

**During the Harlem Renaissance, how did Meta Vaux  
Warrick Fuller's 'Ethiopia Awakening' (1921) challenge  
Eurocentric beauty ideals for African American women?**

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"Her eyes were ever opened unto beauty, and all the world was art"

–Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller (Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, 2024)

In 1921, Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller's 'Ethiopia Awakening', shown in Figure 1, redefined beauty and identity for African American women in the Harlem Renaissance. Fuller's sculpture was commissioned by W.E.B Dubois in 1921 for the America's Making Exposition (Figure 2). The piece has been categorised as a "pre-cursor to the Harlem Renaissance and as the first Pan-African work". ( Hanh, C). This essay will explore how 'Ethiopia Awakening' engaged with and challenged Eurocentric beauty ideals during the Harlem Renaissance by: firstly exploring Fuller's life; the prevailing beauty standards of the time; the specific context of the sculpture's creation; its material and allegorical features, and finally, the essay will reflect on the changes in beauty standards that Fuller's work contributed towards. While it is impossible to quantify the exact impact of 'Ethiopia Awakening' on beauty standards, the sculpture nonetheless played a pivotal role in challenging Eurocentric ideals and fostering a growing appreciation for Afrocentric aesthetics. The Harlem Renaissance involved people from many different disciplines, including visual artists and writers, who worked together to promote the image of African Americans in the early 20th century. Their work often alluded to Africa and wrestled between their identities as both Americans and people from the African diaspora. Prominent writers such as W.E.B Dubois and Alain Locke worked to use art as a tool against racism. Locke, in his book 'The New Negro', said that "the Negro can be

carefully studied, not just talked about in art instead of being wholly caricatured". Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller was one of few African American women working at the time, her identities made her career as a successful artist unlikely. However, her identities proved to be cornerstones of her groundbreaking work.

Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller (Figure 3) was born in 1877 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, into a middle-class and culturally engaged African American family. Encouraged to pursue her artistic talents from an early age, she studied at the Pennsylvania Museum and School of Industrial Art. She later honed her craft in Paris under the mentorship of Auguste Rodin. Fuller's work often grappled with themes of racial identity, femininity, and spiritual awakening. By the time she created 'Ethiopia Awakening', she had proven herself as a pioneering African American sculptor who merged classical techniques with profoundly symbolic themes. This piece reflects her commitment to addressing the historical and cultural aspirations of the African diaspora.

Fuller, an avid reader of 'The Crisis', would have gained knowledge of Egyptian art through the magazine's detailed coverage of archaeological excavations in Sudan and Ethiopia, in which the reign of the Kushite kings and the ancient city of Meroe were highlighted. During her time as a student in Paris, Fuller frequently visited the Louvre, where she likely encountered its Egyptian artefact collection, which had been on display since 1826. Later, as a resident of Framingham, Massachusetts, a small town near Boston, she had access to the renowned Egyptian art collection at Boston's

Museum of Fine Arts. Among the notable pieces in this collection was the statue of King Menkaure and Queen (Figure 4). In a 1921 letter, Fuller described “the period of the Negro kings” as “the most brilliant period, perhaps of Egyptian history” (National Museum of African American History and Culture, 2024), a statement that references the reign of the Kushite kings in Egypt from 712 to 664 BCE. (R, Ater) Illustrating Fuller’s profound fascination with Egypt, a fascination that would go on to inspire her for many decades to come.

The cultural context surrounding the creation of *Ethiopia Awakens* was shaped by the dominance of Eurocentric ideals of beauty, which marginalised non-European features and traditions. Early 20th-century popular media and advertisements celebrated a vision of femininity characterised by light skin, refined features, and delicate forms attributes aligned with Western standards. These representations were exclusionary, often disregarding the beauty of African and other non-European peoples. In March 1903, Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller was featured on the cover of ‘Colored Magazine’ (Figure 5). This issue emphasised the “recovery of an alternative history of the Black race, a history that begins in a glorious African past” (Dahn, E). Despite this celebration of African heritage, the advertisements within the magazine reveal the pervasive influence of Eurocentric beauty standards. For example, a prominent ad for Crane and Co.’s “Wonderful Face Bleach” (Figure 6) promised to lighten skin tones. Similarly, a full-page advertisement for Hartona Remedy Co. (Figure 7) promoted products such as Hartona Hair-Grower, Straightener, and Face Bleach.

