teach piano, but his earnings are limited by the impoverishment of the local African American community. The Ex-

Colored Man's journey to Jacksonville reveals the plight of forced vagabondage, underscoring both the narrator's and the larger community's struggle to find stability and a reliable income [3].

The Ex-Colored Man's life in Jacksonville unfolds, revealing a newfound understanding of his identity through communal interactions. His roles as a tobacco stripper and oral reader in a cigar factory symbolize a connection to his origins, as tobacco ironically represents the agrarian system and the legacy of slavery. This immersion in African American Southern culture becomes a transformative baptism, an initiation into his racial identity. He reflects, "This was really my entrance into the race. It was my initiation into what I have termed the freemasonry of the race. I had formulated a theory of what it was to be colored, now I was getting the practice" (Johnson 89-90). Living within the black community allows him to develop empathy and comprehension of the African American experience, often overlooked by his white peers. Over time, he recognizes the complexity and diversity within the black community, challenging the simplistic portrayals perpetuated by society at large. The black community becomes a complex caste, an enigmatic realm that offers him profound insights and a tangible connection to the knowledge he finds in books.

When the protagonist shares his observations regarding the different classes among African Americans, the hegemonic society appears to mediate and alter his objective perceptions. In fact, The Ex-Colored Man classifies African Americans based on their wealth and their relationship with mainstream whiteness, which serve as key parameters for determining their level of success or failure in society. He identifies four distinct social classes: the Talented Tenth, the working

[3] It is also important to note that the landlady's advice indicates her immediate detection of his black identity despite his appearance as a white man. This recognition prompts her to suggest teaching music to black children, emphasizing the low salaries associated with the position. As he remarks, "The thought of my teaching white pupils did not even remotely enter her mind" (Johnson 86).

middle-class, the working lower class, and the castaways (Johnson 91-93). Although the protagonist does not identify with any particular social class, his observations provide valuable insight into deconstructing the stereotype, assuming that all African Americans belong to the lower class of American society. The protagonist's later successful career and ability to elevate himself align him with the figure of the New Negro. Through his achievements and social uplift, he personifies the ideals of progress, self-determination, and empowerment promoted by the New Negro movement.

Alain Locke's concept of the New Negro represents an unprecedented approach to the pursuit of justice for African Americans. In his book *The New Negro: Voice from the Harlem Renaissance*, Locke emphasizes the contrast between old and new, highlighting the modern sense of cultural identity. The Old Negro is depicted as voiceless, viewed as a formula rather than a human being, and reliant on others' judgments. Locke partly attributes the Negro's condition to self-imposed behaviors that prevent self-understanding and social awareness. By focusing on controversial issues and conforming to stereotypes, the Old Negro perpetuated a lack of true identity and understanding. However, Locke argues that African Americans' political maturity has enabled spiritual emancipation and a deeper comprehension of their racial identity (Locke 4). In this sense, the Ex-Colored Man partly echoes a manifestation of the New Negro movement. The protagonist's exceptional talent in playing ragtime music becomes a means to elevate his social status. However, it can be argued that his ability to promote African American music stems more from his ability to pass as white rather than solely relying on his musical skills and social uplift. This peculiarity is where the protagonist diverges from the archetype of the New Negro figure as it sets him in a privileged position to promote his talent and to easily engage in vagabondage, breaking free from the racial constraints of his identifiably black counterparts.

The Ex-Colored Man presents a detached and nuanced perception of social class divisions among African Americans. One can draw a parallel between the protagonist and what Elizabeth Cole describes as the "mulatto elite" (Cole 786-787). This term refers to the privileges afforded to individuals with lighter skin tones during the period of slavery. In the context of the novel, the Ex-Colored Man also benefits from certain privileges that he is undoubtedly aware of as he strategically exploits them to his advantage. The protagonist's light skin grants him access to greater social mobility and possibilities of success that would typically be denied to African Americans. His biracial background thus serves as a means that opens the doors closed by segregation, enabling him a total capacity for vagabondage and urban mobility.

The Ex-Colored Man's journey in the South immerses him in the struggles faced by people of color. Because he decides to reside in Jacksonville among African Americans, he finds himself unable to save money for his education. He reflects, "I learned to be careless about money...It seemed impossible for me to save as much as two hundred dollars" (Johnson 95). This illustrates how social forces damage his ambitions and exert control over his life by restricting his choices due to the racial and economic limitations of the region he inhabits. Consequently, the protagonist finds himself embracing a sense of fatalism, relinquishing his educational aspirations. However, it can be argued that this event serves to secure his desire for liberation from conformity, affirming his decision to embrace vagabondage and self-exploration through music instead of following a pathway predefined by the hegemonic society. Under these circumstances, his ambivalent identity becomes a privileged means of escaping his reality, affording him social mobility and the freedom of travel that other African Americans could not have.

Vagabondage in all its forms plays a crucial role in the protagonist's evolution, as each major decision he makes is met with unexpected events stemming from social injustice, forcing

him to alter his plans or abandon his goals. Despite the hardships he endures, his pursuit of identity persists, fueling his determination to elevate himself to a higher social rank. However, one can observe that he significantly distances himself from the community he shares a cultural identity with. His redundant use of the pronoun "they" instead of "we" implies a lack of personal connection with African Americans despite his co-optation of their culture and the fleeting bonds he creates through his wanderings. He vehemently defends African American identity in a neutral manner, which is exemplified by his fascination with ragtime or when he praises more specific aspects of the culture. Furthermore, he asserts that African Americans have created influential artistic expressions such as the Uncle Remus stories, Jubilee songs, ragtime music, and the cakewalk. He recognizes that ragtime, despite being globally renowned, originates from a marginalized community that society overlooks. He might perceive it as a lesser form of art, yet he envisions its increasing aesthetic sophistication and potential for growth in the hands of dedicated artists (Johnson 95). This passage marks the protagonist's introduction to ragtime, and it seems to inspire a shift in his life trajectory. He decides to relocate to New York, specifically Harlem, where the African American community thrives during the Harlem Renaissance. This choice to venture into another unfamiliar environment illustrates how vagabondage shapes the protagonist's identity. Although he has not fully aligned himself with a particular community, he becomes more receptive to his African American heritage and leans toward identification with it.

In his novel, Johnson makes a calculated decision to center the plot around ragtime music rather than more popular African American musical styles like blues or jazz. This choice holds profound implications for the exploration of identity and cultural heritage within the narrative. According to J. E. Smyth, ragtime emerged as an African American style rooted in a fusion of African, slave, march, and riverboat music. Prominent musicians such as Ernest Hogan, Scott

Joplin, and Jelly Roll Morton contributed to its development (Smyth 8). The choice of ragtime serves as a symbolic representation of the Ex-Colored Man's willingness to confront the past and the cultural legacy of slavery within his community. As a character embodying a dual identity, ragtime becomes a means to reconcile these conflicting experiences. Throughout the novel, the protagonist's trajectory ultimately leads him to embrace ragtime music, which becomes the vehicle for his travels.

The protagonist's discovery of ragtime music introduces a transformative phase, leading to a shift in his identity and eventually propelling him into a period of bourgeois vagabondage in Europe. His time at "the club," located in the heart of New York during the vibrant Harlem Renaissance, deeply influenced his life choices. The club serves as a metaphor for African American identity and cultural vitality. In this setting, he experiences a life of decadence and revelry, where a wealthy white audience celebrates ragtime and African American art. During his time there, the Ex-Colored Man becomes aware of the unlawful interactions between the two communities, particularly highlighting the relationship between a white woman known as "the rich widow" and a young black man. The narrator's discomfort with the interracial couple reflects the pervasive racial stigma of the time, despite being a person of mixed race himself (Johnson 109). One can argue that his perception exposes the psychological complexities of racism in segregated America and underscores the challenge of reconciling one's identity and beliefs within an oppressive society.

The protagonist's initial fascination with New York and the vivid description he gives of the city reflects his cosmopolitan spirit as he even confesses the feeling of being born again. His metaphor symbolizes his entry into a more diverse environment that promises new experiences and opportunities, which aligns with his vagabond spirit and evolving identity. The Ex-Colored

Man's mixed-race background becomes an asset in his quest for identity in a cosmopolitan setting like New York. The complicity and affection he develops towards the city can also be attributed to the fact that the Ex-Colored Man himself symbolizes the product of multiculturalist love, embodying the essence of cosmopolitanism.

The narrator's choice to pursue a career in ragtime music becomes crucial to the plot as it serves as his primary source of income, stimulating his bourgeois vagabond lifestyle. Although the financial stability of a musician outweighs that of a gambler, his decision holds a deeper purpose. Seeking opportunities to express his identity, the character constantly moves from place to place. His musical expertise in ragtime becomes instrumental in achieving his goals. The essence of ragtime music irresistibly attracts the character, leading him to spend most of his nights at the club. However, simply listening to ragtime is not fulfilling. He takes a significant turn by employing his musical talents to play ragtime, aiming to glorify African American culture and make a living while doing so. His innovation of incorporating classical selections into ragtime further demonstrates his active contribution to the style's development. Fueled by his passion and talent, his life undergoes a drastic change, earning him the unofficial title of "professor" among his audience. His captivating presence elevates the popularity of the club, which he considers his headquarters. The protagonist's engagement with ragtime music reflects a broader cosmopolitan vision of embracing cultural diversity and challenging hegemonic norms. His exploration of ragtime becomes a means of creating a cultural exchange and symbolic dialogue between the black and the white communities.

The Ex-Colored Man's promotion of his cultural identity through ragtime music achieves some success as more people start attending the club solely to listen to his performances. However, despite his comfortable position at the club, the concept of vagabondage remains prevalent, as he

accepts the offer to play at private parties for a wealthy white man. The Ex-Colored Man is never satisfied and constantly seeks to promote his music elsewhere, aspiring to expand his influence and explore new spaces. The positive response to African American sounds is evident when the protagonist captivates the guests at a party, surprising and delighting them with his ragtime performance. The author's choice of words indicates that this new style garners positive attention, capturing people's attention until the end of the event. Ragtime music poses a threat to the hegemonic society by providing a powerful form of expression for African American culture. The protagonist's intentional offering of this performance can be seen as a form of protest, challenging the cultural dominance of white society and debunking stereotypes about his community's supposed lack of cultural production. The audience's curiosity and excitement about the concert stem from their limited exposure to African American culture and identity, highlighting how the hegemonic society deliberately diminishes African Americans to preserve white supremacy. As classical music has become commonplace in such settings, ragtime novelty allows the Ex-Colored Man to introduce his audience to a fresh and thrilling experience. Moreover, the protagonist's ability to pass as white facilitates his interaction with the audience, enabling him to use his social mobility to challenge the dominant culture and present African American culture in an unexpected and ultimately extolled manner (Johnson 114-115).

The Ex-Colored Man conceptualizes ragtime music as carrying significant cultural and sociopolitical implications. One could contend that it serves as a representation of a cosmopolitan style. Despite the protagonist attributing the origins of ragtime to African American influences, its widespread popularity and appeal among diverse audiences raise it to the status of a cosmopolitan style. Ragtime's universal popularity thereby becomes a crucial element in facilitating the bourgeois vagabondage pursued by the character, allowing him great social mobility while

maintaining his success and influence. The contradiction surrounding the perception of ragtime as an inferior style becomes evident when the protagonist exposes the actions of white arrangers who capitalized on its melodies and took advantage of segregation to claim a genre that belongs to African Americans (Johnson 104).

