Nella Larsen and the Intertextual Geography of Quicksand

Toward the middle of her 1928 novel Quicksand, Nella Larsen thematizes her authorial relation to the literary past in a scene that uncannily adumbrates the future demise of her career. Larsen’s protagonist, Helga Crane, ponders over the writing of her new employer, Mrs. Hayes-Rore, a prominent lecturer on “the race problem” who has hired Helga to edit her speeches. But the lectures, as Helga interprets them, “proved to be merely patchworks of others’ speeches and opinions.” As she puts her own hand to Mrs. Hayes-Rore’s writing, in fact, Helga mentally accuses her employer of that most serious of authorial crimes:

Helga had heard other lecturers say the same things in Devon and again in Naxos. Ideas, phrases, and even whole sentences and paragraphs were lifted bodily from previous orations and published works of Wendell Phillips, Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and other doctors of the race’s ills. For variety Mrs. Hayes-Rore had seasoned hers with a peppery dash of Du Bois and a few vinegary statements of her own. Aside from these it was, Helga reflected, the same old thing. (70)

Helga’s unspoken charge, of course, is plagiarism. Mrs. Hayes-Rore has taken “ideas, phrases, and even whole sentences and paragraphs” not only from “previous orations” but also from “published works,” material copyrighted as the intellectual property of individual authors, whom Larsen names directly here to heighten the full effect of Helga’s assessment. Indeed, Helga is able not only to recognize the specific sources of familiar ideas and language but even to distinguish Mrs. Hayes-Rore’s original pronouncements from those she has appropriated.

Yet Helga proves to be mistaken in dismissing the resulting texts as “merely patchworks” of “the same old thing.” As the implied comparison between the sensual pleasures of writing and cooking suggests, “a peppery dash of Du Bois” and a few new “vinegary statements” season the final speeches, in Larsen’s culinary metaphor, to their own perfection. While Larsen may well have shared her protagonist’s condescension toward “doctors of the race’s ills,” she seems nevertheless careful to suggest that Helga has underestimated the shrewd authorial figure who sits before her like “a cat watching its prey,” eyes “bright and investigating,” lit with a “humorous gleam.” Busy “correcting and condensing,” Helga overlooks the aggressive revisionist strategy behind the assimilation of familiar words, sentences, and paragraphs that characterizes her employer’s writing (70). Helga misses the point of the “patchwork”: the recirculation of ideas in different contexts, the recombination of authorial voices to new ends. And her failure here to read for the range of possibilities made available by the “patchwork” is precisely what marks Larsen’s allusion to her novel’s own revisionary relation to prior

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texts—a relation that would, in Larsen’s last published work, be misunderstood by her contemporaries as much as it was by her protagonist in *Quicksand*. In April, 1930, she was publicly accused of plagiarizing from the British writer Sheila Kaye-Smith to create the story “Sanctuary,” an event that irreversibly devastated her authorial career.1

As a librarian, a self-fashioner through literary examples, and ultimately an alleged plagiarist, Larsen was indeed a committed revisionist—and perhaps the consummate revisionist not only of the Harlem Renaissance, with which she is most commonly associated, but also of a cultural moment in which American writers urgently sought to recover a national literary past. *Quicksand* was written and published during a period of intense American cultural nationalism that, as George Hutchinson has recently argued, represents a crucial but often overlooked context for interpretations of African American modernism (*Harlem*). Writing during what Ann Douglas has called the American “literary reclamation project” of the 1920s (194), Larsen made her authorial debut when the task of documenting American literary history was taken up with new urgency by leading intellectuals on the American scene, from the British expatriate D. H. Lawrence to Van Wyck Brooks to Larsen’s own good friend, Carl Van Vechten. The decade marked an unprecedented outpouring of books and essays devoted to the subject of American literary history and criticism, including the landmark completion of the four-volume *Cambridge History of American Literature* in 1921. The ostensible purpose of such projects was to promote newly ardent forms of literary nationalism—and specifically to “enlarge the spirit of American literary criticism,” as the editors of the *Cambridge History* put it, by “render[ing] it more energetic and masculine” (1: x). Indeed, Van Wyck Brooks had opined as early as 1915, in the path-breaking *America’s Coming-of-Age*, that the “first generation of American writers were like prudent women . . . [in] a new house . . . cutting and hanging the most appropriate window-curtains, and pruning the garden” (47). Warning future critics not to betray emerging studies of the national literary history with feminine sensibilities, he sternly insisted, “It is of no use to go off into a corner with American literature, as most of the historians have done . . . criticism being out of place by the fireside” (43).

The possibility of explicit participation in this project of reclaiming the American literary past, and divesting its study from “fireside” sensibilities, was obviously somewhat limited for Nella Larsen. It was not simply that she inevitably failed to generate the gendered cultural capital and institutional prestige surrounding the leading men of letters of her moment. On the subject of African American literary production, the *Cambridge History* noted tangentially that the “negroes . . . can show an orator, two prose-writers, and one poet of merited eminence”—Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Paul Laurence Dunbar—but hastened to add that only Dunbar was “of unmixed negro blood” (2: 350-51). Such concerns with racial “purity” and “amalgamation” were not at all frequent in some of the most prestigious of the period’s various discourses of literary nationalism. Decrying the “simian” types of Theodore Dreiser’s “barbaric naturalism,” Stuart Sherman—one of four main editors of the *Cambridge History*—detected a “new note in American literature, coming from that ‘ethnic’ element of our mixed population” (*On Contemporary* 91, 87). The “riotous and unclean hands of the naturalists” were abetted, Sherman proposed, by aesthetic and literary philosophies “import[ed] . . . in fragments from beyond the borders of Anglo-Saxonia” and pieced together to disastrous, “alien-spirited” effect by critics of “quick Semitic intelligence” (*On Contemporary* 249; “National”
was Protestant, gave "that found white revealing had biographer, from in advocate "Ku Klux Kriticism" ("Ku Klux" 314).

During the very cultural moment in which Harlem writers of the 1920s found unprecedented access to a white-dominated publishing industry, in other words, the literary-nationalist endeavor to reinstantiate what the white critic and Harlem Renaissance advocate Joel Spingarn referred to as "Jefferson's literary Declaration of Independence" ("Criticism" 288) was revealing a host of powerfully exclusionary critical tendencies—tendencies, in some instances, not so very different from Jefferson's own 1785 assessment that Phillis Wheatley's writings were "below the dignity of criticism" (135). And no part of this paradox was ever lost on Nella Larsen. As her recent biographer, Thadious Davis, has pointed out, when Larsen was asked at various points of her career to list her favorite authors, she would often offer up the names of the writers covered in the rigorous library examination she had passed to obtain her position at the 135th Street branch of the New York Public. She would present her list of prized writers—all of them white men—almost as if she had internalized the exclusionary values of the dominant literary culture, to which she paid homage by reproducing a micro-canon based on a test itself designed to exclude (Davis 145-46).2

But Larsen was not consistent in her literary orientations. Deft at manipulating traditions, she endlessly refashioned her relation to the literary past to make her points. Larsen's 1928 first novel, for instance, unmistakably echoed the title of Edith Wharton's short story "The Quicksand," and a contemporary reviewer of her 1929 novel Passing, remarking somewhat condescendingly that Larsen had "gone to Mrs. Wharton . . . for her lessons in writing," observed that the prose bore a striking similarity to the elder author's.3 Yet in a 1926 letter to the editor of Opportunity magazine, Larsen had been dismissive of the novelist who would so inform her own style. Defending the novel Flight of her fellow Harlem Renaissance writer Walter White, Larsen took on what she felt was a misguided review of the novel by an "admirer of . . . Mrs. Wharton," a critic without the ability to read as one, as she "confessed" herself to be, "warped . . . by the European and the American moderns": according to her seemingly impromptu list, "Sherwood Anderson, Carl Van Vechten, Joseph Hergesheimer, Huysmans, Conrad, Proust, Thomas Mann, Galsworthy."4 "Authors do not supply imaginations, they expect their readers to have their own, and to use them," Larsen bristled ("Correspondence"). And this unimaginative, Wharton-admiring critic did not possess, she stressed, "the range of reading to understand the book which he attacked with so much assurance."5

Such a "range of reading" and the various revisionist strategies it afforded together constitute the self-referential subject of Quicksand. The novel finds Larsen launching a critique of the literary past while engaging implicitly with the very contemporary discourses of American literary historiography that excluded her.6 In her own oblique act of literary reclamation, less celebratory but more inclusive than that of her contemporaries, Larsen creates a novel haunted by a literary past that resides not only on the literal shelves of texts that Helga encounters wherever she travels, but also in a veritable "patchwork" of prior texts that makes Quicksand, above all else, a book about books. While much of the most important scholarship on the novel has convincingly emphasized Larsen's unique contributions to the African American literary tradition, Quicksand proves nevertheless to be the product of a literary genealogy that is unmistakably biracial, a genealogy that not only rep-
represents the novel’s textual heritage but also constitutes its own subject and polemical target. In a subtle intertextual conversation among a diverse array of works by both African American and white authors, Quicksand traces its heroine’s alienating journey—from Naxos to Chicago, Harlem, Copenhagen, Harlem again, and finally a small Alabama town—across the perilous territories of American literary history. The work of place in the novel is to cultivate what I will argue is a kind of intertextual geography, a series of allusive literary landscapes through which Larsen revisits the scenes of various fictions and revises her key prior writers: Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Theodore Dreiser, William Dean Howells, Gertrude Stein, T. S. Stribling, Carl Van Vechten, and Jean Toomer. The following pages track Larsen’s geographical exploration of the narrative, aesthetic, and ideological limitations of these predecessors, arguing ultimately that the author deploys Quicksand as a revisionary intervention into American literary historiography itself.

