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Nella Larsen's Quicksand: Untangling the Webs of Exoticism

In 1925, when Josephine Baker went to Paris to perform in the Revue Negre, she drew attention for her comic faces and the ways in which she could move her body. Baker's biographer Phyllis Rose writes, "Every part of her seemed to go in a different direction, flung from some central volcano of spirit. She made faces and flailed about. She shook her rear end, then drew it in and strutted in place. The radiance of her personality and her joy in life seemed to express themselves in her body" (4). The female body is frequently figured as text—the uncontrolled body that flails around is frequently sexualized. That the body described by these lines is a black body adds yet another dimension to this already problematic figuring of the body. Josephine Baker's body has become, for her audiences, the personification of the exotic primitive.1 When the managers of the Théâtre de Champs-Élysées, where the Revue Negre was to be performed, first saw the performance that the dancers and musicians from Harlem had brought to Paris, they were reportedly "in despair." To remedy the situation they brought in an outside producer to spice up the show. Jacques Charles "agreed that the show needed something. It was noisy and inelegant, and worst of all it wasn't black enough" (Rose 5).

The "blackening" of the Revue Negre was a move to domesticate and homogenize the black American performers in the show—to create "authentic" blackness as already figured in stereotypes of blackness. It can be read as a move to sensationalize and dramatize blackness—the move to personify and embody stereotypical performances of blackness for the pleasure of an audience. Black performers needed to be blacker. By this definition, blackness was constructed as the exotic, coming from the jungle. No performer has signified this move more than Josephine Baker, whose famous banana dance had its origins in Paris. Originally called the "Danse Sauvage," Baker's trademark topless dance came from this move to "authenticity." Rose reports, "For this piece of authenticity Josephine Baker and her male partner were dressed in Charles's notion of African costume—bare skin and feathers" (6). Baker, the female exotic, was to dance topless, and "the Revue Negre excited its audiences by reminding them of a world that was both mysterious and sexually available, alien, yet subject." Rose quotes a review of the show which states, "'As for reality, we like it exotic' " (23).

Baker's "Danse Sauvage" situates the theoretical points of intervention I want to make into the discussion of black female sexuality and the ways it is always already figured as exotic. The move toward authenticity in the construction of the jungle dis-

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cussed above is illuminating in its attention to specific already circulating notions of what constituted and still constitutes "blackness." This complex relationship between female bodies and notions of black "authenticity" is a tangled web. As a critique of authenticity, James Clifford, examining New York’s 1984 Museum of Modern Art show entitled “Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern,” asserts that if there had been different stories told in the exhibition, then they might have been stories of race instead of art. What was constructed for the show, however, was a story of art which neatly situated “high” and “low” art by juxtaposing the “tribal” with the “modern.” Under this umbrella, Clifford writes, “modernism is thus presented as a search for ‘informing principles’ that transcend culture, politics, and history. . . . the tribal is modern and the modern more richly, more diversely human” (191). By presenting the show in this manner, in the drive for “humaness,” other questions are shut out. What the show’s configuration does not permit are questions of history, race, and politics. Instead the exhibit is presented as a non-problematic desire on the part of the West to collect the world—the notion that tribal arts did not in any way exist as arts before they were discovered by modernist painters, specifically Picasso (Clifford 196). Clifford suggests that, if the exhibit had permitted alternate stories, one such story could have been figured in the body of Josephine Baker.

Art in the history the MOMA presented, Clifford writes, had no “essential link with coded perception of black bodies.” Indeed, the tribal artifacts in the exhibit lost all specificity except as defined by the way in which they were inflected next to Western, modern art. Clifford claims that

a different historical focus might bring a photograph of Josephine Baker into the vicinity of the African statues that were exciting the Parisian avant-garde in the 1910s and 1920s; but such a juxtaposition would be unthinkable in the MOMA history, for it evokes different affinities from those contributing to the category of great art. The black body in Paris of the twenties was an ideological artifact. Archaic Africa . . . was sexed, gendered, and invested with “magic” in specific ways. Standard poses adopted by “La Bakaie,” like Léger’s designs and costumes, evoked a recognizable “Africanity”—the naked form emphasizing pelvis and buttocks, a segmented stylization suggesting a strangely mechanical vitality. The inclusion of so ideologically loaded a form as the body of Josephine Baker . . . would suggest a different account of modernist primitive . . . (197-98)

Problematising the exotic in this way, suggesting that it has a specificity and that this specificity can be traced to the body of Josephine Baker, does radically alter the story, especially if we believe the way in which the Revue Negre was made blacker. The body itself becomes more than an artifact, because bodies can tell their own stories. At the very least, they tell the story of how their bodies were put on display.