The Ex-Colored Man's pursuit of his identity through vagabondage takes a new turn as he decides to join his sponsor on trips across Europe. This choice is partly influenced by a tragic incident he witnesses, where a white woman is murdered in front of him, triggering a desperate instinct to flee. By escaping overseas to Europe, the narrator demonstrates how mobility and vagabondage played a crucial role in shaping his own understanding of racial identity. At this point of the argument, it is important to highlight that his privileged position as educated and racially ambiguous allows him to evade the oppressive circumstances of white supremacy that would likely have wrongfully implicated him in the crime. Through his movement, he discovers a sense of security and freedom in a foreign land. It can be argued that this event justifies and permits the protagonist's continued life of vagabondage, as it presents a world open to exploration and self-discovery. Despite achieving local recognition for his music, Johnson's protagonist remains unsatisfied and seeks to promote ragtime music internationally, propelling him forward on his journey. His decision to move once again underscores the notion that he finds himself through a form of bourgeois vagabondage, with each destination contributing a piece to the puzzle of his identity. Additionally, Europe holds symbolic significance for him due to his white heritage and the profound influence of European culture during his formative years through literature and music.

The reception of ragtime in Europe mirrors the amazement it caused in the United States. The narrator, traveling across the continent, initially enjoys enormous success and even receives

an offer to promote African American music in Africa and Asia. However, he becomes dissatisfied with this lifestyle, realizing he is wasting his time and talent. His stay in Europe brings him to the realization that he is seen merely as a white-passing composer, with little value placed on his African American heritage. This revelation fills him with remorse, prompting him to make a significant change (Johnson 128). He decides to return to the United States, specifically the South, where he feels he could contribute to the development of ragtime and be recognized as a talented black musician. His remorse stems from squandering time in Europe, where his white appearance contradicts his goal of promoting African American culture.

However, one can argue that his decision can also be motivated by the desire to escape an oppressive situation for which he has no control. Indeed, the Ex-Colored Man experiences an awkward incident at the opera that vividly illustrates the continued existence of racial and social boundaries in society: he realizes his biological father and half-sister, his father's legitimate heir, are also in the audience—though they remain unaware of his presence. His encounter at the opera makes it clear that his mixed background restricts his potential to form meaningful relationships. It becomes evident in his inability to connect with his own family due to the prevailing racial hierarchy and social mores. The Ex-Colored Man's longing to bridge the gulf between himself and his biological family, despite his awareness of his racially subordinate position, stresses the loneliness he experiences. His desperate desire to touch his sister's hand and call her family is a profound testament to his hunger for connection. The fact that he leaves the opera during an act, referring to the situation as a real "tragedy," further highlights the oppressive and limiting effects of racial and social boundaries (Johnson 123). The Ex-Colored Man's withdrawal signifies his inner unrest and serves as a powerful expression of his emotions in the face of a situation in which he is powerless. This departure creates profound echoes with the notion of vagabondage, extending

beyond plain physical movement. It assumes the role of a loophole in the face of his internal conflicts and when confronted with circumstances beyond his control. Vagabondage, therefore, serves as a means of seeking refuge from both an oppressive reality and the internal strife arising from the protagonist's dual and conflicting identities.

While the chances of encountering his family in this context were slim, the significance of the event is undeniable (Johnson 123-124). Anne Bombergen cleverly observes that the racial boundaries in place prevent the narrator from even acknowledging his father or their familial bond. He is no longer merely a man attending the opera; he becomes the "illegitimate" biracial son who is only superficially recognized by his father (Bombergen 25). Bombergen effectively captures the narrator's predicament, revealing that he is rejected by his white family. Furthermore, the protagonist experiences for the second time the painful rejection of his own father, who displayed no interest in supporting him or maintaining contact, particularly following the death of the protagonist's mother. This situation implies that the protagonist is viewed as an embarrassment or a hidden secret within his father's eyes. The racial boundaries create a profound sense of alienation, as the protagonist and his family sit in proximity yet remain perfect strangers to each other. The protagonist is thus faced with a harsh reality; despite achieving a certain degree of respectability and social mobility through his privileged vagabondage, he is forced to confront the painful truth that he will never truly belong to the white world, intensifying his sense of alienation and informing his understanding of his own identity.

The decision to go back to the United States brings its share of problems in the context of American apartheid and the concomitant violence perpetrated against blacks, especially in the South. His white employer considers blackness as a "handicap" that destroys every chance of social and musical success. He also seems annoyed by his protégé's motive to move as he tries to separate

ragtime from African American culture, arguing: "Music is a universal art; anybody's music belongs to everybody; you can't limit it to race or country" (Johnson 130). Nevertheless, the narrator does not seem affected by the lecture, and despite the successful career that was being offered to him in Europe, he still decides to stick to his objectives and move back to the United States.

During his voyage back to the US, the Ex-Colored Man encounters a young black physician with whom he shares thoughts on the "Negro question." The language he employs reveals a significant shift in his approach to identity after his time in Europe. He explicitly states: "I, in referring to the race, used the personal pronoun we" (Johnson 133). This choice demonstrates the embrace of his own identity, no longer distancing himself from his people through third-person references or other designations. His conversation with the educated compatriot about the Negro question reaffirms his decision to return to the South. By returning, the Ex-Colored Man strategically seeks cultural recognition and freedom from the dominance of white supremacy. This progressive stance aims to contribute to the advancement of African American identity and challenge the entrenched values of racism and segregation prevailing in the South. Through popularizing ragtime in the region, the protagonist becomes an agent of social activism, striving to liberate his people from segregation and enable their identity to flourish.

In *Turning South Again*, Houston A. Baker provides an insightful exploration of the African American experience in the United States. He introduces the concept of tight places, which he defines as the representational obligations of race in America — an obligation to articulate and act in society from a position that combines specters of abjection related to slavery or Jim Crow (Baker 73-75). By exploring the concept of tight places, Baker illustrates how African Americans must continually negotiate their place in society as they are forced to navigate the ever-shifting

boundaries of identity in an attempt to create a sense of freedom and self-determination. Baker's analysis demonstrates how mobility and movement are essential to understanding the complex dynamics between black American identity and the hegemonic culture. *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* provides an insightful example of this obligation, highlighting the importance of mobility and movement in the making of African American identity.

Heather Russell Andrade illuminates how African Americans, particularly black male subjects, are inherently framed within the dominant white social structure. This framework dictates their interactions with society, perpetuating a system of domination and subjugation (Andrade 258). Consequently, African Americans are often confined to specific perspectives imposed upon them, emphasizing their marginalization and oppression. However, as the Ex-Colored Man embarks on his vagabond journey, he undergoes a transformative process that challenges this preconceived framework. Throughout his narrative, the Ex-Colored Man frequently aligns himself with other black people, seemingly conforming to hegemonic norms. This association can be viewed as an attempt to navigate within the dominant white social structure. However, as the story unfolds, the protagonist acknowledges that his involvement is merely that of a privileged observer, suggesting a growing sense of detachment from the black community. This revelation is a pivotal moment that propels the Ex-Colored Man to contemplate his identity and the societal constraints imposed upon him. Striving for liberation and autonomy, he ultimately makes the daring decision to abandon his African American identity and instead pass as an "Ex-Colored" individual. This act of passing, in the context of his vagabondage and travel, becomes a powerful form of resistance against the hegemonic culture. By passing as white, the protagonist passively challenges the racial hierarchy and asserts agency over his own narrative. It becomes a strategic tool for navigating through different communities as he seamlessly circumvents racial boundaries. In essence, his

vagabond journey becomes an embodiment of resistance and liberation, defying the limitations placed upon African Americans by the dominant white social structure. Moreover, this act of passing carries profound implications for the narrator and his family. It grants them the opportunity to lead a life of peace and prosperity, shielded from the discrimination and marginalization experienced by the majority of African Americans in their society. However, it is essential to emphasize that the protagonist's ability to pass as white is a significant factor contributing to his positive experience with vagabondage. His fair complexion plays a crucial role in facilitating his success in securing employment and thus allowing him to engage in bourgeois vagabondage without experiencing the difficulties typical in these forms of travel.

The Ex-Colored Man is no exception to the already framed position of the black male discussed earlier. Indeed, several times throughout the narrative, he is subject to the mores of hegemonic culture, some of which were previously mentioned in this paper. The weight that hegemonic society has in defining and imposing its ideological order can be clearly identified in the novel. The following passage illustrates the relationship that the protagonist holds with his white employer; the diction of the Ex-Colored Man is pregnant with meaning as he declares:

> This man of the world, who grew weary of everything and was always searching for something new, never appeared to grow tired of my music; he seemed to take it as a drug. He fell into a habit that caused me no little annoyance; sometimes, he would come in during the early hours of the morning and, finding me in bed asleep, would wake me up and ask me to play something. (Johnson 121)

The white employer is described by the Ex-Colored Man as someone who has everything, which can be regarded as an analogy for the place of privileged whites in American society.

Johnson's use of rhetoric in the narrator's description of his employer is indicative of a master/slave relationship between the Ex-Colored Man and his employer. This analogy serves to illustrate the entitled status of whites in American society, and Masami Sugimori argues that it further suggests the Ex-Colored Man's "hyper-awareness" of his racial inferiority in the eyes of the white audience. The protagonist's role as an instrument of entertainment and distraction for the white man further reinforces this hierarchical dynamic (Sugimori 42). The Ex-Colored Man's subjugation is apparent in his music-making, as he feels obliged to provide novelty in order to appease his white employer.[4] This master/slave dynamic is further evidenced by his lack of free will, being suddenly awoken in the early hours to play music. The protagonist experiences a recurring pattern of vagabondage, but despite his wanderings, his life seems redundant, especially as he is compelled to serve his employer within a domestic sphere. Through his experiences, it can be argued that vagabondage is not only a matter of survival for the Ex-Colored Man but also a means of reclaiming a sense of autonomy and independence. This dynamic is further complicated by the racial tensions and power dynamics that are entrenched within the societies he inhabits, which ultimately shape his identity and choices. In the context of the novel, the protagonist gradually becomes aware of his inferior position within society. One could argue that his desire to return to the United States and serve a greater cause is essentially an attempt to escape from his subordinate status to the white employer. Therefore, his decision to become engaged in vagabondage is primarily fueled by personal aspirations for independence and autonomy. By highlighting the protagonist's realization of his social standing, the narrative underscores the complexities of his motivations. It suggests that his

[4] One may question the queer relationship that the white employer entertains with the Ex-Colored Man. The protagonist stresses the peculiar interest his employer holds for him as he points to the uniqueness of their relationship (Johnson 121). It could be understood that the white employer used the protagonist as a means to stop the passing of time through his ragtime performances which created moments of temporal suspension for him. The Ex-Colored man points out later in the narrative that, subsequent to his departure, the employer took his own life, considering death as the only escape from the relentless march of time and the absence of his friend (Johnson 128).

longing to contribute to a higher purpose might, in fact, be rooted in the selfish desire to liberate himself from the control and influence of a hegemonic society.

The protagonist's ambition to transcend racial boundaries and achieve social mobility models standard American characteristics. Kathleen Pfeiffer explains how individualism and the quest for independence push the narrator to contest his position in society. She also highlights the acts of self-determination that the Ex-Colored Man has undertaken to create his own independent identity. This assertion of individualism is seen as particularly American and reminiscent of the self-reliance found in the works of authors such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry James. In order to succeed in his endeavors, the Ex-Colored Man has to manipulate his identity to create a status based on forms of privilege related to class, education, religion, and family history, a kind of meritocracy commonly celebrated in national myths. By passing as white, he is able to challenge the accepted rules of color division and expose the ideology of whiteness in action. In doing so, the narrator reveals how racial identity can form an integral part of cultural identity (Pfeiffer 405). However, it is credible to suggest that in his pursuit to accommodate his identity within prevailing norms, he ends up sacrificing his true self in order to secure his acceptance into the hegemonic society. In this process, he not only assimilates into whiteness but also embodies bourgeois respectability. In many aspects, one can conclude that he becomes a reflection of the figure of his father, which he yearned for but was initially denied due to his association with his black mother.