**Naxos: “Of Lasting Service for the Race”**

As Quicksand opens, Helga Crane sits beneath a “reading lamp” surrounded by “the bright covers of the books she had taken down from their long shelves.” The “white pages of the opened one” (35) Helga has just selected to read come from Marmaduke Pickthall’s Said the Fisherman, a quasi-historical novel set in nineteenth-century Syria and Egypt, where the hero dies as a martyr of Islam while wearing the clothes of a Christian missionary. Set far in time and place from the Southern Naxos community Helga so longs to escape, Pickthall’s novel is nevertheless appropriate to this opening scene, for Helga wants “forgetfulness” in particular from “that holy white man of God” who has just visited the school to praise the “Naxos Negroes” for knowing “enough to stay in their places” (36-37). The novel offers Helga temporal and geographic distance from her “place” at Naxos, initiating as well an ironic shift in religious perspective that undercuts the oppressive words of the white minister. Quicksand’s opening scene, in other words, foregrounds the central place of Helga’s novels, distinct from her “schoolteacher’s paraphernalia of drab books” (38), in Larsen’s larger commentary on the prevailing racial ideologies of her historical moment. The “intentional isolation” of “this little time . . . with her own books” (36) locates Helga in a self-referentially intertextual world through which Larsen appropriates and rewrites the different literary territories Helga will traverse as her meta-literary protagonist.

Helga’s revisionary journey begins in the literary territory of “racial uplift,” staked out and explored by Frances E. W. Harper in 1892. Though Larsen never explicitly mentions Harper’s well-known novel Iola Leroy in her letters or literary essays, it is hard to imagine her not holding strong opinions about the prolific African American woman writer and activist who had achieved a popular reputation in the late nineteenth century, marking a place for herself in Phoebe A. Hanaford’s 1883 Daughters of America; or, Women of the Century. In 1911, one year after Larsen attended college at Fisk, Du Bois himself eulogized Harper in The Crisis, contending that she “was not a great writer, but . . . wrote much worth reading.” By 1925, Iola Leroy appeared at the end of Alain
Locke’s Harlem Renaissance anthology *The New Negro*, listed prominently in the short bibliography of “The Negro in Literature: American Fiction Before 1910.” Fittingly, then, *Quick sand* starts in a sense where *Iola Leroy* left off, and in a landscape Larsen knew well from her own experiences at Fisk and Tuskegee: at “a large and flourishing school” in the South, where devoted servants of the race are found “casting [their] lot with the colored” and “lifting up the homes of the people” (280).10 Just as the beautiful mulatta Iola Leroy leaves the North at the close of Harper’s novel to live as “a blessing to others” in the South (281), Helga Crane is a strikingly lovely interracial character who has, in language that unmis-takably evokes Iola, “dreamed dreams of doing good to [her] fellow men” and chosen “not only to teach but to befriend those happy singing children” of the rural black folk (40). Yet the optimistic rhetoric of Harper’s novel is quickly deflated when Helga contemplates her life dedicated to “Negro education,” sees the “keen joy and zest” of her “dreams of doing good” as “immature,” and observes in her school certain “trivial hypocrisy and careless cruelties which were, unintentionally perhaps, a part of the Naxos policy of uplift,” with its “air of self-righteousness and intolerant dislike of difference” (38-40). For the characters in Harper’s novel, the policy of “lasting service for the race” (262) replaces sorrow and despair with hope, as *Shadows Uplifted*, the subtitle and unifying metaphor of *Iola Leroy*, suggests: Harper’s tale of “Shadows in the Home” (73), the “shadow of [slavery’s] million crimes” (86), and the perpetual shadows across the faces of her characters, concludes with the certainty that “the shadows have been uplifted from all their lives” (281). The opening of *Quick sand*, by contrast, finds Helga Crane at Naxos “in soft gloom,” her room “shadowy,” her single lamp “dimmed by a great black and red shade” amid a “desert of darkness” (35-36). As Larsen’s consideration of “The South, Naxos, [and] Negro educa-tion” grows increasingly specific and critical, Helga reaches to dim even fur-ther the remaining bit of light, “pinn[ing] a scrap of paper about the bulb under the lamp’s shade” (38), as if definitively to reject the rhetoric of “shadows uplifted” that informs the literary territory surrounding Naxos. Revisiting this fictional ground, Helga calls to mind her novelistic forebear through a number of telling parallels, repetitions that consistently disturb the novelistic closure attending *Iola Leroy’s* happy ending.

Toward the end of Harper’s novel, when Iola Leroy articulates her desire to “do something more for our people than I am doing . . . something of lasting service for the race,” “her future husband and partner in racial uplift, Frank Latimer, urges her to write “a good, strong book . . . a book to inspire men and women with a deeper sense of justice and humanity” (262). The book he has in mind, of course, turns out to be Iola’s own story and the novel that Harper has written, the tale of a beautiful and far from tragic mulatta who refuses to pass into white society, choosing instead “to take her place with the freed people, as their teacher, friend, and adviser” (263). Larsen refigures this mise-en-abyme within *Iola Leroy* in a satiric scene in *Quick sand*, just after the narrator has reflected on the source of Helga’s love of bright colors despite the Naxos preference for “black, brown, and grey”:

> Something intuitive, some unanalyzed driving spirit of loyalty to the inherent racial need for gorgeousness told her that bright colors were fitting and that dark-complexioned people should wear yellow, green, and red . . . One of the loveliest sights Helga had ever seen had been a sooty black girl decked out in a flaming orange dress, which a horrified matron had next day consigned to a dyer. Why, she wondered, didn’t someone write *A Plea for Color*? (51)

While the vivid flash of the girl in the orange dress illustrates in a single
ruined image the oppressively prudish atmosphere of Naxos, the seriousness of Larsen’s critique is nevertheless mixed with a certain self-reflexive irony. Given Larsen’s contemptuous dismissal of what she would in 1929 call “ancient superstition” about race, or “twaddle concerning the inherent qualities of the Negro,” as she put it in an unflattering review of Black Sadie by the white author Thomas Bowyer Campbell (24), it is difficult to believe she could have entertained to any degree of real seriousness the notion of “the inherent racial need for gorgeousness” that dictates Helga’s fashion choices.11 The irony sharpens in Helga’s contemplation of A Plea for Color, a hypothetical work of sartorial propaganda whose title self-consciously evokes the story of Helga’s endless quest for aesthetic satisfaction while at the same time playing on the serious work of racial uplift—the plea, as Harper put in the afterword to Iola Leroy, “in behalf of those whose fortunes of war threw, homeless, ignorant and poor, upon the threshold of a new era” (282). In Helga’s question lies Larsen’s satiric refusal to write what she saw and deplored as a propagandistic “plea for color[ed people]”—a novel doomed, Larsen believed, to the sensibility of the “horrified matron.”

Helga’s own dormitory matron, “humorless, prim, ugly” Miss MacGooden, who has only contempt for the very students she seeks to uplift, exemplifies a defining aspect of this sensibility. “... given to understand [there were] things in the matrimonial state that were of necessity entirely too repulsive for a lady of delicate and sensitive nature to submit to” (46), Miss MacGooden epitomizes what Ann duCille terms the female “literary passionlessness” prevalent in Victorian writing in general, and, with very different political implications, in late-nineteenth-century African American women’s literary production in particular. “... in the face of centuries of institutionalized rape and sexual coercion,” duCille observes, literary pass-
futile,” “a sudden attack of nerves, 
muteness, “inward confusion,” an 
“almost overpowering desire to laugh” 
in short, as the narrator puts it, 
“something very like hysteria” (50-52). 
Manifesting the latent erotic impulses 
that become so explicit later in New 
York, Helga’s hysterical symptoms 
bespeak as well the more general 
repression of sexuality that Larsen’s 
rewriting of Harper diagnoses in both 
Helga’s forebear Iola and—anticipating 
some of the most groundbreaking 
contemporary criticism of nineteenth-century 
African American women’s literature—in the specifically novelistic 
ground of “lasting service for the 
race.” 13

Finally, Helga’s revisionary 
sojourn in this literary territory 
explodes its often disguised but still 
insistent approbation of whiteness. 
Though Harper does include the dark- 
skinned Lucille Delany “of unmixed 
blood” (199) as a member of the elite 
group of young leaders undertaking 
the project of racial uplift—and, 
through Lucille’s voice, reminds 
readers that “complexional prejudices are 
not confined to white people” (278)—
her central project remains the creation 
of a heroine with whom, as Barbara 
Christian has pointed out, a contempo-
rary white female readership might 
easily have identified (26). Iola’s 
repeatedly emphasized white appear-
ance functions in powerful ways 
throughout the novel, projecting 
visions of what Houston Baker has 
termed “a universal white-faced 
American non-place” (30). It is Iola’s 
whiteness, after all, that the heroic 
exslave Tom Anderson invokes when he 
expresses his fervent wish for her free-
dom: “‘My! but she’s putty. . . putty 
blue eyes, an’ jis’ ez white ez any-
body’s in dis place’ ” (38). Tom loves 
this white-as-anybody Iola as “a Pagan 
might worship a distant star” (40), 
while Iola herself, in telling her story to 
Dr. Gresham, emphasizes that the 
“negro blood in her [mother’s] veins” 
was altogether “imperceptible” (114). 
When Gresham in turn purports to 
love her for her “own sake,” separate 
entirely from her “disadvantages of 
birth,” he stresses that her complexion 
is “pure” as hers (114, 116). And the 
very fact of her white appearance, with 
which Iola “could have cast her lot 
with the favored race,” brings Frank 
Latimer finally to suggest her, in the 
novel’s closing, as “the subject of a 
soul-inspiring story” (263-64). It is pre-
cisely this fetishization of corporeal 
and ideological whiteness in the liter-
ary territory of racial uplift that Larsen 
determines her own heroine will so 
explicitly expose and reject. In Larsen’s 
retelling, the “large and flourishing 
school” in the South that welcomed 
Iola reveals itself to Helga as an institu-
tion of “enormous influence”—“a big 
knife with cruelly sharp edges ruthless-
ly cutting all to a pattern, the white 
man’s pattern” (48, 39). Within her 
twentieth-century revisitation of 
Harper’s novel, the image crystallizes 
Larsen’s larger point: The prevailing 
ideology of whiteness in the literary 
territory of Naxos (an anagram of 
Saxon, as critics have observed) is 
 inseparable from its aesthetic priorities. 
Leaving Naxos, Helga brings along the 
love of books and reading that locates 
her personal story within the novel’s 
larger commentary on literary tradi-
tion. Her quest for happiness and self-
knowledge is simultaneously Larsen’s 
quest for new literary ground.

