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Essence and the Mulatto Traveler: Europe as Embodiment in Nella Larsen's Quicksand

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When Nella Larsen's novel *Quicksand* appeared in 1928, in the midst of the Harlem Renaissance, its enthusiastic reception was due in part to the alternative it seemed to offer to the trend of "primitivism" embodied by such books as Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem*, which had come out the same year, and which W.E.B. DuBois had denounced as "nauseating" (Vincent 359). If *Quicksand* was not exactly an example of "racial uplift"—a mission which the novel's heroine explicitly and its author implicitly repudiated—at least, to the relief of many middle-class black readers, its heroine was not a prostitute, and its language was not the vernacular. A critic in 1928 wrote:

> *many folks will be interested to hear that this book does not set as its tempo that of the Harlem cabaret—This is the story of the struggle of an interesting cultured Negro woman against her environment.... Harlem night-life is more or less sub-merged by the psychological struggle of the heroine....* (Thornton 287)

But there was a difficulty inherent in Larsen's own position as a member of the class represented in the novel by characters such as James Vayle, the class which promoted "uplift" and the duty of DuBois's "talented tenth." Even while Larsen wished to explore her heroine Helga Crane's sexuality, she was compelled, in order to avoid primitivist stereotypes, to make Helga a model of chastity and education, a person who never uses dialect, who disapproves of nightclubs, dance, and promiscuity, and who finds it natural to use phrases such as "Thanks awfully" to her fellow teachers in Naxos, Mississippi.

One means of avoiding the choice of "uplift" vs. "primitivism" and yet incorporating that binary opposition into "the psychological struggle of the heroine" was to make the heroine a mulatto, as Larsen did in both *Quicksand* and her second novel *Passing*, and to place the question of racial indeterminacy at the heart of both novels.[1] Another means was to transport the action, midway through *Quicksand*, to Europe, where Helga's (and Larsen's) heritage partly lay. Both moves prove to be problematic, however, in that 1) "mulatto" is still read as "black" in the 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 Americans' thinking, the "primitive" vs. "uplift" binarism—that is, Helga herself sees going to Europe as a move away from "primitive" forces in

[1] Although Spanish offers both the masculine and feminine spellings of *mulato* and *mulata*, English confines us to the generic *mulatto*, which, with some misgivings, I will use throughout this essay.

America. Nevertheless, it is these two conditions—of travel and the mulatto heroine—which establish *Quicksand* as a novel *sui generis* about the African-American's construction and self-construction as art object abroad.

The mulatto embodies the United States' racial question—literally, a question: is s/he or isn't s/he? In Claude McKay's story "Never White," a character comments, "They hate us even more than they do the blacks. For they're never sure about us, they can't *place* us" (Berzon 25, emphasis mine). Much of the criticism of *Quicksand*, both early and recent, has indeed set the novel in the context of "tragic mulatto" novels, in which the mulatto man or woman is presented as a "lost, unhappy, woebegone abstraction," as Sterling Brown described her (Thornton 289). Hazel Carby's more recent view contests this hopelessness, arguing that Helga Crane's position is actually enabling, allowing her to be both inside and outside the race issue, observer and participant (Carby 171). But Helga finds, as contemporary anthropologists also find, that she cannot occupy both positions, that her indeterminacy, though it facilitates border crossings, does not enable the search for Self.

Octavio Paz, in a discussion of the analogous problem of the mestizo, writes:

> *The Mexican does not want to be either an Indian or a Spaniard. Nor does he want to be descended from them. He denies them. And he does not affirm himself as a mixture, but rather as an abstraction: ... He becomes the son of nothingness. [This is] the wound that we alternately flaunt and conceal.* (Paz 87)

Helga, like Paz's mestizo, wants neither to be black nor white, and affirms herself as an abstraction, seeming to puzzle over the question of an identity anterior to gender, race, and body, free of those determinants. Trying to locate that identity, that mythical unconstructed ground, is her project. "Something deep down inside me," she says at one point, by way of an explanation to her uncle for her rejection of her Danish suitor Axel Olsen (Larsen 203). And, earlier, she reflects "that the Danes had the right idea.... Enhance what was already in one's possession" (163). One thinks of Nietzsche's odd injunction to "become what one is." But what does one "already" have "deep down"? Larsen suggests, throughout the novel, some ground in the body, some physical givens. But all Helga finally "has" in Europe is her alterity, which, though impossible for her to bring into focus, becomes her obsession and her treasure.