I agree with Clifford that the black body in 1920s Paris was already caught in a complicated web of discourses. But it is precisely this web that tells the story and calls its own assumptions into question. In Clifford’s formulation, body = art = refiguring relations of power. As the body becomes an exotic curiosity, a literal performance of the exotic, the power relationship between the performer and the viewer is politicized. When the black body presents performances of its mythical exoticism, it calls these relations into question. Indeed, I believe that it challenges the very notions of real and exotic that the review Rose cites above locates. Thus, Josephine Baker’s body, next to the same tribal art used to set off the modern “high” art, could create an alternate text.
However, this move would not be totally unproblematic. What Clifford fails to factor into his formulation is the way in which the female body is continually structured as object of the gaze. To place a photograph of Baker’s body in a museum would be to recommodify her, even if in a different setting. To do so might even replicate the same structure which created the black body as an artifact.

Although the black female body was already a readable text, it will be clear in Larsen’s repositioning of this body that it is more than an artifact. The juxtaposition above would call attention to the making of the body into art, but this gesture would be done at the risk of keeping myths intact in the same way that Rose unself-consciously asserts of Baker, “The radiance of her personality and her joy in life seemed to express themselves in her body.” Similarly, instead of problematizing the exotic, Rose tries to make the classification less problematic by explaining it through modernist art and literature. For Rose, the exotic is easily separable from the primitive. She writes, “An enthusiasm for African statues in one thing, for black flesh another. I would call one primitive and the other exotic” (43-44). The exotic primitive is yet a third. Its construction stems from the texts of the exotic that are already assumed. To make the separation between the exotic and the primitive today in an intellectualized manner is a much simpler gesture than it was when Josephine Baker danced in Paris. If Baker were merely exotic and not primitive, then why the desire to dress her up in “primitive” costume? Why the desire to make her sensuality exotic? And why has this conflation of black women and exoticism held fast for so many years?

In her “Introduction” to the Rutgers edition of Nella Larsen’s Quicksand, Deborah McDowell suggests that, “since the very beginning of their 130-year history, black women novelists have treated sexuality with caution and reticence.” She goes on to assert that “this pattern is clearly linked to the network of social and literary myths perpetuated throughout history about black women’s libidinosexuality” (xii). Two vital contributions to the discussion of this “libidinosexuality” and the myths that surround it are Gertrude Stein’s Three Lives and Nella Larsen’s Quicksand. And it is my contention that the juxtaposition of these two texts is a way into the complicated web of desire and representation that faces any literary depiction of black womanhood. My concern lies in the way in which, when juxtaposed, these texts engage in a dialogue. The conversation that they hold forms the center of a persistent debate about race, gender, and sexuality.

Although Stein’s notions of black female sexuality come out of what critically look like misreadings of black women, her book is one of many in a literary history that has continually represented black womanhood through such misreadings. Black women writers were reticent to repeat the same notions they had heard for years. As a white writer, Stein may be said to have exhibited a naïveté of subject matter. However, the problem of representation seems more endemic to a literary history than to a specific person. Indeed, both texts must be situated together to illuminate this history. I want to argue that by engaging the myths that Stein deploys in Three Lives, Larsen poses questions of sexuality to challenge the historical misrepresentations of black women. In doing this she challenges, most specifically, the portrayal of the black woman as exotic and always available for public consumption. Indeed, she takes on the misreadings of Josephine Baker’s performances.
The opening pages of "Melanctha," the centerpiece of Three Lives, paint portraits of two very different "negresses." Rose Johnson, who has been raised by white folks, is a "real black, tall, well built, sullen, stupid, childlike, good looking negress." Rose "laughed when she was happy and grumbled and was sullen when everything troubled her." She laughed, but "she had not the wide, abandoned laughter that makes the warm glow of negro sunshine....

Hers was just ordinary, any sort of women laughter" (85-86). Rose lacks complexity; indeed, she is representative of those who merely respond to life on the basis of their emotions. Melanctha Herbert, on the other hand, is described, in opposition to Rose, as "a graceful, pale yellow, intelligent, attractive negress" who has not been "raised like Rose by white folks but then she had been half made with real white blood" (86, emphasis added). This whiteness, and the yellowness of Melanctha’s skin, give Melanctha an advantage in the relationship that the two women have. Rose, having just given birth, has been attended by the "patient, submissive, soothing, and untiring" Melanctha, while "black Rose grumbled and fussed and howled and made herself to be an abomination and like a simple beast" (85). In the hierarchy of the animal kingdom, Melanctha’s proximity to whiteness and her ability to stay calm separates her from the beasts. Above all, however, Melanctha is complex and desiring; this is what truly separates her from negresses like the simple Rose Johnson.