Chicago: “A Waif Amid Forces”

Just before Helga flees the literary 
territory of “racial uplift,” Larsen 
introduces the subject of heredity in a 
charged conversation between her pro-
tagonist and the Naxos principal, Dr. 
Anderson. When Anderson pro-
nounces Helga a woman of “breeding,” 
she takes him to be “speaking of fami-
ly” and retorts that she “was born in a 
Chicago slum” (54). Anderson in turn 
invokes genetic inheritance, citing the 
well-worn—and, in Larsen’s cultural
moment, often racially-coded—maxim that “financial, economic circumstances can’t destroy the tendencies inherited from good stock” (55). Yet despite the approbation of Anderson’s assessment that she herself is proof of her own good breeding, Helga bitterly denies the existence of such hereditary value and announces instead her interracial parentage: “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” (55). Effectively collapsing the concept of “good stock” into a “joke” upon those who invoke it, Helga is off to revise new literary territory, this time the Social Darwinist landscape of Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*.

In a novel that explores the range of the human species, from the “sensitive, highly organized natures” to the “dullest specimen” in which “highly organized reasoning is absent” (287), Dreiser was deeply influenced by the theories of Herbert Spencer, whose applications of Darwinian principles to what he termed “survival of the fittest” in the social world underpinned increasingly widespread theories of racial and ethnic hierarchy from before the turn of the century well into Larsen’s own moment. Yet the Social Darwinist world Dreiser represented in *Sister Carrie* did not precisely engage with or conform to the racial schema deployed by Social Darwinist sociologists, a fact that seems not to have gone unnoticed by Stuart Sherman (*Cambridge History of American Literature* editor and alleged proponent of “Ku Klux Kriticism”). Particularly disturbing to Sherman was Dreiser’s use of Anglo-Saxon names like “Carrie Meeber”—which he feared might be associated with “our most highly ‘cultured’ race”—for characters enacting “the struggles which arise in the jungle” (*On Contemporary* 95, 91). This combination of Dreiser’s interest in Social Darwinism and his position as a writer of literature deemed both scandalous and unfavorably “ethnic” (as Sherman put it) must have appealed to Larsen’s revisionary imagination in identifying with his Carrie her own biracial protagonist. Indeed, Dreiser’s work, and particularly his most controversial novel, *Sister Carrie*, had by the time Larsen was writing *Quicksand* achieved unprecedented fame, catalyzed largely by the 1925 publication of *An American Tragedy* and its popular dramatic production on Broadway.

The basic narrative in which Larsen casts the new literary territory would thus have been immediately familiar to many contemporary readers. Like Carrie, Helga rides alone on a train to Chicago to begin life anew. The personified city that awaits her—“seductive, charming, and beckoning” (49); “dirty, mad, hurrying” (59)—establishes the terrain of social forces that will besiege her, as they did her predecessor: As Dreiser warns, “The city has its cunning wiles, no less than the infinitely smaller and more human tempter” (2). Both protagonists are drawn to the crowds, “the myriad human beings pressing hurriedly on” (*Quicksand* 62), the “buzz and energy-yielding enthusiasm” (*Sister Carrie* 46). Both women are at heart consumers who quickly learn the difficult lesson that they themselves are commodities: Helga discovers in the big city the “smallness of her commercial value” (67), just as Carrie met potential employers “looking her over as one would a package” (27). Helga, like Carrie, traverses many named and detailed Chicago streets in a desperately lonely and discouraging search for work. As Carrie once found the city progressively “larger, harder, more stolid in its indifference” (28), it makes Helga “feel small and insignificant that in all the climbing massed city no one cared a whit about her” (66). As Carrie once felt “sick at heart and in body” (29), Helga, “hungry too, for her small money was dwindling,” is panicked, an “agitated feeling of disaster clos[ing] in on her, tighten[ing]” (66). Alone, poor, turned away abruptly.
from many doors of employment, Helga wanders about Chicago and waits on the merciless forces of her environment to determine her fate, as it once determined Carrie’s. Steering her protagonist through this Dreiserian territory of a cruel, naturalist Chicago, Larsen locates her squarely within the same system of economic determinism that rendered Carrie before her “a waif amid forces” (1), drawn here and there by the magnet of the city.

The Chicago section of Quicksand embeds as well an oblique but suggestive commentary on the contemporary politics of 1920s literary culture. Unlike her Dreiserian forebear Carrie, for whom “. . . books were beyond her interest” (2), Helga, Larsen’s narrator stresses again, “knew books and loved them” (62). Her first unsuccessful venture out for employment is, appropriately, to a library—an establishment which, to Helga’s knowing eye, “housed much knowledge and a little wisdom, on interminable shelves” (62-63). Reminding readers with this differentiation to consider the limitations of the “interminable shelves” of literary history itself, Larsen lists the terms of Helga’s rejection from the institution: “library training” - ‘civil service’ - ‘library school’ - ‘classification’ - ‘cataloguing’ - ‘training class’ - ‘examination’ - ‘probation period’” (63). The overwhelming number of prerequisites for employment at the library suggests the unyielding barriers of the world of belles lettres itself. As the most prestigious American literary histories of the 1920s reveal, the closed circle of editors and critics who measured and distributed literary currency were demanding, in Larsen’s own moment, an aesthetic removed from any suggestion of femininity; and they were in some cases perpetuating a sensibility that was “Puritanical,” as Sherman’s writings suggest, not only in the moral but in the ethnic sense of the word. Like the contemporaneous literary historiographies produced by such writers, the library’s rigid systems of organization and disciplinary structure of training, examination, and probation seem to demand an inflexible relation to literary texts and even to reading that Larsen, herself a former librarian, wholeheartedly rejects. Through Helga, she questions the ability of these official guardians and classifiers of literary culture to understand and interpret the world of books: “‘How erudite they must be!’ she remark[s] sarcastically to herself” (63).

Given this representation of the unfriendly impediments of the dominant literary culture, Larsen’s appropriation of a book that had been censored only twenty-eight years before for the moral outrage of Carrie’s illicit relations assumes a certain self-referential dimension. For Larsen too defied certain strict and longstanding literary conventions, creating in Helga what Hazel Carby has called “the first truly sexual black female protagonist in Afro-American fiction” (174). The rigid and disciplinary institution housed in the library registers Larsen’s consciousness of her own novel’s relation to tradition, and of the possible consequences of representing a heroine who did not conform to a prevailing convention of “passionlessness.” At the same time, however, Larsen turns her revisionary gaze back upon the very text she uses to signal her break with a genteel tradition, moving her narrative through the Chicago of Dreiser’s Sister Carrie only to reveal the limitations of perspective in the landmark text of American naturalism. Most crucially, Larsen counters Dreiser’s gendered economic determinism with an alternative model of female patronage. Alone, poor, and fighting to survive in the overwhelming city, both Carrie and Helga are many times accosted and propositioned for “services” by strange men, “well groomed and pleasant spoken” (Quicksand 66, 61), but mere human cogs in the city of “cunning wiles.” Unlike Dreiser’s “half-equipped little knight” (3), however, Helga is able to calculate the unspoken cost of the offers and to determine that “the price of the money [is] too dear” (66).
In this Dreiserian territory, she is still essentially at the mercy of fate, and like Carrie, she finds that “Fortune,” “determined to smile” (69), carries her off to New York and to finer style. But Helga’s chance benefactors are women: Mrs. Hayes-Rore and Anne Grey, whose motivations contrast sharply with those of Dreiser’s Drouet and Hurstwood. Mrs. Hayes-Rore, as “a prominent ‘race’ woman” (70) and lecturer working for “uplift,” is the very sort of person Helga despised and mocked at Naxos. Having passed through a second literary territory, Larsen shifts her emphasis to the debt of gratitude Helga owes to Mrs. Hayes-Rore and, by association with Naxos, to the woman-centered literary tradition of “service for the race” inspired by Harper: “Ever afterwards . . . [Helga] wondered at her own lack of astuteness in not seeing in the woman someone who by a few words was to have a part in the shaping of her life” (69).15

New York: “Sinister Folk . . . Who Had Stolen Her Birthright”

As the train and the novel travel to New York and new literary ground, Mrs. Hayes-Rore asks Helga to explain her background, her lack of “people.” Recounting her story, Helga feels a “sore sensation of revolt,” and “torment . . . loom[s] before her as something brutal and undeserved”; “passionately, tearfully, incoherently, the final words tumble . . . from her quivering petulant lips” (71). For Mrs. Hayes-Rore, the story Helga tells of her mixed parentage does not “exist”: “For among black people, as among white people, it is tacitly understood that these things are not mentioned” (72).

But it is a story told quite often in writing, one that involves what Catherine Starke calls the “oldest archetype” of American literature (89). For the tale Helga tells—“dealing as it did with race intermingling and possi-

bly adultery” (72)—invokes the trope of the “tragic mulatto,” refigured to the point of literary formula by Larsen’s day. Though the tragic mulatto stereotype evolved, as Sterling Brown explained in his influential 1933 essay on the “Negro Character as Seen by White Authors,” from the work of anti-slavery writers who sought to create “near white” enslaved characters with whom a white audience might sympathize (170), the figure was later exploited by the “Negrophobia” writers of the 1890s, most famously Thomas Nelson Page and Thomas Dixon, both of whom stressed theories of atavistic violence and animalism.16 “The mulatto is a victim of a divided inheritance,” as Brown describes the stereotype: “From his white blood come his intellectual strivings . . . from his Negro blood come his baser emotional urges, his indolence, his savagery” (172).17

Thus, as Larsen enters this literary region of the tragic mulatto, she deftly situates her revisionary protagonist in a performative and highly parodic relation to the archetype. Helga herself begins to speak “savagely,” and is unable to suppress a “violent kick” (72). But she tells her story “mockingly” in what the narrator calls a “recital” (71-72): She has begun to enact the familiar role of a literary stereotype. In immediate response, the faces of Helga and Mrs. Hayes-Rore take on the accoutrements of theater itself, beginning to “harden,” “almost as if they had slipped on masks” (72). Moving through her melodramatic performance, Helga quickly rehearses the basic traits of the stereotype: “brutal and undeserved” “torment” of an illicit background; “quivering” emotionalism; repressed savagery; latent tendency toward violence. In the New York section of Quicksand that follows this scene, however, Larsen explores the tragic mulatto material not of “Negrophobia” propaganda but of a more self-consciously literary scene—material that was heavily informed by the convention but less explicitly racist, and perhaps, in Larsen’s eyes, ulti-
mately more insidious. Exploring literary formulas and the narratives that propagate them, Larsen’s New York interludes participate in a larger project of the Harlem Renaissance: the rethinking of “The Negro in American Literature,” to borrow the title of William Stanley Braithwaite’s ground-breaking essay in *The New Negro*, and the concordant resistance to the “over-mastering and exploiting hand” of white authors (29). It was to three such exploitative narrativizations of the tragic mulatto stereotype that Larsen turned for their very different influences on the representation of interracial characters in American literary history.

