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Smart Ladies Sit Still: Women, Modernism and Photography

A Dissertation Presented

by

Lauren M. Rosenblum

to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

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Abstract of the Dissertation

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This dissertation examines the relationship between modern women writers and photography. Modernism was long understood as being opposed to mass culture and mediums of mass production, but this project argues that the movement was in fact dependent upon women's engagement with mass cultural forms, like photographs and the magazines that presented the images. I argue that modern women writers thematically and stylistically integrated photography to critique a complicated and evolving visual culture, one in which a woman's mechanically copied appearance became an increasingly vital means for her to express her subjectivity.

Jean Rhys, Nella Larsen, Gertrude Stein and Susan Sontag incorporated photography in their texts and, in the process, expressed the challenges of being modern and a woman in a visual landscape increasingly dominated by mass-produced images of their physical forms. These writers embraced the challenges that visual culture presented to them even while they, and their characters, sometimes struggled, and even collapsed, from the resulting pressures of appearing. As a result, I demonstrate that references to specific photographs, the practice of posing for photographs and the media that contextualized and distributed these photographs gave these writers the resources to loosen the binaries that insisted on women's passivity, such as subject and object, copy and original, and text and image. These disruptions, I further argue, are essential to the evolving classification of the modernist period.

My emphasis on texts that feature elements of autobiography further reveals that, by disturbing the line between text and image, these writers also redraw genre distinctions. I conclude with an analysis of the most recent images by artist Cindy Sherman to demonstrate how contemporary work can further inform our understanding of women's role in literary modernism.

For David Rosenblum

David Moss

Rafferty Moss

Table of Contents

List of Illustrations.....	vi
Acknowledgements.....	vii
Introduction: Modern Looking/Looking Modern.....	1
I. A ‘Certain Type’: Jean Rhys and Modern Women.....	29
1. Photographs and Frames in <i>Voyage in the Dark</i>	35
2. Mistresses and Mannequins in <i>Quartet</i>	49
II. Nella Larsen’s <i>Quickand</i> and (In)Sights of Objectification.....	64
1. Visual Culture and African American Subjecthood.....	66
2. ‘Things, Things, Things’: Helga Crane and Modern Magazines.....	74
3. Helga Crane, Modern Escape Artist: Denmark and the American South.....	87
III. The Work of Art in the Age of Gertrude Stein.....	101
1. Authenticity and Aura in Benjamin and Stein: Towards a New Aesthetic Theory of Mechanical Production.....	102
2. Stein’s Vision: Genius and the Autobiographical Apparatus.....	112
3. Gertrude Stein and the Avant-Garde: Works of Art Designed for Mass Production.....	120
IV. ‘Beautiful Pointlessness’: Susan Sontag’s Late Fiction and Last Photographs...	132
1. Performance in <i>In America</i>	136
2. Keeping the Company of Death: The Last Photographs of Susan Sontag..	155
Conclusion: Modernism After Cindy Sherman.....	167
Works Cited.....	190

List of Illustrations

- 1.1 Jean-Eugène-Auguste Atget, *Boulevard de Strasbourg (Corsets)*, 1912
- 1.2 Jean-Eugène-Auguste Atget, *Old Mill Charenton*, 1915
- 2.1 Helen Harmon presents Nella Larsen with the Harmon bronze, 1929
- 3.1 Dustcover for the first U.S. edition of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, 1933
- 3.2 Man Ray, *Marcel Duchamp Disguised in Rose Selavy's Clothes*, 1921
- 3.3 Man Ray, *Marcel Duchamp Disguised in Rose Selavy's Clothes, Fur Collar*,
1921
- C.1 Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #54*, 1980
- C.2 Cindy Sherman, *Untitled*, 2008
- C.3 Cindy Sherman, *Untitled*, 1981
- C.4 Cindy Sherman. *Untitled*, 2010

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Introduction

Modern Looking/Looking Modern

What is the most important thing that remains: the images or a way of looking?

Edwin Carels, "The Cinema and its Afterimage-Projection and Hindsight in:

Still/A Novel"

The Publicity Predicament

An unusual early copy of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, in which a sketch of Woolf's face was included on the title page, turned up on an antique bookseller Web site a few years ago. Woolf alternatively courted and despised publicity, never including artist's portraits in her published books or books she published through the press she ran with her husband Leonard Woolf, so this copy was curious. After I received the book, it became apparent that the image was not part of the original copy at all, but rather one that a reader had pasted in, as if the book was incomplete without the inclusion of Woolf's face. What, I wondered, inspired the reader to trim this reproduction painstakingly and apply it permanently to this copy?

In fact, I have learned that what is curious is not this reproduction of Woolf's face at all but that the reader was inspired to make the indelible connection of her image with her book, when more often the images of writers are not connected to their work. Woolf and the subjects of this dissertation - Jean Rhys, Nella Larsen, Gertrude Stein and Susan Sontag - all appeared in contemporary mass market magazines in their lifetimes. And by

appear I mean literally - not their writing but their photographs; these magazines often did not print the writers' work and mentioned their publications only in passing.¹ The photographs instead would implicitly refer to the writers outside their writerly identities.

Rhys's image in the women's fashion magazine *Eve*, for example, is a photograph of an artist's bust of Rhys's face, which was the result of modeling she had done before trying to earn her way through her writing. Woolf was seen as the subject of her great aunt Julia Margaret Cameron's celebrated photographs and in *Vogue* in 1924 wearing a Victorian dress belonging to her mother, Julia Duckworth Stephen, that would no doubt bring to mind Mrs. Stephen's well-known beauty to that generation more than Woolf's experimental prose, though the caption did refer to Woolf's own writing. This was prior to the 1928 publication of Woolf's most popular novel, *Orlando*, which solidified her fame as an author. Stein's appearance in the *New York Times* in 1923 in relation to *Tender Buttons* was more likely a comment on her notoriety than an endorsement of her work, which had been limited to small print runs by independent presses.² For Larsen and Sontag, the situation was slightly different: their images solidified, rather than augmented, their recognition. An image of Larsen receiving an award from the magazine the *Crisis* appeared in one of its issues and, it could be argued, the lack of additional opportunities for a black woman writer to appear in the press might be one of the reasons she was initially left out of the Harlem Renaissance historical narratives. *Vogue* published

¹ Woolf and Rhys did publish in *Vogue*, Larsen in the *Crisis*, Stein in *Vanity Fair* and Sontag in various publications, but these writers' photographs additionally appeared in the publications aside from their written work.

² Stein was most often credited with discovering Cubism in these references in the media. Her writing, however, was more often than not referred to as inaccessible due its style, in addition to its correlated unavailability in bookstores. See Karen Leick 125.

a photograph of Sontag and her young son in the column “People are Talking About” in June 1966, almost two years after the publication of “Notes on Camp” that launched her “overnight success” (Rollyson and Paddock 84). Thus, despite having recognizable and unique prose styles, these writers actively accepted and even sought out the inclusion of their visual image in lieu of their texts, both before and after widespread audiences were seeking out their writing.

Pursuing the marketing of one’s photographed image is risky and Woolf warns her imagined female readers against it in her anti-war treatise *Three Guineas*: “We must extinguish the coarse glare of advertisement and publicity, not merely because the limelight is apt to be held in incompetent hands, but because of the psychological effect of such illumination upon those who receive it” (114). As Woolf recognizes, in addition to the “psychological effect of [...] illumination,” one who pursues publicity risks falling victim to a capricious audience that is more concerned with a reflection of their selves than an evocation of the writer’s appearance. The introduction to the October 2011 issue of *PMLA*, “Celebrity, Fame and Notoriety,” clarifies that the production of such images is not as one-sided as Woolf claims, however, and rather consists of an ongoing symbiotic relationship between subjects and audiences: “The face of celebrity depends on being seen and on celebrities’ reflecting back images of their own fantasies and failures to spectators” (907). The writers in this project would relate to this description of projecting their “fantasies and failures” through photographs, though their celebrity status was a by-product of their participation in visual culture, rather than a goal in itself.

Woolf's early experience with *Vogue* demonstrated to her both the power and the danger of photography and its role in contributing to her status as a celebrity, or more specifically, as Jane Garrity describes Woolf, "as a high-brow, a Bloomsbury snob, and a desexualized genius" (213). Garrity determines that despite modernism's reputation for producing work that is unpopular and even unreadable, "The movement's most conspicuous aesthetic value is not poetic difficulty but the marketing of a beautiful Englishwoman's face" (214). Thus, critics argue that one of the reasons Woolf was able to reach her distinction as a - or *the* - modernist woman writer, given that traditionally her gender, if not her class, would have denied her inclusion into the elite category of modernism, is due in part to the marketing of her photograph.³ Of course, Woolf is part of the movement because of the immense amount of work she produced that corresponds to its concerns, such as experimentation with subjectivity and fragmentation. But Woolf also is recognized as a modernist writer because she strategically offered up her beautiful face to the media, a tactic of which I argue the writers in this project were well aware.⁴

Sitting Smartly for the Camera, Sitting Smartly for Modernity

Despite her later dismissal of such publicity, Woolf's consent to the editors of *Vogue* reveals that she grasped that appearing in photographs was essential to fostering

³ Aaron Jaffe writes that Woolf's image is "out-distancing all other postcard-rack worthies" and has become an emblem not just of modernism but also for the "ascendancy of a postmodern Woolf" (170).

⁴ These photographs also were instrumental to making her work essential to the modernist canon *after* her death. See Hermione Lee 246.

an identity as a modern woman who could also be a modern writer.⁵ Similarly, Rhys, Larsen, Stein and later, Sontag, all posed for photographs, sometimes taken by friends, sometimes by professional photographers, and the results appeared in mass media magazines, usually with the writers' consent, if not their urging. As Liz Conor argues in *The Spectacular Modern Woman*, rather than being victimized by her mechanized image, as Woolf feared, "This modern appearing woman was inflected with the consumption and production of self as commodity image, as a means of access to and presence in the modern" (122). Such actions also required a careful balance between a woman's artfully constructed visual image and the uncontrollable framing and reproduction of it. As Laura Doan writes, when explaining how the writer Radclyffe Hall came to be known as a "mannish lesbian," a photograph can seamlessly transform from an expression of its subject's identity to an expression of what the observer or the publisher wants to communicate:

As the image filters into public culture, its message, formerly at the service of the photographic subject, is resituated in a different context, one that effectively steals away the earlier frame. The portrait thus becomes a "frame" entrapping the would-be framers. (167)

In other words, to be modern was to negotiate a slippery road of references: on one side a clear communication of one's autonomous identity and, on another, the participation of observers who can rescind this autonomy. Strategically engaging these references could promote a woman writer's career. However, ignoring the risks could undermine her

⁵ Woolf also published photographs of her fictional subjects in two of her novels, *Orlando* and *Flush*.

ability to be recognized as modern, and make her work appear irrelevant before it was even read.

“Smart Ladies Sit Still” addresses how modern women writers engaged photography as a means to articulate this complicated and evolving visual culture in which a woman’s mechanically replicated appearance was an increasingly vital means for her to express her subjectivity despite the dangers of being misunderstood, or worse, entrapped in dubious meanings. Thematically and stylistically incorporating photography in their writing, Rhys, Larsen, Stein and Sontag reveal the challenges of being both modern and women in a visual landscape increasingly dominated by easily copied photographs of their physical forms. For these writers and their characters alike, photography and the mass media that reproduced images was a means towards modern autonomy, even as this version of modernity could unravel the autonomy that being modern implied, as this unraveling is, too, part of being modern. As Marshall Berman writes in his seminal work *All That is Solid Melts into Air*: “To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth [...] and, at the same time [...] threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are” (15).

References to photographs, and the media that reprinted them, gave women writers the resources to loosen the unyielding binaries that maintained women’s role as passive objects of the male gaze. “Smart Ladies” argues that these writers disrupt such binaries as subject and object, copy and original and text and image, and that these disruptions are essential to the evolving classification of the modernist period - a

response to Rita Felski's suggestion in *The Gender of Modernity* that scholars look at women's writing as potentially "paradigmatic" of modernity and modernism (10).

Indeed, while a number of critics, such as Lawrence S. Rainey and Kevin J. H. Dettmar and Stephen Watt, disable the traditional view of the distance modern writers kept from the marketing and selling of their work, they still use male modernists as templates for their new interpretations of the period.

With this loosening of binaries, artifacts of modernism previously treated dismissively - photographs, mass market magazines, fashion, commodity culture and even the concept of beauty - become integral to the evolving definition of modernism. Ascribing significance to these artifacts assists in the further inclusion of women as active participants who were instrumental in the articulation of the boundaries that defined the movement. In this regard, Andreas Huyssen's *After the Great Divide* has become a foundational text for feminist scholars to argue against, particularly his premise that "mass culture is [...] associated with women while, real, authentic culture remains the prerogative of men" (47). Susan Stanford Friedman, for example, describes modernist aesthetics with a disregard for the established restrictions of high and low culture, in favor of:

Cultural practices that both articulated and mediated the experience of modernity, such as mass-produced and mass-consumed phenomena of fashion, design, advertising, architecture and urban environment, or photography, radio and cinema. (*Disciplining Modernism* 243)

“Smart Ladies” is based on the precept that the mass of women to whom these phenomena appealed shaped modernism just as much as the white, male, educated elite who have previously dominated discussion of the movement. In the most well-known modernist poem, *The Waste Land*, T. S. Eliot references a woman whose connection to mass media comes close to a new modernist model. She attempts to shrug off an “undesired” sexual experience by engaging with the cultural idiom of mass-produced music: “When lovely woman stoops to folly and / Paces about her room again, alone, / She smooths her hair with automatic hand, / And puts a record on the gramophone” (238, 254-256). This woman confronts her feelings about the encounter with an “automatic” hand that echoes the mechanized recording device she uses to distract herself. Her experience is one of the ways women interacted with modernity; these technologies were utilized as means of responding to the physical and emotional violence of modernity. In other words, mechanization was both a cause of modernist alienation and a response to it.

The Age of New Media: the 1920s and 1930s

Modernist writers are known, of course, for grappling with the sudden influx of technologies that shrank geographies and expanded the reach of popular media from the hundreds to the thousands, such as the airplane in the opening pages of Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* and the women’s magazines Gerty McDowell recalls in the “Nausicaa” chapter of Joyce’s *Ulysses*. As Berman writes, the massive number of scientific, industrial and

mechanical discoveries, brought about “a state of perpetual becoming” that is at the heart of modernity:

These world–historical processes have nourished an amazing variety of visions and ideas that aim to make men and women the subjects as well as the objects of modernization, to give them the power to change the world that is changing them, to make their way through the maelstrom and make it their own. (16)

The effect of the ongoing introduction of new technologies that “gave [...] the power to change the world” also necessitated a constant renegotiation of how these technologies complicated the seemingly opposing roles of subjectivity and objectivity.

The most profound impact these technological innovations had was on seeing itself. In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger underscores this fundamental role of vision, explaining, “Seeing establishes our place in the surrounding world” (7). Suddenly hustled by cars and trains, one might attempt to establish one’s place, but it would never likely be for long. Michael North points out further that the new visual recording devices “revealed an inherent instability in the relationship of human perception to reality” (*Camera Works* 9). First, the camera demonstrated how much the human eye fell short in its ability to reproduce large landscapes and also made seemingly negligible details vital to the scene. Inevitably, however, the reliance on the camera as replacing human vision was inadequate; photographs stopped being understood as mere reproductions, or improvements, of reality and became tools of artists who altered, recreated, interpreted or innovated in the way that Impressionist painters had done before them and abstract painters would continue to do. As a result, at the forefront of the minds of artists and

writers was coming to terms with the changing perception of the hard and fast division between the real and the imagined, the authentic and the imitation, the objective and the subjective, when the role of the camera, previously understood as a documenter of reality, became a tool of artistry. Perhaps, then, the camera was not to blame for the “instability of perception,” but rather the artificial divisions themselves were problematic.

The recording of what the visual senses perceived began in antiquity with the creation of the camera obscura.⁶ The first permanent photograph was invented in 1826, and in 1839 the process was simplified by the invention of the Daguerreotype, which made the mechanical reproduction of a fixed image using silver and copper plates possible. In the 1860s American newspapers began printing photographs of the Civil War and the inclusion of documentary-style photographs to tell a story (and sell newspapers) became customary. In fact, nineteenth-century culture began to be altered irrevocably as a result of the camera well before modernism. In his book *Sexual Visuality from Literature to Film, 1850-1950*, Dennis Denisoff argues that the Victorians “developed a means of categorizing reality that relied primarily on visuality” and it was through this visuality that they attempted to maintain a reliable grasp of morality (11).⁷ “Smart Ladies” makes the argument, however, that the 1920s and 1930s was underscored by a perfect storm of cultural changes related to visuality: the increasingly low cost and portability of the camera; the ease with which photographs could be copied in mass market magazines, as well as the increased popularity of these magazines; and the abandonment of the belief

⁶ See Martin Jay’s *Downcast Eyes* for a discussion of visuality in antiquity, 21-82.

⁷ Nancy Armstrong’s book, *Fiction in the Art of Photography*, also emphasizes that photography influenced fiction as early as the Victorian era, particularly in the development of realism.

that visual technology was a reliable reproduction of the real in favor of its ability to represent the subjectivity and fragmentation that characterized the modernist movement.

Vanity Fair in particular took advantage of this emerging form of modern art, and its mass readership was exposed to shocking visual experiments. In 1922, the article “A New Method of Realizing the Artistic Possibilities of Photography” included four different Rayographs by Man Ray who was “experimenting along new lines with the artistic possibilities of photography” (November, 50).⁸ That same year, a still life by Paul Outerbridge was reprinted with the caption, “The Kitchen Table: A Study in Ellipses Suggesting How the Modern Conception of Abstract Design may be Applied to Still Life Photography” (July, 52). Five years later, around the time Larsen was set to publish *Quicksand*, the piece “Cubistic Phases of New York” offered cityscapes at odd and severe angles, which should “make you gasp,” and if they did not, “consult your psychoanalyst immediately” (April, 58). In the space of these pages, photography emerged as a sophisticated - even gasp-worthy - art form that did not rely on traditional mimesis.

These images demonstrated to the public how point of view could be multiplied; the camera created abstract perspectives that the human eye alone did not. Again, the idea that photographs were inevitably objective reproductions of reality was irrevocably altered in the face of these modernist artists who created seemingly unimaginable points of view that did not match up with reality. And further, because photographs were not only equal to human perception, but were far better, people began to question how reality

⁸ A rayograph is an image recorded on photographic paper. No camera lens is used.

itself was experienced. As Pamela Caughie explains in the introduction to *Virginia Woolf in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, “Human perception [...] is organized differently by new media so that how we see and hear, even what we see and hear changes” (xxi). There was a tremendous opportunity in this new world of sensory experience to produce innovative texts influenced by these perceptions and, also, a tremendous threat, as I will explain below.

The Crisis of Seeing Takes On the Crisis of Being Seen

While renowned modernist critics who write about visual culture and mass production, such as Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, and more recent intellectuals such as Andreas Huyssen, acknowledge the immense power of photography and film, these scholars perpetuate suspicions of the mechanical mediums, in part due to their connection with mass culture. As I discuss in more detail in my chapter on Stein, Benjamin’s concern for the abuse of mechanical production by fascist politicians overshadows his discussion of the possibilities of the medium for artists, and his commitment to the idea of the autonomous artist has caused scholars to be unable to see the artistic opportunities in visual technologies. Kevin J.H. Dettmar and Stephen Watt point out that “any suggestion that modernist art is not pure is read as a ‘concept that belittles.’ This is so because, following Benjamin’s argument, a concept that shatters the aura of authenticity also brings the unique and distant into the realm of the transitory and

the commensurate” (2).⁹ In many ways echoing Benjamin, Adorno regrets that “culture today is infecting everything with sameness” (94). Although Huyssen acknowledges the significance of mass culture, writing that it “has always been the hidden subtext of the modernist project,” he ultimately identifies it and its connection to women as the inferior half of a binary, claiming, “Aesthetic discourse [...] consistently and obsessively genders mass culture and the masses as feminine, while high culture, whether traditional or modern, clearly remains the privileged realm of male activities” (47). Felski therefore concludes that the “feminization of modernity [...] is largely synonymous with its demonization” (62).

Thus, in this environment where photographs were lauded as revolutionary, they were also characterized as thinly veiled threats to the intellectual elite previously safe from the presumed reductive commodification that mass culture implies. Lawrence Rainey points out that such an interpretation of the effect of commodity culture on modernism necessarily confounds the movement’s reach and depth, making it appear as “little more than a reactionary, even paranoid fear of popular culture” (2). As Elizabeth Outka explains further, modernism more accurately embodies “the friction between an often elitist desire to escape the marketplace and a contradictory but powerful appetite for its spectacular bounty,” the latter of which requires the participation of the masses (7). And since historically a women’s role in the creation of her image has been described primarily in terms of the peril it represents - such as Laura Mulvey’s description of the passive female figure in film as a “castration threat” - the introduction of photography

⁹ See also 61-89.

and its adoption by mass culture would be perceived initially as particularly problematic for women of the modern movement, and they would even be held responsible for its problems, and worse, personify its risks (*The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader* 44).

Rather than a threat, however, photography offered women the opportunity to curate their own representations. The relative low-cost of sittings compared to conventional paintings - especially as women began to make their own income - made access to their reproduced image possible.¹⁰ Broadly, “portraiture has been recognized as having the power to evoke feelings from the viewer who senses some familiarity with the subject” (Denisoff 5). More typically, women had little input into the production of their portraits, and the suitability of their likenesses fell to either artists’ whims or that of the male relatives who paid for the paintings. This was a mutually beneficial relationship between the painter and the male patron; the former received payment and the latter the recognition of his political, class or financial position. As the women who were the subjects of these portraits were often related to wealthy or titled men, the portraits were a means for these men to demonstrate their financial capabilities, from the jewels and the clothes to, of course, the women themselves as possessions.¹¹ Prior to the widespread adoption of photography, a woman’s involvement in the production or dissemination of her image was, with rare exceptions, limited to posing for the artist.

Of course, a woman did not necessarily need to rely on others to see a reflection of her self. In *Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century*

¹⁰ This self-reliance also was problematic and assumed to be related to compromising one’s morals. I will discuss this further in my chapter on Jean Rhys.

¹¹ Berger explains further that commissioning a portrait “had nothing to do with the modern lonely desire to be recognized 'for what one really is'" (“Moments of Cubism” 44).

Literary Imagination, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar point out that before women could see themselves in photographs, they found their reflections in the mirror. They explain that this activity did not help fill out a woman's identity but rather created a downward spiral where a woman could be "caught and trapped in a mirror [...] driven inward, obsessively studying self-images seeking a viable self" (37). Should a woman find satisfaction in her appearance, she would fall into what Tirza True Latimar calls "the clichés of narcissistic femininity" (135). Berger again provides perspective in *Ways of Seeing*. He points out in his analysis of the mirror as a tool used by Renaissance artists in nude paintings of women that "you painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, you put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting *Vanity*, thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure" (51). A woman could not rely on others to provide an insightful representation of her appearance and assessing her own reflection was deemed pointless at best, narcissistic at worst.¹²

"Smart Ladies" asks how this complicated relationship to a woman's reproduced image changed in the face of increased visibility, which, as a result of mass media, altered interpretation of visual images where a photograph came to represent a multiplicity of views rather than one paid for and painted by men. In other words, given a woman's already complicated relationship to her image, the problems of mass media that concern Benjamin and Adorno are interpreted as an even more substantial problem for a woman writer. In addition, a woman's relationship to her mass-produced image also

¹² I discuss the problem of the perception of narcissism in women writers' use of the "I" in the chapter on Stein. See also Huyssen 46.

could still be connected to her role as material possession; although by this time women in many ways were emancipated from the limitations of their roles as wives and mothers, the photograph maintained their status as objects. They could be represented as black and white images, framed and contextualized by magazine editors, as Radclyffe Hall experienced, and repeatedly observed without their knowledge or consent. Brenda Silver explains further that connecting oneself with visibility has problematic repercussions: “Being on the side of the visual has its price in our culture, [women] linked as image, spectacle and often the grotesque [...] always containing within the threat of subversion, or rebellion” (18).

But just as photography allowed for multiple copies, and therefore multiple readings, a woman’s participation in the dissemination of her image did not necessarily have to be damaging to her reputation or self-actualization. This project demonstrates how women writers addressed the complicated history of women’s relationships to their images, revealing that physical reproduction does not dictate value or singular identity but rather is part of a process of becoming through performance in which she anticipates the inevitable mass production of her likeness.

Approaches to Women’s Writing and Mass Production

Some of the earlier scholarship discusses the advent of modernism as having a profoundly negative effect on the image of the modern woman writer. In many cases, women’s writing is framed through the work of traditional modernists such as James

Joyce and T.S. Eliot. For example, in Gilbert and Gubar's *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, the follow-up to *The Madwoman in the Attic*, they point out that from Joyce's and Eliot's perspective, a woman writer at best "can only ascend to sentimentality" or at worst is "obscene," with nothing in between (233). Gilbert and Gubar point out further that in the section of *The Waste Land* entitled "What the Thunder Said," "The language of women embodies 'the horror, the horror' [of modernism]" (236). Scholarship like Gilbert and Gubar's, in other words, emphasized that in addition to women's confrontations with the conventions of portraiture, where they were literally and metaphorically framed by men, their voices were similarly interpreted and judged.

In addition, opportunities that the advent of modernity made possible for women, such as participating in mass production either by commodity consumption or by creating an appearance with an eye towards being mechanized, were deemed similarly ineffective or even dangerous. Meredith Goldsmith claims, for example, that "using consumption as a tool to claim a coherent identity" is "inauthentic" (263). She argues further, in her discussion of Larsen, that when a woman protagonist focuses on her appearance it causes an "uncomfortable proximity with [...] the prostitute" and that such proximity threatens a character's "autonomy" (265). Thus, no matter how a woman presents herself, either through writing or her appearance, she threatens to undermine her own authenticity that until recently was believed to be essential to the framing of the modern movement, or destroy the potential of her own (non-sexual) self-realization.

For Woolf, the problems of mass production are not limited to women but to a larger perception of making oneself a spectacle in order to promote a position, particularly because the dissemination and contextualization of such spectacle were often in the hands of men. In *Three Guineas*, Woolf uses photographs (images of famous men reprinted in newspapers) to criticize the roles men play in creating war. Photographs of the “old ceremonies - the Lord Mayor, with turtles and sheriffs in attendance, tapping nine times with his mace upon a stone” are in Woolf’s words “a barbarity which deserves the ridicule which we bestow upon the rites of savages” (101, 20). Woolf also makes these famous public men anonymous representations of types by not including their proper names in the captions or the text. And as types, they become either powerless, reduced to “a ridiculous, a barbarous, a displeasing spectacle” or, in their worst manifestation, threatening, such as photographs of Hitler or Mussolini, who were rarely seen in the press outside their military uniforms (21). Woolf reveals a contradiction: While “a woman who advertised her motherhood by a tuft of horsehair on the left shoulder would scarcely [...] be a venerable object [...], [for men] splendour is invented partly in order to impress the beholder with the majesty of the military office” (21).

“Smart Ladies,” however, argues that that the pursuit of gendered appearances in hopes of being photographed offered opportunities that contemporary interpretations, like Woolf’s, sometimes misunderstood, either due to sexism (which Woolf is pointing out) or in answer to the fascist threat that images of uniformed men perpetuated. These reactions were worsened by the strident minority of modernists and scholars who subscribed to the elite character of the movement and, indeed, even late twentieth-century theorists such as

Berger and Mulvey who emphasized the passive nature of women's performances in the media over their active participation. Bonnie Kime Scott explains, "Our critical generation did not invent gender as a literary concept. [...] Modernists themselves attached labels such as 'virile' and 'feminine' to the new writing as they reviewed it" (*Gender of Modernism* 3). But image and mass culture were not far from the minds of Eliot, Joyce and Pound, all of whom worked to control the dissemination of their photographs, though, given their gender, some of this work was done for them by editors willingly and unknowingly maintaining the gender divide.¹³ This is not to say they did not appear but that the act of appearing made them look disinterested in their own spectacularization. Thus I agree with Huyssen that mass culture is the "hidden subtext" of modernism, but if we follow modernist women writers, like Gertrude Stein and Rebecca West, photography and related mass culture can be read as an opportunity for expressing subjectivity rather than a complicated threat.¹⁴

In looking to photography as presenting such an opportunity for expression, "Smart Ladies" advocates for a more nuanced interpretation of the concept of authenticity that characterizes the modernist period. The writers in this project offer a means to recognize the many ways in which women appeared and that these appearances are all simultaneously authentic and inauthentic. Thus fictional subjects are free to negotiate

¹³ See Rainey and David Chinitz.

¹⁴ Patrick Collier writes of West that "Modernism's willingness to push the frontiers of imaginative knowledge accorded with her unrepentant belief in the possibility of progress; new forms of representation were needed to make sense of the ever-emerging world of experience" (173). Additionally, in West's discussion of Eliot in "Mr. Eliot's Authority," she points out Eliot's most profound shortcoming, which is too much investment in conventional tradition, or "ancestral worship" (Scott, *Gender of Modernism* 591). Had Stein and West become the cause célèbre of modernism, the conversation - and the discussion of women's inclusion - might have evolved differently.

their roles in modernity and all the repercussions, positive and negative, that these negotiations bring about. Modernism becomes less about the pursuit of authenticity, as defined by what Patrick Collier calls the “Eliot-Leavis model,” in which art “answers not to the society from which it emerges, but to the tradition it seeks to enter,” and more about questioning its definition by its binary, inauthenticity (187). And so begins the disabling of other binaries that have, until recently, defined the modernist period but that the writers in this project implicitly unravel.

In fact, recent scholarship promotes such an alternative interpretation of the significance of how a woman produced her image and prepared herself for appearing on the modern scene. Connor, following Judith Butler, establishes mechanized recording of gender performance as necessary for women to be linked with modernity. As she writes, “For women, to identify themselves as modern, the performance of their gendered identity had to take place within the modern spectacularization of everyday life” (7). Further, feminist scholars have led the charge to disable conventional modernist aesthetics that “demanded nothing less than ‘authenticity’ [...] so that the self presented to the world is the ‘true’ self in every respect” (Singal 14). Theories related to manufactured aesthetics dominate recent discussions of women’s role in modernist literature: Judith Brown discusses glamour as an aesthetic that “[links] literary form to modern mass culture” (8); Maggie Humm points out that “modernist writers were [...] engaging in highly articulate and self-conscious ways with new images of external/internal realities and gender” (5); Christopher Breward and Caroline Evans

describes fashion as a “modern mechanism for the fabrication of the self” (2).¹⁵ “Smart Ladies” reflects the direction of this recent work and, by contrast, specifically demonstrates that women writers’ representations of their characters’ engagement with cultural artifacts, created for and by mass production, were informed by evolving perceptions of visual culture. In other words, I argue that Rhys, Larsen, Stein and Sontag integrate the form of photography, and related mass produced artifacts, and that this integration is necessary to the expression of modernism.

Yet “Smart Ladies” also recognizes that the ideal of a modern woman expertly negotiating the reproduction of her image can be paralyzing for some of the writers’ fictional characters. In fact, although a range of twentieth century women writers portray the issues of mass production, this dissertation addresses Jean Rhys, Nella Larsen, Gertrude Stein and Susan Sontag because their characters, or they themselves, are not necessarily successful in their negotiation. In the two novels by Jean Rhys, Anna in *Voyage in the Dark* (1934) and Marya in *Quartet* (1929) come up against various types of the modern women, but it is the most precarious type, women of loose morals, that they most resemble. Because they are inevitably and repeatedly compared to, or assumed to be, this type, it becomes difficult for the characters to create fully actualized selves in which they can find satisfaction or, more urgently, financial stability. In *Quicksand* (1928) by Larsen, Helga Crane traverses the world, trying out identities as a black southern teacher, a Harlem socialite, an exotic foreigner in Denmark and, finally, the continually pregnant wife of a preacher, too poor and ill to continue her search. Sontag’s

¹⁵ See also the discussion of humor in chapter three of Catherine Keyser’s *Playing Smart*.

main character in *In America* (1999), Maryna, confronts the profound changes of the period by creating a life as stage actress, seemingly free from the potential negative effects of ubiquitous mass production. However, in order to be a popular success, Maryna resists becoming more substantial than the predictable characters she plays. In other words, what these characters lack most profoundly are the resources to express a unique subjectivity, particularly when they are surrounded by images of women who can *only* exist through the artifice of mechanically produced copies. Stein represents the most particularity in the version of herself she offers in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), but my discussion of the influence of the avant-garde on her work reveals that such success had to come by reaching outside the traditional influences of the modernist-movement to photographs that, not coincidentally, trouble the gender divide.