Wandering in "Melanctha" is the central act of the text. The complex, desiring Melanctha "wanders" both for knowledge and for sex. As a euphemism, wandering cuts two ways—it is an active and a passive activity. It is both a quest for knowledge and the desire somehow simply to acquire knowledge, to have it conferred upon one—a wondering that Melanctha has to wander to discover; a wondering that leads her first into relationships with men who will grant her knowledge, and then into a more complex relationship with Jane Harden, who will give her bodily knowledge. Yet, in all its connotations, wandering is a sexual activity—a desire to know, to feel, to be somehow better or smarter in the world. It is a movement that takes Melanctha many times over the tracks into the rail yard to talk with men during the day, but then leads her back to those in the business, or middle class, at night.

Described as an almost uncontrollable desire, wandering for the negress Melanctha becomes emblematic of worth: "Melanctha Herbert always loved too hard and too much. She was always full of mystery and subtle movements and denials and vague distrusts and complicated delusions" (89). Hers is an enigmatic position, a position that is, I believe, constructed by Stein to embody the "knowledge" she as author has about black women. This knowledge, however, comes in the replication of myths of the black woman, myths that are centered around exotic sexuality and licentiousness. Stein also, and problematically, equates blackness with the animal, a beastly sexuality, which permits the reading of black women as beasts. This is most clearly seen in the above description of Rose giving birth; black women are almost always on the verge of turning into "simple beast[s]." This is what Melanctha must fight against but is unable to escape.

If, as Ann Charters notes in her "Introduction" to the Penguin edition of Three Lives, this text is a refiguring of Stein’s earlier Q.E.D., then the choice of transplanting the story of a white love triangle into a black context is an interesting one. Charters argues that Stein felt herself on "secure
ground as a storyteller because she was reworking an episode of her own life,” the desire/affair she had with a
woman at Radcliffe (xvii). However, the move into blackness, so to speak, is a move into territory that, through
its myths, is figured as a more readily acceptable world for complex and non-
traditional desire. In this shift from
“Whiteness” to “Blackness,” Stein car-
ries with her, and indeed exploits, a
longstanding and traditional miscon-
ception: that black women are exotic and always sexually available. Exotic
is used to distinguish “us” from the
“Other.” The Other, then, becomes the
convenient receptacle for fantasies, or
Josephine Baker’s coerced self-repre-
sentation of the connection between
black women and the jungle. The ex-
otic black woman, figured as sexually
available, is constructed as exotic
precisely to distance us from her, to
suggest that because her body is al-
ready prefigured as untamed she can-
not fully speak for herself. To do so
would be to speak against the story
that her body already tells. To argue
that Stein transplanted her story onto
such a different world in order to dis-
guise it completely and distance it
from herself is a compelling argument.
This argument, however, does not
fully take into account the implica-
tions of making such a shift—the im-
plications of crossing the figurative
line that divides Whiteness and Black-
ness. Most damaging to the argument
of distancing is that Stein crosses the
line without problematizing her own
crossing (or passing, more specifically,
since Stein passes, by posing, as black
Jeff Campbell in the narrative). Her
disguise in the text becomes a passing
and a cross-dressing simultaneously.
Because of this double passing, Stein’s
voice and language assume a black-
ness, a privileged access to the story
she is telling. Stein’s position solely as
voyeur is erased as she disguises her
whiteness in the text.  

Charters does note in her introduc-
tion some skepticism which counters
her somewhat unproblematic reading
of Stein’s reworking of “Melanctha”:

The truth is that all of the portraits in
Three Lives are based on ethnic and
racial stereotypes resulting in part
from Stein’s simplistic theories of
human character and in part . . . from
the conventional social prejudices she
shared with most of the people of her
time. But all three heroines in Three
Lives also exist as living characters
because they are presented with com-
passion and sympathy. (xvii)

Charters’ skepticism is a double ges-
ture, one that condemns and excuses
at the same time. Because Stein was
building on already available and
widely accepted stereotypes, and
these stereotypes were not of her own
making, the stories in the text are per-
mitted to remain believable and com-
passionate. 4 But Charters leaves no
room for the argument that in replicat-
ing stereotypes, and portraying them
compassionately, Stein is responsible
for actively reinforcing them. Stein’s
added element of compassion or
believability is more compellingly
read as another gesture in a long his-
tory of portraying black women’s ex-
toticism to the reading class.

