

Rollins College

Rollins Scholarship Online

Honors Program Theses

Spring 2022

Fashioning the Flapper: Clothing as a Catalyst for Social Change in 1920s America

Julia Wolffe
juliabwolffe@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.rollins.edu/honors>



Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#), [American Art and Architecture Commons](#), [American Film Studies Commons](#), [American Literature Commons](#), [American Material Culture Commons](#), [American Popular Culture Commons](#), [Contemporary Art Commons](#), [Cultural History Commons](#), [Dance Commons](#), [Fashion Business Commons](#), [Fashion Design Commons](#), [Fiber, Textile, and Weaving Arts Commons](#), [Film and Media Studies Commons](#), [Fine Arts Commons](#), [Gender and Sexuality Commons](#), [History of Gender Commons](#), [Illustration Commons](#), [Literature in English, North America Commons](#), [Literature in English, North America, Ethnic and Cultural Minority Commons](#), [Marketing Commons](#), [Music Commons](#), [Painting Commons](#), [Photography Commons](#), [Poetry Commons](#), [Race and Ethnicity Commons](#), [Sculpture Commons](#), [Social History Commons](#), [United States History Commons](#), [Women's History Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Wolffe, Julia, "Fashioning the Flapper: Clothing as a Catalyst for Social Change in 1920s America" (2022). *Honors Program Theses*. 162.
<https://scholarship.rollins.edu/honors/162>

This Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by Rollins Scholarship Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Program Theses by an authorized administrator of Rollins Scholarship Online. For more information, please contact rwalton@rollins.edu.

**Fashioning the Flapper:
Clothing as a Catalyst for Social Change in 1920s America**

Julia B. Wolffe

A Senior Honors Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
Requirements of the Honors Degree Program

May 2022

Faculty Sponsor: MacKenzie Moon Ryan

Rollins College
Winter Park, Florida

Acknowledgements

To my parents and my twin brother George for their continuous support.

A special thank you to Dr. Ryan for her unwavering guidance and knowledge, to my committee members Dr. Dennis and Dr. Libby for their insightful input, and to the Art History Department at Rollins College for helping me explore my passion.

Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	1
LIST OF FIGURES	4
PREFACE: FASHION AND SOCIAL CHANGE.....	5
Life Magazine Cover Study	7
PART I: THE CORSET LEGACY AND RESTRICTING WOMEN THROUGH CLOTHING .	9
Introduction: Corsets at Confinement Devices	9
The History of Corsetry	11
The Victorian Era: The Height of Restriction	15
The Turn of the Century: The Freedom Contradiction.....	20
The 1920s: The Abandonment of the Corset	24
PART I ILLUSTRATIONS.....	28
PART II: THE FLAPPER REVOLUTION.....	33
Introduction: The New Ideal.....	33
The Making of a Fashion Icon	34
Historical Influences of the Flapper.....	37
Finding Freedom through Dress: A Closer Look at Flapper Fashions	42
The Moral Revolution and Flapper Controversy	49
The Flapper in the Spotlight	51
Conclusion: The Impact of the Flapper	55
PART II ILLUSTRATIONS	56
PART III: DECENTRALIZING WHITENESS IN FASHION: BLACK INFLUENCE ON FASHION AND SOCIETY IN THE JAZZ AGE	61
Introduction: Terminology.....	61
Intersectionality and Decentralizing Whiteness in Fashion History.....	64
Rewriting Fashion History: Elizabeth Keckly and Ann Lowe	67
The Harlem Renaissance and the New Cool	69

The Visual Arts in 1920s Harlem	73
Capturing Fashion Through the Lens of James Van Der Zee.....	79
Passing Fashions and the Binds of Double Consciousness	85
The Birth of the Jazz Age	91
The Emergence of Flapper Dresses in Jazz Clubs	95
Josephine Baker: The First Black Fashion Icon	101
Flapper Fashion as a Vehicle for Social Change	105
CONCLUSION: THE PROGRESSION OF FASHION IN AMERICAN SOCIETY.....	107
PART III ILLUSTRATIONS	109
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	123

List of Figures

<u>Figure</u>		<u>Page</u>
1	<i>Life Magazine Cover by L. J. Holton</i>	28
2	<i>Tight-Laced Corset</i>	29
3	<i>S Curve Corset</i>	30
4	<i>Girdle</i>	31
5	<i>Corselet</i>	32
6	<i>Gibson Girl Illustration</i>	56
7	<i>Life Magazine Cover by John Held Jr.</i>	57
8	<i>Canary Yellow Evening Dress</i>	58
9	<i>Jade Green Evening Dress</i>	59
10	<i>Clara Bow in Embellished Evening Dress</i>	60
11	<i>Aspects of Negro Life: Song of the Towers</i>	109
12	<i>Ethiopia Awakening</i>	110
13	<i>Bal Jeunesse</i>	111
14	<i>Portrait of a Couple</i>	112
15	<i>Woman in a Dress with Sequins and Pearls in Front of a Painted Backdrop</i>	113
16	<i>Billy</i>	114
17	<i>Street Style in Harlem</i>	115
18	<i>Fringe Dance Costume</i>	116
19	<i>Cream Evening Dress</i>	117
20	<i>Orange Evening Dress</i>	118
21	<i>Gold Evening Dress</i>	119
22	<i>Josephine Baker in Banana Skirt</i>	120
23	<i>Josephine Baker in Stage Costume</i>	121
24	<i>“Josephine Baker” Dress</i>	122

Preface: Fashion and Social Change

Many view fashion as frivolous and superficial—after all, clothing is what most people first notice about others when they first meet. In academia, fashion is typically devaluated because for centuries it has been associated with capitalism, vanity, and “women’s pursuits.”¹ What we often fail to discuss, however, is how fashion has become a catalyst for shaping society throughout history, as fashion has the power to forge identities and allow marginalized communities to assert their independence. Aspers and Godart define fashion as “an unplanned process of recurrent change against a backdrop of order in the public realm” that is “a social phenomenon that can apply to almost any human activity.”² In other words, fashion is a process in which clothing and adornment constantly change to adapt to society, therefore it can be applied to nearly every aspect of everyday life. It is for this reason that fashion is central to society and can be used as a device to drive social change. This thesis will explore how the shift from corsetry to flapper fashions in the 1920s impacted American society.

Prior to the twentieth century, women were heavily policed and restricted which is reflected through the rigid corsetry they were expected to wear. Thus, the corset both physically and psychologically debilitated women and placed them in a position of oppression for nearly four hundred years. The history of corsetry provides a window into American society because it mirrors societal perceptions of women.

The beginning of the twentieth century marked a turning point for society in the United States as industrialization, women's rights, and racial equality came to the forefront of American focus. With the many social issues that were evolving at the time, fashion served as a way for

¹ Patrik Aspers and Frédéric Godart, “Sociology of Fashion: Order and Change,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 39 (2013): 172, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43049631>.

² Aspers and Godart, “Sociology of Fashion,” 185.

these issues to be propelled forward. The 1920s was a particularly noteworthy era for fashion as the corset was almost entirely abandoned, styles became increasingly androgynous, and minority groups became highly influential to the latest trends. With the political and cultural undercurrents of women's suffrage, Prohibition, and the Harlem Renaissance, fashion was a tool that American women used to transform previous antiquated perceptions regarding gender, race, and society overall.

This thesis aims to look at fashion history through an intersectional and feminist lens to change the widely pre-conceived notions of women's fashion and society in the 1920s being overtly glamorous, frivolous, and superficial. To be more inclusive and informative about how society functioned at the time, I will draw upon primary sources that illustrate societal perceptions of women and oppressed groups at the time. I will also utilize secondary sources which outline women's history, Black history, and fashion history through an academic lens. Finally, I will examine extant garments and artwork from the period to provide visual sources that further the argument that fashion was a catalyst for shaping 1920s American society.

There is a significant gap in the scholarship of fashion history through the lens of feminism and intersectionality, therefore this thesis aims to fill the gap and in turn argue for the importance of fashion history in academia while decentralizing whiteness and positioning women at the center of focus. Overall, this thesis explores how fashion can be used as a device for social change by giving women and minorities more agency in society through their clothing and style.

Life Magazine Cover Study

Upon first inspection, this *Life* magazine cover from 1926 depicts a fun-loving, joyful flapper (Figure 1). When we revert our focus to the background of the image, however, the message becomes more complex and convoluted. Behind this image of the quintessential flapper with her bobbed haircut, short, shapeless dress, and rolled-down stockings is a repetitive pattern of African people that are steeped in racist stereotypes. They have curly hair, exaggerated lips, minimal clothing, body paint, and are holding spears. The image perpetuates racist imagery and ideologies as this cover would have been circulated throughout the nation. Ironically, the image suggests that the woman is dancing to the music of the African people, thus alluding to how Black music and culture became increasingly popular in the 1920s despite it still being engulfed in stereotypes and prejudice. The 1920s marked a new era for women's liberation as well as increased Black pride, yet there was—and still is—a long way to go before Black people would be removed from racist imagery and women and marginalized groups would be regarded as equal to white men. The fact that a white, stylish woman is in the foreground of the composition while racially charged figures of African people are in the background relays the message that the white woman is superior to the Black people when in reality, it is the Black community that can be credited with creating flapper fashions.

In this thesis, I will argue that the infamous flapper dress originates from Black American culture at the height of the Harlem Renaissance. With the emergence of Black culture and music into mainstream culture, fashion was highly influenced by music and dance—particularly jazz music and dance that mainly stemmed from Black musicians in the American South. With the emergence of this new genre came the desire to dance, thus leading to the abandonment of the confining, restrictive corset and the creation of the free-moving flapper dress. The flapper dress

is characterized by an androgynous silhouette, a short hemline, and kinetic, sparkling embellishments which would have been ideal for dancing. The flapper evening dress is exemplary of how fashion is central to our understanding of society in a particular period and can shape societal perceptions of minority groups.

Part I: The Corset Legacy and Restricting Women Through Clothing

Introduction: Corsets at Confinement Devices

For nearly four hundred years, the corset existed as a tool for women to conform their bodies to the fashionable body ideals of the time. In turn, corsetry served as a device that society used to subconsciously control and restrict women both physically and psychologically. However, fashion historian Valerie Steele states that one must give women agency when exploring this complex garment: “by patronizing the women of the past as ‘victims’ of fashion, historians have ignored the reasons why so many women were willing to wear corsets for so long.”³ She argues that the mere fact that women wished to wear this undergarment reflects that women—not society—ultimately chose to wear restrictive clothing. In this section, I will argue that this is not entirely true. It is essential to recognize that societal standards and women’s fashion choices go hand-in-hand; society directly informs a woman’s ideals of her body and therefore what she wears to conform to these ideals. Although women chose to wear corsets and it is important to give women agency, corsets ultimately were constrictive devices impressed upon women by society to regulate women’s body shapes and subsequently their subservient role in society.

Corsets reached the height of opulence and restriction in the Victorian era and have often been described as “quintessentially Victorian” because of their role “in creating and policing middle-class femininity.”⁴ Within Victorian society’s strict rules surrounding morals, the corset acted as a tool to control modesty while also paradoxically being associated with eroticism and intimacy, thus creating a double bind for women. Corsets are an example of a garment that informs society’s views of women and serves as a catalyst for altering perceptions of women’s

³ Valerie Steele, *The Corset: A Cultural History*. (New Haven: 2001), 2.

⁴ Steele, *The Corset*, 35.

bodies. Corsets laid the foundation for female suppression that was eventually reconfigured in the 1920s.

The History of Corsetry

A corset is a rigid, structured bodice that contains boning throughout and lacing that is typically at the back to shape a woman's torso and bust into the ideal shape of the period.⁵ Corsets created a stiff base for outer garments to be placed over, thus they were deemed essential to a woman's ensemble. The word "corset" itself comes from the French word for bodice, *corse*.⁶ Early corsets were known as *corps à la baleine* (meaning "whalebone bodies") because whale baleen was used to stiffen fabric and create a rigid base. Corsets are also often referred to as "stays," which likely comes from the French word *estayer*, meaning "to support."⁷ This alludes to the notion that for centuries, women were seen as the weaker sex, thus they needed physical support to function properly alongside men.

The origins of body-shaping garments trace back to ancient times. Components of the corset come from the ancient Greek *zona* which shaped the waist, and the Roman *strophium* and *mamillare* which supported the breasts.⁸ Mosaics and wall paintings in ancient Rome and Pompeii depict women with their torsos bound in cloth, suggesting that body-forming garments were conceptualized there as well. Iron corsets from the late sixteenth century are often regarded as the first corsets, but they were more likely orthopedic devices used to correct spinal deformities.⁹

In Medieval France, the word "corset" referred to doublets and gowns as well as armor; at this time, both women and men wore clothing with laced closures.¹⁰ The first corset likely originated from Italy or Spain in the first half of the sixteenth century when upper-class women

⁵ Valerie Steele and Colleen Gau, "Corset," in *The Berg Companion to Fashion*, ed. Valerie Steele (Oxford: 2010), 165.

⁶ Steele and Gau, "Corset," 166.

⁷ Steele and Gau, "Corset," 166.

⁸ Steele, *The Corset*, 4.

⁹ Steele, *The Corset*, 5.

¹⁰ Steele, *The Corset*, 6.

began wearing bodices made of rigid materials such as whalebone, buckram, and horn.¹¹ By the end of the sixteenth century, corsets were worn mainly by aristocratic women and girls.¹² In the seventeenth century, both aristocratic girls and boys began wearing corsets as young as two years old because it was thought that corsets would force their bodies to grow upright and unbent.¹³ While boys stopped wearing corsets around the age of six, girls continued to wear them for the rest of their lives.

By the eighteenth century, corsets became increasingly synonymous with eroticism and subsequently with the objectification of women's bodies. Steele states that "the erotic appeal of stays was multi-faceted, including the exposure of underwear, the symbolism of lacing as surrogate intercourse, and the way stays displayed the bosom."¹⁴ In France, paintings and prints of women dressing became popular; this was known as *la toilette galante* and specifically as the subcategory of *essai du corset*.¹⁵ Paradoxically, a woman who wore a corset was also seen as respectable because corsets "controlled the body and, by extension, the physical passions."¹⁶ In this time, a woman who wore her stays tightly-laced was not "loose." The contradiction between corsetry being eroticized to appeal to the male gaze while also restricting women for modesty is reflective of a highly patriarchal society and relates to the concept of the double bind.

The double bind refers to "situations where one's options are limited and all the options involve punishment or censure."¹⁷ The double bind is ubiquitous with women in patriarchal societies throughout history and is especially present in fashion history.

¹¹ Steele, *The Corset*, 6-7.

¹² Steele, *The Corset*, 8.

¹³ Steele, *The Corset*, 12.

¹⁴ Steele, *The Corset*, 20.

¹⁵ Steele, *The Corset*, 19.

¹⁶ Steele, *The Corset*, 28.

¹⁷ Sukaina Hirji, "Oppressive Double Binds," *Ethics* 131, no. 4 (2021): 647, <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/713943>.

In the eighteenth century, working-class women began to wear stays as well, with reeds and wood being a less-expensive alternative to the common whalebone corsets.¹⁸ Critique of ‘artificial’ fashions—which included stays—arose later in the century, not necessarily for feminist reasons, but “on the grounds that they interfered with women’s maternal functions” and that deforming the natural body was seen as unattractive.¹⁹ It is important to note that this tension between maternal functions and conforming to body ideals has existed for thousands of years.

By the end of the century, Neoclassical styles of dress that were particularly popular among the French elite resulted in a transition from the waist to the breasts being highlighted through Empire waist dresses.²⁰ These dresses featured high waistlines atop long, columnar skirts that were inspired by gowns from antiquity and popularized by the French Empress Josephine in the early nineteenth century.²¹ This style of dress can be seen in her portrait entitled *The Empress Josephine* by Pierre-Paul Prud’hon from circa 1805. Interestingly, the columnar shape of these dresses mirrors the shapeless silhouette that became popular among flappers nearly one hundred years later in the 1920s. The popularization of Empire waist dresses led to the creation of a prototype of the bra which was influenced by ancient Roman bust-bodices (see page 11).²²

After a brief digression from stays around the 1800s, one would think that women would have abandoned the corset altogether, but it reappeared and became more popular than ever in the nineteenth century.²³ This is partly due to the rise of new commercial materials such as India rubber, which became available in 1830 and was soon used in corset production to increase

¹⁸ Steele, *The Corset*, 27.

¹⁹ Steele, *The Corset*, 29.

²⁰ Steele, *The Corset*, 30.

²¹ Charles Otto Ziesenis and Katell Le Bourhis, *The Age of Napoleon: Costume from Revolution to Empire, 1789-1815* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989): 94-5, <https://libmma.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15324coll10/id/12336>.

²² Steele, *The Corset*, 30.

²³ Steele, *The Corset*, 33.

flexibility.²⁴ Industrialization was also a large factor in increased corset wearing, as the Industrial Revolution led to an explosion of urbanization. With increasing autonomy in urban settings came the desire to emphasize one's appearance and to create a unique identity, thus paving the way for increased demand in clothing and corsetry.²⁵

By the mid-1800s, a large number of working-class women wore corsets as cheaper, mass-produced corsets became more widely available.²⁶ Steele notes that even enslaved women wore the undergarment: "in nineteenth century America, not only did free black women wear corsets, but so did some enslaved women, especially if they were young and worked in the household, not the fields."²⁷ This widespread use of the corset among the enslaved did not necessarily stem from males attempting to control the female body, but it often came from older women of the household enforcing corset wearing because "the cultural weight placed on propriety and respectability made it difficult for women to abandon the corset, even if they wanted to."²⁸ Corset wearing for enslaved women served as a marker of the household's status and respectability, therefore it was sometimes necessary for enslaved women to wear corsets.²⁹ After the Civil War, many Black women wore corsets in photographic portraits to display their modesty and newfound freedoms, therefore corsetry became a universal garment that crossed racial divides.³⁰ The corset became seen as a necessity as women of all classes began wearing them.

²⁴ Steele, *The Corset*, 43.

²⁵ Steele, *The Corset*, 47.

²⁶ Steele and Gau, "Corset," 166.

²⁷ Steele, *The Corset*, 49.

²⁸ Steele, *The Corset*, 51.

²⁹ Katherine Egnor Gruber, "Slave Clothing and Adornment in Virginia," *Encyclopedia Virginia*, Virginia Humanities, accessed March 31, 2022, <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/slave-clothing-and-adornment-in-virginia>.

³⁰ Barbara Orbach Natanson, "Portraits of Nineteenth Century African American Women Activists Newly Available Online," *Library of Congress*, March 29, 2017, <https://blogs.loc.gov/picturethis/2017/03/portraits-of-nineteenth-century-african-american-women-activists-newly-available-online/>.

The Victorian Era: The Height of Restriction

The Victorian era was named for the period that Queen Victoria ruled England from 1837 to 1901.³¹ Although this term mainly refers to England, historians often use this term to refer to the latter half of the nineteenth century in the United States due to the many cultural connections between the United States and England at the time.³² The Victorian era saw many shifts in women's silhouettes and body ideals and is synonymous with its extravagant fashions.

Women wore countless layers under their dresses at this time, the first of which consisted of a chemise and drawers. The corset was worn on top of the chemise, and on top of the corset were the corset cover and petticoats.³³ In 1855 the caged crinoline was introduced, which aided women in achieving the popular 1850s bell-shaped silhouette. The caged crinoline was often made of flexible steel and was nicknamed the "birdcage skirt" because it quite literally caged in the wearer.³⁴ As C. Willett Cunnington wrote in the 1930s, however, the crinoline was also a reflection of women being "determined to occupy a larger space in the world" through their clothing.³⁵ In addition to the corset, this undergarment heavily restricted a woman's freedom of movement. Furthermore, the cage crinoline proved to be a hazard as they were easily caught in carriage wheels and often accidentally caught on fire. The safety concerns as well as changing trends in silhouettes are likely twin factors in the cage crinoline's eventual downfall.

By the 1870s and 1880s, the cage crinoline was replaced by the bustle.³⁶ This undergarment consisted of pulled-back overskirts, pads, or artificial humps that emphasized a woman's backside and "proportionately lessened women's small waists, produced by

³¹ Daniel James Cole and Nancy Deihl, *The History of Modern Fashion*. (London: 2015), 14.

³² Daniel Walker Howe, "American Victorianism as a Culture," *American Quarterly* 27, no. 5 (1975): 507-8, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2712438>.

³³ Cole and Deihl, *The History of Modern Fashion*, 24.

³⁴ Cole and Deihl, *The History of Modern Fashion*, 25.

³⁵ Qtd. in Cole and Deihl, *The History of Modern Fashion*, 25.