The Ex-Colored Man's witnessing of a brutal lynching sparks his abandonment of both his culture and his aspirations. He recognizes the inherent danger of embracing and promoting his African American identity, foreseeing the potential negative repercussions doing so could have on his life. This key event marks a transition from one phase of his life to another when the protagonist puts an end to his vagabondage. According to Kathleen Pfeiffer, the protagonist's choice to pass

challenges the concept of white purity and underscores the undeniable presence of African American heritage within the so-called unblemished whiteness of the hegemonic society (Pfeiffer 405). Despite renouncing his quest for identity, due in part to his desire for personal safety, the narrator continues to harbor a deep longing for the social acknowledgment of his African American roots. The presence of a box filled with items that he uses to nostalgically contemplate his identity suggests a persistent desire for recognition of his musical talent and, thus, of his African American identity. The protagonist's long-held box also signifies a continual feeling of guilt. By choosing to pass as a white man and enjoy a life of comfort and privilege instead of confronting racial injustices, the protagonist carries a sense of remorse. The box becomes a materialization of his internal conflict, serving as a reminder of his acquiescence to social expectations.

By the end of the novel, the protagonist's disparate experiences intensify his uncertainty regarding his identity and goals, revealing a form of selfishness resulting from his ambiguous status and experiences. As he reflects on his present place in society, he admits: "It is difficult for me to analyze my feelings concerning my present position in the world" (Johnson 167). This statement captures the internal conflict that arises from his unique circumstances. At times, the protagonist questions whether he has truly been a part of the African American experience. He perceives himself as a privileged spectator, observing the struggles and challenges faced by other African Americans in a less privileged position. This sense of detachment stems from his ability to navigate between different worlds, thanks to his light skin color and relatively higher social status. The protagonist's privilege affords him certain advantages, shielding him from some of the overt racial discrimination that many African Americans face daily. This disconnection between his own experiences and the collective experiences of his community contributes to his complex identity. However, the protagonist also experiences feelings of guilt and self-doubt. Despite his

privileged position, he grapples with a sense of betrayal for distancing himself from his African American roots. This internal conflict arises from the tension between his desire to assimilate into the dominant culture and his recognition of the cultural heritage and community he left behind. The character's privileged status becomes double-edged, affording him the opportunities and freedoms of a white man while also burdening him with the weight of his choices and the constant struggle to reconcile his dual identities. Society strips away his true essence, destroying his passion for ragtime and forcing him into a state of perpetual identity crisis. While he outwardly appears as a man who can pass as white, inside, he is left devoid of a true sense of self, trapped as a stranger with no authentic identity.

The conclusion of his vagabond lifestyle, marked by a return to New York, signifies both the end of his wandering and the erosion of his ambitions. Rather than embracing either of his dual identities, the protagonist chooses to reject both, driven by specific reasons. To start with, at first glance, he seems to disavow his whiteness due to the extreme savagery exhibited by a white crowd, which results in the horrifying public execution of a black man burned alive before his eyes (Johnson 154). Secondly, the lynching he witnesses leads him to despise and deny his black identity as a result of the dehumanizing treatment endured by his community, turning the identity he once took pride in into a source of shame and disgrace. Shortly after his traumatic experience, the narrator completely distances himself by referring to blacks as "the people of his mother," implying a sense of detachment and suggesting that they are not his own people. He goes further by acknowledging that he has never truly been a "Negro" but rather a privileged witness of their fate (Johnson 167). This declaration replaces any sense of belonging that the Ex-Colored Man expressed throughout the narrative with the idea that he has only exploited his talent without acknowledging that the success he was met with is indebted to his black heritage. In a sense, he

reproduces the actions he criticized in white composers who aimed to appropriate and copy ragtime music, consequently revealing a form of hypocrisy in his own actions.

It is also important to point to the fact that despite claiming to renounce his whiteness, the protagonist's decision to pass as whatever people perceive him to be raises questions about his true intentions. The manner which he uses to refer to his decision exposes a paradoxical intention as he states:

> I finally made up my mind that I would neither disclaim the black race nor claim the white race, but that I would change my name, raise a mustache, and let the world take me for what it would; that it was not necessary for me to go about with a label of inferiority pasted across my forehead. (Johnson 156)

The protagonist's actions of changing his name and appearance directly contradict his statement of disclaiming a white bourgeois identity. By opting to alter his identity, he demonstrates a clear desire to shed his previous African American persona and, instead, embraces a position akin to that of a white middle-class man. This choice indicates a willingness to abandon his former identity, suggesting that he no longer wishes to be recognized as the African American individual he once was but rather aims to assume the privileges and social status associated with being perceived as a white person. His silence and active evasion of identity thus automatically mark him as white when whiteness is normative and the default racial status. It can be argued that the protagonist's declaration of disclaiming his whiteness may serve as a means to relieve his guilt for passing as white rather than genuinely embracing his blackness.

The novel's title reflects the protagonist's conclusion to isolate himself from any particular color or race. This marks a significant departure from his earlier life, during which he embraced

African American culture and a cosmopolitan lifestyle. His decision to rely on people's assumptions about him and live for their expectations, rather than freely expressing his true identity and talent, symbolizes the victory of a hegemonic society over him. The protagonist's selfishness is evident from his decision to pass as white, which ultimately prioritizes his personal comfort over the collective struggle of his mother's people. He reveals that his decision to distance himself from his African American identity stems primarily from a deep sense of shame he develops after witnessing the lynching (Johnson 156). Albeit recognizing the moral righteousness of the African American cause throughout the novel, he still chooses to distance himself from it. He falls short in taking action to address the injustices that he condemns. Instead, he explicitly shows no regrets in his choice to prioritize his self-interest, protecting himself and his family rather than engaging in the struggle for the social betterment of the black community. Consequently, he is characterized as a coward and an antihero of the New Negro, despite the empathy that one may have regarding his decision.

Bourgeois vagabondage plays a vital role in providing the dynamics and social mobility necessary for the Ex-Colored Man to limit the oppressive grip of the hegemonic culture. In his analysis of Johnson's text, Thomas Morgan argues that Johnson's novel consciously abandons the pastoral South as the protagonist transitions to the North, relinquishing both the physical space and the representational logic that have traditionally defined black identity. This decision stems from the narrator's ability to pass as white and his conscious choice to allow the world to perceive him as it wishes (Morgan 222). In Johnson's text, the protagonist intentionally passes through and leaves behind the rural South, a region historically associated with African American subjection, and permanently relocates to the North. His biracial background thus allows him to passively defy racial stereotypes. However, it can be argued that the novel's ending presents a more nuanced and

ambivalent representation of Johnson's protagonist. Rather than portraying his choice as heroic for challenging racial hierarchy, the narrative suggests that there is an underlying fear and self-serving motivation behind this choice. By embracing a white bourgeois lifestyle, the protagonist raises questions about his capacity to truly embrace the ideals of vagabondage and cultural multiplicity. Furthermore, his relocation presents another paradox. While initially appearing to align with the North's ostensibly more progressive positions on race, it ultimately becomes a source of profound remorse. Despite leading a comfortable life, he finds himself trapped in a conflictual identity. This internal struggle can be attributed to his decision to pass. By wearing a metaphorical mask and suppressing a more complex form of self-representation, he denies himself the freedom of authentic self-expression and allows hegemonic society to assert its power over his life.

The protagonist's subversive nature is evident but not dishonest as he reveals to his future wife the truth about his racial identity. However, it becomes obvious that he prioritizes his personal interests over the African American community's social uplift. His complete transformation reflects his inability to stand against the hegemonic society's influence, leading him to embrace a radically different lifestyle from the ideals of plurality, cosmopolitanism, and the musician's vagabond ethos he once fostered. He attributes this shift to the presence of his white children and his desire to save them from the psychological and socio-economic constraints of their identity. The protagonist's actions ironically mirror his mother's attempts to shield him from his racial identity, as he inadvertently repeats the same behavior with his own children, seeking to protect them as well.

The Ex-Colored Man's pursuit of identity and self-understanding, as uncovered through his vagabondage, highlights the importance of movement and artistic expression, particularly within the African American cultural context. His ability to use his ambiguous racial identity and ragtime

skills not only secures him a comfortable existence but also provides a platform for intercultural dialogue. One can draw the conclusion that despite the Ex-Colored Man's apparent support for the social advancement of African Americans, he ultimately emerges as an antihero within the context of the New Negro figure by choosing to pass, prioritizing self-interest over confrontation. This hypocrisy is highlighted by his exploitation of his talent without acknowledging its roots in his black heritage. This claim finds support in his rejection of the cosmopolitan, musical, and vagabond lifestyle that once defined his identity, as he instead opts to live an existence devoid of cultural vigor and authenticity. He ultimately abandons this authenticity to embrace the problematic identity of his indifferent father, an identity that he had previously rejected in favor of his mother’s blackness and his own celebration of African American culture.

III: Vagabondage and Gender Dynamics in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*

In the previous chapters, the conversation engaged the concept of vagabondage and its significance in forming modern African American identity. The analysis of James Weldon Johnson's protagonist provides valuable insights into the ways in which social mobility and displacement have been employed as tools for resistance and self-discovery. However, importance is given to the privileged social status of the Ex-Colored Man, which I thereby consider as the crucial element which allows him to perform a kind of bourgeois vagabondage that lets him move from one setting to another without ever experimenting with the true hardship of displacement and uncertainty that his community was facing. In this chapter, my attention shifts toward Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*, which shares a striking resemblance with *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* in terms of the protagonist's background. indeed, both characters represent members of the mixed-race middle-class within the African American community. However, *Quicksand* offers a distinct perspective on the themes of mobility and vagabondage, with particular consideration given to Orientalism as developed by Edward Said and the influence of gender dynamics.

My main focus is on Helga's journey towards self-awareness and the process of claiming her identity, I specifically consider how gender dynamics shape her experiences and interactions. Additionally, I am interested in how the gendered dimensions of the African American experience influence the ways in which mobility and displacement can be empowering or limiting in the pursuit of identity. By examining her use of imagery, symbolism, and narrative structure, I will analyze how Larsen's depiction of mobility and displacement illuminates the tensions and ambiguities inherent in the New Negro woman's struggle for self-definition.

Before I continue, I believe it necessary to specify that Larsen offers a vivid portrayal of the protagonist's struggles that, in some regards, mirrors her own life as Helga moves through various geographical and social settings in which she continually fails to belong. Thus, George Hutchinson provides valuable insights into Nella Larsen's life in his article "Nella Larsen and the Veil of Race." These revelations underscore the evident presence of autobiographical elements in the character of Helga Crane. Similar to her protagonist, Larsen, too, emerges from the union of a biracial couple, and her formative years are characterized by a succession of displacements. Notably, she stands as the sole child of color amidst a white family in Chicago, which significantly influences her sense of belonging and accentuates her feeling of alienation. Hutchinson further highlights, among other things, how Larsen's biological father's rejection, driven by her inability to pass as white as he himself did, significantly shaped her perception of racial identity and the societal expectations placed upon her (Hutchinson 330-333). By giving her character some aspects of her own personal attributes and lived experiences, the author asserts her agency and thus actively contributes to the modernization of the black woman's portrayal during an era burdened with racial adversity and traditional gender dynamics.

