Jessie Fauset’s *Plum Bun* and the City’s Transformative Potential

CATHERINE ROTTENBERG
Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

We are mainly indebted to writers of fiction for our more intimate knowledge of contemporary urban life. (3)

Robert E. Park, “The City,” 1925

In a moment of accumulated outrage at the humiliations of everyday racism, Angela Murray, the protagonist of Jessie Redmon Fauset’s 1928 novel *Plum Bun*, decides to leave what she considers her staid hometown of Philadelphia and launch herself “into a freer, fuller life” that can be had only in a truly great city like New York (80). To avail herself of the greatest possible freedom, she also chooses to cross the color line and pass as white. This is a decisive—if expected—moment in the text, and the rest of the narrative details the various repercussions of Angela’s daring decision to set off as an unfettered woman. Fauset’s novel thus traces Angela’s movement over time and space: from her early years in a respectable black neighborhood in Philadelphia, through her adventures as a young woman passing as a white artist in bohemian Greenwich Village, and eventually to reclaiming her racial identity and moving to Paris to pursue her art. At the novel’s conclusion, Angela is coming into her own as a portrait artist and has been reunited with the love of her life, Anthony Cross.

Set exclusively in various and increasingly cosmopolitan city spaces—from Philadelphia to New York City to Paris—Fauset’s novel participates, at least to some degree, in the “urban aesthetics” of Harlem Renaissance literature that Maria Balshaw details in *Looking for Harlem*. In her book Balshaw considers the then-nascent discipline of urban sociology as practiced by thinkers such as Robert E. Park, whose words serve as the epigraph to my essay, and Charles S. Johnson. She demonstrates that their progressive ideas about urban space formed an important background to the optimism of the Harlem Renaissance
Yet Balshaw does not discuss Fauset’s work at any length, despite the fact that Plum Bun—like Nella Larsen’s Quicksand and Passing—clearly takes part in the ongoing debate about “the embeddedness of African American women in consumer culture and in the city” (97, emphasis added). Because Plum Bun engages in important ways with both urban aesthetics and the concerns of urban sociology, I will demonstrate that the novel can be read as raising crucial and timely questions about the emancipatory potential of urban space for upwardly mobile black women.

By emphasizing the centrality of city space in Plum Bun, I add a new dimension to literary criticism on Fauset while reinforcing Kathleen Pfeiffer’s claim that the novel’s narrative is “neither anachronistic nor marginal” but rather modern, complex, and worthy of serious scholarly attention (80). Susan Tomlinson has convincingly argued that Plum Bun “explores the intersections of race and gender constructions of black and white American women” (90). Angela Murray, Tomlinson suggests, manages to emulate two norms of womanhood: that of the New Negro Woman—characterized by racial pride and sexual respectability—and that of the New Woman—characterized by sexual experimentation and the pursuit of a public career. Yet, according to Tomlinson, not until the novel’s end—when Angela is in Paris, has disclosed her racial identity, and begins to devote herself to her artistic career—“do both gender and racial advancement coalesce in the unified female subject” (90). The impossibility of combining these norms in one female subject in turn reveals their contradictions and mutual exclusivity. Cherene Sherrard-Johnson makes a similar point, suggesting that the passing character as artist is the locus of Fauset’s oscillation between advocating an avant-garde womanhood and endorsing a more conventional New Negro womanhood (Portraits 49). Pfeiffer, on the other hand, examines the narrative in light of its even larger cultural context, suggesting that Fauset uses passing as a way to reflect on “the multivalent transformations in which white American culture at large was then participating” (80). Defending Plum Bun from critics who have summarily dismissed it, Pfeiffer claims that the novel is deeply invested in the larger philosophical question preoccupying contemporaneous US intellectuals, namely, whether “absolute freedom aid[s] or obstruct[s] the development of meaningful identity” (79). Fauset consequently records a general cultural instability while “writ[ing] race into its account” (86).

Each of these scholars has significantly revised earlier critical assessments of Fauset’s fiction as being ideologically motivated or as offering mere “moralistic portraits of the black middle class” (Sherrard-Johnson, Portraits 49). Indeed, until the 1980s, Fauset was considered to be what Langston Hughes called a
“midwife” of the Harlem Renaissance, and scholars had little positive to say about any of her four novels (218).\footnote{Catherine Rottenberg} Building on the foundations and insights of current scholarship, I shift the critical focus toward the unusually acute spatial sensibility of Fauset’s best-known and best-received novel. I argue that *Plum Bun* sheds light on the intricate and constitutive relationship among urban existence, emancipation, race, and gender—a relationship with which contemporary feminist urban studies is still preoccupied. The novel engages in and contributes to the debates regarding the modern city’s transformative potential, since, like the early urban sociologist Park and the contemporary feminist urban scholar Elizabeth Wilson, Fauset offers a relatively optimistic vision of the metropolis. The city functions as a centripetal and liberating force in the text. Yet Fauset’s vision of the city is nuanced and critical since it is informed not only by a gender and class perspective—à la Wilson—but also by a racial one. In *Plum Bun*, various upwardly mobile urban women attempt to emulate the ideals of the New Woman or the New Negro Woman. By juxtaposing the experiences of two sisters—Angela and Virginia Murray—the narrative illustrates how the city’s emancipatory potential takes on a different hue depending on whether the female subject traversing urban space is white or black.