³⁶ Cole and Deihl, *The History of Modern Fashion*, 29.

corseting.”³⁷ As the caged crinoline was abandoned, the body—which was previously hidden under a multitude of layers—became more visible, thus leading to a turning point for corsets in the 1870s and they became more rigid and served to actively redefine a woman’s curves instead of simply enhance them.³⁸ It is in this era that women and men had two very distinct roles in society, therefore silhouettes were highly exaggerated to emphasize these separate and distinct gender roles.

The advent of industrialization and increased urbanization in conjunction with strict Victorian rules surrounding gender roles and modesty led to an increase in artifice that is no better exemplified by the practice of tight-lacing. As the term implies, tight-lacing refers to the act of women tightly lacing their corsets to achieve an extremely small waist. Most nineteenth-century sources suggest that women were motivated to tight-lace for vanity and pride in one’s appearance.³⁹ It was also seen as a sexualized practice with extremely small waists being eroticized.⁴⁰

When metal eyelets replaced cloth eyelets in the late 1820s, women were able to lace themselves—or be laced by their servants—into their corsets tighter than ever before.⁴¹ The practice was ill-defined because there was no exact waist size that women were striving to achieve. However, evidence suggests that most young women did not allow their waists to go beyond twenty-four inches, with some even tight-lacing under twenty inches.⁴² Furthermore, tight-lacing contributed to a wide range of medical issues; in 1868 *The Lancet* stated that “tight-lacing seriously limits, indeed almost annihilates, the respiratory movements of the

³⁷ H. Kristina Haugland, “Bustle,” in *The Berg Companion to Fashion*, ed. Valerie Steele (Oxford: 2010), 106.

³⁸ Aurore Bayle-Loudet, “The Corset, Essential Protagonist of Modern Femininity,” in *Fashioning the Body: An Intimate History of the Silhouette*, ed. Denis Bruna (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 164.

³⁹ Steele, *The Corset*, 105.

⁴⁰ Steele, *The Corset*, 90.

⁴¹ Bayle-Loudet, “The Corset, Essential Protagonist of Modern Femininity,” 170.

⁴² Steele, *The Corset*, 88.

diaphragm.”⁴³ Corsets pushed the ribs in and up which moved the internal organs over time, thus creating a multitude of medical concerns that were further induced by tight-lacing. Is for this reason that women who practiced tight-lacing were perceived as immoral and of poor taste.⁴⁴

Tight-lacing was regarded as torturous, harmful, immodest, and even criminal; paradoxically, tight-lacing was also synonymous with eroticism. This is an example of the two-fold nature of corsetry and women’s continuous struggle with the double bind, reflecting how the garment played a crucial role in shaping societal perceptions about women. Steele states that “‘tight-lacing’ was so ill-defined and the practice apparently so ubiquitous that it seemed to prove all women’s mental – and moral – inferiority. Tight-lacing came to stand for everything that was wrong about a woman.”⁴⁵

Corsets were sometimes so tightly laced that the wearer’s torso became extremely small, as seen in this corset from circa 1866 that has a waist measuring only eighteen inches (Figure 2).⁴⁶ This was the smallest corset displayed in an exhibition curated by Valerie Steele and Fred Dennis at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York, with most other corset waist sizes being between twenty and twenty-three inches. The wearer of this corset likely achieved her unnaturally small waist through the practice of tight-lacing. The idealized hourglass torso of this time is highly dramatized by this corset, as the ratio of the hip measurement to the waist measurement is twenty-five to eighteen inches. The wearer’s curves would have been further emphasized by the heavy boning on this corset that extends through the bust and down to the hips. Furthermore, the inclusion of lace and ribbon at the top of the corset reflects how corsets were designed to be erotically alluring and decorative. The paradox of the corset being a tool for

⁴³ Qtd. in Steele, *The Corset*, 69.

⁴⁴ Steele, *The Corset*, 87.

⁴⁵ Steele, *The Corset*, 111.

⁴⁶ Steele, *The Corset*, 101.

female modesty as well as sexual allure is apparent through this garment. The high idealization of the body made possible by the heavy boning and tight-lacing would have given the wearer modesty as she would have been deemed attractive for her hourglass shape, meanwhile the erotic nature of this corset as seen in the embellishments and ultra-small waist would have given her sexual appeal. The wearer might have even been regarded as overly promiscuous because of the negative connotations that tight-lacing had. On the other hand, the wearer may have wanted to tight-lace her corset to feel more confident in her body. This reflects the two-fold nature of eroticism as both objectifying women's bodies and allowing them to express themselves. The wearer of this tight-laced corset would have had to navigate the double bind, as she would have been seen as both respectable and sexualized because of her corset. This corset is exemplary of how a garment can greatly shape societal views of women.

Although Steele suggests that women had some agency in their wearing of corsets for nearly four centuries, I disagree with her in that I believe women are not only to blame for the long history of corsetry. Of course, corsets would not exist had women not agreed to wear them and therefore women do play a role in the popularity and demand of the garment, but society at large is the main culprit. Society's standards of modesty—especially in the Victorian era—strictly policed women and this percolated to every aspect of their lives including their dress. Men also played a large role in this thinking, as they prohibited women to be on the same level as them on the social hierarchy. In a highly patriarchal society, women did not have room to move up the social ladder to become equal to men. Corsetry acted as a device to further hold women back from attaining power in society. Furthermore, the double bind of the corset being a symbol of modesty and respectability while also being associated with sexuality and eroticism reflects the double bind that women have faced regarding their fashions throughout history;

women were seen as both modest, self-effacing creatures and objects of sexual desire, sometimes even being criticized for their overt sexuality if they practiced tight-lacing.

Corsetry in the Victorian era reflects the societal perception of women as less-than and the Victorian era's rigid beliefs about how a woman should act, thus creating immense pressures for women to behave in ways that would likely be criticized no matter what actions they took to appear modest. Although women had agency in their choice to wear corsets, their perceptions of corsetry were shaped by the misogynistic views of women that existed for centuries. Therefore, in wearing a corset, women had to navigate a maze of double binds to be respected, and even then, she might still be objectified. A women's agency in her corset wearing existed within the restraints of societal forces, thus perpetuating double binds. Corsetry is reflective of how fashion is a device used by society to alter perceptions of women.

The Turn of the Century: The Freedom Contradiction

The dress reform movement that existed throughout the majority of the nineteenth century challenged the ideas of what makes a woman attractive, which in turn led to a rapid evolution of female body ideals at the turn of the twentieth century. Dress reformers favored “hygienic” dress which included shorter skirts, lower heels, and “healthy” corsetry.⁴⁷ Steele explains that “reformers insisted that ‘The Unnatural Can Never Be Beautiful.’ But they also reluctantly admitted that ‘Deformity has through long custom become to us beauty.’”⁴⁸ Dress reform contributed to the double bind of corsetry at the turn of the twentieth century by reshaping what it meant to be beautiful and healthy.

Body ideals shifted greatly from the once fashionable hourglass silhouette to the S curve shape that prevailed at the beginning of the twentieth century. This shift was in part caused by dress reformers and their desire to create more hygienic and healthy dress codes. The straight-front corset was popular from 1900 to 1908, and as the name suggests, it featured a rigid, straight busk that threw the hips back and the chest forward.⁴⁹ This style is also commonly referred to as the S curve corset. With increased interest in health and hygiene in the early twentieth century brought about by the ideas of dress reformers, S curve corsets were promoted as “healthier” than previous corsets because they reduced waist pressure. In reality, the posture this style created was unnatural and therefore unhealthier.⁵⁰ This example of an S curve corset from between 1904 and 1906 (Figure 3) features lacing in the front as opposed to the back which made it possible for the wearer to dress herself, thus reflecting the possibility for women of all classes and

⁴⁷ Steele, *The Corset*, 62.

⁴⁸ Steele, *The Corset*, 53.

⁴⁹ Steele, *The Corset*, 144.

⁵⁰ Cole and Deihl, *The History of Modern Fashion*, 85.

backgrounds to wear this style of corset. However, this style provided less bust support, therefore many women turned to wearing proto-brassieres in addition to the corset.⁵¹

The decline of the S curve corset can be attributed to many different events including lingering criticisms about corsetry brought about by dress reformers, the fact that women now needed multiple undergarments to feel supported, and the unnatural posture that the S curve corset created. Furthermore, by the turn of the century, it became increasingly acceptable for women to partake in sports and physical activity, therefore the need for corsets slowly began to fade.⁵² This caused a panic among corset manufacturers, as they attempted to advertise the benefits of corsets to keep their businesses intact. Many manufacturers even used scare tactics to frighten women into buying corsets.

Articles relating to what Fields deems as “the corset panic” cropped up at this time, many of which were backed up with “evidence” of the corset’s significance in medicine, politics, and society.⁵³ An example of this is a quote by physician Havelock Ellis from 1910: “woman might be physiologically truer to herself if she went always on all fours. It is because the fall of the viscera in woman when she imitated man by standing erect included such profound physiological displacements...that the corset is morphologically essential.”⁵⁴ Women were made to believe that they were inherently flawed, thus they needed corsets to correct the body. Fields states that “corset manufacturers’ panic about losing control over the female market would be eased by invoking, and thus reinforcing, broader structures of control.”⁵⁵ The corset panic led to an

⁵¹ Steele, *The Corset*, 145.

⁵² Jill Fields. “‘Fighting the Corsetless Evil’: Shaping Corsets and Culture, 1900-1930,” *Journal of Social History* 33, no. 2 (1999): 358, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3789627>.

⁵³ Fields, “Fighting the Corsetless Evil,” 364.

⁵⁴ Qtd. in Fields, “Fighting the Corsetless Evil,” 358.

⁵⁵ Fields, “Fighting the Corsetless Evil,” 364.

increased level of control over women's bodies which is a contributing factor to the eventual downfall of the corset.

By the 1910s, corsets became longer, extending below the hips and to the top of the thighs to conform to the slim dress styles that were popular.⁵⁶ The body ideal of a less constricted waist and slim hips led to the rise of the girdle, which was a corset that only extended from the waist to the top of the thighs. As women were increasingly permitted to partake in physical activity, they desired greater freedom of movement and comfort. Contradictorily, this resulted in a desire for undergarments that created a "natural" and "uncorseted" effect through an elasticized girdle and brassiere combination.⁵⁷ In 1914 the tango dance became popular, and women began abandoning their restrictive corsets at parties to dance.⁵⁸ The "tango corset" became widely available at this time and was made of flexible and elastic material to allow for greater movement.⁵⁹

Until about 1919 corsets still contained some type of boning, not made of whalebone but typically of rubber-coated steel.⁶⁰ It is often thought that the First World War directly led to the end of corsetry as the metal in corsets was likely relinquished to contribute to the war efforts.⁶¹ However, it is important to note that the shortage of steel did not directly lead to the advent of rubberized girdles, and shorter hemlines do not directly relate to fabric shortage.⁶² Steele claims that "the war did not have a profound impact on fashion: the carnage of the war years further loosened the grip of Victorian propriety, and as men went off to the front, many to never return,

⁵⁶ Fields, "Fighting the Corsetless Evil," 357.

⁵⁷ Steele, *The Corset*, 148.

⁵⁸ Fields, "Fighting the Corsetless Evil," 359.

⁵⁹ Steele, *The Corset*, 148.

⁶⁰ Steele, *The Corset*, 148.

⁶¹ Steele, *The Corset*, 151.

⁶² Steele, *The Corset*, 151.

women assumed more responsibilities.”⁶³ Thus, the notion that the rationing of fabrics to assist with the war efforts led to the fall of the corset is not entirely true; the decline of corsetry at the end of the war is largely connected to women gaining more responsibilities as their husbands went off to war. Women now assumed the responsibilities of being a single parent to their children, therefore they required clothing that was simpler and more practical to aid their many daily tasks.

When World War I ended in 1918, the corset drastically evolved. The years leading up to women’s suffrage in 1920 saw an increase in women fighting not only for their voice to vote, but for access to birth control, the ability to partake in leisure activities, and more agency in society overall. The corset was thus “a conveyor of social meaning” representing antiquated views of women’s restriction and patriarchal control.⁶⁴ Steele states that “postwar fashion was also positively interpreted as an aspect of women’s struggle for social and political power.”⁶⁵ The shift in the corset to a minimized version of the garment by the 1920s reflects women’s new liberations and their fight to overcome the previous control that society held them to.

⁶³ Steele, *The Corset*, 151.

⁶⁴ Fields, “Fighting the Corsetless Evil,” 356.

⁶⁵ Steele, *The Corset*, 152.

The 1920s: The Abandonment of the Corset

By the 1920s, traditional boned corsets were almost completely abandoned and evolved into the wearing of other foundational garments such as corselets, girdles, and brassieres.⁶⁶ Fashion designer Paul Poiret is often credited with ousting the corset. In his 1931 biography, he stated that “it was still the age of the corset, I waged war upon it...It was...in the name of Liberty that I proclaimed the fall of the corset and the adoption of the brassiere which, since then, has won the day. Yes, I freed the bust.”⁶⁷ However, it is essential to note that a man is crediting himself with “freeing” a woman’s body rather than women freeing themselves through wearing less restrictive undergarments. It was women themselves who played key roles in renouncing the corset and opting for more flexible and comfortable undergarments which aligned with their new freedoms following women’s suffrage.

To generate the slimness that would have been achieved through a corset, women were advised to partake in physical activity. The fashions of the 1920s emphasized the ideal of a boyish and androgynous shape which was further achieved by wearing hip-slimming girdles and chest-flattening brassieres. The clothing and undergarments of the era created a straight silhouette, but women’s bodies themselves were expected to have a “rounded slenderness” that would have been achieved through physical activity.⁶⁸ This again relates to the double bind of women’s bodies, as women were expected to have a simultaneously androgynous and feminine figure.

The shift from corsetry creating the fashionable hourglass shape of the nineteenth century to the popular straight silhouette of the 1920s is apparent in this girdle from circa 1920 (Figure

⁶⁶ Steele, *The Corset*, 152.

⁶⁷ Qtd. in Steele, *The Corset*, 147.

⁶⁸ Steele, *The Corset*, 154.

4). It is made of pink elastic and metallic brocade, and the light purple ribbon lacing on the front of the garment mimics the traditional lace-up closure of corsets. Design elements such as the use of pastel colors, floral patterned fabric, colored ribbons for lacing, and ribbon embellishment at the top of the waist reflect how this garment is meant to be both seen and unseen. It is at this time that undergarments became increasingly decorative, which is representative of women becoming more sexually liberated in the late 1910s and throughout the 1920s. This girdle was designed for the wearer to be able to put it on and remove it herself, which is reflective of women's growing societal freedoms because she did not need assistance to dress herself. This is also a reflection of an increase in the democratization of fashion as women from every class were able to partake in the latest trends. The elastic panels at the sides of the girdle and along the waistline would have allowed for greater freedom of movement, making this garment ideal for the everyday woman. There is metal boning through the hips of the girdle which would have slimmed the wearer's hips into the ideal columnar body shape of the period. Ironically, the design of the girdle itself is highly feminine with its delicate details and colors, yet the structure of the girdle would have created a boyish figure. The metal clasps at the front of the garment along with the lacing down the middle would have allowed the wearer to further slim their hips through slight constriction. Lastly, the garters at the bottom of the garment make the piece more utilitarian; these would have been used to secure stockings to prevent them from rolling down throughout the day. Overall, this girdle is exemplary of the shift in body ideals from a curvaceous, feminine figure to an androgynous, straight form. This girdle also illustrates women's increased desire for comfort, less restriction, more utility, and greater freedom of movement in their undergarments which directly coincides with an increase in women's liberation.

Another example of how the corset evolved according to the new body ideal of the 1920s is exemplified in this undergarment from circa 1925 (Figure 5). This is a multi-purpose and revolutionary foundational garment that contains lingering elements of traditional corsets. The piece is known as a corselet, which can be loosely defined as a one-piece foundational garment consisting of a brassiere attached to a girdle. This corselet is made primarily of beige silk which gives the piece a feminine, luxurious feel and is meant to match a white woman's skin tone to be invisible under her clothes. The lace covering the bust also provides a delicate sense of femininity. The boning on the corset is made of bone, reflecting how this material was not completely abandoned for use in undergarments by the 1920s. Interestingly, some of the boning seems to also function as a decorative element with its crisp, diagonal lines, creating an Art Deco-style pattern that would have been seen as highly fashionable for the period. The V-shaped elastic panels on the sides of the corselet provide flexibility and comfort for the wearer. Although made of rigid bone, the elastic would have allowed for some movement. Another element that is unlike traditional corsets is the shoulder straps which would have eliminated the wearer's need to adjust the garment throughout the day, as these straps add an extra sense of security and comfort. Similar to the girdle in Figure 4, this corselet features garters to hold stockings, which further adds to the piece's multifunctionality. Also similar to the girdle, this corselet would have smoothed the wearer's hips to create the popular androgynous figure. Lastly, the brassiere would have functioned to support and flatten the chest and create a streamlined body shape. The lingering elements of traditional corsetry such as the use of bone and silk in the lower portion of the piece reflect the impact that corsets still had on undergarments by the 1920s. However, this corselet is exemplary of how corsets were modified to create a new idealized body shape that

aligned with women's new freedoms in the 1920s. This garment allowed for greater comfort and freedom and was far less restrictive than the corsetry of decades past.

The abandonment of corsetry by the 1920s was generated by a multitude of factors, including dress reform concepts of health and hygiene, an increase in women partaking in physical activity, increased desire for flexibility and movement in undergarments, increased women's independence following women's suffrage and World War I, and body ideals shifting from a curvaceous, feminine figure to a slender, boyish frame. All these factors contributed to the corset eventually evolving into the popular girdle-brassiere combination of the corselet by the 1920s. Ultimately, it was women themselves who retired the corset; they are responsible for shifting the body ideal from ultra-feminine to boyish after being inspired by their new freedoms in society. The shift in body ideals in turn led to the desire to relinquish the corset and instead wear undergarments that flattened the body.

The corset signifies a four-hundred-year history of the restriction of women through clothing and serves as a symbol of how clothing can shape society's perceptions about gender roles through the physical constraint of bodies to maintain strict gender divisions. The corset was a catalyst for social change as well as a marker of women's liberation, as the abandonment of the corset is a metaphor for women throwing off the shackles of patriarchal society and stepping into a new era of liberation.

Part I Illustrations

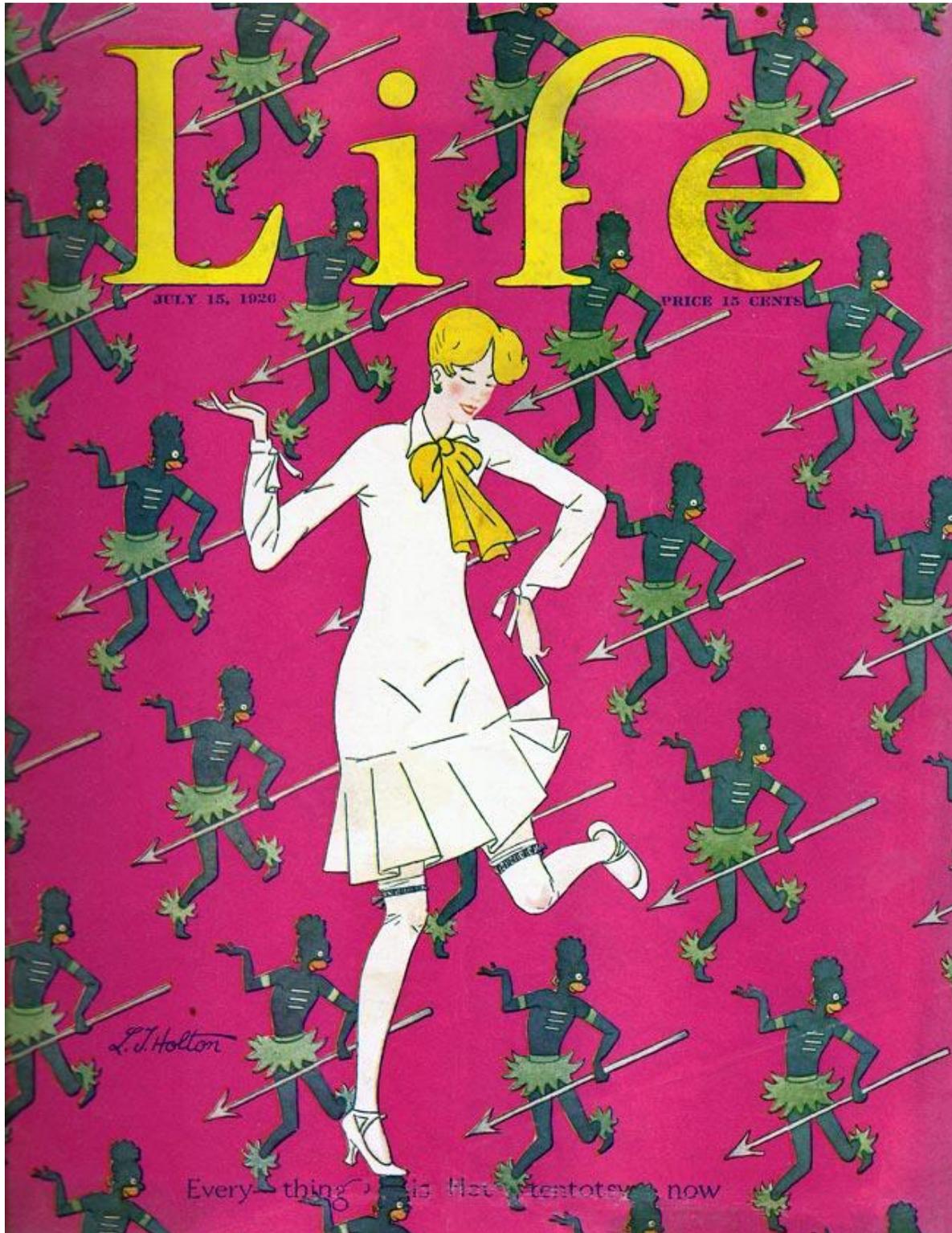


Figure 1. *Life* magazine cover by L. J. Holton. *Everything is Hot-Tentotsy Now*, July 15, 1926, in *Life* magazine, <https://archive.org/details/Life19260715>.