This exoticism is more clearly
figured in “Melanctha” through the
notion of wandering. But more trou-
bling is the description of wandering
as an uncontrollable urge for
Melanctha. This urge takes away, to a
great extent, Melanctha’s agency, espe-
cially if one reads wandering as per-
haps the only way Melanctha expres-
ses herself in the text. This loss of agen-
cy is compounded by the idea that
Melanctha’s real power is continually
being described as coming from her
father. This power is then transformed
into sexual power: “Melanctha Her-
bert had always been old in her ways
and she knew very early how to use
her power as a woman.” Melanctha’s
sexuality, her power, comes from her
father, who is “very black and evil”
This indeed is the figure of Melanctha’s sexuality—black and evil. This is the kind of conclusion that the text permits. Because Melanctha’s father exhibits his blackness and evilness in violence, both physical and verbal, Melanctha’s own sexuality takes on this same violence. In this way it is an evilness—an indication of danger or threat. This same sexuality scares away Jeff Campbell; Melanctha is too much for him. Late into their relationship Jeff says to Melanctha,

“... I certainly do get awful afraid to come to you, and I certainly never do feel I could be very trusting with you. And then I certainly don’t know anything at all about you, and I certainly don’t know which is a real Melanctha Herbert, and I certainly don’t feel no longer, I ever want to talk to you. Tell me honest, Melanctha, which is the way that is you really, when you are alone, and real, and all honest.” (139)

While this conversation makes Jeff seem like the confused party, in that he cannot pin Melanctha down, his confusion is undercuts because it is not Jeff’s observations that are called into question but Melanctha’s “duplicity”; her honesty is challenged, not his right to challenge her “duplicity.” Stein, cross-dressing as Jeff Campbell, indicts her own heroine. Although this indictment is not wholly consistent in the text, there are by far more instances of scorn for than praise of Melanctha Herbert.

A further indictment against both Melanctha and Stein’s construction of Melanctha is Jane Harden. Having been Melanctha’s lover, friend, and companion, Jane, turned into a sick drunk in the text, talks to Jeff Campbell about Melanctha. The narration then uses Jane’s information to help Jeff challenge Melanctha. In her early wanderings, Melanctha met Jane, “a negress, but... so white that hardly any one could guess it” (103). Jane, a biracial like Melanctha, seems to be separated from the animality of Rose Johnson. But Jane’s drinking sup-

plants color as the way to becoming a beast. At first, Melanctha admires Jane because she is not afraid to know and because “Jane was a roughened woman. She had power and she liked to use it, she had much white blood and that made her see clear, she liked drinking and that made her reckless. Her white blood was strong in her and she had grit and endurance and a vital courage” (104). Here, as in the beginning of “Melanctha,” whiteness is privileged. Melanctha and Jane find in each other similar characteristics, beginning with color. Jane teaches Melanctha strength, gives her special access to knowledge, and “love[s] Melanctha hard and ma[k]e[s] her feel it very deeply” (106). Finally, it is this love that is suppressed in the text. Jeff uses the women’s relationship indirectly, through information that Jane drunkenly gives to him, to “corner” Melanctha about who she really is—in other words, to question her sexuality. Jane’s relationship with Melanctha is supplanted by Jeff’s, and Melanctha herself becomes more and more emblematic of the mysteriousness and licentiousness the narrator says she inherited from her mother.

Although Melanctha stops wandering for a time, the pressures of her relationship with Jeff eventually lead her to wander again. One might be able to read this return to wandering as a forced move manipulated by patriarchy to keep women circulating. However, because the narrative plays on familiar tropes of black female sexuality, this move turns out to be what one “expects” from a black woman. Stein uses and reinforces this wandering—Melanctha is at no time permitted complete control of her sexuality because her sexuality is continually being figured for her. Similarly, Rose and Jane continually fight their categorization as typically exotic while they simultaneously reinforce it in Melanctha. And, finally, narrative authority is deferred to Jeff Campbell.
who, as “author,” believes he knows how to categorize all three women. When his relationship with Melanctha is over he says, ”’... honest, I think perhaps I wasn’t real bad to you any more than you just needed from me’ “ (148).

The end of the narrative situates Melanctha and Rose together again in oppositions that mimic the beginning. Melanctha, again patient and serving, now helps Rose out. Rose is motivated in this relationship by jealousy—her husband Sam is too kind to Melanctha. If in the beginning of the novella Rose needed Melanctha, now the tables are turned. When Rose begins to treat Melanctha with less and less civility, the latter begins to wonder: She “dared not ask Rose why she acted in this way to her. Melanctha badly needed to have Rose always there to save her. Melanctha wanted badly to cling to her and Rose had always been so solid for her” (231). But because Melanctha has figuratively fallen into the trap of her own sexuality by literally entering into a relationship with Sam, she no longer has access to her friend Rose. Indeed, this final gesture firmly situates Melanctha as “beast,” a black woman fallen prey to her own sexuality. Once again Melanctha’s desires are beyond her control—they are controlled by myths outside of the text.