William Dean Howells, who had died at the beginning of the decade, came out with *An Imperative Duty* in 1892, the same year that saw the publication of *Iola Leroy*. In a narrative seeking to subordinate religion to science—the stern prejudices of Puritanism to the democratizing forces of logic and empiricism—Howells’s ostensible figure of reason is Olney, a white doctor who believes not in the moral “tragedy” of mixed blood but in the “natural tendency . . . to the permanent effacement of the inferior type,” which ensures that “sooner or later our race must absorb the colored race . . . obliterating not only its color, but its qualities” (161). These qualities include “sudden fierceness” that bespeaks “ancestral savagery” (183), “easy . . . irresponsible . . . fond[ness] of what is soft and pleasant” (171), “barbaric taste in color” and “innate feeling for style” (140). By the end of the narrative, the scientific and “reasonable” Olney purports to have mastered his initial “repulsion” for the “negro blood in [the] veins” (165) of Rhoda Aldgate, the beautiful mulatta heroine of white appearance, and to attribute her hereditary shame not to her grandmother, a slave, but “to the man who called himself her master” (227). Yet beneath its self-consciously progressive ending, the narrative of biological tragedy persists: Olney continues “instinctively” to treat Rhoda “as if she were his patient” (231) and, after marrying her, to locate the source of her “dependency” in her blood: in the “war between her temperament and her character,” between the “sunny-natured antetypes of her mother’s race” and the “Puritanism of her father’s” (233).

As both an author and a critic who had dominated the American literary scene of the 1890s, and as an intellectual whose work was consistently read and disputed throughout the 1920s, Howells was of no small interest to those Harlem Renaissance writers concerned with “The Negro in American Literature.” *An Imperative Duty*, like *Iola Leroy*, was included in the bibliography of race literature before 1910 at the end of *The New Negro*, and Braithwaite asserted in the essay he contributed to the anthology that Howells had “prophesied the Fiction of the Color Line” (32). Yet in 1905, a mere thirteen years after the publication of Howells’s novella, Gertrude Stein complained that because she could “never write the great American novel,” she had to “content [her]self with niggers and servant girls and the foreign population generally.” Four years later she published *Three Lives*, in which the central story, “Melanchta,” featured its own version of the tragic mulatta.

“Melanchta” opens, as *Quicksand* ends, just after a scene of birth: The mulatta heroine has patiently assisted while “the sullen, childish, cowardly, black Rosie grumbled and fusssed and howled and made herself to be an abomination and like a simple beast” (85). Describing Rose Johnson, “a real black negress but [who] had been brought up quite like their own child by white folks,” the narrator asserts the primacy of heredity: “Her white training had only made for habits, not for nature. Rose had the simple, promiscuous unmorality of the black people.” Melanchta, on the other hand, is “graceful, pale yellow, intelligent, attractive”: She “had not been raised by white folks but then she had been
half made with real white blood." Contrast the different ancestors, the narrator wonders "why was this unmoral, promiscuous, shiftless Rose married, and that's not so common either, to a good man of the negroes, while Melanctha with her white blood and attraction and her desire for a right position had not yet been really married" (86). Yet despite the hereditary qualities she has to recommend her, Melanctha is doomed from the start to tragedy: True to formula, her heritage is "divided" by a color line between "a sweet-appearing and dignified and pleasant, pale yellow, colored woman," the source of her "real white blood," and her "robust and unpleasant and very unendurable black father," the source of "the real power in Melanctha's nature" (90). "Complex" and "desiring," Melanctha wonders often "how it was she did not kill herself" when "this was the best thing for her herself to do" (87, 89).

A failure in popular terms, "Melanctha" was nevertheless lauded by such Renaissance figures as Langston Hughes and Paul Robeson for authenticity, and cited extensively and approvingly in the novel Nigger Heaven by Larsen's close friend Carl Van Vechten. Larsen herself wrote to Stein praising the text: "... a truly great story. I never cease to wonder how you came to write it and just why you and not one of us should so accurately have caught the spirit of this race of mine." But if "Melanctha" caught and held Larsen's interest, a book published even closer to her composition of Quicksand prompted an explicit desire to respond, along with the Harlem Renaissance writers Walter White and Jessie Fauset, in her own writing; T. S. Stribling's 1922 novel Birthright. All three writers were quite "affected" by Stribling's work, Fauset reported in an interview in The Southern Workman: "A number of us started writing at that time. ... We reasoned, 'Here is an audience waiting to hear the truth about us. Let us who are better qualified to present that truth than any white writer, try to do so'" (Starkey 218-19). Like White and Fauset, I would suggest, Larsen rose to this challenge, though straightforward presentation of the "truth" was of far less interest to her than strategic manipulation of the tragic mulatto novel that had recently achieved best-seller status.

Birthright's tragic mulatto protagonist, Peter Siner, begins his journey through the novel on a Jim Crow car, returning from college in the North to his hometown in Tennessee to teach school, just as Larsen's heroine, inverting this journey near the beginning of Quicksand, leaves her teaching position in the South and rides a Jim Crow into the North. Like Helga, Stribling's Peter wants to participate in the project of racial uplift, using his Northern education to help the people of Hooker's Bend "reconstruct our life here culturally" (97). But the novel's tragic mulatto character, Cissie Dildine—one of the truly great storys. I never cease to wonder how you came to write it and just why you and not one of us should so accurately have caught the spirit of this race of mine." But if "Melanctha" caught and held Larsen's interest, a book published even closer to her composition of Quicksand prompted an explicit desire to respond, along with the Harlem Renaissance writers Walter White and Jessie Fauset, in her own writing; T. S. Stribling's 1922 novel Birthright. All three writers were quite "affected" by Stribling's work, Fauset reported in an interview in The Southern Workman: "A number of us started writing at that time. ... We reasoned, 'Here is an audience waiting to hear the truth about us. Let us who are better qualified to present that truth than any white writer, try to do so'" (Starkey 218-19). Like White and Fauset, I would suggest, Larsen rose to this challenge, though straightforward presentation of the "truth" was of far less interest to her than strategic manipulation of the tragic mulatto novel that had recently achieved best-seller status.

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sentative of “the whole negro race”: “She could steal and falsify, and in the depth of her Peter sensed a profound capacity for fury and violence. For all her precise English she was untamed, perhaps untamable” (264). The novelistic closure provided within such a narrative of biological determinism hinges predictably upon Peter’s realization in the final pages that “all races are [not] bound for the same port,” and that, despite Harvard, he is still, “just as he went in, a negro” (309).

Larsen subtly draws from these three tragic mulatto narratives to inform the landscape of the new territory Helga traverses in New York. Evoking crucial scenes from each, establishing points of confluence, alluding to specific themes, Larsen inscribes the New York interludes in Quicksand in the fashion of Mrs. Hayes-Rore’s “patchwork”; she offers a collage of references that collectively appropriate and revise the trope of the tragic mulatto not only to depict a complex passage in Helga’s life but also to excavate and disable the stereotype, pointing up the limits and consequences of this literary terrain. The New York interludes present the novel’s most complex and searching exploration of a literary region, located precisely in the publishing center of the nation, and in the city in which Larsen herself was both reading and writing in the 1920s. Larsen’s relation to this literary territory may begin, like Helga’s new home in the house of Anne Grey, “in complete accord with what she designated her ‘aesthetic sense’ ” (76). But the new territory is also, despite superficial appearances, a treacherous one: From the outset, the morning is “vicious”; there is “a whirling malice in the sharp air”; the city emanates an “aggressive unfriendliness,” while its crowds are “manifestations of purpose malevolence”; it is “appalling,” “scornful,” “threatening almost,” “ugly” (72–73). Like the Chicago library that turns her protagonist away, the new home Larsen provides Helga in New York is an explicitly metaliterary one, its walls lined with “endless shelves filled with books” that must be confronted (76).

In language that mimics the “burden of ancestral sin,” the “guilty” secret of “negro descent” that Howells imposed upon her heroine, Larsen’s narrator has earlier explained that in Chicago Helga feels “the outrage of her very existence” (61), sees herself “for an obscene sore” in the lives of her white relatives, and “under the stinging hurt . . . understood and sympathized with [their] point of view” (62). In New York, as well, she finds that “colored people won’t understand” her mixed ancestry (74), a circumstance that confirms the conventional placelessness of the tragic mulatta heroine. Yet Helga finds a temporary solution to the problem by entering her new home under false pretenses, choosing not to mention her background. Passing into a new identity with the help of her benefactor, she has forever afterwards “only to close her eyes to see herself standing apprehensively in the small cream-colored hall” of her new home—“and to feel like a criminal” (74). Helga is moving through the emotional territory of Howells’s tragic mulatta, for whom “silence . . . concerning her origin weighed upon her sometimes with the sense of a guilty deceit” (233). But Helga’s shameful secret, of course, is that her “people are white” (74): Larsen begins her revision of this literary ground by inverting the terms of Howells’s ancestral crime.

Though Helga is at first pleased by the “aesthetic sense” of this literary territory, where she is surrounded by “sophisticated cynical talk” and “unobtrusive correctness” in matters of style (75), repulsion quickly sets in during a scene that recalls in some detail Rhoda’s hour of “late-found solidarity of race” in An Imperative Duty (191). As Rhoda walks the streets in “self-loathing and despair” (192) and with “an agony of interest” (191) in the Negro people with whom she now unwillingly identifies, Helga too feels “an excruciating agony” as she moves
through Harlem: “The mere sight of the serene tan and brown faces about her stung her like a personal insult” (84). As if performing Rhoda’s part in a melodrama of racial self-recognition, Helga finds in a “panic” that the “brown faces, all cast from the same indefinite mold, and so like her own, seemed pressing forward against her” (85-86). She feels a “smoldering hatred,” and is “overcome by another, so actual, so sharp, so horribly painful, that forever afterwards she preferred to forget it”:

It was as if she were shut up, boxed up, with hundreds of her race, closed up with that something in the racial character which had always been, to her, inexplicable, alien. Why, she demanded in fierce rebellion, should she be yoked to these despised black folk? (86)

Like the self-pitying Rhoda among the Negro crowd, who “seemed to see herself and hear herself stopping some of these revolting creatures, the dreadfulest of them, and saying, ‘I am black, too’ ” (193), Helga repeats over and over to herself, “They’re my own people, my own people” (86). And just as Rhoda’s “vindictive hate” for the people finally “expressed itself in a frantic refusal of their claim upon her” (197), Helga maintains at the culmination of this scene that she “didn’t, in spite of her racial markings, belong to these dark segregated people” (86).