Figure 2. Tight-laced corset. *Corset*, ca. 1866, 32 x 18 x 25 in. New York, The Museum of the City of New York. Photograph by Irving Solero. Courtesy of The Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology, New York. In *The Corset: A Cultural History* by Valerie Steele, p. 101.



(Front)

(Side)

Figure 3. S curve corset. Bon Marché, *Corset*, 1904-6, French, cotton, metal, elastic, bone, and silk. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2009.300.3123a-e, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/158025>.



Figure 4. Strouse, Adler Co., *Girdle*, ca. 1920, American, pink rayon silk, pink elastic, light purple velvet ribbon, metal, gold metallic brocade, light purple and blue ribbon. New York, The Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology, 85.80.24, <https://fashionmuseum.fitnyc.edu/objects/2784/858024?ctx=16edaa7f-2c79-4efa-951a-591edb8b82c8&idx=1>.



(Front)

(Side)

Figure 5. *Corselet*, ca. 1925, French, silk, elastic, and bone. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2009.300.2891a–g, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/157766>.

Part II: The Flapper Revolution

Introduction: The New Ideal

There is no better symbol of the Roaring Twenties than the infamous flapper. Flappers—also known as *garçonnnes* or the feminized word for “boys” in French—were young women who wore daring fashions and represented women’s growing interest in freedom and liberation.⁶⁹ They rejected the matronly styles of decades past and instead chose to wear less feminine and more revealing clothing, thus creating a wave of youth culture. As Cole and Deihl state, “their behavior could be read as a reaction to the seriousness of the suffragettes: with the vote obtained, these young women set their signs on their next demand – sexual liberation.”⁷⁰ The flapper revolutionized the fashion world, which in turn transformed the way society perceived women as they increasingly grew more independent over the course of the 1920s. Fashion was a tool that flappers used to exercise their agency within the bounds of the patriarchal American society in which they lived. Through their lifestyles and clothing, flappers are indicative of how fashion serves as a vehicle for social change that can reshape societal attitudes.

⁶⁹ Cole and Nancy Deihl, *The History of Modern Fashion*, 135.

⁷⁰ Cole and Deihl, *The History of Modern Fashion*, 135.

The Making of a Fashion Icon

The term “*garçonnes*” originates from the controversial 1922 novel by Victor Margueritte entitled *La Garçonne* in which the protagonist wore a bobbed hairstyle, masculine clothes, and was sexually liberated.⁷¹ *Garçonnes* soon became synonymous with a lean and androgynous silhouette for women, but some Americans were uncomfortable with the term, therefore manufacturers began labeling their clothing simply as “boyish.” Flappers soon became known as the American version of the *garçonne*.⁷² The term “flapper” itself originates from England and refers to a young girl in her awkward, mid-teen years.⁷³ Yellis explains how “the awkwardness was meant literally, and a girl who flapped had not yet reached mature, dignified woman-hood.”⁷⁴ The term also refers to the adolescent body type that was the standard of beauty at the time. Flappers came to reflect the carefree, rebellious attitudes of women in the 1920s that directly aligns with their new freedoms in society.

Imagery of the youthful, carefree flapper can be contrasted with the style icon at the turn of the century, the Gibson Girl. The Gibson Girl archetype was popularized by drawings, as Charles Dana Gibson’s illustrations from the 1890s provided a visual reminder of how society believed a woman should dress and act for years to come.⁷⁵ As seen in this illustration by Gibson (Figure 6), the Gibson Girl wore long dresses, S curve corsets, fanciful hats, had long hair that was styled in intricate updos, and were modestly dressed overall. By contrast, the flapper was the antithesis of the Gibson Girl—she rejected every societal expectation from the previous years and revolutionized how women are perceived by society. Yellis states that “while the Gibson girl

⁷¹ Cole and Deihl, *The History of Modern Fashion*, 136.

⁷² Cole and Deihl, *The History of Modern Fashion*, 136.

⁷³ Kenneth A. Yellis, “Prosperity’s Child: Some Thoughts on the Flapper,” *American Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (1969): 49, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2710772>.

⁷⁴ Yellis, “Prosperity’s Child,” 49.

⁷⁵ Yellis, “Prosperity’s Child,” 44.

seems incapable of an immodest thought or deed, the flapper strikes us as brazen and at least capable of sin if not actually guilty of it. She refused to recognize the traditional moral code of American civilization, while the Gibson girl had been its guardian.”⁷⁶ The flapper rejected the matronly, S-curved Gibson Girl and turned to a new, freer form of dress. The juxtaposition between the Gibson Girl and the flapper mirrors the major societal changes for women between the turn of the century and the 1920s.

Similar to Charles Dana Gibson’s drawings, American cartoonist John Held Jr.’s illustrations gave rise to the imagery of the infamous flapper, exemplifying how a single image can define an era.⁷⁷ Held’s illustration featured on the cover of *Life* magazine from April 28th, 1927 (Figure 7) depicts a young woman in typical flapper attire, wearing a knee-length, handkerchief hem dress, a cloche hat, layered jewelry, and stockings rolled to the knees. Handkerchief hem styles were especially popular by mid-decade and hemlines were often knee-length at this time.⁷⁸ The cloche was a tight, bell-shaped hat that was the most popular hat style of the decade, serving to highlight the wearer’s fashionable bobbed hairstyle.⁷⁹ This hairstyle would have been seen as particularly revolutionary for the period as it was the first time for centuries that women rejected the feminine, long hairstyles of the past and embraced short hair, thus symbolizing the new freedoms that they had gained after women’s suffrage.⁸⁰ As for the flapper’s jewelry, layers of long necklaces were popular as they elongated the silhouette.⁸¹ Layers of bangle bracelets were typical as well for accessorizing party dresses. With the rise of the hemline throughout the decade, the most daring flappers rolled their stockings to their knees,

⁷⁶ Yellis, “Prosperity’s Child,” 44-5.

⁷⁷ Yellis, “Prosperity’s Child,” 44.

⁷⁸ Cole and Deihl, *The History of Modern Fashion*, 140.

⁷⁹ Cole and Deihl, *The History of Modern Fashion*, 141.

⁸⁰ Yellis, “Prosperity’s Child,” 48.

⁸¹ Cole and Deihl, *The History of Modern Fashion*, 142.

displaying their newfound sexual liberation.⁸² In this illustration, Held portrays the flapper as fun-loving and vivacious. Paradoxically, the flapper here is also portrayed as unintelligent and foolish—the quote at the bottom of the image which reads “she missed the boat” refers to the act of smashing a champagne bottle on a ship for good luck before it sets sail, yet the flapper in this cartoon misses the boat and instead smashes the bottle on the man’s head. This reflects how despite women becoming increasingly liberated, society still viewed them as naïve. This illustration is exemplary of how Held largely helped create the archetypal flapper image that was widely circulated throughout American society via magazine covers.⁸³ The shift from the maternal Gibson Girl to Held’s spirited flapper reflects the greater societal changes that affected perceptions of women and the fashions that were catalysts for these changes.

⁸² Yellis, “Prosperity’s Child,” 49.

⁸³ Cole and Deihl, *The History of Modern Fashion*, 136.

Historical Influences of the Flapper

The stark contrast between the Gibson Girl and the flapper is reflective of the major shift that women experienced in their personal lifestyles from 1890 to 1920. In the late nineteenth century and at the turn of the twentieth century, it became increasingly acceptable for women to partake in sports and physical activity.⁸⁴ It is at this time that society experienced a “leisure revolution” in which physical activity became seen as a pleasurable pastime rather than a laborious chore.⁸⁵ This change greatly affected fashion because by the 1920s, sportswear became acceptable daywear in women’s wardrobes.⁸⁶ As Riello states, the rise in popularity of sports greatly influenced fashion: “sport is surely the factor that has most informed fashion since the second half of the nineteenth century. Without sport we would not be able to understand the rise of casualwear, the everyday choices of millions of consumers, and the emergence of youth culture in fashion.”⁸⁷ The acceptance of women partaking in physical activity therefore transformed the fashion world in the decades leading up to the 1920s, and this trend continued throughout the decade. Furthermore, the fact that women of all classes and racial backgrounds could participate in physical activity led to the beginning of the democratization of everyday fashion.

It is impossible to discuss the flapper without explaining the immense impact that women’s suffrage had on women and their clothing in this decade. When the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution was ratified in 1920, women were granted the legal right to vote.⁸⁸ This Amendment stated that “the right of citizens of the United States to

⁸⁴ Giorgio Riello, *Back in Fashion: Western Fashion from the Middle Ages to the Present* (New Haven: 2020), 144.

⁸⁵ Riello, *Back in Fashion*, 144.

⁸⁶ Karina Reddy, "1920-1929," Fashion History Timeline. Fashion Institute of Technology, last modified August 18, 2020, <https://fashionhistory.fitnyc.edu/1920-1929/>.

⁸⁷ Riello, *Back in Fashion*, 142.

⁸⁸ Reddy, "1920-1929."

vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.”⁸⁹

Therefore, it became unconstitutional for ballots to be reserved for men.

Despite this, women still had to navigate a maze of laws regarding race, age, citizenship, mental competency, residency, and more to vote. A statistical study of the 1920 election from 1924 found that “women had not utilized the ballot to the same extent as men, nor had they voted predictably; however, [the authors of the study] suggested that women were politically handicapped—not by a psychological incapacity for politics, as some critics claimed, but only by lack of experience.”⁹⁰ The conclusion of this study is based on a bias that women are less mentally competent than men which reflects how society still did not view women as equal to men. However, the conclusion offers key insight into the fact that suffrage did not entirely end women’s fight for the vote.

One of the most difficult obstacles that women faced when voting was racism, even after the Fifteenth Amendment was passed which prohibited states from discriminating upon the basis of race to determine who can vote. Many Black men were unable to cast their votes due to the obligations of literacy tests and poll taxes, and many Black women faced the same barriers. In the fall of 1920 in Huntsville, Alabama, the African American newspaper *Voice of the People* stated that “practically the same rules of qualification to [women] as are applied to colored men” regarding voting qualifications.⁹¹ Many Black women were still able to navigate these restrictions and vote in the fall of 1920, but it is important to recognize that Black women—and many other women of marginalized groups—faced various obstacles that did not guarantee them

⁸⁹ Martha S. Jones, "For Black Women, the 19th Amendment Didn't End Their Fight to Vote," *National Geographic*, August 7, 2020, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/black-women-continued-fighting-for-vote-after-19th-amendment>.

⁹⁰ Estelle B. Freedman, “The New Woman: Changing Views of Women in the 1920s,” *The Journal of American History* 61, no. 2 (1974): 376. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1903954>.

⁹¹ Qtd. in Jones, “For Black Women, the 19th Amendment Didn't End Their Fight to Vote.”

the right to vote after the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified. Race still proved to be a harsh obstacle in the 1920s.

Although not completely sound in granting freedom to all women, women's suffrage marked the first step towards increased liberation for women which manifested in nearly every other aspect of women's daily lives. It is in the 1920s when "young women celebrated unprecedented rights, including suffrage, increased access to education, and more opportunities to work outside the home."⁹² For the first time, women were not expected to move from their father's house directly to their husband's house to start a family; it was now socially acceptable for them to be single, live alone, become college-educated, and have their own jobs. New freedoms for women in society required more freedom in their clothing, which is reflected in the simplicity, practicality, and casualness of clothing in the decade. Unlike the maternal, wifely ideal of the Gibson Girl, the new ideal woman—the flapper— "was self-sufficient, intelligent, capable and active. She possessed skills and had acquired needs unknown to her mother."⁹³ Women were able to generate their own income and participate in American consumer culture to a larger degree, thus impacting their ability to buy the latest fashions. Voting rights for women served as the foundation upon which new liberties for women were built. The flapper was the model for the new, liberated woman, and her fashions reflected emancipation in every way as restrictive corsets and long hemlines became impractical for the "fast living" working young women of the decade.⁹⁴

⁹² Summer Lee, "Roaring & Swinging: Shared Fashionable Ideals of Flappers and Mods," Fashion History Timeline, Fashion Institute of Technology, last modified June 2, 2020, <https://fashionhistory.fitnyc.edu/roaring-swinging-flappers-and-mods/>.

⁹³ Yellis, "Prosperity's Child," 51.

⁹⁴ Lee, "Roaring & Swinging."

Another significant event that generated a great cultural impact on America was Prohibition, or the ratification of the Eighteenth Amendment which legally prevented the manufacturing, transporting, selling, and importing of “intoxicating liquors.”⁹⁵ This term was loosely defined until the Volstead Act categorized an intoxicating beverage as any drink containing over 0.5% of alcohol.⁹⁶ Prohibition officially went into effect on January 16th, 1920 and led to a wave of bootlegging and criminal activity connected to the desire for alcohol consumption. Before Prohibition, saloons were the common place to drink, yet they only catered to men.⁹⁷ Thousands of saloons were forced to shut down once the Eighteenth Amendment was ratified, and soon “speakeasies,” or hidden, unlicensed bars, began appearing across America as a way for people to continue to consume alcohol despite the laws preventing it. Speakeasies were named for the way guests whispered the password to gain entry to the bar to prevent law enforcement from hearing. The rise of the speakeasy coincided with women entering the workforce alongside men as they “were now competing with men in the business world to an unprecedented degree. Moreover, whereas the saloon had been a male preserve, women now drank with men in speakeasies.”⁹⁸ For the first time, it became socially acceptable for women to drink with men in a bar setting, therefore the era of gender-segregated social activity and partying drew to a close.

Liquor became a luxury item and a status symbol that in turn affected the moralities of 1920s society as members of the middle and upper classes—including women—began

⁹⁵ J. C. Burnham, “New Perspectives on the Prohibition ‘Experiment’ of the 1920’s,” *Journal of Social History* 2, no. 1 (1968): 55, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3786620>.

⁹⁶ “The Senate Overrides the President’s Veto of the Volstead Act,” United States Senate, accessed November 21, 2021, https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/minute/Volstead_Act.htm.

⁹⁷ “The Speakeasies of the 1920s,” Prohibition an Interactive History, The Mob Museum, accessed November 21, 2021, <https://prohibition.themobmuseum.org/the-history/the-prohibition-underworld/the-speakeasies-of-the-1920s/>.

⁹⁸ Yellis, “Prosperity’s Child,” 46.

consuming an increased amount of alcohol in their leisure time.⁹⁹ As Burnham states, “this utilization of drinking as conspicuous consumption was accompanied by the so-called revolution in manners and morals that began among the rebellious intellectuals around 1912 and reached a high point of popularization in the 1920’s.”¹⁰⁰ Prohibition—which in turn led to the creation of the speakeasy—influenced a culture of carefree, joyous social activity that loosened the morals of both women and men of all classes.

Flapper fashions were greatly influenced by the rise of the speakeasy, as women’s eveningwear became more party-friendly for dancing with increased embellishment, comfort, and revealing details. Jazz music and dance that originated from Black communities in the American South were especially influential to flapper eveningwear because dresses that allowed for freedom of movement were required for dancing in speakeasies and jazz clubs. Thus, the Black community can be largely credited with the emergence of the infamous flapper dress due to their creation of jazz. This topic will be explored at length in the next section of this thesis. Prohibition and the party culture that came along with it set the stage for the rest of the 1920s in which women and men shared spaces of social activity, blurring the lines of patriarchal standards and racial divides.

⁹⁹ Burnham, “New Perspectives,” 63.

¹⁰⁰ Burnham, “New Perspectives,” 63.

Finding Freedom through Dress: A Closer Look at Flapper Fashions

As aforementioned, the ideal body type of the flapper in the 1920s was boyish and androgynous. This ideal was influenced by women's increased liberation in society and their desire to break away from the restrictions of decades past to create a new type of woman. The fashions of this time reflected this ideal, as columnar, drop-waist, tubular dresses with shorter hemlines became popular. Flapper fashions were a far reach from the curve-enhancing, hip-hugging fashions of the previous decades; the focus on a woman's torso made possible by corsetry to create extremely small waists shifted to a focus on a woman's lean, slim limbs through revealing clothing.¹⁰¹ This shift was also caused by the wider factors of an increased emphasis on women's physical activity and advancements in technology such as the mass-production of clothing and new materials such as rayon and artificial silk which allowed for new casual styles to flourish.¹⁰² Furthermore, the advent of the automobile and heated homes led to less necessity for clothing for physical protection from the elements.¹⁰³ The emphasis on physical activity and new technologies led to a democratization of fashion in which women of all classes, races, and backgrounds had access to the latest styles.¹⁰⁴

Flapper fashion existed in both day and eveningwear and took inspiration from menswear to create the *garçonne* look.¹⁰⁵ As women became increasingly liberated in society, they wished to become closer to men as equals and therefore adopted menswear styles in their dress. By 1925, the boyish silhouette reigned as the supreme fashion ideal.¹⁰⁶ "Chemise" styles of dress became popular and were characterized by calf-length, shapeless garments with loose belts

¹⁰¹ Yellis, "Prosperity's Child," 49.

¹⁰² Cole and Deihl, *The History of Modern Fashion*, 142-3.

¹⁰³ Yellis, "Prosperity's Child," 50.

¹⁰⁴ Reddy, "1920-1929."

¹⁰⁵ Cole and Deihl, *The History of Modern Fashion*, 137.

¹⁰⁶ Cole and Deihl, *The History of Modern Fashion*, 136.

situated at or below the hips. Hemlines slowly rose throughout the decade, with dresses being ankle-length in 1922 to rising just below the knee by 1926. In fact, flappers often wore their stockings rolled down below their knees.¹⁰⁷ This was seen as extremely scandalous for the time as women were not allowed to reveal their legs—let alone their knees—in public for centuries, again reflecting women’s newfound sexual and social liberations. By the end of the decade, hemlines had again fallen to below the knee or longer, sometimes with the hem being shorter in the front and longer in the back or with strips of fabric theatrically draped to trail behind the wearer.¹⁰⁸ The handkerchief hemline was also a popular trend that prevailed by the middle of the decade and was desired for its sense of movement.

Fabrics of the decade often featured geometric patterns, flattened or stylized florals, metallic threads, and Art Deco motifs.¹⁰⁹ Art Deco was a popular design movement that greatly influenced textile design because historically, art and fashion go hand-in-hand. The movement was named after the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes in Paris in 1925 when a group of artists and fashion designers displayed their revolutionary works, greatly influencing the art and fashion worlds with their designs.¹¹⁰ The style derived from a wide range of sources including Cubism and the ancient Near East to create a sleek, modern, and minimalist aesthetic with geometric shapes and streamlined motifs.¹¹¹ Art Deco’s elegant shapes and modernism mirrored the lean flapper body ideal, as exemplified by the figures of starlets such as Josephine Baker. Furthermore, the works of Black artists of the Harlem Renaissance

¹⁰⁷ Yellis, “Prosperity’s Child,” 49.

¹⁰⁸ Cole and Deihl, *The History of Modern Fashion*, 140.

¹⁰⁹ Cole and Deihl, *The History of Modern Fashion*, 143.

¹¹⁰ Reddy, “1920-1929.”