The issues of sexuality and access to whiteness that I raise are problematic in relation to the way in which Three Lives was received, especially by black writers during the period that has come to be known as the Harlem Renaissance. One of Stein’s biographers, John Brinnin, notes that Three Lives was praised in many reviews “as much for its refreshing non-patronizing attitude toward Negroes as it was recommended for its stylistic innovations.” Richard Wright, Brinnin goes on to explain, “considered ‘Melanctha’ one of the most important influences on the beginnings of his career” (120-21). James Weldon Johnson felt that “Gertrude Stein was ‘the first . . . white writer to write a story of love between a Negro man and woman and deal with them as normal members of the human family.’ ” Most interestingly, for my purposes, the novelist Nella Larsen, Brinnin reports, “wrote a letter to Stein in which she said, ‘I never cease to wonder how you came to write it and just why you and not some one of us should so accurately have caught the spirit of this race of mine’ “ (121).

Although not all black writers were so enthusiastic—Claude McKay “found nothing striking and informative about Negro life” in the novella (qtd. in Brinnin 121)—Larsen’s comments take on a different inflection when one examines her novel Quicksand, written in 1928. Quicksand and “Melanctha” share many stylistic and narrative characteristics. Helga Crane, Larsen’s heroine, is “seeking” in a similar way to Melanctha Herbert’s “wandering.” Both heroines are biracial, and their proximity to whiteness is problematic; and, curiously, both authors have been overly figured, by critics practicing biographical criticism, into their texts. For Stein this figuring in relation to “Melanctha” is a question of sexual preference. Having been a white lesbian actor in Q.E.D., Stein wrote herself as the black, male, heterosexual actor in Three Lives. This shift has already been problematized, with attention to race, above. In Larsen’s case, much criticism of her novels begins with the fact that Larsen herself, like the character Helga Crane, was a biracial and that she, like her heroine, spent time in Denmark.

The desire to exert biographical criticism onto novels by women does not begin or end with these two authors. One finds this with other
women modernists as well: Jean Rhys, H. D., and Zora Neale Hurston come to mind. All too frequently critics have tried to make sense out of novels by women through an examination of their lives. The assumption is that women always only write autobiography, an idea that has done much to marginalize novels by women writers. In relation to Stein, literary scholars have chosen biographical criticism, I believe, because it is easier to create stories from the life than the literature. This critical move is extremely problematic. Criticism that begins with the life can shed light on texts, but frequently this light casts too many shadows. While both Quicksand and Three Lives are open to biographical criticism, it is necessary, I believe, to start in a different place, focusing on black female sexuality as it is figured in the novels, and not as it is figured in the lives.

Larsen's Quicksand becomes an increasingly rich and complex text when read against “Melanchta.” Larsen's letter to Stein cited above provides evidence that Larsen was familiar with Three Lives. Indeed, it is my contention that, even though Larsen praised Stein's text, she effectively rewrote Melanchta's narrative to deconstruct the very stereotypes which kept Stein from fully writing black women's experience in an way that was empowering. On a stylistic level, Larsen adopted the short sentences and narrative repetition of Stein's writing. The most obvious way in which this is figured in Quicksand is the continual repetition of the heroine's full name: Helga Crane. Like the repetition of Melanchta Herbert, the repeated inscription of the female name can be read as a way to place the woman subject firmly in the text—by repeating the subject’s name, she becomes that which controls and manipulates the narrative. This assertion is most problematic in Stein's text because, as I stated above, the narrative seems to take control of Melanchta rather than Melanchta's taking control of the narrative. In Larsen's novel, however, Helga Crane, and the frequent inscription of her name, does assert a control over the text—even if it is a control frequently figured as not being in control. In other words, frequently other characters in the narrative position Helga by "creating" her as they see her; however Helga's own actions and moving are self-motivated, not literally created by the other characters in the text. The way that other people see her is continually called into question.

If in "Melanchta” sexuality is stereotypical in a way that does not problematize the cultural narratives of sexuality that created these stereotypes, then Quicksand takes off from this position to call into question these same cultural motivations. Even though Helga Crane seems like Melanchta in her desire to want knowledge, to roam, and thus to find this knowledge, Helga's actions are actions, albeit ones that take place in a very controlled environment—Helga Crane, as a black woman, does not have many choices. She is subject to the same restrictions as other black women of her class. And even though she has white blood, she is not light enough to pass. But while Melanchta's wandering could be talked about as sleepwalking, Helga covers vast space, money, and effort—hers are conscious choices, although

By engaging the myths that Stein deploys in Three Lives, Larsen posits questions of sexuality to challenge the historical misrepresentations of black women.

