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QUESTIONING MULATTO WOMAN'S IDENTITY: RACE, SEXUALITY, AND NELLA
LARSEN'S *QUICKSAND*

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ABSTRACT

Nella Larsen wrote during 1920s when Harlem Renaissance was at its peak. This article makes an attempt to read Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928) as an exploration of African American 'biracial' / 'mulatto' women in White Anglo Saxon Protestant America and their quest for an identity within the confines of race, gender, sexuality and how it feeds into a movement against essentialism. The argument will focus on how the novel addresses the question of white patronage and black concession and how Larsen indicts both the white and the black communities. The argument will be based on the meeting point between acceptability and rejection and conflict between respectability and passion experienced by a 'mulatto' woman.

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Nella Larsen, one of the major woman voices of the Harlem Renaissance, wrote when many African American writers were attempting to establish African-American identity during the post-World War I period. Figures as diverse as W.E.B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, A. Philip Randolph, Jessie Fauset, Zora Neale Hurston along with Nella Larsen sought to define a new African American identity that had appeared on the scene. These men and women of intellect asserted that African Americans belonged to a unique race of human beings whose ancestry imparted a distinctive and invaluable racial identity and culture.

This paper aims at showcasing the exploration of African American 'biracial' / 'mulatto' women in White Anglo Saxon White Protestant America and their quest for an identity with reference to Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928). As Hostetler points out *Quicksand* "is a meditation on color: gowns of shivering apricot; sunsets of pink and mauve light; the turquoise eyes of fellow travelers" (35). Larsen not only explores the modernity of New African American racial identity, but also expresses the concerns of the female "mulattos" who struggle with their "biracial" identities in a country that is sharply divided by color line.

"This is the story of the struggle of an interesting cultured Negro woman against her environment," writes Thronton (287). The novel begins with Helga's teaching at an African American school called Naxos, but she soon leaves Naxos. She decides to resign and in her meeting with Anderson, the Principal Helga renders the limitations of her heroic pose and the prominence of fears about her supposedly worthless social value. Anderson, who seems to be a quintessence of New African American possibility, also expresses a social vision informed by the prejudices of an old social order:

What we need is more people like you, people with a sense of values, proportion, an appreciation of the rarer things of life. You have – something to give which we badly need here in Naxos. You must not desert us, Miss Crane". She nodded, silent. He had won her. She knew that she would stay. "It's an elusive something", he went on. "Perhaps I can best explain it by the use of that trite phrase, 'you're a lady; you have dignity and breeding"

"If you're speaking of family, Dr. Anderson, why I haven't any. I was born in a Chicago slum".

The man chose his words, carefully he thought. "That does not at all matter, Miss crane. Financial, economic circumstances can't destroy tendencies inherited from good-stock you yourself prove that!"

"The Joke is on you, Dr. Anderson. My father was a gambler who deserted my mother, a white immigrant. It is even uncertain that they were married. As I said at first, I don't belong here. I shall be leaving at once. This afternoon". (18)

Paradoxically, in standing up for herself, she discloses how deeply racism and sexism have shaped her identity.

Helga and her mother were abandoned by her father when she was a child and her mother remarried thus leaving sense of derision and disdain in her but then as she was growing up she had to identify herself with her African American blood. She breaks an engagement with the aristocratic James Vayle and leaves Naxos with a bit of dissatisfaction even though she is partially moved when the handsome Principal, Anderson appeals to her to stay. Helga makes her way to Harlem and is taken in as house guest by Anne Grey.

Helga's turning down Anderson's proposal speaks with urgency her sentiments that underpin her shame about her parents' failed biracial marriage and her own deficient childhood. In this attempt to hide her sentiment she could not be completely honest with herself and Anderson. In posing as a woman lacking the social graces that Anderson sees in her, she casts herself as a prey of Naxos's conservative moralist and exclusionary practices rather than their active opponent. Helga rather accepts the power of Naxos to define and restrict her instead of seeking to subside this power through a move that was positive self determination. Helga makes a great impression on Danish society and enjoys the attention she elicits in Denmark, but soon she gets a feeling that she does not fit here either. Disillusioned she returns to Harlem, ostensibly to celebrate her friend Anne's marriage to Robert Anderson, the former principal of the school at Naxos.

This sense finds repetition of her observation on the novel's first page that she "gave willingly and unsparingly of herself with no apparent return" – grounds the realization that she has not succeeded in escaping her "Fate" as an African American woman. She too is exploited. As a light-skinned "mulatto," she can opt out of the African American working class in an attempt to pass for white.