¹¹¹ Cole and Deihl, *The History of Modern Fashion*, 131.

such as Aaron Douglas and Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller inspired art and fashion with their modern, geometric approaches that were similar to Art Deco styles.¹¹²

The Art Deco motifs which were common in flapper fashions are exemplified in this American evening dress from 1924 made of canary yellow silk and rhinestones (Figure 8). This dress would have been worn by someone of the upper-middle or upper class, as it utilized beaded silk which would have been less affordable to the lower and middle classes. Extant garments within prestigious institution collections such as The Metropolitan Museum of Art were likely donated by wealthy white women, yet these are some of the only examples of well-preserved extant garments from the decade, therefore they will be one of the main visual sources for this thesis. Furthermore, the fashions worn by upper-class women were often inspired by trends originating from other communities that produced popular art forms at the time—mainly the Black American community and their contributions to music and dance.

The silhouette of this canary yellow dress (Figure 8) is illustrative of the typical flapper evening dress with its columnar, shapeless silhouette that emphasized the boyish *garçonne* body ideal. The lack of sleeves on this garment is also exemplary of flapper dresses, as women often showcased their bare shoulders and arms in eveningwear as gloves were rarely worn.¹¹³ This too is reflective of women's new liberations and sexual freedoms. Also typical of eveningwear at this time were increasingly revealing necklines. The neckline of this dress would have been viewed as slightly revealing yet still tasteful as it draws attention to the *décolletage* but does not expose the bust. The vivid color of this dress would have highlighted the wearer's presence in a speakeasy or social setting, which further reflects the vivacious, lively nature of flapper dresses.

¹¹² Mary Schmidt Campbell, David Driskell, David Levering Lewis, and Deborah Willis Ryan, *Harlem Renaissance Art of Black America* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 29.

¹¹³ Cole and Deihl, *The History of Modern Fashion*, 140.

Furthermore, yellow is symbolic of joyfulness and optimism, which aligns with the hopefulness of the decade as industrialization, women's rights, and racial equality were coming to the forefront of America's focus. The beadwork on this dress is particularly notable; the flattened, floral design in the center of the textile and the Art Deco lines at the top and along the hem would have been seen as highly fashionable for the period. The crisp, radiating lines that extend from the waist to the shoulders and neckline further highlight the wearer's décolletage and revealing neckline to add a fashionable, Art Deco-inspired sleekness to the overall garment. The cut-out detail at the back of the dress adds an element of tasteful yet playful appeal, and the lines that the cut-out create echo the clean lines of the beadwork details. Overall, this dress allows for freedom of movement for the wearer with its loose-fitting silhouette, short hemline, and lack of sleeves while also remaining glamorous and on-trend with its vibrant color and sparkling embellishments.

Common eveningwear fabrics included velvet, crepe, and georgette in neutral or jewel tones. Continuing with their daring fashion choices, some flappers even wore dresses made of lamé or metallic fabrics trimmed with feathers, fringe, or tassels. By mid-decade, simple sheath dresses with decorations at the hips became the norm. Dresses were often made in response to popular dance trends, with freedom of movement and comfort being key desires. Popular music and dances often derived from the influences of Black American communities—especially within the genre of jazz—and Black art forms were highly influential to fashion trends of the decade. In 1923, the Charleston became a popular dance craze that required low-waisted dresses with full hemlines for flappers to kick up their feet.¹¹⁴ As hemlines rose, waistlines continued to

¹¹⁴ Reddy, "1920-1929."

drop since 1923 then rise again by 1928. The glamorous yet carefree nature of flapper clothing reflects the flapper's unapologetic emergence into society with full force.

Another garment that combines many key elements of the flapper style is this jade green evening dress from circa 1925 to 1926 (Figure 9). Again, this dress is an example of an extant garment in the collection of a prestigious institution, therefore it was most likely worn by an upper-class white woman. However, this dress is highly reflective of typical flapper fashions of the decade. It is made of silk chiffon and features lace decoration with faux pearl and diamond embroidery. Similar to the yellow dress (Figure 8), the vivid color of this ensemble would have made the wearer stand out in any social setting, thus reflecting the flapper's unapologetic exuberance. The dress is comprised of two parts—the first of which is a satin underslip with tan floral lace at the bust and around the back, a drop-waist trompe l'œil belt with a faux diamond clasp, and a chiffon skirt that features bead embellishments down the center and along the hem. The embroidery and beadwork are likely inspired by Art Deco designs with their sleek, minimalist lines and geometric motifs. The designs also reflect Egyptian influence which was popular in the 1920s; when King Tutankhamun's tomb was discovered in 1922, it sparked a fascination with Egypt in American culture known as "Egyptomania."¹¹⁵ The drop-waist of this slip allows for greater freedom of movement while contributing to the straight, lean silhouette that was fashionable. The lace detail—reminiscent of a lingerie slip—adds sensuality and femininity to the look. This dress would have been seen as very revealing with its low neckline, sheer panel exposing the back, and hem length which exposes the ankles and lower legs. The gathering below the drop-waist creates a slight fullness at the hem which would have made this garment ideal for dancing. The second component of this dress is the sheer vest with an

¹¹⁵ Karin J. Bohleke, "Mummies Are Called upon to Contribute to Fashion: Pre-Tutankhamun Egyptian Revivalism in Dress," *Dress* 40, no. 2 (2014): 94, <https://doi.org/10.1179/0361211214Z.00000000027>.

extremely low V-neckline and more faux pearl and diamond beadwork. This vest serves to cover the shoulders to add a bit more modesty to the overall ensemble, yet because the fabric is sheer, the vest also adds a playful element that slightly exposes the shoulders and décolletage while simultaneously covering them. The flirtatious, spirited aura captured in this ensemble is at the heart of flapper style; this garment combines many elements that were key to the flapper's overall image.

Like fashion, beauty trends give important insight into the society of a particular era. Another key factor of flapper style was their makeup and hair. The popular flapper hairstyle was known as the "Ponjola" bob, which was a short, cropped hairstyle originating from dancer Irene Castle in the mid-1910s. The Ponjola bob was considered radical at the end of WWI because for hundreds—and even thousands—of years prior, women's hair was often worn long to reflect their femininity.¹¹⁶ Marcel waves were a softer, more feminine alternative to the bob achieved with a curling iron.¹¹⁷ Another flapper hairstyle that came into fashion in 1926 was the Eton crop, which was ideal for highlighting stylish cloche hats and was popularized by Black stage performer and fashion icon Josephine Baker.¹¹⁸ Female starlets were greatly impactful in influencing beauty trends, one of the most influential being actress Clara Bow who popularized the "bee-stung" lips look.¹¹⁹ Other key flapper beauty regimens included thin, arched eyebrows, smoky, kohl-lined eyes, and the new cosmetic trend of colorful nail polish.¹²⁰

These revolutionary beauty trends were a tool that women used to assert their new liberations in society, as they were used to break away from the beauty standards of decades past

¹¹⁶ Yellis, "Prosperity's Child," 48.

¹¹⁷ Cole and Deihl, *The History of Modern Fashion*, 153.

¹¹⁸ Reddy, "1920-1929."

¹¹⁹ Yellis, "Prosperity's Child," 48.

¹²⁰ Cole and Deihl, *The History of Modern Fashion*, 153.

and forge a new path to female independence and freedom of expression. This directly relates to how women used revolutionary flapper fashions to forge their own paths in society and claim liberation.

The Moral Revolution and Flapper Controversy

The Literary Digest wrote articles throughout the 1920s in response to the immorality and immodesty brought forth by the flapper's challenging of societal standards.¹²¹ President Campbell of Sterling College in Kansas wrote in the *Digest* that "this [younger] generation is sex mad."¹²² After all, it was the first time in centuries that women were baring their legs in public, renouncing their corsets, and cropping their hair as the Victorian rules of morality were upended in this decade. In 1924, *The New York Times* argued that the flapper was "an entirely different specimen from anything ever known before in the history of the species female, normal or otherwise."¹²³ The flapper created a groundbreaking new archetype for women that were sexually liberated, carefree, and rebellious, which consequently led to a backlash from the media and society at large.

In her progressive article from 1974, Freedman explores the identity of this "new woman" in the 1920s and provides a somewhat intersectional view of feminist history, disputing former historians' critical conceptions of women after suffrage and discussing the issue of female discrimination based on race. She explains how critics of this "moral revolution" viewed women at the time as being "more concerned with clothing and sex than with politics. Women had by choice, the accounts suggested, rejected political emancipation and found sexual freedom."¹²⁴ This led to historians in the 1930s and 40s viewing the moral revolution that was propelled forward by the flapper as a threat to family life, whereas in the 1920s, shorter skirts and bobbed hairstyles were symbols of female emancipation and suffrage victories rather than

¹²¹ Yellis, "Prosperity's Child," 45.

¹²² Yellis, "Prosperity's Child," 46.

¹²³ Qtd. in Lee, "Roaring & Swinging."

¹²⁴ Freedman, "The New Woman," 379.

contributing to the decay of domesticity.¹²⁵ Freedman states that “the portrayal of the 1920s as a period of full equality, when in fact discrimination in education, hiring, salaries, promotions, and family responsibilities was abundant, has perpetuated a myth of equality, one which has helped undermine women's attainment of group consciousness.”¹²⁶ She suggests that historians in the years following the 1920s created a “myth of equality” to weaken female empowerment and in turn protect familial structures and patriarchal society.¹²⁷

Many historians and writers had a hidden agenda of emphasizing the positives of female emancipation in the 1920s: “by proclaiming emancipation a *fait accompli* and denying the existence of discrimination, they only helped to discourage further feminist efforts for deeper social change.”¹²⁸ Furthermore, historians often state that women were politically apathetic yet sexually active in the 1920s, which created a “sexual revolution” that further drove “sexually stereotyped historical roles for women” forward while reflecting historians’ inability to conceive women outside of domestic and sexual roles.¹²⁹ Therefore, to prevent society from becoming too loose in its morals, the moral revolution that the flapper created was suppressed in the media and academia in an effort to protect male dominance.

¹²⁵ Freedman, “The New Woman,” 382.

¹²⁶ Freedman, “The New Woman,” 393.

¹²⁷ Freedman, “The New Woman,” 393.

¹²⁸ Freedman, “The New Woman,” 378.

¹²⁹ Freedman, “The New Woman,” 393.

The Flapper in the Spotlight

The shift from silent films to the first “talkie” or film with audible dialogue, *The Jazz Singer* (1927), caused the film industry to boom to new heights in the 1920s.¹³⁰ Throughout the decade, nearly one hundred million Americans attended the movies every week, which amounts to roughly the entire US population at the time.¹³¹ Furthermore, American film studios provided 90% of the world’s total movies and by 1926, America was home to two-fifths of the world’s total movie theaters.¹³² In the same year, an anonymous author of Stuart and Company’s financial report wrote that “it does not seem extravagant to prophesy that the motion pictures will come to be regarded as almost as necessary to healthful living as the food which...people eat [and] the clothes they wear. The industry behind all this promises to be and will long continue [to be] one of the most serviceable to mankind.”¹³³ America’s film industry grew rapidly throughout the decade, greatly impacting society. In turn, new fashion trends that the everyday woman wore—especially flapper fashions—influenced costume and beauty trends in Hollywood.

Costume design for stage and film was a large source of inspiration for fashion trends of the twenties, with many designers creating both casual every daywear and extravagant costumes.¹³⁴ American designers such as Gilbert Adrian, Howard Greer, and Natacha Rambova designed for major film studios in Hollywood.¹³⁵ Erté, who was known for his showgirl costumes on Broadway and in Paris, also worked as a costume designer for MGM.¹³⁶ In 1925, *Picture Magazine* wrote that “styles are dictated in Hollywood and Paris designers follow

¹³⁰ Angela Dalle Vacche and Jennifer M. Bean, *American Cinema of the 1920s: Themes and Variations*, ed. Lucy Fischer (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 9, https://www.google.com/books/edition/American_Cinema_of_the_1920s/Ldy074fjkygC?hl=en&gbpv=0.

¹³¹ Vacche, *American Cinema of the 1920s*, 15.

¹³² Vacche, *American Cinema of the 1920s*, 15.

¹³³ Vacche, *American Cinema of the 1920s*, 15-6.

¹³⁴ Cole and Deihl, *The History of Modern Fashion*, 152-3.

¹³⁵ Cole and Deihl, *The History of Modern Fashion*, 152-3.

¹³⁶ Cole and Deihl, *The History of Modern Fashion*, 152-3.

them.”¹³⁷ The fashions on the silver screen that were viewed by millions of Americans were highly impactful on the fashions of the decade.

Movie stars—and especially the actresses who portrayed flappers—soon replaced royals as fashion inspirations in the 1920s.¹³⁸ Stars such as Colleen Moore, Louise Brooks, Josephine Baker, and Clara Bow became style icons.¹³⁹ When Clara Bow starred in the 1927 movie *It*, she became the quintessential flapper and the “It Girl,” a term that became a euphemism for sex appeal and style.¹⁴⁰ The portrayal of the flapper in film created a new on-screen archetype that generated strong box office revenues while also garnering much criticism from the press.

Films featuring flapper characters were often censored, directly aligning with the advent of the moral revolution and the conception that flappers possessed lower morals than the women of previous generations. This led to directors presenting the flapper using two strategies to avoid censorship: painting them as a social problem and providing a moral lesson by the end of the film, or making the flapper the subject of comedy in order to “retain the moral redemption angle in comedic form.”¹⁴¹ Ross explains how this “comic masquerade” of flappers in film was essential to creating the flapper archetype that eventually influenced society’s view of the flapper and young women overall.¹⁴² By depicting the flapper as a lesson to society or as a comedienne, directors were able to avoid criticism and censorship by retaining morality. Furthermore, some directors used the flapper archetype against women in an attempt to suppress female roles within society. This consequently perpetuated the idea that women were not allowed to exercise their newfound freedoms. Paradoxically, flappers were often exploited for their sexuality to generate

¹³⁷ Cole and Deihl, *The History of Modern Fashion*, 152-3.

¹³⁸ Yellis, “Prosperity’s Child,” 63.

¹³⁹ Cole and Deihl, *The History of Modern Fashion*, 137.

¹⁴⁰ Cole and Deihl, *The History of Modern Fashion*, 136.

¹⁴¹ Sara Ross, “‘Good Little Bad Girls’: Controversy and the Flapper Comedienne,” *Film History* 13, no. 4 (2001): 409, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3815458>.

¹⁴² Ross, “Good Little Bad Girls,” 409.

higher box office sales.¹⁴³ Nevertheless, the flapper archetype rose to great fame in Hollywood, which in turn inspired the fashions of the everyday woman. Many women often reclaimed the Hollywood flapper archetype by adopting the flapper fashions they saw on film and using them to empower themselves rather than become oppressed by their patriarchal society.

Clara Bow is an example of the quintessential Hollywood flapper. She became the top female box office actress in 1928 by portraying her sexuality as playful, humorous, and innocent.¹⁴⁴ Although her characters were known for the “bad behaviors” associated with flappers such as drinking, smoking, and wearing revealing clothing, Bow’s flappers partake in these behaviors “not only to rebel or get a reaction from their elders, but because they thoroughly enjoy these activities.”¹⁴⁵ Clara Bow’s performance as the prototypical flapper thus gave the archetype more agency in their rebellious actions while only slightly pushing the boundaries of what society deemed as acceptable at the time. By somewhat stepping out of the confines of society’s expectations of morality and being unapologetically liberated, Bow’s flapper characters greatly impacted how society viewed the flapper by the end of the decade. Bow’s portrayal allowed women to feel freer to partake in the behaviors that they wished to and not feel pressured to comply with the rigid moral standards of decades past. Clara Bow and the flapper in film greatly influenced female liberation.

In this still from the 1927 film *Get Your Man*, Clara Bow wears typical flapper fashion and beauty trends which encapsulate the essence of the Hollywood flapper overall (Figure 10). In the photograph, Bow presses her ear to a door attempting to listen to the conversation within the room with a surprised, doe-eyed expression on her face. Bow was known for her dramatic,

¹⁴³ Ross, “Good Little Bad Girls,” 410.

¹⁴⁴ Ross, “Good Little Bad Girls,” 418.

¹⁴⁵ Ross, “Good Little Bad Girls,” 421.

frequently changing, and rapid facial expressions which were essential to silent film acting and served to further shape Bow's persona of the innocent, playful flapper.¹⁴⁶ The costume Bow wears in this still is typical of flapper fashions from the decade, as her dress features sequined embellishments, straps that reveal the arms, and a handkerchief hem that mirrors the flapper dress in Held's *Life* magazine cover (Figure 7). The strip of fabric that drapes down from Bow's shoulder adds an element of theatricality. The pearl necklace and bangle bracelets that she wears—which were also typically worn by flappers at the time—emphasize her glamour and highlight the sparkling details of her dress. Finally, the elements of Bow's beauty regimen such as her bobbed hairstyle, thin eyebrows, smoky eyes, and her famous “bee-stung” lips add drama to the overall look and drive her flapper image forward. These elements would have been read by viewers as extremely fashionable in 1927, and Bow's public image of being the quintessential flapper and “It Girl” further informed audiences of Bow's prominent influence on fashion. Clara Bow served as a significant style icon for flapper fashion in the era as she used fashionable clothing and beauty regimes to shape the flapper archetype in Hollywood which women eventually imitated to assert their power within society.

¹⁴⁶ Ross, “Good Little Bad Girls,” 418.

Conclusion: The Impact of the Flapper

A multitude of historical events led up to the emergence of the flapper. As Yellis states, “a congeries of social and psychological factors, therefore, are bound up in the question of dress and the deeper questions of behavior and values which it symbolized.”¹⁴⁷ The changing values of 1920s society due to women’s suffrage, women entering the workforce, and Prohibition led to unprecedented freedoms for women that led to the rise of the flapper which, in turn, highly influenced women’s everyday fashions. The playful rebellion of the flapper mirrors the era as one of political unrest due to Prohibition and the events leading up to the Great Depression yet great progression towards women’s liberation. The fashions of the flapper—which were popularized through the circulation of illustrations such as John Held Jr.’s on magazine covers and through the emergence of Hollywood starlets such as Clara Bow—reflect the flapper’s unapologetic, vivacious, and free-spirited attitude that not only served to express women’s newfound freedoms, but to inform societal attitudes about women in the 1920s and change how society perceived women overall.

However, this is not the complete story; the emergence of the flapper and flapper fashions mainly derived from the advent of jazz music and dance in Black American communities (which will be explored more in-depth in the following section). Flapper fashion—in addition to the major influence that the Black community had on these fashions—greatly shifted society’s perspective of gender roles from a highly patriarchal, male-dominated view to an empowered, female-liberated view. Flapper fashion is essential to understanding the attitudes and changing beliefs of the 1920s and reflects how fashion can shape societal perceptions and become a catalyst for social change.

¹⁴⁷ Yellis, “Prosperity’s Child,” 48.

Part II Illustrations



Figure 6. Gibson Girl illustration. Charles Dana Gibson, *Picturesque America, Anywhere in the Mountains*, circa 1900, pen and ink over graphite underdrawing, 59 x 74 cm. Washington, D.C., Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

<https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2010716157/>.



Figure 7. *Life* magazine cover by John Held Jr. *She Missed the Boat*, April 26, 1927, in *Life* magazine, <https://archive.org/details/Life19270428>.



(Front)

(Back)

Figure 8. Canary yellow evening dress. *Evening Dress*, 1924, American, silk and rhinestones. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2009.300.1247, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/155941>.



(Front)

(Back)

Figure 9. Jade green evening dress. Stein & Blaine, *Dress*, 1925-1926, American, green silk chiffon, lace, silk satin, beads. Kent, Ohio, Kent State University, 1983.001.0342 ab, <https://kent.pastperfectonline.com/webobject/2C53BBCA-F90B-4C2C-9A02-143535930043>.

(Image withheld due to copyright restrictions – see link)

Figure 10. Clara Bow in embellished evening dress. Still from *Get Your Man*, directed by Dorothy Arzner (Paramount Pictures, 1927), 39:45, <https://youtu.be/wO3YFNmmGc8>.

Image by Hulton Archive courtesy of Getty Images, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0017928/mediaviewer/rm4104599552>.

Part III: Decentralizing Whiteness in Fashion: Black Influence on Fashion and Society in the Jazz Age

*I have just seen a most beautiful thing,
 Slim and still,
 Against a gold, gold sky,
 A straight black cypress,
 Sensitive,
 Exquisite,
 A black finger
 Pointing upwards.
 Why, beautiful still finger, are you black?
 And why are you pointing upwards?*

- Angelina Weld Grimké, "The Black Finger," 1925¹⁴⁸

Introduction: Terminology

The Harlem Renaissance was one of the most impactful cultural movements in American history. The movement shaped the American experience forever through its breakthroughs in art, literature, music, philosophy, and poetry. The driving force behind this movement was Black Americans who set out to establish and create a new life for themselves after being oppressed for hundreds of years through enslavement, prejudice, unjust laws, and systemic racism. Fashion was directly impacted by the many art forms that flourished during the Harlem Renaissance, and these fashions soon broke the bounds of racial divides and were adopted by American society at large.