Fauset’s introduction of race, I will show, problematizes Wilson’s claim about the city’s liberating potential for women in a number of important ways. First, the narrative’s trajectory demonstrates that gender norms are always already racialized and, conversely, that racial norms are always already gendered. This further complicates the notion of the “emancipatory city” that feminist urban scholars such as Loretta Lees have recently discussed. Work that sees the city as a space of emancipation often assumes a white subject. As a result, such scholarship has not yet attended to the specific interplay between race and gender norms—an interplay that tends to reinforce racial hierarchies and oppression. Bringing race into the discussion helps emphasize that while the city itself is produced and organized by and through dominant power relations, urban space has the potential—more than any other space—to put normative schemes under pressure. By comparing the New Woman and the New Negro Woman, *Plum Bun* provides insight into how acceptable black middle-class feminine behavior was being intensely renegotiated during the Harlem Renaissance. The new modern black bourgeois norm that emerged from this renegotiation certainly opened possibilities for African American women in the public sphere, yet it simultaneously circumscribed black female sexuality. Thus read, the novel offers a complex perspective on the city’s transformative potential and can add complexity to Wilson’s still influential analysis.
As Meredith Goldsmith has noted, Fauset displays her spatial acuteness from the very beginning of the novel by opening with a description of Opal Street, the “[n]arrow” and “unsparkling” Philadelphia street on which Angela and her younger, darker-complexioned sister, Virginia, grow up (49). These early descriptions emphasize the disadvantages of the sisters’ unpretentious but eminently respectable life. Opal Street “has no mystery, no allure”; it has none of the marks of cosmopolitanism—“either of exclusiveness or of downright depravity” (11). The neighborhood, while urban, has the feel and sensibility of a small town or suburb. The adjectives Fauset uses most often to describe the street on which the two sisters live are “tiny” and “little” (see, for example, 12, 58, and 366). Everyone knows everyone else in the colored neighborhood. Everyone goes to church on Sunday; every house is a nearly exact copy of the house next door. Given this background, it is no surprise that the young Angela, who wants nothing less than “light, pleasure, gaiety and freedom,” feels constrained by the tight-knit and small community of Opal Street (13). As she enters young adulthood, she feels increasingly circumscribed and despairs of trying to widen her circle of friends among the bourgeois black Philadelphia community, since “[i]f she made calls there would be merely a replica of what she was finding in her own household” (67).

Angela’s desire “for broader horizons” (64) and the link between broader horizons and cosmopolitan spaces can be read as expressing a sentiment that Wilson analyzes in her pathbreaking book *The Sphinx in the City*. Wilson argues that European and American cities presented new prospects for women, since the very nature of modern cities helped weaken traditional gender divisions and the authority of the patriarchal family. In contrast to the small community, which was more strictly controlled by traditional roles, urban living promised women economic independence as well as cultural, commercial, and sexual freedom from the patriarchal household. The city, Wilson claims, “is the zone of individual freedom. There, the ties of family and kinship may be loosened and avenues of escape may open up” (16). If in the late nineteenth century “[f]or middle-class women the most likely alternative to marriage was a career and spinsterhood,” by the turn of the twentieth century an increasing number of urban women had begun to assert “the right to heterosexual experience outside marriage, or sometimes to lesbianism, and they fought for a place alongside men in artistic and political life” (65). Wilson’s insights about the city’s impact on women’s lives have greatly influenced feminist urban studies and have sparked debate about whether and in what ways the city can liberate women by enabling them to escape gender constraints.4
Wilson’s framework is particularly useful for reading *Plum Bun* since Fausset explicitly examines the liberating potential of urban life for her protagonist. From the moment Angela is introduced to the reader, she articulates her desire to live without the narrowness of the suburb or small town: “Freedom! That was the note which Angela heard oftenest in the melody of living which was to be hers” (13). Described as fiercely independent by nature, strong, and unable to countenance restraint, she yearns to be in the company of “people with a broad, cultural background behind them, or, lacking that, with the originality of thought and speech which come from failing, deliberately failing, to conform to the pattern” (67). To Angela during her adolescent years, the little house on Opal Street represents “the dingiest, drabtest chrysalis that had ever fettered the wings of a brilliant butterfly” (12). Goldsmith has also observed that the respectable middle-class neighborhood in which Angela’s house is located is thus linked with narrowness and confinement while what the protagonist most desires is the “broad[ness]” and freedom that is associated with the metropolis (49).

During her years in Philadelphia, Angela is doubly oppressed: by the tight strictures of race (and, more specifically, the notion of propriety that goes with these strictures) within her own community and by the blatant racism of the white world. Her black middle-class community is preoccupied with respectability and the race question. The young men in Angela and Virginia’s circle are training to be teachers or workers in the post office—the only middle-class professions open to black men—even though their ambitions are elsewhere. Young women who do not want to work as domestics have only one other choice of profession: teaching. The life of this upwardly mobile community is saturated by what Candice M. Jenkins has aptly termed the “salvific wish,” loosely defined as the embrace of bourgeois propriety, especially in matters concerned with intimate sexual conduct (95). On the one hand, then, the norms of respectability and race pride shape the black Philadelphian middle-class community. Angela’s sister, Virginia, for example, finds the security and respectability of this community to be sufficient for her well-being. Angela, by contrast, feels these norms to be unbearable and frequently voices her impatience with talk of race. “I’m sick of this business of always being below or above a certain norm,” she tells her friends. “Doesn’t anyone think that we have a right to be happy simply, naturally?” (54).

On the other hand, Angela experiences the poison of racism in the larger white community of Philadelphia. Once her fellow pupils in high school or in the Art Academy find out that she is black, their interactions with her change. In one instance, when the wife of her art instructor learns that Angela is not white, she tells her husband, “Coloured, is she? Well, she shan’t come here

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again, Henry” (72). Such experiences, which Angela ascribes more to race and racism than to gender and sexism, propel her to declare that she is “going to leave Philadelphia, give up school teaching, break away from [her] loving friends and acquaintances, and bust up the whole shooting match” (77).