The Hartona advertisement, a recurring feature in the magazine, used line drawings to depict transformations that aligned with Western beauty ideals. These illustrations presented a dark-skinned woman with curly hair as the "before" and a white-skinned woman with straight hair as the "after," claiming its products could "turn the skin of a black or brown person four or five shades lighter, and a mulatto person perfectly white." Additionally, it asserted that "Hartona positively straightens the kinkiest of hair." Such marketing reinforced the notion that white features were synonymous with goodness and desirability, even in publications aimed at an African American audience. This juxtaposition between the magazine's content celebrating Afrocentrism and the advertisements promoting Eurocentric beauty standards highlights the contradictions, tensions, and ambivalences that many African Americans navigated during this period. Although, this issue of 'Colored Magazine' was published eighteen years before the creation of 'Ethiopia Awakening,' the prevailing beauty standards for African American women remained unchanged, reflecting broader societal pressures and internalised biases.

The life-sized sculpture 'Ethiopia Awakening' was first presented by Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller in 1921 at the America's Making Exposition. This event was part of the World's Fairs and Expositions tradition that aimed to project cultural strength globally. In the United States, beginning with the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial International Exhibition, art could be utilised to signal this message. The America's Making Exposition specifically celebrated the contributions of immigrants to American society (Figure 8). Despite their forced arrival to the United States via the transatlantic slave trade, African

Americans were invited by the committee of the exposition to take part as “honorary immigrants” (Ater, R). The exposition took place during the aftermath of the Red Scare (1919–1920) and sought to convey the message that America was “a land of but one people” (City and State Departments of Education). However, as Ater notes, “belief in assimilation and a unified American cultural identity underscored their rhetoric.” The NAACP and the National Urban League collaboratively organised the "Americans of Negro Lineage" section of the exposition. In 1921 ‘Crisis magazine’ said of the exhibit “the education value of this exhibit cannot be estimated.” (Crisis, 1921). James Weldon Johnson, field secretary of the NAACP and chairman of the exposition's "Colored Section", and W. E. B. Du Bois commissioned Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller to create an allegorical sculpture for the event (Ater, R). Fuller recalled, “they had an idea all cut and dried that they would have Ethiopia” (Ater, R). She agreed to produce "a twelve-inch sketch or model which could be enlarged to whatever size they wanted" (Ater, R) (Figure 9).

The title ‘Ethiopia Awakening’ evokes a profound sense of renewal and pride, positioning the sculpture as a counter-narrative to prevailing norms. "Ethiopia" references the literary-religious tradition of Ethiopianism, rooted in the biblical prophecy of Psalm 68:31: "Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God." This symbolism resonated deeply with African American cultural and spiritual consciousness (Ater, R). ‘Ethiopia Awakening’ served as a framework for African Americans to assert their racial identity by drawing on the grandeur of Egyptian history while celebrating the romanticised ideal of Christian

Ethiopia as a symbol of Black liberation. However, its presentation at a "melting pot" event also underscored an assimilationist element, reflecting the tension of African Americans striving to prove their worth to a society that systematically excluded them from full citizenship (Ater, R). Nonetheless, the exposition and by extension Fuller's piece was describes a "revelation in its accomplishment" (1922) and a "promise in its originality and beauty" (1922) in Crisis Magazine.

'Ethiopia Awakening' is a striking representation of the themes of awakening, renewal, and identity. Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller described her allegorical sculpture, saying,

"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"

(National Museum of African American History and Culture, 2024).