To discuss this extremely influential Black cultural movement as a white woman is difficult, as I strive to do it justice and explain the enormous impact that it had on America without sounding performative or contrived. It is essential to highlight the struggles that Black people faced during the Harlem Renaissance while also celebrating Black pride and their many

¹⁴⁸ Angelina Weld Grimké, "The Black Finger," in *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (Albert & Charles Boni, Inc., 1925).

achievements. Although I will never fully understand first-hand the hardships of being Black in America, in this section I strive to bring light to the issues—as well as the Black pride—that Black women and men experienced during the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s. I stand as an ally for Black Americans, and I respect their past.

I will use the term “Black” with a capital B throughout this section because capitalizing the name of the group validates their shared experiences and culture. W. E. B. Du Bois—one of the key figures of the Harlem Renaissance—started a campaign in the 1920s to capitalize the N in “Negro,” writing that “the use of a small letter for the name of twelve million Americans and two hundred million human beings was a personal insult.”¹⁴⁹ Nearly one hundred years later, *The New York Times* began capitalizing the word Black because according to their executive editor Dean Baquet and the associate managing editor Phil Corbett, it “conveys elements of shared history and identity, and reflects our goal to be respectful of all the people and communities we cover.”¹⁵⁰ Brittany Cooper, associate professor at Rutgers University and author of *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower*, states that “in the choice to capitalize, we are paying homage to a history with a very particular kind of political engagement.”¹⁵¹ Conversations surrounding the capitalization arose amidst the killing of George Floyd and the subsequent Black Lives Matter protests throughout the nation in 2020. The word “white” is not being capitalized in this section because it does not represent a shared community and culture in the way that Black does, and white has often been capitalized by hate groups.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹ Nancy Coleman, “Why We’re Capitalizing Black,” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), July 5, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/05/insider/capitalized-black.html?smid=url-share>.

¹⁵⁰ Qtd. in Nancy Coleman, “Why We’re Capitalizing Black.”

¹⁵¹ John Eligon, “A Debate Over Identity and Race Asks, Are African-Americans ‘Black’ or ‘black’?” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), June 26, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/26/us/black-african-american-style-debate.html?smid=url-share>.

¹⁵² Coleman, “Why We’re Capitalizing Black.”

The Associated Press—the organization that sets the standard for major news and journalism outlets—states that in capitalizing Black one is respecting “an essential and shared sense of history, identity and community among people who identify as Black, including those in the African diaspora and within Africa. The lowercase black is a color, not a person.”¹⁵³ They also state that the reason behind not capitalizing white is because “white people generally do not share the same history and culture, or the experience of being discriminated against because of skin color.”¹⁵⁴

Furthermore, I am intentionally using the term Black as opposed to African American because not all Black people in America are African. The National Association of Black Journalists suggests that subjects should determine their preference of which term to use and that one should be as specific as possible when discussing race.¹⁵⁵ In the case of this thesis, I will be using Black as an umbrella term for the community in which there are people of many backgrounds who are not solely from the African continent.

¹⁵³ “Explaining AP Style on Black and white,” AP News, The Associated Press, July 20, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/archive-race-and-ethnicity-9105661462>.

¹⁵⁴ “Explaining AP Style.”

¹⁵⁵ “NABJ Style Guide A,” National Association of Black Journalists, accessed February 16, 2022, <https://www.nabj.org/page/styleguideA>.

“I belong to no race nor time. I am the eternal feminine with its string of beads.”

- Zora Neale Hurston, “How It Feels to Be Colored Me,” 1928¹⁵⁶

Intersectionality and Decentralizing Whiteness in Fashion History

Fashion history has long been centered around white, upper-class female fashion, and the immense impacts that Black American women have had on fashion has not been widely recognized. To provide an intersectional perspective to this thesis, I aim to decentralize whiteness within the discipline of fashion history and to advocate for more conversation surrounding the Black women and men who shaped fashion as we know it today.

Decolonial fashion discourse has only been studied in recent years, and as Angela M. Jansen states, its goal is to “[propose] a radical redefinition of fashion by delinking it from modernity—the very core of its constitution—and therefore from coloniality by redefining it as a multitude of possibilities—in and outside of modernity—rather than a normative framework falsely claiming universality.”¹⁵⁷ In other words, to decentralize whiteness in fashion is to disassociate fashion with modernity and instead to view fashion from a wide range of perspectives, including perspectives that fall beyond the typical fashion history canon. Jansen states that “the purpose is not to regulate a canon, but to allow for the recognition of a plurality of epistemologies in regard to fashioning the body.”¹⁵⁸

In the scholarship and teaching of fashion history, there is often a sharp, artificial divide between the notions of traditional dress and fashion.¹⁵⁹ This is especially apparent within

¹⁵⁶ Zora Neale Hurston, “How It Feels to Be Colored Me,” in *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing...And Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1979), 155.

¹⁵⁷ Angela M. Jansen, “Fashion and the Phantasmagoria of Modernity: An Introduction to Decolonial Fashion Discourse,” *Fashion Theory* 24, no. 6 (2020): 817, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1362704X.2020.1802098>.

¹⁵⁸ Jansen, “Fashion and the Phantasmagoria of Modernity,” 817.

¹⁵⁹ Jansen, “Fashion and the Phantasmagoria of Modernity,” 820.

museums that display traditional dress separately from fashion exhibitions. The reason for this is that the framework of fashion history discourse is often Eurocentric and associates the idea of “modernity” with the West and “tradition” with the East. This framework fails to account for the circulation of fashions throughout non-European societies and the change and growth of dress that has occurred within these societies for thousands of years.¹⁶⁰ Fashion bears complex histories that lie at the intersection between social class, race, and ethnicity. Fashion reflects the shared nature of the arts in that it crosses many boundaries, changing and shifting as time moves forward. To draw a line between modernity and tradition of clothing is to erase the plurality of fashion. By looking at fashion through an intersectional and decolonial lens, one can recognize the inequality that is present throughout much of fashion history, reframe it as a discipline that respects the unique aesthetics and cultures of many societies, and recognize the fact that fashion circulates throughout the world. As Jansen states, “decolonial fashion discourse is about the reestablishing of and the listening to those genealogies, interconnectivities and esthetics that have been violated, denied and erased by contemporary fashion discourse.”¹⁶¹ In the different ways of fashioning the body around the world, many aspects of individuality must be illuminated. Decolonial fashion discourse encourages one to listen to the voices of the people who were once silenced and highlight the impacts that they had—and continue to have—on fashion.

By standing as an ally to Black voices, I wish to provide a platform on which Black voices can be heard. My goal is to transform the notion of Black fashion history into fashion history, and the notion of fashion history into history. Fashion provides a window into society,

¹⁶⁰ Jansen, “Fashion and the Phantasmagoria of Modernity,” 820.

¹⁶¹ Jansen, “Fashion and the Phantasmagoria of Modernity,” 831.

therefore it is crucial to decentralize whiteness in fashion history and to respect fashion history as an essential part of history in order to gain a holistic view of society.

“Notwithstanding all the wrongs that slavery heaped upon me, I can bless it for one thing—youth’s important lesson of self-reliance.”

- Elizabeth Keckly, *Behind the Scenes: Or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House*, 1868¹⁶²

Rewriting Fashion History: Elizabeth Keckly and Ann Lowe

Throughout history, many Black fashion designers have not been recognized because of racist societal perceptions of the Black community. In attempting to decentralize whiteness in fashion history, it is essential to recognize the Black fashion designers that have remained essentially invisible throughout history and reposition them as key players.

Elizabeth Keckly (1818-1907) was a Black fashion designer who made a great impact in the industry.¹⁶³ She was born into slavery in rural Virginia to an enslaved woman and her owner.¹⁶⁴ She used her dressmaking skills to form professional connections outside of her owners’ households, and eventually, she raised enough money from her clients to buy her and her son’s freedoms in 1855.¹⁶⁵ She became a renowned dressmaker in Washington, D.C. for many elite American women and eventually became the dressmaker for Mary Todd Lincoln.

Similarly, Ann Lowe (1898-1981) was a Black fashion designer who gained much success but little recognition during her career.¹⁶⁶ She was born in Alabama and learned dressmaking skills from her mother and grandmother.¹⁶⁷ She took over her mother’s business when she passed away in 1914, then moved to Tampa, Florida and became a famous dressmaker

¹⁶² Elizabeth Keckly, *Behind the Scenes: Or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House* (New York: Cosimo, 2009), 6.

¹⁶³ Elizabeth Way, “Elizabeth Keckly and Ann Lowe: Recovering an African American Fashion Legacy That Clothed the American Elite,” in *Fashion Theory* 19, no. 1 (2015): 116, <https://doi.org/10.2752/175174115X14113933306905>.

¹⁶⁴ Way, “Elizabeth Keckly and Ann Lowe,” 116.

¹⁶⁵ Way, “Elizabeth Keckly and Ann Lowe,” 118.

¹⁶⁶ Way, “Elizabeth Keckly and Ann Lowe,” 116.

¹⁶⁷ Way, “Elizabeth Keckly and Ann Lowe,” 118-119.

for Floridian socialites. She opened a store in New York City in 1928 but had to close soon thereafter due to a lack of business. In the 1940s her success grew as she became the dressmaker of some of the most prominent New York City socialites; her client list included the names Roosevelt, DuPont, and Rockefeller, among others. In 1953 she created one of the most important dresses of her career—Jacqueline Kennedy’s wedding gown. She did not receive credit for the making of this dress, however; Jacqueline later simply stated that her gown was made by “a colored woman dressmaker,”¹⁶⁸ thus robbing Ann Lowe of her identity and achievements.

The fact that Lowe and Keckly learned skills from their mothers and not from an apprenticeship in workshops (as is typical with dressmakers) makes their stories even more remarkable.¹⁶⁹ However, they had to be exceptional if they wished to succeed as Black women. They were not given the same opportunities as white dressmakers because of the society that they lived in, therefore they had to work even harder to achieve the success that they did. It is important to recognize designers such as Keckly and Lowe when discussing fashion history because they are key contributors to fashion, yet they were rendered nearly invisible due to racism and white supremacy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As fashion historian and author Elizabeth Way states, “Keckly and Lowe together represent the finest fashion designers over the breadth of the transition from enslaved dressmaking to freely produced African American dressmaking and fashion design. They are valuable contributors to a wider story of American fashion.”¹⁷⁰ The legacies of Lowe and Keckly—as well as many other Black fashion designers—prevail to this day, and it is important to reestablish their legacies to gain a more inclusive view of fashion history.

¹⁶⁸ Qtd. in Way, “Elizabeth Keckly and Ann Lowe,” 124.

¹⁶⁹ Way, “Elizabeth Keckly and Ann Lowe,” 123.

¹⁷⁰ Way, “Elizabeth Keckly and Ann Lowe,” 138.

“In Harlem, it was like a foretaste of paradise. A blue haze descended at night and with it strings of fairy lights on the broad avenues.”

- Arna Bontemps, 1924¹⁷¹

The Harlem Renaissance and the New Cool

After the Civil War drew to a close in 1865 and the long fight for freedom was nearly over, Black women and men dreamed about exercising their new freedoms.¹⁷² However, these dreams were halted in the late 1870s when white supremacy was restored in the South as Jim Crow laws forced Black Americans into second-class citizenship. Systems like sharecropping were designed to keep Black people poor, and the Ku Klux Klan was founded to use scare tactics to keep Black Americans from voting and exercising their rights. In the North and Midwest, industrialization was on the rise and Black Southerners soon realized that there were better opportunities for them beyond the South.

At the turn of the century, the Great Migration led to thousands of Black Americans relocating from the South.¹⁷³ Many moved to the Harlem neighborhood of Manhattan, which occupied only three square miles. Harlem soon reached a population of about 175,000 people and became the city with the largest concentration of Black people in the world. Although many were from different backgrounds and classes, Black Harlemites shared common experiences and were therefore able to create a safe space in which they could develop their new identities as free women and men. Between the end of World War I and the 1930s, an explosion of culture

¹⁷¹ Elizabeth Way, “Dressing to Pass during the Harlem Renaissance: Fashion in the Novels of Jessie Redmon Fauset and Nella Larsen,” *Fashion Theory* 24, no. 4 (2020): 542, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1362704X.2020.1746506>.

¹⁷² “A New African American Identity: The Harlem Renaissance,” National Museum of African American History and Culture, Smithsonian, July 31, 2014, <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/new-african-american-identity-harlem-renaissance>.

¹⁷³ “A New African American Identity: The Harlem Renaissance.”

originating from Harlem created one of the most important cultural movements in American history—the Harlem Renaissance.

The uniting force behind this movement was the shared experience of what it meant to be Black in America; writer Langston Hughes described it as an “expression of our individual dark-skinned selves.”¹⁷⁴ Hundreds of Black artists, writers, poets, intellectuals, and musicians expressed their individuality and Black pride through the arts while asserting their rights as Americans. Alain Locke, the writer, critic, and teacher known as the “dean” of the Harlem Renaissance, described the movement as a “spiritual coming of age” in which Black Americans shifted from “social disillusionment to race pride.”¹⁷⁵

Alain Locke is often credited with launching the movement after publishing his book *The New Negro* in 1925.¹⁷⁶ This was an anthology of works by influential writers and poets of the 1920s who were young and old, Black and white, and women and men. *The New Negro* also contained illustrations by artists Aaron Douglas and Winold Reiss. The book exudes racial pride, but the main targets were likely white people; “through the display of black sensitivity, intelligence, and artistic versatility, it was believed, whites would come to a new understanding of the humanity of African Americans and help to accelerate social change.”¹⁷⁷ Locke stated that the “New Negro” is an “intelligent Negro” who rose above their social imbalances through art forms such as painting, poetry, literature, writing, music, and philosophy.¹⁷⁸

One of the most preeminent figures of the Harlem Renaissance was W. E. B. Du Bois—a historian, author, sociologist, and editor of *The Crisis*.¹⁷⁹ *The Crisis* was a literary magazine in

¹⁷⁴ Qtd. in “A New African American Identity.”

¹⁷⁵ Qtd. in “A New African American Identity.”

¹⁷⁶ Arnold Rampersad, “The Book That Launched the Harlem Renaissance,” *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 38 (2002): 87-8, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3134215>.

¹⁷⁷ Rampersad, “The Book That Launched the Harlem Renaissance,” 89.

¹⁷⁸ Carol Tulloch, *The Birth of Cool: Style Narratives of the African Diaspora* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 63.

¹⁷⁹ Rampersad, “The Book That Launched the Harlem Renaissance,” 88-9.

which many Harlem Renaissance writers and artists made their debut.¹⁸⁰ As Delgado-Tall states, he was “one of the greatest promoters of the New Negro Movement, striving to infuse it with his moral and political conceptions of art and literature. When in 1910 he made *The Crisis*, the organ of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and a medium to promote Black achievements, he was encouraging a more self-confident Black personality.”¹⁸¹

Without Du Bois and his contributions, the Harlem Renaissance may not have been as impactful as it was, as his writings and creation of *The Crisis* allowed for information about Black art, philosophy, literature, and culture to be spread to the masses.

Both Locke and Du Bois had optimistic views of the era, yet it is important to not lose sight of the fact that Black women and men still faced many hardships in the 1920s.¹⁸² As English states, “writers may have been optimistic, but they also testify to a clear and widespread sense of urgency, even of anxiety and despair, during the Harlem Renaissance.”¹⁸³ This can be found in the poems of Claude McKay and in the novels of Nella Larsen, whose narratives of struggle and adversity while navigating the world as a Black man or woman sharply contrast the hopeful tones of Locke and Du Bois’ writings. Themes of hardships and urgency can be found within many of the visual arts of the era as well. It is crucial to not be blinded by the optimistic tropes of the Harlem Renaissance and to recognize that there was still a long way to go until equality. This optimism, however, is central to the movement because, after generations of slavery, racism, prejudice, and hate, the Harlem Renaissance marked the first time the Black community felt that their voices were being heard by all Americans.

¹⁸⁰ Kelly King Howes and Christine Slovey, *Harlem Renaissance* (Detroit: U-X-L, 2001), xxii.

¹⁸¹ Sonia Delgado-Tall, “The New Negro Movement and the African Heritage in a Pan-Africanist Perspective,” *Journal of Black Studies* 31, no. 3 (2001): 292, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2668034>.

¹⁸² Daylanne K. English, “Selecting the Harlem Renaissance,” *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 4 (1999): 812, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1344105>.

¹⁸³ English, “Selecting the Harlem Renaissance,” 816.

At the height of the Harlem Renaissance, the Harlem neighborhood was seen as the epicenter of American culture, thus creating a portrait of Black America.¹⁸⁴ Black culture was deemed the new “cool” and was soon adopted by all Americans—including whites. Because Harlem was at the heart of not only Black culture but of American culture overall, new fashions stemmed from this movement and aligned with the latest music, art, and literature that derived from it.

¹⁸⁴ Rampersad, “The Book That Launched the Harlem Renaissance,” 91.

“We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn’t matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too.”

- Langston Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” 1926¹⁸⁵

The Visual Arts in 1920s Harlem

The art scene in Harlem grew as the population rose, and soon art became one of the central elements of the Harlem Renaissance. Art served as a vehicle for Black women and men to express pride in their heritage while simultaneously forming their own unique artistic identities. Black artists often employed traditional African elements in their art while also drawing from new styles such as Cubism and Fauvism.¹⁸⁶ The new art movements in the 1920s had a direct influence on fashion—as seen in the geometric, streamlined Art Deco motifs on many flapper dresses—and the art that came from Harlem was no exception. Stylistic trends that arose from the Harlem Renaissance were crucial in shaping the fashions in Harlem and America at large.

Artist Aaron Douglas is a prime example of this, as he often combined the modernist approach of shallow depth, the monochromatic color palette of Cubism, and the simplifications of African sculptures in his work.¹⁸⁷ Douglas is often regarded as the “official” artist of the Harlem Renaissance for these reasons.¹⁸⁸ His paintings and illustrations were often seen as “the prototypical visual expression of the Harlem Renaissance” as they captured Black history and modern revolutions.¹⁸⁹ In 1925 he moved to New York City and studied with German artist

¹⁸⁵ Langston Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002).

¹⁸⁶ Campbell et al., *Harlem Renaissance Art of Black America*, 29.

¹⁸⁷ Campbell et al., *Harlem Renaissance Art of Black America*, 29.

¹⁸⁸ Campbell et al., *Harlem Renaissance Art of Black America*, 13.

¹⁸⁹ Campbell et al., *Harlem Renaissance Art of Black America*, 29.

Winold Reiss who often used folk themes in his artwork, and he encouraged Douglas to look to African art for inspiration.¹⁹⁰ Douglas soon developed his trademark style of “geometric symbolism” which employs geometric shapes and silhouettes to weave narratives of the Black community’s rich ancestral past.¹⁹¹ His work was featured on book and magazine covers such as *Vanity Fair*, *Theatre Arts Monthly*, and *The Crisis*, which allowed for his work to circulate throughout America and bring more attention to the Harlem Renaissance.¹⁹² His work undoubtedly influenced many fashions of the time, especially after his art was featured on the covers of major publications.

One of Douglas’ most famous works is *Aspects of Negro Life*, which is a series of four murals that chronicle aspects of Black Americans’ lives.¹⁹³ The paintings use elements from history, folklore, politics, and religion to form various narratives. In the section entitled *Song of the Towers* (Figure 11), Douglas creates a scene of a hopeful, free urban landscape. In the background are skyscrapers, factory smokestacks, and the silhouette of the Statue of Liberty, all of which point to the themes of industrialization, modernization, and independence. In the foreground are three men, one of which is climbing up a set of stairs holding a briefcase, which again alludes to modernization and freedom for Black women and men who were newly entering the workforce at the time. The man in the center of the painting is playing the saxophone, which represents the large role that music—especially jazz—played in Black American culture. The concentric circles near the center of the piece create a spotlight effect on the saxophone, which further emphasizes the major role of music in Black culture. The hand on the left of the painting creates an unsettling, foreboding effect as it reaches out and attempts to grab the man in the

¹⁹⁰ Howes et al., *Harlem Renaissance*, 110.

¹⁹¹ Howes et al., *Harlem Renaissance*, 28.