However, Helga's status as "mulatto" woman is repeatedly compromised because of the ambiguous nature of her struggles. As a school teacher in Naxos Larsen destabilizes the melodramatic moments which bear the sound or look of melodrama but which point to the falsity of the accepted moral polarities that melodrama usually reinforces. After leaving Naxos, Helga confronts the same repressive strictures of a racist and sexist division of labor in Chicago. It comes as desperation when she realizes that despite being educated and skilled, she cannot find employment in any other sector than domestic service. Helga "felt the smallness of her commercial value" (27) as an unwanted commodity in the economy of America. And her lighter skin color propelled her ambition for prospective mates with lighter color. On arriving in Copenhagen, "she took to luxury as the proverbial duck to water" and realizes that "ever since childhood" she had wanted, not money, "but the things which money could give, leisure, attention, beautiful surroundings. Things, things, things" (49-50).

As a mulatto, Helga has a twofold symbolic significance in this process of exchange: her light skin bestows respectability, and her African Americanism signifies hyper sexuality. And, of course, she resists being objectified as a "decoration," a "curio," a "Peacock" as a means of "advancing the social fortunes of the Dahls of Copenhagen" and fulfilling the sexual needs and vanity of Axel Olsen (51-54). Olsen's desire to possess made her feel like an object reduced merely to a Chattel and his painting of her underscores how he replicates the racist fantasy about African American women as jezebels or as Helga puts it, "Some disquieting sexual creature" (67). Her refusal of his marriage proposal – parallels her resignation from the college; both actions

seek a way out of the stifling social roles defined for women, particularly African American or “mulatto” women. While staying at Anne Gray’s middle-class house in Harlem, she thinks to herself:

Some day she planned to marry one of those alluring brown or yellow men who danced attendance on her. Already financially successful, any one of them could give to her the things which she had come now to desire, a home like Anne’s, Cars of expensive makes such as lined the avenue, clothes and furs from Bendel’s and Revillon Freres, servants and leisure.(35)

Frazier has pointed out that by identifying with the bourgeoisie, Helga tries to break the signifying chain that links her to the African American working class, a response typical of the African American middle-to-upper class interested in maintaining respectability in a white world (qtd. in “The Gold Standard of Racial Identity” 287, 299). Her dislike for talks on racial issues among her Noxas Colleagues, Harlem friends, and Copenhagen relatives and acquaintances was a consequence of it. Before leaving for Copenhagen she thinks from Harlem, “Why . . . should she be yoked to these despised for – Black folk” (41). In Copenhagen – seduced by the wealth and attention she receives, Helga vows never to return to America. She is charmed by the working-class district which was free from “that untidiness and squalor which she remembered as the accompaniment of poverty in Chicago, New York, and the Southern cities of America” (56); in her frame of reference, it appears bourgeois. And shortly after she receives Anne’s letter announcing her marriage to Dr. Anderson, Helga muses on what would have become of her if she had never left Harlem and instead married Anderson herself. She would be “working everyday of (her) life. Chattering about the raced problem”: “Negroes who were allowed to be beggar only, of life, of happiness, of security Negro blood, one must not expect money, education, or, sometimes, even work whereby one might earn one’s bread” (60).

Helga could however not escape the reification of African American association. Her move to Denmark brings to light three important dimensions of her identity and Jeffrey Gray points it out as:

1) mulatto is still read as black in white cultures of both the United States and Europe; 2) racism is merely replaced, as Helga discovers in Denmark by exoticism; and 3) the move itself from the United States to Europe reinscribes, in Helga’s and other American’s thinking, the “primitive” vs “uplift” binarism – that is, Helga sees herself going to Europe as a move away from “primitive” forces in America. (257)

Perhaps Helga’s most desperate attempt to free herself from class/racial crucifixion is her marriage to a southern Reverend, Mr. Pleasant Green, whose name evokes a kind of utopian fantasy and the bourgeois value of marrying for money. The marriage is a way of finally consummating her sexual desires, without feeling belittled or somehow beneath her husband.