Helga's status as mulatto is further differentiated from the mulatto figure traditionally realized in fiction, when we note that she is *not* the mulatto represented in *Quicksand*'s epigraph:

> *My old man died in a fine big house.*
> *My ma died in a shack.*
> *I wonder where I'm gonna die,*
> *Being neither white nor black?*

Hortense E. Thornton has suggested that the epigraph—from Langston Hughes' poem "Cross"—is inappropriate because Helga Crane's plight does not arise

solely out of her racial heritage but more importantly out of her gender.[2] But there is another powerful reason why the epigraph is inappropriate: it represents the wrong *kind* of mulatto. Helga's is not the plantation case of the white master's seduction/rape of the black woman slave. Frantz Fanon, writing of the Martiniquaise novelist Mayotte Capecia, explains that a white mother is rarer than a white father for a mulatto. "The white man can allow himself the luxury of sleeping with many women.... But when a white woman accepts a black man there is automatically a romantic aspect.... It is an honor to be the daughter of a white woman. That proves one was not 'made in the bushes'" (Fanon 46).

Nella Larsen herself was born to a Danish mother and a West Indian father. Her father died—unlike Helga's who deserted—and her mother remarried a white man, with whom she had other children, but by whom Larsen was not well-treated. Larsen, like Helga, spent time in Chicago, where she was born, in New York, and in Copenhagen, where she attended university classes. Except for the death of the father in Larsen's case, the parallels are clear-cut, and certainly the estrangement which the author felt in her life is one we can trace in her heroine. But whether or not we wish to allow the biographical text into the literary text, we have at least to see that Helga's indeterminate position as mulatto is additionally problematized, in that she was brought up with whites and has no black family. Her going to Europe, therefore, is not only in order to seek a happy future in Copenhagen, where there were "no Negroes, no problems, no prejudice" (*Quicksand* 123), but to join the only blood relatives who will accept her. (Ironically, her journey is facilitated by the blood relative who will not accept her, Peter Nillsen, who gives her $5,000 and godspeed.)

What Fanon goes on to say in his discussion of mulatto fiction is especially germane to *Quicksand*: "only one course is left for the heroines: to go away" (47). Thus, the two questions of racial indeterminacy and of geographical "place" are not only equally paramount but finally become a single question. The mulatto is a traveler, moving back and forth between black and white communities, or, in Helga's and other contemporary cases, between continents. As with most journeys, Helga's is a quest for Self and for Self-location. But her shuttling geographical movement also corresponds to the binarism in which the African-American novel of the time found itself trapped: primitive vs. uplift, where the United States represents the primitive of the repressed Self, and Europe the idealized (and aestheticized) Other. This shuttling movement is the controlling figure of *Quicksand*.

A study of African-American travel subjectivity remains to be written. Travel as self-discovery is usually described, for blacks in this country, as a movement from the South to the Northern cities, and, for whites, as a movement to Europe. Alex Haley does go to Africa for his roots, as European-Americans go to the "old world" for theirs, digging up spurious genealogies and coats-of-arms. But the importance of Europe as an African-American Other has not received nearly the attention which Africa has received as the white

[2] Two of Larsen's critics—Hortense E. Thornton and Deborah E. McDowell—have specifically addressed this epigraph; virtually all of the critics who have examined *Quicksand* in the last two decades have argued that there is a danger in letting the issue of race displace that of gender. Hortense Thornton may be the earliest to take this view (in 1973); others are Cheryl A. Wall and Anne E. Hostetler.