Larsen evokes Howell’s melodrama of racial epiphany even more explicitly in a later scene in New York, soon after Helga has returned from Denmark. Again, Helga goes out, like Rhoda, to walk the darkening streets. Both women are alone, distraught, moving quickly but aimlessly; both find their way eventually to a service in a Negro church. To Rhoda, the speaker in the church has a “goblin effect,” while the congregation’s “repulsive visages of frog-like ugliness added to the repulsive black in all its shades”; an old woman with a “catfish mouth” cries out next to her (196-97). Rhoda is overtaken by her sensations:

The night was warm, and as the church filled, the musky exhalations of their bodies thickened the air, and made the girl faint; it seemed to her that she began to taste the odor; and these poor people, whom their Creator has made so hideous by the standards of all his other creatures, roused a cruel loathing in her. . . . “Yes” she thought, “I should have whipped them, too. They are animals; they are only fit to be slaves.” But when she shut her eyes, and heard their wild, soft voices, her other senses were held, and she was rapt by the music from her frenzy of abhorrence . . . . (197)

Unaware that the service has concluded until an old woman touches her arm, Rhoda “start[s] with a shiver, as if from a hypnotic trance” (198), and is afraid to walk home alone.

In Larsen’s revisitation of this church scene, Helga has taken to the streets in a state of turmoil for a reason quite different from Rhoda’s: She believes herself rejected by Dr. Anderson just when, for the first time, “desire had burned in her flesh with uncontrollable violence” (137). Just as Rhoda feels “two selves,” “one that had lived before that awful knowledge, and one that had lived as long since” (193), Helga too feels “alone, isolated from all other human beings, separated even from her own anterior existence” (137). She enters the store-front church and finds, like Rhoda, a frightening scene. She sits between “a fattish yellow man with huge outstanding ears and long, nervous hands” and a “grotesque ebony figure” who grabs at her like a “crazed creature” (139-40). The congregation’s singing, which began as “a low wailing thing” (139), accompanied by “the writhings and weepings of the feminine portion,” soon takes on “an almost Bacchic vehemence”:

Fascinated, Helga Crane watched until there crept upon her an indistinct horror of an unknown world. She felt herself in the presence of a nameless people, observing rites of a remote obscure origin. The faces of the men and women took on the aspect of a dim vision. “This,” she whispered to herself, “is terrible. I must get out of here.” But the horror held her. She
remained motionless, watching, as if she lacked the strength to leave the place—fool, vile, and terrible, with its mixture of breaths, its contact of bodies, its concerted convulsions, all in wild appeal for a single soul. . . gradually a curious influence penetrated her; she felt an echo of the weird orgy resound in her heart. . . . Arms were stretched toward her with savage frenzy. The women dragged themselves upon their knees or crawled over the floor like reptiles, sobbing and pulling their hair and tearing off their clothing.

(141-42)

Revising the melodrama of Rhoda’s racial self-recognition, Larsen depicts the psychological reverberations of Helga’s sexual awakening in the same church milieu, accompanied by the same sense of vileness and horror, and even certain shadows of specific images, from the “goblin” speaker and the “frog-like” congregation in Rhoda’s scene to the “grotesque ebony figure” and the reptilian women who frighten Helga. Larsen’s rewriting of the scene exposes as well the sexual subtext of Howells’ depiction, the eroticized spectacle of racial alterity his scene produces: bodies thickening the air, wild soft voices, a fainting girl, her engrossed senses of taste and odor, her rapture, her frenzy, her shivering start from a hypnotic trance. Larsen exploits Howells’ own lurid fascination, evoking a scene that she explicitly terms a “weird orgy” or “Bacchic vehemence” in which the women tear off their clothes. She effectively appropriates Howells, in other words, by turning her revisionary gaze back upon the unspoken, unacknowledged desire projected onto the Negro church in An Imperative Duty.21

But if Larsen evokes and revises crucial scenes from Howells, her careful study of Helga’s consciousness offers through an extraordinary catalogue of confluences a virtual psychological twin to Stein’s “complex, desiring Melanctha” (87). Like the ever-searching Helga, Melanctha “had not found it easy with herself to make her wants and what she had, agree” (89). “Melanctha was always losing what she had in wanting all the things she saw” (77), just as Helga, the consummate consumer, realizes bitterly that all she has “ever had in life has been things,” “which hadn’t been, weren’t, enough for her” (144). Melanctha “in negro fashion went very often to the negro church,” though she is “still too complex with desire” to “know how to use religion” (87); likewise, Helga attends the “very fashionable, very high services in the Negro Episcopal church,” but she is pointedly “not religious,” for she “took nothing on trust” (66). Melanctha is full of “denials and vague distrusts and complicated disillusions” (89); Helga often tells herself she has found “what she was sure were peace and contentment”—“found herself,” even (75)—but always the happiness “didn’t last” (78), leaving only “ridicule and self-loathing,” the “knowledge that she had deluded herself” (137). While Melanctha “was always being left when she was not leaving others” (89), Helga, too, both eventually rejects the people she meets and is rejected herself by her stepfather and half-siblings, her uncle Peter and his wife, and finally Dr. Anderson, whose final words to her seem “a direct refusal of the offering” of her love (137). Helga’s quixotic but always bitterly disappointed life expresses precisely Melanctha’s tendency to “be sudden and impulsive and unbounded in some faith, and then . . . suffer and be strong in her repression” (89). Like Melanctha, Helga experiences always “loneliness which . . . tormented her like a fury” (125); both women at moments think it would be easier to die.

Melanctha loves the young Dr. Jefferson Campbell, who “always liked to talk to everybody about . . . what he could do for the colored people,” though Melanctha “did not think much of this way of coming to real wisdom” (116); Helga loves Dr. Anderson, who works for what she contemptuously calls “Uplift” (84). Neither doctor can grasp the complexity of the woman who loves him and who, in Stein’s
words, “wanted very much to know and yet . . . feared the knowledge” (101). Jeff Campbell discovers that, “helpless to find out the way she really felt now for him,” “Melanctha was too many for him” (175); Dr. Anderson can only observe that Helga is “still seeking for something,” unaware of “the longing for sympathy and understanding which his presence evoked” (82). Jeff Campbell wants love to be “a good quiet feeling in a family when one does his work, and is always living good and being regular,” and he is afraid that Melanctha will incite “the other way of loving,” “having it like any animal that’s low in the streets together” (124). Likewise, Robert Anderson’s life is an “ascetic protest against the sensuous, the physical,” but Helga accesses in him “a more lawless place,” “a vagrant primitive groping toward something shocking and frightening” (124). Both men ultimately betray the sexual desire expressed by the women who love them: As Jeff Campbell “certainly [has] killed all that kind of feeling” in Melanctha (203), Anderson too “forfeit[s] it forever” in Helga, “leaving an endless stretch of dreary years before her in an appalled vision” (137).

As Larsen herself put it in her letter to Stein—which she enclosed with a copy of Quicksand—“I have read [‘Melanctha’] many times. And always I get from it some new thing” (Gallup 216). Through a series of striking parallels between Melanctha and her own heroine, Larsen thus appropriates from Stein material perfectly suited to her depiction of Helga’s divided subjectivity, the difficult and ultimately thwarted expression of her sexuality, and her alienation from the modern world. But Larsen, despite her epistolary compliments to Stein regarding her work, remained ever conscious in her revision of “Melanctha” that the tragedy at hand in her predecessor’s text was precisely that of a “half white girl” (86). In Helga, she creates a self-referential Melanctha of the twenties who at moments openly mocks the very biologic literary tradition that has produced her. Marked by the conventional mulatta character’s “certainty of the division of her life into two parts,” Helga nevertheless conceptualizes her “divided heritage” as an altogether socially constructed opposition between “physical freedom in Europe” and “spiritual freedom in America,” freedom from Jim Crow racism versus freedom from the “heavy solemnity” of Copenhagen (125). With a satiric nod to the biological, inevitably blood-based placelessness of Melanctha and her counterparts in the tradition of “neither white nor black,” Helga considers her own predicament by contrast to be “unfortunate, inconvenient, expensive,” even “a trifle ridiculous.” Suggestively self-aware, “she caricature[s] herself moving shuttllelike from continent to continent” (125).

Finally, if “Melanctha” provided Larsen with a foil for constructing Helga as a psychological subject, it was to Stribling’s narrative that she turned to explore the tragic mulatto tradition’s obsession with atavism through the trope of the birthright. In Stribling’s novel, the titular “birthright” is the tie that binds one by birth to race, especially, it seems, to the “negro race”: It is the inexplicable link—“shot through with the uncanny and the terrible” (119)—between the Negro mourning community in Hooker’s Bend and “the jungle.” Their birthright incites them to “perform . . . through custom an ancient rite of which they knew nothing” (120), while Stribling’s tragic mulatto protagonist, Peter Siner, alienated from his birthright by his Harvard education, sits “staring at his bookcase, like a white man” (121); he has only distaste for the “black folk in the African kraals beating tom-toms and howling, not in grief, but in an ecstasy of terror” (120). In Quicksand, Larsen revisits this conflicted scenario of birthright recognition during an interlude of wild cabaret dancing in which Helga’s shocked reaction at her own participation recalls the rhetoric of Stribling’s primitivist descriptions. After “shaking . . . ecstatically to a
thumping of unseen tomtoms” amid a crowd “strangled by the savage strains of music”—“the color, the noise, and the grand distorted childishness of it all”—Helga realizes where she has traveled spiritually and “drag[ed] her self back to the present with a conscious effort”:

... a shameful certainty that not only had she been to the jungle, but that she had enjoyed it, began to taunt her. She hardened her determination to get away. She wasn’t, she told herself, a jungle creature. She cloaked herself in a faint disgust ... (89-90)

Echoing Stribling’s terminology explicitly, Larsen figures Helga, like Peter, as alienated from the wild revelry, the “tontoms,” the “jungle.” Indeed, the letter inviting Helga to live with her white family in Copenhagen has already arrived, as if to confirm her unconscious longing for the white world that, like Peter, she has left behind and purported to disavow:

No, not at all did she crave, from those pale and powerful people, awareness. Sinister folk, she considered them, who had robbed her birthright. Their past contribution to her life, which had been but shame and grief, she had hidden away from brown folk in a locked closet, “never,” she told herself, “to be reopened.” (77)

Invoking the title and central theme of the novel to which she had promised along with White and Fauset to respond, Larsen reverses the terms of Stribling’s birthright. Peter Siner’s birthright is his deepest heredity, nature, and instinct, the tie to his mother’s race that allows him, despite the infusion of “white blood” that took him north for education, to make at the end of the novel the “amazing discovery that although he had spent four years at Harvard, he had come out, just as he went in, a negro” (309). Helga’s hidden but binding tie, by contrast, links her to the “pale and powerful people” rather than the “brown folk.” But this birthright connecting her to a white world has been “stolen,” a circumstance that recalls the biblical story of Jacob and Esau. Subverting the biologica

logical rhetoric of Stribling’s novel, Larsen’s allusion thus recasts the trope of the birthright not as a natural law of the blood but as a cultural inheritance that can be robbed, lost, traded, tricked away, exchanged, bought, or “sold”—in the words of Harlem Renaissance writer James Weldon Johnson in The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man—“for a mess of pottage” (211).