AFRICAN AMERICAN REVIEW

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prefigured by limited options. And while Stein’s heroine keeps notions of female exoticism and sexual availability intact, Larsen challenges these, and the already written scripts of black female desire, by sacrificing her heroine to the very sex(uality) she is supposed to want and enjoy so much. Larsen thus works against the exotic primitivism that is in Stein’s text and became a familiar trope in modernist literature.

Helga Crane’s struggle with herself and her surroundings is figured from the beginning of the novel. Caught within a narrow space in Naxos, where she teaches school, Helga sits in her room with only one reading lamp glowing. Everything is ordered, and all of her belongings surround her. The light was “a small oasis in a desert of darkness” (1). This is evident in more ways than one. Not only is this small light in the literal darkness of the room, but Helga herself is a small light in the figurative darkness of Naxos. Helga does not fit in Naxos for a combination of reasons. Others around her read her as exotic because she dresses differently and does not follow all of the rules. She is also a light in that she does not fully understand or believe in the culture that surrounds her. In this representation, Larsen complicates the association of darkness/ignorance, lightness/knowledge. At first glance it would seem that, because Helga is in the light, she has an advantage over the darkness around her. But Helga is as confused in the light as she sees others are in the dark. Her confusion is of fitting in. Helga herself embodies both the light and the dark in the color of her skin and her black and white heritage. Larsen thus throws the borders of knowledge into confusion.

The people of Naxos dislike Helga because she does not fit—she has a passion for fine things and bright colors that does not mingle well with this environment. Additionally, be-cause Helga does not fit and makes no effort to conform, she does not like the people of Naxos. In her room, watching the drab, dull colors outside of her window, Helga reflects on “fragments of a speech made by the dean of women . . .— ‘Bright colors are vulgar’ — ‘Black, gray, brown, and navy blue are the most becoming colors for colored people’ — ‘Dark-complexioned people shouldn’t wear yellow, or green or red’ ” (17-18). This reflection on color foregrounds Helga’s own color. She calls herself “a despised mulatto” but finds that

... something intuitive, some unanalyzed driving spirit of loyalty to the inherent racial need for gorgeousness told her that bright colours were fitting, and that ‘dark-complexioned people should wear yellow, green, and red. Black, brown, and gray were ruinous to them, actually destroyed the luminous tones lurking in their dusky skins. One of the loveliest sights [she] 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 the dyer. Why, she wondered, didn’t someone write A Plea for Color? (18)

Although the dean of women is a “great ‘race’ woman” she does not know her race, wants to keep her race from acknowledging color. This “Plea for Color” that Helga imagines is more than a plea for colored clothes. It is a plea for the recognition of her own color—of the different colors of the black race. Yet Helga’s plea illuminates two points simultaneously. It reveals the struggle that Helga has both with color and with sexuality. Her recognition of an “unanalyzed driving spirit of loyalty to the inherent racial need for gorgeousness” is a double gesture in which Helga finds the desire for colors not only to break stereotypes, but also to help acknowledge both sides to herself. In other words, the recognition of the “exotic” in the self and the self as desirable. This is a doubling that Helga will struggle with throughout the text.
Because of her passion for color, one of many passions she has to keep under control in Naxos, Helga "could neither conform, nor be happy in her unconformity" (7). Helga’s color and passion for colors situates her on the border between cultures—whiteness and blackness. Because she does not feel comfortable either in an all-black world or an all-white world, she cannot fully cross the line into one or the other. Her discomfort with the race question, and her equal discomfort with the way her own blackness is perceived in a white world, makes it difficult for Helga to fit. This will become apparent later in the text when Helga travels to Denmark and becomes fully marked by her color—and the colors she wears—in a culture of whiteness. Deborah McDowell notes that, "... in focusing on the problems of the ‘tragic mulatto,’ readers miss the more urgent problem of female sexual identity which Larsen tried to explore" (xvii). I concur with this reading but want to carry it further by asserting that it is precisely the "tragic mulatto" who enables the reading of sexuality that McDowell wants to practice. Because Larsen foregrounds color in her text, she uses the focus to illuminate questions of sexuality. By portraying the color border, Larsen has enabled readings of other borders as well. To stop on the border of color, I agree, is a reading that does not touch sexuality. But one cannot examine sexuality in the text without confronting color and the way in which color itself becomes sensualized and sexualized. Thus McDowell’s question—"How to write about black female sexuality in a literary era that often sensationalized it and pandered to the stereotype of the primitive exotic?"—is the right one to ask (xvi). Questions about the intersection of color and sexuality simultaneously need to be posited. For example, how does color regulate Helga’s own sexuality?