European's Other. For the African-American artist, Europe functions as a way of altering positionality, and thus as a means of finding one's way out of notions of "essence"—not because Europeans are not quick to essentialize (representations of blacks in French literature, movies, and television should remove all doubt on this score), but because the geographical/cultural movement itself allows the Subject the possibility of uncovering the constructedness of representations, on either side of the Atlantic. If Helga's travel is doomed to failure, it is not because she fails to "find herself," but because she is looking for herself, for her "essence." In particular, she accepts the body as given and fails to see its constructedness at every stage. Perhaps it is too easy to pass 1990s-style judgments, thinking, as we currently do, that we are as free to negotiate among the identities socially ascribed to us as we are to craft identities of our own. But travel subjectivity, even in earlier times than ours, offers just such possibilities. Even in Helga's historical moment, her experience might have led her to interrogate and perhaps to redefine standard inscriptions. She comes, as we will see, very close to such redefinition—by virtue of her dissatisfied, restless travel—but she is finally unable to achieve it.

The mulatto's position "between" races, and particularly Helga's position of having family only on the distaff/white side, complicates "going away," a phenomenon already complicated in the work of African-American artists who have addressed the problem of Europe. The African-American artist's journey to Europe may be a flight *from* white and/or black Americans, but it is certainly a flight *to* a different or at least a differently perceived white people. We may see Helga too as an artist—her art being self-aestheticization, self-creation—like those other writers and performers, in the 1920s, '30s, and '40s, who fled a racist America in the hope of finding a hospitable and generous Europe. Helga has in common with them the experience of the additional embodiment which Europe gives them, puzzling but pleasurable. "Difference" feels different here, they report. Richard Wright's, James Baldwin's, Josephine Baker's, and Helga Crane's reactions to Europe are full of contradictions, but they are remarkably similar contradictions.

Richard Wright was invited to France by the French government in 1945. He was met in Paris by two limousines, the American embassy officer, and Gertrude Stein: "For the first time in my life, I stepped on free soil. If you are not black you will never know how heavy weights seem to fall off your body," Wright commented. (Webb 247). He describes a physical freedom, the sensation of his legs swinging from his hips differently from the way he remembered, an effortlessness in his motion.[3] The contradiction that Wright remarks in his new surroundings takes the form of pleasurable indifference on the one hand ("He did not bother them! They did not give a damn about him!" [247]) and a similarly pleasurable high visibility (their stares were "friendly, open, curious" [247]). These two reactions become important in discussing Helga Crane's dilemma. After all, doesn't indifference equal invisibility? And doesn't visibility, on the

[3] Constance Webb does not attribute most of the remarks she quotes or paraphrases, explaining that they come from personal conversations with Wright or from his diaries.

other hand, entail embodiment and objectification? Wright, settled into Paris, reads to Gertrude Stein from his introduction to *Black Metropolis*, and makes a choice:

> *No more fiendish punishment could be devised ... than that one should be turned loose in society and remain absolutely unnoticed by all members thereof.... [If they] acted as if we were non-existent things, a kind of rage and impotent despair would ere long well up in us, from which the cruellest bodily tortures would be a relief....* (Webb 249)

Given the two choices, then, Wright prefers embodiment, visibility, as affirming one's existence. Helga, also a celebrity in Europe, is additionally embodied as woman and "after awhile [gives] herself wholly to the fascinating business of being seen, gaped at, desired" (162-63). (Interestingly, though she is often objectified in the United States—as a "lady" in Naxos, as a prostitute in Chicago, as a "poor los' Jezebel" in the Harlem church—she posits Harlem as a place of lesser visibility compared to Naxos, when, in an effort to relax James Vayle, she says, "Nobody's watching us, or if they are, they don't care a bit what we do" [225].)

The other reason for going to Europe is to escape white *and* black Americans. Though Helga eventually leaves Europe because she is homesick for Negroes (207), her original reason for going there is that there will be "no Negroes, no problems, no prejudice" (123). James Baldwin, in "Encounter on the Seine: Black Meets Brown," has described how in Europe, far from wanting to socialize, African-Americans would avoid each other: "past humiliations [are] associated not only with one's traditional oppressors but also with one's traditional kinfolk" (36). "Why," Helga demands in a moment of fury and humiliation, "should she be yoked to these despised black folk?" (121). "It was as if she were boxed up ... closed up with that *something* in the racial character which had always been, to her, inexplicable, alien" (120, italics Larsen's).