While Fauset’s protagonist clearly understands cities to be potential sites of freedom, independence, and nonconformity for adventurous middle-class women, *Plum Bun* demonstrates that the pull of city life for Angela has as much to do with her attempt to escape race and racism—both within the black community and within larger white society—as it does with her attempt to eschew traditional gender roles. Significantly, Angela decides to move to New York after her father and mother die. She and her sister thus jointly inherit the tiny house on Opal Street. The two young women, now financially independent, even employ a domestic servant. Angela’s dissatisfaction with the constraints of life in Philadelphia is less related to tangible patriarchal control and more related to the racism she encounters. Her story thus complicates the tendency of urban feminist scholars to assume that women flee to the city to escape patriarchal control and traditional gender roles.6

By the novel’s second section, Angela has escaped to New York City and has successfully loosened her ties to her family and her former community, which allows her to pass as white and, she believes, to free herself from normative black middle-class respectability. As Tomlinson has pointed out, “[u]pon arriving in New York, Angela cloaks herself in a New (white) Woman persona—complete with bacherlorette apartment, art classes, free-thinking friends, and eventually extramarital sex” (94). Moreover, as if to highlight the connection between liberation and the city, Angela repeatedly glories in her freedom and independence once she arrives in the Big Apple. Her life seems “free and . . . full,” and initially she believes that “she [is] getting acquainted with life in her own way without restrictions or restraint” (92, 87–88).

*Plum Bun*’s clear link between Angela’s urban life and racial emancipation reveals that Wilson’s notion of the emancipatory city is premised in many ways on the assumption of whiteness and does not fully recognize that gender norms are always already racialized. A closer examination of Angela’s trajectory in New York can, I believe, add a crucial element to Wilson’s analysis, for the tempered urban optimism of Fauset’s novel can be read as a corrective to current feminist discussions of urban space.

PASSING IN THE CITY

It is important to note that, at the beginning of the novel, constraint and freedom are related to two different but interrelated themes. One theme is Angela's
initial conviction that her racial affiliations rather than her gender profoundly impede her progress. As Fauset puts it, “[I]t seemed to Angela that all the things which she most wanted were wrapped up with white people. . . . [F]or the present they had power and the badge of that power was whiteness” (73). In other words, for the young and ambitious Angela, restriction is associated with blackness, while freedom and liberation are associated with whiteness. Thus Angela thinks, “[T]he good things of life . . . could come to you in America if either you were not coloured or the fact of your racial connections was not made known” (46). This sentiment is in tune with Cheryl A. Wall’s claim that in the Jazz Age the social climate was such that racial politics took precedence over feminist issues (12). Passing as white, then, represents the widening of Angela’s horizons in directions that would have been unimaginable for a middle-class black woman during the 1920s.

Constraint and freedom are also—and crucially—presented in spatial terms, and space is a fairly neglected theme in Fauset literary criticism.7 In *Plum Bun*, social freedom is not only linked to whiteness, as Pfeiffer has claimed, but is also inextricably tied to the texture of urban life. Whiteness and passing are merely the means that allow Angela to loosen the final restraints that she sees as preventing her from enjoying those things “which her heart craved, bustle, excitement and fashion,” all of which are found exclusively in the metropolis (17).

The racial and the spatial elements of freedom coalesce in passing, since in order for Angela to pass—not occasionally, as her mother had done, but to pass over into the white world—she has to break ties with her past and find a place where no one knows her: “[S]he would go to New York or to Chicago, certainly to some place where she could by no chance be known” (80). The condition for the possibility of passing is anonymity, which, as the narrative so clearly highlights, is most easily realized in a big city. While it may be true that distance from one’s hometown might be enough to ensure successful passing, urban life links anonymity with heterogeneity, making the city the preferred destination for the vast majority of passing protagonists in Jazz Age African American literature. Anonymity is a necessary but insufficient condition for these protagonists, who, like Angela, are searching not only for white privilege but for the expanded possibilities that being white in the metropolis can offer.

According to Balshaw, the passing woman is “a quintessentially modern figure—characterized by her anonymity, her restless pursuit of pleasure, disavowal of family and racial belonging as well as her enthusiastic embrace of the material experience of modern life” (11). Sherrard-Johnson argues that the passing protagonist allows Fauset to negotiate the pitfalls of both avant-garde womanhood and the New Negro Woman. Even though I concur with both of these analyses, I would emphasize the vital role of the city: The passing woman

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in Plum Bun is first and foremost a quintessentially urban figure (and thus, as a corollary, a modern and perhaps even modernist figure) because she is interested in opening up possibilities for herself that whiteness in and of itself does not. After all, during the Harlem Renaissance—a period of exceptional literary output—no major passing female protagonist decides to live as a white woman in a town in the United States, and this is particularly true of Angela Murray. The anonymity of Manhattan allows Angela to pass successfully; however, Fauset’s protagonist decides to pass in New York—and not simply somewhere far away from her hometown—because she wants to take advantage of the broadmindedness and opportunity she thinks the city will provide. No other space allows these conditions to be met simultaneously. Thus passing and the city are inextricably linked in the novel, and by placing her light-enough-to-pass character in the metropolis where she can thrive, Fauset can interrogate the liberating potential of urban life—first, as I argue, for white bourgeois women and then for black middle-class women.