Standing at sixty-seven inches tall, the bronze sculpture depicted a "pseudo-Egyptian black woman" (Ater, R). The mummified form begins to unravel, with the figure clutching one end of the linen shroud against her heart, this can be clearly seen in the maquette in Figure 9. She appears to be unravelling herself, or perhaps the bandages are simply loosening on their own. Her legs, however, remain tightly bound, rigid and immobilised. While her arms, once crossed in the posture of death, are now freed, there is a soft "graceful gesture" in her left hand and a symbolic act of self-liberation in her right. The figure's head, wearing a Nemes, twists at the neck. No longer fixed in a forward-facing stare, it turns with determination and hope, searching for a new place.

The sense of awakening is palpable. The Nemes, a traditional headdress of Egyptian royalty, were rarely depicted on women in ancient Egyptian art except for Queen Hatshepsut, who was often portrayed in the regalia of a male pharaoh (Figure 10) (Ater, R).

Despite the power of Fuller's sculpture, it was not universally praised by her contemporaries. Critic Alain Locke, in his book *The New Negro* (1925), dismissed much of Fuller's work as "imitative and not highly original." He regarded her expressions of racial identity as "an insult" (Ater, R). However, Locke made an exception for 'Ethiopia Awakening', which he considered a breakthrough. To him, the piece demonstrated the potential of race-based art when directed toward "representative group expression." He considered it "outstanding." (Ater, R). In 1863 the Emancipation Proclamation ended slavery however, true freedom and equality still remained elusive. Fuller, a staunch supporter of the Equal Suffrage Movement, initially campaigned for women's right to vote but became disillusioned upon discovering that black women were excluded from its advocacy. Nonetheless, cultural tides were shifting. As Fuller envisioned, a race that had endured centuries of mummified subservience was beginning to take charge of its destiny.

The contrast between 'Ethiopia Awakening' and early 20th-century beauty ideals is striking. While mainstream media marginalised African aesthetics, Fuller's sculpture stood as a powerful celebration of Black beauty and cultural pride. As art historian Ater notes, "Fuller treated 'Ethiopia's' facial features with a distinctive reference to black physiognomy," depicting "full lips, a wide nose with flared nostrils, and sharply angled



cheekbones.” By embracing these features, Fuller challenged the exclusionary norms of her time and presented an alternative vision of beauty rooted in pride and cultural significance. Ater explains that Fuller “acknowledged this need for historical validation and vindication” by creating “a regal physiognomy that celebrated blackness.” African American viewers of the era would have recognised the sculpture’s significance as a tribute to ancient history and an affirmation of Black cultural “genius.” Through its emphasis on African heritage and the potential for renewal, ‘Ethiopia Awakening’ invites viewers to reconsider beauty as a diverse and inclusive concept.

Fuller, a pioneer of the Harlem Renaissance and Pan-African art, helped redefine beauty ideals during her time. This shift is evident in contemporary advertisements (Figures 11, 12, and 13) that began to embrace Black physiognomy. Figure 11, an advertisement from Crisis Magazine in March 1923, claims its ‘superfine preparations’ would ‘preserve your natural heritage’, reflecting the growing appreciation for black physiognomy. Advertisers “increasingly relied on the association of brown skin with beauty” (Haidarali, L), as seen in Figures 12 and 13, which promoted dolls with ‘beautiful brown skin’ and described ‘brown skin dolls’ as ‘beautiful’. Haidarali observes that these advertisements departed from earlier Eurocentric ideals, noting that they “signalled the growth of a new culture of beauty” (Haidarali, L) rooted in Afrocentrism. Unlike the advertisements of earlier decades (Figures 6 and 7), these new depictions celebrated the values of Afrocentrism and redefined beauty in terms of Black pride and identity.

Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller's 'Ethiopia Awakening' is a powerful statement that challenged the Eurocentric beauty ideals of the early 20th century and helped reshape the African American identity during the Harlem Renaissance. Although the precise extent of 'Ethiopia Awakening's' influence on beauty standards cannot be measured, its symbolic power and celebration of Black identity undeniably contributed to the shifting perceptions of beauty and representation in African American culture. The deliberate use of Egyptian motifs and its celebration of Black physiognomy, the sculpture countered the pervasive marginalisation of African aesthetics. Also, it reclaimed cultural pride and heritage for the African diaspora. Fuller's work is deeply rooted in the historical and cultural consciousness of the Harlem Renaissance, drawing from the grandeur of Egyptian history and the spiritual ideals of Ethiopia to inspire a vision of renewal and awakening. The significance of Ethiopia Awakens is profound. Tuliza Fleming, curator at the National Museum of African American History and Culture, aptly observed, "The 20th century started with that piece" (Hanh, C). Fuller's sculpture not only marked a breakthrough in African American art but also predicted the cultural and aesthetic shifts that would redefine beauty and representation. By juxtaposing Fuller's sculpture with prevailing beauty standards and the shifting cultural narratives reflected in contemporary advertisements, this essay highlighted how 'Ethiopia Awakening' subverted dominant norms and predicted and contributed to a growing Afrocentric aesthetic.



Figure 1- Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller's 1921, bronze 'Ethiopia Awakening'.

## AMERICANS OF NEGRO LINEAGE



By Mrs. Meta Warrick Fuller  
a Negro Sculptor

*"Ethiopia" A Symbolic Statue of the  
EMANCIPATION of the NEGRO  
RACE.*

*From the Exhibit*

**I**N the making of America, the part played by the African group is of tremendous importance. His great contributions have been labor, personal service and music.

Negro labor in slavery and freedom, cleared the forests and swamps for the great agricultural regions of the South. It entered America one year before the Puritans and only twelve years after the Cavaliers. From the early 17th Century to the present day, Negro labor has been indispensable in the fundamental industries of the South. On its work depend the great crops of cotton, sugar, tobacco and rice. Negroes are also engaged in the operation of coal mines, fisheries and transportation. It has furnished faithful personal and domestic service and recently has succeeded in the skilled trades.

In 53 years of freedom the Negro has increased his homes owned from 12,000 to 600,000; farms operated from 20,000 to 1,000,000; business enterprises from 2,100 to 50,000. He has increased in literacy sixty per cent. and the number of his teachers from 600 to 38,000. The sum spent from his own pocket for his own education has increased from 80,000 to 1,700,000 dollars; his church property from 1,500,000 dollars to 85,900,000 dollars, and his general wealth from 20,000,000 dollars to 1,100,000,000 dollars.

Churches, colleges and great social agencies have been organized by the Negro. This race has produced orators, writers, and educators. It has given to this country the only distinctively "American" music; the "Sorrow Songs" or Jubilee Music and the syncopated instrumental and vocal rhythms.

The Negro exhibit is designed to symbolize the origin of the race in Africa and its progress in America. Wall decorations will show their industrial contribution to the nation and the educational work among those of their own race. The industrial school will be depicted. Their Musical festival typifies their wonderful contribution to this branch of art.

Figure 2 – "Americans of Negro Lineage," from The Book of America Making Exposition



Figure 3- Photograph of Meta Warrick Fuller, ca.1911.



Figure 4 - King Menkaure (Mycerinus) and queen Egyptian Old Kingdom, Dynasty 4, reign of Menkaura 2490–2472 B.C.





Figure 5- Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller on the cover of 'The Colored American Magazine' in March 1903.



## BLACK SKIN REMOVER.



### A Wonderful Face Bleach. AND HAIR STRAIGHTENER.

both in a box for \$1, or three boxes for \$2. Guaranteed to do what we say and to be the "best in the world." One box is all that is required if used as directed.

#### A WONDERFUL FACE BLEACH.

A PEACH-LIKE complexion obtained if used as directed. Will turn the skin of a black or brown person four or five shades lighter, and a mulatto person perfectly white. In forty-eight hours a shade or two will be noticeable. It does not turn the skin in spots but bleaches out white, the skin remaining beautiful without continual use. Will remove wrinkles, freckles, dark spots, pimples or bumps or black heads, making the skin very soft and smooth. Small pox pits, tan, liver spots removed without harm to the skin. When you get the color you wish, stop using the preparation.