Baldwin has also written about going *back*; one of his stories, "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon," has its main character preparing for his return (though the story ends before the ship has docked). But Baldwin says that whenever the black American in Europe gets homesick, "there begins to race within him, like the despised beat of the tom-tom, echoes of a past which he has not yet been able to utilize ... " (38). The sound of the tom-tom reminds us of Helga Crane's only encounter with other blacks in Denmark: her revulsion at the minstrel show, and her exploration of that revulsion through her repeated visits. It was as if her "pale pink and white" friends "had been invited to look upon something in her which she had hidden away and wanted to forget" (183). Later, still disturbed by the experience, she reflects that her friends had all along divined the presence of that *something*, undisclosed to her who feels herself "inside" it:

some characteristic, different from any that they themselves possessed. Else why had they decked her out as they had? And they hadn't despised it. No, they had admired it.... Why? (184)

The sound of the tom-tom also echoes the earlier scene in the Harlem jazz club where Helga, after surrendering to the music, feels ashamed and longs all the more to flee to Europe.

The question of in/visibility in Europe and the question of flight from other Americans are brought together in an interview with the most celebrated African-American *artiste*-in-exile of her time. Josephine Baker, in 1973, two years before her death, was interviewed on the French Riviera by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., then just out of college and writing an article for *Time* on black expatriates. Baker had come to Paris in the 1920s, of course, long before the writers we have been discussing, but concurrent with the Harlem Renaissance writers. She told Gates,

A lot of us left, not because we wanted to leave, but because we couldn't stand it anymore.... I felt liberated in Paris. People didn't stare at me. But when I heard an American accent in the streets of Paris, I became afraid. (Rose 267)[4]

Perceptions of the locals' perceptions of oneself as foreigner will vary not only from person to person but also from day to day. But African-American artists have agreed in sensing that difference is different in Europe. To be a foreigner is to be additionally embodied: one is African *and* American. For Helga, embodiment is multiple: she is exhibited as black, female, American, English-speaking, and silent—that is, because of the language, at a remove of greater voicelessness. She is seen and not heard. Like Josephine Baker's, Helga's flesh is exposed at her Danish debut:

Marie had indeed "cut down" the prized green velvet, until, as Helga put it, it was "practically nothing but a skirt." She was thankful for the barbaric bracelets, for the dangling ear-rings, for the beads about her neck. She was even thankful for the rouge on her burning cheeks and for the very powder on her back. No other woman in the stately pale-blue room was so greatly exposed. But she liked the small murmur of wonder and admiration which rose when Uncle Paul brought her in. (155)

Helga's "dress" is the equivalent of Josephine Baker's famous "banana skirt." Indeed, Helga is carrying on a tradition of more than a century's standing, the tradition of exhibiting "exotic" African females at European social gatherings. Sander L. Gilman, in "Black Bodies, White Bodies," discusses, among several such examples, the "Hottentot Venus," who was the sensation of a ball given by

[4] Phyllis Rose suggests that Baker is revising her life here, for the benefit of the young interviewer whose politicized expectations she could read. Baker had stayed away from the United States during all of the civil rights era. She had originally gone to Paris, at the age of 15, because she had been offered the best job of her life up to that point. (Rose's book, incidentally, cites *Quicksand* [44] as an example of the African-American's struggle with the choice between American racism and European exoticism.)

the Duchess Du Barry in Paris in 1829 (Gilman 232). Helga, though, participates in the creation of herself as fetish by several means: she speaks little, deliberately retains her "slow, faltering Danish" as being "more attractive than a nearer perfection" (163), and wears a smile like "a fixed aching mask ..." (157). She is objectified, embodied more than she was in the United States, but the embodiment feels different, in part because she consents to and has a hand in its construction. Even her mood is calculated: "She managed, too, to retain that air of remoteness which had been in America so disastrous to her friendships. Here in Copenhagen it was ... mysterious and added another clinging wisp of charm" (163). She takes to the admiration eagerly. And if they want to dress her up in colors—though something in her resents it—yet "Certainly she loved color with a passion that perhaps only Negroes and Gypsies know" (151). And, she reflects, she *does* have lovely shoulders, and her feet *are* nice.