My focus on the broader chronology of twentieth-century writers, rather than just modernist ones, also enables me to demonstrate that the perspectives on mass production have not changed significantly, which actually limits readings of modernist texts. As this work's conclusion on the visual artist Cindy Sherman reveals, clarifying critical response to contemporary work can influence approaches to work written in the 1920s and 1930s, when women writers began to appear on the visual scene with increasing frequency - though with little standardization as to the context in which they appeared. In other words, this project points out that although it is obvious that chorus girls and actors were engaged with the process of appearing, so were women like Helga Crane and Gertrude Stein (both the writer and the "Gertrude Stein" in *Toklas*), whose professions and life

choices would seemingly keep them remote from the complications that was the result of fostering an image that anticipated mass production.

Genre, Representation and Spectacularization

I deliberately select these five works due to the not-so-hidden subtext of autobiography, whether the author intended the likeness or not, since mechanical production, photographs and other mass produced artifacts, were interpreted as a means through which one could further articulate the self. The main characters in the two books by Rhys that I discuss have many similarities to her own history. The path that Helga takes in *Quicksand* recalls details of Larsen's education, time in New York City and Copenhagen, and, more disturbingly, Helga's near death at the end of the novel could be read as prediction of Larsen's killing of her writerly self and pursuit of a career as a nurse. Toklas's "autobiography" discusses some of the most-minute details of her partnership with Stein, including how Toklas prepares the eggs she serves a disrespectful Matisse. *In America*'s narrator cites an early marriage to a much older man, which echoes the kind of union Sontag experienced.¹⁶ These overlaps suggest that mechanized performance was endemic to these writers' lives as well, and therefore strengthens my argument for the crucial role that mechanical production plays in modernism. In other

¹⁶ My intent is not to damage the writers' credibility by pointing out the real-life counterparts to their characters, as some critics are prone to do. In the second chapter, I will discuss this problem with early critical accounts of Rhys's work.

words, even in the very creative process, these writers are integrating a type of mass production by creating characters that copy elements of their own lives.

Jean Rhys, the author whom I focus on in the first chapter, “‘A Certain Type’: Jean Rhys and Modern Women,” was born in the Caribbean and spent her adult life in England and in France. Her birthplace initially situates her on the perennial outside - as a white girl growing up in the Caribbean, and as a white Caribbean woman in England or Continental Europe - and this status as an outsider translates to her characters who are eternally outsiders as well. They share Rhys’s immigrant status and the challenging circumstances in which she was forced to support herself in a culture where training or education was considered excessive for a woman but nonetheless morally judged the few ways she could support herself. This chapter reveals that there was yet another challenge presented to Rhys’s characters: measuring up to the idealized and often fragmented women’s bodies that appear in women’s magazines during the period. More than this - and Rhys also shared this dilemma with her characters - I argue that the characters accomplish the goal of representing sameness but this was also deemed their failure, in part because they become just as vulnerable as the types they are copying. Thus Anna in *Voyage in the Dark* and Marya in *Quartet* are the casualties of their reputations as promiscuous women, “amateur prostitute” and “mistress,” respectively. Rhys employs the language of photography and framing to articulate the situation these women were in as outsiders who attempt to move inside, become demoralized, and suffer a worse fate ironically due to their ability to assimilate.

This first chapter begins the process of reassessing women's role in modernity and the ways in which they articulated modernist selves, while these modernist selves struggled under these conditions of modernity. In the second chapter, "Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and (in)Sights of Objectification," I argue that Larsen's representation of the body integrates the way contemporary photographs featured mass-produced objects and clothes, particularly photographs reproduced in fashion magazines and their accompanying rhetoric. Specifically, Larsen's main character, Helga Crane, exercises her subjecthood by experimenting with a photographic-objectification, and in this way, she accesses a form of modernist "vitality" essential to the expression of the modern self (Scott, *Gender in Modernism* 3). And what defines a modern self is more than the pursuit of a position of authority; Larsen articulates an ambivalent and ever-changing subject and object divide whereby Helga's version of modern subjecthood includes a disruption of, and also re-engagement with, a woman's role as a traditionally objectified body.

In the third chapter, "The Work of Art in the Age of Gertrude Stein," I read Benjamin's essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" alongside "Pictures" from Stein's *Lectures in America*. I demonstrate that Benjamin's concern that film encourages passivity has overshadowed his discussion of the advantages of other forms of visual technology, such as photography. This chapter argues that by privileging Stein's aesthetic theory developed in "Pictures" over that of Benjamin, the woman artist/subject commands a role in commodity culture, rather than her value necessarily being diminished by it. The second part of this chapter argues that Stein enacts this new aesthetic theory described in "Pictures" to cultivate her reputation of genius in *The*

Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas. The third section details the influence of avant-garde photography on the autobiography and, by doing so, demonstrates how technologies of mass production were instrumental to Stein's transition from a much-talked about author to a widely-read one.

Although not often included in modernist analysis that strictly adheres to a traditional interpretation of modernism, Sontag was committed to the concerns that preoccupied the modernists who came before her, most profoundly, as Jesse Matz articulates, "[an] urge to redeem modernity through art" (6). As Friedman further points out, modernism is necessarily diametric: "For all its insistence on the new, a relational modernity is inevitably part of a generational dynamic. Modernity rebels against its parental precursors, only to be rebelled against by its inheritors" (23). Rebellion is what characterizes modernity, not what, specifically, the rebellion is attempting to undermine. It also is in this drive to rebel, according to Sontag, that modernism and photography are intricately linked. She writes that because photography initially was not considered fine art, it is therefore inevitably "subversive": "Modernist taste has welcomed this unpretentious activity that can be consumed, almost in spite of itself, as high art" (*On Photography* 127).

Integrating this approach to modernism through subversion, the last chapter in this project, "'Beautiful Pointlessness': Susan Sontag's Late Fiction and Last Photographs" argues that Maryna, the main character in her novel *In America*, is in many ways the ideal, rebellious, modernist woman who thrives on her performance and disregards the pursuit of an authentic self. Maryna consistently attempts to move backwards and

forwards in time when she can “breathe fresh air [...]. Wash my clothes in a sparkling stream or [look] into the future [...]. to know how the journey will turn out” (48). In either case, past or future, Maryna hopes to distance herself further from the alienation that inevitably accompanies modernism. Yet, by being so untethered, Maryna becomes reduced to merely “woman,” as described by her contemporary in the novel, Edward Booth. She is reduced to a type so sweeping that she defies Sontag’s own standards of beauty, which are expressed in the writing she completed just before her death, published in the collection *At the Same Time*. The last portion of this chapter discusses the photographs of Sontag taken during her final illness and just before her death to emphasize how in words and images she, nonetheless, transcends binaries of beauty and truth-telling that the traditional approach to modernism perpetuates and that, during her productive career, she both enabled and dissolved.

“Smart Ladies” concludes with a discussion of the 2012 exhibition of Cindy Sherman’s work at the Museum of Modern Art. Since the 1970s, Sherman has been constructing characters of familiar types and photographing them, using only herself as a model, to question identity, representation, media, performance and masquerade in contemporary culture. She has occupied roles from the almost impossibly beautiful to the grotesque to question our assumptions of the part subjectivity plays in both the articulation and recognition of subjecthood. I argue that Sherman’s creation of these personas demonstrates that spectacularization is essential to our expression of not just our selves, but of our photographed selves, which has become a separate entity. However, her work falls short, still, of articulating the immense opportunity these reproductions offer,

and in fact, the irony is that her career has substantially benefited from it. Sherman's most recent series, part of the 2012 MoMA exhibition, marks the first time she has used computer technology to alter her appearance, and it provides the most progressive means for women to engage with their spectacularization.

Chapter 1

A 'Certain Type': Jean Rhys and Modern Women¹

I begin this dissertation with Jean Rhys, who more than anyone else I discuss in this project expressed frustration with the pressures of appearing in mass-produced imagery and yet still emphasized the significant role that mechanical reproduction played in the lives of modern women. Rhys also specifically pointed out the struggle of being not just a woman but a writer, too - already a complicated position that became more complicated by the fact that both roles received increasing amounts of recognition through their interaction with the media. For example, in a letter to her friend and fellow writer Evelyn Scott, Rhys complains of how male critics treat her, which in her mind reflects the general reaction to women writers. Rhys condemns their response: “[The] idea that you can be rude with impunity to any female who has written a book is utterly *damnable*. You come and have a look out of curiosity and then allow the freak to see what you think of her” (original emphasis, *Letters* 32).² Rhys represents a problem critics had with women writers in general. She was a “freak” because she attempted to differentiate herself by becoming a writer, but this activity of differentiation only encouraged critics to reduce her to the type of woman writer, which was inevitably freakish. Rhys also points out, significantly, that these critics are most interested in seeing her, “having a look” and then allowing her to “see” what they think. The importance of

¹ See the second page of this chapter for the full quotation.

² The language here is reminiscent of a line from *Voyage in the Dark*. Anna gets angry with two men she and her friend Maudie meet on the street, pointing out, “you pick up people and then they are rude to you. This business of picking up people and then they always imagine they can be rude to you” (13).

what the offending woman writer looks like is not lost on her, while what the (likely male) critic thinks, rather than his appearance, is what is observed.

In fact, Rhys was more focused on the act of writing than that of appearing as a writer. She claimed only to pursue publishing as means to support herself and she came to form a hatred of a readership she likened to a theater audience.³ Rhys makes this comparison in a 1963 letter to her publisher Diana Athill, “I never think of possible readers [...]. Once, years ago I was on the stage. In the chorus. Well I *hated* the audience - and dreaded them too” (original emphasis, *Letters* 225).⁴ Rhys presumed her reading audience would see her characters as duplicates of her own life. Indeed, these characters pursue many of the positions Rhys herself held, such as chorus girl, film extra, waitress serving soldiers and even amateur prostitute.⁵ As a 1931 *New York Times Book Review* critic insists, “The author has no interest of achieving anything except a portrait of a certain type of woman” (June 28, 6). Rhys felt she would never be able to convince critics like this one of her singular identity. Indeed, they even seemed to get closer in proximity; in a 1960 letter to her daughter, she complains that her neighbors “are terribly narrow-minded and gossip like crazy. [...] For them ‘I’ is ‘I’ and not a literary device. Every *word* is autobiography” (original emphasis, *Letters* 187).⁶

³ In 1950 Rhys lamented that “I must get a job” but bemoaned that she had to rely on her writing because “I can’t type, am too slow and lethargic for a servant...I can’t sew – in fact I’m completely useless” (*Letters* 71).

⁴ Rhys abruptly left a live production where she served in the chorus after an angry audience stomped out. She lost the job as a result.

⁵ See Carol Angier.

⁶ Ernest Hemingway encouraged and benefited from this conflation of literary character and author. The drawing on the back cover of *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) is meant to be of a fictional couple from the novel but the man looks like Hemingway. By 1940 and the publication of *Whom the Bell Tolls*, the back of the dust jacket features a large photograph of Hemingway instead of a list of additional titles also offered by the publisher, as was the practice. In these cases, however, the implication is that such likenesses are

Similar critical accounts like the one that appeared in the *New York Times* review perpetuated this oversimplification of Rhys's characters. They were perceived as unsuccessful due in part to the idea that they were only versions of Rhys and her own life.⁷ Helen Nebeker points out that "awareness of her biographical emphasis has often led critics to either dismiss Rhys's writing with veiled condescension or to praise it effusively as they assess only superficially her literary contribution" (ii). Other critics have attempted to save Rhys from this condemnation, which might have caused her to vanish from the critical landscape as she almost did prior to the 1966 publication of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, by claiming the singularity of Rhys and her characters. Paula Le Gallez, for example, writes that it is necessary to "free Rhys's main characters from a forced relationship to the writer herself" (4).

In this chapter, however, I offer a new perspective on the resemblance of Rhys to her characters and her characters to one another. I argue that this pattern of repetition is crucial to understanding her fiction specifically and modernism more generally. It corresponds to how in the 1920s photography was employed by mass market magazines such as *Vanity Fair*, *Vogue*, and *Eve*. These magazines featured photographs of models, particularly in the advertising, which were not easy to distinguish from each other. A woman's unique nature was overlooked in favor of her ability to perform as a type to which all women can, and did, aspire. For example, a December 1933 advertisement in American *Vogue* for "Gotham Adjustables Silk Stockings" offers "Legs...thousands of

evidence of the narrative's authentic voice rather than a means to trivialize the writer or question his morality.

⁷ Paula Le Gallez details a number of additional reviews (2).

Legs” accompanied by a photo montage of various legs adorned with stockings, none of which offer a recognizable image of the women to whom the legs belong (8). Women sought such inclusion in the mass media. As Liz Conor argues in *The Spectacular Modern Woman*, “Rather than being undone by her spectacularization, the modern woman was produced by it” (82). Further, this kind of visibility relied on “comparison to an ideal”; women were beautiful when they were seen to have mimicked the ideals of types of beauty previously articulated for them in the media, such as the photographs of legs in the advertisement (132).

I will demonstrate that the main characters in Rhys’s novels *Voyage in the Dark* (1934) and *Quartet* (1929) believe they will find emotional and financial security when they fulfill their roles as imitations. Though these characters start out as unique individuals, by the end of the novels, they become copies of types, reflecting the larger cultural impact of photographic technology. Rhys points out that this is a dubious accomplishment and jeopardizes the characters’ survival. Her subtle portrayal of photography also articulates her ambivalence: on one level her characters’ attempts to be perceived as mass-produced types is paramount to their participation in modernity, yet as I pointed out, Rhys wants to avoid being treated as a type herself.

This discussion of types calls attention to the limited economic opportunities women in the 1920s had. As Celia Marshik argues, “Rhys’s novels reflect the difficulty of replotting female sexuality in a historical movement when education and economic change did not keep pace with moral and social transformations” (168). Women needed to be financially independent but were not given the necessary education or personal

freedoms. Some women engaged in what was perceived as morally questionable behavior, which only encouraged those in society with morality agendas to argue against expanding women's rights. Further, the few jobs open to women - chorus girl or living mannequin, for example - were euphemisms for prostitutes. Through her characters, Rhys exposes the challenges financially-strapped women had of supporting themselves when they did not have the opportunity to do so beyond the exploitation (actual or implied) of their own bodies. Although Rhys claims in her autobiography, "People talk about chorus girls as though they were all exactly alike, all immoral, all silly, all on the make [...] they were rather a strange mixture," the mixture itself is a subset of a singular type - a woman desperate for economic stability (88). It is these women who narrate Rhys's novels.

Rhys also shares with the chorus girls and prostitutes that populate her novels their roles as public women. Writing, like prostitution, was considered "the opposite of the hard labor the women previously performed" in order to earn income, such as physically challenging and monotonous domestic work (Michie 121).⁸ Thus though Conor convincingly argues that engaging in modern spectacle is an act of agency, there are additional complications when the modern appearing woman also wants to be a writer, especially if she is a writer who seeks profit.

In *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar reveal another challenge the modern, appearing woman confronted. They point out that through a "complex of

⁸ See also Marshik 93.

metaphors” male writers enclose women in “frames:” He has “framed” a “thought” while “she has been both ‘framed’ (enclosed) in his texts glyphs, graphics” and “‘framed up’ (found guilty, found wanting)” (13). Taking this frame metaphor further, it also includes women as the subjects of mass-produced photography, which allows men more easily than ever to be possessors, and metaphorical frames can be actualized into the physical framing of photographs or the contextualization of photographs in the popular media. In other words, instead of assisting women writers in perpetuating their careers as writers, their ubiquitous photographic images could be used as a means of enforcing external identities. Thus, in addition to the problems inherent in the idealization that photography can promote, frames can “entrap” women writers within unwanted or unanticipated labels (Doan 167). Rhys is distinguished from the frame, and from her characters, through her novels. But her writing, when published, and its marketing in mass market magazines, often through her image, has the potential to frame her as a public woman, a role that she tried to avoid when she stopped appearing in the chorus of live performances.

Rhys responds to this quandary by enacting the very frames that can be so limiting for women writers and the types of women whose lives she fictionalizes. This is similar to how T.S. Eliot frames modernism through antiquity. According to Garry Leonard, Eliot’s insistence in his influential modernist essay “Ulysses, Order and Myth” that the modernist writer interact with antiquity is a framing device inspired by a desire to control the sometimes bewildering effects of modernity rather than a commitment to defining the movement in a particular way: “[Eliot’s] point is less how to represent ‘modernity’ and more how to capture it, contain it” (237). Like Eliot’s emphasis on

antiquity, Rhys's representation of types whose lives follow predictable patterns is another means of "capturing" modernity. Further, the types of women Rhys portrays are also modern, fully aware of framing as a mechanism of control and intentionally engage with this practice, even though it only brings about further uncertainty.

Part I Photographs and Frames in *Voyage in the Dark*

Rhys acknowledges the power photography had on her from an early time in her life. She begins her unfinished autobiography *Smile Please* (1979) with a description of herself as a girl sitting for a photograph that was initially written for her original ending of *Voyage in the Dark*.⁹ She clearly sees, in black and white, her "white dress...white socks...black shiny shoes with the strap over the instep": an ideal image of a portrait of little girl (13).¹⁰ But once her mother reminded her to "keep still," her arm "shot up of its own accord," encouraging the unknown photographer to comment "what a pity" at the ruined portrait. A fine shot was finally achieved and Rhys comments that she was proud of it until three years later when she noticed it again: "I looked at the photograph with dismay that I wasn't like it any longer. I remembered the dress she was wearing, so much prettier than anything I had now, but the curls, the dimples, surely belonged to somebody else. The eyes were a stranger's eyes." Rhys's recollection is extraordinary here: she remembers sitting for the photograph, the photograph itself, how alienated she felt from it

⁹ Such overlaps also question genre distinctions - how much *Smile Please* was fictionalized and how much *Voyage in the Dark* was Rhys's reality

¹⁰ Bonnie Kim Scott reprints this alternate ending in *Gender of Modernism* 381-392.

three years later, and how profoundly this memory effected her even late in life. The Rhys in the narrative is “I” but she calls the subject in the photograph “she.”

By contrast, Rhys locates the “I” in the person who stares at her from a “long looking glass” (*Smile Please* 14). This reflection reveals:

A thin girl, tall for my age. My straight hair was pulled severely from my face tied with a black ribbon. I was fair with pale skin and huge staring eyes of no particular color [...]. I was wearing an ugly brown Holland dress, the convent uniform, and from my head to my black stockings, which fell untidily round my ankles, I hate myself.

Both the memory of the photograph and the memory of Rhys’s image in the mirror are described in the muted tones that characterize early photography, from the “eyes of no particular color” to the disordered black stockings. Rhys reveals from this memory that at a young age she felt that she could not live up to the expectations of her own image, not only photographs of herself from a younger age but even the mirrored reflection of her very own face.¹¹

In *Voyage in the Dark*, Rhys demonstrates how copies of a woman’s image can have a powerful impact on her while she also simultaneously tries to undermine them. Rhys explains that *Voyage in the Dark* has “something to do with time being an illusion” (24). The book can be read cyclically: it opens with the stream of consciousness that the main character, Anna Morgan, experiences at the end of the novel while suffering a

¹¹ Jacques Lacan famously argues that an infant first recognizes itself as whole in a mirror and thus the mirror image is the “threshold of the visible world” but that such encounters offer only a pretense of wholeness, creating a “totality and autonomy [that the infant] can never attain” (1286, Leitch 1281).

hemorrhage after an illegal abortion. The rest of the novel unravels the story of how Anna became pregnant: she comes to England from her West Indies birthplace with her stepmother after her father's death and joins the chorus of a traveling show, which she leaves after meeting a man who soon breaks up with her. She makes some vague attempts to support herself but eventually becomes a prostitute. Repeatedly abandoned - by her father's death, her stepmother, and her lover - Anna's experience is as circular as Rhys's narrative style and, in this way, Rhys provides a series of infinite and infinitely disappointing copies.

Rhys intimates the important role photography specifically will play in Anna's life with the metaphor of a curtain falling. She writes, "It was as if a curtain had fallen, hiding everything I had ever known" (*Voyage in the Dark* 7). The curtain is literally a reference to a curtain falling at the end of a play, but I also interpret it as an allusion to the curtain photographers shielded themselves with when taking photographs, which Rhys explicitly cites in *Smile Please* when she notices the man who "dodged from behind the dark cloth" as her photograph is being taken (13). In early photography, the curtain regulated the amount of light to which an image was exposed. It also kept the photographer hidden from the subject. In *Voyage in the Dark*, the curtain signals Rhys's acknowledgement of her control of the story, her role hidden behind the scenes. As much as the novel is written in the first person, the curtain confirms that the "I" is in fact a "literary device," as Rhys wrote in her letter. Anna is victimized by her circumstances and suffers a great deal but Rhys is the photographer who sheds as much or as little light as she sees fit while in the process of revealing Anna's consciousness. The world of

darkness Rhys creates for Anna is not an expanse of emptiness but rather a darkness that “hides.”

At the same time, the early lines of *Voyage in the Dark* signal that Rhys’s narrative will not be revealed through traditional visual imagery. The opening lines are Anna’s stream of consciousness and do not employ the pictorial, “It was almost like being born again [...]. The smells different, the feeling things gave you right down inside yourself was different” (7). This first sentence focuses on the concept of difference, of sensations feeling unfamiliar: the *feeling* of unfamiliarity has more significance than specifically what is unfamiliar. Anna tries to locate warmth and she does this by focusing on sensations such as smell, heat and light, in other words, what cannot simply be articulated through sight: “Sometimes I would shut my eyes and pretend that the heat of the fire, or the bed-clothes drawn up round me, was sun-heat or I would pretend I was standing outside the house at home looking down Market Street [...]. Market Street smelt of the wind.” Later on the same page Rhys gives more detail of the smells, “frangipani and lime juice and cinnamon and cloves” and, again, she resists creating visual images. For example, the view of “Market Street to the Bay” is left to the reader’s imagination and “sun-heat” subjective. She avoids lengthy descriptions of place or of Anna as an individual. Her focus is on details that cannot be contained in a visual image either because they express feelings or sensations or because Rhys is unwilling to draw the picture for the reader.

Rhys’s treatment of time in *Voyage in the Dark* demonstrates an even more ambiguous relationship to the photograph. A photographic image displays a dramatic -

and seemingly objective - pause in the sequence of time. W. J. T. Mitchell writes that the camera “seems to come equipped with a historical, documentary claim built into its mechanism: this actually happened, and it looked this way, at this time” (180). In fact, the first title of the novel, *Two Tunes*, actually references time, not sound; Rhys explained that the title intimated “Past and Present” but points out that this description no longer suits the novel: “Then Past got altered and cut to an echo” (*Letters* 149). In the final version of *Voyage in the Dark* past and present merge as if sequential moments occur simultaneously. For example, after Anna sickens with flu and convalesces in England, she briefly experiences being home again in the West Indies with her childhood caretaker, Francine. Rhys writes: “It got dark, but I couldn’t get up to light the gas [...]. Like that time at home when I had fever and it was afternoon and the jalousies were down and yellow light came in through the slats” (31). “Like that time” *becomes* that time when Rhys makes the later experience a repetition of the earlier one: “Then Francine came in [...]. She changed the bandage round my head.” The present moment merges with the past and they become “always” as in Anna’s comment to herself, “Of course you’ve always known, always remembered. [...]. Always - how long is always?” (37). Photographic time, “it looked this way, at this time,” entraps Anna. It forces her to replay moments in her life and move backwards in time rather than forward. And the past offers many more possibilities than the present: Anna says to herself, “If it could go back and be just as it was before it happened and then happen differently” (23).

Anna’s oppressively repetitive experience undermines her ability to foster her individuality. In fact, Anna cannot even locate what part of her life in England is original

and what part is the copy. Rhys writes, “Sometimes it was as if I were back there and as if England were a dream. At other times, England was the real thing and out there was the dream” (*Voyage in the Dark* 8).¹² The bleakness and chill help to distinguish her adopted country from the West Indies, but there is little of the sensory-filled language she uses to describe her birthplace. Instead, “The towns we went to always looked so exactly alike. You were perpetually moving to another place which was perpetually the same. There was always a little grey street leading to the stage-door of the theater and another little grey street where your lodgings were.” The colors again allude to the aesthetic qualities of early photography - “grey stone...grey-brown...grey green” - and intimate arbitrary, ambiguous locations that could easily be captured on black and white film. But Anna does not place herself in this description. Instead, she uses the pronoun “you.” This choice distances Anna from the experience and also further emphasizes the sameness; this is something we all have seen. Elaine Savory writes that in Rhys’s work “color functions as symbolic code” and specifically the “absence of colours generally means that Anna is feeling little or nothing” (85, 102). Grey lacks particular hues and represents Anna’s lack of emotional connection to these repetitive landscapes.

This sameness does not just characterize the places she travels to while in the chorus but also her interactions with people, such as the bantering exchange she has with the two men who follow her and her friend, fellow chorus girl Maudie. Walter Jeffries, who becomes her first lover, asks Anna her age and when Anna says she is eighteen, she asks, “Did you think I was older?” (*Voyage in the Dark* 13). His friend Jones responds,

¹² As I argue in the third chapter, both the original and copy have value, but it is still helpful to know which is which.

“You girls only have two ages. You’re eighteen and so of course your friend’s twenty-two. Of course.” The men have already decided that they are the familiar “you girls” and Jones’s repetition of the phrase “of course” emphasizes his expectation that they will cooperate with his perception of their ordinariness.¹³ Maudie, too, participates in this process of reduction and responds, “You’re one of those clever people, aren’t you?” Their entire exchange sounds rehearsed.¹⁴ These are men who have picked up women on the street before and the two women also are familiar with the process. Anna is different, however, in part because she was born in the West Indies and because she feels so alienated - her nickname is “Hottentot” and Maudie claims “She is always cold” (13). Savory points out that in *Voyage in the Dark* “race is evidently a major source of identity” (34), yet Anna attempts to hide her racial distinction in England by integrating herself into this tyranny of sameness she experiences there. Her job as a chorus girl is her effort, in part, to do just that.

Anna works to conceal her colonial difference and her feelings of being other while making herself appear sexually available. In order to do so, she cannot draw attention to her individual self. In fact, chorus girls, metaphorically and literally, frame the main action on stage and they fail when they attempt to differentiate themselves in Rhys’s work and, worse, lose their jobs. For example, Rhys’s short story “Till September Petronella” echoes her own experience going on the stage: Petronella explains that she

¹³Even the chorus girls cannot distinguish themselves from one another. Despite Anna’s identity as the West Indian girl, fellow chorus girl Laurie, who claims that she is “a lot better than most of the other old cows,” cannot remember Anna’s name (2).

¹⁴Maudie often does not even bother to explain herself, assuming that Anna knows exactly what she is saying because it has all been said before. When she and Anna part, she tells Anna to “take care of yourself and if you can’t be good be careful. Etcetera and so on” (49).

squandered the one opportunity to separate herself, “The stage manager had the dotty idea of pulling me out of my obscurity and giving me a line to say [...]. It was one of the most dreadful moments of my life, and I shan’t ever forget it [...]. My mind [went] a complete blank” (*Short Stories* 148-149). Despite this emphasis on maintaining anonymity, the girl encounters notoriety. This was a contradiction chorus girls generally confronted. Their role emphasizes sameness but they cannot remain hidden given their reliance on external acknowledgements. Thus, one cannot merely be a chorus girl; one must be seen in the chorus during a performance by, most importantly, men. This dependence on public recognition associates her with prostitution. In fact, the landladies Anna encounters generally suspect that Anna and her friends are actually selling sex and deem themselves as morality enforcers, though in part the landladies’ rejection of this perceived type was a strategy to protect their own livelihood since allowing prostitution in their homes might get them in trouble with the official police. One landlady makes the double-entendre, “No, I don’t let to professionals” and “made a row because we both got up late and Maudie came downstairs in her nightgown and a torn kimono”; and she further invokes European red light districts when she complains that Maudie puts herself on display by literally framing herself in the window - ““showing yourself at my sitting-room [...]’alf naked like that”” (*Voyage in the Dark* 8, 9).

Framed In, Edged Out: The Limits of Type

During the novel, Anna reads the story of a deceptive and selfish prostitute, Emile Zola's *Nana*. Rhys writes that "the look of the dark, blurred words going on endlessly" makes Anna feel "curious [...] sad, excited and frightened" (*Voyage in the Dark* 9). Her copy features an image of Nana "brandishing a wine glass [...]. Sitting on the knee of a bald-headed man in evening dress," causing Maudie, who has not read the book, to comment, "It's about a tart. I think it's disgusting. I bet you a man writing a book about a tart tells a lot of lies." According to Nebeker, Maudie's remark indicates that Rhys considers her own novel a reproduction of Zola's earlier work and, because it is from a woman's point of view, will not "tell a lot of lies" (54). But Maudie and Anna are both, to employ a cliché, judging the book by its cover, its frame. Their reductive readings foreshadow that Anna likewise will be judged only by her frame; she will be the tart about whom men tell a lot of lies. As Anna's life increasingly becomes predictable and her downfall, like Nana's, inevitable, she loses interest in books entirely. Later in the novel she recognizes that "everybody says that a man's bound to get tired and you read it in all books. But I never read now" (74). Anna does not need to read anymore - she might not want to admit it, but she knows that the lives of women like her rarely end with a marriage or other escape from their ordeals. In other words, I am arguing that Anna is not a victim of "a man writing a book about a tart"; she is complicit in her framing. Anna might not have had many, if any, means to escape the frame but she is, nonetheless,

responsible for keeping it firmly intact as she learns that the repercussions of avoiding the frame are even less bearable.

For example, the first time Anna encounters Jeffries she takes a liking to him because she believes he acts differently from the other men she has met when in fact he takes even less time trying to understand her as an individual. He appears not to be interested in her sexually: “He didn’t look at my breasts or my legs, as they usually do” (13). But Anna also acknowledges she is careless in her observation – just as she did not pay close attention to the words of *Nana*. She continues, “Not that I saw. He looked straight at me and listened to everything I said with a polite and attentive expression, and then he looked away and smiled as if he had sized me up” (14). Anna realizes that Jeffries only sees her as a sexual prospect after he takes her to dinner and she has to resist his advances. Jeffries stops his attempts and “[looked] at me with his eyes narrow and close together, as if he hated me” (23). Worse for Anna, he looks *through* her as if “I wasn’t there; and then he turned away and looked at himself in the glass.” While Jeffries’s appearance in the mirror confirms his dominant masculine role, his response to her refusal of his framing of her as a sexual object eliminates her very presence in the room. Anna mimics Jeffries’s behavior, looking at her own image in the mirror but, as Rhys experienced, “it was as if I were looking at somebody else” (23). She hopes that there will be reconciliation - that either his perception of her will change or that she will become who he wants her to be: “He’ll be different and I’ll be different” (24). But instead he gets a taxi to take her home.

