

A Bitter Journey: The “Passing” Mulatta as “Expatriate”

in Jessie Redmon Fauset's *Plum Bun*

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From certain standpoints, to travel is to encounter the terrorizing force of white supremacy,” says black feminist critic bell hooks in her essay, “Representations of Whiteness in the Black Imagination” (174). Remembering the bitterness of the journey that was part of her childhood experience of walking through a white neighborhood to her grandmother’s place, a passage she describes as a “constant reminder of white power and control” (175), she brings home to her readers the necessity of expanding the theoretical framework of traveling by moving away from its long-standing connotations of “middle class ‘literary’ or recreational journeying.” In answer to the questions James Clifford asks in his “Notes on Travel and Theory,” – “How do different populations, classes and genders travel?” and “What kinds of knowledges, stories, and theories do they produce?” (quoted in hooks, 173). I am going to look at the phenomenon of “passing”, the movement from one race to another as it is seen in Jessie Redmon Fauset’s novel *Plum Bun*. Documenting this journey by employing some of the headings hooks suggests in her essay, such as “rites of passage, [...] migration, relocation, enslavement, and homelessness” (173), I want to show how Fauset, an African American woman writer of the Harlem Renaissance, used the conventional theme of “passing” in order to problematize issues of national identity and expatriation.

Jessie Fauset’s career as a novelist is a very good illustration of the way African American literary criticism has changed in its attitude towards

fictional representations of the black middle class (cf. Johnson 143). Although she was praised during the 1920s by important literary figures such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke for not giving in to the fad of the age which demanded “the treatment of Negroes as exemplars of primitivism,”¹ and was even called “the potential Jane Austen of Negro literature” by William Stanley Braithwaite in 1934 (Hemenway 50), her novels were later on dismissed as “genteel lace curtain romances,” labeled “Victorian” and “assimilationist” (cf. McDowell 1985, 86; Johnson 144). Fauset herself was increasingly seen as a “literary midwife” of the Harlem Renaissance, the dubious honorary title Langston Hughes had decided to give her in his autobiography *The Big Sea* (cf. McDowell, ix).

It was only in the late 1970s and early 1980s that critics started looking beyond the surface of Fauset's writings again and discovered new complexities in her work, both as the literary editor of *Crisis* (1919-1926) and as a novelist. In 1979, Joseph J. Feeney, S.J., was the first to point out the unconventional, sardonic nature of her writings, a characteristic that is embedded in the “double structure” and “double vision” of her novels. Choosing to write about light-colored middle class professionals who “lived on the borderline of two races” (Johnson 149), and, in the case of the “passing” mulatta, took advantage of their possibility to transcend the limiting context of a segregationist society, Fauset contributed more than mere “black novels of manners” to the African American literary canon. In *Plum Bun*, for instance, the perspective of the “passing” African American woman is used to explore in full detail the discrepancy between the expectations raised by the democratic traditions embodied in the “American Dream” and the restrictions placed on its black second-class citizens. Wrapping her critique of American political hypocrisy in the cloth of a traditional novel of “passing,” Fauset, then, found her own — fictional — way of depicting the unique perspective which Du Bois had called the “double consciousness”² of the African American.

Abby A. Johnson, in her 1978 study, “Literary Midwife: Jessie Redmon Fauset and the Harlem Renaissance”, has analyzed a piece of writing, published in *Crisis* in 1921, that elucidates Fauset's stance on the problematic nature of African American national identity:

[Fauset] best captured the bond she sensed with all Afro-Americans in a piece

called 'Nostalgia.' American Negroes suffered, she wrote, from 'spiritual nostalgia,' which 'arises from the lack of things of the spirit, a difference in ideals.' They had given to the country and were of the land but had not been accorded full citizenship. For such people, the ideals of the American Constitution were 'not here - just beyond, always beyond.' 'The black American is something entirely new under the sun,' concluded Fauset. 'Shall he ever realize the land where he would be?' (Johnson 148f.).

In *Plum Bun*, Angela Murray sets out to discover this land "where (s)he would be," and her hazardous passage takes her, like bell hooks in her childhood memory, through a hostile white territory.