The narrator's and Helga's reflections bring us back to a ground of signification which Helga cannot resolve. For the narrator, Helga's bone structure and color are fixed, whatever the discursive protocols. Helga's "amber loveliness" (29), her "biscuit-colored" skin (24), are givens. Helga's body is the event of the novel, whose plot consists of a series of descriptions of that event. Conflict arises with the question of who will have the authority of representing her body. Axel Olsen's painting of Helga is the most powerful representation, not solely for its considerable forwarding of the plot (following the painting's unveiling, decisions are made on all sides, most importantly Helga's and Axel's decision not to marry) but also because of the range of reactions it elicits. "It wasn't herself," Helga thought, "but some disgusting sensual creature with her features. Herr and Frau Dahl had not exactly liked it either," she reports, although "critics had been unanimous in their praise." The painter's own assessment is that "my picture is, after all, the true Helga Crane" and that therefore—perhaps because it *is* "disgusting"?—it is a "tragedy" (199).

The next reading we have of the painting is that of Marie, the maid, who, pressured to answer Helga's question, "Do you think this is a good picture of me?" replies, blushing and hesitating, " ... no, I don't like that picture. It looks bad, wicked" (199-200).

But the last opinion is that of the narrator, who closes the chapter by repeating—with what measure of irony?—"Yes, anyone with half an eye could see that it wasn't she" (200). Larsen, in fact, withholds an iconic representation, both of the painting and in narrative descriptions of Helga's body. The painting, if described in material terms, would have opened up a discussion among its viewers of its iconicity, its representativeness. Instead, the discussion can take place only on a symbolic and arbitrary level, in terms of an abstract canon whose parameters we cannot know. The painting, like Helga's body, becomes a moral, not a topological, text.

Assessments of the painting resemble assessments of Helga: there are scarcely any "descriptions" which go beyond the moral terms indicating the narrator's preferences: "well-fitted," "well-turned" (in reference to arms and legs, as if turned on a lathe), "radiant," "pretty," "sensitive and sensuous,"

"good," "delicately chiseled," "delightful" (3) are a few of the adjectives in a single passage of "description" of Helga. Indeed, there are so many moral terms that one's image of Helga must remain nebulous. (What kind of mouth is a "pretty mouth"? What kind of nose is "good"?) We also have Helga's attractiveness on the authority of such apparent experts as her aunt Katrina and the painter Axel Olsen. Here, as with Axel's portrait, Larsen's deferral of reference saves the reader, but perhaps not Helga, from falling into the fallacy of believing that, if only one had physical identity, the problem of self-identification would vanish.

If Helga's body is an object of art for herself and others, it is also an object of anxiety in her private thoughts. Helga the aesthete, the sensitized neurasthenic, is tormented by a disgust for the physical. Her body locates her in that place from which her cognitive closures—especially regarding sexuality—exclude her. She is adamantly, often crudely, Cartesian. She wants to put off the sordid flesh standing in the way—as she sees toward the end of the novel, after her "conversion"—of her spiritual perfection. Amid the ordinary squalor of daily life she suffers from a Proustian excoriation of the senses: on the train, "the smell of stale food and ancient tobacco irritated Helga like a physical pain" (55). Her personal habits are her way of compensating for a vulgar and untidy environment—her fussiness over her dress ("faultlessly tailored" [66] and, according to her aunt, "puritanical"); or over table utensils ("the thick cups and the queer dark silver of the Young Women's Christian Association distressed her" [66]).