While the Harlem Renaissance is widely recognized for its profound impact on African American social life as a result of its cultural effervescence, a comprehensive examination of this movement demands an exploration of its gender dynamics. It is evident that the movement predominantly reflected a male-dominated landscape, with male voices garnering greater recognition within its political and artistic circles. Black women, in particular, faced compounded obstacles stemming from intersecting systems of racism and sexism. Notwithstanding these challenges, women writers and artists played a pivotal role in the Harlem Renaissance, utilizing their creative expressions to confront stereotypes and assert their agency. *Quicksand* is set in the

early 20th century, a time when African American women were subjected to multiple layers of marginalization and discrimination. As such, Helga's experience of mobility and vagabondage is informed by her gender and the social expectations placed upon her.

The significance of African American women within the Harlem Renaissance is often overlooked due to the patriarchal influence that characterized the movement. Emily Hinnov argues that primitivist stereotypes played a detrimental role in perpetuating the portrayal of black women as hypersexualized and exotic figures, objectifying them and undermining their contributions to the cultural and intellectual milieu of the time. These stereotypes not only reduced the role of African American women but also reinforced societal biases that marginalized and silenced their voices. Consequently, the intersectionality of race and gender during the Harlem Renaissance perpetuated a hierarchical structure that hindered the recognition of African American women's leadership and creative contributions. Hinnov argues that this situation created a particularly conscious performance of self for women writers within a male-dominated literary and cultural movement. The extent to which these women writers successfully confronted representations of race and gender within the Harlem Renaissance is hence a crucial question (Hinnov 47-51). Helga faces the triple bind of double-consciousness, misogyny, and racism. This convergence of factors impedes her ability to establish a genuine sense of belonging in the various locations she visits, as well as within both the white and black communities she encounters.

In line with this perspective, the essay "The New Negro Woman," by Martha Patterson, defines the African American woman as a rising revolutionary figure who has brought about a significant change in the social, economic, and political attitudes of the African American community. The New Negro woman is described as a determined and undaunted figure who is marching forward with her head held high, conscious of her historic and noble mission of doing

her part toward the liberation of her people and the human race in general. The author argues that the contributions of the New Negro Woman were just as important as those of men for the Harlem Renaissance. While men were often seen as the primary drivers of the movement, women played a crucial role in shaping and defining the cultural phenomenon. In her pursuit of racial and gendered emancipation, the New Negro woman had to navigate the complexities of her identity and social perception of her position (Patterson 88). One can argue that the Harlem Renaissance movement's tendency to marginalize women resulted in pushing them away from the forefront of the revolution, which forced them to hold secondary roles in the fight for change. However, embracing the identity of a vagabond woman may be seen as one of the most radical forms of protest and emancipation. In the case of Helga Crane, it is evident that she purposefully challenges the misogynist role imposed on black women. Through her act of vagabondage, she defies white hegemonic structures as well as the perpetuation of gender oppression within African American communities. Helga resists and refuses the marginalized role of black women by embarking on her journey of vagabondage, which allows her to define her own perspectives free from most forms of constraint.

Furthermore, Jennifer Margaret Wilks discusses the position of women in the context of New Negrohood, negritude, and black Atlantic modernity. The author contends that while these movements address gender and acknowledge the category of "woman," they ultimately position women figures and intellectuals as different from, rather than equal to, their male counterparts. This difference is exemplified by the metaphorical descriptions of women as "midwives" and "godmothers," which serve to emphasize the nurturing and secondary roles women are expected to play. Consequently, the figure of vagabond woman embraced by Helga can be seen as a threat to traditional notions of black womanhood as established by the elite of the Harlem Renaissance.

Wilks argues that by stepping outside the prescribed roles of mother, lover, or partner, women like Helga expose the limitations and biases inherent in the way gender has been conceptualized within these movements (Wilks 20-21). It might be suggested that the representation of vagabond women, most often portrayed as wanderers or outcasts, challenges the traditional expectations of women's roles and expected behaviors. By rejecting patriarchal norms and expectations, women travelers disrupt the established notions of womanhood and thus challenge the restricting roles assigned to them. Helga Crane represents the archetype of the vagabond woman who controls her life and decisions. Such unexpected and daring representations enable black women to liberate themselves from the unwanted burdens of their communities and society. They can redefine womanhood in a way that better suits their needs and the current times, asserting their importance in the Harlem Renaissance on par with prominent male figures.

Helga can stand as a fictional embodiment of the New Negro woman; her experiences mirror the broader cultural movement of women's liberation from social and racial constraints. I would like to reiterate that she defiantly rejects gender norms and actively rebels against this image through her choice of vagabondage. Helga initially appears dissatisfied with her life, despite holding the position of a teacher and being engaged to James Vayle, a decent man, which seemingly guarantees a fulfilling future for a woman of her era. However, rather than accepting her destiny, she decides to defy it and embarks on a nomadic journey that provides her with the freedom she lacks. Additionally, she rejects the academic institution of Naxos, which she describes as a place of hypocrisy, where the dominant society attempts to exert control and destroy the values of African American youth, as shown in the following passage:

> Teachers, as well as students, were subjected to the paring process, for it tolerated no innovations, no individualism. Ideas it rejected and looked with

> open hostility on one and all who had the temerity to offer a suggestion or ever so mildly express disapproval. Enthusiasm, and spontaneity, if not actually suppressed, were at least openly regretted as unladylike or ungentlemanly qualities. (Larsen 15)

This institution serves as an apparent example of a failed social uplift policy, as it is overseen by a white supremacist power structure that lacks genuine concern for improving the lives of African Americans. Helga rejects becoming a part of this masquerade, showcasing her desire to contribute to authentic social change within her community. Her decision to end her engagement with her fiancé partly stems from his acceptance of the institution and his complicity in its ideological actions. Moreover, Helga realizes that she can no longer bear the burden of a lifestyle entrenched in gender stereotypes and judgments, which propels her decision to remain single and fully independent. Helga's refusal to conform becomes evident in her interactions with her colleagues, who never fully accept her. One can also notice that a significant portion of Helga's earnings is dedicated to indulging in her lifelong passion for expensive objects, captivating books, and meticulously furnishing her personal space. However, this penchant for beauty and her unyielding pursuit of nice things have cast her in disfavor among her colleagues in Naxos, who scornfully label it as nothing more than "pride" and "vanity," showcasing their enmeshment in the traditional gender roles that Helga refuses to endorse (Larsen 17). The response from her colleagues can be attributed to the influence of the dominant culture, which explains their dismissive attitude towards individuals who deviate from the norms. It can be argued that the primary concern lies not in the fact that Helga embraces queer and luxurious material possessions but rather in the manner through which she obtains them. If a man had provided her with all these resources, she would likely not have faced the harsh judgments of her colleagues, as the acquisition would have been attributed to

the man's demonstration of affection. This pursuit of self-care and financial independence represents a form of mobility beyond physical movements, which challenges fixed gender roles. Helga's defiance of norms and their assertion through her choices illustrate a progressive form of mobility of her time, illuminating the dissatisfaction and judgments she faces from others.

The social pressure she endures leads to a growing hatred for the South, crystalizing her resolution never to work there again. This rejection of conformity becomes even more apparent when Dr. Anderson, the head of the school, attempts to persuade her to stay by appealing to her sense of duty and her role in the social uplift process. Initially, his efforts have some success. However, when he reduces Helga to her biological function by declaring, "You're a lady. You have dignity and breeding," it reinforces her decision to leave Naxos for Chicago.

Furthermore, the intersection of her traumatic childhood experiences and her mixed racial heritage contributes to a deep-rooted struggle to fit into conventional norms and expectations. Her desires are expressed through elusive and abstract concepts, leaving her uncertain about the factors that genuinely contribute to her happiness and fulfillment, as demonstrated in the following excerpt:

> But just what did she want? Barring a desire for material security, gracious ways of living, a profusion of lovely clothes, and a goodly share of envious admiration, Helga Crane didn't know, couldn't tell. But there was, she knew, something else. Happiness, she supposed. Whatever that might be. What, exactly, she wondered, was happiness. Very positively, she wanted it. Yet her conception of it had no tangibility. She couldn't define it, isolate it, and

> contemplate it as she could some other abstract things. Hatred, for instance. Or kindness. (Larsen 20-21)

This profound uncertainty mirrors her ongoing struggle with self-discovery and a persistent lack of clarity regarding her own aspirations. Helga's pursuit of true contentment remains vague as she struggles to gather the elements that could truly satisfy her. It becomes evident that happiness and love evade her grasp, influenced by her hostile familial environment and an innate incapacity to reciprocate affection from men who have proposed marriage to her. She instead tries to find belonging through the material lifestyle in the context of her bourgeois vagabondage as she immerses herself in the allure of picturesque landscapes and the attention it bestows upon her.

Just like the Ex-Colored Man, Helga faces the difficulties of being mixed-race and fails to be fully accepted by any of the white and black communities she encounters. On one hand, she finds herself unable to truly belong within the confines of traditional African American society in the South, confessing that she would never feel at home in Naxos because she could neither conform nor be happy in her unconformity (Larsen 18). On the other hand, the protagonist has issues with her white relatives. Her interaction with white Americans proves to be complicated and animated by deep hatred and racism as everyone in her family tries to dissociate from her. Thus, her stepfather shows no interest in her and rapidly sends her to a school for black students following her mother's death. Conversely, Helga also faces the harsh feeling of rejection from her uncle's wife, who is determined to distance herself and her husband from Helga's existence. Not only does she deprive her niece of a sense of legitimacy, but she also denies her rightful place in their family. Helga's reaction towards successive rejections is effectively expressed in this passage: "She was torn with mad fright, an emotion against which she knew but two weapons: to kick and scream, or to flee" (Larsen 38). These encounters emphasize her marginalized position in the racial

hierarchy of the more extensive social system. Since knowing the depth of her anger—or expressing it could potentially lead to severe repercussions, she instead chooses to utilize vagabondage as a means to escape from her reality. The impact of the hegemonic society on her understanding of the situation shows that she is under its direct influence. This dynamic is illuminated when the narrative reveals that "she saw herself for an obscene sore in all their lives, at all costs to be hidden. She understood, even while she resented. It would have been easier if she had not" (Larsen 38). This passage demonstrates that the rejection is not only external but also internal. In fact, Helga acknowledges her understanding of the point of view of her uncle's racist wife. This awareness makes it difficult for her to feel a genuine sense of peace or acceptance in Chicago, her childhood home, and the city of her birth; instead, she longs to wander away.

The same can be observed when she immerses herself in the vibrant lives of urban African Americans and becomes acquainted with the influential community of the Harlem Renaissance and the Talented Tenth. This tension becomes obvious after Helga is advised by Mrs. Hayes-Rore to conceal the fact that her mother is European when interacting with African Americans. This suggests that many members in the African American community may not understand or accept Helga's biracialism. Mrs. Hayes-Rore suggests that it is in Helga's best interest to keep this information private, emphasizing the importance of not revealing what others may not understand or feel ambivalent about (Larsen 51). This exchange illuminates the potential challenges and prejudices faced by some mixed-race individuals in being accepted within the African American community. It becomes evident that Helga bears a more significant burden in navigating these barriers compared to the male protagonist in Johnson's novel. One can also conclude that there may be a certain level of suspicion or judgment towards those who deviate from traditional racial categories and that the discovery of such information could lead to social complications.

Consequently, it becomes evident that many in the African American community only partially accept Helga's presence, as they dismiss her white heritage, thus impeding her sense of complete belonging. This rejection drives her to another displacement, in the search for a place where she can most authentically express herself.