Bohemian Greenwich Village

The second section of Plum Bun also begins with a description of an urban street: Fifth Avenue. Like Opal Street, this famous avenue is narrow but not unpretentious. Fauset likens it to a canyon. It boasts towering buildings and is the very “manifestation of living.” Fourteenth Street also offers a striking contrast to Opal Street. It is full of people who “were living at a sharper pitch of intensity than those [Angela] had observed in Philadelphia” (87). Angela is soon consumed by the bustle and the energy of these New York streets. Exhilarated by her newfound freedom and independence, she dreams of having a salon, “where men and women, . . . real, alive, free and untrammeled in manner and thought, should come and pour themselves out to her sympathy and magnetism” (88).

By using terms like “freedom,” “independence,” and “unrestraint” to depict Angela’s initial feelings of what it means to traverse metropolitan space, Fauset seems to be meditating on the opportunities the truly cosmopolitan city offers young, ambitious, and talented women (88, 89, 92). Of course, the feeling of emancipation is related to throwing off the shackles of racial prejudice, but the sense of freedom is just as much about being a young white woman alone in the city with the future ahead of her. As Tomlinson observes, Angela discovers that she can put “herself on the marriage market at its most commercial level” or reject marriage altogether (94). She can use her money as she pleases (and thus eventually face poverty) or make a living using her skills. Indeed, the second part of the novel explores how the city (historically) enabled middle-
class white women to pursue new possibilities. For Angela, the city’s pull might have been the desire to escape racism, but once she chooses to pass as white, she experiences, and to some degree participates in, the struggle of urban middle-class white women to widen their horizons by renegotiating traditional gender roles and expectations (96–97). In other words, by abjuring her racial past, she gains entry into the lives of perhaps the most non-normative bohemian yet middle-class women—women who take full advantage of urban life to carve out modern female identities. In one sense, it is only because Angela has thrown off the shackles of race that the issue of gender emerges so forcibly.

This second section of the novel is titled “Market.” Here the reader is introduced to several women who seem to typify various versions of the New Woman ideal: Paulette Lister, who clearly embodies the attributes of the New Woman; Martha Burden, who is trying to live up to her radical ideals of gender equality; and Rachel Salting, the Jewish librarian who has artistic aspirations. While scholars such as Tomlinson and Goldsmith have noted the many types of New Women in the novel, I emphasize that *Plum Bun* demonstrates how urban life has made these types possible and allowed them to flourish.

During her sojourn in the white bohemian neighborhood of New York City, Angela becomes friends with the artists Martha Burden and Paulette Lister. Both are women of “markedly independent methods of thought and action” (207). Martha has retained her surname even though she is married, and her relationship with her husband, Ladislas Starr, is based on her unconventional ideals of mutual giving. Although the text does not state this outright, it seems clear that Martha had moved to the city from an affluent Long Island suburb in order to live out her “high-falutin advanced ideas” (195). She has defied upper-class norms by living with her lover for two years before she agrees to marry him. She earns her own living by selling art and has become “a caricaturist of no mean local reputation” (109). Like the modern urban women Wilson describes, Martha has “claimed the right to heterosexual experience outside marriage” and is fighting for a place alongside men in artistic and political life (65). Martha and Ladislas introduce Angela to a wide variety of “specialists”: war correspondents, psychiatrists, conscientious objectors, and press agents (113). These gatherings, importantly, include powerful, successful, and extremely opinionated women who claim intellectual and political parity with men. At one such event there is a scene in which Angela registers surprise that Mrs. Cecil, a press agent, knows more about “a Bill pending before Congress” than the male corporation lawyer with whom she was having a “bitter argument” (114).

The most flamboyant character, of course, is Paulette, the epitome of the New Woman. When Angela first meets her, Paulette is an illustrator for a fashion magazine. Yet this is only one of her various incarnations, since she has
met with every conceivable experience. She smokes, drinks, eats, and relates to sexual intimacy like a man but does so without losing claim to her femininity. Furthermore, “like men, [who] took love and marriage as the sauce of existence” rather than its essence, Paulette “var[ies] her lovers but she never varied in the manifestation of her restless, clever mental energy. At no time did she allow her ‘love-life’...to interfere with her mental interests” (274). Paulette manages to defy traditional gender and sexual norms while pursuing a wide variety of careers or vocations.

Like the other notable women in Plum Bun, Paulette thrives because she lives in the city. She seems to exude all of the possibilities the city offers a woman interested in living life without the constraints of traditional gender norms or normative gender expectations. Where else could a woman conduct herself so completely according to her own laws and still maintain friendships and socialize with other middle-class, albeit liberated, men and women? Where else would she find an upwardly mobile community that accepts her even as she deliberately thwarts mainstream social mores? Indeed, of all the women portrayed in the novel, Paulette is the most emancipated—free to make her own decisions about how to live her life. But Angela also instinctively understands that Paulette is “a remarkable personage, a woman apart” (275). Most women, even those who have escaped to the city and attempt to emulate the New Woman ideal, are still profoundly influenced by dominant gender norms and yearn for the social approbation that marriage affords.

Paulette most clearly approximates Angela’s early fantasy that people who have originality of thought and speech deliberately fail to conform. According to Tomlinson, “Paulette’s subjectivity haunts both the text and protagonist” because she represents the possibility of living and thriving outside of sexual convention and accepted codes of female ambition (94). But Paulette is white, and this clearly makes a difference. Even at the height of her enthusiasm and her conviction that she is freer than she has ever been in her life, Angela has a dawning sense that despite the great city’s heterogeneity and tolerance, if not encouragement of difference, certain hierarchies restrict “all that richness, all that fullness of life which she so ardently craved.” She admits “that men had a better time of it than women, colored men than colored women, white men than white women” (88).