Larsen’s plea for color is much less monolithic than the blackness constructed as more “authentic” in 1925 Paris. Yet it is no less problematic for her heroine. With images of the exotic circulating widely in art and literature, it is no wonder that one of the main struggles Helga Crane must face is the intersection of her sexuality with her race. Indeed, these identities come together to refute, to some extent, the exoticism embodied in Josephine Baker. The “exoticism” in Quicksand is quickly shut out and reduced to sex. When Larsen’s novel first appeared, it was praised by Gwendolyn Bennett in her Opportunity column “The Ebony Flute”:

Nella Larsen’s Quicksand has just arrived. And let me say that many folks will be interested to hear that this book does not set as its tempo that of the Harlem cabaret—this is the story of the struggle of an interesting cultured Negro woman against her environment. Negroes who are squeamish about writers exposing our worst side will be relieved that Harlem nightlife is more or less submerged by this author in the psychological struggle of the heroine. (qtd. in Rose and Randolph 214-15)

Indeed, Helga’s struggle is figured as psychological, a struggle that rebels against the very notions of Negro life that have been defined by the cabaret or the jungle. The Harlem cabaret, Bennett’s review concedes, was an all-too-familiar trope in literature—an image that relied on negativity or stereotype for its portrayal. Quicksand is not without its nod to Harlem nightlife, however. Helga moves in the middle-class circles of Harlem, circles more prone to intellectual dinner parties than night-time cabarets. Yet one night Helga finds herself with friends in a place where “a glare of light struck her eyes, a blare of jazz her ears” (58). Historically, cabarets were middle-class milieux, but Helga has never before experienced one. Helga brings her uncomfortableness with her to this place—a feeling that
she does not belong. It is a feeling similar to that she had about Naxos.

Larsen describes the club scene as follows, while readers look both with Helga’s eyes and at Helga:

They danced, ambling lazily to a crooning melody, or violently twisting their bodies, like whirling leaves, to a sudden streaming rhythm, or shaking themselves ecstatically to a thumping of unseen tom-toms. For a while, Helga was oblivious of the reek of flesh, smoke, and alcohol, oblivious of the oblivion of other gyrating pairs, oblivious of the color, the noise, and the grand distorted childishness of it all. She was drugged, lifted, sustained by the extraordinary music, blown out, ripped out, beaten out, by the joyous, wild, murky orchestra. The essence of life seemed bodily motion. And when suddenly the music died, she dragged herself back to the present with a conscious effort; and a shameful certainty that not only had she been in 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. (59)

The complexity of feelings and movement expressed in this passage cuts crucially to the intersection of sexuality and race. If the Harlem nightclub can be a place of abandon and licentiousness, then to enjoy oneself in this place is to participate in the jungle. For Helga, to lose herself here is to risk the recognition of her own sexuality—a risk because to acknowledge in this place that she is a part of the place would be for her to fit a mold to which she is unwilling to conform fully. The danger of this conformity is to have one’s sexuality examined and put on display as the “savage,” as Josephine Baker in Paris or as Helga in Denmark.

A similar scene is staged in Zora Neale Hurston’s essay “How It Feels To Be Colored Me,” also published in 1928. Describing that she feels “most colored [when] thrown against a sharp white background,” Hurston then portrays a situation in which the tables are turned. To do this she il-

istrates how the inside and outside constantly shift. Her experience in the white world is mirrored by a white person’s experience in the black world of the Harlem cabaret:

... when I sit in the drafty basement that is The New World Cabaret with a white person, my color comes. We enter chatting about any little nothing that we have in common and are seated by the jazz waiters. In the abrupt way that jazz orchestras have, this one plunges into a number. It loses no time in circumlocutions, but gets right down to business. It constricts the throat and splits the heart with its tempo and narcotic harmonies. This orchestra grows rambunctious, rears on its hind legs and attacks the tonal veil with primitive fury, rending it, clawing it until it breaks through to the jungle beyond. I follow those heathen—follow them exultingly. I dance wildly inside myself; I yell within, I whoop; I shake my assegai above my head, I hurl it true to the mark yeeeeeoww! I am in the jungle and living the jungle way. My face is painted red and yellow and my body is painted blue. My pulse is throbbing like a war drum. I want to slaughter something—give pain, give death to what I do not know. But the piece ends. (123)

Hurston’s cabaret is a celebratory place—one in which she finds herself totally free, in which her color comes out. But this place of abandon is used in Hurston’s text as a place in which she has knowledge that the white person beside her will never understand. When Hurston returns from the “jungle” she finds that her white friend has not heard the music at all—“He is so pale with his whiteness then and I am so colored” (124). Hurston’s scene is a scene of her own power, but I think that it points quite interestingly to something else—what whiteness sees when it looks at blackness. Although Hurston controls hearing in her text, she also replicates, perhaps unwittingly, the site of the exotic. As Barbara Johnson writes, “The move into the jungle is a move into mask; the return to civilization is a return to veneer. Either way, what is at stake is an artificial, ornamental surface”
("Thresholds" 177). For Hurston, this surface or mask is a positive place, but for Larsen this place is made more problematic.