Anna thinks not of what has happened but of clothes, which could serve as a means to fill out the frame in which sees her, and further, mark her as the sexual object he desires. Rhys writes, “About clothes, it’s awful. Everything makes you want pretty clothes like hell. People laugh at girls who are badly dressed” (25). In fact, when Jeffries and Anna first meet, he accompanies her in her pursuit of the purchase of silk stockings and offers to pay for them. This commercial exchange eventually sets the tone for their relationship, which becomes another commercial exchange (Emery 86). After their initial failed sexual encounter, Jeffries sends her money to buy more stockings and other clothes and he writes “don’t look anxious when you are buying them, please” (*Voyage in the Dark* 26). With this offer to purchase her clothes, he buys her participation in the exchange of money for sex. He also attempts to buy Anna’s agreement to *look* like a girl who sells sex. Anna goes shopping for those clothes she was so desperate for but after buying shoes, underclothes and silk stockings, she feels disoriented. She remarks, “The streets looked different that day, just as a reflection in the looking-glass is different from the real thing” (29). The streets look different because with her acceptance of the money, Anna also accepts Jeffries’s framing of her; she begins to look outward from inside the frame and the world is as unrecognizable as her mirror-image was when she first saw herself as Jeffries sees her.

What looks different to Anna might actually be further recognition of how everything looks alike. This type of sameness is evident in photographs by Eugene Atget. Although Atget was not well known during Rhys’s lifetime, she finished writing *Voyage in the Dark* while living in Paris in the 1920s, a few years after Atget photographed the

city. Among Atget's most recognizable works are the photographs of Parisian storefronts riddled with repetition: innumerable look-alike wooden wig mannequins lined up in a shop window, for example, or multiple corsets, hung in rows, indistinguishable from one another, as shown in figure 1.1. To the contemporary French, these storefronts might not have been noteworthy. But Benjamin points out that Atget intentionally "looked for what was unremarked, forgotten, cast adrift" (*Selected Writings* 518). In this way, through his photographic frame, Atget changed the ordinary into the extraordinary. These once commonplace shop windows also serve to reveal Anna's goal: she is trying to avoid being one of the "forgotten" and "cast-adrift" and ironically, in order to do so, she is forced to become ordinary, not herself, but like an identical form in a corset. Thus unlike Atget's shop windows, Anna never becomes extraordinary through her framing - she is simply trying to survive through one of the few ways available to women.

Such anonymous recognition is preferable to the alternatives she has experienced, some of which allow women to remain hidden from the camera but not the frame. Even if Anna can resist becoming an amateur prostitute and avoid the pitfalls of invisibility, she still risks becoming what she calls the "ones": "The ones without money, the ones with beastly lives. Perhaps I'm going to be one of the ones with beastly lives" (*Voyage in the Dark* 26). The faces of the "ones" are the color of "woodlice," a color even more lacking in pigment than the black and white photographs Rhys referenced earlier in the novel. Being "one of the ones" who avoids being sexualized does not provide release from the frame, it simply puts one in a different frame. In other words "one of the ones" is just another type, even if it is a type that does not rely on being seen for its existence. And the

comparison to woodlice points out that this is certainly no path to fulfillment. As Rishona Zimring points out, at least “adornment [offers] some means of self-assertion, [even if]...these women never achieve final consolation” (216).



Fig. 1.1. Jean-Eugène-Auguste Atget, French, 1857–1927, *Boulevard de Strasbourg (Corsets)*, 1912, Gelatin silver printing out paper print, 22.9 x 18 cm, Julien Levy Collection, Gift of Jean and Julien Levy, 1975.1130 Reproduced with the permission of the Art Institute of Chicago.

By the end of the novel, Anna has completely lost sight of who she is outside of the frame. For example, while working as a manicurist, Anna is introduced to a man named Carl ostensibly to do his nails. But when he confesses, “Oh, don’t worry about the manicure [...] I only wanted to talk to you,” she becomes who he wants her to be (*Voyage in the Dark* 153). Rhys writes, “When he touched me I knew that he was quite sure I would. I thought, ‘All right then, I will’” (154). Since Carl is “quite sure” that Anna is a prostitute, Anna does not contradict him. Anna, initially so reflective, hardly notices this transformation. She is “surprised at myself in a way and in another way I

wasn't surprised." She claims that this is how it is on days that are "foggy." But since her original shopping trip with Jeffries's money, which has made the streets look different, every day is foggy. As means of survival, Anna has lost sight of herself.

This attempt to endure costs Anna her life. She becomes pregnant and dies (in Rhys's final version), or almost dies (in the published version), after an illegal abortion. When Anna is visited by the doctor, he comments, "You girls are too naïve to live, aren't you?" (*Voyage in the Dark* 187). Mary Lou Emory comments that this is an ironic statement referring to "the early humanitarian/religious and later feminist view of prostitutes as victims - naïve girls, seduced and abandoned" (97). Anna is a victim, a victim of her uncaring family, limited job opportunities, and the society that controls women through framing. But she is not a passive victim. Anna has transformed herself by being complicit in the framing. She does not refute the doctor's claim because she is too ill, of course, but also because she has by now learned to occupy fully the frames that are drawn for her. She becomes, literally, too naïve to live. In the unpublished version of the novel, the last line ends with "everything is blotted out and blackness comes" (*Gender of Modernism* 388-389). In the published version, Anna thinks of "starting all over again [...] being new and fresh [...]. And about starting all over again, all over again" (*Voyage in the Dark* 188). The repetition of the "all over again" indicates that even if Anna could start all over again, if she does survive as the published version suggests, she likely will return to the same life, overwhelmed by the frame.

Part II Mistresses and Mannequins in *Quartet*

The visual alienation Rhys felt upon seeing the younger self that she wrote about in *Smile Please* and Anna struggles with in *Voyage in the Dark* is so thoroughly enmeshed in the everyday life in her novel, *Quartet*, that the protagonist, Marya, is not able to see the frame in which she entraps herself. *Quartet*, published six years before *Voyage in the Dark* but after Rhys originally wrote out the events that inspired that novel, offers a character older than Anna and no more secure. Whereas Anna frames herself as the tragic prostitute, Marya frames herself, or more accurately as I will argue, performs, as another type, that of mistress.¹⁵ After her husband, Stephen, is jailed for trafficking in stolen artworks, Marya finds herself alone and without financial resources. She moves in with Lois and Hugh Heidler, a wealthy English couple, whom she met through a mutual friend. Soon enough, Marya becomes Heidler's mistress with the knowledge and permission of Lois, who anticipates correctly that "he'll get tired of [Marya] as soon as she gives in" (81). By the end of the novel, Heidler sends Marya away to Cannes to "get well," though in reality he does so to avoid her until she can come to terms with the end of their affair. She returns to Paris upon hearing from her husband, to whom she confesses. Stephen first threatens to kill Heidler but eventually focuses his anger on Marya: with one push, she hits her head on the side of a table and Stephen leaves her in what may be her final act, "crumpled up and...still" (185).

¹⁵ The word *type* is used in *Quartet* as way to describe fashionable eccentrics: "[Lois] was anxious to have people like Cri-Cri at her parties. People who got written about. Characters. Types" (40).

Quartet emphasizes the role that photography played in the 1920s, when it was, as Michael North explains, “the context, simultaneously technical, social and aesthetic, within which both writers and artists [...] worked out their ideas about representation” (*Reading 1922*, 16). In addition to providing such a wide-ranging inspiration, photography presented a new self-consciousness about being the focus of this eyesight. Rhys, who already was mortified by the feeling that she could not live up to an earlier photographed version of herself, now found herself in a world where a woman’s identity was based even further outside the physical self to the omnipresent, visual realm. Connor uses the word *appearing* to explain this state, which “describes how the changed conditions of feminine visibility in modernity invited a practice of the self which was centered on one’s visual status” (7).

Rhys felt challenged by the process of locating identity through the act of appearing. In addition to feelings of deprivation - as experienced by Anna who complains “everything makes you want pretty clothes like hell” - Rhys’s letters provide evidence that she struggled with her own spectacularization. She asserts that her novels offered her a needed escape from the act of appearing, stating, “Writing can be (among other things), a safety valve,” and complains, “I am not chic or elegant. I am grotesque unless somebody else dresses me” (*Letters 59, 77*). Significantly, her characters are often in a state of either needing clothes, wanting clothes or having to give up their clothes; in other words, there is rarely any long-term satisfaction. For example, Marya in *Quartet* is forced to undress: desperate for money after Stephen’s incarceration, she attempts to sell her clothes to Madame Hautcamp, who informs her that they are not worth much.

According to her, one particular dress would only be worn by a woman “qui fait la noce” (37). She says, “It is not a practical dress [...]. It’s a fantasy, one may say. Therefore, if it is bought at all, it will be bought by that kind of woman.” The fact that Marya is forced to sell this dress, and then not even get any money from it, further emphasizes that this fantasy is no longer her reality, if it ever was. For Rhys, committing to a performance of a gendered identity, through clothes or in other ways appearing, likewise was only perpetuating a fantasy. It would only be a matter of time before, as she writes, “the strain” would be revealed (qtd in Plante 39).¹⁶

Rhys likely also had difficulty reconciling the pressure she felt to appear with being a writer, the latter of which, according to Gilbert and Gubar, requires what are “by definition male activities” (8). She needed the recognition of male modernists, particularly Ford Madox Ford, who ultimately was so essential to launching her career (and with whom she had a public affair).¹⁷ Nebeker explains that, in order to be admitted into the male-dominated publishing industry in a way that engages her own voice, she had to “find a language, a metaphor through which she can express *her* pain, *her* grief, *her* longing, in terms acceptable to man” (original emphasis 10). Rhys chose to write about the “other woman,” a type recognized by men and as which she posed but also renounced. Further, unlike *Voyage in the Dark*, which stylistically responds to the technology that captures the performance of these types, *Quartet* focuses on pointing out the artificiality, and ubiquity, of performance even outside the mechanisms of mass

¹⁶ Two titles that Rhys also considered for *Quartet* were *Postures* and *Masquerade*, both of which emphasize the act of appearing as another, artificial self.

¹⁷ See Sheila Kineke’s essay, “‘Like a Hook Fits an Eye’: Jean Rhys, Ford Madox Ford, and the Imperial Operations of Modernist Mentoring.”

production.¹⁸ This enables Rhys to intimate that, as Judith Butler articulates in *Bodies that Matter*, “the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced by regulatory practices” (34). Rhys explores these “regulatory practices” to which Butler refers as they relate to type, that of other women, and points out that these practices alienate women from their performance rather than inscribing them. In other words, according to Rhys, performing gender only emphasizes its artificiality. Thus, unlike Anna who becomes fully enmeshed in her frame, Marya becomes divided from it and, as a result of this division, is unable to tolerate the repercussions of being the other woman.

This performance that Marya engages in again relies on the audience Rhys hated to validate its success. Stephen serves as this kind of audience for Marya. She tells him, “I love you,” and he responds, “C’est Vrai? [...]. I’ll *see* that” (emphasis mine, *Quartet* 45). To Stephen, Marya’s love has to be seen to be believed. The omnipresent eye that dispenses judgment is illustrated further, on a grander scale, at the end of the novel when Marya comes across some photo enlargements in the office of a business acquaintance of Stephen’s. Rhys writes that Marya “didn’t know that anybody ever wanted their photographs enlarged these days” (172). By this time, photo enlargements had fallen out of fashion as cameras became smaller, cheaper and produced larger images. Yet, the fact that the form these photographs take is outmoded makes them all the more threatening - even when Marya least expects them, they are around to keep an eye on her. She becomes terrified when “left alone in that sinister, dusty-smelling room with the enlarged

¹⁸ Although the word performance might seem to imply the moving image, my focus is on the still image. A viewer can pause in consideration over a photograph but she cannot do so at the screening of a movie. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes explains further that “in front of the screen, I am not free to shut my eyes; otherwise, opening them again, I would not discover the same image; I am constrained to a continuous voracity; but not *pensiveness*” (original italics, 55).

photographs of young men in their Sunday-best smirking down at her” (185). What she sees in their smirk is their ability to judge her failure to fulfill the role of kept woman satisfactorily. The men in their “Sunday-best” are like a theater audience dressed up for an evening’s entertainment. In this case, the entertainment is the mess Marya believes she has made of her life.

Though Marya concedes that she is the subject of observation, she refuses to admit her participation in creating an appearance in preparation for it. Other characters emphasize their commitment to giving a convincing performance, particularly of gender roles, such as Lois and Heidler who want to perpetuate the guise of their happy marriage. For example, Lois is most concerned that her despair over her marriage is not “given away; she doesn’t want anyone to know” (89). Heidler insists further that the three of them must continue the illusion of their stable lives and that Marya is just a friend to whom they are offering assistance. According to him, they must always perform for posterity, as if he is anticipating the photographic record that will serve to reconstruct lived experience: “Everybody had for everybody’s sake to keep up appearances. It was everybody’s duty, it was in fact what they were there for” (113). Marya claims to be shocked at this emphasis on appearances and does not fully accept that she participates in these illusions. She says to Lois, “I don’t think I’d ever plan anything out carefully [...]. If I went to the devil it would be because I wanted to or because it’s a good drug, or because I don’t give a damn for my idiotic body of a woman anyway. And all the people who yap” (53). Marya claims that she does not “plan” and she does not “give a damn,” despite her “idiotic body of a woman,” which puts her in the position to perform in the

first place. And despite her many protestations that she is in love with Heidler, this too appears to be a performance: Rhys writes of Marya's impression of him, "He wasn't a good lover, of course. He didn't really like women. She had known that as soon as he touched her. His hands were inexpert, clumsy at caresses; his mouth was hard when he kissed"(119). Marya submits to him despite (or because) he "crushed her. He bore her down." Her only "reward," as she puts it, is Heidler's mild, and repetitive, encouragements - "You pretty thing - You pretty, pretty thing. Oh you darling" - and he quickly returns to the trivialities of life: "Did you notice what I did with my wristwatch?" (118).

At one point Marya does acknowledge to herself, however, that "Everybody pretends" (7). In fact, she experienced the importance of performance as a young woman when she, like Anna, worked in the chorus of a traveling production. In Marya's case, she was not just playing a role in the chorus - simply being a member of the chorus required another level of acting: "She learned, after long and painstaking effort, to talk like a chorus girl, to dress like a chorus girl and to think like a chorus girl - up to a point. Beyond that point she remained apart, lonely, frightened of her loneliness, resenting it passionately" (16). In order to appear in the chorus, Marya had to appear as a chorus girl *outside* of the performances. She still remains in her own mind separate and afraid, but in Rhys's work, this uneasiness also is part of the character of the chorus girl.

Further, Marya ever so briefly admits the importance of performance in her own marriage, before Stephen's incarceration, what she calls "[putting] a better face on it" (53). Remembering a time when she and Stephen were so poor they skipped meals and

drank wine to wash away the hunger, she remarks that “it was astonishing how significant, coherent and understandable it all became after a glass of wine on an empty stomach [...]. One realized all sorts of things. The value of an illusion, for instance, and that the shadow can be more important than the substance” (22-23).¹⁹ Marya reveals that the “substance,” people’s authentic selves, is less essential to survival than who they pretend to be, which in this particular case is the illusion of the happy married couple. When Stephen gets arrested and Marya is left on her own, she seems to have forgotten her earlier recognition that her contentment was most likely a pretense. Having fully relied on the shadow, she falls flat when the painful reality of their underlying dissatisfaction becomes apparent, despite acknowledging that “she had always known it was there - hidden under the more or less pleasant surface of things” (33).

Marya instead insists she experiences life as an outsider, as she does when she explains that she had to act like a chorus girl beyond the stage but only “up to a point.” In order to maintain this perception fully, she becomes, as Emory describes, “Other in the most concrete way - the ‘other woman’” (109). Eventually, this insistence that she is different overtakes her and her performance ultimately becomes a trap. Unlike Anna, who becomes ensnared in the frame as means towards survival, Marya is so entranced with her role as outsider that she forgets that the ultimate goal is to perpetuate the illusion of the other for her own advantage. No matter how innocent Marya claims to be - she thinks to herself, “Of course, there they were: inscrutable people, invulnerable people, and she

¹⁹ Photography relies on the very shadows and illusions to which Marya refers. From Julia Margaret Cameron’s intentionally blurred long exposures and soft focus to Duchamp’s experimental photographs, which “rather than revealing a unitary nugget of identity [...] dissolve, multiply and contradict,” photographs often emphasize artificiality. They “simultaneously [hide] as they reveal [...] enigmatic and paradoxical meaning” (Clarke 97 and 4).

simply hadn't a chance against them, naïve sinner that she was" - the other characters inevitably read this innocence as part of her performance (*Quartet* 101). They rely on her consistent ability to act naïve and to perform as the one who is consistently disappointed in others' deception. Marya cannot see beyond the character that she has helped to create and she will soon learn, as was written in a clause of her contract as chorus girl, "no play, no pay" (15).

Inexact Copies: Wooden Dolls, Live Mannequins and Photographs

Marya's denial of her own performance causes her not only to sacrifice a role that at least temporarily might have brought her material satisfaction; she also becomes an empty form, only an "idiotic body of a woman" she claims not to give a "damn for," which is similar to the many images of dolls Rhys presents throughout *Quartet*. Early in the novel, Marya notices a doll in the Heidlers' house "dressed as an eighteenth century lady [which] smirked conceitedly on the divan, with satin skirts spread stiffly" (50). Later, she becomes a twentieth-century version of this doll, though far less sardonic: Lois says of her, "We must get Mado another hat...She must be chic...She must do us credit," and Rhys adds, "She might have been discussing the dressing of a doll" (85). Marya *is* in many ways the Heidlers' doll or, more specifically, their mannequin. In fact, a live mannequin is one of the jobs Lois suggests to Marya as a way to support herself while Stephen is incarcerated. Though Marya "tried – and failed – to imagine herself as a mannequin," this image suits the Heidlers' expectation that she perform for their benefit

and when Lois insists that “she ought to amuse us sometimes; she ought to sing for her supper,” Marya does not protest (85). In fact, Marya finds comfort in allowing others to “dress her” or to fill out her role. Her marriage to Stephen serves as another example. During this time, Marya has the idea that “she was the petted, cherished child, the desired mistress, the worshipped, perfumed goddess” (22). Stephen helps Marya adopt this identity: “She was all these things to Stephan - or so he made her believe” (22).

The image of the live mannequin - an individual woman who is literally and figuratively dressed by others - consistently appears in Rhys’s work, most directly in her short story “Mannequin.” Such live mannequins became the norm in Rhys’s contemporary Paris and elsewhere. These models were real women, yet they served as seemingly identical copies of different types of girls.²⁰ In *Quartet*, Rhys describes a parade of girls that suggests these mannequins: “The Spring came early [...] the chestnuts flowered and the girls walking along with linked arms began to discuss their new robes endlessly” (67). In “Mannequin,” Rhys creates another character named Anna who works as one of these mannequins and becomes exhausted by it; she wants “just to dress and rush away anywhere” (25). Upon leaving the store, however, Anna forgets her misery and begins to relish the idea that she is finally one of them, delighting in “the feeling that now she really belonged” (25). The last image is of a Parisian street brimming with identical mannequins “as gay and beautiful as a bed of flowers” (26).

Marya echoes the frustration this story’s Anna initially expresses, particularly with the repetition perpetuated through the mannequins’ appearances as types and

²⁰ Rhys lists a few of these types in her story “Mannequin”: “the *gamine*, the traditional blonde *enfant*...the *femme fatale*...the *garconne*” (23).

formalized gestures, while also demonstrating how seductive the feeling of inclusion through sameness can be. Caroline Evans explains, “Contemporary commentators unflinchingly remarked on the repetitive nature of the mannequin’s work [...]. They focused on the fact that her actions were neither genuine nor individuated but a *répétition* which in French has the double meaning of both performance and repetition” (255). Indeed, Marya complains of the “endless repetition” she experiences in her relationship with Heidler as she increasingly becomes aware of her role as other woman who is, indeed, just another version of the many women with whom he has already conducted affairs: he “was forcing her to be nothing but the little woman who lived [...] for the express purpose of being made love to. *A petite femme*” (*Quartet* 118). Also like a mannequin, she still consents to being metaphorically dressed by him, acknowledging that she “found herself trying to live up to his idea of her.” And in order to occupy this role of *petite femme* fully, Marya allows herself to be replaced again by another inanimate incarnation of herself, just as mass-produced mannequins would soon take over the job of modeling clothes. After one particularly brutal argument between her and the Heidlers, she begins to envision herself replaced by a wooden or plastic doll: “She [...] felt like a marionette, as though something outside her were jerking strings” (105).

Rhys’s novel *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* (1931) further demonstrates that an inanimate copy of a woman - even a two-dimensional painting - can be seen as preferable to a living one. In the novel, Julia looks at a copy of painting of a woman by Modigliani and comments that the subject has a “lovely, lovely body. Oh, utterly lovely” (53). Rhys writes,

And a face like a mask, a long, dark face, and very big eyes. The eyes were blank, like a mask, but when you had looked at it a bit it was as if you were looking at a real woman, a live woman [...]. I felt as if the woman in the pictures were laughing at me and saying: "I am more real than you. But at the same time, I *am* you. I'm all that matters of you."

Julia believes that this image of a woman with a vacant face is more lifelike than she. The emptiness of the woman in the painting, her blank, mask-like eyes, forms a presence. She is "more real" but also "all that matters of you." This quixotic statement points out a no-win situation: The woman in the painting is more real than the real woman in the novel, and her very unreality, her blank face, is what she believes is recognizable to the male gaze. Here, unreality is what Julia must seek if she wants to be recognized as real.

Whereas Julia is troubled by this realization, Marya acts resigned, and even relieved, by the inevitability of being replaced by a doll. Rhys writes, "She never reacted now. She was a thing. Quite dead. Not a kick left in her" and preferred "sitting... silent, her hands cold and a little fixed smile on her face" (*Quartet* 123-124). She thinks longingly of an ephemeral, yet repetitive, existence in which she no longer has to "stare at herself, feeling a horrible despair" when she does not meet the expectations of appearing, such as when "her eyelids were swollen and flaccid over unnaturally large, bright eyes [...]. Her mouth drooped, her skin was grayish, and when she made up her face the powder and rouge stood out in clownish patches" (124). Marya prefers her image to be still and effortlessly pleasant. She desires a place where she can "[walk] straight ahead, her face stiff and set [...]. Under the railway bridge where the cobblestones are

always black and glistening” and in this way be assured that “her life was a dream-that all life was a dream. ‘It’s a dream’ she would think; ‘it isn’t real’ - and be strangely comforted” (123, 50). Like in *Voyage in the Dark* where Anna’s feeling of sameness is indicative of *Boulevard de Strasbourg (Corsets)* by Atget, Rhys’s description here evokes another photograph of her contemporary Paris by Atget: *Old Mill, Charenton* (1915) depicts a motionless, serene image of a bridge and a stone wall and their reflections in the water (figure 1.2). The image’s tranquility is dreamlike, especially in the face of the painful, even garish, realities of Marya’s insecure life, and she can feel soothed by “the wavering reflections seen in the water” (123). Although this Atget image is similar to additional images by him and even other artists of the period, these similarities are part of the point as they gesture yet again to Anna’s desire for predictability.



Fig. 1.2. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles,
Jean-Eugène-Auguste Atget, *Old Mill Charenton*, 1915,
Albumen print, 7 1/8 x 8 1/2 in.

In fact, at this point in the novel, the characters all appear like copied photographs, duplicating one another with no clear original. The Heidlers, whom Marya describes as “in some strange way a little alike,” are “like the same chord repeated in a lower key, sitting with [their] hands clasped in exactly the same posture” (19, 97). In addition, just as Heidler calls Marya “savage,” Stephen places Lois in a similar position of the colonized by calling her “primitive” (131, 142). The Heidlers also are as unwaveringly committed to each other as Marya is unrelenting in her loyalty to Stephen, despite her affair and the fact that this loyalty undermines her ability to maintain her relationship to Heidler. The Heidlers’ devotion is demonstrated by Lois, who swallows the tears she sheds at the end of her husband’s relationship with Marya: “She blinked, pressed her lips together, and told herself again: ‘Yes, that’s that’” (141). The repetition of this last phrase demonstrates that the scenario of Heidler’s affairs with Lois’s knowledge and consent will continue to be repeated (141).

Thus the Heidlers serve as copies of themselves, endlessly repetitive, which ensures their longevity, while Marya appears more like a rare photograph, mechanically produced but also a unique throwback, similar to the photo enlargements she encounters later in the novel. She progressively becomes for the Heidlers “the object of their desires” (Emery 109). They mock and criticize her all the while using her to ground their own monotonous self-image. Their profession as art dealers also enables them to trade her like an artwork, one which, paradoxically, is an original that *decreases* in value. When Marya first meets Stephen, he explains to her that “he acted as an intermediary between Frenchmen who wished to sell and foreigners...who wished to buy pictures, fur coats,

twelfth-century Madonnas, anything” (*Quartet* 20). When Marya clarifies, “Oh, you sell pictures,” and Stephen replies, “Pictures and other things,” Marya probably does not imagine that “other things” will include her (161). Stephen is arrested for selling stolen artwork but it is Heidler and Lois who attempt to steal Marya from her husband. In the process, Marya loses her self-possession, and her ability to articulate herself as a modern, appearing woman. Her death-like pose under the watching eyes of the photo enlargements is the end to her performance as other, or any, woman.

The similarity of *Quartet* and *Voyage in the Dark* concluding with violence (a sadistic push; the execution of a brutal abortion that disregards a woman’s well-being) that threatens and possibly ends Anna’s and Marya’s lives emphasizes Rhys’s treatment of her characters as types, which I argue is essential to the representation of women in modernity. The two women, however, do devise distinct ways of integrating metaphorical frames as a means towards locating the financial stability that becoming these types seemingly secured, and their suffering is not due to their involvement with the frame but the fact that they lose sight of it as a tool.

Rhys avoided Anna’s and Marya’s tragic endings and continued to write until her death at the age of eighty-nine. In fact, writing might be the one act that perhaps more than anything else makes her distinctive from her characters. But even she did not escape the frame. By the time she published her final novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, in 1966, photographs had become an essential part of the marketing and selling of books. When Rhys realized that her image and her writing had become equal commodities, she worried that “no one will want to read anything I write” (qtd. in Plante 39). The inevitability of

the frame begs a larger question then: what would happen to these women *without* the access to frames to contextualize and provide a modicum of control over their lives? My impression is that we would be left with books like Zola's *Nana*, which have important literary value but also, to paraphrase Maudie, tell a lot of lies about tarts. As Rhys's novels reveal, there is a great deal more to women's stories than that.

Chapter 2

Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and (In)Sights of Objectification

There is a trend of women modernist writers who seem to disappear from the literary landscape during their lifetime: Jean Rhys was assumed dead before Selma Van Diaz found her through a newspaper advertisement in 1949, and Nella Larsen, after spending the 1920s successfully cultivating literary contacts in Harlem, relinquished those contacts by the late 1930s and, in the early 1940s, was mistakenly believed to be passing as a white woman in downtown Manhattan.¹ According to George Hutchison, Larsen also “‘disappeared’ from a literary historian’s point of view” until following the “dramatic retrieval of Zora Neale Hurston from obscurity [...] the work of reconstructing [Larsen’s] long hidden life had also begun” (2).²

But the idea that Larsen’s *work* disappeared might have more to do with a perception that undermines the successes of women writers and perpetuates the idea that women are only passive victims of a literary field traditionally dominated by male writers. In the 1920s, before and just after the publication of her two novels, Larsen actively participated in the Harlem Renaissance both as a cultural consumer and producer until, as Hutchinson writes, she “became ‘invisible’”(1). Thadious M. Davis claims

¹ Larsen had an apartment only across the street from the building where she lived when her friends from her literary circle knew her (Hutchinson 454). She kept her married name, which was how she was personally known - only her books were published under the name Larsen - and pursued a career in nursing, a job she had held when she first met her husband and through whom she first met many of her literary connections.

² Barbara Christian draws further parallels between “Larsen and Hurston’s disappearances from the world,” arguing “although very different writers, they were both assaulted by the prejudices of the other society” (61).

further that Larsen's disappearance is anticipated in her fiction where "the protagonists disappear from their active lives into passive enactments of their own worst nightmares," made all the worse considering Larsen's previous "determination for voice, for agency, and for visibility" (17). Certainly Larsen's final fate is troubling - she rebuffed her contacts from the Harlem community who celebrated her work and isolated herself to pursue her job as full-time nurse in lower Manhattan - but this notion of her invisibility reveals much about a culture that requires women writers to appear *physically* even as their texts complicate this type of appearance.³ Indeed, Larsen's fiction maintained its presence even as she resisted the attempts by Carl Van Vechten and others to submit her papers to archives of the period (Hutchinson 460), in other words, to appear *physically* even as her texts complicate this type of appearance. Her novels were never out of print for any length of time, and a resurgence in interest can be dated to as early as 1973 with the publication of Hortense Thornton's article, "Sexism as Quagmire: Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*" (Davis xvi).

This chapter will reconsider Larsen's disappearance in terms of her overall consideration of corporality and ornamentation in her novel *Quicksand* (1928). Larsen's main character, Helga Crane, exercises her subjecthood by playing with her objectification, and in this way, she is accessing modernist "vitality" (Scott, *Gender in Modernism* 3). In other words, what defines a modern self is not necessarily the pursuit of a position of authority. It can also include, in Anne Anlin Cheng's description, "the desire

³ Contemporary male writers have more successfully removed themselves from the public landscape, most notably J.D. Salinger. In this case, his popularity benefited from the aura of mystery that surrounded him even though he did not publish once he entered seclusion.

for the ambivalence of personhood” (Cheng 1032). Helga’s version of modern subjecthood thus includes the disruption and also a redefinition of her role as a traditionally objectified body. Further, although Larsen does not directly address photography in her novel, it is my argument that Helga is preparing for her image to be reproduced in this way. At first Helga attains subject status through her relation to mass produced objects that appear in photographs in 1920s magazines and then performs objectification that anticipates the spectacularization of her body. Her disappointment with how others misinterpret her appearance, however, demonstrates that she has only a partial grasp of the limitations of any one person’s ability to control the media she implicitly engages.

Part I Visual Culture and African American Subjecthood

Authorial portraits have played a major role in African American writing from the eighteenth century to the Harlem Renaissance. The eighteenth-century African American poet Phillis Wheatley was “effectively put on trial in front of eighteen prominent white male citizens of Boston and required to prove that she was capable of writing [published] poems” and her 1773 *Poems on Various Subjects* included a letter from these men to confirm that she was, in fact, the author (Carroll 7). Significantly, Wheatley and the publishers of her poems apparently did not feel that *textual* evidence was sufficient to verify her authorship and the book also included an image of Wheatley seated at a desk with a pen and paper, “eyes raised in contemplation.” This inclusion of images with texts

written by African Americans as a means to guarantee authentic authorship then became the norm (8).

By the twentieth century the major magazines of the Harlem Renaissance, the *Crisis*, *Opportunity* and the *Messenger*, used images and photography regularly in their publications, though none of the magazines had a standard convention. The special “New Negro Woman” issue of the *Messenger*, published in July 1923, featured small photographs of the (female) writer next to the texts, perhaps another attempt to authenticate that the articles were written by African American women. Later issues of the magazine did not continue this practice regularly and usually featured photographs of the articles’ subjects rather than the articles’ authors or authors of reviewed books. When these publications did include images, it was in an effort to “provide compelling evidence against stereotypes of African Americans as incapable of progress and achievement” (Carroll 39). In order to communicate to white Americans that African Americans were capable of making contributions to the nation, the publications relied on photographic evidence, such as portraits of well-dressed men and women college graduates in the *Crisis*, or images of black-owned homes in the *Messenger*.

Although these magazines included photographs less regularly than the publications marketed to white audiences, such as *Vanity Fair* and *Harper’s Bazar* (later *Harper’s Bazaar*), they did often feature similar society pages, which were primarily images of women; the photographs of men were most often of artists, writers and intellectuals. David Levering Lewis points out that magazines of the Harlem Renaissance, particularly the *Messenger*, “sometimes read more like sleek, snobbish

Vanity Fair” (109). Carroll claims that the editors and writers of these publications were most concerned with creating a *Vanity Fair*-like image of their audience: male, well-educated and financially successful but African American (109). Unfortunately, regular features in these publications, such as the *Messenger*'s “These Colored United States,” demonstrated that women were sometimes mistaken for objects that communicated these sought-after identities of men. The series introduced accomplished African American men from all over the country, yet often only included photographs of women, such as the March 1924 issue that names many of the successful men in Indiana and is illustrated with published images of their wives and daughters (76-79). Photographs in these publications portrayed women as the objects that prove the success of men and, therefore, convey men's identity.