One can argue that the particular challenges Helga encounters in trying to belong to the African American community may, in part, originate from her own lack of resolute determination to fully adopt this group as her own. She also appears to dislike traveling among black people, as illustrated in the passage where she describes her experience on a segregated train going to the North:

> Over the flying landscape hung a very faint mist, disturbed now and then by a languid breeze. But no coolness invaded the heat of the train rushing north. The open windows of the stuffy day coach, where Helga Crane sat with others of her race, seemed only to intensify her discomfort. Her head ached with a steady pounding pain. This added to her wounds of the spirit and made traveling something little short of medieval torture. (Larsen 32)

This passage illuminates Helga's preference for bourgeois vagabondage as she associates her segregated journey on the train with misery because of the demeaning conditions. Her discomfort seems to be amplified by the fact that she is traveling with other black people as an undifferentiated mass unworthy of respect or cleanliness, despite them having paid the necessary rate. This triggers a sense of pressure to accede to unacceptable conditions, leading to noticeable anxiety on Helga’s part. An argument could be put forth that Helga's experience on the train implies a form of disconnection from her direct environment, including elements of her racial identity. One must

acknowledge that such a reaction is not only explainable by elitism tendencies alone; this discomfort must be considered under the assumption that Helga's perceptions are deeply affected by the dominant white culture. One specific trait of this dominant culture is its inclination toward homogenization regarding African American citizens. Therefore, considered as an undifferentiated group, Black individuals are also symbolically destitute of their worth and perceived as only belonging to lower social classes. Considering this context, Helga's reactions can be attributed to forms of resistance against being categorized within white society's definitions of African American as a monolithic lower class.

Helga's struggle to find her place within the cosmopolitan society of the Harlem Renaissance as well reveals her personal vision of an ideal society where she would truly belong. The diversity she encounters averts the likelihood of her standing out and catching the attention of those around her, as she is surrounded by individuals from various racial, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds. Instead of being seen as a novelty, she feels like just another face in the crowd. This passage illustrates her sense of oppression and the underlying desire to escape this setting through vagabondage:

> Leaning against the railing, Helga stared into the approaching night, glad to be at last alone, free of that great superfluity of human beings, yellow, brown, and black, which, as the torrid summer burnt to its close, had so oppressed her. No, she hadn't belonged there. Of her attempt to emerge from that inherent aloneness that was part of her very being, only dullness had come, dullness and a great aversion. (Larsen 73)

It could be contended that Helga experiences a sense of oppression within the diverse and multicultural urban environment. It is within this context that her spirit of individualism becomes the most articulated, as she rejects conformity and distances herself from individuals who resemble her. In a way, she sees them as impeding her ability to be unique and express her individuality as she highlights the feeling of confinement that she develops. The passage also highlights Helga's social awkwardness, as she appears uncomfortable and uninterested in interacting with most other people, finding them mundane. She proclaims her contentment with solitude, which evidently stems from her past and the unsuccessful relationships she had attempted to build with her extended family in the US. Consequently, she uses her privilege to flee this place through bourgeois vagabondage. Her journey shifts to Denmark, where she hopes to immerse herself in a community of predominantly white individuals in the hope that her distinctiveness will stand out and grant her the attention that validates her existence.

Even before her arrival in Denmark, Helga manages to capture the attention of the travelers, who find her presence quite odd on the ship. They were likely all Europeans and were intrigued to see a black woman traveling alone to Europe, highlighting the uncommonness of black travelers, especially solitary women. An employee of the Scandinavian-American line even recognizes her from her previous travel with her mother (Larsen 73). This type of attention seems to be what Helga craves, despite the fact that one can quickly tell that she is othered by European passengers. Her particularity seems to grant her a sense of freedom and positions her as the focal point of everyone's curiosity, fulfilling her desire for a sense of belonging, despite perhaps being perceived as a novelty. One can observe that Helga feels more at ease when she travels among Danes, outwardly embracing her role as an outsider. It is a contrast to her previous experience on the train, where she appeared to blend into the background indicating her desire to be unique and thus get

the attention of her surrounding. It is a contrast to her prior experience on the train, where she seemed to fade into the background. Presently, she displays a greater sense of physical ease and finds herself released from the strains of the segregation that once triggered feelings of inferiority.

In his book *Orientalism*, Edward Said introduces the theory of othering, which parallels the process observed in the relationship between Western societies and the Orient and aligns with Helga's experience in Denmark. He exposes that the colonial West has created and imposed on the world a paradigm that separates human societies according to racial or ethnic status. This order resulted in the emergence of two heterogeneous blocks, one of which profits from the status quo at the expense of the other. He asserts:

> Can one divide human reality, as indeed human reality seems to be genuinely divided into clearly different cultures, histories, traditions, societies, and even races, and survive the consequences humanely? By surviving the consequences humanly, I mean to ask whether there is any way of avoiding the hostility expressed by the division, say, of men into "us" (Westerners) and "they" (Orientals). For such divisions are generalities whose use historically and actually has been to press the importance of the distinction between some men and some other men, usually towards not especially admirable ends. (Said 45)

This passage raises a series of issues. Most fundamentally, Said reflects on the global order and wonders whether it is possible to divide human societies into distinct races and histories without leading to hostility or tension between them. He implies that such divisions have only been applied to implement a sense of superiority of one group over another. One can conclude that Western nations imposed their social model based on a pallet of sociobiological indicators proper to their

own standards, thus creating a Eurocentric framework more favorable for the West rather than for the East. Said also insists on the fact that the West nourishes the ideology of racial and cultural distinction between people in order to ensure Western control over other nations by exploiting everything that is supposedly different and distinct, in the process freezing these characteristics as inferior.

Drawing from Said's theory, one can apply this framework to understand the objectification of Helga by both her aunt and Danish society. Helga's European family's behavior is characterized by their paternalistic and colonial gaze upon her. They perceive Helga through the lens of exoticism, diminishing her to a mere embodiment of their preconceived ideas about the "Other". The selection of attire by her aunt, including "barbaric bracelets," "dangling earrings," and "beads around her neck," serves as evidence of their intention to portray her as uncivilized. Moreover, it reveals their inability to distinguish between African American and African culture, perceiving her solely as a black individual without acknowledging any kind of differentiation. According to Hostetler, Helga becomes ensnared in a predetermined role shaped by the desires of her relatives rather than her own aspirations. They exploit her difference by parading her before Danish high society—particularly the famous painter Axel Olsen, in hopes of social advancement and a potential marriage (Hostetler 41). This passage, in which Olsen speaks to her family about painting her instead of directly addressing her, exemplifies her subordinate position:

> The great man hadn't addressed a word to her. Here she was, a curiosity, a stunt, at which people came and gazed. And was she to be treated like a secluded young miss, a Danish frøkken, not to be consulted personally, even on matters affecting her personally? She, Helga Crane, who almost all her life had looked after

> herself, was she now to be looked after by Aunt Katrina and her husband? It didn't seem real. (Larsen 81-82)

The phrase "a curiosity, a stunt, at which people came and gazed" highlights how Helga feels objectified and presented as an attraction for others to see. This suggests that she is seen as an exhibition rather than an individual. The fact that she is being observed by others, presumably due to her uniqueness or otherness, reinforces the notion of her objectification. In addition to the colonial discourse, this passage also highlights gender inequality and the way Helga is treated based on her womanhood. The mention of her being "treated like a secluded young miss, a Danish frøkken" implies that she is being limited to traditional gender roles and denied the autonomy to make decisions for herself. One can conclude that her aunt fails to see her as an individual with free will and emotions, instead viewing her as a curiosity to be possessed and exploited.

Similarly, Danish society perpetuates Helga's othering by sexualizing her and denying her full recognition. A passage in the novel particularly highlights how Danish women do not feel any jealousy towards Helga, perceiving her as someone who does not hold much significance in their lives. They view her as attractive and intriguing, possessing an exotic and almost wild charm. However, she is quickly marginalized and perceived as an outsider, which is why they do not see her as a rival (Larsen 80). This exclusion is rooted in the West's desire to assert its cultural and racial superiority, maintaining control over those who diverge from their prescribed standards. In Olsen's perception, Helga is reduced to a trophy, objectified, and treated as a possession. This aligns with the racist and misogynistic ideologies that Hazel Carby discusses in *Reconstructing Womanhood*, which portray black women as hypersexual beings (Carby 174). However, Helga's refusal of Olsen's proposal signifies her realization that she cannot be reduced to a mere object or an empty stereotype.

Copenhagen citizens' perception of Helga as an exotic object can be analyzed from the perspective of *Orientalism*. It correlates with the lack of agency and consent given to the Oriental woman Said discusses in his book, exemplified by Flaubert's encounter with an Egyptian courtesan. The author argues that Flaubert, being a wealthy European male figure, assumed the role of speaking for and representing her. This dynamic is tied to historical forms of domination, which granted him not only physical possession of Kuchuk Hanem but also the authority to define her as "typically Oriental" to his readers (Said 6). An analogy can be made with Helga's presence in Copenhagen. One can observe comparable themes of power dynamics and representation. Just like the Oriental woman in Flaubert's encounter, Helga's voice and agency are diminished or even suppressed. She is often spoken for or represented by others; she is not even able to choose her clothes according to her own preferences.[5]

The protagonist only gains insight into Olsen's perception of her once she contemplates her portrait. She recognizes Olsen's representation as a disturbing and sensual entity that barely reproduces her actual appearance. In this context, Ann Rayson attributes the racist and sexist representations to a deeply rooted stereotype originating from the institution of slavery, which depicts black women as a sexual Amazon always available (Rayson 89). Olsen's depiction is indicative of typical colonial portrayals of "the other." This elucidates the reason why the independent Helga appears at first content with the attention she receives, tolerating her objectification and even deriving pleasure from it. However, her comprehension was flawed as she remained unaware of the fact that those in her surroundings viewed her not according to her own

[5] Helga's position as a descendant of enslaved Africans likely influenced the way she was perceived and treated in Denmark, amplifying her exoticization, and reducing her agency. While Said's Orientalism theory might not directly align with the specific historical context of the African American or black diasporic experience, it provides an optimal framework to explore larger themes of race and power, and the loss of individual agency, which resonate with Helga's interactions in Copenhagen.

perception of herself, as a bourgeois African American woman, but rather as exoticized and sexualized.

As soon as Helga realizes her subordinate position in Danish society, she concludes that she will always be an outsider in this setting. Yves Clemmen claims that she is examining the way others perceive her and acknowledges that the distinction is not placed where she personally locates it. Instead, this disparity transforms into a form of oppression rather than self-actualization (Clemmen 465). This means that the attention she receives is no longer enjoyable; ultimately, the experience causes her to yearn to vagabond in order to flee her humiliation and rage . In a powerful act of defiance, Helga challenges and demolishes the distorted colonialist and misogynistic images that have been imposed upon her while alluding to slavery and her ownership. Her words in this passage carry weight as she firmly announces: "But you see, Herr Olsen, I'm not for sale. Not to you. Not to any white man. I don't at all care to be owned" (Larsen 97). This passage effectively demonstrates the intersection of these two very different paradigms; Helga asserts her independence as a black woman and consequently breaks the orientalist depiction attributed to her race and gender. She rejects the notion of being reduced to a commodity and refuses to relinquish her autonomy in the face of the racist ideology that interpellated her.