But it is especially human bodies, and, of those, especially the bodies of her close male contacts, which arouse revulsion in Helga. If these feelings are an inscription of the prim and chaste ideal of the black heroine, constructed to counter the then prevalent myth of the black woman's licentiousness, they would seem to go well beyond such an ideal. Helga's feelings about James Vayle, as she leaves Naxos, are indicative: "Acute nausea rose in her as she recalled the slight quivering of his lips sometimes when her hands had unexpectedly touched his; the throbbing vein in his forehead" (54). Much later, a similar feeling invades her with regard to the once-admired Axel; she is amazed "to discover suddenly how intensely she disliked ... the shape of his head, the mop of his hair, the line of his nose, the tones of his voice, the nervous grace of his long fingers" (190). As for the man she marries, even while Helga is still in the honeymoon phase, feeling that "their two lives were one" and looking forward to each "night when all that was living in her sprang like rank weeds ... with a vitality so strong that it devoured all shoots of reason" (273), she has already begun to notice Pleasant Green's dirty fingernails, his fat unwashed body, and the odor of his sweat. By the time she is awaiting her fourth child, she looks "in helpless dismay and sick disgust at the disorder around her," and when the child is born, her disgust widens to include the latest "little dab of amber humanity which [she] had contributed to a despised race" (283). When her husband approaches her bedside, she repels him: "She drew her hand away from him ... and turned her face away to hide a grimace of unconquerable aversion.... She knew only that ... the luster of religion had van-

ished; that revulsion had come upon her; that she hated this man" (288). Helga weeps to think of what she has done to herself, as well as to her sons and daughters, who "would grow to manhood, to womanhood, in this vicious, this hypocritical land" (292). When she learns that her newborn child has died, she closes her eyes in relief: "One less" (293).

If Robert Anderson escapes Helga's disgust, it is because he is never quite embodied for her. She tells herself that she dislikes his control, his coolness and confidence (49), but it is his detachment that keeps her fascinated. Except for the one instant of intimacy toward the novel's end, Helga sees Anderson from a distance, either in semi-darkness, "blurred slightly in outline in that dimmer light" (41) in their first encounter; or across the room in a nightclub, where he sits with the fascinating Audrey Denney; or finally, distanced still further, as the husband of her friend Anne Grey.

The two points—on the one hand, Helga's almost anal aestheticism and self-fashioning as art object, and, on the other, her urge to go to Europe and her subsequent embodiment as black American there—are vitally related. There are two possible ways of creating the Self as an art object. One is to work with one's "personal" raw materials ("Enhance what was already in one's possession" [163]). The other is to work with one's surroundings, so that raw materials seem to transform themselves in relation to their background. In the most visible sense—the sense in which "*Quicksand* is a meditation on color," as Ann Hostetler has suggested (35), and Helga moves restlessly within that meditation, changing as she moves—Helga is a sort of anti-chameleon, placing herself in settings which will not conceal her but show her to greatest effect. Just as she would drape herself against a piece of furniture ("In vivid green and gold negligee and glistening brocaded mules, deep sunk in the big high-backed chair, against whose dark tapestry her sharply cut face, with skin like yellow satin, was distinctly outlined, she was—to use a hackneyed word—attractive" [3]), so she drapes herself against the backdrops of Naxos, Chicago, New York, Copenhagen, and Alabama.

It is the Danish backdrop, she feels, even when she is disenchanted and has begun to consider leaving, that suits her "complexion" best. Indeed, chronologically, Copenhagen is the culmination of a series of figure-ground contrasts. In Naxos—an anagram for "Saxon"—Helga's "dark purples, royal blues, rich greens, and deep reds" stand out against the town's drab and unrelieved "navy blue, black, brown" (38-39). In the livelier atmosphere of Harlem, Helga works harder, coming to a dinner party in a "cobwebby black net touched with orange," which she describes as "too *décolleté*" (124). But the highest relief, the sharpest contrast Helga achieves is in Denmark, where, aided by the artifice of Axel and Aunt Katrina, all the polarities of white/black, light/dark, north/south, culture/nature, cold/hot, subject/object are called up. The intensity of the contrast, and of the attention paid to her as the figure against that ground, is almost commensurate with the demands of her imagination, the dreams she had had, before the voyage, of "life somewhere else ... where at last she would be permanently satisfied," and of the image of "herself in different, strange places, among approving and admiring people" (126).