The structural framework of Angela's journey between the two races represents the movement described in the epigraph of the novel:

To Market, to Market
To buy a Plum Bun;
Home again, Home again,
Market is done.

This nursery rhyme which describes the economic success story of a conventional white male narrative serves throughout the novel as an ironic contrast to the protagonist's experiences as a white-skinned colored woman. Providing the titles for the five individual segments of Angela's *rite de passage*, — "Home", "Market", "Plum Bun", "Home Again", "Market Is Done" —, it is a constant reminder of its original optimistic message while the meanings of its key terms "market" and "plum bun" are being subverted in the course of the novel as the power relations in American society are shown within a racialized context.

"Home" for Angela is a little house on Opal Street, in a black neighborhood of Philadelphia, where she grows up in middle class surroundings in the midst of her family which consists of her parents and her sister Virginia. Already, as a young child accompanying her equally light-skinned mother on her "passing sprees", Angela concludes, "first, that the great rewards of life — riches, glamour, pleasure, — are for white-skinned people only. Secondly, that [her father and sister] were denied these privileges because they were dark" (17f.). As a result of these simplified conclusions, Angela internalizes a hierarchy of color in her thinking that

makes her “feel a faint pity for her unfortunate relatives” and “that coloured people were to be considered fortunate only in the proportion in which they measured up to the physical standards of white people” (18). After two incidents in which the revelation of her racial heritage brings her both insult and trouble, she seriously begins to wonder “which was the more important, a patent insistence on the fact of colour or an acceptance of the good things in life which could come to you in America, if either you were not coloured or the fact of your racial connections was not made known” (46).

After the death of her parents, Angela decides to act upon her conviction that “colour or rather the lack of it seemed [...] the only prerequisite to the life of which she was always dreaming” (13). In her desire to reach for broader horizons, she leaves her darker sister Virginia and, thus covering her tracks, goes off to start a new life as a white woman in New York City. Soon her white mask is so perfect that on her first visit to Harlem she is able to see colored people “objectively, doubly so, once with her natural remoteness and once with the remoteness of her new estate” (97). Looking at Harlem from her new perspective, Angela convinces herself that the decision to ‘pass’ has been the right one. For although life in Harlem seems to her fuller and richer than her own new existence, she soon realizes where, for her, the difference lies: the elitist world of art, which she is planning to be part of by becoming a distinguished painter, has no home in Harlem which is, after all, only a city within a city: “In all material, even in all practical things these two worlds were alike, but in the production, the fostering of those ultimate manifestations, this world was lacking, for its people were without the means or the leisure to support them and enjoy” (97).

Singlemindedly, then, Angela dives deeply into the opportunities of her white life which she builds around her circle of acquaintances from her school. Her ambition for becoming an artist being quite moderate, though, she soon decides that the best thing for her to gain both money and power would be to marry a rich white man.

If she were to do this, do it suitably, then all that richness, all that fullness of life which she so ardently craved would be doubly hers. She knew that men had a better time of it than women, coloured men than coloured women, white men than white women. (88)

After having found this “golden way” out of her material difficulties in the person of Roger Fielding, she naively enters into the power game of the marriage “Market” where she is bound to be the loser, trying — as Deborah E. Mc Dowell puts it — “to ‘buy’ in a society that only allows her to ‘sell’ “ (xix). Therefore, Angela has to realize soon that she is as powerless to manipulate Roger, whose “plum” is a bohemian concept of “free love” rather than marriage, as she is unable in the long run to deny her black identity. Her seemingly goal-oriented consciousness is disrupted again and again by incidents that show that, while her intellect approves of her social endeavors, her emotional side as well as her outlook on life are still deeply connected with her hidden self and her different sense of reality:

(She) could not explain to (Roger) the picture which she saw in her mind of men and women at her father's home[...] — the men talking painfully of rents, of lynchings, [...] the women of childbearing and the sacrifices which must be made [...] And in later years[...] the talking of ideals and inevitable sacrifices for the race; the burnt-offering of individualism for some dimly glimpsed racial whole. This was seriousness, even sombreness, with a great sickening vital upthrust of reality. (116)

In addition to that, Angela gets to know Roger's racism, or what bell hooks calls “the terrorizing force of white supremacy.” While her rich white lover boasts of incidents where he was able to “spoke the wheel” of various colored people, a silent Angela analyzes what is going on in the minds of the three colored persons whose ejection from a restaurant Roger has induced. She knows that an incident like this would result in “an increased cynicism in the elderly man, a growing bitterness for the young fellow and a new timidity in the girl” (136).