¹⁹² Howes et al., *Harlem Renaissance*, 111.

¹⁹³ Howes et al., *Harlem Renaissance*, 111.

corner, which is perhaps symbolic of Black people not being completely free from the grips of American society. This piece represents the tension between industrialization and individual independence with the smokestacks symbolizing modernity and the saxophone player symbolizing freedom.¹⁹⁴ The rest of the murals in the series contain these darker themes, one of which is *From Slavery Through Reconstruction* depicting slaves doing plantation fieldwork and the Ku Klux Klan.¹⁹⁵ Douglas contrasts his dark themes with optimistic ones, which relays the message that Black people are gaining more freedoms, yet they are still not equal and their past is not forgotten. *Aspects of Negro Life* exemplifies the power that Aaron Douglas held through his art through his use of African and modern art influences to create an entirely new aesthetic that radiates Black pride and narrates Black history.

Black culture in the 1920s was often stereotyped as being “primitive” and “exotic,” both of which are based on racist constructions stemming from the Black community being viewed as outsiders and less than. Many white people viewed much of the visual arts during the Harlem Renaissance as primitive and exotic, especially when the artist utilized influences from African arts which are typically more minimalist in aesthetic. However, Black artists like Aaron Douglas often combined African influences with other elements to highlight the complexity of Black Americans and to erase stereotypes and the perceived singularity of Black people. At times it was these primitive and exotic tropes that drew white people to Black art, therefore some artists—including performing artists such as Josephine Baker—leaned into these stereotypes and capitalized on them, reclaiming them as their own.

¹⁹⁴ Campbell et al., *Harlem Renaissance Art of Black America*, 29.

¹⁹⁵ Howes et al., *Harlem Renaissance*, 111.

Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller was one of the most influential artists of the Harlem Renaissance because of her spin on exotic African tropes to create refined sculptures.¹⁹⁶ She utilized Egyptian and West African influences to inspire her work and studied with famed sculptor Auguste Rodin in Paris at the turn of the century. She was also inspired by W. E. B. Du Bois' Pan-Africanist philosophy that highlighted the shared African heritage of Black Americans, as seen in one of her most famous works entitled *Ethiopia Awakening* (Figure 12). This piece was commissioned by W. E. B. Du Bois himself for the New York exposition America's Making in 1921.¹⁹⁷ This work represents the industrial and musical contributions of Black Americans and employs Pan-African influences to create a graceful, elegant sculpture. It mostly resembles an ancient Egyptian funerary statue with its pharaonic headdress and legs bound as if mummified.¹⁹⁸ The crisp, geometric lines and lean form of the figure also resemble Art Deco design that was popular in art and fashion at the time. The sculpture depicts a woman awakening from her sleep with one hand over her heart and one arm extended. As Fuller wrote, "here was a group who had once made history and now after a long sleep was awaking, gradually unwinding the bandage of its mummied past and looking out on life again, expectant but unafraid and with at least a graceful gesture."¹⁹⁹ Campbell et al. state that Fuller "tempered her romanticism with a very clear-eyed view of the contemporary condition of Black people in America."²⁰⁰ Fuller utilized a range of worldly influences and reclaimed the exotic tropes of African art to highlight her community's shared heritage and advancements and to point to hope for the future.

¹⁹⁶ Campbell et al., *Harlem Renaissance Art of Black America*, 25-7.

¹⁹⁷ "Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller, Ethiopia, 1921," National Museum of African American History and Culture, Smithsonian, accessed May 2, 2022, <https://nmaahc.si.edu/meta-vaux-warrick-fuller-ethiopia-1921>.

¹⁹⁸ Campbell et al., *Harlem Renaissance Art of Black America*, 27.

¹⁹⁹ "Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller, Ethiopia, 1921."

²⁰⁰ Campbell et al., *Harlem Renaissance Art of Black America*, 27.

Another artist who employed stereotypes in his work was Palmer Hayden. His work captured lively everyday scenes of Harlem street life, therefore making him another key artist of the Harlem Renaissance.²⁰¹ In his painting entitled *Bal Jeunesse*, Palmer depicts a couple joyously dancing to music (Figure 13). Similar to Douglas' *Song of the Towers* (Figure 11), this work celebrates jazz as it serves as a symbol of freedom that derives from Black American communities. Palmer offered a somewhat controversial portrayal of Black American life, however, as his art was often criticized for employing Black stereotypes such as exaggerated lips.²⁰² Defenders of Hayden's work claim that his use of stereotypical imagery of Black Americans was a form of satire to draw attention to racism in 1920s America. Eventually, Palmer responded to this criticism in his later works with portrayals of Black people in a less exaggerated manner.²⁰³ Palmer's work is celebrated for capturing everyday life in urban communities and is rooted in folklore and oral tradition from his upbringing.²⁰⁴

As seen in Douglas' portrayal of historical storytelling, Fuller's refined Pan-Africanist sculptures, and Palmer's depiction of everyday life, artists played a key role in the shaping of the Harlem Renaissance as they brought visual context to life in Harlem and contributed to a deeper understanding of what it means to be Black in America. Because Black art was not widely exhibited or documented throughout the Harlem Renaissance, fashion served as an outlet for the influence and trends of Black art to be showcased to New York City and the rest of America. Art of the Harlem Renaissance stood on the basis of "a [group] consciousness driven by intense ethnic pride, political activism, and a sense of a unique cultural lineage which cut across

²⁰¹ Campbell et al., *Harlem Renaissance Art of Black America*, 31.

²⁰² Howes et al., *Harlem Renaissance*, 113.

²⁰³ Campbell et al., *Harlem Renaissance Art of Black America*, 31.

²⁰⁴ Campbell et al., *Harlem Renaissance Art of Black America*, 33.

geographic regionalism, inspiring Black artists to produce as they never before dared.”²⁰⁵ Black artists played a crucial role in forming a new American identity that trickled down to all other aspects of culture, including fashion.

²⁰⁵ Campbell et al., *Harlem Renaissance Art of Black America*, 14.

*Tis a noble gift to be brown, all brown,
 Like the strongest things that make up this earth,
 Like the mountains grave and grand,
 Even like the very land,
 Even like the trunks of trees—
 Even oaks, to be like these!
 God builds His strength in bronze.
 To be brown like thrush and lark!
 Like the subtle wren so dark!
 Nay, the king of beasts wears brown;
 Eagles are of this same hue.
 I thank God, then, I am brown.
 Brown has mighty things to do.*

-Effie Lee Newsome, "The Bronze Legacy," 1922²⁰⁶

Capturing Fashion Through the Lens of James Van Der Zee

At the turn of the century, photography was still a relatively new art form. The medium gained momentum in the 1920s, and this was especially true in Harlem through the works of photographer James Van Der Zee who used photography to capture scenes of everyday life and to commemorate special occasions. Photography is an essential tool for understanding fashions of the decade, as it captured what people wore in their everyday lives. In fashion history discourse, perceptions of dress are typically formed through extant garments that are exhibited in museums. However, these garments do not create a holistic view of the clothing from a specific era, as they are often garments that were loaned to the museum by wealthy aristocrats and prominent figures who were likely white. To gain an understanding of what everyday women and men in Harlem wore, one must turn to photographs to decode their style.

James Van Der Zee was the most well-known and important photographer in Harlem. He opened his studio in 1916 where he could capture portraits of Harlemites posed against

²⁰⁶ Effie Lee Newsome, "The Bronze Legacy," *The Crisis*, October 1922.

intricately painted backdrops depicting bourgeois villas, gardens, and fireplaces.²⁰⁷ He was essential to shaping the image of the “New Negro,” as his studio became “the site where the modern Black identity was born, where the New Negro forged an urban personality.”²⁰⁸ The fanciful sets, beautiful clothing, and carefully posed women and men created a sense of escapism in his photographs. Van Der Zee would retouch imperfections on photographs by hand-painting them, which further added to the sense of near-perfection that he aspired to create for Harlemites.²⁰⁹

Most of Van Der Zee’s portraits from the 1920s were not widely circulated in the form of postcards, newspaper photographs, or magazine covers; instead, they served as mementos and heirlooms for families to proudly hang in their homes and pass down through generations. Thus, Van Der Zee’s photographs represent an internal Black pride as opposed to an external Black pride that was meant to be showcased to the rest of American society. The Black pride in Van Der Zee’s photographs contributed to Harlemites forging their identities as “New Negroes” from the inside-out, which reflects the notion that Black artists were creating for themselves first and the rest of American society second.

The photograph entitled *Portrait of a Couple* from 1924 is one of the best examples of the bourgeois image Van Der Zee strived to create (Figure 14). The man in the portrait is wearing a three-piece suit and bowtie complete with a cane and hat, and the woman is wearing an ankle-length, drop-waist dress that features delicate embroidery in an elaborate geometric pattern. She has a straight, shiny bob haircut, which is of particular importance in this photograph because it has been styled to reflect the white ideal hairstyle of the time; this suggests

²⁰⁷ Howes et al., *Harlem Renaissance*, 118.

²⁰⁸ Campbell et al., *Harlem Renaissance Art of Black America*, 36.

²⁰⁹ Campbell et al., *Harlem Renaissance Art of Black America*, 36.

that she has either claimed white styles as her own or she is using them for passing. The woman stands in a pose that accentuates her figure and her clothing and she has completed her look with jewelry. The background depicts an upper-class home complete with decorative moldings and long curtains. The furniture in the photograph is as ornate as the man and woman's clothing, and there is a large floral arrangement on the table to the right. This image exemplifies Van Der Zee's work as it combines elements of performativity, individuality, and elegance.

Fashion is essential in Van Der Zee's photography as his subjects wore the most fashionable clothing of the era; "all of them, men, women, and children, wear the most stylish clothes, made from the most luxurious fabrics and tailored with the most intricate detailing."²¹⁰ The highly stylish fashions held a deeper meaning than merely surface-level chicness—they served to transform the antiquated perceptions about Black Americans to help them create their own new identities. This can be seen in his portrait entitled *Woman in a Dress with Sequins and Pearls in Front of Painted Backdrop* from 1925 (Figure 15). The woman in this photograph is wearing an extremely elaborate, fanciful dress. The hanging pearls and the glittering sequins on the dress mirror the exuberant flapper dresses of the era, especially flapper dresses worn by stage performers such as Josephine Baker. Her T-bar satin shoes are also a stylish choice for the time.²¹¹ The large bouquet she holds in her hands further adds to the sense of escapism that is apparent in this portrait. Her hair is worn in its natural texture and is elegantly coiffed, which is likely a deliberate choice instead of completely relaxing her hair to be straight to conform to white ideals. Interestingly, this photograph features the same background as *Portrait of a Couple* (Figure 14), which suggests that Van Der Zee would often reuse his backdrops, perhaps as a

²¹⁰ Campbell et al., *Harlem Renaissance Art of Black America*, 36.

²¹¹ Martin Pel, Terence Pepper, Dennis Nothdruff, and Tessa Hallmann. *1920s Jazz Age Fashion and Photographs* (London: Unicorn, 2018) 20.

marker that the photographs were taken in his studio as the backdrops would serve as a “signature” for his work. The confidence that the woman in this portrait exudes is telling of her use of this photograph as a tool to build her unique persona and self-image, and her clothing is the main element she uses to achieve this.

Many of Van Der Zee’s photographs serve to create a sense of theatricality and escapism, as is apparent in the photograph *Billy* from 1926 (Figure 16). Here the subject is wearing the popular *robe de style* which was popularized by French designer Jeanne Lanvin and greatly contrasted with the androgynous, columnar flapper dresses of the period.²¹² The *robe de style* is reminiscent of Victorian dress with its romanticized femininity and long, full skirt, which adds to the escapism and idealism of this portrait.²¹³ This particular *robe de style* features a drop-waist and extravagant details including a large bow at the waist, swags of ribbon around the skirt, and tulle ruffles at the hem. She wears gloves, a hat, and a large neck ruff, and she holds a cigarette in her right hand. Her hair is relaxed and styled in a shiny, curled bob, and her makeup includes thin, penciled eyebrows and dark lipstick—all of which were typical flapper beauty styles. The combined elements of Billy’s ensemble create an atmosphere of theatricality in the portrait. It is clear that Van Der Zee and his subject wished to capture a performance and fantasy through this photograph, as everything from the pose and styling to the backdrop creates an attention-grabbing scene. Another important detail to note is that this appears to be the same background as the photographs in Figures 14 and 15, yet unlike the previous two images, the backdrop is cut off on the left side to reveal that the subject is standing in front of a painted backdrop instead of an actual bourgeois villa. This further emphasizes the theatrical quality and desired artifice of the

²¹² Reddy, “1920-1929.”

²¹³ N. J. Stevenson, *The Chronology of Fashion: From Empire Dress to Ethical Design* (London: A & C Black, 2011), 90.

photograph. *Billy* is exemplary of the escapism that Van Der Zee's portraits created, as over-the-top outfits as seen here served as a sort of armor that his subjects utilized to create a new identity, similar to how an actor uses costume to create a character.

Van Der Zee also took photographs outside of his studio on the streets of Harlem, as seen in the photograph from circa 1927 entitled *Three Members of the Northeasterners, Inc. Edith Scott, Louise Swain, and Helene Corbin on Seventh Avenue in Harlem* (Figure 17). In this image, all three women wear fashions that would have been seen as very stylish for the time: fur-trimmed coats, calf-length dresses, cloche hats, bobbed hair, and kitten heels. The fabrics and styles of their garments emanate luxury and elegance, especially the furs on the coats of the woman to the left and in the middle and the shiny satin of the coat on the woman to the right. The women's carefree, youthful demeanors shine through in this image as the photograph is not entirely posed; it seems to be somewhat candid, especially for the woman to the left who is not looking directly at the camera. The place where this photograph was taken—Seventh Avenue—was one of the most fashionable streets in Harlem, as sidewalk strolls became a popular pastime for people to show off the latest fashions.²¹⁴ Street style photographs such as this are essential to understanding the power that fashion held in Harlem.

Van Der Zee's portraits were self-telling in that they enabled Black people to have control over their self-image and representation in American society.²¹⁵ As Tulloch states, "style narratives are a form of agency through the style choices an individual makes to construct their individualized look from various components of garments, accessories and beauty regimes."²¹⁶ In other words, the clothing choices of Van Der Zee's subjects served as a vehicle for Harlemites

²¹⁴ Way, "Dressing to Pass," 542-3.

²¹⁵ Tulloch, *The Birth of Cool*, 64.

²¹⁶ Tulloch, *The Birth of Cool*, 64.

to claim their unique narratives through the photographs for which they posed. The performative aspect of Van Der Zee's portraits in their sets, styling, posing, and retouching contributed to the greater goal of the Harlem Renaissance, which was to construct an individualistic, intelligent, and fashionable image of the "New Negro." Clothing was an essential catalyst for Harlemites to create themselves and their newfound confidence as Black Americans. Furthermore, with an increase in women's freedoms in the 1920s, Van Der Zee's photographs allowed women to assert themselves as independent individuals.

*Not wholly this or that,
 But wrought
 Of alien bloods am I,
 A product of the interplay
 Of traveled hearts.
 Estranged, yet not estranged, I stand
 All comprehending;
 From my estate
 I view earth's frail dilemma;
 Scion of fused strength am I,
 All understanding,
 Nor this nor that
 Contains me.*

- Georgia Douglas Johnson, "Cosmopolite," 1922²¹⁷

Passing Fashions and the Binds of Double Consciousness

While fashion was an important tool that Harlemites utilized to forge new identities, some Black women felt the need to dress in certain ways which conformed to white beauty and style ideals. The concept of passing was explored in the novels *Quicksand* by Nella Larsen and *Plum Bun* by Jessie Redmon Fauset (both from 1928), and these novels were critical in shaping what passing meant to Black women in 1920s America.²¹⁸ The term "passing" refers to "the practice by which light-skinned African Americans would pretend to be white in order to gain the social and material advantages denied to blacks."²¹⁹ Passing not only meant Black women adopting white beauty regimes and fashions to "pass" as white, but it also meant using clothing and beauty to appear wealthier and of a higher social status. As Elizabeth Way states, both Larsen and Fauset explore passing as a way for "black women [to] accomplish the monumental task of moving between both black and white society's fixed perceptions of what a black woman

²¹⁷ Georgia Douglas Johnson, "Cosmopolite," in *Bronze: A Book of Verse* (Boston: B. J. Brimmer Company, 1922).

²¹⁸ Way, "Dressing to Pass," 535.

²¹⁹ Howes et al., *Harlem Renaissance*, xxv.

could be.”²²⁰ In both novels, fashion plays a central role as Black women in 1920s America used clothing to utilize their agency over how others perceived them. Through their novels, Larsen and Fauset gave Black women a voice in society and highlighted the complex role that fashion played for Black women in the 1920s.

In *Plum Bun*, Fauset’s protagonist Angela is from a conservative Black community in Philadelphia, yet she longs to be a part of a glamorous white community when she moves to New York.²²¹ She eventually decides to attempt to pass as white to achieve her goals. At one point in the novel, Fauset describes in detail Angela’s outfit when she goes on a date with a wealthy white man:

Her dress was flame-colour [...] of a plain, rather heavy beautiful glowing silk. The neck was high in back and girlishly modest in front. She had a string of good artificial pearls and two heavy silver bracelets. Thus she gave the effect of a flame herself; intense and opaque at the heart where her dress gleamed and shone, transparent and fragile where her white warm neck and face rose into the tenuous shadow of her hair. Her appearance excited herself.²²²

This description of Angela’s dress is exemplary of how Fauset uses fashion as a vehicle for Angela’s confidence throughout the story. The connection between fire and Angela’s dress can be read as an allusion to race, as Zackodnik states that “Fauset plays on the idea of race read in the body by invoking the notion [of] blackness—a warm vitality lurking beneath fair skin and in hair that cannot be...subdued.”²²³ The fiery color of her dress reflects how Angela can attempt to pass as white but her Blackness will never fully be extinguished.

Furthermore, the fact that Angela did not have real pearls but rather “good artificial pearls” implies that she is attempting to pass as wealthier to match the status of her date.

²²⁰ Way, “Dressing to Pass,” 536-7.

²²¹ Way, “Dressing to Pass,” 537, 551.

²²² Jessie Redmon Fauset, *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1928), 123. <https://archive.org/details/plumbunovelwith00fausrich/mode/2up?ref=ol>.

²²³ Qtd. in Way, “Dressing to Pass,” 554.

However, the silver bracelets and silk dress imply that passing is not unattainable for her—she can afford some luxurious materials, yet she is not white and therefore feels the need to pass. Here there is an ambivalence in Angela’s clothing that gives her the confidence she needs to form new relationships and become the woman she wants to be. Fauset contrasts this with Angela’s sister Virginia, who is proud of her Blackness and represents the modern Harlem woman.²²⁴ By the end, it is clear that Fauset is an advocate for Black authenticity, yet she expands the definition of Black pride to include the Black bourgeoisie that many aspired to become.

In *Quicksand*, Larsen’s protagonist Helga is a biracial woman who works at a Black college in the South where she is viewed as an outsider.²²⁵ Helga goes beyond passing in the traditional racial sense by also attempting to move beyond class and gender barriers. She constructs multiple personas throughout the novel as she moves cities, joins new social circles, and changes her clothing. At one point in the novel when Helga is job searching, Larsen describes what she chooses to wear: “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.”²²⁶ This is not the typical clothing that Helga would gravitate towards, but instead it is “plain,” “unadorned,” and “smart” as to help Helga assert herself as a serious potential employee. Here she is not only attempting to navigate the barriers of race but of class and gender as well; she wishes to position herself as a sensible, competent professional worthy of respect. This is exemplary of how Larsen uses clothing to communicate certain aspects of identity.

²²⁴ Way, “Dressing to Pass,” 555-6.

²²⁵ Way, “Dressing to Pass,” 556-7.

²²⁶ Nella Larsen, *Quicksand* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1928; New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 66. Citations refer to the Negro Universities Press edition. <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.32106012331168>.

Both Helga and Angela use fashion as a vehicle for overcoming barriers within their respective cultures, which directly correlates to how Black women in 1920s America used clothing to shape how others perceived them. Fauset and Larsen's novels consider Black dress in American history and illustrate how fashion can be used to manipulate perceptions of Black women within the context of the fluctuating 1920s society. They also highlight how “mainstream fashion could act as an oppressive force that excluded, controlled, and stereotyped black women,” as Black women were often outcasted by their communities for adopting mainstream fashions in attempting to pass.²²⁷

Passing is a complex topic because it can be both inclusive and polarizing. For example, if a Black woman attempts to pass as white by wearing her hair in a traditionally “white” style (such as the relaxed, straight bob seen on the women in Figures 14 and 16), she both adapts to mainstream standards as white styles were typically the beauty and style ideals of the time, but she also surrenders her own Black culture by not wearing her hair in its natural state. In Figure 15, the woman in the portrait is wearing her hair in its natural texture, but she has pulled it into an elegant updo; this is an example of how Black woman would style their hair in their natural texture when they were not attempting to pass as white but rather to simply appear fashionable. Some Black women may perceive a “white hairstyle” as traitorous to Black culture, therefore the woman may be deemed an outcast by her own culture.