Alain Locke and the editors of the March 1925 special issue of *Survey Graphic* magazine, “Harlem: The Mecca of the New Negro” (later to be expanded and published as a book entitled *The New Negro*), went a different route to point out the advancements of the race. They included photographs of Harlem and a number of portraits drawn by artist Winold Reiss to provide, alongside the text, physical confirmation that the “new negro” differed dramatically from the stereotypical uneducated, rural blacks prevalent in popular culture. The photographs included in the issue primarily illustrate the streets of Harlem and as such give the impression of providing documentary evidence of the bustling and urbanized streets crammed with well-dressed African Americans seemingly on their way to or from work. In order to exemplify the individual new negro, Locke chose artist Reiss who provided drawings, each of which presents a type, along a

“continuum of black identity” beginning with “Congo: A Familiar of New York Studies” and ending with a “A College Lad” (Nadell 48, *Survey Graphic* 651, 654).

In addition to the female types, such as “Mother and Child” and “Young American: Native Born,” there are “Four Portraits of Negro Women,” which move from the Caribbean to Americans from the Northern Hemisphere, beginning with “A Woman from the Virgin Islands.” (652). The last woman in the series and the only portrait to be based on an individual is Elise Johnson McDougald, whose essay, “The Double Task: The Struggle of Negro Women for Sex and Race Emancipation,” also appears in the issue (688).⁴ McDougald argues that African American women hold an essential role in the struggle for racial equality. In addition, she “implicitly attacks type studies,” insisting that “one must have in mind not any one Negro woman, but rather a colorful pageant of individuals, each differently endowed” (Carrol 146, *Survey Graphic* 688). As much as McDougald argues for the importance of female individuality, however, the fact that she is included in a series of types highlights her own position as a type, such as what could have been termed “the intellectual.” In this capacity, McDougald is not read as an individual with particular ideas but rather as a part of a larger African American movement. Her image overtakes the details of her essay and what she represents appears more important than what she writes. Thus, though three of the female portraits are of women who are professional, educated, and in one case, stylish, and McDougald is

⁴ The second woman in the series, “The Librarian,” is distinguished by her stylish dress and hat. “Two Public School Teachers” follow the Librarian and their unfashionable appearance concerned a number of African Americans who felt that this image would work against the cause of racial uplift. McDougald’s face is one of the more finely detailed images in the magazine. Weiss pays much less attention to her clothes.

actually named and speaks through the text, it is still hard to see these women as more than improved stereotypes.

Despite these shortcomings, Locke's work - and photographs published in other Harlem Renaissance magazines - demonstrates the opportunity that visual imagery offers the cause of redefinition. These publications made possible the very nomenclature "African American" when previously blacks were limited by the racist assumption that they were separate and distinct from the American population. Indeed, by not using photographs, Locke was able to intimate a universality of progressive types that would be harder to emphasize via photographed portraits of particular individuals. The images also suggest that to the writers, artists, and consumers of Harlem Renaissance culture, perceptions of identity could, and would, be altered by visual representations that were not limited to straightforward images of particular individuals.

Larsen was highly attuned to the crucial role visual images played in the Harlem Renaissance, especially in terms of how her appearance could shape her own career. Davis explains that she was "conscious of the value society placed on a female's looks and manners" (10). Larsen's response was to emphasize her status as a modern black woman who also was a writer. Again, according to Davis, "[She] cultivated a dramatic feminine presence at a time when the novelist of color was expected to be male." Figure 2.1 is a 1929 photograph of Larsen receiving the Harmon Award bronze medal for her first novel. She stands out because of her gender - there are five men in the photograph and one other woman - and because of her light-colored fashionable dress against the

dark conservative clothes of the men.⁵ It looks as if Larsen self-consciously dressed in antithesis to how the others appeared. This image demonstrates that to Larsen, beauty was not necessarily based on physical qualities but on “a woman’s ability to dress herself in garments of her own choosing, [which] would always signify [...] her freedom and personal agency” (Hutchinson 41).



Fig. 2.1. Helen Harmon presents Larsen with the Harmon bronze, 1929, also pictured: Channing H. Tobins, James Weldon Johnson, George Haynes and an unidentified man.

Larsen was a voracious reader of popular magazines and newspapers and was known to have kept scrapbooks of reviews of her and her friends’ books and other published references to herself and the people she knew. Thus, she was exposed to the images published alongside these texts and was well aware of how images of women of

⁵ The other woman pictured, Helen Harmon, is the daughter of the award’s benefactor.

all “types” were frequently reproduced. Her friend Carl Van Vechten, for example, wrote a number of articles for *Vanity Fair* and was also frequently mentioned in the publication in connection to his 1926 novel *Nigger Heaven*.⁶ In April 1927, a photograph of Van Vechten appeared in an article, “Harvesters in the Golden Field of Fiction: Six Distinguished American Novelists Who Have Found That Good Books Can Be Best Sellers,” along with photographs of Ernest Hemingway and Willa Cather, among others (65). Larsen did not write for the sheer pleasure of it; she wrote to be published and she recognized that a photo reprinted in a popular magazine was a sign of a successful career.

And though *Vanity Fair* was unlikely to mention the work of any African American writer, man or woman, Larsen’s photograph reprinted in mass market publications did play a major role in the value judgments of her novels. Portraits accompanied reviews of her books: for example, the *Chicago Defender* published a photograph by James L. Allen and, significantly, Larsen’s achievement of critical success might be dated to January 1929 when this photograph and a photograph of Claude McKay were reproduced in *Opportunity* as part of Locke’s article, “1928: A Retrospective Review” that offered a rundown of the year’s literature by African American writers. The photographs are much larger than photographs reprinted in literary reviews included in this publication during this time. There also are not so subtle disparities in these photographs. The soft focus of Larsen’s image preserves the articulation of conventional femininity and, although her forthright gaze is unusual for photographs of women during this time, the way her head is cocked is not: her body is

⁶ After Van Vechten began experimenting with photography in the 1930s, these photographs were also published.

turned to the side but her head faces forward, giving the onlooker a not quite complete view of her face. The photograph of McKay is much more straightforward; he faces front, looks directly at the camera and is dressed in a suit and bow tie.⁷ Thus, African American magazines were endeavoring to change how blacks were viewed by white society and in their own communities and proved that they were generating an impressive oeuvre of literature and art. Larsen's feminine image and McKay's professional one, however, uphold gender roles and reveal that these contributions still "embodied the contradictions of the age" (Christian 138).⁸ It is this contradiction of being a woman in charge of her own spectacularization, while still being vulnerable to gendering and objectification, that Larsen responds to in her work.

This brief analysis of photographs and other images related to the Harlem Renaissance demonstrates that they were essential to the articulation of the movement and that, significantly, the subject/object position of the individuals (or types) represented in each case is ambiguous and loaded. Instead of specifically mentioning these problematic representations in *Quicksand*, Larsen found alternative means of

⁷ Additionally, the connection of patriarchy to authorship, as discussed in the previous chapter, can be seen in the relationship between the men and women writers of the Harlem Renaissance. Langston Hughes famously naming Jesse Redmond Fauset the mid-wife to the Harlem Renaissance, rather than complimenting her, undermined her work as a writer by emphasizing her role assisting with the birth of male writers. And, even in this work as mentor, Davis writes, Charles S. Johnson blocked Fauset's "development as a leader" during her editorship on the *Crisis* by promoting Alaine Locke above her and by an "unspoken antagonism toward women" (159).

⁸ Locke's description of McKay's and Larsen's novels also divulges how the two writers' work was treated differently. McKay's *Home to Harlem* was praised because of its "descriptive art and its reflection of the vital rhythms of Negro life [...] authentic" (Opportunity 9). Locke's choice of language here indicates that McKay's novel works as a counterpoint to fiction that stereotypes African Americans. In contrast, when Locke admires Larsen's *Quicksand* as "a living moving picture of a type not often in the foreground of Negro fiction," his language evokes cinema, more known for elaborate fantasy than authenticity. And whereas McKay's success is undermining stereotypes, Larsen provides insight into one. Her novel "offers a whole side of a problem" rather than the specificity of a character and, as a result, Locke's language prohibits Larsen's character, indeed, Larsen herself, from being more than a type, which was only further emphasized by her feminized photographic portrait.

rearticulating racial and gender identities based on many of the same strategies related to mass production that informed the Harlem Renaissance, the culture of the 1920s, and modernism. As I will reveal, Helga engages in spectacularization as a means to exhibit her multi-dimensionality, complexity, and beauty with no requirement that a camera is present. In this way, Helga can further destabilize the object/subject binary that fostered a racist and sexist gaze - at least until a non-mechanical, and decidedly un-modern, painter attempts to capture her appearance, which shifts the trajectory of Helga's life.⁹

Part II 'Things. Things. Things':¹⁰

Helga Crane and Modern Magazines

Nella Larsen's novel *Quicksand* opens with an epigraph from Langston Hughes's poem "Cross":

My old man died in a fine big house.

My ma died in a shack.

I wonder where I'm gonna die.

Being neither white nor black?

In this poem, the reader knows the race of the "old man" and "ma" purely based on where the "old man" and "ma" live, in a "fine big house" and a "shack" respectively. There is

⁹ Liz Conor points out that attempts by aboriginal women in Australia to appear for reproducibility, as white women did, were read as "imperfect and flawed" or, as Homi Bhabha's explains, "'Almost the same, but not white'" (187). By not literally engaging in the recording of her appearance, Helga avoids this inevitably racist comparison.

¹⁰ This subtitle comes from *Quicksand* when Helga Crane begins to settle into her new life in Denmark: "Always had she wanted, not money, but the things which only could give, leisure, attention, beautiful surroundings. Things. Things. Things" (97).

an emphasis not only on gender as a defining characteristic that inscribes the fate of the “old man” and “ma” but also, by clarifying where they live, Hughes demonstrates who these people are without literally having to express their races. Magazine culture of the 1920s and 1930s shows a similar emphasis on place: Though removed from the horrors of slavery, these publications operated with the principle that where one lives defined one’s socio-economic position. It is through these publications that I read Helga’s search for a place she can call home and also, I argue, a place that provides her with a means to spectacularize herself while avoiding the negative consequences of more traditional photographic portraits.¹¹

The broad strokes of Helga’s life are similar to Larsen’s: Helga is the child of a white Danish mother and a black father from the West Indies and Larsen first introduces Helga while she works as a teacher in the South, in Naxos, a critical representation of Booker T. Washington’s idealistic Tuskegee Institute, where Larsen worked as a nurse. Here, the similarities end: whereas Larsen spent most of her adult life in New York City, Helga’s emotional and eventual physical departure from Naxos foreshadows her periodic disillusionment and exodus from Harlem, Copenhagen and Harlem again, until she moves to the deep South with the Reverend Mr. Pleasant Greene, whom she marries the day after they meet at a rousing church service.

¹¹ Some fictional works by black writers implicitly argue that there is no place for African American commodity consumption in a culture framed by whites, such as Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* and Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Susan Willis points out, however, that there still is a marked advantage in interaction with commodity culture among diverse populations: “Black culture has at its disposal and can manipulate all the signs of artifacts produced by the larger culture. The fact that these are already inscribed with meanings inherited through centuries of domination does not inhibit the production of viable culture statements, even though it influences the way such statements are read” (182).

In the first half of the novel, Helga is most concerned with the interior fittings of the places where she lives, which Larsen describes in substantial detail. For example, she introduces Helga in her small room in Naxos that, despite its size, is fitted with a number of essential possessions, such as “the blue Chinese carpet...the shining brass bowl...the oriental silk,” items that help Helga “consider oneself without repulsion” (35). No doubt these objects are mass produced copies, possession of which communicates style, if not the family connections that would provide an inheritance of original items that these copies were meant to evoke or the finances it would take to purchase them.¹² Elizabeth Outka writes that items like these offer what she calls an “originary authentic,” and that they were “valued in part for [their] evocation of a veneration of the past. At other times [...] the authenticity that was evoked was of novelty, of being the first, the new” (9-10). Helga’s room, “comfortable [...] furnished with rare and intensely personal taste,” serves both these purposes for Helga and, therefore, acts as a means for her to articulate her identity (Larsen 35).

During the Harlem Renaissance, magazines published by well-respected blacks and marketed to black audiences referred to material items like these that we see in Helga’s room to counteract negative stereotypes of the time. A 1918 advertisement from the *Messenger* - one of the few full-page advertisements in that publication - offers “Frank R. Smith Furniture of the Better Kind” and “Oriental and Domestic Rugs” perhaps not unlike the “blue Chinese carpet” Helga has in her room. The emphasis on material possessions goes beyond the advertisements to the editorial. In May 1924, the

¹² Larsen conspicuously avoids African objects d’art that were popular at the time in favor of items that reflect a global identity.

Messenger printed an article on Mortimor H. Harris, a successful businessman, whose accomplishments were visually depicted by images of the home he owns and the interior of his offices (in addition to photographs of his wife and daughter) (“Properties and Real Estate” 140). Ironically, the modern technologies of mass production that created these possessions that seem to have inhibited individualization actually fostered it; again they provided the ordinary authentic, and made it possible for a home to display individual taste - if such taste was shared by enough people to make it worthwhile to sell these items on a mass scale. As the article “An Exquisite Town House” in the January 1928 *Harper’s Bazar* asserts, fitting a modern home could be easily done with “a minimum expenditure of money and a maximum expenditure of rare taste” (93).

Through Helga’s room, Larsen integrates the ways in which Harlem Renaissance publications, as well as magazines marketed to white audiences such as *Harper’s Bazar*, used objects to demonstrate how identity could be represented. More specifically, the mass-produced objects in the room assist Helga in participating in spectacularization while focusing the gaze away from her female figure. As Liz Conor points out, “Through techniques of appearing [women] were able to incorporate the principle operation of the modern spectacle - the increasing articulation of social meaning, gender, race, and power relations at the level of the eye” (255). In the novel the “technique of appearing,” which communicates various “social meanings,” takes place through the representation of objects and houses instead of images of women that, once printed, were circulated and, like the painted portrait of Helga that she despises later in the novel, “[attracts] much flattering attention and many tempting offers” (Larsen 119). The objects are still a means

towards spectacularization, but the focus on them relieves the female subject from what Helga refers to as “dissatisfaction with her peacock’s life”; she can perform her chosen identity as unique, attractive and sought-after without having to be put on display (111). Further, her performance does not require an audience; for her, seeking isolation is part of the role she is playing. Larsen writes that Helga’s room is a means for her to enjoy

intentional isolation for a short while in the evening, this little time in her own attractive room with her books. To the rapping of other teachers, bearing fresh scandals, or seeking information, or other more concrete favors, or merely talk [...] Helga Crane never opened her door. (36)

Thus the room works in a two-fold manner: it shelters the possessions on which Helga relies to articulate her identity and it offers her the ability to further claim that this identity is introspective and remote, despite its reliance on external objects. Helga further avoids the impulse to suppress the instinct towards individuality that she criticizes others for, such as the “Negroes” in America who “didn’t want to be like themselves” or, later in the novel, the Danes she encounters who desire to be “considered as exact copies of other people” (104,113).

Outside of her room, Helga’s affect of individuality becomes problematic as it prohibits her from fitting in with her colleagues and the more conservative people of Naxos. Helga believes this problem is related to her unorthodox family structure, namely her black West Indian father who left her poor, white immigrant mother: Larsen writes, “You could be queer or even attractive [...] if you were a Ranking, or a Leslie, or a Scoville [...] But if you were just plain Helga Crane, of whom nobody had ever heard, it

was presumptuous of you to be anything but inconspicuous and conformable” (43). In fact, when Helga gives notice of her impending departure to the school principal, Robert Anderson, who reappears later in the novel, she becomes offended when he claims that she had “tendencies inherited from good stock” and responds in outrage. Barbara Christian explains Helga’s response:

What Helga cannot stand throughout the novel is that her appearance and education seems automatically to qualify her as lady. Yet if the class that extols her virtues knew the origins of her birth, it would, in all its bristly hypocrisy, condemn her [...]. She hates the lie of the situation. (50)

To Helga, African American society is “rigid in its ramifications [...] If you couldn’t prove your ancestry and connections, you were tolerated but you didn’t ‘belong’” (Larsen 43). Without a family to confer a favorable identity, there is no wonder that “all her life Helga Crane has loved and longed for nice things” (41). Helga also has learned a lesson from this society - that parts stand for the whole - and, in this way, she acquires objects to stand in the place of absent and unbecoming familiar roots, albeit not always successfully. Thus she seeks an appearance that is strategically curated, not merely born into, and she despises the implication that she has such a birthright, while implicitly pointing out that such a “favorable identity” is insufficient to make one satisfied with one’s life. She complains that social backgrounds are “stuffy” and breaks off her engagement to a man that would have provided her with the last name she claims was one of her ex-fiancé’s “first attractions” (43).

Thus, Helga rejects these connections in favor of possessions, which help her not only to “[attain] the status of active subject in relation to other objects” but also to acquire authority (Felski 65). Armed with this authority, she uses the objects to elevate the status of objects overall, including herself. For example, later in the novel, she condemns her friend Anne’s politics but acknowledges that Anne’s “home was in complete accord with what [Helga] designated her ‘aesthetic sense’” (Larsen 80,76). Larsen describes “beds with long, tapering posts to which tremendous age lent dignity and interest, bonneted old highboys, [...] rare spindle-legged chairs, and others whose ladder backs gracefully climbed the delicate wall panels” (76). “These historic things” provide Helga with a temporarily satisfying connection to long-term stability and a family history, without the negative associations. The flattering description also focuses on form: language such as “tapering posts,” “dignity,” “bonneted” and “gracefully” could describe a female body. It is as if in Anne’s house, Helga’s own “well-turned arms and legs” (as described earlier in the novel) are replaced with “spindle-legged chairs” (32). The association to the female body elevates even further the aesthetic value of these historic things and she, too, benefits from the connection.

In addition, though Larsen emphasizes things and even uses them to stand in for Helga’s own physical form, she does not avoid putting Helga on display. In fact, Larsen challenges the critical stance one assumes when a woman appears as an object. For example, Larsen describes Helga’s appearance through the eyes of an anonymous “observer” and quickly turns the focus to Helga’s complementary outfit and furniture:

A slight girl of twenty-two years, with narrow, sloping shoulders and delicate but well-turned arms and legs, she had, none the less, an air of radiant careless health. In vivid green and gold negligee and glistening brocaded mules, deep sunk in the big high backed chair, against whose dark tapestry her sharply cut face, with skin like yellow satin, was distinctly outlined. (36)

Complemented by a carefully selected nightgown and curated furnishings, this “slight girl” shows off “radiant careless health,” a feature that might otherwise be lost in less well-thought-out surroundings. Indeed, the “observer,” to whom Larsen attributes this overview, might be Helga looking at herself. Who else but Helga would be so concerned - and so pleased - with the colors and fabrics highlighted in this scene? Thus Larsen is articulating an ambivalent and ever-changing subject and object divide. Sometimes Helga is in charge of her environment and sometimes she blends in, another object that, nonetheless, expresses her aesthetic sensibility. As Cheng further points out, a woman of color has an advantage in her encounters with things: “It may seem counterintuitive or even dangerous to talk about the raced and sexualized body’s longings to be thinglike or to disappear into things, but it is the overcorporalized body that may find the most freedom in [...] material self-extension” (1032). Helga’s place on the subject/object divide is in flux, but she still makes a calculated attempt to materialize her own autonomy.

Larsen’s description of Helga reads like editorial copy found in issues of *Harper’s Bazar*. For example, in January 1920, one sketch depicts “another lovely Mandel creation [...] a dainty frock of white organdie, worn over a slip of palest green chiffon. Motifs and

insertions of filet trim it, and the girdle is green satin” (“Society” 70).¹³ Larsen’s inclusion of color and fabric in her description of Helga, such as “vivid green and gold,” “glistening brocaded mules,” “dark tapestry” and “yellow satin,” echoes the magazine’s emphasis on similar details. Reading the *Harper’s Bazar* copy as a template reveals that the only detail missing in Larsen’s account of Helga is the location where such items can be purchased. Fashion magazines like *Harper’s*, however, were unapologetically for white audiences and the only diversity demonstrated by the interior photographs and fashion drawings was the occasional inclusion of a blonde woman instead of a brunette or a Rockefeller instead of a Carnegie. This exclusion might actually work in Helga’s favor: She looks *like* a fashion photograph but she avoids the resulting problems of the binary objectification that we associate with the white models in these publications because she cannot be included and, therefore, she remains in control of her own spectacularization.

In fact, in the 1920s, fashion was another means of experimental modern self-expression, no more frivolous than Man Ray’s Rayographs or Paul Outerbridge’s photographs, which were also produced in these magazines.¹⁴ As Ilya Parkins and Elizabeth Sheehan explain, “Fashion links gendered representations of the modern to women’s experiences of modernity” (2).¹⁵ Helga exemplifies this age where fashion and modern experience cohere and her fixation on her clothes, accessories and appearance

¹³ Mandel Brothers of Chicago was one of the city’s largest department stores.

¹⁴As I write in the introduction to this project, these photographs reveal the existence of numberless points of views rather than confirming the capability of the medium to offer a “right” one.

¹⁵ Wendy Steiner argues that the “Modernists vilified aesthetic pleasure [...]. At the same time, they treated the ‘new woman’ and the goal of female self-realization as equally irrelevant to the laboratory of the modern” (xix). Yet Judith Brown maintains that rather than “vilifying” aesthetics, modernists directly engaged them: “With the device of a focused observer, often with a highly aesthetic eye, many novels created the sense of a fascinated voyeur framing [...] the events of the narrative” (10).

demonstrates that these details are integral to the further destabilization of her subject/object position. “Chic,” as these magazines called one’s fashion wisdom, requires both inborn and learned skills. An advertisement for Madame C.J. Walker’s Superfine Toilet Preparations in the September 1924 issue of the *Messenger* concurs: “Only a few women are born beautiful, but all can achieve it” (285). There also was an emphasis on looking “smart”; for example, an advertisement published in *Harper’s Bazar* in October 1926 advises women that Vici shoes will “put brains on your feet” (192). *Vogue* in May 1928 similarly insists that the most fashionable women are the cleverest:

This season, the wisest women will watch for every issue, read every word, and study the sketches and photographs as they once studied their schoolbooks - or should have. Those that really assimilate what they find between *Vogue’s* covers will still be impeccably chic. And, this year, chic will be more than ever worth attaining, for it will be an expression of distinction, good breeding, intelligence and taste. (“*Vogue’s* Eye-View of the Mode” 55)

The language of the last sentence emphasizes that fashion is not about following “the mode” but in presenting a woman’s unique character. Again in its regular feature “*Vogue’s* Eye-View of the Mode,” this time in the September 1927 issue, the magazine points out that postwar uniformity was clearly out of style: “Instead of women vigorously and rigorously restraining themselves into a mould of similarity, this season will see the beginning of chic women reflecting to some degree, if not at first frankly asserting, their personality” (41). Of course, uniqueness is not exceptional if it requires the purchase of mass-produced items that are also owned by other women; the “frank assertion” that this

Vogue article emphasizes is that even more than a unique wardrobe, chic requires the appropriate attitude.

Thus fashion magazines that have a reputation for objectifying women incongruously also offered the idea that a photographic subject could act as if she possessed an individual subject position, at least for a specific class of white women. In the publications of the 1920s and early 1930s, photographs were primarily reserved for society women in the latest gowns who were clearly named in the captions that often included their married and given names. (Drawings that did not correspond to specific individuals illustrated the latest styles.) The women certainly have more agency than the types from the Reiss drawings. Since there were no fashion-related publications for African American women at the time, Larsen could fill this void while also enabling a black woman to appear in mass culture on her own terms. It is not my intention to gloss over the potential damaging effects on a woman's self-image (and obvious racism) that these publications fostered, which predominately print photographs of the idealized white and objectified female form. However, these magazines offered a means for a woman to express her subjecthood through the mass production and consumption of objects and her own spectacularization. It was, and still is, persuasive.

Further, Helga avoids "[reiterating] the status of woman as an object of consumption," as Meredith Goldsmith claims, and unhesitantly responds to a man who propositions her "scathingly [...]. Harshly" (270, Larsen 61-62). In fact, her constant moving, even running, in the novel represents a refusal to be trivialized as the traditional subject/object divide presupposes. When Helga first arrives in Chicago, she immediately

feels at home among the “moving multicolored crowd” where she finds familiarity, ironically, “as if she were tasting some agreeable exotic food” (Larsen 62). Helga “traversed acres of streets” and purchases a book and a tapestry purse along the way (66). These are “things which she wanted but did not need and certainly could not afford” and she resolves “to go without her dinner as a self-inflicted penance, as well as economy” (64). Helga’s movement confirms her as a participant in modernity and her engagement with commodity consumption indicates that she still is actively negotiating her position in relation to objects. In fact, she chooses objects over food; food is literally consumed and disappears whereas objects remain with her, serving the needs of her identity and corporeality, if not physical sustenance.

Helga’s purchases augment her ability to sustain herself, even without food, as a physically and metaphysically irreducible individual, in other words, constantly present and available for her ongoing spectacularization. She buys the book and purse after her painful interaction with her Uncle’s wife, Mrs. Nilssen, who questions not only Helga’s parents’ legal status as husband and wife but also Helga’s very existence when she insists, “My husband is not your uncle” (60). Mrs. Nilssen’s statement undermines Helga’s feelings of legal legitimacy *and* corporeality. Her parents’ questionable marriage should not undermine her biological connection to her uncle. Thus, if her aunt’s claim is true, that she is not Peter Nilssen’s niece, is she not her mother’s child? Does she exist at all? Larsen writes that the conversation makes Helga feel that she is disappearing: “The wind cut her like a knife, but she did not feel it,” and she is “numb.” But with her purchases, despite the sacrifices they require, Helga can take charge of her subjectivity

and ensure her physicality. By being “framed” by these items - a word that Larsen uses throughout the novel - Helga’s existence is guaranteed: Every frame requires its subject.

During her ensuing job search, Helga again uses objects, this time in an effort to appear to conform to what she perceives are conventional values. Rather than highlighting unique taste, Helga attempts to fit in: “She dressed herself carefully, in the plainest garments she possessed, a suit of fine blue twill faultlessly tailored, from whose left pocket peeped a gay kerchief, an unadorned heavy silk blouse, a small, smart fawn-colored hat, and slim brown oxfords” (63). Because Helga is essentially playing a role, the outfit appears more like a costume than her more fashionable garments. Small details such as the suit “faultlessly tailored,” the “gay kerchief,” “smart” hat and “slim” shoes, language suitable for fashion magazines, divulge Helga’s love for style but in this case Helga’s things - her clothes - no longer serve their purpose. Her initial job inquiry at the library is met with rejection and though she vows she will go to the YWCA “employment office the first thing tomorrow morning, [...] it was not until three days more had passed that Helga sought the Association” (64).¹⁶ In this case, Helga’s clothes do not empower her nor do they provide her with a means of self-expression. As a result, unlike her possessions in Naxos, her things in Chicago become mere things, lacking vitality. Bill Brown explains,

We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us:

When the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when

¹⁶ Larsen, in fact, was the first African American woman to graduate from the New York Public Library training program and worked in the Harlem branch.

their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. (4)

Likewise, Helga's objects are reduced in status when they are no longer able to serve their purpose. This outfit does not represent Helga's personality, nor is it sufficient either to secure her a new place or to inspire her to work harder to do so. Significantly, the clothes Helga wears as she submits these job applications are diminutive, "small," "slim," with a handkerchief that only "peeps" (Larsen 64) This undersized proportion reflects how little impact they will have, lacking the capacity to function as a representation of Helga. Further, Helga does not realize that the "right" clothes and performance are not sufficient in this case, when training is required, and her disappointment ironically foreshadows the profound shock she will experience later in the novel when her risqué clothes *do* communicate an identity, and not the one she intended. At this point in the novel, however, and without the aid of this outfit, Helga does find a position, relocates to Harlem, and then moves on to Denmark. It is in Denmark where her expression of modern subjecthood is articulated by a disruption, and ensuing re-instatement, of her identity as a objectified body and thus she participates in the vital range of modern women's self-representation.

Part III Helga Crane, Modern Escape Artist: Denmark and the American South

Helga becomes frustrated with the hypocrisy of Harlem, the "insipid drinks, dull conversation, stupid men" and especially her friend Anne, who is "obsessed with the race

problem” all the while, as Helga complains, mimicking white middle-class values (Larsen 83, 79).¹⁷ Her encounter with her former boss from Naxos, Robert Anderson, and her “refusal to acknowledge her own sexuality,” spur her to take her uncle’s advice and meet her Danish aunt in Copenhagen (Sherrard-Johnson 260). If Helga desires Anderson, it remains hidden between the lines of text; Hazel Carby explains that Helga is inclined towards “burial, not the discovery, of the self” (173). For example, Helga emphasizes that she is disturbed by Anderson’s looking but does not acknowledge that his looking potentially fuels her romantic interest. Larsen writes, “Another vision [...] came haunting Helga Crane: level gray eyes set down in brown face which stared out at her, coolly, quizzically, disturbingly” (83). She instead longs to be “among approving and admiring people where she would be appreciated and understood” (88).

At the beginning of her stay in Denmark, she accomplishes this goal. Although at first she resents her Aunt Katrina, also called Fru Dahl, for commenting on her clothes, it is because she calls into question Helga’s “deep faith in the perfection of her taste” (99). Helga acknowledges that at least in one instance, the case of a Chinese dressing gown, her aunt is right: “It did suit her [...]. And she knew that she had lovely shoulders, and her feet *were* nice.” Helga also begins to become comfortable with being looked at by the Danes. Outside her aunt and uncle’s apartment, Helga initially feels like a “veritable savage as they made their leisurely way across the pavement” (100). Cheryl Wall describes this feeling as an example of Helga being “made into an exotic female-other

¹⁷ An ad for White Star Line that appeared in a 1928 issue of Harper’s Bazar would speak directly to Helga: “Are you bored with your friends? Have you seen everything worthwhile in the theater and been to all the smart clubs? Of course you have! And you’re just tired to death of it all. You want to get away. Look at yourself in the mirror and see if you don’t” (19).

symbol of the unconscious, the unknowable, the erotic, and the passive. Her aunt and uncle conspire to this end, by dressing her in [what Larsen describes as] ‘batik dresses, leopard-skin coats [...] glittering jewelry’” (103). But after a while, Helga enjoys the experience, if not of being the other, certainly of being seen and appreciated for her appearance:

No other woman in the stately pale blue room was so greatly exposed. But she liked the small murmur of wonder and admiration which rose when Uncle Pohl brought her in. She liked the compliments in the men’s eyes as they bent over her hand. She liked the subtle half-understood flattery of her dinner partners. (Larsen 100)

Helga is literally exposed: her outfit has been tailored “until, as Helga put it, it was ‘practically nothing but a skirt.’” She again finds comfort in things because they displace the focus from her body: “She was thankful for the barbaric bracelets, for the dangling earrings, for the beads about her neck. She was even thankful for the rouge on her burning cheeks and for the very powder on her back.” This experience is the “realization of a dream that she had dreamed persistently” and Helga enjoys the “wonder,” “admiration,” and “compliments in the men’s eyes” because, unlike her encounter with Anderson, these people are not “studying her, appraising her” (97, 81). Helga does not need to be concerned with misreading, or perhaps worse, an insightful reading because in Denmark, the flattery is only “half-understood” (97). Helga is physically exposed but she cannot really be seen. Essentially she is using her body to deflect attention from her self.