Thus, the novel clearly meditates on the significance of the city for women looking to broaden their horizons, and the narrative is clearly optimistic—yet this optimism is not without its qualifications. The city is not always what Goldsmith characterizes as a “panacea” for women attempting to escape confining norms, as Fauset’s description of Rachel Salting makes clear (60). Rachel, Angela’s Jewish neighbor on Jayne Street, hails from Utica, New York;
like Angela, she has migrated from her more conventional hometown to Greenwich Village. Although she is desperate to marry her beau and clearly wants the security of marriage, she is still a young, mobile woman living alone in the city. She is “a curious mixture of Jewish conservatism and modernity” (211). On the one hand, she is an ambitious and aspiring playwright; on the other hand, she is willing to sacrifice her career—although only for the first few years of marriage—for her future husband. Toward the end of the novel the reader learns that Rachel’s fiancé is Catholic and that Rachel comes from an orthodox Jewish family in Utica. She has obviously broken away from her family’s orthodox and patriarchal traditions—so much so that she wants nothing more than to marry someone outside her faith. This, as Angela discovers, is an unforgivable transgression to Rachel’s father. Ultimately, and despite the fact that Rachel is potentially independent enough to disown her family and marry John, she hesitates to go against her father’s wishes, since she is mortally afraid of his “curse” (312). At the time, Angela cannot understand how her friend can give up her love for such an archaic attitude. “‘Love,’ [Angela] said musing to herself . . . ‘is supposed to be the greatest thing in the world but look how we smother and confine it. Jews mustn’t marry Catholics; white people mustn’t marry coloured—’ ‘Oh well, of course not,’ Rachel interrupted in innocent surprise. ‘I wouldn’t marry a nigger in any circumstances’” (313). Communal ties and deep-seated prejudice seem to exercise a psychic force that not even life in the heterogeneous metropolis can eradicate or dissipate. This appears particularly true for women who are positioned on the margins of majority culture.

Fauset’s description of Rachel highlights two different aspects of city life. First, the city facilitates unlikely matches, especially interreligious and inter-racial pairings. Clearly, had Rachel remained in Utica and in the folds of her orthodox family, the chances of her contemplating an interfaith marriage would have been significantly diminished. As Robert Park so acutely observed just over a decade before Fauset wrote her novel, only “[u]nder the conditions imposed by city life [do] individuals and groups of individuals, widely removed in sympathy and understanding, live together under conditions of interdependence” (27). Fauset is very conscious of this aspect of city life not only when she describes Rachel’s love affair but also when she describes other incidents in the novel. After all, Angela meets her very unlikely match—the white, wealthy, privileged, racist Roger Fielding, who becomes her lover rather than her husband—as a result of the serendipity of city life. Fauset also ascribes Rachel and Angela’s closeness to their being entirely cut off from their homes and from other natural resources of small communities (244). These two women from such different worlds would likely never have met, let alone cultivated an intimacy, if they had not moved to the metropolis.
The other aspect of urban life that Fauset brings to the fore through the character of Rachel is that moving to the city does not free women from the psychic effects or force of dominant norms; sometimes these norms or normative forces are more powerful than the liberating potential of the city. The psychic force of primary racial or ethnic identifications—as black or as Jewish, for example—and the influence of dominant norms within one’s own community, especially if that community is a minority community, are highlighted by Rachel’s decision not to marry the man she loves. They are also highlighted through Angela’s attempts to negotiate between her desire to emulate the white New Woman and her inability to simply shake off her family ties and identification with blackness. Indeed, the city brings these struggles to the fore because the metropolis exposes its dwellers to and allows for a much broader array of identifications, desires, vocations, and matches.

THE CITY AND DOMINANT NORMS

At the beginning of her sojourn in the great city of New York as a white woman, Angela is convinced that she can, if she so desires, conduct herself absolutely according to her own laws. As time goes on, however, she begins to understand that the psychic forces of the past as well as normative expectations related to gender, which she has imbibed since childhood, are stronger than she has imagined. Moreover, the city produces and circulates its own normative schemes. While Angela conceives of her escape to the city in racial terms, her position as a passing middle-class, albeit artistic, bohemian woman means that in order to liberate herself she will have to navigate the new urban norms she encounters. At the same time, she cannot escape the psychic and material remnants of racial and racialized gender norms that dictate certain codes of respectability.

During her first years in New York, while only halfheartedly pursuing her art, Angela is constantly on the lookout for a wealthy husband. Early on, she makes up her mind to marry a wealthy white man, believing that this will give her “power and protection in addition to the freedom and independence . . . which now lay in her hand” (88–89). During her courtship with Roger, she assumes that his money will free her to pursue and obtain whatever she wants. But after she cuts her sister at the train station when her white racist lover unexpectedly appears, and after she enters a free-love relationship with him, she slowly becomes disillusioned. Roger refuses to marry her. His callous disregard for her feelings forces Angela to realize that she needs to break free from her unhealthy dependence on him and find a way to support herself. Angela’s exposure to women such as Paulette and Martha allows
her to make the choices that she does: first to try out free love, then to reject it, and eventually to pursue her art with great earnestness and to revise her vision of marriage.

Indeed, the notion of free love is specifically described as being against Angela’s “family instinct” and “all the training which she had ever received” (146, 199). Because Angela has been brought up in a community in which what Jenkins identifies as the salvific wish shaped perceptions of acceptable sexual intimacy, her relationship with Roger is fraught in ways that her white friends’ sexual adventures are not (23). It is important to note that Angela continues to identify as a middle-class black woman. Although “her surrender [to Roger is] made out of the lavish fullness and generosity of her heart,” she is haunted by the voice of Hetty Daniels—Virginia and Angela’s former domestic helper in Philadelphia (204, 205). Hetty is literally the mouthpiece for the salvific wish. Although she is working-class, Fauset emphasizes the connection of Hetty’s desire for respectability with her insistence on sexual propriety. Her “great fetish” and obsession “was sex morality,” and her major objective in life is “to be a verjous woman” (66).