But Helga's own aesthetic sense embraces only the non-human, a limitation we can see by comparing her reactions to two striking catalogues of color in *Quicksand*. One passage describes the spoils of a shopping spree during which Axel Olsen selects the clothes and Katrina pays the bill; once home, Helga is delighted to see the clothes spread out in a "startling array" (161):

> *There were batik dresses in which mingled indigo, orange, green, vermilion, and black; dresses of velvet and chiffon in screaming colors, blood-red, sulphur-yellow, sea-green; and one black and white thing in striking combination. There was a black Manila shawl strewn with great scarlet and lemon flowers, a leopard-skin coat, a glittering opera-cape. There were turban-like hats of metallic silks, feathers and furs, strange jewelry, enameled or set with odd semi-precious stones....* (162)

Poring through this exotica, Helga tries to sort out her feelings,passing through several adjectives—"amused," "grateful," "vexed," and "excited" among them—until she settles on "incited": "She was incited to make an impression, a voluptuous impression. She was incited to inflame attention and admiration" (162-63).

But when a *human* panorama of color is spread before her, she is "blind to its charm," according to the narrator. The scene is a pivotal one: the Harlem nightclub where, after being "drugged, lifted, sustained ... blown out, ripped out, beaten out, by the joyous, wild, murky orchestra" (130), Helga comes to herself with a sense of shame at having succumbed; she looks on the other dancers with disgust; watching them, she sees a "moving mosaic":

> *There was sooty black, shiny black, taupe, mahogany, bronze, copper, gold, orange, yellow, peach, ivory, pinky white, pastry white. There was yellow hair, brown hair, black hair; straight hair, straightened hair, curly hair, crinkly hair, woolly hair. She saw black eyes in white faces, brown eyes in yellow faces, gray eyes in brown faces, blue eyes in tan faces. Africa, Europe, perhaps with a pinch of Asia, in a fantastic motley of ugliness and beauty, semibarbaric, sophisticated, exotic, were here. But she was blind to its charm....* (130-31)

The two passages represent two kinds of aesthetic experience, the one "artificial" (nature, in the form of feathers and furs, also becomes artifice), the other "natural" and "human." The items in the first list can be slipped on and off, as one's backdrops and occasions demand; the attributes in the second cannot. They represent to Helga a kind of deterministic bedrock, not construction but essence, the trap of the body itself, which she refuses to accept. Even the ecstasy which, moments before, she had experienced, she now repudiates, as belonging also to that "something" which she imagines the eyes of her white relatives perceive. That "something," though a mystery still to Helga, seems connected to the body and thus has a frightful finality for her.

Homi Bhabha, in his introduction to Franz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, refers to "the white man's artifice inscribed on the black man's body"—a collapsing of the two categories, clothing and skin—and elucidates the psychological dynamics of the colonized Other (xvi). He writes that "paranoia never preserves its position of power, for the compulsive identification with a persecutory 'They' is always an evacuation and emptying of the 'I'" (xx). We may see, even without invoking "paranoia" or persecution in the case of Helga, a similar dynamic at work in her: it is not simply that she is othered, objectified, fetishized; it is that in her effort to find a ground, a self prior to the categories available to her, she looks for that ground in the perceptions of those othering her and in doing so identifies with them; she thus leaves behind the empty "abstraction" which Octavio Paz and Sterling Brown (Berzon 25), in different contexts, refer to. She *almost* becomes aware of this move at the minstrel show, when she is able to see for a moment the admiration of her Danish friends, directed not at her but at other—to her grotesque, parodic—African-Americans. She tries then, through repeated visits to the show, to fathom the "something" they see, but without success.

The last third of *Quicksand* traces the gradual and deliberate relinquishing of Helga's control over the art object she has become. After Europe, her life as art is over. She tries, in fact, to relinquish the very idea of herself as object but only to find herself objectified anew. Her marriage to Rev. Mr. Pleasant Green—for Helga, both a "natural" and a spiritual figure—is a move away from the puzzling complexity, the rainbow of nuances whose charm she is blind to—toward what she sees as simplicity, stability. In the religious moment, Helga loses her irony, the anthropological "outsideness" which she had cultivated as her source of mobility; in the Harlem church scene, Helga moves from the stance of observing and noting, to the feeling that she must escape, and then to the (equally anthropological, in the more current sense) surrender in which she glimpses the "grandeur and holiness of far-off simpler centuries" (255).