In addition, she relies on the same methods of implying her own reproducibility as she did while living in Harlem, though outside the context of relevancy of 1920s American culture. She incorporates the visual rhetoric of Josephine Baker, who first appeared in Paris in 1925 and in film starting with *Siren of the Tropics* (1927), and whose performances were regularly recounted in the American media. Helga's performance as a Baker-type exotic is an example of how, as Debra B. Silverman explains, she can "use already available stereotypes in order to subvert them" and thus Helga assumes an extremely complicated representation of a black woman while also distancing herself from the role (15). Larsen writes that Helga calculates how she will go about her performance, calling it a "business of being seen"; "intentionally [keeping] to a slow, faltering Danish"; and "[retaining] an air of remoteness" (104). Helga also fragments her figure: as photography in the 1920s offered a "rigorous examination of meticulously selected physical details," she, too, emphasizes her neck, cheeks and back so that "fine detail," which was the "hallmark" of photography, is also the focal point of Helga's appearance (North, *Camera Works* 51). Helga is not reproduced photographically in the novel but she could not appear as she does in Denmark, and attempt to undermine the racialized implications, without her previous exposure to this type of representation.

Barbara Johnson calls Helga's bodily-display and her ensuing self-congratulation examples of "narcissism," which she sees as evidence of a "lack of self" (257). On one level, I agree with Johnson's reasoning: there are limits to what Helga can achieve when her narcissism brings her "periods of heightened vitality and contentment [...] followed by a renewed sense of depletion" (257). However, the value of the vitality should not be

undermined by the subsequent exhaustion. Hélène Cixous points out that narcissism creates an impossible situation for women: “Men have committed the greatest crime against women. Insidiously, violently, they have led them to hate women, to be their own enemies [...]. They have made for women an antinarcissism!” (2041-2042). Helga’s carefully put together appearance, and her appreciation when this appearance is admired, does warrant charges of narcissism but critical recognition as well. In fact, her narcissism enables her to pursue beauty as a means to negotiate herself out of a severely racist and sexist social structure. The word beauty is complicated, especially considering Helga’s insistence that she is not beautiful per se: When her uncle sees Helga in a new dress, he exclaims, “‘She’s beautiful; beautiful’” (Larsen 99). Larsen writes further, “Helga Crane knew she wasn’t that, but it pleased her” (99). As Wendy Steiner argues, “The experience of beauty involves an exchange of power,” and, therefore, beauty essentially has a “value” (xxi-xxiii). Despite Helga’s protestations then - which also indicates the limits of her narcissism - she has charged herself with the pursuit (and performance) of beauty as a means of power in a social structure that, no matter where she is in the world, severely undermines her access to it.

Moreover, Helga’s relishing of her experience in Denmark is evidence of powerful and, more importantly for this project, modernist self-expression. It is the visual equivalent of the written “*Plea for Color*” that she argued was so crucial while still employed at Naxos:

Fragments of speech made by the dean of women floated through her thoughts -
‘Bright colors are vulgar’ – ‘Black, gray, brown, and navy blue are the most

becoming colors for colored people' [...]. But something intuitive, some unanalyzed driving spirit of loyalty to the inherent racial need for gorgeousness told her that bright colors *were* fitting [...]. One of the loveliest sights Helga had ever seen had been a sooty black girl decked out in a flaming orange dress, which a horrified matron had the next day consigned to the dyer. Why, she wondered, didn't someone write *A Plea for Color*. (51)

Her "*Plea for Color*" takes the form of the "batik dresses in which mingled indigo, orange, green, vermilion, and black; dresses of velvet and chiffon in screaming colors, blood red, sulphur yellow, sea green" (103).¹⁸ Steiner confirms that beauty is not "a thing or a quality" but rather "a kind of communication" (xxi). Helga is making herself heard, or rather, seen, and her beauty is an "[enhancement of] what was already in one's possession" (Larsen 104). Further, although this pursuit of beauty does not result in a work of art per se, it falls under the category of "expressive cultures" that Paul Gilroy describes, which "developed into slavery to continue to preserve in artistic form needs and desires which go far beyond the mere satisfaction of material wants" (57).

Helga's aesthetic statement of beauty is a controlled and deliberate activity, related to her rejection of intimacy in the novel. Her physical desire in the novel for Anderson and Audrey Denny, a mixed race woman who embraces her whiteness,

¹⁸ Some of these items are the same ones Wall refers to as making Helga the "Other-symbol" (267). Although these symbols are problematic, I argue that they are evidence of Helga's self-reliance in part because she agrees to wear these clothes while not performing in other ways as the exotic sexualized other. Debra B. Silverman explains, "Larsen challenges [stereotypes] [...] by sacrificing her heroine to the very sex(uality) she is supposed to want and enjoy so much. Larsen thus works against the exotic primitivism that [...] became a familiar trope in modernist literature" (607).

“threatens to obliterate Helga’s careful self-presentation” (J. Brown 138).¹⁹ The pursuit of the pleasures of the body over aesthetic ones would undermine Helga’s commitment to her spectacularization. Thus she rejects Anderson, her ex-fiancé James Vayle, her friend Anne, Audrey and other acquaintances in Harlem, and even the places where she lived, many in which she initially claimed to feel at home. These continual rejections are not for lack of feeling. Her emotions quickly change from adoration to hate, and this range, according to T. S. Eliot’s seminal essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” is part of the process of creating modernist art: “The poet’s mind is in fact a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unit to form a new compound are present together” (118).²⁰ Larsen demonstrates that Helga is archetypically modern, in Eliot’s terms. She serves as a “receptacle” for “numberless feelings.” For example, the description of Helga’s marriage to Green at the end of the novel, first described by Helga cuttingly as “a truly spiritual union,” is termed by her even more harshly later as a “crowning idiocy” (146, 161). While in Denmark, Helga’s emotional distance helps her to communicate her aesthetic sense; thus when Larsen writes that Helga “didn’t at all count” when explaining her object/subject position in Denmark, it affirms Eliot’s assertion that the poet does not have a “‘personality’ to express, but a particular medium” (Larsen 100, Eliot 118). Helga is not a poet but she does engage with the same cultural modes that informed modernist art and writing as a means to access a more satisfactory gender and racial position.

¹⁹ For more about queer desire in Larsen’s fiction, see Judith Butler, chapter six.

²⁰ Celia Marshik originated this model of using Eliot’s theory for reading female appearance in her conference paper, “‘Definite,’ rather bad, taste?”: Ottoline Morrell In and Out of the Eyes of Bloomsbury.”

While in Denmark, the artist Axel Olsen, who paints Helga's portrait, proposes marriage and this proposal illustrates that he mistakes Helga's ambiguous object identifications for the racist stereotype of the sexually available black female body, in part because her references are not culturally relevant to the Danes, while racism is. Grant McCracken points out that such is the problem with relying on clothes as a form of communication: The "looks [do] not constitute a set of infinite possibilities but a delimited universe" (65). Helga confesses surprise at Olsen's pursuit of her: "In spite of [Olsen's] expressed interest and even delight in her exotic appearance, in spite of his constant attention upon her, he gave no sign of the more personal kind of concern" (Larsen 107). Helga initially courts this lack of intimacy: she "managed, too, to retain an air of remoteness" and does not foresee that Olsen will, nonetheless, claim to understand her (104).

Larsen does not include Olsen's initial proposal to Helga, which seems to have been far more insidious than marriage because it gives Helga a "stripped, naked feeling under his direct glance" (116). As part of his second proposal, he declares that Helga has "the soul of a prostitute" - odd for one attempting to convince another to marry. He continues, "You sell yourself to the highest buyer. I should of course be happy it is I" (117). Within his comments lies a reference to slavery even though he and Helga are outside its traditional geographic context. Helga is perceived as a black body available for purchase to the white male "bidding" at a slave auction. Olsen's insistence that "*You* sell yourself to the highest bidder" only confirms his perception of black women as not possessing what he considers to be white moral values, and that her enslaved position is

somehow her fault. In other words, Olsen reduces Helga's pursuit of beauty and desire to control the gaze to the same assumptions that justify racism. He is the interpreter of clothing who "examines an outfit not for a new message but an old one fixed by convention" (McCracken 66).

Significantly, Olsen needs to frame Helga to make her fit his racist reading of her and he waits to finish his portrait to make his offer. But she is repelled by his proposal: "I'm not for sale. Not to you. Not to any white man. I don't at all care to be owned" (Larsen 117). When it comes to her material body, Helga maintains her rights of possession; she only frames herself. Yet, through the representation of her image, Olsen's portrait, which he claims is the "true Helga Crane," Helga becomes available for purchase (119). His insistence that the "true" Helga Crane cannot only be painted on canvas, but that such a thing as a *true* copy exists in the first place is the antithesis of modernity. The painting is also troubling in its immobility: "It had been hung on the line at an annual exhibition, where it had attracted much flattering attention" (119). In Harlem, by contrast, Helga experienced modernity that moved: Music and dancing make her feel "drugged, lifted, sustained [...] blown out, ripped out, beaten out" so that "the essence of life seemed bodily motion" (89).

Olsen and his portrait have an irrevocable impact on Helga. In the words of the Dahls' maid Marie, the portrait is "bad, wicked" (Larsen 119). Helga claims that "anyone with half an eye could see it wasn't she," but she is hurt and threatened by what it represents. As Cherene Sherrard-Johnson stresses, "While Larsen confronts the consuming gaze, she cannot completely dismantle its [...] force" (48). Helga leaves

Denmark for Harlem, a stay that is meant to be temporary. Instead, she meets “the grandiloquent Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green, that rattish yellow man,” at a church service she enters to escape the rain (Larsen 145). She undergoes a conversion of sorts: Larsen treats Helga’s consideration of God in her sudden decision to marry Green as an addendum to a stream of consciousness passage that includes thoughts of Denmark, Anderson and then Green (145). She considers that she might have been ““saved”” but thinks more that Anderson “would be shocked. Grieved. Horribly hurt even. Well, let him!”

In Arkansas, where she moves to join Green, Helga initially continues to pursue her play with objects and objectification, this time as a means to assist the financially and culturally deprived women in Green’s ministry: “She would help them with their clothes, tactfully point out that sunbonnets, no matter how gay, and aprons, no matter how frilly, were not quite the proper things for Sunday church wear” (146). Helga is framing these women as she attempted to frame herself by insisting they appear according to her modern aesthetic values. But as Helga experienced in Denmark, when this framing is placed by an outsider’s perspective, it cannot take hold. The women from the ministry are no more modernist subjects than she was what Olsen imagined her to be. Helga’s initial “zest for the uplifting of her fellow men” quickly diminishes and she focuses instead on her own family, describing them through the perspective of her old life. She speaks of them as objects that she places around her as a means to articulate her identity and validate her choices. Of Green, she says to herself that she is “proud and gratified that he belonged to her”; her sons are inspired creations, “like rare figures carved out of amber”;

and her daughter is similarly an artwork, described as a “cherished possession,” as if she was selected to complete an elite art collection (149, 150).

Biological creation begins to undermine Helga’s pursuit of aesthetic beauty, however. Her pregnancies signify that she is no longer in control of her body, and therefore, she can no longer continue to negotiate the subject/object divide. When she questions if there was more to life than exhaustion from her continual child-bearing and caretaking, another woman from the ministry merely responds that she will find relief in the next world: “Jes’ make de bes you can [...]. In de nex’ worl we’s all recompense” (152). Helga is not given much to hope for in this world and the desire for a release from suffering soon overpowers her desire for beauty.

Confronted by the material limitations of her cyclically expanding and shrinking maternal body, Helga begins the process of disappearing. In Arkansas, she never refers to her former contacts, as she had done when she thought of Harlem while living in Denmark, or of Denmark when she returns to Harlem. Additionally, as Helga thinks about leaving Arkansas, she is at a loss for a place to go. She says to herself, “How, then, was she to escape from the oppression, the degradation, that her life had become?” (161). In the past, Helga continually hatched future plans for escape. For example, she leaves Naxos believing her uncle in Chicago will help her and she leaves New York to visit her aunt in Denmark. In Arkansas, she reminisces about the past, but falls short of finding an out:

It was so easy and pleasant to think about freedom and cities, about clothes and books, about the sweet mingled smell of Houbigant and cigarettes in softly lighted

rooms filled with inconsequential chatter and laughter and sophisticated tuneless music. It was so hard to think out a feasible way of retrieving all these agreeable, desired things. (161-62)

Helga feels “almost hopeless” and she no longer spins out possibilities but rather “put[s] aside the making of any plan for her going” (161). Previously, Helga has left places in haste; now, her illness and poverty make her put off her departure.

At the end of the novel, Helga is pregnant again with her fifth child. Her physical escape is all the more unlikely and her death all but confirmed. The loss of her fourth child, who “just closed his eyes and died. No vitality,” might foreshadow Helga’s own death. If she does survive, her return to her former pursuits will be impossible. Thus Larsen chooses for Helga disappearance over the continuous loss of bodily autonomy and of appearing as she wants to be seen. As Helga becomes more ill, her husband begins to ignore her, only returning to her between pregnancies to start the process again. His physical intimacy controls her and he, like Olsen, does not recognize that she is more than an outlet for his passion. Her children are the only ones who are pleased to see her but they also limit her ability to find a way out. She thinks of “their cry of ‘Mummy, Mummy, Mummy’” and resolves that “she couldn’t desert them” (161). In her role as mother, she ironically loses the ability to “reiterate the continuity of [...] life” (Gilroy 57). Helga fades from her own story: “She dozed and dreamed in snatches of sleeping and waking letting time run on. Away. [...]. She began to have her fifth child” (Larsen 162).

Helga needs her body to move within and beyond modernity, from Chicago to Harlem, to Denmark and then Arkansas. Her engagement with objects and her re-definition of her objectification is dependant upon the placement of her body, even while her body is displaced or defined by objects. Once she loses control of her physical manifestation she can no longer render herself as her own representation. As a writer, however, Larsen did not need to rely on her physical self. After the success of *Quicksand*, she published one more book, *Passing* (1929), and there is speculation that she wrote perhaps two or three more that were not published. It is unlikely that Larsen ever foresaw the ubiquity of her images in relation to her work: the photographs on the covers of her books and her symbolic image as the black woman writer who disappeared. But disappearance implies that Larsen inadvertently got lost, as Helga does in Arkansas, or that the white and male-dominated literary scholarship overlooked her due to her race and gender, despite her efforts to maintain her rightful place in the literary landscape. It enforces what Judith Butler calls “the regulatory norms of ‘sex,’ [which] work in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies, and more specifically, to materialize the body’s sex, to materialize sexual difference” (2). In other words, when scholars discuss Larsen’s disappearance it is with the assumption that Larsen needed to appear materially; her existence as a writer, they believe, depended on the physical presence of her body. In fact, Larsen’s success, and the success of many of the writers in this dissertation project, is derived from an ability to undermine the cultural expectations of a woman’s corporeality. Therefore, just as we read women’s role in modernity as, in part, spectacularized, then conscious absence from this spectacle is another expression of

modernity. Larsen's self-imposed removal from the literary landscape could suggest a refusal to be represented by anything apart from her writing. Since she no longer was able to get published despite the success of her two novels, Larsen could have chosen to let these novels speak, or in this case, appear for her.

Chapter 3

The Work of Art in the Age of Gertrude Stein

Walter Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" has long been the magnum opus for discussing the virtue - and vice - of modern visual recording technologies. Indeed, Benjamin's analysis of mechanical reproduction frames our own culture of scholarship as much as it articulates the challenges of evolving visual technologies of the early twentieth century.¹ Yet by reading Benjamin's essay alongside "Pictures" from Gertrude Stein's *Lectures in America*, both initially composed in the 1930s, it becomes apparent that Benjamin's concern that film encourages passivity and might be used as a dangerous tool of fascism has overshadowed his discussion of the advantages of other forms of visual technology, such as photography.² Modernist critics, relying on Benjamin as the authority, often neglect the constructive influence of the mass production of images and interpret his essay as confirmation of the dichotomy between elite culture and mass culture that some modernists claimed.³ My intent here is not to critique Benjamin but to elucidate and contextualize his essay by drawing comparisons to Stein's "Pictures." Stein offers an interpretation of oil paintings that suggests recognition of the constructive influence of evolving visual recording devices on her and other modernist artists. In part one of this

¹ Benjamin did recognize the progressive possibilities of the Dada movement's use of new technologies. See Andreas Huyssen 153-154.

² "Pictures" was prepared by Stein for her 1934 lecture tour of America, which immediately followed the popular success of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. Benjamin's text was written and revised three times between 1936 and 1939. I quote from the third version.

³ Brenda Silver, Andreas Huyssen and Judith Brown are just a few of the scholars whose work reflects, if not always applaud, Benjamin's precepts.

chapter, I argue that Stein's aesthetic theory developed in "Pictures" allows the woman artist/subject to command a role in commodity culture, rather than her value necessarily being diminished by it. Part two reveals how Stein enacts the aesthetic theory she describes in "Pictures" to cultivate her reputation of genius in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. The third part details the influence of avant-garde photography on *Toklas* and demonstrates how technologies of mass production were instrumental to Stein's transition from a much-talked-about author to a widely-read one.

Part I Authenticity and Aura in Benjamin and Stein:
 Towards a New Aesthetic Theory of Mechanical Production

At the heart of Benjamin's famous essay is his acknowledgement that "in principal a work of art has always been reproducible," referring to sculpture and lithography (*Illuminations* 218-219). Yet, he is known for distinguishing photography from these other two media by what he claims is the absence of the artist: "For the first time in the process of pictorial reproduction, photography freed the hand of the most important artistic functions" (219). As Susan Sontag confirms, this moment did not change the relationship between art and interpretation: "Photographs are as much an interpretation of the world as paintings and drawings are" (*On Photography* 6-7). Benjamin's insistence, however, on the significance of the physical manifestation of the artwork, such as his argument that "the presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity," (*Illuminations* 220) feeds into the perpetuation of what Aaron

Jaffe describes as modernism's preoccupation with "a distinctive [...] mark of authorship" (Jaffe 1). Benjamin further determines that "even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be" (*Illuminations* 220). And though Benjamin is primarily referring to photographic copies of paintings and is not making an argument regarding the nature of photography, he promotes an investment in the authenticity of the physical relationship between a work of art and the artist, such as an oil painting touched by the hand of the painter or even a lithograph that was based on a woodcut physically forged by an artist.⁴ Thus Benjamin's claim that an artistic original *produced* by the artist is far more authentic than one he believes is *reproduced* by technology encourages a belief in the "rule of scarcity" that among traditional approaches to modernism works to "distinguish" a reputable artwork from "signs" of mass production (Jaffe 1).⁵

Stein offers a compelling alternative: She argues that *all* figurative work is essentially a copy, which suggests that there is no clear distinction between photographs and paintings and even photographs of paintings, and, further, complicates the idea of the mark of authorship, which is discussed in the second part of this chapter.⁶ To Stein, all artistic visual mediums "effect a representation and transformation of their subject"

⁴ Benjamin comments only briefly that there is a distinction between photographs that have "captured a place of its own among the artistic processes" and those that reproduce paintings (*Illuminations* 220).

⁵ Through the double meaning of the word "reproduction," the same in English and German, the cultural dismissal of artifacts of mechanical reproduction that follows Benjamin's essay might be linked to the dismissal of the pivotal role that women's bodies play – and the threat that their creative, intellectual output posed. Whenever possible, I limit my use of the word to references to Benjamin.

⁶ According to Plato's theory of mimesis set forth in the allegory of the cave, all material forms mimic transcendent Forms and, therefore, art is an imitation of an imitation (*The Republic*, Book VII).

(Stewart 107).⁷ Stein begins by asserting that she appreciates anything depicted on a “flat surface”: “I like the representation or the presentation of anything [...]. I even like a curtain or a sign painted as they often do in Europe painted in oil of the things to be sold inside and I like a false window or a vista painted on a house” (*Lectures* 60). In fact, as she states above, Stein appreciates depictions that pretend to be something else; in other words, not only conventional representations of people and places hung in museums (or in her own home), but those that are “false,” simultaneous representations and acknowledgements that the representations are not what they appear to be. A window scene painted in oil on a canvas or a trompe l’oeil vista on the wall of a house are meant to echo the beauty of life, and even pretend to be lifelike, but do not make a claim of being equal to it; in fact the pleasure of trompe l’oeil is in the revelation that it is false. The aesthetic value is not reduced by the implicit admission of being a copy (i.e., an oil painting or trompe l’oeil) of an original (i.e., life). Stein argues instead that an oil painting, whether a faithful copy of life or a more abstract representation, “[achieves] an existence in and for itself, it exists on as being an oil painting on a flat surface and it has its own life and like it or not there it is and I can look at it and it does hold my attention” (61). In other words, what characterizes artwork in Stein’s point of view is not the claim of authenticity but its independent existence apart from the function of imitating reality.

Benjamin, however, is invested in the oil painting primarily because it is an historic object. He does see the advantage of photography as a function of its ability to “capture images which escape natural vision” and that it enables a work of art to be

⁷ Although Stewart is specifically referring to representations of the atypical body, her language is an apropos description of my interpretation of Stein’s theory.

viewed beyond the limitations of its geographic presence (*Illuminations* 220). But work produced by modern recording technologies is deficient without having value as an authentically historic object, as measured by, for instance, “chemical analyses of the patina of a bronze” (or, in contemporary culture, its material connection to an artist/celebrity). Alternatively, Stein’s description of her appreciation of art paves the way for evaluating artwork apart from its historical presence - after all, merely being present in the sixteenth century is, arguably, not a value in itself - or, at the very least, a different kind of value than an aesthetic one. Reading Stein invites a reassessment of the modernist focus on authenticity that Benjamin seems to encourage. For example, she writes, “Anything once it is made has its own existence and it is because of that that anything holds somebody’s attention. The question always is about that anything, how much vitality has it and do you happen to like to look at it” (*Lectures* 61). Stein insists further, “By anything here I really mean anything. Anything that happens anything that exists anything that is made has of course its own vitality” (62). It is not too far afield to understand “anything” as anything mass-produced. Stein rescues the artwork from its creator, giving the viewer the ability to give it value. Thus, although she does not mention photography specifically, her essay suggests that even a photographic copy of an original artwork can be appreciated for its qualities apart from the artwork it duplicates and, therefore, is still in possession of vitality, albeit different from its predecessor. Like an oil painting, it can have “a life of its own” (63).

Stein further points out that life itself can appear like an oil painting, since neither one precedes or undermines the other, either sequentially or in aesthetic value. She recalls

visiting a historic battlefield near Paris, which morphs between a living scene and a representation of one:

And just then into this thing was so historical that it almost did look like an oil painting a very old couple of people a man and woman got out of an automobile and went to look at a grave [...] and the moment of its existence as an oil painting ceased, it became a historical illustration for a simple historical story. (64)

In this case, history does not guarantee authenticity. In fact, there are three aesthetic moments in Stein's description and two are representations. The moments are: actual experience (a grey day, the old couple), the imagined oil painting version of this experience and the imagined historical illustration. Each moment is vital and offers a "perfectly definite picture of the battle" (65).

This leveling is enlightening: through it we see that Benjamin's focus on the aura and the inevitable loss "of the authority of the object" that occurs as a result of mechanical reproduction does not acknowledge that the mass-produced object has an aura itself, in part because it offers space for the imagination (*Illuminations* 221). His claim that "reproductions [...] [substitute] a plurality of copies for a unique existence" prohibits the recognition of a copy as another type of aesthetic object worthy of our attention and admiration (121). In "Portraits," also published with "Pictures" in *Lectures in America*, Stein disagrees with Benjamin's insistence on singularity (and also implicitly defends her own work): "It is not repetition if it is that which you are actually doing because naturally each time the emphasis is different" (179). If we read aura through this lens, a product of repetition would possess an aura that is distinct from the original; the

“emphasis” is multiplied rather than reduced and each of the “plurality” of copies possesses some distinction.

Virginia Woolf, arguably more than Stein, represents the challenge that Benjamin’s problematization of mass production has given us. As Jane Garrity puts it, “Woolf’s popularity depends upon the reproducibility and mass circulation of her image, to an extent that perhaps exceeds the circulation and reception of her texts” (194). This is a conflict of interest considering that, if we follow Benjamin, such mass circulation is inevitably reductive, and leads to what Garrity explains as the “tendency to hierarchize different forms of cultural production: that which is too openly commercial, too popular, and too accessible is held in contempt, whereas the art that appeals to a minority is sacralized” (195). The perception is that the less an author’s image is copied, the more valuable her work is. Indeed, according to Brenda Silver, Woolf’s reputation suffers from the mass production of her image on t-shirts, coffee cups, shopping bags and posters on dorm room walls, “sending disconcertingly mixed messages into the cultural realm,” messages that often value these commercial items over the writing that made her a cause célèbre in the first place (129).

Benjamin’s argument that, on the one hand, “that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art” and, on the other, despite this withering “every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction” has shaped our understanding of the contentious relationship between the writer and her image that Garrity and Silver describe (221,

223).⁸ But in the age of Gertrude Stein, aura does not wither because it is not reliant on the physical limitations of the object. As Stein expresses in “Pictures,” “The picture [does] not live within the frame [...]. The first hope of a painter who really feels hopeful about painting is that hope that the painting will move, that it will live outside its frame” (86-87). An artist’s most profound desire is that the work will be present beyond the limitations of its own physicality, that it will have impact beyond what can immediately be accessed. In this way, one can perceive an aura no matter how distant and distinct it is from the original object and even focus on the creator’s image rather than the creation itself. Stein also points out that an oil painting “always will have a tendency to go back to its frame” (85). Thus no matter how much we want to access the artist through her image, the “real” Woolf, or “actual” Stein, she remains elusive, always safe inside the frame of the text. Stein assures us, after all, that there is no real connection between an image and the object the image represents: “The relationship between the oil painting and the thing painted was really nobody’s business” (79).

In fact, for Stein, there is such a thing as *too* much resemblance or authenticity. She liked paintings that looked like people “more or less” but the work of the artist Gustave Courbet, for example, is *too* lifelike: “He did really use the color that nature looked like that any landscape looked like when it was just like itself as you saw it [...] (sic) Courbet really did use the colors that nature looked like to anybody” (74). She wonders further if the lifelike colors “add or detract from the reality of the oil painting as oil painting” (75). Stein is articulating that a medium should know its place. In other

⁸ John Berger counters that a subject’s aura is no more accessible in portrait paintings: “It is a myth that the portrait painter is a revealer of souls” (*Moments of Cubism* 42).

words, it is acceptable for a painting to look *like* nature but not for it to be mistaken for nature: “I worried about the Courbets not being an oil painting but being a piece of country in miniature.” Eventually she determines “no the Courbets were really oil paintings with the real life of oil paintings as oil paintings should have,” but acknowledges “only the Courbets being nearly something else always keep them from being really all they are” (75). “Being nearly something else” undermines, to some degree, the success of these works as oil paintings. An oil painting’s “resemblance” to a living thing is secondary to the painting’s value as an independent object. Stein insists, “Everybody really forgets about this resemblance [...]. So the resemblance of the oil painting that is to anybody that is to any anything is only a thing that has become historical” (80). Thus the resemblance is an outdated artifact relegated to dusty museums and faded catalogs; the *copy* has a changing and ongoing livelihood.

Indeed, Stein relishes the multiplicities that modernity offers art. She writes, “An oil painting [...] makes you see something to which it is resembling makes you see the thing in the way it the oil painting resembles it. And that [...] is a pleasant thing” (79-80). This commitment to copies suggests that photography too can share in this ability to represent an original and transform it, so that the original and the copy are altered irrevocably. As Stein explains further: “When you have looked at many many faces and have become familiar with them, you may be surprised by a different kind of face you may be even shocked by a different kind of face you may like or not like a new kind of face but you cannot refuse a new face” (80). Stein sought new faces through her innovative writing style and, of course, her own art collection. Her essays can be read as

a means to validate all these faces and all the ways they are represented visually so that “you look very hard at some of them and you look very hard at all of them and you do all of this very often. Faces gradually tell you something, there is no doubt about that” (79).

There is one more detail that Stein offers that sheds further light onto Benjamin’s essay. She argues that when people take issue with an oil painting, the problem is with what the painting represents: “You do understand that what really annoys people that is anybody who is at all annoyed by an oil painting is not its being an oil painting, but the subject that is to say what it paints as an oil painting” (88). Benjamin’s concerns about mechanical reproduction reveal the cultural disparagement of particular photographs and their audience rather than a problem with mass production in general. For example, he appreciates Atget’s photographs of Paris, which look like “scenes of a crime,” but he maintains “picture magazines” do not “challenge” the viewer (*Illuminations* 226). Atget’s work, to this day, has a small museum-going audience intent on gathering the early artistic impulse of photography. The picture magazines Benjamin references, on the other hand, were primarily geared toward and read by women. Benjamin’s preference, then, as it was of many of the modernists, was not necessarily a problem with photography or even photographic copies of artwork, but was based on an idealization of an *audience*, one that is educated, erudite and lacking in new (female) faces.

These preceding pages reveal that scholarly work, while using Benjamin’s essay as a means to analyze the effect of photography, has overlooked the contributions of the medium and therefore much of women’s writing that is informed and transformed by it. Stein’s essay “Pictures” helps us get excited again about photography and similar

technologies of mass production, and the different forms of representation they spurred. In fact, Stein's aesthetic theory offers a novel approach to the rhetoric she employs in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. The revision of the original/copy binary that she expresses in "Pictures" ironically assists to convince her readers of her own status as an original genius.

Part II Stein's Vision: Genius and the Autobiographical Apparatus

Gertrude Stein was first connected publicly to visual art in 1913 when Mabel Dodge wrote in *Arts and Decoration*, "In a large studio in Paris, hung with paintings by Renoir, Matisse and Picasso, Gertrude Stein is doing with words what Picasso is doing with paint" (172). Since then, her experimental work is most often discussed in relation to Cubism.⁹ Although it has been convincingly argued that Cubism was "crucial as a spur to her daring rather than a source of technique," her reputation as a "Cubist" writer remains, in part because Stein used Picasso's proto-Cubist portrait of her as the primary visual image referred to in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (DeKoven, "Gertrude Stein" 82). The Cubist connection served as a means to counter contemporary critics who called her work excessively difficult, childlike, or, perhaps worse of all, a hoax. Figuring herself

⁹ In 1923 *Vanity Fair* published Stein's textual portrait of Jo Davidson accompanied by three images of Stein that differ from the traditional headshot featured in the magazine. In the top photo (the largest), Stein is seated behind Davidson who is at work on her sculptured likeness; the second smaller photo is of a bust of Gertrude Stein by sculptor Jacques Lipschitz; the third is a photograph of the ubiquitous Picasso painting. In fact, Picasso appears to be the modern genius in this article: The caption reads, "Picasso has brought out in her, much more than the other two artists, the strange and almost mystic turn of mind which produces her extraordinary writings" (February 48). Stein's text (the portrait of Jo Davidson) requires her own pictorial presence (as female muse) and the presence of esteemed male artists to rationalize her inclusion in the magazine.

as a Cubist writer - an art form that was originally derided only to become one of the most influential artistic innovations of the century - Stein hoped she too could mirror this evolution and fulfill her oft-quoted desire to be recognized as a genius.

The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas clearly associates Stein with another visual image besides her Cubist portrait: her photographed self, recognizable from mass media commentary related to her earlier work.¹⁰ The original dust jacket, figure 3.1., features a photograph of Stein, seated at her desk, occupying the authoritative position of the writer while Alice appears entering the doorway surrounded by an almost angelic glow.¹¹ There are a number of additional photographs in the book: Stein and Toklas, taken in Paris prior to and during World War I; Stein's famous friends, such as Pablo Picasso; her home with her art collection on display; and individual modern art paintings she collected. This coupling of text and image capitalized on Stein's familiar physical features, a unique practice for literature at the time.¹² Thus while high modernists like James Joyce and T.S. Eliot struggled with the presumption of lost authenticity related to the modernist age, which they believed to be vital to artists, Stein celebrates the loss through explicit and implicit references to the technologies of visual reproduction. Through these references, Stein creates a convincing persona that simultaneously is genius and female, a high stakes risk for the modern woman writer.