Helga's dissatisfaction with her life in Denmark also highlights her paradoxical condition. She is overwhelmed by a deep and profound sense of shame when the local community discovers a hidden facet of her identity during a visit to the great circus. This revelation occurs as two black performers showcase their musical and dancing talents on the stage. Her intense feelings of hatred towards the African American men could potentially be attributed to her unconscious recognition that they are also subjected to the same colonialist perspective that she experiences in her interactions, a process that impacts her subconsciously. However, it is precisely during this

moment that a newfound admiration for African American culture begins to take root within her. She finds herself drawn back to the circus repeatedly, captivated by the aspects of her identity that she once sought to ignore. Through these experiences, she gradually came to recognize that the fascination exhibited by the European audience stemmed from an appreciation for the distinctive qualities and talents possessed by the African American performers (Larsen 92-93). The paradox lies in Helga's shift of desires as she initially expresses reservations about belonging to the New Negro society. The interest she develops comes as a contradiction of her previous decision to break from the African American community, suggesting the complexity and evolving nature of her quest for identity. Her everlasting struggle to find a sense of belonging further reinforces the notion that she can only truly fulfill her need through a permanent state of vagabondage. I observe that the attention she garners is always temporary, and by embracing a vagabond lifestyle, she would likely continue to encounter the temporary forms of recognition and attention that fulfill her without having to deal with the insensitivity of the white population that surrounds her. However, upon realizing that the attention Helga received from the Danes was not the type she had anticipated, she rapidly attempts to evade it by developing an unexpected interest in her African American counterparts. Once she confesses to feeling homesick—not for America, but for black people—she sets off on a return voyage to the U.S.

Helga's return to America is characterized by her aimless wanderings, with few specific details from the text showcasing her vagabond lifestyle. The fact that she chooses to stay in a hotel room rather than at her friend's house signifies her inclination to maintain an outsider status and have only a temporary presence in the places she inhabits. Perceived through the lens of a hegemonic society, Helga consequently becomes subjected to othering in American society. This act highlights the power dynamics at play, where Helga, as a biracial woman, is positioned as

different and outside the normative boundaries set by mainstream culture. Europeans, on the other hand, view her as an exotic other, albeit with a paternalistic gaze influenced by their colonialist experience. She is thus fetishized, displayed as an exotic curiosity at the parties organized by her aunt. The pejorative image behind blackness and Africa reproduced in the American unconscious is, thus, nothing but the product of colonial ideologies promoting European superiority over the rest of the world. History journalist Erin Blakemore describes colonialism as the occupation of a sovereign territory by external invaders with the aim of exploiting its resources and subjugating its people. The specificity of the European model of colonialism is that it is also linked with cultural imperialism. The latter seeks to promote the cultural determiners of the oppressing nation, such as its language and religion, at the expense of those of the local identity (Blakemore). The Eurocentric worldview resulting from imperialism compels Europeans to deem anything non-European as inferior and odd.

In a separate vein, Helga's social status as an educated African American woman, combined with her white heritage, confers her the freedom to travel and indulge in a bourgeois vagabond lifestyle. This financial privilege empowers her to fully explore her identity and embark on journeys without fearing attack or exploitation, as might be the case for a female vagabond who appeared less polished or who had fewer elite connections. Jeanne Scheper makes an insightful claim by suggesting that the protagonist is seemingly defined by her elegant taste in clothing and her collection of expensive and idiosyncratic objects. This exemplifies a shift in consumption habits during industrialization and the rapid growth of capitalism and consumerist culture. Scheper argues that while this socioeconomic shift is often attributed to the white population, Helga, nevertheless, seems to enjoy her capacity to afford beautiful things (Scheper 689). The preceding argument comes to strengthen my claim that Helga epitomizes a privileged elite attempting to

imitate the bourgeois white culture. She skillfully utilizes her social standing to engage in vagabondage and assert her privileges, exploiting her ambiguous identity to challenge a pervasive stereotype that perpetuates the representation of black women almost exclusively as domestic workers[6].

Her ability to independently afford a luxurious lifestyle without relying on a male figure for support serves as a powerful challenge to the prevailing hegemonic society. Helga's refusal to conform to societal expectations by rejecting marriage reveals her capacity to sustain herself financially. She undertakes, through vagabondage, a life free from the constraints of heteronormative customs and gender dynamics, or what Kimberly Monda associates with the cancellation of possession (Monda 31). A way to replace her desire to belong is thus through surrounding herself with material objects and creating a sense of belonging through consumption. Johanna Wagner, on the other hand, states that Helga has a stronger feeling for her wardrobe than she does for men, which clearly indicates her detachment and inability to find a sense of belonging through marriage; instead, she prefers vagabondage and the freedoms it grants her. The author's claim also suggests that Helga's initial longing is to belong. However, as the argument progresses, it becomes apparent that her concept of belonging expands beyond mere social inclusion to encompass broader dimensions. She argues that Helga desires not money itself but the opportunities and experiences that money provides, such as leisure, attention, and beautiful surroundings, which strengthens my claim that bourgeois vagabondage fulfills her needs of attention and allows her to navigate different settings without the financial and social constraints bond to her gender. She becomes fixated on material possessions and external trappings. Her

[6] Ironically, Helga's perspective on money carries a touch of superstition. While she worries that acknowledging its importance only serves to magnify its influence over her life, she still communicates her social status through her expensive clothing, employing her chic wardrobe to showcase her uniqueness and draw attention to herself.

repeated emphasis on "Things. Things. Things" highlights her materialistic desire that only wealth can afford. It can be suggested that the protagonist's pursuit of a bourgeois vagabond lifestyle is not merely driven by the desire to belong to a specific family or group but is rather motivated by the aspiration for social mobility (Wagner 131-134). She is undoubtedly drawn to the social privileges associated with financial prosperity. This attraction is exemplified by her interest in her Danish family, whose elevated social status gives her access to the attention and luxurious surroundings that foster her sense of belonging. In light of the preceding claim, it becomes unmistakable that travel affords a unique form of mobility that substantially contributes to the development of the protagonist's identity. Consequently, one can assert that Helga is acutely aware of her privileged position and utilizes it to achieve the social mobility that allows her to be independent.

In Jeanne Scheper's analysis, the focus on Larsen's depiction of Helga as a modern woman brings to the forefront the complexities of subjectivity in relation to relocation and mobility. By examining Helga's constant movement and her search for identity, the author argues that Larsen presents a nuanced exploration of the limitations of self-authorship and the potential for liberation from gender dynamics and constraints. Larsen's novel is showcased as a demonstration that women who wander the modern urban landscape as shoppers, consumers, or tourists are not exclusively privileged white women. The novel expands this narrative by presenting Helga Crane as a woman of color, who occupies a multiplicity of positions within society. Scheper concludes that mobility can serve as a strategic form of resistance against the constraining nature of social categories, which are often constructed based on shared attributes or properties, inherently imposing limits and creating distinctions (Scheper 689-693). My argument meets Scheper's as it can be said that by actively engaging in vagabondage and almost arbitrary relocation, the protagonist challenges

these fixed categories and breaks free of the confinements they impose. However, it is noteworthy considering that Helga's contribution to the broader advancement of the New Negro woman is primarily indirect. Her quest for identity appears to be driven more by individualistic and egoistic motives, as she prioritizes her own interests rather than the collective good of the community. While Helga strives to become the embodiment of a New Negro woman, it is important to acknowledge that her representation largely pertains to herself, as many women within her community lack the same level of independence and the financial means that enable her to wander freely. For most African American women in this era, the pursuit of identity often takes a backseat to the challenging economic and social circumstances they face. Their realities confine them, limiting their opportunities for self-exploration and placing greater emphasis on survival within existing constraints. In addition, it can be added that due to her biracial heritage, Helga makes the unconscious choice to avoid full commitment to the causes advocated by the Harlem Renaissance. Instead, she devotes herself to what could appear to be the hedonism of vagabondage as she embraces her position as an outsider, although she does not always seem to be aware of this process.

Helga's inclination toward bourgeois vagabondage displays a sense of indecisiveness and contradiction when it comes to her expectations from life. On the one hand, she seeks a sense of belonging, but on the other hand, she fears settling down and uses vagabondage as a means to escape social responsibilities that she refuses to embrace. She acknowledges that there is something beyond material possessions and societal approval that she longs for. She labels this abstract longing as "happiness," although she admits to not fully understanding its nature. Her pursuit of happiness is characterized by a lack of clarity and tangibility. Unlike other concepts, such as hatred or kindness, which she can define and observe, happiness remains intangible and

elusive to her (Larsen 20). Wagner argues that it is evident that Helga demonstrates her agency and sexual subjectivity by rejecting each of her male suitors. Rather than conforming to societal expectations of securing conventional kinship ties through sex and marriage, Helga makes the conscious choice to remain independent and loyal to her own material well-being.

One can argue that Helga appears to be attracted to men who are unreachable, and when she finally manages to get their attention, she rejects them. This reinforces the argument that Helga only craves attention, and this is true for her relationships with men as well. Her rejection is often expressed through a feeling of disgust that she develops toward every man in her life. As she loses interest, she begins to focus on their flaws, which she had not even noticed before. Helga's desires are also characterized by contradictions, which explains her constant recourse to vagabondage. She blames her first fiancé for being a hypocrite for working in Naxos and also states feeling "a curious sensation of repugnance" towards him (Larsen 34). She also seizes the opportunity to challenge and reject the institution of marriage, as well as the conservative cultural norms prevalent among African Americans in the South. Conversely, she eventually returns to the South and marries the very symbol of African American values and traditions, a representative of the church. She ends up living a life that she would have rejected at the beginning of the novel. But she soon loses interest in the reverend and perceives him as unattractive and dirty, a similar pattern she had used with her previous suitors (Larsen 130).

A similar defensive response can be noted through Helga's final interactions with all her previous suitors, as is the case with Dr. Anderson and Axel Olsen. For instance, when she realizes the orientalist perspectives through which Olsen perceives her, she feels betrayed and immediately develops a deep feeling of repulsion. This shift in perspective becomes evident as Larsen uses

pejorative vocabulary to depict Olsen in a new and negative light. Helga's transformed perception of Axel Olson is particularly apparent in the following excerpt:

> She was too amazed to discover suddenly how intensely she disliked him, disliked the shape of his head, the mop of his hair, the line of his nose, the tones of his voice, the nervous grace of his long fingers, disliked even the very look of his irreproachable clothes. And for some inexplicable reason, she was a little frightened and embarrassed. (Larsen 95)

Drawing from the preceding passage, It is justifiable to assert that the protagonist uses this repulsion as a defensive pattern and a justification for her vagabondage. Indeed, it can be seen as a way to resist embracing submissive gender roles and traditional depictions of black women as inferior. Helga's decision to decline marriage proposals from her admirers exemplifies a purposeful longing to distance herself from her dread of conformity. Her rejection of marriage through vagabondage consequently becomes a means to assert her individuality through the demonstration of her independence and autonomy.

I align with Wagner's claim, which argues that Helga's enduring aversion to men, combined with her open contempt for intimacy, makes her a perfect candidate for a queerer reading (Wagner 130). Indeed, it can be argued that the protagonist's disinterest in men and lack of engagement in sexual life can also be attributed to her ambiguous sexuality. Throughout the novel, Helga appears to exhibit asexual tendencies, as there is no mention of her sexual life or any expressed interest in men until the last chapters of the novel. When her uncle confronts her about her refusal to marry Olsen, she finds it difficult to articulate her reasons. The following passage suggests that she carries a secret that remains concealed due to the social consequences that would ensue if revealed: "It's

just something—something deep down inside of me," she turns away, concealing a face overwhelmed by the threat of tears (Larsen 101). It is crucial to emphasize that Helga's decision to marry Reverend Green is not based on finding him attractive, as she refers to him as "the confusion of seductive repentance" (Larsen 127). This prompts the question of what exactly she is repenting for, possibly hinting at her queer desires. The pejorative language used to describe the Reverend Green, such as being referred to as a "rattish yellow man," further supports the notion that Helga lacks any physical attraction towards him. She later describes him in a highly negative manner, reinforcing her disinterest and contempt for him. The final and perhaps the most compelling evidence lies in the emotions that sex evokes within her. Helga depicts sex as a repugnant experience, one she must endure night after night. Her description of the night does not trigger metaphorical images of blossoms and flowers; instead, she describes it as a time filled with "rank weeds" (Larsen 131). The choice of adjectives to express her feelings toward sex clearly reveals her lack of pleasure in such moments, further emphasizing the likelihood of her ambiguous sexuality.