The term for Black people not being able to fit securely into one specific cultural norm or standard is known as a “double consciousness.” Created by W. E. B. Du Bois in 1897, this term refers to the internal conflict within Black individuals between what is considered “Black” and what is considered “American.”²²⁸ This construct is based on white stereotypes of Black culture

²²⁷ Way, “Dressing to Pass,” 541.

²²⁸ Qtd. in Way, “Dressing to Pass,” 558.

and the racist concept that Black culture is completely separate from white culture. Furthermore, double consciousness directly relates to the double bind which was used to oppress women for centuries (see page 12). In terms of fashion, double consciousness relates to the struggle Black women face when choosing between dressing “traditionally” according to their African heritage to reflect their Black pride, or to dress “American” and adopt white beauty and fashion standards to be accepted into mainstream society. Both Larsen and Fauset’s protagonists grapple with a double consciousness in their novels just as Black women experienced the binds of double consciousness in their everyday lives in the 1920s.

On the other hand, the adoption of mainstream or “American” culture can also be seen as Black women having more agency over their style as opposed to them mimicking white standards; the artificiality of beauty and dress were major elements of 1920s Black fashion to disrupt white beauty standards. White and White state that a Black woman who dyed, straightened, or bobbed her hair “was not some pathetic and inept attempt to imitate white mores. What it did signify, however—and here there was a clear similarity between what young white and black women were doing, although who was imitating whom could be difficult to work out—was [the] difference from the ‘natural’ look of their mothers and grandmothers.”²²⁹ Therefore the adoption of mainstream fashion and beauty trends by Black women can also be perceived not as mimicry of white styles, but rather a reaction against former styles of the past and emergence into modern style as it correlates with the newly independent modern woman—something that both Black and white women alike were doing at the time. This is especially apparent in flapper fashions in the twenties.

²²⁹ Qtd. in Way, “Dressing to Pass,” 543.

The complex nature of passing by utilizing fashion in Larsen and Fauset's novels is a testament to the power of fashion and how it can shape societal perceptions of marginalized groups. At the end of Fauset's *Plum Bun*, it is clear that Fauset does not approve of passing as she believed it was destructive to Black identity; she instead was an advocate for authenticity. Fauset does, however, approve of Angela's quest for self-discovery, which illustrates how Fauset was encouraging Black women and their self-growth.²³⁰ Similarly, Larsen conveys through Helga in *Quicksand* that self-fashioning is critical to shaping a Black woman's identity when navigating gender, class, and racial boundaries.²³¹ Both Larsen and Fauset conclude that there is no entirely safe place for Helga and Angela to pass into because of the complex nature of passing and its double consciousness, yet clothing allows them to explore this.

²³⁰ Way, "Dressing to Pass," 556.

²³¹ Way, "Dressing to Pass," 565.

*The rhythm of life
Is a jazz rhythm,
Honey.
The gods are laughing at us.*

- Langston Hughes, "Lenox Avenue: Midnight," 1926²³²

The Birth of the Jazz Age

A central element of the Harlem Renaissance and Black culture in the 1920s is its music. The freely moving, swinging flapper dresses of the era were highly influenced by the birth of a new musical genre that would soon take America by storm—jazz. Characterized by the jovial, exuberant, highly expressive, and often improvisational rhythms, this new form of music could be heard in nearly every club in Harlem and cities throughout America by the end of the decade. Jazz represented modern and unconventional modes of thought that coincided with the new ideas brought forth by the Harlem Renaissance. Jazz and the dances that arose from it were hugely impactful to the clothing that was worn by all Americans, Black and white alike.

Jazz is widely believed to originate from New Orleans, Louisiana, where a wide range of people of African, European, Caribbean, Native American, and Creole descent settled.²³³ The origins of jazz have also been traced back to the instruments and rhythms of slaves that their ancestors played. European folk music is another influence of the genre, as there are traces of Scottish music that can be found in early jazz. A combination of instruments brought from Africa by slaves such as makeshift drums and the banjo combined with the fiddle played by European descendants led to the birth of jazz. In New Orleans, people also took discarded instruments such as trombones and trumpets from Civil War marching bands and incorporated them into their

²³² Langston Hughes, "Lenox Avenue: Midnight," in *The Weary Blues* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926).

²³³ Howes et al., *Harlem Renaissance*, 83-4.

music. When ragtime became popular in the 1890s, the syncopated melodies of the piano were adopted by jazz musicians. Spirituals or Christian songs originating from Black Americans provided a foundation for jazz music as well. Despite this range of influences, jazz is mainly rooted in Black American tradition.²³⁴

Much like the origins of jazz, the circulation of the genre can also be credited to a variety of sources, including minstrel shows in the late nineteenth century which often played early forms of jazz.²³⁵ In minstrel shows, white actors would travel around the country in blackface and imitate Black people for entertainment purposes.²³⁶ Although these shows perpetuated racial stereotypes and were detrimental to Black culture, they served as an important stage as well; Black people themselves would perform in these shows as it was one of the only acceptable forms of entertainment for Black people to participate in at the time. One of these Black minstrel performers was Ferdinand “Jelly Roll” Morton, a ragtime pianist for minstrel shows who later became one of the first-ever jazz stars.²³⁷ Morton was a driving force behind bringing jazz from New Orleans to Chicago and New York. Another pioneer of jazz—especially during the Harlem Renaissance—was Duke Ellington. He is credited with creating the “Big Band” sound, consisting of a jazz orchestra comprised of multiple players on each instrument.²³⁸ Louis Armstrong later became one of the most famous jazz musicians in the world. Born in Louisiana, he gained a large following in Harlem after performing at famous clubs such as Connie’s Inn. Black musicians such as Morton, Ellington, and Armstrong were critical in bringing jazz into the mainstream music culture of the 1920s.

²³⁴ Howes et al., *Harlem Renaissance*, xxiii.

²³⁵ Howes et al., *Harlem Renaissance*, 83-4.

²³⁶ Howes et al., *Harlem Renaissance*, 71.

²³⁷ Howes et al., *Harlem Renaissance*, 84-5.

²³⁸ Howes et al., *Harlem Renaissance*, 86-7.

The white perception of jazz bears a complex history. Much like the white perception of Black visual arts in the 1920s, many white publications from 1917 to 1930 labeled jazz as dangerous, primitive, savage, aggressive, and even unhealthy.²³⁹ Popular publications stated that the genre was not a serious form of music and claimed that Africans and slaves were the sole originators of jazz. Black jazz musicians were often characterized as animalistic and inhuman; *The Current Opinion* published an article in 1918 which stated that jazz is “African in origin” and “is an attempt to reproduce the marvelous syncopation of the African Jungle.”²⁴⁰

The idea that jazz originated from Africa and slavery served to invalidate the genre when in reality, jazz was American in origin and reflected a melting pot of influences, much like the Black American population. Thus, critiques of jazz were used as racist propaganda, with targeted, harmful terms such as “savage” and “beast” being used to directly refer to jazz musicians in an attempt to perpetuate the fear of Black Americans.²⁴¹ Specifically in the 1911 book *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics*, jazz was used as a justification for the oppression and hatred of Black people. This relates to how Black art was perceived in the 1920s, with terms such as “primitive” and “exotic” being used to drive racist conceptions of Black art forward.²⁴²

The white population soon realized the growth in popularity of jazz, though, and they began to capitalize on the new genre by creating new categories of jazz themselves. The all-white Original Dixieland Jazz Band was the first to profit off jazz when they first recorded jazz music around 1917.²⁴³ Soon white jazz musicians began to “refine” jazz in an attempt to make it more acceptable for mainstream society; during the early years of jazz, it was widely perceived

²³⁹ Maureen Anderson, “The White Reception of Jazz in America,” *African American Review* 38, no. 1 (2004): 135-7, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1512237>.

²⁴⁰ Qtd. in Anderson, “The White Reception of Jazz in America,” 138.

²⁴¹ Anderson, “The White Reception of Jazz in America,” 141.

²⁴² Anderson, “The White Reception of Jazz in America,” 142.

²⁴³ Howes et al., *Harlem Renaissance*, 85.

that “when white people play jazz, it is jazz music, but when black people play jazz, it is jungle noise.”²⁴⁴ Black jazz musicians still prevailed throughout the Harlem Renaissance, though, as artists such as Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong became the premier acts of their time. Despite white critics’ attempts at shifting the narrative, jazz will forever remain a uniquely Black American genre.

²⁴⁴ Anderson, “The White Reception of Jazz in America,” 144.

*Oh, silver tree!
Oh, shining rivers of the soul!*

*In a Harlem cabaret
Six long-headed jazzers play.
A dancing girl whose eyes are bold
Lifts high a dress of silken gold.*

- Langston Hughes, "Jazzonia," 1926²⁴⁵

The Emergence of Flapper Dresses in Jazz Clubs

The explosion of jazz music and its subsequent new dance crazes laid the foundation for the flapper dress. As Hannel states, "music and fashion have always had a close relationship, so when jazz became popular in the post-war years, it is not surprising that it had an effect on fashion."²⁴⁶ With the advent of jazz came popular dances such as the Charleston and the Black Bottom, which required dancers to wear clothing that moved *with* the wearer and enabled them to move freely and express their newfound freedoms.²⁴⁷ This is a far cry from the confining fashions of previous decades, thus marking American society's turn to modernity.

One of the most popular dances of the 1920s that emerged from jazz and the jazz club scene was the Charleston. In this dance, one would bend the knees then straighten them, pivot the feet in and out, and shift their weight to the other leg while kicking out the free leg at an angle.²⁴⁸ This dance was created by Black Southerners and was popularized by the Broadway musical *Shuffle Along*,²⁴⁹ the first all-Black musical which made Black music and dance more prominent in mainstream culture.²⁵⁰ Soon the Charleston became a popular dance for Black and

²⁴⁵ Langston Hughes, "Jazzonia," in *The Weary Blues* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926).

²⁴⁶ Susan L. Hannel, "The Influence of American Jazz on Fashion," in *Twentieth-Century American Fashion*, edited by Linda Welters and Patricia A. Cunningham (New York: Berg, 2005), 58.

²⁴⁷ Hannel, "The Influence of American Jazz on Fashion," 58.

²⁴⁸ Hannel, "The Influence of American Jazz on Fashion," 63.

²⁴⁹ Hannel, "The Influence of American Jazz on Fashion," 63.

²⁵⁰ Rampersad, "The Book That Launched the Harlem Renaissance," 89.

white partygoers alike, especially as white society gained an increased interest in Black culture. These dances became especially popular due to the rise in white Manhattanites going uptown to Harlem to enjoy the nightlife there—a trend referred to as “Harlemania.”²⁵¹ In 1926 Eric Walrond wrote in *Vanity Fair* that “people like the Charleston because it satisfies an instinctive urge in them. In a measure it is for this very reason that there is interest in the primitive songs and music of the black slaves and their descendants. It certainly is the spirit preeminently responsible for the vogue of black and brown reviews, [...] Harlem and the Negro cabarets.”²⁵² Many equated the free, syncopated dancing to jazz music as the start of a liberated, modern age.

The extremely lively nature of jazz dancing led to the need for women to wear evening dresses that were less restrictive and increasingly glamorous. Hemlines rose to allow for women to kick up their feet in jazz clubs, dresses became looser to allow for free-flowing movement, and the lack of sleeves allowed for the arms to swing as they danced.²⁵³ Geometric prints of Art Deco and Orientalist themes that were popular during the decade mirrored the exciting, improvisational nature of jazz rhythms. Furthermore, the addition of embellishments such as fringe, feathers, beads, handkerchief hems, and fabric panels that would fly away from the wearer and shimmer as they moved created an aesthetic that became closely associated with jazz and dancing. The liberating flapper evening dresses that arose from the Jazz Age coincide with an increase in women’s independence as well as an increased influence and appreciation for Black music and culture.

Some of the common elements of flapper evening dresses such as fringe and wooden beads that were regarded as “primitive” and stereotypically “African” directly connected jazz

²⁵¹ Howes et al., *Harlem Renaissance*, xxii.

²⁵² Qtd. in Hannel, “The Influence of American Jazz on Fashion,” 64.

²⁵³ Hannel, “The Influence of American Jazz on Fashion,” 58.

music to fashion.²⁵⁴ Dresses that included elements that made sounds when one moved were popular in the jazz club scene along with bangles and necklaces that again drew influence from stereotypically African fashions.²⁵⁵ Hannel states that “the addition of fringe that swayed imitated African dress and, along with the sound it generated, contributed to perceptions about the primitive aspects of the performance and of the dance.”²⁵⁶ Thus, as jazz grew as a widely accepted genre of mainstream music, stereotypical elements associated with African dress such as fringe and beads also became staples in flapper evening dresses that were worn in jazz clubs.

An example of this influence is a fashion plate from 1922 which depicts a dance costume with a fringed overskirt and a beaded belt (Figure 18). The white appropriation of traditional African dress elements is reflected in this costume and exemplifies the growing white fascination with African art styles and jazz music. This costume, however, minimizes African influence to a stereotypical depiction of tribal-inspired dress, thus perpetuating prejudice against the Black community. The many embellishments of flapper dresses that stem from stereotypical traditional African dress contributed to the performativity and glamour of the Harlem nightlife scene, yet they are often rooted in appropriation.

Dresses that caught the eye and moved with the dancer in jazz clubs were ideal during the Jazz Age. This dress from the late 1920s is a cream silk satin evening dress embellished with rhinestones, pearls, and fringe (Figure 19). The V-shape neckline is meant to expose the wearer’s décolletage, and the sleeveless design of the garment along with the short hemline would have made it possible for the wearer to move her legs freely while dancing. Furthermore, the loose, columnar shape of the dress allows for the wearer to be unrestricted in her movements. The

²⁵⁴ Hannel, “The Influence of American Jazz on Fashion,” 64.

²⁵⁵ Hannel, “The Influence of American Jazz on Fashion,” 72.

²⁵⁶ Hannel, “The Influence of American Jazz on Fashion,” 74.

rhinestones and pearls of the textile are arranged in a pattern that reflects the combined influences of Art Deco and traditional African art with crisp, geometric shapes. The skirt of this dress features sparkling beaded fringe in a chevron pattern which would have moved, sparkled, and made a sound as the wearer danced. The sheen of the silk satin fabric would have shifted in the light to the rhythm of the music as she danced. This dress is a quintessential flapper evening dress of the 1920s that surely would have been worn in jazz clubs and takes influence from Black culture.

Some flapper evening gowns were made in bright colors to attract additional attention to the wearer, such as this evening dress from circa 1925 (Figure 20). The burnt orange hue of this garment is reminiscent of the “flame-coloured” dress Angela wore in Fauset’s *Plum Bun* which alludes to her Blackness (see page 86). Similar to the fabric of the previous dress, the velvet silk material of this garment would have shifted in the light and cast a sheen as the wearer danced. The focal point of this dress is the long, triangular-cut streamers that taper to a point and are stitched artfully along the hemline. The streamers suggest that this dress was surely meant for dancing, as they are reminiscent of the fringe overskirt from the dance costume in Figure 18 and therefore the influence likely stems from stereotypical depictions of African dress. Each streamer is delicately trimmed with shimmering gold beads that would have glistened as the wearer kicked up her legs when dancing. Furthermore, the streamers are featured in three different colors—orange, pink, and yellow—with different colors being revealed as the wearer danced, thus adding performativity and theatricality to the garment.

The cut of this dress features a scoop neckline to accentuate the wearer’s décolletage and a straight cut at the waist to provide freedom of movement. Again, the lack of sleeves and short hemline would have made it possible for the wearer to swing her arms and legs in dance. The

belt serves to accentuate the hips to add a touch of femininity, and it also provides another element that would have swung along with the dancer in addition to the streamers. This evening dress was made for dancing and reflects mainstream society's increased interest in jazz music that originated from Black American culture. Although this dress is French in origin, it is still an excellent example of what an American flapper evening dress would have looked like as Paris and America were constantly in communication through fashion in the 1920s; Americans often borrowed styles from Paris and vice-versa.

The French were fascinated by American jazz when it became part of mainstream American culture during the 1920s. Parisian audiences appreciated jazz music for its exoticness and sensuality they felt Europe was lacking during this time.²⁵⁷ In 1927 the French couturier Paul Poiret stated that "the implacable and hypertrophic rhythms of the new dances, the blues and the Charleston, the din of unearthly instruments, and the musical idioms of exotic lands' as well as other American influences would eventually lead to increasing masculinity and severity in women's fashion."²⁵⁸ Jazz and the dances that came along with it were highly influential to the androgynous, boyish silhouette of the era because the columnar shapes of flapper dresses allowed wearers to move with less restriction. French fascination with jazz continued to grow throughout the 1920s as jazz was increasingly mentioned in major fashion publications.²⁵⁹

Another French dress that provides a glamorized example of how jazz influenced fashion is this light gold sequin fringe evening dress from 1926 to 1927 (Figure 21). This garment features a straight cut to provide the fashionable androgynous silhouette, and the short hemline and lack of sleeves provide enhanced movement for the arms and legs. The silk fabric is layered

²⁵⁷ Hannel, "The Influence of American Jazz on Fashion," 59.

²⁵⁸ Hannel, "The Influence of American Jazz on Fashion," 64.

²⁵⁹ Hannel, "The Influence of American Jazz on Fashion," 61.

in three tiers that would have shifted and moved with the wearer as she danced. Additionally, the cape-like fabric panel at the back of the garment would have flown up in the air and trailed behind the wearer on the dance floor. The delicate cascades of thousands of sequins that are arranged vertically to create a fringe throughout the entire garment are central to the style of the piece. This sequin fringe would have swayed, glittered, and shifted with the wearer as she danced. The fringe was likely inspired by African dress, as African stereotypes and art were highly connected to jazz in mainstream culture. Similar to Figures 19 and 20, this dress was clearly created with dancing in mind because of its purposeful movement and glamour. This dress is reflective of the immense impact that jazz music had on Americans and the French.

Jazz music and the new dances that arose from the genre were highly influential to fashion. The advent of jazz reflects how Black Americans had a direct impact on fashions during the decade as the freely moving, short-hemmed, fringed, and embellished evening dresses of the era can be directly tied to the birth of jazz in Black communities. Although this impact was often repressed with stereotypes and labeled as “primitive” or associated with the “jungle,” Black Americans were responsible for the creation of the quintessential garment of the 1920s—the flapper evening dress.

“I wanted to find freedom of soul and spirit. I wanted to do things to help freedom come to my people. I was ready to fight, if necessary to obtain it. I wanted to feel that I was a human being and that we were all human beings.”

- Josephine Baker Home Coming Speech in St. Louis on February 3, 1952²⁶⁰

Josephine Baker: The First Black Fashion Icon

The woman who can be credited with bridging the gap between jazz music and fashion in mainstream society was the Black American stage performer Josephine Baker (1906-1975).²⁶¹ Baker was born in St. Louis, Missouri, and began performing as an escape from poverty, discrimination, and violence after the East St. Louis riots of 1917. She performed around the United States in vaudeville showcases²⁶² (stage shows that featured a variety of acts such as singing, dancing, and comedy²⁶³). Eventually, she starred in the Broadway musical *Shuffle Along*.²⁶⁴ In 1925 she moved to Paris and headlined the all-Black musical *Revue Nègre* where she enchanted audiences in her famous skirt made of bananas (Figure 22).²⁶⁵ She soon became a sensation in France where she was admired by thousands because she embodied an “exotic” energy that fascinated the French.

Hannel describes Baker as “the master of her image” despite racial biases and stereotypes that clouded the white perception of Black women.²⁶⁶ Baker would purposefully manipulate her stage persona to align with American and French stereotypes of exoticism and the “Black savage”; her signature *danse sauvage* portrayed the “primitive” Black woman in the context of

²⁶⁰ Josephine Baker, “The Josephine Baker Home Coming Day,” transcript of speech delivered at the University of Missouri, St. Louis, February 3, 1952, <https://www.umsl.edu/virtualstl/phase2/1950/events/perspectives/documents/jbhomecoming.html>.

²⁶¹ “Josephine Baker,” National Museum of African American History and Culture, Smithsonian, accessed November 17, 2021, <https://nmaahc.si.edu/LGBTQ/josephine-baker>.