¹⁰ Karen Leick argues that though Stein was not widely read until the publication of *Toklas*, she was well-known through references in the popular media, often photographs with captions that referenced her "unreadable" work (8, 46).

¹¹ In the *Vanity Fair* spread from 1923, Stein serves as the female muse for three male artists, even as she defies the standards of conventional feminine appearance. In the photographs published in *Toklas*, Alice is the muse.

¹² Two exceptions were also biographies: 35's fictional *Orlando* and Ernest Hemingway's memoir, *Green Hills of Africa*. More often these images, if included, were in the form of a drawing (F. Scott Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise*, for example).

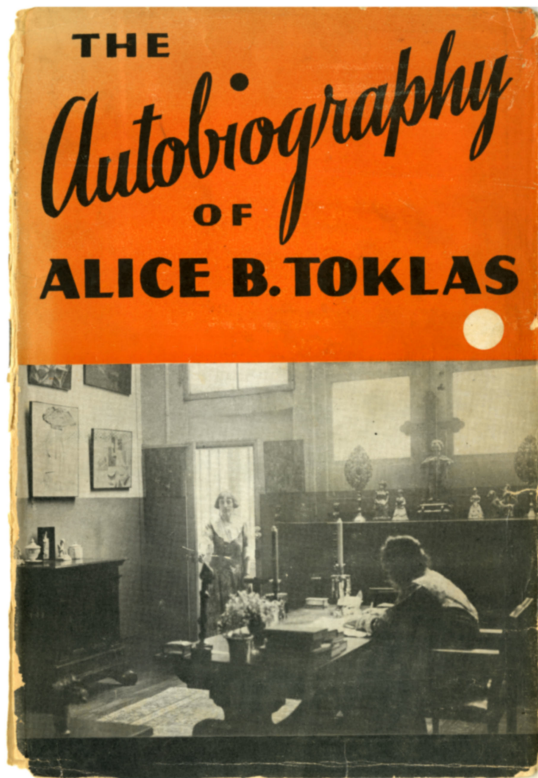


Fig. 3.1. Dustcover for the first U.S. edition of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1933.

The female-dominated (and sometimes maligned) autobiographical form should have undermined Stein's assumption of genius, which Stein circumvents by writing Toklas's rather than her own.¹³ Two very different analyses, one by a traditional modernist critic and one by a feminist scholar, help to demonstrate how Stein also capitalizes on the contentious gendered space of the female "I," while clearly associating the text with her (not feminine but still female) image through the photographs. In a discussion of the writer Jean Rhys, Thomas Staley initially claimed,

Central to modernist art is the concept, best exemplified in English by Joyce and Eliot, of the impersonality of the artist, the notion that the artist was to be refined out of the of art: an art so impersonal that the subject might well follow the

¹³ Until recently, autobiography was "a genre critics described as a kind of flawed biography at worst, and at best a historiographical document" (S. Smith 3).

contours of the autobiographical self, such as Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, but the artist himself remains beyond his handiwork, refined out of existence. (35)

The feminist Nancy Walker points out that such impersonality is endemic to the male "I" while alien to the female one:

The very concept of an individual identity - an 'I' that is central to any text purporting to be 'about' the 'self' - raises different issues for women than it does for men. Whereas the white male, heterosexual 'I' can assert that it is somehow *impersonal*, that it represents cultural and aesthetic values, the female 'I' reflects instead the instability of the 'self,' as the woman occupies the marginal position of 'other.' (273-274)

Stein sidesteps the problem of the "marginal position" without "refining herself out of existence" by departing from the confessional and sometimes intensely personal interiority expected from female-authored autobiography. In *Toklas*, exteriority provides the illusion of interiority.

For example, personal details about Stein and Toklas are neglected in favor of details about the people with whom they keep company. Even without the stardom of names (and acknowledged geniuses) like Picasso, Henri Matisse and Sherwood Anderson, much of the book reads like a list of associations intended to impress. One typical description: "There were amusing people in Florence. There were the Berensons and at that time with them Gladys Deacon [...]. Then there were the first Russians, Von Heiroth and his wife [...]. Then there were the Thorolds" (55). Through this kind rhetoric that focuses on everybody *except* Stein, Stein decenters herself. She (and Toklas) appear

as the focus but they step away just in time to allow the attention to fixate on others. This is how Stein presents an impression of an identity that is in reality only a representation of her original self, just as photography offers a perspective of an event that can appear objective. In neither case do these representations of reality provide insight about what is “real.” As Benjamin writes in the essay “Little History of Photography,” “Less than ever does the mere reflection of reality reveal anything about reality” (*Selected Writings* 526).

Further, Staley does not mention the emphasis of portraits in modernist work. But to Stein, the repetitive act of portrait making, both as author and subject, is essential to legitimizing modernist genius. Picasso’s portrait of Stein was often reproduced and she, of course, mentions it a number of times in the book. Other portraits by Matisse and Cezanne receive attention. Of a Cezanne portrait that Stein owns, Stein’s Toklas points out, “It was an important purchase because in looking and looking at this picture Gertrude Stein wrote *Three Lives*” (34). Stein purchased this portrait from Vollard, a dealer whom she quotes warning a young artist that he was not prepared for official recognition because no one would want a portrait painted by him: “Supposing an important personage came to France, and wanted to meet the representative painters and have his portrait painted [...] just look at yourself, the very sight of you would terrify him” (33). Through the voice of Toklas, Stein details her own commitment to portrait making, beginning with “Ada:” “This was the beginning of the long series of portraits. She has written portraits of practically everybody she has known” (114). And the portraits have the endorsement of their noteworthy subjects and audiences: “Ada was followed by portraits of Matisse and Picasso, and Stieglitz who was much interested in

them and in Gertrude Stein printed them in a special number of *Camera Work*” (114). Indeed, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* is another portrait about and by Stein that offers recognition of her genius but effectively keeps her interior life hidden.

Portraits as a genre - and the autobiography specifically - become the apparatus through which genius is produced. Yet Stein acknowledges that these portraits also fail to communicate adequately the artist’s genius and the subjects they are attempting to describe. Stein writes of Matisse’s famous (and once infamous) “La Femme au Chapeau”:

It was a portrait of a woman with a long face and a fan. It was very strange in its colour and in its anatomy [...]. People were roaring with laughter at the picture and scratching at it. Gertrude Stein could not understand why, the picture seemed to her perfectly natural [...]. It bothered her and angered her because she did not understand why because to her it was so alright, just as later she did not understand why since the writing was so clear and natural they mocked at and were enraged by her work. (34-35)

Stein draws an obvious parallel between Matisse’s portrait - by the time of the publication of *Toklas* recognized as brilliant - and her own misunderstood writing. The initial failure of these textual and visual works of art to convince the audience of the artist’s genius further links portraits to technologies that produce copies: the “perfectly natural” copy of the original (the original being Matisse’s model) reveals that it is impossible to mimic life exactly as we think we see it. Stein’s frustration demonstrates that all portraits, visual and textual, are inevitably restricted by their nature as copies.

They have value, as I argued in the first part of this chapter, but the value is different from what the original offers: “One of the things that always worries [Stein] about painting is the difficulty that the artist feels and which sends him to painting still lifes, that after all the human being is essentially not paintable” (119). Stein’s ongoing pursuit of the modernist portrait results in the creation of *Toklas* as an ekphrasis, “the verbal representation of the pictorial,” in which Stein ironically emphasizes what cannot be adequately visualized or verbalized (Krieger 9).

From the outset of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein emphasizes the role that the pictorial takes in the authentication of genius.¹⁴ Toklas endeavors to describe “what I saw when I came” and her focus is not on the people with whom Toklas meets in Stein’s famous salon but on Stein’s art collection, which included this particular Matisse (7). Stein describes Toklas’s experience: “And on all the walls right up to the ceiling were pictures [...]. The pictures were so strange that one quite instinctively looked at anything rather than at them just at first. I have refreshed my memory by looking at some snap shots taken inside the atelier at that time” (7, 9). There is no initial experience of seeing to guide Toklas; her process of looking is characterized by looking away and then, at a later time, looking back through memory and photographs. This enables Stein to submit to her readers a convincing performance of seeing that again decenters its subject, decentered because he/she/it is never directly seen. She pretends to offer her readers a verbal representation of the pictorial – “what I saw when I came” – while actually

¹⁴ Stein also relies on a number of visual metaphors. For example, Toklas recalls, “I have met several great people but I have only known three first class geniuses and in each case on sight within me something rang” (5). Stein writes further that when she and Toklas met, she was “just *seeing* through the press *Three Lives*” (6, my emphasis).

demonstrating that such a representation is impossible. Thus, though she reprints photographs of herself, she insists her audience look to the verbal to *see* her portrait, which, according to Toklas's example, can only be perceived by looking elsewhere. As Stein writes in "Portraits and Repetition," another essay included in *Lectures in America*, "I began again to let the looking be predominating not to have the listening and talking be predominating but to once more denude all this of anything in order to get back to the essence of the thing contained within itself" (199).

In *Toklas*, seeing "the essence of the thing contained within itself" is a skill enjoyed by *particular* individuals, mostly artists and writers. Picasso is portrayed in the text as one of the privileged few who, unlike Toklas, can be trusted to see and "express the rhythm of the visible world" (119). Toklas introduces Picasso's portrait of Stein "now so famous" with Picasso's comment that "everybody says that she does not look like it but that does not make any difference, she will" (6, 12). Toklas also describes Picasso's reaction when Stein alters her appearance and risks undermining his portrait's accuracy:

Gertrude Stein had had her hair cut short, she had always up to that point worn it as a crown on top of her head as Picasso has painted it [...]. [Picasso] caught sight of her [...]. Let me see, he said. She let him see. And my portrait, said he sternly. Then his face softening he added, mais, quand meme tout y est, all the same it is all there. (57)

At first, Picasso acts angry at Stein, speaking "sternly" to her, yet in the end her alteration only reaffirms his genius: His copy more accurately depicts Stein than Stein physically

represents herself. Its success is not based on its direct and obvious relationship to the original.

Toklas emphasizes that Stein, also like Picasso, is a genius who can recognize what cannot easily be accessed by non-geniuses. While Toklas waits in front of two pictures at an exhibition, Stein comments to her, “You have seated yourself admirably [...]. Right here in front of you is the whole story” (18). Toklas cannot understand what the story is and Stein never explains it: “We looked but we saw nothing except two big pictures [...]. We were puzzled, we had seen so much strangeness we did not know why these two were any stranger.” And again later in the novel, “When a casual stranger in the aggressive way of the casual stranger said, looking at [a Matisse painting of a nude woman among cactuses], and what is that supposed to represent,” Stein responds with an obtuse story of the first time she saw the painting, holding a little boy and yelling “in rapture, oh là là what a beautiful body of a woman” (17). In these instances, Stein appears to hold a key to seeing that cannot be put into language for the non-geniuses of the world. Language offers no consolation for what cannot be glimpsed.

This genius-sight is a tool that geniuses exercise in a deliberate way. Toklas explains that, for example, “Gertrude Stein never corrects any detail of anybody’s writing, she sticks directly to general principles, the way of seeing what the writer chooses to see, and the relation between that vision and the way it gets down” (214). Writing is an act of communicating genius-sight, rather than reporting objectively what is seen. Likewise, not seeing is also an act of genius, as profound as seeing. After a falling out between Braque and Picasso, Braque sees a photograph of Picasso by Man Ray. Stein

writes, “The photograph was being passed around and when it came to Braque he looked at it and said, I ought to know who that gentleman is, je dois connaître ce monsieur” (194). Braque “ought” to recognize the man in the photograph, but because of his anger, he simply chooses not to. His statement acknowledges his recognition and simultaneous denial of recognition. The repetition of the phrase, in English and French, demonstrates Braque’s commitment *not* to see what he must see.

Stein’s genius in *Toklas* is that she convinces readers of her interpretation of what a genius is, which is a finely-drawn representation that eludes all except the keenest - and willing - eyes, that is, those belonging to Stein. In the next section a comparison of Stein’s writing to artwork created by the avant-garde will reveal that this representation of seeing is uniquely reliant on photography.

Part III Gertrude Stein and the Avant-Garde:

Works of Art Designed for Mass Production

In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein takes ownership of her physical image by replacing its traditional female appearance with a myriad of possibilities. First and foremost, she is neither traditionally female nor male; she is a Picasso. And while Stein takes pains to make parallels between her “real” self and Picasso’s version, she also simultaneously creates new visual identities. Stein writes,

In these days Gertrude Stein wore a brown corduroy suit, jacket and skirt, a small straw cap, always crocheted for her [...], sandals, and she often carried a cane.

That summer the head of the cane was amber. It is more or less this costume without the cap and the cane that Picasso had painted in his portrait of her. This costume was ideal for Spain, they all thought of her as belonging to some religious order and we were always treated with the most respect. (116)

Stein is as Picasso paints her, “more or less,” though her “costume” is not what would be worn by a conventional female muse. The “brown corduroy suit” is mostly asexual (save for the skirt); and the cap and cane offer a touch of the (typically male) dandy. She also appears as a member of “some religious order” and accepts the resulting deference. Stein fits a number of identities, drawn for her and by her, exposing less about Stein than a constructed, constantly changing character with her name and face.

This idea of constructed character connects Stein’s image (photographs included in the first edition and the description above) in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* with photographs taken by Man Ray of Marcel Duchamp as his female alter ego, Rose Sélavy. In the autobiography, Stein mentions visiting Man Ray’s studio and viewing photographs of Duchamp in 1922, during the very same period when Man Ray and Duchamp were working together on the Rose Sélavy images (197). Man Ray and Duchamp are not given the same amount of scholarly attention as Stein’s Cubist counterparts, perhaps because Stein did not give them very much attention either. Given her desire for popular recognition, it makes sense that she bypassed them in favor of the Picasso connection since, at the time, the Dadaists did not carry the same cache as the Cubists. Nonetheless, given Stein’s relationship with Man Ray in 1922 - he took many of the photographs of her that appear in *Toklas* that same year - and her passion for

experimentation by visual artists, her familiarity with Duchamp's Rose is more than likely. Comparing the two demonstrates how photography by the Dadaists helped Stein to reimagine issues of authority associated with the female-authored memoir.

Duchamp's Rose Sélavy is a self-conscious pose of a female identity that does not directly undermine a male one. In figure 3.2, the first Man Ray/Duchamp image of Rose that was taken in 1921, Duchamp's posing is plain. His masculine features show through the artificial femininity of Rose's garments, her feathered hat, frilled coat and pearls, already out of style in 1921. Because Duchamp's gender is still recognizable, this image becomes less about Duchamp posing as a woman and more about questioning singular gender identity. There is an excess of gender signs and, as a result, Duchamp is not Rose but he is not quite Duchamp either. In figure 3.3, taken later that year, Duchamp uses excess again: Rose's hands actually belong to a fellow artist's mistress. In this later image, Duchamp's mouth is softer and the purpose of makeup is not to cover up his masculine complexion but to emphasize his feminine features.

By comparison, Man Ray's photographs of Stein, which were taken at the same time, appear to have much less artifice. The one selected for the cover of the first edition of *Toklas* (figure 3.1) puts Stein in the position of author and Alice as opening the door, offering light or inspiration. Thus, as has been argued, Stein and Alice preserve the conventional roles of husband/wife or creator/muse even if they defy the custom of male/female coupling (Stimpson 496). But if we compare this image to Duchamp's Rose, then Man Ray's version of Alice and Gertrude Stein – and Stein's self-representation in the autobiography – demonstrate the inadequacy of such binaries of

gender and text/image in mimetic visual culture. Art Historian David Hopkins writes that Rose “de-essentializes gender and the notion of a unitary authorial self” (Hopkins 303).



Fig. 3.2. Man Ray (b. Emmanuel Radnitzky), 1890-1976, *Marcel Duchamp Disguised in Rose Selavy's Clothes*, 1921, © 2012 Man Ray Trust / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York /ADAGP, Paris



Fig. 3.3. Man Ray (b. Emmanuel Radnitzky), 1890-1976, *Marcel Duchamp Disguised in Rose Selavy's Clothes, Fur Collar*, 1921, © 2012 Man Ray Trust / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York /ADAGP, Paris

Likewise, the visual cues in *Toklas* assert Stein's authority while destabilizing the viability of a unified authorial (male) identity. Thus, Stein thwarts the expectations of a male-authored text (or female-authored memoir) and woman as photographed subject.

More than this, these constructed characters *require* mimesis. Both Rose and the "Gertrude Stein" that appears in *Toklas* are copies distinct from their original versions. Duchamp's later photograph of Rose clarifies this point. The image is signed "Lovingly Rose Sélavy" and underneath there is written "alias Marcel Duchamp." The author/authority of it is intricately webbed, as in *Toklas*. The signature unravels the possibility that there is such thing as an original. It is impossible to decipher if Duchamp is posing as Rose or if Rose is posing as Duchamp. The result is, in Walter Benjamin's words, a "work of art reproduced [that] becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility" ("Work of Art" 224). Rose and "Gertrude Stein" are "designed for reproducibility"; they are conceived with the idea that commodity consumption - consumption that requires mass production - is essential to its viability rather than offering a claim of exclusivity central to other modernist work.¹⁵

The second Rose Sélavy photograph was placed on a fictional product described both as a perfume and mouthwash and called *Belle Heilein: Eau de Voilette* (Beautiful Breath: Veil Water). This bottle was photographed for the Dada magazine *New York Dada* and was not actually an item for sale, but the seed was planted: Duchamp, as Rose, could be acquired by his audience/viewer/reader. This commodification can be seen as the opportunity that Stein sought to move on from the limited text runs of her earlier

¹⁵ The initial buyers of *Ulysses*, for example, paid high prices for the limited edition first published and available in the United States.

publications to a more mainstream readership. She could commodify herself like Duchamp/Rose without sacrificing her authority. In fact, like many of the material items that were produced through the Dada movement, the Duchamp's perfume bottle was secondary to the photograph of it. The image in *New York Dada* was repeated, printed upside down and accompanied by the caption, "Therefore, Madame, be on your guard and realize that a really dada product is a different thing from a glossy label" (sic, qtd. in Ades 108). The effect was a parody of an advertisement, literally turned on its head. The caption mocks the authenticity of the imaginary product, a double irony for a product that is both making fun of such products and does not actually exist. "A really dada product is a different thing from a glossy label" because it is nothing more than a glossy label. It is authentic because it is not.

Like the perfume bottle, a Stein product is bound to be a different thing from its label. And perhaps it does not matter that *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* is not an autobiography *about* Toklas; contemporary accounts confirm that the autobiography sounds just like Toklas did and accurately reveals Toklas's total fixation on Gertrude Stein and her career. Most importantly for Stein, the book finally gave her the mass readership that she sought. She, and her writing, became mass-produced.

Yet there is a typically Steinian complication: Stein still takes pains to assert the veracity of traditional visual codes. For example, Toklas reports that Stein counters critics of Picasso's Cubist landscapes who claimed that they saw "nothing but cubes" by comparing the landscapes to their photographic likenesses. Stein would show these critics the photographs and, according to Toklas, "The [Picasso] pictures [...] might be declared

to be too photographic a copy of nature” (90). In this quotation, Stein appears to enforce the authority of photography but is actually asserting herself as the authority. In other words, her insistence that there are right and wrong ways of seeing is a reverse psychology that undermines seeing itself. It prohibits the realization that this seeing is reliant on, and limited by, the visual signs offered by Stein. Thus, as Michael North explains, photography, first embraced as “objectively incarnate, also came to serve as one of modernity’s most powerful emblems of the subjectivity of perception” (*Camera Works* 11). This idea of subjective perception explains why Stein’s sexuality was well-hidden from her contemporary readers, despite the fact that to us the nature of her and Toklas’s relationship is obvious. Through her explanations of the visual and providing photographs as “evidence,” she could claim objectivity while still perpetuating her own subjectivity.

Given the parallels between the culmination of Rrose’s and Stein’s visual rhetoric in *Toklas*, Stein’s disabling of visual cues related to gender and authority suggests a foundation in the avant-garde. It was an equal exchange of influence as some critics have suggested that the avant-garde also was inspired by Stein. For example, Hopkins hypothesizes that the name Rrose is an implicit reference to Stein’s famous phrase, “A rose is a rose is a rose” (307). In fact, the name Rrose Sélavy evolved from an interest in Jewish names and many scholars still associate Duchamp’s Rrose, which was a popular Jewish name in the 1920s, with a Jewish identity not unlike Stein’s.¹⁶ In Duchamp’s comments about the creation of his female alter ego, he did not initially plan a gender

¹⁶ Man Ray was also Jewish.

switch but was rather inspired to pose as Jewish, the seeming opposite to his Catholic identity. He chose Rose Sélavy because “I didn’t find a Jewish name I liked” and, as he comments further, “It was all word games” (qtd. in Ades 106). Stein, who was well-acquainted with word-games and found little commercial success with them, moved from these games to the visual ones that Duchamp engages in the Rose Sélavy photographs. These photographic images demonstrated to Stein the power of mimetic production to claim and undermine the concept of authentic identity that the memoir form implied.

Additional connections between the avant-garde and Stein support the argument that there is a synthesis. For example, in the 1920s Man Ray began to work on an emerging technique he called Rayographs, photographs made from objects placed on photo paper and then exposed to light to create unrecognizable shapes. The first Rayograph was published in in 1922 with the caption ROSE ROSE Sel a Vie, (the first rose spelled backwards and the letters reversed but still recognizable) (Umland 282). Considering that Rayographs and Stein’s experimental writing are similarly without metaphorical meaning - Jean Cocteau describes the Rayographs in 1922 as “the very objects themselves, not photographed through a lens but by your poet’s hand directly interposed between light and the sensitive paper” (2) – the caption can be viewed as another allusion to Stein’s famous phrase. The objects photographed were common household items, a pencil or simple piece of wire. In the Rayograph, the item’s familiarity becomes an alienation of identification; its use-value is replaced by aesthetic-value. This allows for a new relationship between the audience and the object, similar to the new relationship Stein creates between her visual image and her audience.

In all this avant-garde work, photography becomes the means by which seemingly straightforward identification and classification is destabilized. Duchamp, posing as Rose in the disempowered feminized position, delegates the control of the production of the photographs to Man Ray while still maintaining Duchamp's authorial control. These images demonstrate that, as Dawn Ades explains, "Photography was the ideal alibi for changes in identity" (97). *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* also provides Stein with an ideal alibi for a change in identity, from unpopular author to a widely-read, much photographed one, without overemphasizing her gender or sexual identity that could have undermined her sought-after success. Cubism might have been instrumental to Stein's transition to fame but, as I argue here, the avant-garde was crucial to the development of her famous book.

Following the runaway success of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein went on a speaking tour of the U.S., which she details in her follow-up biography *Everybody's Autobiography*. Stein also received much attention as the result of the production of the opera *Four Saints in Three Acts*, for which she wrote the libretto. Stein finally achieved the public recognition and financial success she felt she deserved. Though today Stein's work is no longer necessarily read very often outside of academia, she still plays an active role in the imagination of the American public, particularly as a figure who connects the literary world to the art world. Two museum shows recently covered her life, work and art collection, including "Seeing Gertrude Stein: Five Stories" at the Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco in 2011 and "The Steins Collect" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City in 2012. Contemporary artists

continue to find her an inspiring figure, such as Woody Allen who tapped Kathy Bates to play Stein in his feature film *Midnight in Paris*. Bates portrays Stein as a domineering, influential, and divisive figure who is most focused not on promoting her own career but on the careers of the artists and writers who are part of her salon.

Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt* (2004) takes a different perspective, and, significantly, engages Stein as a decentered figure. The book tells the imagined story of one of the Steins' cooks, a Vietnamese man of many names, none seemingly accurate or pronounceable in either English or French. He is with "My Mesdames" after the dramatic success of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and the novel ends just as they leave for Stein's lecture tour in America. The attention from the press has put the Steins "in a playful mood as of late. They are giddy. They have been telephoned. They have been telegrammed. Best of all, they have been photographed" (233). The cook points out, "I have been apprehensive all the same. Because photographers are even more curious than servants. The only difference is that photographers practice their invasive art while my Madame and Madame are still in the room" (233). The photographers are "invasive," searching, perhaps intent on stealing the aura of the Mesdames and selling it to the highest bidder, all in the full light of day.

Binh, the name the cook goes by, has a different relationship to photography than what he fears his Mesdames have. After approaching a photographer to purchase a photograph of him and his former lover who has left him, he finds himself more interested in another image. This image is of a mysterious man with whom he only experienced a dinner and an overnight affair, whose name he does not know. To Binh,

this image, in all its mystery, is more alive than the affair itself: “The photograph was printed on paper that had the appearance of something that breathed, with a porous surface that opened with each intake of air [...]. Less of a photograph, more of a tattoo underneath the skin” (247). The photograph is labeled with the surname “Nguyễn” a name that provides no clue to identity since “I and almost everyone else in Vietnam have the [same] surname.” The print is valued for the process with which it was created, the proprietor commenting, “best photograph retoucher [...]. No one can paint eyelashes like that one. No one. More delicate than the real thing” (246). This touched-up photograph, better than the real thing, is valued for its *lack* of presence. Binh need not worry about his Mesdames for now. That, too, is what the Steins strove to achieve.

Despite Stein’s careful attention to articulating a particularized and distant persona, however, today her larger than life figure overshadows her writing. She points out the inherent contradiction of her fame in *Everybody’s Autobiography*: “It always did bother me that the American public were more interested in me than in my work. And after all there is no sense in it because if it were not for my work they would not be interested in me” (51). There still is much to uncover in Stein’s work; as she emphasizes, the primary reason she is appealing is that her work demands our consideration, if not always our comprehension. Her prose offers new perspectives on photography and updates perceptions of authority in modernism and the avant-garde. Further research into Stein’s work will enable a more accurate and inclusive perspective of the movement. Stein fosters new conversations with long-standing leaders, such as Benjamin and Picasso, and, indeed, Stein even offers insights on her own impressively sized oeuvre.

Thus, recognized as a key innovator of modernism, Stein will become more than a character recognized outside of it.

Chapter 4

‘Beautiful Pointlessness’: Susan Sontag’s Late Fiction and Last Photographs¹

Susan Sontag’s position as a woman and a writer was no less complicated than that of the earlier writers in this study despite the decades that passed between them. Sontag even engaged many of these writers and artists of the 1920s and 30s throughout her work, including Virginia Woolf, whose *Three Guineas* Sontag used as a launching pad for *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), and Gertrude Stein, Man Ray and Walter Benjamin, whom she referenced in various essays. Like them, she embraced her own spectacularization and fostered a trademark image wearing all black with the only “color” one grey streak of hair. In other ways, however, she was fiercely protective of her own image as an intellectual who existed beyond the limits of photographic reproduction, rarely sitting for photographers later in her life other than Annie Leibovitz.

Sontag’s pivotal writings on photography make a discussion of her work essential to answering the question of how women writers grapple with new technologies of visual

¹ Cimetiere du Montparnasse, 12eme Division
by Frederick Seidel

I have a friend who has a friend
Who asked her to place her hand
And place a flower on Samuel Beckett's grave
On his behalf.
[...]
It seemed reason enough to come to Paris.
And it was.
And there, quite a surprise, was Susan Sontag's grave.
And now it's time to get the fuck out
Of this beautiful pointlessness.

representation.² In including Sontag here, I also demonstrate that the spectacularization of the writer subject/object, with which I began this project in my analysis of Jean Rhys, becomes simultaneously more daunting and more freeing as women writers are required less and less to appear as copies of ideals of female beauty and are increasingly individualized as writers.³ Sontag picks up where these earlier writers left off by referencing photography and its ethical repercussions in her essays and fictional works yet ends up in a place they might not have imagined, with such a profound distancing of the physical body that it is no longer capable of being spectacularized.

Sontag is most closely associated with her concept “ethics of seeing,” which intimates that the camera, due to its lack of accountability, is a predatory device that victimizes its subjects; as she argues, it is a “passport that annihilates moral boundaries and social inhibitions, freeing the photographer from any responsibility toward the people photographed” (*On Photography* 41). As a result, Sontag insists that an ethics of seeing must be undertaken by the photographer in order to treat the photographed subject with respect.⁴ By setting her last novel, *In America* (2000), in the past, however, Sontag makes it photographic in that she provides a similar “aesthetic distance” or an automatic “pathos of time past” that photographs have without forcing her or her subjects to confront the same ethical issues (*On Photography* 21). As the narrator further explains in *In America*, this photographic distancing is actually liberating for the storyteller: “I feel nostalgic for

² *On Photography* (1977) and *Regarding the Pain of Others* are Sontag’s two most well-known books on photography. She also wrote the introduction to Leibovitz’s collection *Women* (2000).

³ Of course, women still struggle with creating and maintaining status as individuals in public space but, at the very least, it is no longer socially acceptable to write about “scribbling women” as Nathaniel Hawthorne once did.

⁴ Sontag later argues in *Regarding the Pain of Others* that the viewer is responsible for applying a moral code to photography, or, at the very least, offering empathy to the photographed subject.

every era before I was born; and one is freer of modern inhibitions, perhaps because one bears no responsibility for the past” (23). Sontag’s storyteller is released from personal inhibitions and public responsibility by offering a narrative through a photographic lens.

Yet according to Sontag, photography also represents, and even reinforces, the alienation of the individual within an oppressive and increasingly omnipresent modernist aesthetic, an aesthetic that she understands in part through the violence perpetuated and recorded in photographs throughout the century. She sees this alienation as the consequence of the inevitably destructive development of modernism in the West, “the course of modern history having already sapped the traditions and shattered the living wholes” (*On Photography* 76). Sontag further claims that photography represents an archetype of this shattered modern self, explaining, “photography is [...] an acute manifestation of the individualized ‘I,’ the homeless private self astray in an overwhelming world” (119).

In other words, though Sontag aims to free both the narrative subject and reader from this kind of alienation by situating *In America* just prior to modernism, the destructive association between photography and modernism outweighs the liberating possibilities of the aesthetic distance that the pre-modern setting provides. In this chapter I examine the limitations of returning to the past as a release from the pressures of modernist responsibility and alienation. My focus on Sontag’s references to photography as a symbol of modernist disillusionment and destruction also exposes how her return to the past inhibits her main character’s ability to express anything but a superficial identity.

To prove further the inexorable relationship of photography to modern alienation in Sontag's work, I close with the intensely personal, and in some cases troubling, images of Sontag at the end of her life included in Annie Leibovitz's collection, *A Photographer's Life: 1990-2005*. My discussion of these images demonstrates that an interpretation of Sontag's work in the twenty-first century requires a more decentralized version of modernism that rethinks periodization, as Sontag does - she broadly defines what she calls "true modernism" as not "austerity but a garbage-strewn multitude"⁵ (*On Photography* 68) - as well as the guiding principle that in evolving definitions of modernisms (plural intentional), "Meaning does not lie exclusively with either the formation of hegemonies or their dismantling [...]. [It] lies liminally in between" (Stanford Freidman 24). This analysis, guided by the "liminally in between," further reveals that in Sontag's discussion of beauty towards the end of her life, and through her own photographs, she approaches a less dialectical position rather than the hegemonic "male, Eurocentric academy," which enforced binaries of gender, genre and high and low culture in traditional definitions of modernism (Scott, *Gender in Modernism* 12).

⁵ For a thorough overview of Sontag as a writer in the modernist tradition, see Stacey Olster's essay "Hebrew/Greek, Ear/Eye, Moral/Aesthetic: Susan Sontag's Bridging the 'Archaic Gap'" and Sohnya Sayres's book, *Susan Sontag: The Elegiac Modernist*.