Clement argues that Helga Crane is portrayed as constantly asserting her distinctiveness to establish control and stability in her life. Her comfort and sense of self rely heavily on the perception of her individuality (Clemmen 462). Clemmen's claim elucidates that Helga's pursuit of distinction considerably influences her choices, which, in turn, accounts for her association with vagabondage and her perpetual pursuit of change as a means to preserve her individuality. By examining the various manifestations of her deviation from social standards, one can assert that her motivations and inner drives are superficial, which is why she wanders with no specific goals or hopes. Experiencing familial and community rejections has made her unable to recognize the

emotions associated with acceptance from the community and family. Consequently, I argue that she uses vagabondage to distinguish herself in order to gain acceptance in her hostile environment.[7]

It can be argued that Helga's desire for uniqueness also played a role in her conversion to Christianity. Prior to entering the church on that fateful rainy night, religion is not mentioned in *Quicksand*, and Helga does not exhibit signs of religious inclination. However, her recent experiences of frustration and rejection likely had a significant impact on drawing her toward religion. Her failed attempts to find a sense of belonging in Copenhagen, coupled with the rejection she experiences from Anderson, erode the exhilaration of the attention and the subsequent sense of validation that she craves. However, upon entering the room, Helga becomes the focal point of the congregation, particularly drawing the attention of the Reverend Pleasant Green (Larsen 121). Desperate to maintain the newfound position she has gained among these strangers; she mobilizes her marriage as an opportunity to remain at the center of attention. Being the wife of such an influential figure in the town adds to her appeal. Additionally, this sense of belonging is further reinforced by her connection to the African American community, a moment in her life where she finally seeks a genuine sense of belonging. Experiencing the humiliation with Olsen serves as a catalyst, deepening her understanding of her father's abandonment. Or as the narrative reveals: "Helga Crane felt sympathy rather than contempt and hatred for that father, who so often and so angrily she had blamed for his desertion of her mother" (Larsen 102). Her engagement with the Reverend marks the paradoxical culmination of Helga's vagabondage and decadent lifestyle. Instead of escaping the confines of the hegemonic society that has imprisoned her, she becomes

[7] One must acknowledge the difficulties that Helga faces when trying to establish emotional connections. These issues can primarily be traced back to her early life experiences. Indeed, She didn't have the opportunity to form a strong bond with her biological parents and was frequently shuffled among various relatives, who continuously dismissed her. This absence of a stable nurturing environment during her developmental years has led to complications in establishing emotional ties in her later life. Notably, even with her personal struggles, she does not abandon her children and sacrifices her freedom for them.

bound to the responsibilities of womanhood and motherhood, rendering her unable to escape her reality even through vagabondage. This unexpected outcome contrasts sharply with Helga's aspirations, echoing the experiences of the Ex-Colored Man, who also finds himself trapped within the constraints of the dominant culture.

Helga's attempts to escape the material world to find relief in religious conversion, sexual fulfillment, and denial of her aesthetic sense demonstrate her inner conflict as she is uncapable to find a sense of belonging through creating conventional social bonds. This compels her to make personal sacrifices, relinquishing her identity and essence in a quest to fit in through a form of religious rebirth which conform with the expectations of her social reality. In this line of argument, Ann Hostetler suggests that she consciously chooses to embrace poverty and anonymity, hoping to find a place for herself in a world that values her for her reproductive capabilities rather than her individuality. As the author writes, "Helga betrays herself as well" by denying the importance of her senses and the material world. Furthermore, the author emphasizes the physical discomforts Helga experiences during pregnancy, drawing parallels to her earlier experiences of racial discrimination. Helga's body, once a canvas for self-expression through clothing, becomes a symbol of her entrapment through the social construction of her biology. In this manner, the author demonstrates how both race and gender constructs restrict Helga's pursuit of self-discovery and identity. Her prolific ability to procreate comes at the expense of her creative pursuits (Hostetler 44). One can argue from Hostetler’s claim that Helga’s identity is not defined by her capacity to belong but rather the search itself defines her true essence as she only seems to belong through vagabondage. At the end of the novel, the memories of her past, aroused by the fragrances of cigarettes and Houbigant, confront the protagonist with the harsh realities of her present circumstances. As she recalls her previous life in the various settings she inhabited, these

recollections are tied to her vagabond life and the temporary moments of pleasure it created. Memories thus become her only opportunity to wander away from the reality in which she is trapped, suggesting her strong bonds with vagabondage. her sad reality.

Helga's conflicting desires can be summarized in the passage of the novel when she leaves Copenhagen for America. She wonders why it is not possible for her to have two separate lives or find contentment in a single place (Larsen 103). One can affirm that her contradictory desires for a sense of belonging and fulfillment potentially reflect her internal struggle with identity. Vagabondage, in the context of the protagonist's journey, emerges as a method for reconciling the different facets of her mixed-race identity. However, when she ultimately chooses to establish herself within the African American community, she finds that it only fulfills a fragment of her being, leading to a profound sense of internal dissatisfaction and unhappiness. Consequently, she realizes that she will never truly find complete belonging or acceptance in any particular setting. As a result, she succumbs to the expectations imposed upon her by the dominant society, embracing the predetermined roles assigned to her as both a black individual and a woman.

Moreover, In "Essence and the Mulatto Traveler," Jeffrey Gray highlights Frantz Fanon's discussion of mulatto fiction, which argues that the heroines are left with no other choice than to "go away." This idea is remarkably relevant in *Quicksand*, which is mainly concerned with the question of racial indeterminacy and geographical "place." Gray suggests that Larsen emphasizes the concept of a "quest for Self" as Helga moves between the black and white communities in the United States and Europe. This shuttling movement serves as the central theme of the narrative, which at the same time reflects the binarism of the African American novel of the Harlem Renaissance, caught between the notions of traditions and uplift. Thus, Larsen's *Quicksand* serves to illustrate the complex reality of racial and geographical identity within a larger cultural context.

The author also analyzes the implications of travel and movement for African American artists. He suggests that, even though Europeans may have essentialized representations of African Americans, travel allows artists to uncover the racial constructed-ness of representations on either side of the Atlantic, allowing the development of racial identity awareness through self-discovery. As a consequence, one can conclude that Helga's failure to "find herself" is not due to a lack of success but instead to her struggle to accept who she is as she does not feel comfortable anywhere but still embraces African American traditions though it leads her to a miserable outcome (Gray 259-260).

Upon examining the motivations of vagabondage and mobility in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand,* it becomes evident that Helga's pursuit of identity and belonging is deeply connected to her experiences of displacement and wandering. Her education and racial background enable her to partake of a form of bourgeois vagabondage, allowing her to travel without a fixed destination while avoiding the negative consequences typically associated with vagabondage.

Her mode of existence serves as a way of challenging both the gender dynamics and racial hierarchy rooted in society. The protagonist goes off the beaten track by assuming her sexual and financial independence. She rejects the gender dynamics that subordinate her to men, choosing instead to live as an independent and self-assured vagabond woman in the early phase of her life. Despite her advantageous background, Helga ultimately fails to find a sense of connection within both the African American and white communities. Just like the protagonist in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, by the end of the novel, Helga also finds herself trapped within the grip of a hegemonic society. As she navigates through various cities where she decides to live or visit, she encounters ephemeral moments of gratification and acknowledgment that satisfy her desire for attention and affiliation. Nevertheless, it is only upon embracing a perpetual state of rootlessness

that the protagonist manages to reconcile the diverse aspects of her biracial identity and attain a sense of connection.

The process of bourgeois vagabondage serves as a means for Helga to navigate through her multifaceted identities without fully committing to any of them. This process becomes fundamental for the protagonist as she encounters difficulties establishing a rooted social existence within white and black communities. Instead, she wanders and eventually finds a form of belonging in the attention she receives during her temporary sojourns. A key aspect of Helga's struggle is her failure to assume her predefined gender role as a black woman within the African American community. In addition to her nonconformity to and rebellion against social expectations, Helga Crane encounters rejection from her community due to her biracial background. The people within the educated caste with whom she interacts deny her the freedom to fully embrace herself by rejecting her white heritage, resulting in a deep frustration that ultimately finds expression through her vagabondage. On the other hand, the protagonist's efforts to connect with her white counterparts are fruitless as well due to her fetishization in Europe and the racism she experiences from her white family in the United States. In light of these social and racial complexities, vagabondage becomes a strategy for Helga to overcome the double rejection she endures. By constantly moving between different spaces and communities, she avoids being confined by societal expectations and norms; instead, she is able to interact with both communities, allowing her to develop her own understanding of identity.

Nevertheless, a question arises involving Helga's unwillingness to assimilate into the African American population. Is it a genuine failure to communicate across complex cultural divides, or rather a conscious refusal to integrate into what she considers to be a marginalized community? The preceding analysis has shown that the protagonist's lack of bonds with African

American counterparts is more likely explained by a desire to avoid ties with a discredited part of American society. More importantly, this reflection leads to the realization that her distancing from the group may be rooted in her unwillingness to relinquish her individuality. One can conclude that being an outsider allows Helga to preserve her distinctiveness and independence from racial and gender norms. This conclusion underscores that vagabondage plays a central role in shaping Helga's identity. Nonetheless, her failure to achieve liberation and sexual freedom exemplifies her incapacity to triumph over the hegemonic forces that ultimately consume her. As she relinquishes her identity and independence, she becomes a mere shadow of the once strong woman she aspired to be, surviving solely through the metaphysical vagabondage of her memories and imagination. The responsibility of motherhood prevents her from abandoning her children, evoking the painful memories of her own father's abandonment. This obligation traps her in a miserable life, constrained by societal gender roles imposed upon her as she is slowly dying.

General Conclusion

My M.A. thesis, "Mobility, Vagabondage, and the Claiming of Modern African American Diasporic Identity," has shed light on the formation and articulation of modern African American identity. The works of Johnson and Larsen both demonstrate the potent role of social mobility and vagabondage as tools of resistance and retrieval for African Americans amidst the challenges of modernity. Through the textual analysis of the Ex-Colored Man and Helga Crane in a state of flux, this thesis has connected a variety of theoretical frameworks, encompassing double-consciousness, Orientalism, and a new approach to vagabondage related to the modernist pursuit of identity. These concepts have not only unraveled the complexities of blackness and African American identity but also offered an innovative perspective on its evolution in an era characterized by heightened urbanization and mobility. From the prior analysis, it becomes evident that social and sexual transgressions have played a decisive role in shaping and defining the identities of both Helga Crane and The Ex-Colored Man. These transgressions, along with their ambiguous appearances, have granted them the perfect conditions for their bourgeois vagabond lifestyle and quest for self. Accordingly, this perfectly aligns with my previous claim that vagabondage should not be perceived as the fatalistic lifestyle depicted by Hayes. Alternatively, I consider it as a means of self-discovery and agency for these characters as they embrace a form of vagabondage that transcends regular survival. Indeed, their mixed-race background affords them the privilege of wandering comfortably and autonomously, unlike the majority of the African American community.

In both novels, the characters' experiences of mobility reflect Creswell's approach to mobility. Through his protagonist's journey, Johnson demonstrates how mobility can be double-

edged, with his character experiencing both the freedom and limitations of mobility due to his specific construction of racial identity. Helga is also subject to a similar dynamic of oppressive social factors, with the additional burden of her gender contributing further challenges for her to contend with. As a result, she is forced to endure the double burden of having to confront the racism and sexism she faces at home and abroad.