²⁶² “Josephine Baker,” National Museum of African American History and Culture.

²⁶³ Howes et al., *Harlem Renaissance*, 84.

²⁶⁴ Howes et al., *Harlem Renaissance*, 75.

²⁶⁵ Howes et al., *Harlem Renaissance*, 82-3.

²⁶⁶ Hannel, “The Influence of American Jazz on Fashion,” 62.

colonialism. The French admired African culture for its seemingly “uncorrupted” and natural essence, and they viewed Black people as not equal to the French but at times even superior because of their perceived closeness to nature.²⁶⁷ Additionally, Baker’s manipulated persona catered to French fantasies about Africa, as she often wore scanty costumes and danced among jungle scenes in her performances. According to Hannel, “by playing the less evolved, less civilized black woman, Baker allowed her audiences to feel superior and in control while at the same time providing a vicarious sexual experience forbidden in everyday life.”²⁶⁸ Baker was able to capitalize on her sexuality by playing up her exoticized image and feeding into racial stereotypes. In turn, she was able to gain control over her Blackness by tapping into her African heritage.

Josephine Baker’s performances also featured highly glamorized, theatrical costumes (Figure 23). These costumes helped launch her to fame and she soon won the praises of major fashion publications in France and America, though these reviews were often still steeped in racial language.²⁶⁹ Baker became a fashion icon through her elaborate clothing choices both on stage and off; she was seen leaving nightclubs with chauffeurs, exotic pets, chic hairstyles, and wearing the most glamorous evening gowns imaginable.²⁷⁰ Baker carefully crafted her image and her style to align with the burgeoning trends of the 1920s—more freedom for women, the rise in popularity of Black culture, and the birth of jazz. Way states that she was the personification of the modern Black woman, “[combining] jazz, fashion, and a distinctly black urbanity in her celebrity persona. Baker represented a focal point of mainstream America’s, and the larger Eurocentric world’s unprecedented, if selective and exploitative interest in African and African

²⁶⁷ Hannel, “The Influence of American Jazz on Fashion,” 59.

²⁶⁸ Hannel, “The Influence of American Jazz on Fashion,” 62.

²⁶⁹ Hannel, “The Influence of American Jazz on Fashion,” 62.

²⁷⁰ Way, “Dressing to Pass,” 547.

American culture.”²⁷¹ Josephine Baker allowed for all the elements of new, mainstream 1920s culture to amalgamate into one stylish, highly influential persona. In turn, she perpetuated the growth of Black culture by bringing it to the forefront of mainstream focus.

The dress in The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s collection entitled “*Josephine Baker*” Dress is inspired by the glamorous, liberated, and courageous persona of Baker (Figure 24). It is made of fiery red silk to match her bold personality, with the color being yet another connection to Angela’s “flame-coloured” dress representing Blackness in Fauset’s *Plum Bun* (see page 86). This dress features the sleeveless, scoop neck, and columnar silhouette that was quintessential to flapper dresses in the 1920s. It was created to be danced in, as the tubular shape and short hemline allow for free movements of one’s limbs. The feathers also highlight the wearer’s movements and mimic Baker’s stage costumes, especially the costume seen in Figure 23. The sheerness of the textile adds a sensuality to the dress which mirrors Baker’s liberated sexuality. Lastly, the beading on the textile is reflective of African art with its geometric pattern. This dress combines the prowess of Josephine Baker with jazz music and Black culture that are at the heart of fashion in the 1920s.

In claiming and embracing the racist stereotypes of the primitive, exotic, sexualized Black woman as her own, Josephine Baker gained agency in the creation of her image. She ingeniously took control of her Blackness and flipped the objectification and sexualization of her body on its head to instead capitalize on it in her unapologetic, exuberant performances. Josephine Baker embodies the confident, stylish, modern Black woman and would inspire others for generations to come.

²⁷¹ Way, “Dressing to Pass,” 545.

Baker's legacy continued after she retired from the stage and joined the French Resistance during World War II.²⁷² She later became the only female speaker during the Civil Rights March on Washington in 1968 and remained a Civil Rights activist for the rest of her life. She adopted twelve children of all different racial and ethnic backgrounds and called it her "Rainbow Tribe."²⁷³ She returned to the stage later in life to fund her large family, but she passed away in 1975 just a few days after her performance for a sold-out audience in Paris. At her funeral, she received a twenty-one-gun salute while thousands of people crowded the streets to honor her. Josephine Baker is remembered not only as a fashion icon but as a courageous, empowered woman who believed in equality for all.

²⁷² "Josephine Baker," National Museum of African American History and Culture.

²⁷³ "Josephine Baker," Historic Missourians, State Historical Society of Missouri, accessed November 17, 2021, <https://historicmissourians.shsmo.org/josephine-baker>.

Flapper Fashion as a Vehicle for Social Change

Fashion is a powerful tool that can be used to transform perceptions about society. The abandonment of the corset at the turn of the twentieth century coincided with increased women's liberation and new freedoms, thus marking the corset as an important device used to revolutionize how society views and treats women. Similarly, the explosion of arts in the Black community during the Harlem Renaissance led to the birth of jazz music, an increase in Black visual and literary arts, and subsequently to the advent of the flapper dress. The flapper dress in turn was used as a tool by Black Americans in proving to mainstream society that Black culture should be respected and celebrated.

Women during the Harlem Renaissance had to transcend the barriers of not only race but of gender and class as well, which proved to be extremely difficult, as seen in the protagonists' attempts at passing in Jessie Redmon Fauset's *Plum Bun* and Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*. The portraits by James Van Der Zee provide visual evidence for Black Americans' new identities in the 1920s through their escapism, theatricality, and style. Black women were able to overcome the multiple barriers of race, gender, and class by using fashion as armor to forge their individual identities and to be accepted into society, and Josephine Baker provided the personification of the modern, empowered fashion icon by rewriting the narrative of racial stereotypes and claiming her Blackness.

The flapper evening dress not only provided women with a garment that allowed them to express themselves through dance in social settings, but it subsequently provided Black women with a sense of racial pride when they wore a garment that stemmed from the music of their communities and allowed them to dance to the sounds of their culture. The flapper evening dress

is inherently tied to jazz and therefore to the Harlem Renaissance, thus making it a key element of not only Black history but of American cultural history at large.

Conclusion: The Progression of Fashion in American Society

Fashion is essential to transforming the ways in which society perceives marginalized groups. As seen with the abandonment of the corset serving to transform society's perceptions of women and the flapper evening dress reflecting Black influences on American society, clothing has the power to alter societal perceptions, therefore changing the narrative of American society and bringing us one step closer to achieving equality for all.

The immense impact that fashion has is exemplary of how fashion history should be a more widely studied and respected discipline in academia. Fashion history provides a window into society from a certain time period, therefore it is exceedingly important in showcasing how society functioned during a particular point in history. With this information one can decode patterns of oppression, which then allows society to avoid these patterns and step forward into a more inclusive future. Furthermore, fashion history coincides with many other disciplines such as sociology, psychology, history, business, economics, philosophy, and more. As Aspers and Godart state, "fashion is a central social phenomenon, mechanism, or process that can be applied to any domain."²⁷⁴ It is essential to social studies because it communicates messages about society and "represents the clearest sign of a general 'aestheticization' of social life."²⁷⁵ It is for these reasons that fashion history should be more widely studied in universities across the world.

As outlined in this thesis, the fashions that women wear serve as a catalyst for shaping societal perceptions of them. The rise and fall of corsetry and the shift to the androgynous, boyish silhouette of the 1920s are reflective of how society is malleable and can be shifted to perceive women as equals. There is still a long way to go until women, the Black community, and other marginalized groups are regarded as complete equals to superior groups in American

²⁷⁴ Aspers and Godart, "Sociology of Fashion," 175.

²⁷⁵ Aspers and Godart, "Sociology of Fashion," 183.

society, but fashion has played—and will continue to play—a key role in reaching the goal of complete liberation.

Part III Illustrations



Figure 11. Aaron Douglas, *Aspects of Negro Life: Song of the Towers*, 1934, oil on canvas, New York, The New York Public Library, <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/6ca557ed-9597-5dcd-e040-e00a18065af4>.

(Image withheld due to copyright restrictions – see link)

Figure 12. Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller, *Ethiopia Awakening*, ca. 1921, paint on plaster, 13 x 3 ½ x 3 ⅞ in. Washington, D.C., National Museum of African American History and Culture, 2013.242.1, https://nmaahc.si.edu/object/nmaahc_2013.242.1.



Figure 13. Palmer Hayden, *Bal Jeunesse*, ca. 1927, watercolor on paper, 14 x 17 in. Pine Bluff, The Arts & Science Center for Southeast Arkansas, <https://www.asc701.org/whatsnewatascblog/swing-camp>.

(Image withheld due to copyright restrictions – see link)

Figure 14. James Van Der Zee, *Portrait of a Couple*, 1924, gelatin silver print, 25.2 cm by 20.2 cm, Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art, 2000.83.1, <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.111152.html#bibliography>.



Figure 15. James Van Der Zee, *Woman in a Dress with Sequins and Pearls in Front of Painted Backdrop*, 1925, gelatin silver print, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1970.539, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/259616>.



Figure 16. James Van Der Zee, *Billy*, 1926, gelatin silver print, 24.13 cm x 19.05 cm, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, 2019.29.2, <https://www.pafa.org/museum/collection/item/billy>.



Figure 17. Street style in Harlem. James Van Der Zee, *Three members of the Northeasterners, Inc., Edith Scott, Louise Swain, and Helene Corbin on Seventh Avenue in Harlem, 1927*, New York, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/aa1933a9-9808-2fea-e040-e00a18061239>.



Figure 18. Fringe dance costume. *Femme Amaguilla (Afrique)*, May 1922, in *La Gazette du Bon Ton* (Paris, Les Publications Lucien Vogel), plate 38, <https://library.si.edu/digital-library/book/gazettedubonton00d>.



Figure 19. Cream evening dress. *Dress*, late 1920s, American, cream silk satin, rhinestones, pearls, and fringe. Kent, Ohio, Kent State University, 1983.001.2488, <https://kent.pastperfectonline.com/webobject/6433B17B-1533-4A4D-815F-105225515545>.



(Front)

(Detail)

Figure 20. Orange evening dress. Voisin, *Evening Dress*, ca. 1925, French, silk velvet, beads, silk thread, silk lining, and satin facing. London, The Victoria and Albert Museum, T.139&A-1967, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O14009/evening-dress-voisin/>.



(Side)

(Detail)

Figure 21. Gold evening dress. Edward Molyneux, *Evening Dress*, 1926-7, French, silk, sequins, and georgette. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, C.I.42.33.3, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/81116>.



Figure 22. Josephine Baker in banana skirt. Walery, 1927, from the Folies Bergère production “Un Vent de Folie,” https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Baker_Banana.jpg.

(Image withheld due to copyright restrictions – see link)

Figure 23. Josephine Baker in stage costume. George Hoyningen-Huene, *Josephine Baker Wearing a Feathered Cape*, February 1, 1931, in *Vanity Fair* (New York, Condé Nast), https://library.artstor.org/asset/AWSS35953_35953_29892364.



Figure 24. House of Drecoll, “Josephine Baker” Dress, 1926, French, silk, glass beads, and feathers, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, C.I.40.169a, b, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/95196>.

Bibliography

- “A New African American Identity: The Harlem Renaissance.” National Museum of African American History and Culture. Smithsonian, July 31, 2014.
<https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/new-african-american-identity-harlem-renaissance>.
- Anderson, Maureen. “The White Reception of Jazz in America.” *African American Review* 38, no. 1 (2004): 135–45. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1512237>.
- Aspers, Patrik, and Frédéric Godart. “Sociology of Fashion: Order and Change.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 39 (2013): 171–92. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43049631>.
- Baker, Josephine. “The Josephine Baker Home Coming Day.” Transcript of speech delivered at the University of Missouri, St. Louis, February 3, 1952.
<https://www.umsl.edu/virtualstl/phase2/1950/events/perspectives/documents/jbhomecoming.html>.
- Bayle-Loudet, Aurore. “The Corset, Essential Protagonist of Modern Femininity.” In *Fashioning the Body: An Intimate History of the Silhouette*, edited by Denis Bruna, 159-76. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015.
- Bohleke, Karin J. “Mummies Are Called upon to Contribute to Fashion: Pre-Tutankhamun Egyptian Revivalism in Dress.” *Dress* 40, no. 2 (2014): 93-115.
<https://doi.org/10.1179/0361211214Z.00000000027>.
- Burnham, J. C. “New Perspectives on the Prohibition ‘Experiment’ of the 1920’s.” *Journal of Social History* 2, no. 1 (1968): 51–68. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3786620>.
- Campbell, Mary Schmidt, David Driskell, David Levering Lewis, and Deborah Willis Ryan. *Harlem Renaissance Art of Black America*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994.
- Cole, Daniel James, and Nancy Deihl. *The History of Modern Fashion from 1850*. London: Laurence King Publishing, 2015.
- Coleman, Nancy. “Why We're Capitalizing Black.” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), July 5, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/05/insider/capitalized-black.html?smid=url-share>.
- Delgado-Tall, Sonia. “The New Negro Movement and the African Heritage in a Pan-Africanist Perspective.” *Journal of Black Studies* 31, no. 3 (2001): 288–310.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2668034>.
- Eligon, John. “A Debate Over Identity and Race Asks, Are African-Americans 'Black' or 'black'?” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), June 26, 2020.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/26/us/black-african-american-style-debate.html?smid=url-share>.

- English, Daylanne K. "Selecting the Harlem Renaissance." *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 4 (1999): 807–21. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1344105>.
- "Explaining AP Style on Black and white." AP News. The Associated Press, July 20, 2020. <https://apnews.com/article/archive-race-and-ethnicity-9105661462>.
- Fauset, Jessie Redmon. *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral*. New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1929. <https://archive.org/details/plumbunovelwith00fausrich/mode/2up?ref=ol>.
- Fields, Jill. "'Fighting the Corsetless Evil': Shaping Corsets and Culture, 1900-1930." *Journal of Social History* 33, no. 2 (1999): 355–84. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3789627>.
- Freedman, Estelle B. "The New Woman: Changing Views of Women in the 1920s." *The Journal of American History* 61, no. 2 (1974): 372–93. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1903954>.
- Grimké, Angelina Weld. "The Black Finger." In *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, Albert & Charles Boni, Inc., 1925.
- Gruber, Katherine Egner. "Slave Clothing and Adornment in Virginia." Encyclopedia Virginia. Virginia Humanities. Accessed March 31, 2022. <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/slave-clothing-and-adornment-in-virginia>.
- Hannel, Susan L. "The Influence of American Jazz on Fashion." In *Twentieth-Century American Fashion*, edited by Linda Welters and Patricia A. Cunningham, 56-77. New York: Berg, 2005.
- Haugland, H. Kristina. "Bustle." In *The Berg Companion to Fashion*, edited by Valerie Steele, 106-8. Oxford: Berg, 2010.
- Hirji, Sukaina. "Oppressive Double Binds." *Ethics* 131, no. 4 (2021): 643-669. <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/713943>.
- Howe, Daniel Walker. "American Victorianism as a Culture." *American Quarterly* 27, no. 5 (1975): 507–32. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2712438>.
- Howes, Kelly King, and Christine Slovey. *Harlem Renaissance*. Detroit: U-X-L, 2001.
- Hughes, Langston. "Jazzonia." In *The Weary Blues*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926.
- Hughes, Langston. "Lenox Avenue: Midnight." In *The Weary Blues*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926.
- Hughes, Langston. "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." In *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002.

- Hurston, Zora Neale. "How It Feels to Be Colored Me." in *I Love Myself When I am Laughing...And Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive*, 152-5. New York: The Feminist Press, 1979.
- Jansen, Angela M. "Fashion and the Phantasmagoria of Modernity: An Introduction to Decolonial Fashion Discourse." *Fashion Theory* 24, no. 6 (2020): 815-36.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1362704X.2020.1802098>.
- Johnson, Georgia Douglas. "Cosmopolite." In *Bronze: A Book of Verse*. Boston: B. J. Brimmer Company, 1922.
- Jones, Martha S. "For Black Women, the 19th Amendment Didn't End Their Fight to Vote." National Geographic, August 7, 2020.
<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/black-women-continued-fighting-for-vote-after-19th-amendment>.
- "Josephine Baker." Historic Missourians. State Historical Society of Missouri. Accessed November 17, 2021. <https://historicmissourians.shsmo.org/josephine-baker>.
- "Josephine Baker." National Museum of African American History and Culture. Smithsonian. Accessed November 17, 2021. <https://nmaahc.si.edu/josephine-baker>.
- Keckly, Elizabeth. *Behind the Scenes: Or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House*. New York: Cosimo, 2009.
- Larsen, Nella. *Quicksand*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1928. Reprint, New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969. <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.32106012331168>.
- Lee, Summer. "Roaring & Swinging: shared Fashionable Ideals of Flappers and Mods." Fashion History Timeline. Fashion Institute of Technology, last modified June 2, 2020.
<https://fashionhistory.fitnyc.edu/roaring-swinging-flappers-and-mods/>.
- "Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller, Ethiopia, 1921." National Museum of African American History and Culture. Smithsonian. Accessed May 2, 2022. <https://nmaahc.si.edu/meta-vaux-warrick-fuller-ethiopia-1921>.
- "NABJ Style Guide A." National Association of Black Journalists. Accessed February 16, 2022.
<https://www.nabj.org/page/styleguideA>.
- Natanson, Barbara Orbach. "Portraits of Nineteenth Century African American Women Activists Newly Available Online." Library of Congress. March 29, 2017.
<https://blogs.loc.gov/picturethis/2017/03/portraits-of-nineteenth-century-african-american-women-activists-newly-available-online/>.
- Newsome, Effie Lee. "The Bronze Legacy." *The Crisis*, October 1922.

- Pel, Martin, Terence Pepper, Dennis Nothdruff, and Tessa Hallmann. *1920s Jazz Age Fashion and Photographs*. London: Unicorn, 2018.
- Rampersad, Arnold. "The Book That Launched the Harlem Renaissance." *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 38 (2002): 87–91. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3134215>.
- Reddy, Karina. "1920-1929." Fashion History Timeline. Fashion Institute of Technology, last modified August 18, 2020. <https://fashionhistory.fitnyc.edu/1920-1929/>.
- Riello, Giorgio. *Back in Fashion: Western Fashion from the Middle Ages to the Present*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020.
- Ross, Sara. "'Good Little Bad Girls': Controversy and the Flapper Comedienne." *Film History* 13, no. 4 (2001): 409-23. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3815458>.
- Steele, Valerie, and Colleen Gau. "Corset." In *The Berg Companion to Fashion*, edited by Valerie Steele, 165-8. Oxford: Berg, 2010.
- Steele, Valerie. *The Corset: A Cultural History*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001.
- Stevenson, N. J. *The Chronology of Fashion: From Empire Dress to Ethical Design*. London: A & C. Black, 2011.
- "The Senate Overrides the President's Veto of the Volstead Act." United States Senate. Accessed November 21, 2021. https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/minute/Volstead_Act.htm.
- "The Speakeasies of the 1920s." Prohibition an Interactive History. The Mob Museum. Accessed November 21, 2021. <https://prohibition.themobmuseum.org/the-history/the-prohibition-underworld/the-speakeasies-of-the-1920s/>.
- Tulloch, Carol. *The Birth of Cool: Style Narratives of the African Diaspora*. London: Bloomsbury, 2016.
- Vacche, Angela Dalle, and Jennifer M. Bean. *American Cinema of the 1920s: Themes and Variations*. Edited by Lucy Fischer. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2009. https://www.google.com/books/edition/American_Cinema_of_the_1920s/Ldy074fjkygC?hl=en&gbpv=0.
- Way, Elizabeth. "Dressing to Pass during the Harlem Renaissance: Fashion in the Novels of Jessie Redmon Fauset and Nella Larsen." *Fashion Theory* 24, no. 4 (2020): 535-66. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1362704X.2020.1746506>.
- Way, Elizabeth. "Elizabeth Keckly and Ann Lowe: Recovering an African American Fashion

Legacy That Clothed the American Elite.” In *Fashion Theory* 19, no. 1 (2015): 115-42.
<https://doi.org/10.2752/175174115X14113933306905>.

Yellis, Kenneth A. “Prosperity’s Child: Some Thoughts on the Flapper.” *American Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (1969): 44-64. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2710772>.

Zieseniss, Charles Otto, and Katell Le Bourhis. *The Age of Napoleon: Costume from Revolution to Empire, 1789-1815*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989.
<https://libmma.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15324coll10/id/12336>.