#### THE HAIR STRAIGHTENER.

that goes in every one dollar box is enough to make anyone's hair grow long and straight, and keeps it from falling out. Highly perfumed and makes the hair soft and easy to comb. Many of our customers say one of our dollar boxes is worth ten dollars, yet we sell it for one dollar a box. THE NO-SMELL thrown in free.

Any person sending us one dollar in a letter or Post-Office money order, express money order or registered letter, we will send it through the mail postage prepaid; or if you want it sent C. O. D., it will come by express, 25c. extra.

In any case where it fails to do what we claim, we will return the money or send a box free of charge. Packed so that no one will know contents except receiver.

CRANE AND CO.,  
122 west Broad Street,  
RICHMOND, VA.

Figure 6- Advertisement for 'Black Skin Remover' in the March 1903 issue of 'The Colored American Magazine'.



TRADE-MARK.



# HARTONA

POSITIVELY STRAIGHTENS  
—ALL—  
Kinky, Knotty, Stubborn,  
Harsh, 'Curly Hair.



TRADE-MARK.

HARTONA makes the hair grow long, straight, beautiful, soft, and glossy. Cures Dandruff, Baldness, Itching, Eczema, and all Scalp Diseases. Prevents Falling Out of the Hair and Premature Baldness. **HARTONA POSITIVELY STRAIGHTENS THE KINKIEST HAIR.** Guaranteed harmless. Sent anywhere on receipt of price—25c. and 50c. per box.

**HARTONA FACE BLEACH** will gradually turn the skin of a black or dark person five or six shades lighter, and will turn the skin of a mulatto person almost white. **HARTONA FACE BLEACH** removes Wrinkles, Dark Spots, Pimples, Freckles, Black-heads, and all Blemishes of the Skin. Guaranteed absolutely harmless. Sent to any address on receipt of price—25c. and 50c. per bottle.


Hartona Remedies are absolutely guaranteed, and your money is positively refunded if you are not perfectly satisfied. Write to us, and we will send you free a book of testimonials of more than one hundred people in your own State who have used and are using Hartona Remedies.

**SPECIAL GRAND OFFER.** Send us One Dollar and mention this paper, and we will send you three large boxes of **HARTONA HAIR GROWER AND STRAIGHTENER**, two large bottles of **HARTONA FACE BLEACH**, and one large box of **HARTONA NO-SMELL**, which removes all disagreeable odors caused by Perspiration of the Feet, Arm-Pits, &c.

Goods will be sent securely sealed from observation. Write your name and post-office and express office address very plainly. Money can be sent in Stamps or by Post-Office Money Order, or enclosed in Registered Letter or by Express.

Address all orders to—


TRADE-MARK.



## HARTONA REMEDY CO.

909 E. Main Street,  
RICHMOND, VIRGINIA.

AGENTS WANTED in Every Town and  
City. Liberal Salary Paid.



TRADE-MARK.

Figure 7 —'Hartona Remedy Co' advertisement in the March 1903 issue of 'The Colored American Magazine'.

## WHERE AMERICA-MAKING IS A REGULAR BUSINESS



*Forty-Eight Thousand Three Hundred Seventy-Six Posters for America's Making,  
Each an Original Design, Have Been Made by Children of the Public Schools*

Figure 8- Illustrations of posters from The Book of America's Making Exposition.



Figure 9 - Maquette for Ethiopia Awakening , 1921, Painted plaster.





Figure 10 - Seated Statue of Hatshepsut New Kingdom ca. 1479-1458 B.C.

*The Beautiful are never desolate;  
But some one always loves them.*

*—Bailey.*

**T**HE truth of this poetic gem is not to be denied, for a thing of beauty is a joy forever. The beautiful, however, are not to be envied. Their beauty is no longer the possession of super charms like Venus de Milo. On the contrary every one of average looks may become bewitchingly attractive by improving ordinary features, strengthening flabby, sagging muscles, eradicating blemishes, rejuvenating skin health and by enhancing her every charm.