Angela eventually comes to understand that she has made many destructive choices for herself and that moving to the city has not provided her with the unrestrained freedom she so ardently desires. I posit that this realization is less about these choices being damaging in some objective way and more about Angela’s coming to terms with the psychic forces of her past and her growing awareness that unrestrained freedom, even in the city, is illusory. As I have argued in Performing Americanness, primary identifications and interpellations, such as racial identifications, have a lasting psychic effect. Thus passing characters can never simply eschew the racial past. Angela eventually embraces her racial identity both because she has developed a sense of racial pride and solidarity and—even more fundamentally—because she cannot leave behind the influence of community norms. Having been raised in a family that values “the joys of ordinary living, home, companionship, loyalty, security, the bliss of possessing and being possessed,” she cannot simply excise these longings and desires (253). She ultimately realizes that to satisfy her taste for adventure, her fastidiousness, and her need for intimate companionship, she will have to reassert her racial identity and confront the conventions that have shaped who she is and what she desires.

By the end of the narrative, Angela has rejected free love and is pursuing her art seriously, but she is also extremely lonely. Her desperate need for companionship propels her to seek Anthony Cross, another passing artist whom it turns out she has always loved. Things do not resolve themselves so quickly or easily, however, since although Anthony loves her, Angela’s early rejection of
him for Roger has led Anthony into Virginia’s arms. This triangulation leads Angela to apply for an art scholarship in Paris, which she receives. But when her colored colleague, Miss Powell, is denied the same artist’s scholarship as a result of US racism, Angela dramatically reveals her racial past by telling a group of reporters that if her colleague cannot travel to Paris, she will not go either since she, too, is colored.

In the end, Angela manages to scrape together enough money to travel to Paris without the scholarship, but before she sails for France she decides to visit Philadelphia. Thus, the culmination of Angela’s endeavor to forge a modern urban identity does not excise her past but incorporates it. The sight of her old house and neighborhood brings her to tears. No longer narrow in a negative sense but rather representative of security and her loving family, Opal Street “seemed a tiny island of protection reared out of and against an encroaching sea of troubles” (366). Fauset, however, does not leave Angela pining for the traditional gentility that this black community represents; rather, she realizes that she has absolutely no wish to stay in Philadelphia: “[S]he was not through adventuring, through tasting life” (362). She understands that to spend her life on Opal Street would mean a cessation of adventure and the expectation that she would be as steady, upright, and responsible as her bourgeois neighbors. Thus, although Angela reclaims her past at the novel’s end, she in no way repudiates her urban present. Her complex negotiation between past and present underscores the constitutive nature of norms. Angela’s failed attempt to eradicate her past by escaping to New York does not and cannot free her completely from the norms that helped shape her. This insight becomes even sharper when Angela’s trajectory is contrasted with that of her sister, Virginia.

ANGEL OR VIRGIN?

The problem of race resurfaces in full force when Angela’s sister, Virginia, joins her in New York. Virginia moves to Harlem, a location “synonymous with the New Negro”; Angela shuttles between Greenwich Village and Fourteenth Street, locations synonymous with bohemia and the New Woman (Tomlinson 92). Thus the novel dramatizes how the city’s emancipatory potential has been qualitatively different for black and white middle-class women. While urban space facilitated white middle-class women’s loosening of traditional patriarchal control, urban middle-class black women faced additional challenges due to their lack of privilege on two counts—gender and race. Moreover, the text demonstrates in specific ways that gender norms are always already racialized and that middle-class racial norms are always already gendered. By juxtaposing Angela with Virginia, Fauset thus offers a complex critique of the racialized
nature of the New Woman and presents the New Negro Woman as her urban racial counterpart.

Virginia’s reasons for moving to New York remain unclear. Perhaps she seeks to fulfill her unrequited love for Matthew Henson, an old Philadelphia friend who has always preferred her older sister. However, she also is aware that New York offers more possibilities for black women professionals. As Virginia tells Angela, Philadelphia lacks jobs for black female teachers while Harlem offers “plenty of work” (170). Her observation is borne out in an essay written in 1925 by Elise Johnson McDougald. The essay, “The Task of Negro Womanhood,” appeared in Alain Locke’s famous anthology The New Negro and declared that Harlem offered more opportunity for upwardly mobile black women than any other place in the United States. Here, in the modern metropolitan space of New York, black women are more fully emancipated “from the cruder handicaps of primitive household hardships and the grosser forms of sex and race subjugation.” Moreover, in Harlem the new professional black woman had “considerable opportunity to measure her powers in the intellectual and industrial fields of the great city” (369). Thus, while the urban pull for Virginia is less overtly linked to race, McDougald’s acute observations remind us that gender is always implicated in race and vice versa.

As Virginia settles into Harlem, that “bustling, frolicking, busy, laughing great city within a greater one,” she finds herself part of “a happy, intelligent, rather independent group of young coloured men and women” (96, 209). This group resembles neither the genteel aspirations of Virginia’s parents nor the close-knit community of Opal Street. They are sophisticated, modern young professionals. They talk “of the theatre, of a dance, of small clubs, of hikes, of classes at Columbia or at New York City College,” and they are acquainted with the great race men and women of the period (209). Virginia quickly carves out a niche for herself: She becomes an effective and successful Harlem teacher, socializes with the most interesting people of color, and gets engaged. Her new urbanity is underscored by the fact that she “no longer [goes] to church; Sunday ha[s] become her ‘pick-up day,’ the one period in the week which she devoted to her correspondence, her clothes and to . . . mysterious rites of beautifying” (254). Harlem offers her a much fuller and more exciting life than had Philadelphia, and even at the end of the novel, when it is clear that Matthew and Virginia will marry, it seems likely that the new couple will remain in New York. Virginia has, after all, been altered by her sojourn in Harlem: She has been transformed from the genteel Philadelphian into the modern, urbane New Negro Woman.