Part I Performance in *In America*

The Ethics of Narration

The contemporary narrator in *In America* addresses many of the same concerns that Sontag raises in her writings on photography, expressing a tension between observer (photographer) and analyst (writer). What this tension exposes, I argue, is Sontag's underlying interest not only with being an observer but also with being observed, a personal concern of hers as well as a creative one. In *In America*, Maryna is an actress and therefore the obvious focus of observation but her profession is almost incidental since Sontag demonstrates that both being the observer and being observed is pivotal to modernism. As a result of Sontag's dual interest in these seemingly oppositional roles, she contradicts some of the paradigms she initially established in *On Photography*.

In America begins when the narrator comes across a group of people, whose identities and relationships she cannot fully understand in a country where she is a foreigner, and relocates them to the year 1876. In her reimagining, this small community of Polish immigrants, led by the beautiful and talented actress Maryna, pursues a Utopian, almost Eden-like past as homesteaders in California.⁶ The endeavor is an attempt to fulfill Maryna's search for personal discovery after losing interest in her career as an actress in her native Poland: "It wasn't a new life Maryna wanted, it was a new

⁶ This California desert lacks the original Eden's reputed lushness but none of its biodiversity. Sontag describes living beings, such as "skinny desert colored creatures scurrying along"; and plant life, "slouching braided sentinels, the yucca tress, and bouquets of drooping spears, the agaves, and the squat clusters of prickly pears" (154). This garden also has offers temptations: "slithery fanged creatures"; and cactuses, such as those that feature "the downy-looking pad of a beaver tail," which deceive one member of the group who "had been unable to restrain her curiosity about what it would feel like to touch one" (155).

self” (228). The experiment is a failure when the work is more challenging and the landscape less forgiving than they imagined. Maryna returns to the stage and forges a career of great renown like that of her contemporary (and competitor) Sarah Bernhardt. Maryna’s final professional success is a continuous engagement with actor Edwin Booth, the brother of John Wilkes Booth, who is both at the pinnacle of his career and consumed by the tragedy of his life.

The narrator intends to gather the background of the strangers with accuracy and authenticity. She is in a hotel dining room “in a country I’d visited only once, thirteen years ago” and she eavesdrops on the group she encounters, deducing the members’ personalities and relationships (3). The narrator believes that she can reduce her own feelings of alienation, of standing out as a stranger in a foreign country, by taking up the role of observer: “I thought if I listened and watched and ruminated [...] I could understand the people in this room” (26-27).⁷ The narrator’s voice in the novel expresses a compulsion that “theirs would be a story that would speak to me, though how I knew this I can’t explain [...] there will be a necessity in it” (27). Thus from the very beginning, the narrator exposes a documentary drive but also a personal, almost spiritual, investment.

For this narrator, watching comes naturally but it can have uncertain consequences and she worries about being rude or, more significantly, being watched herself:

⁷ Sontag writes in *On Photography* of tourists and their use of cameras as a means to “take a possession of space in which [they are] insecure” (8).

I didn't mind just watching, listening. I don't ever mind, especially at parties; though I did imagine that, could the guests at this party have become aware of my presence [...] a place would have been made for me at the table. (That I might have been pushed out on the snowy street never crossed my mind.) Uninvited, unseen, I could look at them as long as I wanted, stare at them even: a piece of bad manners because it's likely to incur a stare in return. (17)

What this narrator claims is that she wants to go unnoticed. She continues, "I often wished I were invisible, the better to watch - I mean not to be watched. But I also played, sometimes, at not seeing at all [...] I like the feeling of being reduced to my own resources" (17). Not seeing implies that one also is *acting* unobserved, like a child playing peek-a-boo. Without the role of watchers, one will not be assisted and therefore will be forced to make due with one's own "resources." The narrator does not merely watch this group, however, she escorts members, which makes her neither independent nor objective: "I decided to follow them out into the world." She becomes a participant, and therefore, an essential part of the unfolding narrative is learning about her, despite her protestations otherwise. In this way, the narrator is not "reduced to [her] own resources" since, as I will demonstrate, she and Sontag both require the participation of the reader/observer.

The narrator's objectivity also is compromised because the job she initially imagined presents unforeseen challenges. The occasion for which the group is meeting, and members' individual identities and relationships, remain puzzling. She must fill in some of the details, demonstrating that "what writing feels like is following and leading,

both at the same time” (17). She decides to create her own names based on what she observes and also on what she imagines: “It seemed to me I’d caught her name, it was either Helena or Maryna - [...] I decide to think of her as Maryna” (4). When figuring out that Maryna is an actress, she is pragmatic:

That would explain how her good looks imposed themselves on others [...], the skillful gestures, the commanding gaze; and the way sometimes she brooded and balked without penalty. I mean she *looked* like an actress. And I told myself I needed to make a greater space for the obvious: that, mostly, people do look like what they are. (11, my emphasis)

The solution to the problem of locating these people’s identities is simple to an astute observer; “People do look like what they are.” Significantly, in addition to commenting on how Maryna acts - “commanding gaze, skillful gestures” - the narrator also comments on how others treat her: “She brooded and balked without penalty.” She *looks* like an actress because people *watch* her from afar.

By making these assumptions this narrator further demonstrates that in *In America* analysis and evaluation are sacrificed in favor of the instantaneous insight that both the human eye and photographic technology encourage. But for Sontag such solutions are never so straightforward and she does not allow such an easy way out in her writing on photography. She insists in *On Photography*, for example, that we need to interrogate what we perceive, “Photography implies that we know about the world [...]. But this is the opposite of understanding, which starts from *not* accepting the world as it looks” (23). Sontag argues further that “the ultimate wisdom of the photographic image is

to say: ‘There is the surface. Now think - or rather feel, intuit - what is beyond it’ (23). Sontag relies again, as she does with the narrator in *In America*, on intuition: to “feel” what people are. In the novel, however, Sontag provides little insight into “what is beyond” besides, ironically, an insistence on the necessity of surfaces.

For example, Sontag is more than a silent author in these opening pages; she includes autobiographical elements and the resulting multi-layered narration emphasizes the performative nature of storytelling instead of offering insight into what is behind the performance. The details of Sontag’s life are clearly recognizable in the narrator’s personal details: her marriage at seventeen to “Mr. Casaubon” (a reference to the stubborn, pedantic character in *Middlemarch*), after “knowing him for 10 days,” the amount of time she knew her ex-husband, Philip Reiff, prior to their wedding; allusions to her visits to Sarajevo; her childhood in Arizona and California; and her grandparents (24). Because of these personal details, Sontag has set up a scenario where part of being an observer is being watched observing. This mutual observation again contradicts Sontag’s insistence in *On Photography* that “any trace of the personal vision of whoever is behind the camera interferes with the primary demand on the photograph: that it record, diagnose, inform” (40). In *In America*, both Sontag and her narrator become the poet that Sontag describes in *On Photography* who “[delves] into her entrails to relate her own pain” while contradictorily claiming in the novel that “I didn’t mind just watching, listening” (*On Photography* 40, *In America* 17). *In America* benefits from subscribing to the features of photography while undermining the ethical requirements for which Sontag

argues. In this way, she enables a focus on watching without the accompanying critical analysis.

This theme of watching links Sontag (and her doppelgänger narrator) to Maryna's profession as an actress, someone whose livelihood is based on being watched but who is not seen as an individual beyond her performances. Indeed, in a discussion of the novel Sontag held with Polish journalist Elzbieta Sawicka, she confessed, "I am an actress, a closet actress" ("Plus Minus"). By identifying herself as an actress, Sontag must have been keenly aware of how writing was in many ways a performance of being a writer. Further, it would have been especially difficult to be an anonymous and silent author given Sontag's notoriety prior to the publication of *In America*. However, by including personal details in this narration, Sontag disables the conceit of the narrative as a fiction and it becomes only a performance of fiction whose overall purpose is limited to emphasizing its own performativity.

The meta-narration and crossing of the roles of observer/observed in these opening pages are a small portion of the complete work but, I argue, essential to exposing its underlying themes. They demonstrate the complications of appearing that *In America* pursues, so essential to Sontag that she violates many of the tenets she set up earlier in her career in *On Photography*. Most importantly for this project, it also points out the consciousness with which Sontag puts herself on both sides of a metaphorical two-way mirror: like Stein, watching for Sontag becomes a performance in itself; however, in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, the performance of "Gertrude Stein" is well-hidden; the artifice of performance in *In America* is the entire point.

Rejoining her Destiny: Maryna in the Past, Present and Future

The theme of performance is most clearly demonstrated by the actress Maryna, and all the other characters' lives revolve around her career and contentment. Maryna's, and Sontag's, commitment to give the most seamless presentation, however, means that Maryna rarely receives the opportunity to divulge more personal insight than her worries about her acting. She repudiates not just authenticity but lived experience itself. Maryna confesses, "Acting isn't about sincerity. It isn't even about feeling, that's an illusion. It's about seeming. It's about deciding. It ought to be about *not feeling*" (53). In fact, Maryna's initial decision to leave the theater in Poland is a result of feeling *too* much. She recalls one particularly painful performance when "the sentiment I had to express became stronger and more pathetic. I sighed, I writhed, and all was genuine" (52). She continues:

I shouted, shouted like the most untalented of actresses [...]. By the fifth act [...] my physical suffering was atrocious, and the arms that stretched out to my leading man as I lay dying were contorted with real desire. When the curtain fell, he carried me senseless to my dressing room. (52)

Maryna refers to herself in this performance as lacking in skill. She makes a clear distinction between experiencing strong feelings and acting like she is experiencing them. The former is amateur and actually painful, emotionally and physically, and the latter is evidence of talent. So rather than seeking feeling for herself, Maryna seeks the life of an actress where the success of her performance is dependant on the response of her

audience, not on how she personally relates to the world. Later in the novel, she confesses to her lover, the journalist Ryszard: “What you want from me...I’m not sure. I know I don’t feel love the way I represent it before an audience. Maybe I don’t feel much of anything at all” (291). To Maryna, this is a supreme accomplishment.

The intentional detachment is related to her rejection of modernity. In Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as Young Man* (1917), Stephen Dedalus imagines that the artist also is disconnected “like the God of creation [...] invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails” (217). It is arguable if he, or Joyce, reaches this ideal. Instead, the sentiment the modernist artist has toward modernity is more precisely defined by profound “ambivalence” (Chinitz 9). In Christine Froula’s words, the modernist artist “critiques and resists” and thus engages modernity, whereas Maryna is most motivated by disengagement, represented by a desire to be in another time, nostalgia masquerading as aesthetic distance similar to what photography offers (3).⁸ But by being so untethered, Maryna still suffers from the modernist alienation Sontag had intended to avoid, without the advantages of self-reflection that artists like Stephen experience. Maryna *sounds* as much like a victim of alienation as someone whose narrative dates between the years 1900 and 1945: She writes in a letter to a friend that she is “consumed with anger. Or is it sadness? For I am truly alone”; she also claims that “she wanted this life, whatever it cost her: this loneliness, this euphoria. The quasi-amorous approval of innumerable, never to be known or barely known, others; her own painful,

⁸ Maryna’s disengagement also differs from what I write in the second chapter about Helga Crane’s expression of modernity. Helga serves, in the words of T.S. Eliot’s essay “Tradition and Individual Talent, as a “receptacle” for “numberless feelings” whereas, Maryna insists she feels no emotion (*The Waste Land* 118).

invigorating dissatisfaction” (304). Yet Maryna avoids the “vital experience” of modernism, described by Marshall Berman as “experience of [...] the self and others, of life’s possibilities and perils” (15).⁹ And if the alienation she describes above is similarly a performance, that only leaves an empty shell, a beautiful - but futile - mask, inadvertently proving Sontag’s point in *Styles of Radical Will* that “[a] radical position isn’t necessarily a forward-looking position” (119).

The narrator does admit early in the novel to the potential complications of setting her novel back in 1876: “I expected there to be some frustrations [...] and a few adjustments” (*In America* 19). Indeed, this date is neither here nor there, as the novel includes some of the technological advantages of a more modern era (trains, steamships, and photography) but few of the other advantages of mass culture (such as audio recording devices or mass-produced products accessible at a low cost). Thus unlike the other characters I discuss in this project, Maryna rarely has access to modern technologies, and when she does, she shows a clear preference for the pre-modern. For example, Maryna briefly visits Manhattan before continuing her journey from Poland to California and experiences the latest that the metropolis has to offer. Although she writes in a letter to her friend that the heat is her “only complaint,” there is little of modern city life she finds worthwhile (137). She points out that the “wagons, carriages, omnibuses, horsecars, streetcars, jostling pedestrians make each crossing an adventure”; she dismissively refers to “walking kiosks,” “bootblacks,” “peddlers” and “musicians [...]

⁹ The language of willful loneliness and energizing dissatisfaction also can be found in references to Stephen in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: “But when he had sung his song and withdrawn into a snug corner of the room he began to taste the joy of his loneliness” (17); “A vague dissatisfaction grew up within him as he looked on the quays and on the river and on the lowering skies and yet he continued to wander up and down day after day” (17 and 3).

who blare their horns and tubas at you”; she finds the “misery and poverty” and “crime” distasteful” (138). She also mocks the modern American idea that “biggest is best,” calling a massive department store “a cast iron palace,” and comments further, “I prefer a smaller emporium” (140, 142). Lastly, the technology introduced at the Centennial Exposition worries her, especially the telephone, through which it is suggested theatrical performances will be heard. Her fascination with the device cannot tamp down her insistence that “nothing can replace the experience of entering a temple of dramatic art [...] and *seeing* a great actor perform. Once there is a telephone in every home, will anyone still go to the theater?” (146, original emphasis).

In other words, Maryna is an opportunist who uses the modernist adage “make it new” only when it helps to promote her career. Sontag has her capitalizing on modernity rather than using technology as a means to *be* modern. When Maryna is on the cusp of fame when she returns to her acting career in America, she begins to travel in her own railroad car because she “liked *being part* of the wave of the future” but she prefers not to direct its course (330, my emphasis). Further, when Maryna decides to return to the stage, it is described as a means to fulfill her desire for “rejoining her destiny,” a phrase that describes her hope to locate a future already set out for her rather than her intent to recreate herself (229). Thus, while Maryna benefits from the innovations of the modern world she still finds comfort in pre-modern forms: She praises “the steamships plying the Atlantic, smoke streaming from their great funnels, [which] also sported, in case of engine failure, a full complement of sails!” (354).

It is not an accident, then, that Maryna also is a fairly conventional stage actress performing pre-modernist roles, such as those found in Shakespeare and nineteenth-century sentimental drama.¹⁰ Indeed, her performances are exceptional but not original: Edwin Booth further insists that, while performing together, they must “promise each other, here and now, always to tell first when we’re going to do something new. There should be no surprises” (387). And even though she requires the physical presence of her audience - claiming “one cannot do one’s best on stage if one does not feel loved” - the success she seeks is the kind that can only exist with the introduction of those mechanical technologies that allow for accolades to be transmitted by more than word of mouth. For example, the triumph of her first performance in America is authenticated by the interest of the mass media, which could easily cover the story by way of a flurry of telegrams: “The day after the opening, seven journalists had set up restless, rivalrous encampments” (246).

Susan Stewart writes that the type of disappointment Maryna demonstrates often follows the adoption of modernist technologies when they “[fail] to approximate” (23). Stewart emphasizes that the accompanying disillusionment “leads to a generalized desire for origin, for nature, and for unmediated experience that is at work for nostalgic longing” (24). This “generalized desire” - and Maryna’s rejection of technology - demonstrates her nostalgia for the seemingly uncomplicated past, and why she initially sets out for California. But Maryna’s lack of commitment to the Utopian project also reveals that this nostalgia is another performance and, in fact, she is most concerned with

¹⁰ The novel is set a little too early for film, when experimentation with camera angles and editing modified how stories were told, and this technology is never mentioned.

how this performance will be received in the future. For example, Sontag points out that Maryna's group has an unrealistic idea of what its project will require and focuses instead on the American myth of the resourceful homesteader the members will confirm when, they imagine, their settlement became self-sufficient: "They refused to allow that their inexperience was an insuperable obstacle. All that was needed was industry, stamina, humility" (158). Sontag also describes Maryna's role: "Maryna arose at six-thirty each morning and instantly seized her broom." This image of Maryna sweeping limits her role to housework and her primary responsibility, one of the few mentioned besides "shelling beans," is literally and hypocritically to sweep away the nature that accumulates.

In fact, the house itself is represented as more like a summer retreat for the wealthy than a home for an assiduous farm family. Sontag points out that "at least the main house had a library now [...] and a proper piano, with a lid and brass legs" and the meals, the preparation of which are the responsibility of the women, provide for all palates: "Some wanted tea, others coffee, others milk or hot chocolate or wine soup; everybody wanted eggs, cooked three or four different ways" (197, 161). Given these details, Maryna's group appears less and less committed to actualizing the type of life the members portend to want to recreate. They merely make features of the past amenable to their current sensibility, ensuring that their idealized project of living only off the land will be impossible since the land cannot provide chocolate milk and brass legs.

Thus, in *In America* nostalgia for the past is best described as a deferment of the present, or better, the desire to project oneself into the future; as Svetlana Boym explains, nostalgia can be "retrospective but also prospective" (xvi). This is demonstrated when,

while still in California, Maryna engages the photographer, Eliza Withington, to take the group's portrait.¹¹ Sontag writes that the portrait will be "evidence that they were really here, pursuing their valiant new life; to themselves, one day, it would be a relic"; in other words, it is an effort to *look forward* to when the present will be the past. (194).¹² Indeed, the time Maryna spends in California is termed Utopian by Sontag, which she defines in the novel as "not a kind of place but a kind of time, those all too brief moments when one would not wish to be anywhere else" (175). The problem is that Maryna continually gestures forward for this time rather than experiencing her present or even convincingly longing for the past.

The Stable Body

The group portrait represents a pivotal point in the novel. After it is shot, Maryna and her group no longer ignore the fact that their experiment has failed. Maryna's husband, Bogden, writes in his diary that the photograph "seemed to bring out a foreboding. Or regret - as if we were taking the first step toward accepting the eventual failure of our colony, by making sure that we would have in our possession an image of what we are now" (207). Or, as Sontag describes in *On Photography*, "As photographs give people an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal, they also help people to take possession of space in which they are insecure" (9). Indeed, this photograph offers

¹¹ Sontag writes, "Through photographs, each family constructs a portrait chronicle of itself" (*On Photography* 8).

¹² Sontag also makes the point that the camera here is simply "chemistry" or merely "painting with light," thus perpetuating her distance from more modern inventions (189, 190).

evidence of the individual members' inclusion in this idealist group and the authentication of the photograph enables the members to "take possession of space in which they are insecure" - in other words, to acknowledge the failure of the endeavor - and move on to pursue other futures. As I will discuss, while the photograph provides the group with "indisputable evidence that the trip was made," it also serves to validate Maryna's impression of her own physical superiority due, in part, to her aptitude in appearing for the medium (*On Photography* 9).

Maryna appears in the group portrait as the ideally reproducible subject the portrait's photographer, Withington, describes: one who is less human than a figure of spiritual serenity. Speaking of Maryna, Withington says,

I address myself particularly to the lady who shifted into such a graceful position just as I was about to expose the first plate [...]. A photograph should show us in our essence, as we try to be, as we wish to be remembered, which implies tranquility. (191)

Maryna's ability to "shift" into a consciousness that she is about to be on display "implies tranquility." With such a winning countenance Maryna does not have to "die to prove [her] sincerity" as she suggests early on in the novel when her "nerves" are not taken seriously as an illness (39). Yet for Maryna, the tranquility to which Withington refers is best expressed through her portrayal of death: she dies repeatedly on stage in moving performances, shifting from life to death, always beautiful and never decaying. While playing the character Adrienne, in *Adrienne Lecouvreur*, approaching death, Maryna remarks to herself the repetitive power of her performance: "That was the line that never

failed to ignite a burst of sobs from the audience” (247). Her frequent performance of death defies the finality of death itself while still offering Withington, and her larger audience, a mystical image, an “essence,” that is usually reserved for the afterlife.

It is also through this photograph that Sontag emphasizes the idealized, aging body that, contradictorily, resists aging. Sontag uses the photograph as an opportunity to detail the career of Withington, who became a photographer following the sudden death of her husband (who fell off a cliff and did not suffer long-term bodily decline). Contradictorily, her most recent subject is a hundred-and-forty-four-year-old woman who has evaded death. The elderly woman is described in the novel as “tiny and bent, the head toothless and furrowed and nearly bald” (193). According to Withington, her subject is “an inspiration to us all” though to Ryszard, the elderly woman is less admirable: “She just doesn’t know how to die” (193). Sontag settles the two contradictory points of view in *On Photography*, pointing out photography’s ability to “beautify [...] its aptitude for discovering the beauty in the humble, the inane, the decrepit” (102). Indeed, by becoming Withington’s subject, the elderly woman has resisted both death *and* further decay, the latter more of a concern of Maryna, who, rather than altering her appearance (“she never looked tired”), simply lies about her age (*In America* 253). Bodies do not break down in *In America*; they are re-shaped to appeal to an audience that does not understand the potential of technologies of mass production and, as a result, does not practice an ethics of seeing.

In other words, in this novel literal death is merely disconcerting, only a disruption, albeit sudden and disturbing, from the photographer’s husband’s untimely fall

to a suicide on the boat on the way to America, losses that one does not mourn but to which one “acquiesces” (130). Edwin Booth suggests further that death simply is part of the melodrama of life, and might be staged accordingly: “Dying is, if one is lucky, an anticlimax” (384). As Maryna also describes, the constant search for the next best thing - “the steam engine, the telegraph, the regular mail” - “portends the rise of a new illness, the inability to become attached to anything” (324). This new illness limits the emotional impact that death causes and enables denial of the steps leading up to death, which in our age of modern medicine is most often a plodding, persistent and sullied decline.

After the portrait is taken, the remaining members of the group follow Maryna to San Francisco, where she attempts to restart her previous acting career. It is here that the novel captures what Sontag writes in her famous essay “Against Interpretation” those “experiments with form at the expense of content [...] [that are] the defense against the infestation of art by interpretations.” (11). It might well be in defense of interpretation that Maryna becomes less and less an identifiable character in a novel than an idealized, unchanging representation of a woman whose body also becomes fixed in time. In other words, Sontag begins highlighting Maryna’s perfect physical form to the detriment of her complexities as an individual.

For example, there is little explanation for Maryna’s decision to renew her previous career, despite the dramatic efforts and insistence that she was done with it. Sontag merely offers that, even considering the failure of the California group, the experience “has been an instrument” for Maryna’s success in locating a new self (228): “She was beginning again [...]; which conferred on her the rich sensation that she had

never gone astray” (229). “Beginning again” is an essential locution because, as I have explained previously, Maryna has no interest in enacting the new; she cannot begin, only begin again.¹³

Further, this process of renewal is actually a process of erasure. During her interviews with journalists, Maryna revises the past to make herself younger, of course, and also to create a narrative that would be familiar to her audience, removing the idiosyncrasies of her history and her character “to jibe with local ideas of seamliness (she knew Americans like being told about early hardships and rebuffs by those crowned with wealth and success)” (269-270). Sontag details Maryna’s fabrications:

Starting with her age (she lopped off six years), her antecedents (the secondary Latin teacher became a professor at the [...] University), her beginnings as an actor ([...] an important private theatre in Warsaw [...]), her reason for coming to America (to visit the Centennial Exposition) and then to California (to restore her health). (268)

In this erasure, Maryna forgets what is artifice - she “had begun to believe some of the stories herself” - and becomes so enmeshed in the storytelling that she “[tells] different stories to different interviewers” (269). Maryna does all this ultimately to please her audience, which of course in the long term would please her by expanding her reputation and improving her career prospects.

¹³ At the end of Rhys’s *Voyage in the Dark*. Anna also thinks of “starting all over again [...] being new and fresh [...]. And about starting all over again, all over again” (*Voyage in the Dark* 188). See the first chapter of this project.

Sontag also writes that Maryna's body does not reflect her life experience, such as the fact that "her endurance was phenomenal. She could sleep whenever she wanted to and awaken refreshed after an hour" (313). She does tell of Maryna's hair loss after a bout with typhoid, but Maryna soon recovers and "the whole mass of hair grew back, and it was unlikely that she would ever be obliged to see her naked scalp again" (314). Maryna easily rationalizes her illness: "You grasp something, something upsetting [...] and then it is gone [...]. How easily disturbing knowledge becomes useless knowledge" (314). Her resilience might make Maryna unable to access a unique self but this, she points out, is unnecessary in her profession, contradicting Withington's earlier comment about her "essence": "An actor doesn't need to have an essence. Perhaps it would be a hindrance for an actor to have an essence. An actor needs only a mask" (306). Maryna needs only to *act* like she has the essence to which Withington refers.

By the end of the novel, Maryna has transformed from performing as the perfect photographed subject that Withington describes to personifying the very characteristics that comprise an idealized photograph. Maryna is not equivalent to a photograph exactly, but she does represent what Sontag argues is so insidious about photography: Despite all its great promise, as Sontag explains, "Reality has come to seem more like what we are shown by cameras" (*On Photography* 161). Indeed, Maryna is perfect, beautiful - almost ephemeral - and she becomes an ideal that no woman, or man, can realize. She doubts the promotion of beauty creams, hair lotions and tooth polishes not because of their reliability but because the claim that stars like herself were "no different from anyone else [...] [she] knew was untrue" (354).

Edwin Booth, in the role of the alcoholic, tragic figure in decline, is troubled by Maryna's perfection. In defense, he points out her singular vulnerability - her gender:

I've *acted* with you, woman. I've seen how you pretend. Nothing more revealing than that. You are as naked to me as if you were my bride. And I am your husband in art. Your elderly husband. Your decrepit, demented husband. (*In America* 387, original emphasis)

Though Booth refers to Maryna reductively as "woman," that is her only fragility that he details. It is his own body that, he admits, is physically falling apart. Maryna lacks depth, exemplified by her uncanny ability to morph into any character at any point in the character's life, while never sacrificing her unchanging looks. Booth concludes despairingly that, as a result, there is nothing worthwhile in what they present to audiences: "We think we are upholding the beautiful and true, and we are merely propagating vanity and lies" (383).

Lies, vanity, even narcissism - these are not the problems with their performance, however. It is that it does not, in the end, account for anything. And neither does Maryna. By refusing to acquiesce to any time, either hers or another's, she is reduced to Booth's thinly-veiled insult, "woman." There is only, to refer to the title of this chapter, "beautiful pointlessness." Ultimately, Maryna represents another concern Sontag had about photography: rather than offering a "genuinely new way of seeing (precise, intelligent, even scientific)," she is only a symbol of the "overoxygenated hopes of modernism" that fails to "open the blinds to a new world" (*On Photography* 99).

Part II Keeping the Company of Death:

The Last Photographs of Susan Sontag¹⁴

In the introduction to her photography collection, *A Photographer's Life* (2009), Annie Leibovitz writes of the realization that “the book had taken me through the grieving process. It’s the closest thing to who I am that I’ve ever done.”¹⁵ To Leibovitz, “who I am” is both personal and professional: “I don’t have two lives. This is one life, and the personal pictures and the assignment work are all part of it.” The span of the collection, encompassing 1990-2005, also coincides with the years of Leibovitz and Susan Sontag’s relationship.¹⁶ The collection begins with a photograph of Sontag in Jordan in 1994, dwarfed by the entrance to the Petra; includes photographs of her illness and death; and ends with memories of Sontag’s life (photographs of her notes to *The Volcano Lover* and her window, which Leibovitz could see from her apartment).¹⁷ Though Sontag had no small amount of fame, the photographs of her in private moments, such as in bed or among a pile of writings and books, would feel out of place next to the photographs of stars polished and primed, including Sylvester Stallone flexing his muscles, veins popping (his head cropped out), and Scarlet Johansson, flanked by sequins, animal skins and velvet, were it not for other family photographs of Leibovitz’s parents, children and more straightforward “journalistic” photographs of the war in

¹⁴ In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Sontag writes, “Ever since cameras were invented in 1839, photography has kept company with death” (24).

¹⁵ The book is without page numbers. All the quotations are from the introduction.

¹⁶ The *New York Times* quotes Leibovitz as saying “With Susan it was a love story” (J. Scott). For the most part, however, she and Sontag chose to keep their personal lives private.

¹⁷ The very last photos are massive landscapes of natural geographies, most of which Leibovitz and Sontag visited together.

Sarajevo. This is a photographer's life or, at the very least, the diverse range of photographs a professional photographer takes over a fifteen-year period.¹⁸

But it is also Sontag's life. As this chapter earlier argues, photographs can inhibit the expression of women's identity because, as in Maryna's case, they idealize or, as in the case of Emma Hamilton, who ages from renown to beauty to a coarse and monstrous alcoholic in Sontag's novel *The Volcano Lover* (1992), they fail to idealize.¹⁹ Sontag's personal relationships to her images reflect both these fictional characters. Her early photographs idealize her as her historic self, physically (if not intellectually) predictable and recognizable - a thoughtful, attractive (if not conventionally feminine) woman. She maintained control over her image and its dissemination. She posed and was shot, the photograph was copied and circulated. At the time of her final illness, however, her photographs reflect her suffering and bodily decay and, after her passing, the responsibility for circulation fell to others. They are forthright and disturbing. But if we encourage characters like Helga Crane to cultivate the beautiful, as I argue we should in the second chapter, then these images of Sontag begin the process of enabling us to see women as something other than beautiful and help to redefine the meaning of the word.

¹⁸ Leibovitz does not give permission for the reproduction of any of these photographs of Sontag and therefore I am unable to reprint them here.

¹⁹ Emma drinks to help her maintain the public image of perfection she has difficulty emotionally perpetuating, yet the attempt to do so makes her unrecognizable. She admits, "Without my beauty, my shield, everyone would mock me" (407). And they do.

The Rhetoric of Reality and the Rhetoric of Beauty

All photographs, from the beautiful, to the artistic, to the “uglifying, showing something at its worst,” are, according to Sontag, “a species of alchemy, for all that they are prized as a transparent account of reality” (*Regarding the Pain of Others* 81). The famous in Leibovitz’s collection are for the most part traditionally beautiful and beautified, but Leibovitz also attempts to demonstrate that her images provide an authenticity. *Newsweek* reports that a few photos, despite meticulous planning, “came out of the blue”; for example, “She didn’t intend to shoot Bill Gates at his computer - but it was where she found him when he wandered away from her lights” (“Through Her Lens”). Thus, while some offer unbelievable artifice, others appear unposed and unplanned. As Sontag points out, however, and this is the underlying difference between her interpretation of photography and Leibovitz’s approach, even seemingly documentary images do not necessarily offer a single point of view. She asks if war photographs, such as one published by Leibovitz in *A Photographer’s Life* of a man in Sarajevo who has just died (according to the introduction), can be considered authentic if they can be denounced as “fabrication[s]” by the side responsible (*Regarding the Pain of Others* 11).²⁰

To complicate matters further, Sontag obviously never saw the photographs Leibovitz took of her in her final days, though, according to Leibovitz, Sontag encouraged her to take more photographs of their personal lives (Brookes). Leibovitz also

²⁰ In the introduction to *A Photographer’s Life*, Leibovitz unapologetically admits to a biased approach to her subjects in Sarajevo.

is quoted in *Newsweek*: “I think Susan would really be proud of those pictures - but she’s dead. Now if she were alive, she would not want them published. It’s really a difference” (“Through Her Lens”). The difference might be, in Leibovitz’s point of view, that Sontag theoretically approved of disseminating photos of herself taken while she was ill, but Sontag personally would not have wanted to experience being the subject of such photos.²¹

Sontag might not have wanted these particular images of the days before her death to be public because she realized that viewers look to photographs to create and fill out the identity of the subject, all the while accepting that we are participating in an inaccurate assessment. She writes in unfinished notes published in *At the Same Time* (2007) that “being modern (and if we have the habit of looking at photographs, we are by definition modern), we understand all identities to be constructions” (125). Yet “the only irrefutable reality - and our best clue to identity - is how people appear” (126). Identities are constructions (or “fragments” as Sontag expresses earlier in these notes), and constructed appearances are the only means to understanding these identities (122). In both cases photographs are “species of rhetoric. They reiterate. They simplify. They agitate. They create the illusion of consensus” (*Regarding the Pain of Others* 6).²² In other words, beautiful or truthful, photographs transform ideas through the representation of authenticity, if not actually offering authenticity. Thus, the risk of the last images is

²¹In *On Photography* Sontag notes that this lack of solidarity between the artist and her subject is indicative of modern photography: “Unlike the fine-art objects of pre-democratic eras, photographs don’t seem deeply beholden to the intentions of an artist. Rather, they owe their existence to a loose cooperation [...] between photographer and subject” (53). And as Leibovitz suggests above, in these last photographs, Sontag’s own intellectual instinct and personal desire also might have diverged dramatically.