Helga’s marriage to Green does not help her to overcome her internalized racism. Sex with Green, a working-class man only temporarily gives her an “anesthetic satisfaction for her senses” (86). Her fear of being identified with the African American working class reasserts itself in her attempt to conceal the poverty, class status and racialization of African American women, especially when she counsels – the women not to wear the racially and class-coded sunbonnets or aprons on Sundays because, one can assume they would look like domestics – too conventionally African American (87). Race for her is an ideological construct as for other African Americans on the American soil and almost echoes what Langston has stated in *Voices of Harlem Renaissance*:

The word white comes to be unconsciously a symbol of all the virtues. It holds for the children (of the Black bourgeoisie) beauty, morality and money – The whisper of - “I want to be white” runs silently through their minds (qtd. in Dawahare 40)

Her contempt for the African American working class grows when she fails to uplift her neighbors and instead becomes more of a proletariat like them. She had to perform more and more domestic work in exchange for her sexual satisfaction – another economic transaction – especially when she has children. Helga comes to view the labor “cost” (116) of having a sex life as an unequal exchange, since she must pay dearly with her body – the double labor of producing children and maintaining a well-kept home. Having reached her final crisis, Helga thinks to herself, she had ruined her life. “She had, to put it as brutally as anyone could, been a fool. And she had paid for it. Enough more than enough” (96).

The former incident foregrounds Helga's trepidations about both her sexuality and the authenticity of her social role, the latter presents an apparently liberated Helga opposing Axel's efforts to stereotype and possess her. Axel mentions to her, "You have the warm impulsive nature of the women of Africa, but, my lovely, you have, I fear, the soul of a prostitute. You sell yourself to the highest buyer. I should of course be happy that it is I" (65). So much like her meeting with Anderson, her encounter with Axel in Copenhagen foregrounds moral and social valuation of Helga by men.

Here Olsen identifies Helga's connivance with her aunt's display of her as an exciting, inciting object, and her apparent fulfillment to make a lucrative marriage. At the same time, he makes a false distinction between Fru Dahl's effort to display Helga and his own version of Helga's "African" nature, a stereotype he captures in his painting of her, which Helga dismisses: "It wasn't she . . . but some disgusting sensual creature with her features" (89). In rejecting Olsen, Helga refuses the intertwined materialism and racism of her white relatives' values, "But you see, Herr Olsen, I'm not for sale. Not to you. Not to any white man. I don't care at all to be owned. Even by you" (65). Having been reduced into playing the role of "primitive other" through the false experience of subjectivity granted by consumerism and self-display, Helga begins her attempt to define her identity as an African American woman on her own terms.

Helga's encounter with Robert Anderson during Anna and Anderson's marriage party brings her back to the days at Naxos. She had often thought of Robert when she was at Copenhagen and now she realizes that his attraction for her is still intact. So when he kisses her at a party, she begins to fantasize about their affair. Her fantasies are cut short when a few weeks later Robert Anderson apologizes blaming his rash action on too many drinks. Helga is shattered by the frustration of her nascent desire. In a state of despair one night, she wanders aimlessly into the rain, and ends the evening by sleeping with the out-of-tower minister, Reverend Green. She marries him, moves to his rural Alabama Parish, and seemingly adjusts to economically depressed conditions. But the parishioners view her as an "uppity, meddlin 'N' the 'nah'" (87). She finally gives up under the clutches of poverty and the hardship of child bearing.

Helga's alienation and struggle for identity thus more specifically relates to the intersection of sexuality and race. So, though race is certainly a central issue in the novel, however, it is not an isolated location for identity. As an African American woman, Helga is linked to a history of being the sexual property of white men. Slave women's reproductive power was "valuable", and white men's exploitation was the accumulation of capital. Each time she suppresses a sexual desire, she suppresses a creative impulse. A sexualized encounter precipitates each of her decisions to leave a social or professional environment in what becomes her compulsive search for "a new life" (66).

So Helga's struggle for an agency for honest self-expression is imperiled by her reluctance to emulate the new race-woman ideal. Larsen challenges the racist and sexist encoding and interrogates the iconicity of both the races that a mulatto woman epitomizes as a figure marked by interracial and intra racial desire.

The oppositional unity encapsulated by her phrase "a fantastic motley of ugliness and beauty", which she uses to describe the varied hues of "this – oppressed race of hers" on display in a Harlem nightclub, deftly captures the conflicting elements of African American femininity that surface (59). Larsen reverses the African American woman's role as the foil for white femininity. Harlem of the 1920s is the major physical landscape for the graphic explorations of Helga Crane's search for an identity within an African American world. The tenure and diversity of the physical settings combine with the intensity and necessity of Helga's gendered and racial search to mark one of the major achievements in *Quicksand*.