The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man and *Quicksand* both explore the complex ways in which mobility is connected to ideas of freedom, rebellion, and agency. This perfectly matches with Creswell's claim that mobility, such as walking, is a way to manipulate spatial organizations and create shadows and ambiguities (Cresswell 20). These novels use mobility to illustrate the power of the individual to challenge and escape oppressive circumstances. In the case of *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and *Quicksand*, the characters' mobility is shaped by the racial and class divisions of the time, as well as their privileged status related to class and color, which allows them to assert greater freedom of movement. Both protagonists develop a sense of identity through their experiences with vagabondage and travel, but the outcomes are different because of their decisions as well as the gender norms, which also is a limiting parameter for women. The Ex-Colored Man gives up on his dream to play ragtime and embraces a lifestyle of racial invisibility for the safety of his family. On the other hand, Helga is constantly striving for independence and autonomy in an oppressive and restrictive patriarchal society. The vagabondage and movement represent Helga's pursuit of personal autonomy that is continually thwarted due to the prevailing gender dynamics. Helga tries to find a place where she can fit in and feel comfortable through her travels across the United States and Europe. In contrast to the Ex-Colored Man, Helga is not trying to escape the racial hierarchy but instead is looking for a place where she can feel independent and belong. Through her travels, she comes to the realization that she will never fit

into the white world in which she was raised, a conclusion that ultimately leads her to conform to gender and racial norms by becoming a religious housewife in the deep South. This highlights how gender dynamics can significantly influence the outcome of a character's life, as Helga's desires are continually restrained.

In Creswell's discussion of the globetrotter and the hobo, a stark contrast between the experiences of these two types of travelers is presented. This distinction can be applied to the Ex-Colored Man and Helga Crane as privileged globetrotters, in contrast to the broader African American community, whose status is more often correlated with that of the hobo (Cresswell 22). As globetrotters, both the Ex-Colored Man and Helga Crane possess the agency to travel and explore diverse cultural landscapes, using their education, lighter skin, and social class as passports to overcome racial and geographical boundaries. Their privilege enables them to negotiate their identities more fluidly, benefiting from a degree of freedom and flexibility inaccessible to most other African Americans of that era. In contrast, the African American community at large, symbolically embodied by the hobo, faces significant constraints on their mobility due to systemic racism and socioeconomic barriers. The hobo's journey is shaped by marginalization and adversity, reflecting the lived experience of many African Americans who must navigate a world that continually restricts their opportunities for self-development and growth. This comparison highlights the power of choice in determining identity and shows that the choice of whether to move or stay still is an integral part of the African American experience. Creswell's distinction between choosing and being compelled to move is also very important to consider in order to understand how African American identity is shaped by the choices made in the context of an oppressive society. By drawing this analogy, we can better understand the fact that our two protagonists stand as bourgeois forms of vagabonds, considering their ease in moving across

different settings. This implies that they are not being forced to move but are taking advantage of their class status to explore their identities.

Helga's mobility is motivated by a sense of dissatisfaction as she fails to find her place in a world that both marginalizes and fetishizes her as a mixed-race woman. Her movements across various locations in the United States and Europe stand for a form of vagabondage that seeks to escape the objectification she witnesses, along with the limitations of racial and gender expectations on her life. In contrast, the Ex-Colored Man experiences mobility as a means of self-exploration and reinvention of African American identity through music. His vagabondage opens his eyes to his identity, leading him to question the social constructs of race in his country. Neither of these novels embraces the romanticized notions of travel and vagabondage found in works such as Claude McKay's *Romance in Marseille.* Both protagonists' quests can instead be considered as forms of self-discovery and detachment from racial stereotypes as they are able to move comfortably without constant fear of what to expect from their destinations. Additionally, the theme of parenthood arises as a significant element in the lives of the protagonists, both in terms of self-definition and their relationship to vagabondage. The Ex-Colored Man's decision to pass as white is mainly motivated by his determination to protect his children from racism and ensure a better future for them. Parenthood clearly had an influence on the protagonist's disconnection from his racial heritage, and it ultimately brought an end to his life as a vagabond. In *Quicksand*, Helga is even more affected by the limitations of her gender as she drives herself toward marriage. Motherhood can be seen as the logical outcome imposed by the patriarchal society, causing her to confront her gender role and abandon her aspirations. In this way, motherhood can be seen as a source of imprisonment and resignation for Helga, as it forces her to live a life of norms and conformities that she sought to avoid throughout her journeys.

The conclusions presented in the preceding chapters reveal that, for the protagonists of both novels, vagabondage represents a means to satisfy their need for belonging in specific situations and social environments. Both of them experience marginalization as they fail to be fully accepted within the white and black communities — which is also due to their unwillingness to fully embrace either of their racial identities because of the fact that they take greater advantage through their racial ambiguity. The Ex-Colored Man and Helga Crane can be considered privileged characters because of their social status and education. As characters who are both of mixed backgrounds, they are each endowed with a unique racial identity that allows them to move across racial boundaries and, to a certain degree, bypass some forms of discrimination. This provides them with more opportunities than the average individual African American. The Ex-Colored Man's privilege is especially evident in his ability to move between different cities without social or racial barriers. He is even able to play ragtime in segregated jazz clubs and develop an international career without much difficulty. This is due to his light-skinned complexion, which allows him to pass for white and be treated with a certain degree of respect. The same can be said about Helga's capacity to move from different settings without facing the obstacles of racial hierarchy. Her darker traits nonetheless expose her to gender stereotypes which affect the way she is portrayed and her capacity to fully experience psychic freedom. As a result, she develops a sense of belonging through her outsider status rather than as a member of the African American community. As a result, the outcomes of the two novels are entirely different but nevertheless intersect in the fact that both characters decide to close the chapter of their vagabond lives and settle.

Vagabonding and migration presented different motives and challenges for these characters showcasing a detachment from their counterparts. Their travels through different spaces, often

from the North to the South, are more about a journey to self-discovery and claiming a coherent social identity rather than being motivated by economic and practical reasons, as was the case for many who partook in the Great Migration north. Nevertheless, both characters still represent an essential aspect of African American identity. The regional experiences of the protagonists in both novels also contribute to their understanding of African American identity. In *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and *Quicksand*, the protagonists' travels take them to various locations, including the Deep South, the Cosmopolitan North, and multiple settings in Europe. Each region exposes them to unique facets of the African American experience, which ultimately contributes to their understanding of their racial identity, informed by their elite social status. Both characters are deeply rooted in an African American identity that provides each with a unique understanding of the experience of this community. Despite their privileged positions, both characters are still subject to forms of social limitations and racism. Some aspects of their personae thus represent a rising elite that rejects the African American community's predefined social status and challenges the hegemonic culture's limitations on them.

Works Cited

Andrade, Heather Russell. "Revising Critical Judgments of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*." *African American Review* 40.2 (2006): 257-270.

Baker, Houston A. *Turning South Again: Re-Thinking Modernism/Re-Reading Booker T.* Durham: Duke UP, 2001.

Blakemore, Erin. "What is Colonialism?". *National Geographic* 19 Feb 2019. Web. 4 June 2021.

Bombergen, Anne. "Passing Through Europe: Race and National Identity in James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man* and James Baldwin's *Giovanni*'s *Room*." *Journal of American Studies of Turkey* (2001): 23-32.

Burt, Janeula M. and Glennelle, Halpin. *African American Identity Development: A Review of the Literature*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association. New Orleans. Auburn Alabama, Auburn UP, 1998.

Carby, Hazel V. *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*. New York: Oxford UP, 1987.

Chaney, Michael A. "Traveling Harlem's Europe." *Journal of Narrative Theory 32* (2002): 52-75.

Clemmen, Yves W. A. "Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*: A Narrative of Difference." *CLA Journal* 40.4 (1997): 458-466.

Cole, Elizabeth R. and Safiya R. Omari. "Race, Class and the Dilemmas of Upward Mobility for African Americans." *Journal of Social Issues* 59.4, (2003): 785–802.

Connell, John, and Chris Gibson. *Sound Tracks: Popular Music, Identity and Place (Critical Geographies)* NewYork: Routledge, 2002.

Cresswell, Tim. "Towards a Politics of Mobility." *Environment and Planning D Society and Space* (2010): 17-31.

De Ruyter, Doret and Jim Conroy. "The Formation of Identity: The Importance of Ideals." *Oxford Review of Education* 28. 4 (2002): 509-522.

Du Bois, WEB. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Place?: Oxford World's Classics, 2007.

Edwards, Brent Hayes. *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 2003.

Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1995.

Gray, Jeffrey. "Essence and the Mulatto Traveler: Europe as Embodiment in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* ." *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 27.4 (1994): 257-270.

Hickman, Christine B. " The Devil and the One Drop Rule: Racial Categories, African Americans, and the U.S. Census." *Michigan Law Review* 95.5 (1997): 1161-1264.

Hinnov, Emily M. "Maneuvers of Silence and the Task of 'New Negro' Womanhood." *Journal of Narrative Theory* 42.1 (2012): 46-68. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24484782>.

Hostetler, Ann E. "The Aesthetics of Race and Gender in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*." *PMLA* 105.1*, Special Topic: African and African American Literature* (1990): 35-46.

Hutchinson, George. "Nella Larsen and the Veil of Race." *American Literary History 9.2* (1997): 329-349.

Johnson, James W. *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man and Other Writings*. New York: Barnes and Noble, 2007.

Larsen, Nella. *Quicksand*. New York: Dover Publications, 2006.

Lewis, David L. "Parallels and Divergences: Assimilationist Strategies of Afro-American and Jewish Elites from 1910 to the Early 1930s." *The Journal of American History* (2015): 543-564.

Locke, Alain. *The New Negro: Voice from the Harlem Renaissance*. Burbank, California. Touchstone, 1997.

Monda, Kimberly. "Self-Delusion and Self-Sacrifice in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*." *African American Review* 31.1 (1997): 23-39.

Morgan, Thomas L. "The City as Refuge: Constructing Urban Blackness in Paul Laurence Dunbar's *The Sport of the Gods* and James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man. African American Review* 38.2 (2004):213-237.

Nwankwo, Ifeoma Kiddoe. "Excerpt From Black Cosmopolitanism: Racial Consciousness and Transnational Identity in the Nineteenth-Century Americas." *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 6.1 (2015).

Patterson, Martha H. *The American New Woman Revisited*. Rutgers New Jersey, Rutgers UP, 2008.

Pfeiffer, Kathleen. "Individualism, Success, and American Identity in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*." *African American Review* 30.3 (1996): 403-419.

Powell, Kareina. M. *Identity and Power in Narratives of Displacement*. New York: Routledge, 2015.

Said, Edward D. *Orientalism*. New York: Penguin, 2003.

Scheper, Jeanne. "The New Negro Flâneuse in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*" *African American Review* 42.3-4 (2008): 679-695.

Smyth, J. E. "Against the Beat: Ragtime, Black History, and Postmodernism."*Film Quarterly* 67.1 (2013): 7-13.

Stepto, Robert B. *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative*. Urbana: University of Illinois, 1991.

Sugimori, Masami. "Narrative Order, Racial Hierarchy, and 'White' Discourse in James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and *Along This Way*." *MELUS* 36.3 (2011): 37-62.

Thomas, Brian W. "Struggling With the Past: Some Views of African-American Identity." *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 6.2 (2002):143-151,

Wagner, Johanna M. "(Be)Longing in *Quicksand*: Framing Kinship and Desire More Queerly." College Literature. 39.3(2012):129-159.

Wilks, Jennifer Margaret. Modernist Women of the Black Atlantic: Gender and Intellectual Citizenship in the Harlem Renaissance and Negritude. The Faculty of the Graduate School, 2003. ProQuest.