Criticism of *Quicksand* has seldom failed to mention the problem of its ending.[5] The transformation of Helga from strong, independent, and charismatic world-traveler to born-again, rural, baby-making drudge is abrupt if not incredible. I would suggest a reading of this ending as an undoing, as both de-aestheticization and disembodiment. The "New World" itself has often been viewed as an undoing of the constructions of Europe, rather than a construction in itself. Helga, then, as she moves from Europe to America, is stripped of the embodiments which had constituted her in Denmark, and is left, on American soil, with (what she sees as) the bottom line of the physical, which she had spent her adult life rejecting.

From this point on, after the abortive kiss and the rejection by Robert Anderson, it is the body only which undergoes adjustment; Helga's "conversion" is to "nature." Her unadorned life in rural Alabama, her "ugly brown house"

[5] McDowell and Wall offer compelling, though differing, explanations of *Quicksand*'s ending, McDowell arguing that Helga's choice indicates a radical effort to "acknowledge a repressed female sexual identity" (McDowell 141), and Wall construing Helga's choice to be a reaction to Axel's parting remark that she is "selling herself"; upon her return to Harlem, "determined not to sell herself, she gives herself away" (Wall 104).

and its "stark bareness" (270) contrast sharply with the luxurious setting described in the opening pages of the novel. There is no more "artifice." The body itself is convulsed, revised, re-shaped by five childbirths. (The fifth, which will perhaps kill Helga, lies beyond the novel's terminus.) The "quicksand" finally *is* the body into which her subjectivity is sinking, and within which the more she struggles (travels and questions), the farther down she sinks. The body is, at the end of the novel, represented in its least artificial, most biological, most "given" terms. Once aware that she is sinking, Helga begins to dream again of her former life, of "things," of change and (re)construction, but it is too late.

Before her surrender to the "physical" and the dream of pastoral—"Pleasant Green" and Alabama—Helga has choices, personal, marital, and geographical. It is these choices that distinguish *Quicksand*—as one feels Larsen must have desired to distinguish it—from the "tragic mulatto" tradition. Helga's failure is not, as Lillie Howard argues, that "she cannot reconcile herself to the reality of her race," or that her "materialism" "masks the essence of herself," or that she "lacks the basic capacity to accept herself as she is" (Howard 226). *Quicksand* offers the much more profound (and, to many, no doubt distressing) idea that there is no essence, black, white, *or* mulatto, that arrival at essence is always deferred; and that in our awareness of ourselves as difference, everyone is a mulatto, born of and self-located between two differences. The racially indeterminate and travelling mulatto figure serves to open up possibilities, to heighten our awareness of that absence of determined essence, and of the reality that the construction of the Self goes on, home and abroad, subject to forces that crowd the body with contradictory representations—pleasant and disturbing, limiting and enabling.

Helga returns to the United States out of the same restlessness that motivated her departure: she is not satisfied. European exoticism was preferable to American racism, but the ground of selfhood she looked for could no more be found in Europe than anywhere else. The only difference is that her embodiment as aesthetic object is less powerfully foregrounded on United States soil, and that the cluster of representations which is Helga, and which was centripetally held together by her view of herself as art object, has become dizzyingly decentered in her consciousness. Is the disembodiment, or the decentering, good for her or bad? "Helga" is too inaccessible to provide a satisfying answer. The abstraction, which in Europe became densely if contradictorily somaticized, is abstraction again, a condition, simultaneously weightless and heavy, which she cannot continue to endure.[6]

[6] Europe, as a mechanism of and a figure for embodiment, was vital to Nella Larsen herself. She had attended university in Denmark, and the Guggenheim she later received, on the strength of her two novels, was for the purpose of going to Spain to do research for a third novel. Larsen went to Spain but did not write the novel. Instead, she returned to the United States and lapsed into a thirty-year silence. There was a painful incident in which she was accused, apparently unjustly, of plagiarism; and there was an equally painful divorce. But Larsen evidently wrote no more; she had been working as a nurse at a Brooklyn hospital when she died in 1963. For this and other biographical information, see M.H. Washington, "Nella Larsen," *Ms.* (December 1980) 44-50.

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