Virginia’s trajectory, read in conjunction with Angela’s, highlights not only the racialized nature of gender norms but also the way the New Negro Woman
of the Harlem Renaissance offered a new race norm that renegotiated acceptable feminine behavior. Middle-class respectability in Philadelphia is linked to gentility and sentimentality and is, in many ways, depicted as a throwback to an earlier era. By contrast, the new race woman in Harlem is an active participant in public life, a partaker in the creation of an African American artistic and intellectual milieu, someone who pursues the pleasures of theater, cafés, and “small clubs” while carefully maintaining her sexual propriety. Plum Bun dramatizes how the New Negro Woman as an ideal could only have materialized and taken hold in a cosmopolitan place like Harlem, which is “the last word in racial pride” (326).

Plum Bun can therefore be understood as offering insight into how and why the New Negro Woman emerged as an urban phenomenon. Such women were, as Darlene Clark Hine has argued, encouraged to be independent and act in the public sphere. But in sharp contrast to the New Woman ideal, they were expected to renounce sexuality and dedicate themselves to the advancement of the race: “In return for their sacrifice of sexual expression, the community gave them respect and recognition” (446). Fauset’s description of Virginia, as her very name connotes, is devoid of any explicit sexuality. The novel thus self-reflectively highlights the difference between the New Woman and the New Negro Woman, a difference that has to do with the power of the salvific wish that so shaped modern middle-class African American subjectivity.

As Jenkins makes clear in her explanation of the concept of the salvific wish, black women have historically been identified as the primary carriers of black familial pathology. Black women more than black men have been marked as hypersexual and sexually available and have been blamed as the primary cause of domestic disorder (14–15). The salvific wish, Jenkins contends, began in large part as a response to this moral defamation of black women in the public sphere (12).

For purposes of the argument I am making here, Jenkins’s observation that moral defamation occurs in the public sphere is foundational. The modern city, after all, considerably expanded the notion of public space; indeed, the particularities of urban life ensured that women of all kinds would be more present and visible in the street, one of the key manifestations or symbols of public space. I suggest that it is precisely because of the rapid expansion of the public sphere and public space at this particular historical juncture that a desexualized but civic norm coalesced. The ideal of the New Negro Woman can therefore be understood as a modern solution to urbanization and the sexualization of black women’s bodies, since it enabled upwardly mobile African American women to enter the public sphere in increasing numbers without losing their claim to middle-class identity. In other words, delinking overt sex-
uality and public life was both a reaction to the historical hypersexualization of black women and a means of distinguishing the middle-class New Negro Woman from black working-class women. The expansion of public space created by urbanization thus proved problematic not only for white middle-class women, as Wilson has shown, but perhaps even more profoundly for black middle-class women.

*Plum Bun* presents a complex comparison of the New Woman and the New Negro Woman. By juxtaposing the two, Fauset emphasizes the racialized nature of avant-garde womanhood and demonstrates how the New Negro Woman responded to middle-class racial norms in complex and gender-specific ways. This norm clearly appropriated the salvific wish, thereby closing down possibilities in the intimate sexual sphere for middle-class black women. Yet, at the same time, Fauset emphasizes the liberating potential of this new form of black bourgeois femininity. She portrays Virginia’s life in Harlem as enviable, for she has community, a meaningful occupation, access to places of entertainment and pleasure, and a newly acquired sophistication. The New Negro Woman, then, must be understood as a modern and middle-class configuration, one that was engendered by African American urbanization.

**A TEMPERED OPTIMISM**

Ultimately, Fauset posits that the city offers more opportunity than the suburb or the small town for both white and black middle-class women. The novel suggests that this liberating potential is, however, qualitatively different for whites and blacks. White, urban, middle-class women were fighting for the right to sexuality outside of marriage and struggling to carve out a place for themselves as professionals, artists, and intellectuals—indeed, as a presence to be reckoned with in the public sphere. Black middle-class women also used the city to increase their public voice and presence and to create more possibilities for pursuing pleasure, but as a result of the unique history of black women in the United States, the New Negro Woman ideal that emerged within urban space reinscribed the salvific wish in relation to sexual intimate conduct. Fauset maps out these racialized differences while exposing how these divergent forms of modern female identity were shaped—if not constituted—by urban space. She insists that race is a central component of city experience and, by juxtaposing the stories of Angela and Virginia, offers an important corrective to the notion of the emancipatory city. Rather than speaking about middle-class urban women’s escape from traditional gender roles, it might be more precise to claim that middle-class women took advantage of the city to challenge dominant racialized gender norms as well as gendered racial norms.
Plum Bun offers us a vision of the city not as a zone of freedom but as a complex site in which dominant norms can be challenged and renegotiated and alternative norms can be generated. This is, I believe, the substance of Fauset’s tempered urban optimism. The narrative underscores how racism thrives even in seemingly liberated urban space. It thus accentuates the implacability of the black-white divide—as evidenced in the segregated living spaces of Harlem and the rest of the city and Miss Powell’s thwarted aspirations—as well as the psychic power of traditional gender and racial expectations, all of which serve as reminders that the city is itself a social production and is never free in the liberal sense of the word.