And like the Negro birthright of Johnson’s narrator, figured in musical compositions long ago abandoned and tragically stowed in “a little box [of] fast yellowing manuscripts, the only remnants of a vanished dream” (211), Helga’s birthright, too, is “hidden away ... in a locked closet” of writing. For her birthright is simultaneously a textual one—stolen not only by the “sinister folk” of her indifferent white family but by the authors Larsen revisits in this literary territory of the tragic mulatto. In the urban landscape of New York where her own fraught literary life was played out, Larsen explores the complex legacy of American interracial fiction as well as the obstacles faced by her revisionary protagonist in the search for full, complex fictional subjectivity far outside the narrow confines of the literary stereotype.

Copenhagen: “Pure Artistic Bosh and Conceit”

As her first stay in New York draws to a close, Helga grows increasingly dissatisfied with the prim Anne Grey, and Larsen increasingly critical in her depiction of talented-tenth elitism.22 Anne’s empty “racial ardor” and inflated talk about “the viciousness of white people” put Helga in mind of “Ibsen’s remark about there being assuredly something very wrong with the drains, but after all there were other parts of the edifice” (80). Citing a prior writer whose satirical relation to the bourgeoisie of his own century

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deeps Helga's mental rejection of Anne's false piety and middle-class hypocrisy, Larsen signals the imminent turn of her revisionary gaze from the literary territory of the tragic mulatto toward new material. Ibsen's committed Scandinavianism foreshadows Helga's coming trip to new novelistic terrain in Copenhagen, where the self-referentially literary quality of her journey becomes most explicit.

As Carby has observed, this section of the novel directly confronts questions of representation through its depiction of the Danish artist Axel Olson and his sensuous, animalistic portrait of Helga, which "displace[s] to Europe an issue of central concern to the intellectuals of the Harlem renaissance: white fascination with the 'exotic' and the 'primitive' " (171-72).

Helga's visit to a Harlem nightclub just before she embarks for Copenhagen suggests the overlap of the two geographical sites in Larsen's ensuing exploration of the literary territory that propagated this cult of the exotic primitive through its highly popular cabaret novels. The specific European site of this displacement proves particularly apt for Larsen's visionary confrontation with a literary terrain occupied with best-selling results by a very good friend—one with whom both she and her protagonist shared a Scandinavian heritage: Carl Van Vechten, who makes cameo appearances in both her novels as the writer Hugh Wentworth.

Van Vechten's 1926 novel Nigger Heaven, in which a librarian character named Mary Love is modeled partially on Larsen herself,23 shares with Quicksand an interest in literary history and the distinction of being a book about books. But unlike the allusive "patchwork" emergent in Larsen's novel, Nigger Heaven's relation to prior writing is didactic and explicit, involving extended plot summaries that assume the tone of a book review or critical essay as well as overbearing commentaries on literary merit in the eyes of various characters and, presumably, the author. The novel is in a sense one long aesthetic manifesto on the Negro as a literary subject; it is the tragedy of an educated, middle-class aspiring Negro writer and his artistic failure in choosing not to depict lower-class Harlem and the accompanying themes of primitivism, promiscuity, criminality, and debasement in his work. The novel's portrayal of black intellectual life in Harlem is framed by the tale that Byron Kasson apparently should have written to avoid literary (and consequent personal) disaster: a tale of adultery, gambling, drugs, and ultimately murder. As the editor Durwood, the novel's white figure of reason and arbiter of aesthetic priorities, warns young Byron, "'Nobody has touched the outskirts of cabaret life. . . . if you young Negro intellectuals don't get busy, a new crop of Nordics . . . will exploit this material before the Negro gets around to it' " (222-23).

Significantly, Durwood has just turned down Byron's manuscript of a story of interracial love, censoring the plot as a "dangerous idea," not "a subject safe for an inexperienced writer to handle" (224). "There's plenty of other copy," Durwood urges Byron:

"There's the servant-girl, for instance, who refuses to 'live in.' Washing dishes in the day-time, she returns at night to her home in Harlem where she smacks her daddy in the jaw or else dances and makes love. . . . Go home now, tear up everything you've written, and begin afresh. Pray and get drunk. Send me something else some time when you've decided to become a regular author and not a pseudo-literary fake." (225-26)

The novel makes it painfully clear that Durwood is supposed to be the voice of the tough, honest, incisive critic who sees through the "melodrama" and "cheap propaganda" in Byron's story (224). Yet it is strangely, but appropriately, the figure of Mary Love/Larsen who articulates the unstated, unacknowledged predilection structuring the narrative's aesthetic manifesto: "I believe . . . that they actually prefer us when we're not respectable" (148).
The real-life Larsen, however, purported in letters to the author to respond to Nigger Heaven with utter admiration, a fact that has recently led Hutchinson to argue that she found Van Vechten’s work “absolutely brilliant” (Harlem 444). After receiving a signed copy from Van Vechten in August, 1926, Larsen wrote him to announce that, although she had ostensibly not yet read the book, she was “terribly excited”:

Too, almost incited to forgo the ritual which the reading of particular books always demands of me, a Houbigant scented bath, the donning of my beautiful crepe de chine pyjamas, fresh flowers on the bedside table, piles of freshly covered pillows and my nicest bedcover,—and sit right down to it. But no, impatient as I am, I shall make it a ceremony. . . . Thanks and other things will follow after the pleasures. Just now, everything waits but that pleasure.24

Pointedly provocative, Larsen sets the scene of her imminent reception of Van Vechten’s novel in her bath and bed, where a literary consumption of sorts will occur, complete with the sensual details of Houbigant scent, fresh flowers, silk lingerie, fine linens, and the assurance that the act will be full of pleasures, that “thanks and other things will follow” afterwards. There is something in her words to Van Vechten that seems designed to satisfy a certain prurient curiosity, a literary voyeurism that resonates powerfully with his own novel’s tendency to gaze lovingly over the beautiful brown bodies of its female characters—raising the possibility, even, that Larsen’s letter was written after at least a first reading of Nigger Heaven. More tellingly, Larsen’s first letter to Van Vechten about Nigger Heaven bears a suspicious resemblance to the Copenhagen section of Quicksand, published two years later. The terms in which Larsen characterizes her feelings about Van Vechten’s book—“excited,” “incited”—are exactly those in which she casts Helga’s state of mind in Denmark:

She began to feel a little excited, incited.

Incited. That was it, the guiding principle of her life in Copenhagen. She was incited to make an impression, a voluptuous impression. She was incited to inflame attention and admiration. She was dressed for it, subtly schooled for it. And after a little while she gave herself up wholly to the fascinating business of being seen, gaped at, desired. (103-04)

“Incited” indeed to play the role of the exotic primitive, Helga enters a literary terrain in which the Dahls do to her precisely what Van Vechten does to his characters in Nigger Heaven: dress her up in beautiful but sexually flaunting clothes (including a leopard-skin coat that recalls his stunning Lasca Sartoris’s trademark) and put her on display. While Larsen may well have regarded Van Vechten as a close personal friend, in other words, her response to his literary efforts appears more complicated than her professed estimation of the novel would suggest.

Almost immediately, Helga’s “new life” in a textual territory that she herself refers to in literary terms as her “proper setting” (97) recalls an early scene from Van Vechten’s novel. Mary Love stands “before the dressing-table, regarding her reflection,” “not displeased by her double,” “the rich golden-brown colour of her skin . . . well set off by [her] simple frock of Pompeian-red crepe” (25). On her first morning in Copenhagen, similarly, before the maid’s “sly curious glances” (97) and her aunt’s frankly objectifying stare, Helga models different dresses before a mirror as Fru Dahl issues instructions that refigure Van Vechten’s fictional descriptions: “‘You must have bright things to set off the color of your lovely brown skin. Striking things, exotic things. You must make an impression’” (98). Helga’s aunt rejects most of her wardrobe as “too sober” but gives her approval to a “Chinese-red dressing gown” with the promise to buy her a frock of that color that will show off her “fine back and shoulders” (98-99). Although Helga, like Mary Love, has to agree that the red “suit[s] her” (99),
Larsen turns her revisionary gaze away from Helga's body long enough to reveal Mrs. Dahl's motives in choosing her niece's clothes: "in spite of all her gentle kindness," she had—like Van Vechten's "new crop of Nordics" appropriating "Negro material"—already "determined the role that Helga was to play in advancing the social fortunes of the Dahls" (98).

Bedecked with the various props of the exotic primitive part—long earrings, rouge, barbaric bracelets, a flesh-exposing dress—Helga feels "like a veritable savage" (99): "Charming, yes,' her Uncle Poul considers her, "But insufficiently civilized" (121). Soon "discovered" by the famous painter Axel Olsen, Helga hears his appraising inventory of her body—"Superb eyes... color... neck column... yellow... hair... alive... wonderful"—and finds that she is wearing the "fixed aching mask" of another stereotype (101), one that bequeaths to her, in the artist's eyes, "the warm impulsive nature of the women of Africa" and "the soul of a prostitute" (117). When she attends a vaudeville house with Olsen and sees the "avidity" with which he watches the "cavorting Negroes on the stage... throwing their bodies about" (112), Helga herself begins to consider the politics of representation surrounding not only the "gesticulating black figures" she returns again and again to interpret, but her own relationship to Olsen. Her companion has already begun to make artistic use of her, creating on his canvas "a disgusting sensual creature with her features" (119) that will be unanimously praised by the critical establishment.