The novel seems to imply that Helga's mother had risked all in violating racial taboos and marrying Helga's father. But another reading is that the mother sacrifices her child for the sake of a man and her own happiness. This interpretation is reinforced by the repetition of the mother's sacrifice in marrying a second time. That second marriage, to a man of her own race, but not of her own kind – so passionately and so instinctively resented by Helga even at the trivial age of six – she now understood as a grievous necessity. Even foolish, chastised women must have food and clothing; even unloved little African American girls must be somehow provided for. Memory, flown back to those years following the marriage, dealt her torturing stabs (19).

Although Helga claims to understand her mother's action as "a grievous necessity", she never forgave her mother for choosing a man over her child. Because of her mother's choices, Helga's childhood, "one long, changeless stretch of aching misery of soul", was marked by "ugly scarifying – quarrels, "her own childish self-effacement", and "her mother's careful management" (20), their mutual attempt to mediate the "spiritual wounds" and "ugly scarifying quarrels" of their daily lives. As an adult, Helga has suppressed her anger towards her mother, particularly her complicity in her child's suffering and her acquiescence to patriarchal power over females. Helga recognizes that her "inherent aloneness", an essential "part of her being" (45), stems from her childhood isolation within a destructive family. In the final sequence of *Quicksand*, "there was her mother, whom she had loved from a distance and finally so scornfully blamed, who appeared as she always remembered her, unbelievably beautiful, young, and remote" (93).

At Copenhagen, Helga becomes an object; her body is objectified, commoditized and placed on the marriage market. When she understands that her relatives are transforming her into both a pampered doll and a sexual commodity, she yearns to move backward in time and reclaim her youth (she desires to do so as an adult and as an agent) and realizes that she cannot accomplish her purpose in Denmark who have no understanding of what it means to be a woman of color and specifically an African American: "I could not marry a white man It is n't just you, not just personal It's deeper, broader than that. It's racial if we were married you might come to be ashamed of me, to hate me, to hate all dark people. My mother did that" (65). She focuses not on her own potential response to an inter-racial marriage but on Olsen's, because the painful model available to her is her mother's reaction both to her father and to Helga herself. Helga's vitality does not last and her own deprivation are so alien that she can neither be happy nor "subdue the cleanly scrubbed ugliness of her own surroundings into soft inoffensive beauty" (87). The pattern of the texts is in line with the conventional female maturation within the marriage plot, displaced by the reproduction of children. With the birth of her fourth child, she becomes too weak to fulfill her social roles as wife and mother.

Talking of marriage, Helga replies: "Someday, perhaps. I dun't know. Marriage that means children, to me. And why add more suffering to the world? Why add any more unwanted, tortured Negroes to America? Why do Negroes have children? Surely it must be sinful. Think of the awfulness of being responsible for the giving of life to creatures doomed to endure such wounds to the flesh, such wounds to the spirits, as Negroes have to endure." (76)

Despite her desperation Helga clearly sees her mother in herself. Notwithstanding remoteness, her mother neither abandoned her nor denied connection with her, so that Helga experiences her resemblance to her mother without rejecting the family. *Quicksand* ends neither with Helga's physical escape nor with her literal death; it concludes with her becoming pregnant with a fifth child before she has recovered from the birth of the fourth. Her loss of autonomy and self-determination is signed by her inability to control her body and by the debilitating effects of reproduction and motherhood: "In that period of racking pain and calamitous fright Helga had learned what passion and credulity could do to one. In her was born angry bitterness and an enormous disgust. The cruel, unrelieved suffering had beaten down her protective wall" (94). So in a sense, the Helga Crane who had dominated the narrative is symbolically dead.

Helga ends, much as she begins in Naxos, isolated within a small room and in bed where "she could think, would have a contain amount of quiet of alones" (94). The bed, however, has become womblike and dangerous. A change of environment as relief from her condition is practically impossible; her children deprive her of other creative expressions because she remains restricted by her personal understanding of family. "She wanted to leave them The recollection of her own childhood, lonely, unloved rose too poignantly before her for her to consider calmly such a solution leave them would be a tearing agony, a rending of deepest fibers" (98). Emotional and intellectual connectedness escape her, her existence is as fragmented as it was at the beginning of the novel. From the beginning, she is a divided person who wants a full, rich life, one marked by achievements and recognition; yet she is also an ambivalent individual incapable of adhering to any one set path in life, primarily because she does not know what she wants to be or what her potential is. Her own restless nature and her latent sexual desires combine with her conflicting attitudes towards race and gender to cause her downfall.