The climactic disruption of Angela's self-righteousness, however, happens when she is forced, in Roger's presence, to deny her own sister. After that, “a sick distaste for her action, for her daily deception, for Roger and his prejudices arose within her. But with it came a dark anger against a country and a society which could create such an issue”(162). Having lost her sister as the last tie to the black community, Angela becomes finally aware of her exiled position and starts longing for “some one of her very own” (163). The disastrous course Angela's relationship with rich Roger Fielding takes after a while, putting her increasingly into a state of both

emotional dependency and economic enslavement brings to mind what her white friend Paulette, a prototype of the “New Woman” has advised her with regard to having affairs. Briefing her unexperienced woman friend on such matters, Paulette holds that she herself “didn't relish the prospect of such an event in a foreign land, it put you too much at the man's mercy. An affair, if you were going to have one, was much better conducted on your own *piéd à terre*” (105f.).

Angela has ignored this wisdom and has entered in Roger's game from a position which is doubly weakened: first of all, she is a woman with no background which — for him — is no more than a clear indication of her poor social status and thus makes her an easy victim, and second, by cutting the last ties to her past, she has stationed herself outside the reach of support of her own community. Thus, after Roger has ended their relationship with an ugly scene, she must realize in despair that “life which had seemed so promising, so golden, had failed to supply her with a single friend to whom she could turn in an hour of extremity” (234).

Underlining Angela's perception of her homelessness and the loneliness connected with her exiled status, Jessie Fauset very effectively weaves a speech into the narrative — a speech delivered by one of the race leaders whose words strike the reader as a stark contrast to Angela's desperate attempts to justify her mostly materialist motivations for “passing” and which serve almost as an admonition. Van Meier, a thinly disguised version of W.E.B. Du Bois, talks above all about

racial pride. A pride that enables us to find our own beautiful and praiseworthy, an intense chauvinism that is content with its own types, that finds completeness within its own group; that loves its own as the French love their country, because it is their own. (218)

Van Meier's nationalistic statement helps to define Angela Murray's position in the white world as that of an “expatriate”. Having left “her own people” in order to gain privileges and to be less burdened with restrictions and restraints, she is now trapped in another world, a “strange, mysterious”, and even hostile world which forces her to conceal her real identity. It is very telling that, for Roger, Angela has “the quality of the foreigner” (123). The irony in the situation of the “passing” African American is, of course, that

she is not actually "ex patria". While living in the country of her birth, she is at the same time forced to exist in a segregated society of "Two Nations", as Andrew Hacker still calls it in 1992, one black, one white, in which only the dominant — white — nation is allowed to call itself "American" in the full meaning of the word. "Black Americans", Hacker says, "are Americans, yet they still subsist as aliens in the only land they know" (3). This fact is made quite clear when Angela once takes her sketch of Hetty Daniels, a colored woman, to her white art school and gets the following comment:

What an interesting type! said Gertrude Quayle, the girl next to her. "What is she, not an American? [...] Oh, coloured! Well, of course, I suppose you would call her an American though I never think of darkies as Americans". (70)

While dark-skinned African Americans, then, are blatantly treated as second-class citizens in their own country, near-white mulattoes do have the chance of enjoying all the privileges that are granted to their white "fellow" citizens — but only as long as they deny their dual heritage, for, after all, as Angela once reflects, "she belonged to two races, and to one far more conspicuously than the other" (265).

The grotesque consequences that follow from this special kind of discrimination are apparent when Angela, who has become so bitter and cynical after her relationship with Roger and her fruitless struggles within her new environment that she feels "like a battle-scarred veteran," is sick of wearing her mask and admits openly to being colored. The final impetus for her revelation is not only her new awareness of the futility of her endeavors or the loneliness of her exile but, even more, the outrageous discrimination of Rachel Powell, a fellow art student, who — after having been awarded an art prize in order to go to France just like Angela — is denied travel money because of her race. On top of that, her black colleague is being pestered by reporters who accuse her of desiring social equality.