It is not surprising, then, that Olsen, as the central artistic figure in this territory of the primitive exotic, shares certain striking similarities with the Hugh Wentworth/Van Vechten figure who appears peripherally in Larsen's novels. Both are described as brilliant, bored, worldly, and ultimately scornful: The maid in the Dahl house sees Olsen's painting of Helga as "bad" and "wicked" (119), while Clare Kendry in _Passing_ pronounces Wentworth's novels "contemptuous," "as if he more or less despised everything and everybody" (229). When Larsen wrote to Van Vechten for the second time after receiving _Nigger Heaven_, she described her reaction to the novel, despite her praise for it, as "a kind of despair." Not only did Carl Van Vechten know "a Negro," she announced, but he knew "the Negro"—"as if you had undressed the lot of us and turned on a strong light." Her protagonist Helga, in turn, has "a stripped, naked feeling under [the] glance" (116) of the primitivist painter, and she "had never quite, in spite of her deep interest in him, and her desire for his admiration and approval, forgiven Olsen for that portrait" (119). When Helga tells Olsen that she is "not for sale... not to any white man" (117), she refuses not only the offer of marriage he has cast in the language of prostitution (and the historical concubinage under slavery it recalls), but also the mode of representation of which he is an agent. She refuses, that is, to be bought as his aesthetic material, to participate in the propagation of an artistic formula. Thus, when Olsen, sulking over her refusal, declares his work to be "the true Helga Crane [and therefore a] tragedy" (119), she dismisses him "in a little impatient motion," and later remarks to herself sarcastically that "He took it awfully well... for a tragedy." Mocking the familiar term so often applied to representations of the mulatta, she ridicules Olsen's pretensions and by extension the literary territory of the primitive exotic, pronouncing it all "'pure artistic bosh and conceit'" (119).

It is finally the range of striking colors in this literary territory that evokes the distance Helga has traveled through a textual past. Her role in the terrain of the primitive exotic is accompanied by new clothes bought by the Dahls to satisfy Olsen's artistic needs: "batik dresses in which mingled indi-
go, orange, green, vermilion, and black . . . blood red, sulphur yellow, sea green”—a “startling array” that “incite[s]” Helga. Her earlier sartorial Plea for Color in the literary territory of racial uplift has exploded in the textual realm of the exotic primitive into an exploitative, objectifying nightmare of “screaming colors” (103), which testify wordlessly not only to the limitations of this literary terrain but, in the next lines, to the signification of color she has fled in America: “How stupid she had been ever to have thought she could marry and perhaps have children in a land where every dark child was handicapped at the start by the shroud of color” (104). Citing the Harlem Renaissance poet Countée Cullen, Larsen foreshadows Helga’s movement to new territory and the end of the novel: in Cullen’s words from “The Shroud of Color” to which she alludes, “Too great a cost this birth entails” (97).

A Tiny Alabama Town: “Not to be Borne. Again.”

J ust after returning from Copenhagen, and just before she leaves New York for the second and final time, Helga re-encounters her former fiancé, still affiliated with Naxos and its mission of racial uplift. The clash of two incompatible literary territories is palpable as James Vayle discusses what he does not condone about New York, “blush[ing] furiously” at the “implication” of interracial, extramarital relations he perceives around him in this sexualized literary landscape: “You know as well as I do, Helga, that it’s the colored girls these white men come up here to see” (131-32). Though Helga disagrees with his interpretation of the scene, the sudden appearance of a Naxos representative in New York foreshadows her imminent return to the South and the mission of racial uplift she left behind in the literary terrain of Harper’s Iola Leroy. In fact, Vayle unknowingly announces her destiny while making a speech on “race improvement”:

“Don’t you see that if we—I mean people like us—don’t have children, the others will have? That’s one of the things that’s the matter with us. The race is sterile at the top. Few, very few Negroes of the better class have children, and each generation has to wrestle again with the obstacles of the preceding ones. . . We’re the ones who must have the children if the race is to get anywhere.” (152)

Helga refuses to “contribute any to the cause” (132). But her trip south, which brings her full circle to the geographical region of her “young joy and zest for . . . uplifting” (146), determines that her “last service for the race”—and the tragedy of a novel dedicated to revising the literary past—will indeed be reproductive.

For James Vayle’s words about serving the race through procreation, and his theory of “steril[ity] at the top,” echo the rhetoric of many contemporary eugenicists whose ideas figured popularly in the literature of the period. “The rich get richer and the poor get—children,” as one character puts it simply in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby (101), published three years before Quicksand. But as Larsen was surely aware, such pronouncements about economic class and reproduction were more often than not linked to ideologies of racial and ethnic difference, as Fitzgerald’s character Tom Buchanan makes clear when he warns that soon “the white race will be . . . utterly submerged” (17) and invokes Lothrop Stoddard’s The Rising Tide of Color Against White World Supremacy (1920), a polemical tract warning that “Nordics” were not breeding so prolifically as other races.26 T. S. Stribling concurred with Stoddard as to the “more exuberant vitality” of “the black race,” though he purported in Birthright to celebrate this alleged fecundity as evolutionary determinism (307-08). In the novel that had so influenced Larsen in writing
Quicksand, Stribling argued that the "single object of all morals [was] racial welfare . . . the breeding of strong children to perpetuate the species" (307-08)—a principle so "deeply ingrained," he asserted, that "almost every novel written by white men revolves about some woman’s choice of her mate being thwarted by power or pride or wealth, but in every instance the rightness of the woman’s choice is finally justified" (277).

It was to this literary instantiation of sociological and racial theory that Larsen movingly responded through Quicksand’s bitter conclusion. The novel’s final section shatters the romance of the conventional marriage—birth ending that structures (as Stribling would have it) "almost every novel written by white men,” depicting instead what no critic has failed to point out is the stark reduction of a woman to her reproductive capacity. At the outset of her return to the Southern territory of racial uplift, Helga sees every child, through the lens of her mission to become “a true helpmate,” as “an emblem of life, of love, and of God’s goodness” (149). But her participation in what Stribling calls the project of “racial welfare” falters as her “breeding of strong children” progressively fails: “Two great healthy boys” soon give way to a “delicate” girl, “not so healthy or so loved,” who is followed in turn by “a sickly infant” without “vitality” that dies “after a week of slight living.” The conclusion finds Helga “used . . . up” by so many births “within the short space of twenty months” (152), realizing too late that she has become, as Angelina Weld Grimké put it in a 1919 story for The Birth Control Review, “an instrument of reproduction” in a world of white cruelty (140).27

Thus Helga meets her end in Pleasant Green, a name that satirically identifies both the husband who repulses her and, as the novel’s first articulation of Southern, black vernacular voices suggests, the literary territory of the lyrical, fertile black South she appropriates from Jean Toomer’s Cane. In the 1923 novel that served as a first clarion of the Renaissance—what Braithwaite in The New Negro called “a bright morning star of a new day of the race in literature” (44)—Larsen found the structural enactment of her protagonist’s figurative search for home, her cyclical movement, following Toomer’s experimental text, from rural South to urban North and finally back to rural South.28 In a subtle but pointed interpolation of the final section of Toomer’s novel, Larsen concludes Quicksand by figuring Helga, like Toomer’s mulatto protagonist Kabnis, as a Northern intellectual out of place in a Southern black community that misunderstands her. Both protagonists despair over the manipulation of Christianity they find all around them, the legacy of what Toomer’s Father John calls “th sin th white folks ‘mitted when they made th Bible lie” (115). Both are quasi-artist figures searching for beauty and for “beautiful words” (Cane 110): Helga interprets the world through novels, Kabnis through the “weird chill” of vernacular poetry (81). At the center of both their stories, moreover, is the potential horror of pregnancy in a world of white oppression: For Helga, giving birth means exposing a “dark child” to “wounds to the flesh” (132); Kabnis is tortured by the story he remembers of Mame Lamkin’s belly ripped open by lynchers, her baby stuck on a knife to a tree.

But for Toomer pregnancy is nevertheless the metaphorical vehicle for artistic creativity: Kabnis may be tortured by the story of Mame, but night is still the “soft belly of a pregnant negress,” birthing the poetry of the canefields and—“Hear their song” (103)—of the text that is Cane. Thus, the final section of Toomer’s novel was for Waldo Frank, as he put it in the foreword to the 1923 edition of Cane, an “invasion into this black womb of the ferment seed: the neurotic, educated, spiritually stirring Negro” (139). In a feminine retelling of “Kabnis,”
Larsen explores the limits of a foundational metaphor that appears to offer neither the same aesthetic nor philosophical conditions of production to a female and literally pregnant artistic protagonist. Helga confuses her babies with art, sees their bodies as “rare figures carved out of amber,” fine sculpture she has wrought, and in which “all that was puzzling, evasive, and aloof in life seemed to find expression” (150). Literalizing Toomer’s metaphor of the “pregnant negress” delivering art, Larsen reduces Helga to her womb and leaves her, about to bear her fifth rare amber figure, in a rural South where the very fertility Toomer celebrates will clearly prove fatal to her.

The horrifying vision of procreation with which Quicksand concludes spells the end of both Helga’s life of reading and Larsen’s sweeping journey across literary history. Helga is simply “Not to be borne. Again”—not to be remade into the new self of each distinct literary ground, nor to reexperience the concordant “dissatisfaction” and “asphyxiation” of Larsen’s prior texts “In Naxos,” “In New York,” “In Copenhagen” (160). The conclusion of Larsen’s self-referential novel finds Helga instead surveying the territories she has traveled, considering her own textual “immersion in the past,” only to realize that “it was finished now. It was over” (156). For when she is finally recovered enough in the aftermath of childbirth to “ask a little diffidently that she be allowed to read” (158), the nurse refuses her request. And when the nurse offers instead to read to her—but only “a little” (158)—Helga is just strong enough to ask for Anatole France’s “The Procurator of Judea,” a story that proposes a Pontius Pilate who cannot recall Jesus of Nazareth nor imagine his importance, when “Africa and Asia have already enriched us with a considerable number of gods.” Recalling the looming presence of Pickthall’s Said the Fisherman at the opening of Quicksand, France’s tale speaks incisively through its fable of religious relativity to Helga’s own entrapment in a Southern town where Christianity so clearly “had its uses for the poor—and the blacks” (159). Larsen thus frames her book about books with Helga’s consideration of two non-American texts that supply critical distance not only from the racialist appropriations of Christianity that structure the rural Southern arenas in which her novel begins and ends, but also from the larger American literary-historiographic project in which her novel participates.