Helga's sudden release from the self-sacrifice of sexual repression propels her into a nightmare of domestic self-sacrifice; Larsen ends her story of sexual discovery with Helga's sinking into what she finally recognizes as a "quagmire" of endless, life threatening pregnancies and childbirths (96). Larsen's exploration of Helga's sexuality involves risk, not only because it entails reclaiming an African American female sexuality that has been defined and exploited by whites, but also because it means entering a literary market place that had celebrated the so-called primitive and savage emotions associated with dark-skinned peoples.

Helga's apparitions about her new life of relentless domestic self-sacrifice detonate after she barely survives almost forty-eight hours of labor, an ordeal that leaves her bedridden and semiconscious for weeks. Her hours of "racking pain and calamitous flight" expose the inadequacy of traditional rewards for maternal self-sacrifice, namely adoration for the new baby and belief in an afterlife (94).

When the midwife presents Helga's fourth child for her "maternal approval", Helga can no longer play her expected role: "She failed entirely to respond properly to this SOP of consolation for the suffering and horror through which she had passed" (92). Similarly, the agony of this latest childbirth shatters both Helga's wifely devotion and her religious faith: "She know only that, in the hideous agony that for interminable hours – no, centuries – she had borne, t he luster of religion had vanished; that revulsion had come upon her; that she hated this man." Raging against the "'white man's God' and the idiotic nonsense" about rewards in the afterlife for present suffering (94-95), Helga finally comprehends the true dimensions of the wifely and maternal self-sacrifice expected of her: sex with a man who repels her and slow murder by childbirth. As she reluctantly regains her strength, she defines her choice: "She was determined to get herself out of this boy into which she had strayed Or She would have to die" (97). When Helga "awakens" from her religious delusion and confronts her horror over her new life, she seems to face her true feelings and situation. Kimberly Monda has pointed out that Larsen seems to portray here that Helga's greatest tragedy is not her remarkably inappropriate marriage, or even her physical danger from too frequent child birth. Rather, the Larsen implies that Helga's process of self-reflection stops short, masking an even deeper layer of self-delusion, and consigning her to her own version of the compensatory myth of rewards in the afterlife that she derides in the rural folk around her ("Self Delusion and Self-Sacrifice" 13) . While Helga's recognition of her hatred for her husband and her realization of her profound entrapment are important first steps, her analysis does not go far enough. Helga judges her unhappiness in this marriage as of a piece with her former struggles: "She had to admit that it was not new, this feeling of dissatisfaction, of asphyxiation. Something like it she had experienced before. In Naxos. In New York. In Copenhagen. This differed only in degree." (97).

Larsen thus dramatizes the ways in which social forces impinge upon the individual psyche unable to acknowledge her sexual desire because of racist constructions of black peoples' allegedly primitive natures; Helga also fails to experience her objectivity. At the end, Helga Crane cannot grant herself the recognition her mother, her father, and the men in her life have failed to give her. Through her self-sacrifice triumph she becomes a mere extension of her husband and children, lost in escapist fantasies that allow her to tolerate remaining the object of their desires rather than the subject of her own. Deborah McDowell attributes these "contradictory impulses" in Larsen's novel to her division between a "desire for sexual fulfillment and longing for social respectability" that renders her sexual expression particularly problematic ("Introduction" ix-xxxi). Throughout the novel, Helga, Larsen's protagonist, finds that her social acceptance depends on either an erasure or perversion of her social expression.

The tragedy of Helga's quest is not the result of either racial identity or sexual identity but of the fact that the two cannot be separated. The repeated slippage of race into sex (and vice versa) is effected through a parallel slippage of subject into object in which Helga's attempts at self-expression are implicated in different – economics of objectification. Helga's inarticulate and incomplete musings about her racial and sexual identity – "I hate such non-sensational soul-searching" (61) a repeated retrain – are externalized in her interactions with her environment.

Helga's silence, her inability to verbalize or mediate her identity in a social world, becomes the text's silence. The novel's continual deferral of meaning and a stable identity ironically culminates in an uncanny outburst of African American female sexuality.

By the end of the novel, Helga's travelling has been replaced by her diseased, overtly fertile body. Her trajectory, negotiated through a proliferation of different masks, allows Larsen to label Helga's choices as different types of slavery, the only movements of acquittal for Helga are when in the midst of delirious illness. In contrast while in Harlem Helga had found herself amidst African American community with an African American view of life (associated with diversity) in which she blended smoothly because the differences are stressed between the individuals to create a mosaic (a unity through diversity). Thus by presenting contrasting positions Larsen makes us question any attempt to define identities in terms of categories such as race, gender and sexuality that feeds into a movement against essentialism.

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