Yet Plum Bun does gesture toward the generative potential of the city, which results from the specific conditions of urban life that Park so eloquently outlined just a few years before the novel’s publication: namely, heterogeneity, plurality, and anonymity. As Park noted, the city attracted “many groups of individuals, widely removed in sympathy and understanding” (27). The modern city thus became a place in which many different normative schemes emerged, circulated, and clashed with one another. In the novel, the city is presented as a modern social formation that facilitates a complex negotiation among and between conflicting norms. But as Fauset’s descriptions intimate, even while the city spawns new norms such as the New Woman and the New Negro Woman, such norms do not emerge ex nihilo but come into being as a result of an intricate process of appropriation, reevaluation, and the creation of new links. The New Woman can be seen as an appropriation of certain traits that were historically linked to white masculinity, a reevaluation of female sexuality outside of marriage, and a new link among middle-class femininity, whiteness, sexuality, and public presence. The New Negro Woman, in turn, can be seen as the product of a reevaluation of racialization and uplift discourse, as well as an appropriation of certain traits that were historically linked to (white) masculinity, such as a public presence. In addition to sexism, however, the New Negro Woman had to confront racism and the power of the salvific wish, all of which conspired to circumscribe the renegotiation of a modern US urban, black, middle-class female identity.

Fauset’s acute spatial sense and tempered urban optimism do not blind her to the fact that the city is itself a product of social relations. Although the urban context can engender new identity formations, any and all negotiations with respect to identification and identity take place within a particular social context. Perhaps this is why she ends the novel in Paris—an idealized city space that, due to its different social context, presents the possibility of future transmutations and negotiations of modern black female identity. Significantly, Fauset’s tempered optimism itself was a product of its time, and as
the heady days of the Harlem Renaissance began to wane, the notion of the city as potentially liberating, especially for women, would be revisited and recast, even by Fauset herself.

NOTES

1. Hutchinson has shown that contemporaneous intellectual movements, such as pragmatism and the works of Park, helped foster the new black arts movement (see especially 1–61). It seems clear that Fauset was influenced by these movements.

2. For my reading of Plum Bun, I am indebted to Meredith Goldsmith—specifically to her analysis of Greenwich Village as site for ethnic women’s “spatial negotiations” of racial and sexual orthodoxies (44).

3. In Women of the Harlem Renaissance, Wall traces the critical reception of Fauset’s work. She claims that although Fauset was one of the most prolific writers of the Harlem Renaissance, she became one of the least respected—a situation Wall sets out to rectify (36). See also duCille 88, McDowell “Neglected Dimension” 86–87 and “Changing Same” 62, and Sylvander 184.

4. For a comprehensive overview of Anglo-American feminist urban geography and how Wilson’s claims have been taken up, see Bondi and Rose and the essays in Lees’s edited collection.

5. Park makes a clear distinction between cities and great cities. A great city is one in which “human relations are likely to be impersonal” (22). While Philadelphia is indeed a city, Fauset depicts it as being qualitatively different from heterogeneous, plural, and anonymous cosmopolitan centers like New York and Chicago.

6. See, for instance, Bondi and Rose 230 and Bondi 5–6.

7. This theme is the subject of Goldsmith’s “Strangers in the Village.” Also, in her excellent introduction to Fauset’s Comedy: American Style, Sherrard-Johnson has noted Fauset’s particular spatial acuity in that novel, although this is only one strain of Sherrard-Johnson’s argument (xxvii–xxxix).

8. In Fauset’s last novel, Comedy: American Style, one of the female passing characters relocates to Toulouse, France, but that town is not in the United States. Moreover, the novel marks a certain dissipation of the urban optimism that characterizes Plum Bun.

9. Scholars such as Pfeiffer have analyzed the relationship between the nursery rhyme “To Market, to Market” and the narrative trajectory of Plum Bun. While I agree that the novel critiques the link between home and marketplace that the nursery rhyme celebrates, my reading lends a more positive valence to the notion of the market and suggests that the final section, “Market Is Done,” is ironic and open-ended.

10. Goldsmith offers an insightful reading of Martha’s old-money background and its reflection in her home’s “felicitous blend of money, comfort, and intellectual cama-
raderie” as Angela’s “possible spatial ideal,” in contrast to Paulette’s unsettled and unsettling bachelorette apartment (51–52).

11. Although many scholars have noted the unstable and shifting definitions of the New Woman (see, for instance, Ammons), a more open sexuality tied to some kind of professional career or public presence appears to characterize this ideal during the latter part of the Progressive Era and into the Jazz Age.

12. According to Balshaw, in the 1920s an unprecedented number of prominent black women artists and professionals lived in major cities, worked for a living, and found their artistic and social contexts within the social and economic fabric of the city (11).

13. Miss Powell, Angela’s black middle-class colleague in the Cooper Union art class, is also a New Negro Woman type. She is actively pursuing a career as an artist, and she is repeatedly described as “dignified” and “reserved.” She is, like Virginia, devoid of any outward signs of sexuality.

14. I therefore disagree with critics like Sherrard-Johnson who suggest that New Negro Womanhood was somehow less modern than the New Woman, since it was exactly the conditions of modernity that produced the possibility of the New Negro Woman (49–50). Of course I use modern here as a spatiotemporal term and not in terms of “more progressive” or “enlightened.”

15. For a fuller discussion of sexual autonomy and public presence for white middle-class New York women, see Stansell 231–34 and Rudnick 71–73. Rudnick also considers the historical circumstances that shaped black middle-class women’s role in the New Woman movement.

WORKS CITED