The novel’s interpolation of Anatole France, in particular, speaks unmistakably to this project. Winner of the 1921 Nobel Prize for literature, France proved an influential figure for the new Americanist critics seeking to establish their own national tradition of belles lettres, their own literary “coming of age.” “Europe is a tale that has been told,” France had encouraged American writers—according to Van Wyck Brooks in his autobiography—“I believe in your American dream” (275). Thus new Americanists as diverse as Stuart Sherman and Joel Spingarn looked to France as a preeminent writer and literary commentator of the period. Perhaps predictably, Sherman found the French writer “too much concerned about the misery of the last man” to suit the tastes of his particular brand of “Ku Klux Kriticism”; he accused France of “making capital of unspeakable things” (On Contemporary 188).

For Spingarn, on the other hand, France’s preeminence as a critic had produced an approach to literature that “constantly tends to get away from the work of art,” an “impressionistic” and “feminine criticism that responds to the lure of art with a kind of passive ecstasy” (“New” 17). Proposing instead a New Criticism that would separate art from politics and declare itself “done with the race, the time, the environment of a poet’s work” (40), Spingarn outlined a critical enterprise

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that he would eventually bring to bear upon Larsen’s own work as a judge for the 1929 Harmon Awards for Distinguished Achievement Among Negroes, where he effectively thwarted Larsen’s chances at second prize by recommending that no first prize be awarded “in order that the standards of the Harmon Awards be maintained at a high level.”

Yet it is finally Springarn’s description not of his own but of Anatole France’s approach to criticism that most accurately evokes Larsen’s oblique critical project in Quicksand: the detailing of one’s “adventures among masterpieces” in a critical form that ultimately “will produce a new work of art to replace the work[s] which gave us our sensations” (“New” 11-12). In the Francesque closing of her novel, then, Larsen invokes a literary figure whose works propounded a critical discourse alternative both to Sherman’s Anglo-Saxonist sensibilities and to the gendered formalism of Spingarn—a figure looming large in the very meditations on the national literature and its “coming of age” that appear to have provided such compelling foils and rich fodder for her own readings of literary history.

But if Larsen’s revisionary powers are in full force in the novel’s final scenes, Helga’s are finally diminished. The woman whose story begins with reading, who quotes Ibsen in her mind to ridicule the Harlem bourgeoisie, who invokes Cullen in her vow not to bear children to a world of white oppression, who is simply never without books, cannot stay conscious long enough even to hear—much less to appropriate, apply, or alter—“the superbly ironic ending which she had so desired” (159). The novel’s movement across multiple literary territories finds Helga finally trapped, mired within the titular “quicksand” that Larsen seems to suggest is the textual condition itself, always already constrained within a web of prior discourses.

Casting literary history as a series of potentially treacherous landscapes, Larsen’s novel functions as a kind of geographical theory of intertextuality in itself, one that speaks productively to recent critical interest in spatiality and the relation between place and narration. If, as Sara Blair has recently observed, the “shared project” of the “new cultural geography” is “the articulation of space as a social product . . . that masks the conditions of its own formation,” Larsen’s novel is not merely well suited to the field’s “powerful new models and vocabularies for revisiting certain definitive . . . problems in American literary studies” (544); in fact, Quicksand is highly self-conscious of its own theory of spatial revisionism. Larsen’s intertextual geography engages with a number of prominent American narratives of place—involving city and region, wasteland and pastoral, the road and the home, the American in Europe—in order to explore the various literary traditions and tropes through which Helga’s experience of her environment is constructed. The novel cultivates a narratology that, however complex and sometimes self-contradictory, always attends to the political dimensions of landscape and place. Its intertexts function both to map Helga’s subjectivity along geographic axes and to constitute Larsen’s continuing critique of her own place, and the place of other writers, in the ideologically fraught landscapes of American literary culture.

Finally, Larsen’s intertextual geography illuminates the ways in which literary critics, too, have participated in constructing geographic models for theorizing processes of revisionism. To take a prominent and richly compelling example from the African Americanist tradition, we might consider Henry Louis Gate’s characterization of “motivated Signifying[g]” as “the clearing of a space of narration” (xxvii), an implicitly competitive form of revision often involving parody, critique, textual struggle. Alice Walker, on the other hand, suggests a more harmonious, affirmative spatial model of revisionism through her injunction to
relocate the lost artistic masterpieces of African American women by setting out “in search of our mothers’ gardens,” “brilliant with colors . . . original in design . . . magnificent with life and creativity” (241). Considered in relation to their respective geographic metaphors, these influential paradigms reflect two enduring spatial fantasies within the American literary tradition: the aggressive (always masculine) clearing of new frontier and the idealized discovery of an Edenic (often feminized) pastoral scene. What Larsen may ultimately offer is yet another geographic model for thinking about literary relations, and one that eludes any gendered polarization. Thoroughly situated in relation to multiple landscapes of prior writing, the intertextual geography of Quicksand neither “clears” the landscape of prior texts to establish its own literary voice nor cultivates a pastoral, purely affirmative space of literary communion. Neither wholly combative nor unproblematically cooperative, Larsen’s geographic revisionism is instead like Helga herself: nomadic and provisional.

1. For discussions of the plagiarism charge against Larsen, see especially Davis (346-64), Douglas (85-87), and Dearborn (56-57). Most scholars agree that the plagiarism scandal “mortally wounded her literary career,” as George Hutchinson puts it (“Nella Larsen” 343); a notable exception, Charles Larson maintains that the real demise of Larsen’s career was due not to the public humiliation of the charges but to the rejection of her next book, Mirage, by her former publisher Alfred A. Knopf (“Introduction” xvi-xviii).
2. For another recent biography of Larsen, see Larson, Invisible Darkness.
3. See the citation and brief discussion in Davis 328.
4. These citations are taken from an unpublished portion of Larsen’s letter to the editor, transcribed and discussed in Davis 202-05.
5. This citation is also included in the unpublished portion of Larsen’s letter transcribed in Davis 202-05.
6. Davis has argued to the contrary that in Quicksand Larsen “depended more mechanically upon Helga Crane’s reading of books to gesture toward the modernity of her novel” than in Passing, where “characters convey the effects of reading rather than display their reading of specific texts.” Davis offers a brief account of how Larsen’s reading in modern literature and psychology shaped Passing (310-11).
7. See, for instance, Carby; Hostetler; McDowell; Christian.
8. See Carby 72, 67.
10. McDowell provides a compelling reading of Quicksand’s final chapters as a commentary on Iola Leroy (96-97).
11. The review is also cited in Davis 304.
12. On Larsen’s interest in Freud, see Davis 310. McDowell offers what is perhaps the most influential and fascinating consideration of the role of desire in both Quicksand and Passing (78-97).
13. For three influential discussions of sexuality and nineteenth-century African American domestic fiction, see the relevant chapters in Carby; duCille; and Tate.
14. Douglas briefly discusses the “new breed of race ideologues” emerging in the 1890s from Social Darwinist thought (305-06).
15. Carby provides the groundbreaking reconsideration of Harper’s novel, reading in it an “attempt to morally rearm the black intellectual and to contest the terrain of racist entrenchment” (62-94).
16. For a close analysis of this figure in Page and Dixon, see Kinney 151-81.
17. Many critics have discussed the lasting influence of the “tragic mulatto” stereotype in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American fiction; see, for example, Berzon and, more recently, the relevant chapter in Sollors. Sollors makes the helpful suggestion that the tragic mulatto stereotype be renamed “Warring Blood Melodrama” to distinguish “racist Kitsch” from “the variety of other representations of mixed-race characters” (243). For treatments of the very different mulatta figure in the works of African American women novelists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for example, see Christian, for whom the figure is first exemplified by Harper’s Iola Leroy, a character at the “center of an upward strving class . . . no longer tragic or melancholy but a source of light for those below and around her” (29), and then refigured in the 1920s by Jessie Fauset and Larsen. For
Carby, on the other hand, the mulatto figure "as a convention of Afro-American literature . . . is a narrative device of mediation," allowing "a fictional exploration of the relationship between the races while being at the same time an imaginary expression of the relationship between the races" (171). Critics have often read Larsen's use of the mulatta character specifically as a metaphor: for "a divided self" (Dearborn 59); for "dual cultural allegiances" and "contradictory impulses" (Davis 253); for "oppositional tensions . . . between male domination and female desire . . . objectivity and subjectivity . . . self and other" (Spillers 166); and for "the paradigm problem citizen . . . the surplus embodiment of a culture that values abstraction" (Berlant 113). For a recent reading of Larsen's use of the mulatta figure, see McLendon, who argues that Larsen was 'affected,' in a negative sense, by the portraits of mulattoes in precursory American fiction by white writers, though she determined in her fictional worlds to make "a movement away from pseudoscientific theories of motivation for the mulatto's behavior" (11).

18. See the discussion in Brinnin 99.
19. The letter is collected in Gallup 216 and is also cited and discussed in Davis 251.
20. The interview was conducted and reported four years after the publication of Quicksand, in May 1932; It is also cited and discussed in Davis 152.
21. For a different reading of this church scene in relation to turn-of-the-century discourses of crowd psychology and urban sociology, see Esteve.
22. See Carby's discussion (171-72).
23. See Davis's brief discussion (212).
24. Davis cites and discusses this letter as evidence of Larsen's concern with "differentiating herself from racially defined others, specifically stereotyped lower-class blacks" (209-10).
25. See Davis 211.
26. On The Great Gatsby and contemporary racial polemics, see Michaels.
27. For a provocative discussion of the "anti-procreative thematic" structuring Grimké's story as well as Larsen's novels, see Castro.
28. Cane was favorably reviewed in a number of prominent journals soon after its original publication in 1923. See, e.g., the selections in the Norton critical edition, edited by Darwin T. Turner.
29. This quotation is cited and briefly discussed by Hutchinson, Harlem 106.
30. Davis provides an extended account of the awards decisions (343-44).

Works Cited


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