Present at such a scene, a new communal feeling for her colored sister makes Angela daring enough to announce her own racial heritage right in front of the press in order to show the absurdity and injustice of such a treatment. Witnessing the humiliation Miss Powell has to go through, she realizes that "after all, this girl was one of her own. A whim of fate had set their paths far apart but just the same they were more than 'sisters under the

skin.' They were really closely connected in blood, in racial condition, in common suffering" (340f.). What she does here is to take a definite stance against colorism in the way that Alice Walker has called for in her essay, "If the Present Looks like the Past, What Does the Future Look Like?":

What black black women would be interested in, I think, is a consciously heightened awareness on the part of light black women that they are capable, often quite unconsciously, of inflicting pain upon them; and that unless the question of Colorism — in my definition, prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color — is addressed in our communitites and definitely in our black sisterhoods we cannot, as a people, progress. For colorism, like colonialism, sexism, and racism, impedes us. (Walker 290f.)

In a rite of passage, then, through the experience of her "passing", Angela has been able to overcome the colorism of her youth. By making a sacrifice for her race for the first time, she has paved her way back into the black community. The consequences of her coming out, however, are bitter as well: the number of her white friends is soon drastically reduced, and her employer reacts by accusing her of deceit and terminates her employment without notice. Explaining to her sister this "special variation of prejudice manifested to people in her position", Angela comments:

Of course, as you see, there are all kinds of absurdities involved. In your case, showing colour as you do, you'd have been refused the job at the very outset. [...] Now here I land the position, hold it long enough to prove ability and the girls work beside me and remain untainted. [...] Looking just the same as I've ever looked I let the fact of my Negro ancestry be known. Mind, I haven't changed the least bit, but immediately there's all this holding up of hands and the cry of deceit is raised. Some logic, that! (353)

Here Jessie Fauset shows the irony and irrationality of the American attempt to explain race exclusively as a biological concept rather than a cultural construct. After several years of "passing," then, Angela is finally driven "back home" to her sister and her people by a society that judges people by their biology — both in terms of race and sex — rather than by their character and individual capacities. While criticizing mainstream American society as a whole because of its racist and segregationist

practices, she uses especially harsh words for Philadelphia, where Fauset herself — the first black female graduate of Cornell — found the high schools barred to her because of her racial origin (cf. MacDowell xiv):

Philadelphia with its traditions of liberty and its actual economic and social slavery, its iniquitous school system, its prejudiced theatres, its limited offering of occupation! A great, searing hatred arose in her for the huge, slumbering leviathan of a city which had hardly moved a muscle in the last fifty years. (261)

At the end of her journey, however, there is hope, too. Proudly stating that “from now, so far as sides are concerned, I am on the coloured side” (373), Angela is finally able to overcome her colorstruck disposition. It is actually a heavy burden that she has managed to shed by revealing her true self: “Not that I myself think it of such tremendous importance; [...] but because this country of ours makes it so important, [...] I was beginning to feel as if I were laden down with a great secret” (354).

Angela Murray's journey from the black community to the white world and back can, then, be seen in the terms that bell hooks suggests for the creation of an alternative theory of travel: in the process of her “passing” she goes through a phase of migration, she becomes economically enslaved by her white lover, she suffers from homelessness by being cut off from the black community while being an outsider in the white world, and she learns through her rite of passage to accept her own racially-mixed self and to take sides with what are culturally “her own people”, thus she is finally relocated within the frontiers of black America, and terminates her status as an “expatriate”, what the reader learns from her experience is, most of all, the importance of perspective in judging both people and events. Inviting us to look at life from the vantage point of somebody who has traveled on two different roads, Jessie Redmon Fauset adds to our understanding of two cultures by giving us the possibility to partake in this multi-dimensional journey written from a minority location. By having her protagonist return to the black community, however, she also indicates that the time has not yet come for America's black citizens to live in a country they can actually call their own.



1) Deborah McDowell in her introduction to Fauset's *Plum Bun*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1990, xxiv. All further references to the the novel will be to this edition.

2) In his groundbreaking 1903 study, *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois writes: "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder". (1973, 3)



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