²²Roland Barthes famously does not include the photograph of his mother that moves him so in *Camera Lucida*, which also implies that its existence is another type of illusion (or delusion).

that they carry this guise of authenticity: Sontag is no longer known as an inscrutable and exceptional female intellectual, as she was previously, but becomes a tragic - and conventional - victim of disease.

The photographs of Sontag in Leibovitz's collection appear authentic because they are not predictably aesthetically appealing. They correspond to Sontag's simple insistence that "photographs that depict suffering shouldn't be beautiful" (*Regarding the Pain of Others* 76). We see Sontag initially in treatment, recovery, decline again, more treatment, and death and burial - interspersed with photographs of Leibovitz's parents (her father passed away soon after Sontag), children and, in the earlier images following Sontag's initial recovery, Leibovitz's commercial work. In photographs of Sontag's cancer treatment in 1999, she still looks like the Sontag that we have come to know with the characteristic grey streak. Despite this recognition, the image is less personal and more institutional: she is on a hospital bed that could be anywhere, flanked by the compulsory monitoring wires, with a routine IV. Her face is turned away from the camera in fitful sleep or pain. There is nothing "enigmatic, dreamy, inaccessible," as Sontag writes in the collection of photographs of women she co-authored with Leibovitz (*Women* 30). No one thought to pull down Sontag's hospital gown to promote, at the very least, the appearance of dignity. On the next page, she is in the same hospital bed, haphazardly covered with a towel and pillow, posing far from her mind. She is living, striving to live. It is "generic" to those who have experienced illness, if brutal in its candor (*Regarding the Pain of Others* 9). In *Illness as Metaphor*, Sontag calls to task the rhetoric of war metaphors in the discussion of illness, such as the ubiquitous phrase "fighting cancer"

(57). This second image can be read as an accompaniment to this argument: It represents dealing with a cancer diagnosis less as a fight than a necessary acquiescence to relentless treatment and its far-reaching side effects.

Except for these first few images of Sontag with her eyes closed, most of the photographs taken during this early cancer treatment feature Sontag gazing at the camera. She appears complicit with the photographer, agreeing to this documentation. In fact, after the initially troubling selection, the images that follow might be more traditionally considered aesthetic because they imply a rhetoric of recovery; along with the images of Sontag at the birth of Leibovitz's daughter, "they invoke the miracle of survival" (*Regarding the Pain of Others* 86). The selection in *A Photographer's Life* that follows is sequential and interspersed with Leibovitz's professional work: Sontag with cropped hair after suffering the side effects of chemotherapy, Sontag on the boat to Ellis Island and in Paris; Sontag in a bear costume sitting at her desk not acknowledging the ridiculousness of Sontag in a bear costume; and finally Sontag back in Paris in 2003, with her recognizable long, dark hair and turtleneck.

In the last set of images of Sontag living, dated November 2004, Sontag does not look at the camera. She is a pale, bloated, unfamiliar version of herself in another anonymous hospital room flanked by wires, machines and cords that are extending life, managing pain or simply keeping nurses informed of her status. Had the photo not been captioned, it would be unclear who the subject is, especially since there are no images leading up to this one that foreshadow her sudden decline. This is not the image of a particular intellectual celebrity but one of anonymous and quotidian, yet intense,

suffering. Sontag is sleeping, drugged or even unconscious. She does not acknowledge the camera in any way. Because of where the page break falls, the last picture of these four appears as if Leibovitz intentionally photographed only Sontag's leg with a large tube inserted into the vein, as if she cropped out the rest of Sontag's body. Identity and appearance do indeed contradict.

As Sontag argues in *Illness as Metaphor*, such images demonstrate that “the person dying of cancer is portrayed as robbed of all capacities of self-transcendence, humiliated by fear and agony” (17). Because they are the last images of Sontag, they cannot be revised or reconsidered the way Sontag continually revisited her own work. Photographs also have the knack of always being present; images of violence and suffering, particularly, seem to depict one-time events as ongoing. As Sontag explains further in her discussion of the photographs of Cambodians in the collection *The Killing Fields*, the women and children included are “forever about to be murdered, forever wronged” (*Regarding the Pain of Others* 61).

In some ways, Sontag enforces an ethics of seeing in these images that provides her with self-transcendence.²³ Throughout her immense body of work, Sontag demonstrated a fierce insistence on the active role we play in creating, participating in, reading and seeing all kinds of visual and textual rhetoric. In this post-Sontag world, many viewers appraise these images of her last days with a consciousness, sensitivity and shared pain for her and those that loved her. Audiences are no longer limited to being passive recipients of such images.

²³ Leibovitz's unwillingness to publish these images again in any form, however, suggests she is more affected by the vulnerability they represent, both her's and Sontag's.

Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor offers further explanation in a discussion of Sontag's fiction:

What Sontag comes to describe as the “mental traveling” offered by art, literature and critique takes each reader on an outlandish journey that, unlike the quest narrative of a novel, does not - indeed *must* not - end. The imperative there is critical: reading and writing are moral acts, and to end the quest - to stop the mental traveling - risks the loss of what is “human” about humanity: our sympathy toward others, at one level, our hope for a “better world,” at another [...]. Sontag is not talking about standards of taste here, but standards of thinking, acting, living, and loving. (80)

These last images of Sontag, clearly troubling, painful reminders of the fragility of the body not only in the face of death but in the treatment to prolong life, interspaced by Leibovitz in this collection with images of America's most beautiful and physically fit men and women, require active processing on the part of the viewer. Sontag insists that despite the onslaught of images we are confronted with each day that enable a self-selection process to turn off both literally and metaphorically what makes us uncomfortable, we can choose to be affected: “That we are not totally transformed, that we can turn away, turn the page, switch the channel, does not impugn the ethical value of assault by images” (*Regarding the Pain of Others* 116). Or as Joyce Carol Oates writes in a review of the Leibovitz collection: “The unsympathetic observer resents being forced into the position of voyeur; the sympathetic observer is willing to be forced into the

position of a fellow voyager” (“Memoirs of the Artist”). I suspect that, when observers are confronted with these last images of Sontag, few are unsympathetic.

Yet, even in my own practice of an ethics of seeing, I find that what I ultimately want to see is beauty within this suffering. In the unfinished essay, “An Argument About Beauty,” Sontag demonstrates how we are perhaps too committed to the concept of beauty, no matter how outlandish. She quotes Pope John Paul II’s response to the “innumerable cover-ups of sexually predatory priests”: ““A great work of art may be blemished, but its beauty remains”” (*At the Same Time* 3). She points out the problem with the Pope’s metaphor:

Is it too odd that the pope likens the Catholic Church to a great - that is beautiful - work of art? Perhaps not, since the inane comparison allows him to turn abhorrent misdeeds into something like the scratches in the print of a silent film [...]. And beauty [is] a term signifying (like health) an indisputable excellence. (93)

Beauty might “signify” distinction but for the most part, as the Pope’s quotation indicates, there is not much consensus on what defines beauty.²⁴ If an institution like the Catholic Church can be beautiful, there is little left for the cause of beauty. Even the most traditional image of a beautiful woman appearing as artistic object - the type of images the writers in this project contend with - can be dramatically altered by almost anyone’s digital toolbox (in addition to the already long list of tools a photographer has had since

²⁴ This concern about what art signifies marks a critical turn for Sontag. In “Against Interpretation” she argues for “transparence,” which she defines as “experiencing the luminousness of the thing itself, of things being what they are” (13). In other words, she emphasizes form over content and insists that “what we decidedly do not need now is further to assimilate Art into Thought, or (worse yet) Art into Culture.”

the medium's invention). This is not to argue that beauty has to be natural but that the current definition of beauty surpasses what the body can offer.²⁵

Even though it is Sontag's undeniable physical suffering that clearly stands out in the photographs of her final illness, Leibovitz tries to make her beautiful in death.²⁶ She writes in the introduction of *A Photographer's Life* of the great care she took in choosing Sontag's clothes for her burial, as if this was a way the loss could be aestheticized and therefore the pain subdued: "She loved to dress up. I brought scarves we had bought in Venice, and a black velvet Yoehlee coat that she wore to the theater." Leibovitz includes images of Sontag's body dressed in these clothes just prior to burial. They are some of the only personal images in the book that are in color. They are also fragmented, spread across two pages as if they have been directly reproduced from the contact sheet. Most of the images show Sontag's full body, lying horizontal on a table. Leibovitz also chose to photograph Sontag in a segmented panorama, each portion of her body individually shot and then the images grouped together to exhibit the full picture. In all the images, the colors are harsh, appearing severely yellow and green. Indeed, there is very little that looks like Sontag here. And the clothes that Leibovitz claims Sontag appreciated are not worn by her in any of the other images in the collection. We see her in her black turtleneck, or nude in the bathtub, or in a bear costume, but never in anything that resembles these clothes. Leibovitz has chosen to attempt to make Sontag authentically

²⁵ Sontag uses Hegel to articulate the difference between beauty in art and beauty in nature: "The beauty of art is better, 'higher,' according to Hegel, than the beauty of nature because it is made by human beings and is the work of the spirit" (*At the Same Time* 13).

²⁶ In Roberta Smith's review of the exhibit that accompanied the publication of Leibovitz's book, she suggests that Sontag provides a kind of vicarious living for Leibovitz: Sontag "[enabled] her to share a fame that she found more authentic than her own" ("Photographer to the Stars"). These photographs of Sontag's last days might also provide Leibovitz with an authenticity she insists is present in her work.

beautiful, but not lifelike. Ironically, this is one element that images of life and death share: somehow the most beautiful ones are the least lifelike.

Beauty, according to Sontag, is no longer a standard for art; “Rather [...] [there is] a decline in the belief that there is something called art” (*At the Same Time* 6). By the time of Sontag’s last illness, beauty had been wrung out, oversaturated by misuse and erroneous definitions. What Sontag suggests in *At Same Time* is a reminder of the boundary between what we perceive as human and, in the Hegelian sense, the spiritual: “What is beautiful reminds us of nature [...] of what lies beyond the human and the made - and thereby stimulates and deepens our sense of the sheer spread and fullness of reality” (13). Thus in the essential opposition Sontag sets up in *On Photography* between “two different imperatives: beautification, which comes from the fine arts, and truth-telling, which is measured [...] by a moralized ideal,” by the time of her final work, beauty had in fact won out (86). Emptied of its meaning, and lacking the righteousness of what “moralized ideal” implies, beauty can be built up again, and now can include the deliberately ambiguous and subjective “fullness of reality” in which “beauty regains [...] its inevitability” (*At the Same Time* 13). Thus, if the last images of Sontag are beautiful, it is not because they offer us aesthetic value, or authenticity, but because they might elucidate her life’s work, “make sense of a large portion of one’s energies, affinities and admirations, or help us to endure the senselessness of her suffering and death.”

Once we either redefine beauty or renounce the central role it plays in our perception of a woman’s identity, there is a range of possibilities of what we can gather from photographs. Brenda Silver points out that Virginia Woolf’s image has become

more about an identity the consumer of the image wants to project, rather than about Woolf herself, “evoking responses that transform her features into a mirror of the viewer’s own” (128). It is as yet unclear what Sontag’s lifetime of images will enable the viewer to project. But if we are not insistent on Sontag’s beauty (our own beauty), we might begin to see who she is outside the frames of her photographs, and indeed, who we are both as a culture and as unique individuals. After all, Maryna’s beauty brought her little comfort. The troubling photographs of Sontag’s illness, however, might only enhance her contribution to twentieth-century criticism.

Conclusion:

Modernism after Cindy Sherman

This dissertation has identified the ways in which women writers tackled the opportunities that photography introduced, especially as photography was adopted and transformed by mass culture. Jean Rhys, Nella Larsen, Gertrude Stein and Susan Sontag, I argue, actively engaged photography as a means to begin to break down gender barriers that restricted their lives and the lives of the women they wrote about in their work. Significantly, the timeline of their texts provides a narrative arc, from tentative experimentation to successful integration, until mass culture's overwhelming impact drowns out photography's constructive possibilities for the articulation of modern women characters: Rhys's characters attempt to appear as exact copies of types and are dejected, and physically wounded, when they succeed in doing so; Larsen's Helga Crane initially experiences satisfaction with curating her own spectacularization, but is not able to surmount the limitations of mass culture; and Stein finds the most critical and popular success in representing herself photographically in the early 1930s, though in her later work she acknowledges unease at the kind of fame she receives. With the ebb of the traditional boundaries of modernism, the promise of what photographs could offer modern women diminished and, in Sontag's novel, the sacrifice that her character Maryna makes in order to remain photographic compromises her ability to participate in modernity.

Further, by including elements of autobiography, these writers also challenged genre lines, which Jeanette Winterson continued to struggle with when writing her semi-autobiographical novel, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. In her most recent memoir, *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal*, she explains:

I was trying to get away from the idea that women always write about “experience” - the compass of what they know - while men write wide and bold - the big canvas, the experiment with form. [...]. Why could there not be experience *and* experiment? (3)

Winterson is arguing that there is potential in the erasure *and* conflation of accepted divisions previously taken at face value, and it is not a coincidence that she uses two modernist writers to explain how the specific division between autobiography and biography can be interrupted: “Woolf called her novel [*Orlando*] a biography and Stein wrote somebody else’s autobiography. Both women were collapsing the space between fact and fiction” (118). Thus, as Winterson points out, modern women writers were particularly willing to take risks with genre, and as I argue, they did so while integrating visual mediums that profoundly impacted the increasingly blurry distinction between their personal and professional lives. In my discussion of women’s writing, however, I am not promoting “his” and “her” modernisms, what Lisa Rado calls “the oppositional moralities of the sexes”; it is not just women writers who were affected by the changing visual culture (7). Women writers do, nevertheless, provide a starting point for updating perspectives of the period that more thoroughly include a range of modern bodies and a depth of modern life, thus the “experience *and* experiment” to which Winterson refers.

I anticipate that the consequences of this dissertation, and other new approaches that reconsider aesthetics and modernism that I mention in the introduction, will be the unraveling of additional barriers that have limited insights into the modernist period, including the disciplinary categories of art and literature, particularly art that references mass culture. An integration of references to photography specifically within the discussion of narrative can offer new perspectives and approaches to literature that are more inclusive and discerning of the complications of the period. In the words of Robert Scholes, we need to address “the full range of Modernist literature and art in order to understand Modernism [...] and hence see ourselves from the other side” (31-32). W.J.T. Mitchell’s book *The Language of Images* is further predicated on the symbiotic relationship between text and images: “By the language of images we mean [...] images regarded *as* a language [and] verbal language as a system *informed* by images” (3, original emphasis). Discussing modernism and contemporary art, the latter of which refers to visual mass culture as insistently as traditional approaches to modernism deny the connection, also allows this study to respond to Michael North’s suggestion that it is “not simply a matter of arguing that modernists were more positive in their attitudes toward mass culture than is usually assumed, but rather of suggesting that this relationship is more complex because mass culture is more complex” (*Reading 1922* 208).

Thus I conclude with a brief discussion of photographs by the visual artist Cindy Sherman. Sherman’s success in the art world with work that is in many cases pastiches of images of women already foremost in popular culture further interrogates the perceptions

of reproducibility that the modernist writers in this project confronted. These perceptions maintain the mistaken assumption that women continue to be victimized not only by the camera but also by mass culture. When it comes to Sherman's work, by contrast, "There's never any question [...] it's she who's in charge" (Sischy 94). My point is that it is not just Sherman who is in charge but also the characters she portrays; they are as complicit with mass culture as the artist. Sherman's latest work, featured at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in the exhibition *Cindy Sherman* (2012) that surveys her career, is the first time she uses digital technology to alter her appearance. This most recent series begins to upset the assumptions about women's relationship to visual technology that have plagued assessments of Sherman's work and the work of those writers discussed in this project.

Sherman is most well-known for her "Film Stills" series (1977-1980) in which she photographed herself in various outfits and situations reminiscent of film characters from the 1950s and 1960s. Her work since then has been a continuation of this derivative approach, with Sherman costumed in the style of subjects in Old Master paintings, clowns or aging women from high society. All these characters are recognizable, either as representations of types from the media or history or people viewers might even know. Laura Mulvey explains in an article on the artist that when approaching a work by Sherman, "The viewer looks, recognizes a style, doubts, does a double take, then recognizes that the style is a citation, and meanings shift and change their reference like shifting perceptions of perspective from an optical illusion" ("Phantasmagoria" 10-11). Or, as Gertrude Stein writes in the essay, "What Are Master-pieces and Why are There So

Few of Them,” Sherman is commenting on the fact that “everybody all day long knows what is happening and so what is happening is not really interesting, one knows by radios cinemas newspapers biographies and autobiographies” (Scott, *The Gender of Modernism* 497). Essentially Sherman is performing a performance already in play; indeed, many of the Film Stills look as if the viewer caught her in the middle of a narrative, and in this way, her work further crosses the line between text and image. For example, in *Untitled Film Still #48* (1979) Sherman stands with suitcase on the side of darkened road, waiting for something or someone that is not clear. With no cars or buildings in sight, it is even uncertain how she arrived at this desolate location. In *Untitled Film Still #54* (1980),



Fig. C.1. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #54*, 1980, black and white photograph, 8 x 10 inches, 20.3 x 25.4 cm, Edition of 10, (MP# 54), Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York.

Sherman appears as a Marilyn Monroe type of starlet, with bleached hair and heavy lipstick and a look on her face that shows she is troubled - whether it is by the rain or by another, more severe, issue is unclear (figure C.1). What is “interesting” about these images, and Sherman’s oeuvre as a whole, is that, as Stein says, it is usually “not really interesting” except when, in the context of a museum or gallery, the viewer is forced to reconsider her assumptions of images she would not normally contemplate.

In addition to the characters’ familiarity, many of them, such as the starlet mentioned above or Carvaggio, who appears in the Old Master series (*Untitled #224*, 1990), reference themselves as commodities. The Film Stills, for example, were meant to mimic the cheaply made and cheaply purchased cards reproduced to promote films. Likewise, Sherman’s stills initially sold for only \$50 each, an inexpensive amount for an original photograph sold by Metro-Pictures, the high-end gallery that still represents the artist (Tomkins 74). Additionally, the Old Master series disables the notion of “high” art, and undermines the distinction between original and copy, historic artifact and contemporary photograph (though Sherman’s own work fetches high prices at auction). These images also question the value of high-priced status objects and one-of-a-kind pieces worthy of museums. Lastly, the society portraits probe the performance of wealth. One particular character has made obvious efforts at a perfect appearance of richness and prosperity with expensive clothes and carefully applied makeup, which is undermined by cheap, gauche plastic footwear (*Untitled #466*, 2008) (see figure C.2).¹ The woman in

¹ A number of critics point out that this detail is evidence of the character’s vulnerability, such as MoMA curator Eva Respini who discusses it as an example of how her “glossy perfection unravels” (“Favorite Cindy Sherman” Moma.org).

Untitled #465 (2008) offers a profile that recalls ancient coins; she faces sideways and then turns her head toward the viewer. Her hair also is carefully pulled back and she wears scant, expertly applied eye makeup but the heavy foundation and blush emphasizes sagging skin and enlarged pores. Thus, like the characters in the literature I discuss, Sherman's characters, and Sherman herself, rely on mass production to articulate their identities as modern subjects or, in the case of the Film Stills and the Old Master paintings, modern objects.



Fig. C.2. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled*, 2008, color photograph, 96.875 x 64 inches (image), 246.1 x 162.6 cm, 101-7/8 x 69-1/4 inches (frame), 259 x 176 cm, Edition of 6, (MP# 466). Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York.

In two of Sherman's series, the Film Stills and a series of portraits she produced for *ArtForum* in 1981 that were never published (referred to as "centerfolds" because the horizontal format is similar to spreads from pornographic magazines), Sherman's

characters can be perceived as victims, often because they look unprepared or in the middle of a crisis: they do not acknowledge the camera; their gazes focus far away as if they are pondering serious trouble; and they are only partially dressed or are unkempt. These characters also give this impression because this is how they are portrayed in the media. We have become accustomed to women portrayed as victims of “a dominant male possessing money and power,” as Mulvey points out in her ground-breaking essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” and more generally, according to Mulvey, of the implied male gaze that fetishizes the disempowered female figure (50).² Since Sherman is both photographer and subject in these images, she is referencing this disempowerment while maintaining power. In this way, she is exposing the conceit of this culture. In the *New York Times* review of the 2012 MoMA show, Roberta Smith calls Sherman a “vehement avenging angel waging a kind of war with the camera, using it to expose what might be called both the tyranny and the inner lives of images” (“Cindy Sherman”). Sherman’s style is such that her “avenging angel” is a wolf in sheep’s clothing.

Some of these images could be visual representations of the characters in Rhys’s or Larsen’s novels, and are illustrations of the type of alienation that Sontag’s Maryna attempts to avoid. For example, in one image from the centerfold series, *Untitled #86* (1981), the character is lying lengthwise, her head resting on her arm with her other arm draped across her stomach; her thin cotton t-shirt and shorts are crumpled; she looks

² I employ Mulvey here with the understanding that such theorists as Liz Conor, Anne Anlin Cheng and even Mulvey herself in later work complicate this analysis. Mulvey’s interpretation, however, is still the dominant one. As Conor notes, “Feminist critique remains strongly influenced by the assignation of sexual difference through the subject/object divide” (34).

away from the camera in blankness or dread and her hair is wet and messy (see figure C.3). This image could serve as the illustration to lines to the original ending of Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark* in which Anna dies of the abortion: "I thought I'm going to fall nothing can save me now but still I clung desperately to my knees feeling very sick and the waves of pain going through me like the sea" (Scott, *Gender of Modernism* 388). Anna and the character Sherman portrays can both be interpreted as suddenly aware of, and frightened by, their own vulnerability. For Anna, this vulnerability is the consequence of trying to pose as a modern woman. For Sherman's character, the vulnerability *is* the pose.



Fig. C.3. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #86*, 1981, color photograph, 24 x 48 inches, 61 x 121.9 cm Edition of 10, (MP# 86). Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York.

What further distinguishes Sherman's photographs is that they interrupt the expectation of the relationship between the artist and the subject. The viewers are complicit with Sherman because she takes on both the roles of photographer and subject, while still performing in the photos as if she is posing for a photographer. Smith explains,

“We are always in on the trick-alerted to their real-feigned nature” (“Cindy Sherman”). In the convention of the Film Stills and the photographs produced for *ArtForum*, in particular, the narrative construction works because not only is it a story in the midst of being told, it is a story that has been told, such as the plot of the troubled starlet from *Untitled Film Still #54* or the centerfolds the *ArtForum* images are meant to imitate. Its nature as pastiche goes beyond Sherman to the characters who are also participating in pastiche. Though there were some early reviews that conflated Sherman’s characters with her own identity, for the most part, she has avoided this reductive gesture that assumes the identity of a fictionalized woman is equivalent to the artist that created her, against which Rhys, for example struggled, as I discuss in the first chapter.³ As Respini points out, “There is no *real* Cindy Sherman, only infinite characters who reflect the countless mediated images that bombard us daily” (“Will the Real Cindy Sherman Stand Up” 50).

Though these Sherman images avoid the pitfalls of being misconstrued as autobiographical, they are still undermined by the assumptions that women who are associated with mass cultural representations of their image must either be victims of sexual violence or manifest sexual desire that is somehow illicit. As a November 1998 Christie’s auction house catalog offering *Untitled #93* (1981) notes in a description of an image that shows Sherman in what appears to be the first light of day, in bed and still wearing makeup perhaps from the evening before: “Suggestions that this image shows a scene after a rape has taken place were countered by Sherman’s [...] description in a Japanese catalogue [...] as imagining someone who had just come home in the early

³ See also Williamson 46-47.

morning from being out partying all night, and the sun wakes her shortly after she has gone to bed” (christies.com).⁴ The horizontal layout, the intimate spaces and the faraway gaze do imply traditional sexual objectification, but because these are performances of performances, Sherman undermines typical conjectures about the image. The insistent reinstatement of these conjectures that Christie’s attempted to deny is yet another misreading that a woman who is included in a reference to mass culture must be experiencing a threat to her (sexual) safety or her moral character. Whatever the narrative behind the image is, the multi-layered performance ensures that it is more ambiguous than either the assumption of rape or even Sherman herself claims.

Sherman’s later photographs, such as the 2008 society portraits, are less explicitly sexual. However, it is interesting that for the most part these images are read as a negative critique or mockery of the characters she portrays within them when there is no detail that directly promotes this interpretation. Sherman plays on her own aging, posing as older women of high social class who are constructing themselves through their portraits (they stare directly at the camera and appear like cooperative subjects who might even be requesting the portraits). They are heavily made up, wear expensive looking clothing and sit in front of impressive backgrounds, such as arches fit for a historic museum (the Cloisters), the Spanish Steps in Italy, or their own homes finely fitted with art in gilded frames and silk-covered couches. Despite these characters’ obvious efforts to fabricate appearances of wealth and prosperity, their attempts only emphasize what one

⁴ It would benefit the seller of the photograph to distance the work from such violent associations. The painting sold for \$96,000. In May 2011, *Untitled # 96* from the same series (1981), featuring a fully dressed, less sexually explicit character, sold for \$3,890,500.

would assume they are trying to hide: loose skin, ill-fitting clothes or, in one photograph, pronounced nipples. The photographs point out where the guise of purchased perfection falls short. In their subjects' pursuit of communicating identities of opulence, they have only affirmed what we already know: that even the lives of the most affluent are flawed. In the *New Yorker* review of the MoMA exhibition, Peter Schjeldahl writes that in these particular images, "Sherman hammers ceaselessly at the delusion that personal identity is anything but a jury-rigged, rickety vessel, tossed on waves of hormones and neurotransmitters, and camouflaged with [...] fashions" (85).

The characters created by the writers in this project are similarly flawed; oftentimes their attempts to perform their modernist identities through their reproduced images only point out both their fragility and the artificial nature of identity. Stein is the one writer who avoided these accusations by writing Toklas's autobiography and insisting on her own authority, but the tragic ends to the lives of Rhys's and Larsen's characters, and the unreal flatness of Sontag's Maryna, are indicative of the grim consequences of women seeking spectacularization. Kaja Silverman claims that the resulting vulnerability that Sherman's characters express, and that I argue these fictional characters share, inspires empathy, rather than negative judgments like Schjeldahl's: "The tenderness with which Sherman details her protagonists' narcissistic ambitions helps us to recognize ourselves in them, as does her willingness to put herself *literally* in their place" (166). My intent in drawing these parallels between Sherman's work and that of the writers I discuss in this project is to point out that perspectives on women who appear in photographs have not changed significantly. In other words, women still seem

to fall on one of two sides when it comes to their relationship to their images - they are either “delusional” or “narcissistic” – and, in both cases, need the audience’s compassion.

By rethinking modernism, our reaction to contemporary photographs of women will be reconsidered in a way that offers a more progressive response. Alternatively, reconsidering Cindy Sherman’s photographs might be a way to work backwards towards a new approach to modernism. As I have argued, employing references to one’s mass-produced image to articulate identity may not always generate the desired result for the characters I discuss, but this does not discount the value of the attempts. Likewise, Sherman’s society portraits can be read as a demonstration of the triumph of mass production (and, indeed, this is the mechanism through which Sherman has built her own career). By drawing attention to her characters’ shortcomings, she is pointing out the performativity of identity not because this *type* of women should be criticized for it, but because, more often than not, we believe the performances we are assailed with every day. In fact, the images demonstrate what an amazing opportunity we all have to try out different versions of our selves and have these versions recorded. And although the women featured in the society portraits are dripping with jewels and can afford trips to Italy, they are humanized and their type of spectacularization is made accessible by their imperfect appearances and use of mass-produced items. As a result, the assumption that these women are vulnerable or shallow cannot be easily separated from the traditional, inevitably reductive connection between mass culture and women, and it might not be because they are deficient in some way but because we want to them to be: If they are

flawed, then viewers are under less pressure to produce and mass-produce their own identities.

Thus, these Sherman photographs demonstrate the pursuit of what motivated Winterson - the representation of experience *and* experiment; they are examples of the ways in which women seek to express both who they are *and* who they want to be. It is not insignificant that Sherman does not, and perhaps cannot, photograph herself as the underprivileged in our society since representations in the mass media are still dominated by the white, wealthy and conventionally attractive set.⁵ Perhaps this is to whom we should direct empathy. Without photographic representations, we might be invisible even to ourselves.

The new set of characters that Sherman created for the MoMA show might assist in encouraging this kind of approach that I am suggesting. These characters are blown up to enormous proportions, featured on larger-than life murals: one wears a full-body, anatomically correct nude suit and grasps a sword; a second holds juggling pins, wears running sneakers and a floral-print leotard embellished with small pom-poms (figure C.4); and a third has on a long, medieval-style dress. These latest images represent a crucial turn in Sherman's work. For one, these characters are no longer recognizable types - except that they are recognizable as works by Sherman - and two, given that they are murals, they are not necessarily collectible or available for purchase at a gallery or auction house. In other words, Sherman uses mass production while removing the

⁵ There is one series by Sherman from 2000 that comes closest to images of working-class women. These women are recognizable in their commitment to familiar styles, accessible through cheap clothes and jewelry available in almost any shopping mall, heavy makeup and conventional hairstyles (bleached blonde or long shags popular in the 1980s). Significantly, this series received little attention in the MoMA exhibition.

possibility that the artifacts can be exchanged as high-end commodities (though smaller reproductions are of course possible.)



Fig. C.4. Cindy Sherman. *Untitled*, 2010, Pigment print on PhotoTex adhesive fabric dimensions variable, (MP# 498). Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York.

Sherman also digitally altered these images and it is the first time she has used such post-production techniques in her work. In one portrait her nose is thinner; in another, her eyes are made smaller and pushed closer together. These post-production techniques are the kind that make fashion models impossibly skinny and, by removing moles, signs of aging and pores, make women in the media appear less and less lifelike - and might make real, live women ashamed about their less-than-photo-ready bodies. The perception that such airbrushing causes negative body image inspired fourteen-year-old Julia Bluhm to start an online petition to ask *Seventeen* magazine to print one unaltered photo spread a month (“Seventeen Magazine: Give Girls Images of Real Girls”

change.org).⁶ Significantly, however, Sherman does not improve her appearance as magazine and catalog post-production technicians attempt to do, but merely takes charge of it. What she does is essentially use the latest technological medium to rework her appearance and, again through experience and experimentation, to represent new identities. This time the identities in question are not pastiche, since they are not recognizable types and, therefore, we cannot fill them in with pre-inscribed narratives. Accordingly, what might be a worthwhile message for the fourteen-year-old who petitioned *Seventeen*, and girls like her who feel they must pursue digital perfection, is not that post-production alterations need to stop, but rather that these can be used as another way to take charge of ourselves, both our lived bodies and our fantasies, fantasies that might be skinny and blemish-free or something else that only can be inspired by the narratives women personally and individually create.

Thus these murals might represent a means for our modernist past to move forward: a guiding strategy for reinterpretation, reassessment and recovery of writing by women and the male modernists who have traditionally framed the movement. When technology and mass production can be read as opportunities for modernist writers, we can discharge many of the assumptions about women as reactionary participants. As a result, the stories that have previously defined modernism and those that have, up until now, been left out become more ambiguous and, therefore, more compelling.

⁶Editors met with Bluhm but refused the demands of her petition (“Seventeen Says Thanks But No Thanks”).

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