**MADAM C. J. WALKER'S**  
**SUPERFINE PREPARATIONS**  
*FOR THE*  
**HAIR and SKIN**

are made to aid you acquire the charms of beauty and to preserve your natural heritage. Buy them, try them, improve your looks and be loved by all for the beauty you will possess.

Face Creams, Powders, Talc, Perfumes, Soaps, etc. and five excellent, unsurpassed remedies for tetter, eczema, dry, thin and falling hair.

*Our 1923 Beauty Book Sent Free On Request.*

**THE MADAM C. J. WALKER MFG. CO. INC.**  
**640 N. WEST STREET** **INDIANAPOLIS, IND.**

Figure 11- march 1923, crisis magazine preserve your natural heritage

**THIS DOLL HAS BEAUTIFUL BROWN SKIN**



**Negro  
Crying  
*and*  
Walking  
DOLL**

**As Shown  
14 inches Tall**

**\$2.49**

**Postage prepaid**

**No C. O. D.**

**No Catalogs**

**O. K. COLORED DOLL CO.**  
**2289-7th Ave. New York, N. Y.**

Figure 12 – Advertisement for 'Negro Crying and Walking Doll with 'Beautiful brown skin' in December 1923 issue of 'The Crisis Magazine'.

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# **BROWN Skin Dolls**

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Beautiful Unbreakable Walking and Talking Dolls with real Black Hair and Beautifully Dressed.

**Size 18 in.**

**\$2.98 each; \$24.00 Doz.**

We also have other Dolls of Different Prices and Styles. Write for Free Catalog. Agents and Dealers Wanted. Photo Medallions, Photo Jewelry, Negro Post Cards, Pictures, Enlarged Portraits and lots of other novelties.

We copy from any photo you send us and return your photo with your order. Prompt shipments.

**BELL MFG. CO.,**

**Dept. C**

**Box 103, Jamaica, N. Y.**

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Figure 13 – Advertisement for ‘Brown Skin Dolls’ described as ‘Beautiful’ in ‘The Crisis Magazine in December 1923

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Figure 1- Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller (1921) Ethiopia Awakening [Bronze sculpture].

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Figure 3- (1921) Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller. Available at:

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Figure 4- Egyptian Old Kingdom, Dynasty 4, reign of Menkaura (2490-2472 B.C) King

Menkaura (Mycerinus) and queen [Greywacke sculpture]. Available at:

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Figure 5- Henderson, K. (2024) Meta Warrick Fuller: Her Eyes Were Ever Opened Unto Beauty, and All The World Was Art. Available

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Figure 6 - The Colored American Magazine (1903) Black Skin remover [Advertisement].

Available at: [https://coloredamerican.org/?page\\_id=373](https://coloredamerican.org/?page_id=373)

Figure 7 - The Colored American Magazine (1903) Hartona positively straightens all Kinky, Knotty, Stubborn, Harsh, Curly Hair [Advertisement]. Available at:

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Figure 8- City and States Department of Education. (1921) The Book of — Americas Making Exposition. Available at:

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Figure 9 – Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller (1921) Maquette for Ethiopia Awakening [Painted Plaster]. Available at: <https://danforth.framingham.edu/exhibition/meta-fuller/>

Figure 10- Joint reign of Hatshepsut and Thutmose III (1479–1458 B.C.) Seated Statue of Hatshepsut [Indurated limestone, paint]. Available at:

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Figure 11 – The Crisis (1923) Madam C J Walker's Superfine Preparations for the Hair and Skin [Advertisement]. Available at:

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Figure 12- The Crisis (1923) Negro Crying and Walking Doll [Advertisement]. Available at: <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=osu.32435023476500&seq=379>

Figure 13- The Crisis (1923) ` Brown Skin Doll [Advertisement]. Available at:

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