Hurston, as Hazel Carby points out, deliberately constructed an image of "the folk" in her writing (169). Hurston’s identification of this group as a positive ignored many racial conflicts. Her representation can compellingly be read as a romanticism which inadvertently reinscribes some of the same myths of blackness that Larsen is trying to dispel. Such a romanticism exhibits itself in the above scene. While Hurston found she was able to celebrate blackness in her affinities with jazz music, this music is the very thing that turns her into an animal. This animal is then a performance for her white friend, the friend that has not even heard the music. Hurston’s performance of the exotic is a celebration, but within this celebration she does not read her own inscription of racial expectations. In other words, by making her celebration unproblematic, Hurston re-creates a segregation of knowledge. It is only in this place designated for blackness that she, as a black woman, can have a distinct access to knowledge.

Larsen’s scene calls this access into question by portraying Helga’s struggle with the jungle in herself and the way she is positioned by the jungle. Helga is not oblivious to what is going on around her, outside of the club. Nor is she unaware of what is within her. Hurston’s scene, in celebration, carries with it some remnants of naïveté. However, what makes the nightclub scene in Quicksand most troubling is that, as Carby points out, "Harlem intellectuals were criticized for two major acts of hypocrisy: their announced hatred of white people and depreciation of any contact with white society while imitating their clothes, manners, and ways of life, and the proclamation of the undiluted good of all things Negro which disguised a disdain, contempt, and amusement for the actual culture and behavior of the majority of black people" (171). The scene, the trip to the club and what happens there, becomes part of this system of disdain. Instead of embracing fully what goes on, the scene is one of tension and conflict. It is not an easy celebration, but an examination of what is at stake in such exhibitions.

Larsen stages this cabaret scene again when Helga is in Denmark, this time rearranging the spectators. Helga is, in Hurston’s words, “thrown against a sharp white background.” Instead of being ashamed of her as Helga thought they might be, her Danish relatives are proud of her and parade Helga around Copenhagen wearing bright colors. Whereas in both Naxos and Harlem Helga felt awkward in her bright colors, when she gets to Copenhagen her aunt exclaims, “You must have bright things to set off the color of your lovely brown skin. Striking things, exotic things” (68). When Helga takes her first walk through Copenhagen she has a curious feeling. She feels “like a veritable savage,” a feeling “intensified by the many pedestrians who stop . . . to stare at the queer dark creature, strange to their city” (69). Even though Helga feels “like nothing so much as some new and strange species of pet dog being proudly exhibited” (70), she comes to like Copenhagen and its people. While Helga is aware that she is walked around town as a “curio” (73), she derives pleasure from knowing that people are looking at her and becomes used to the stares. Helga’s relatives sculpt her in their white image of blackness—the black female exotic. And the clothes her aunt and uncle buy her offer one answer to Helga’s plea for color: “There were batik dresses in which mingled indigo, orange, green, vermillion, and black; dresses of velvet and chiffon in screaming colors, blood-red,
sulphur-yellow, sea-green” (74). Indeed, they make Helga more “authentic” à la the Revue Negre. At the same time her walks through Copenhagen show the problematic nature of Hurston’s celebration: Because Helga is not in a place where she can let go on her own terms, she is labeled, dressed, and misunderstood as other people’s image of a black woman.

Helga is dressed again in Copenhagen by Axel Olsen, a painter. His construction of Helga has more of a literal nature, yet it comes from the stereotypical exoticism of his imagination. Olsen is commissioned to paint Helga’s portrait, and her aunt and uncle hope that he will marry her. Olsen’s portrait, Helga contends, isn’t “herself at all, but some disgusting sensual creature with her features” (89). The portrait comes from a doubling—the Helga that is, and the Helga that Olsen wants to see. This doubling can also be read in the words Olsen speaks just prior to Helga’s expressing her thoughts about the portrait: “You have the warm impulsive nature of the women of Africa, but, my lovely, you have, I fear, the soul of a prostitute. You sell yourself to the highest buyer. I should of course be happy that it is I” (87). But the image that Olsen has bought is not the person that Helga would have been selling. Helga’s refusal of Olsen’s marriage proposal comes from a new identification of herself with blackness—both positive and negative. She cites race as her reason for not marrying him: Se would never marry a white man because it would pose too many problems. When Helga rejects Olsen on racial grounds, she is at the same time rejecting his construction of her sexuality.

Additionally, Helga’s awareness of race and her eventual nostalgia for Harlem grow out of a vaudeville show she attends in Copenhagen. Near the end of the show everyone is bored and gets up to leave, but they are riveted to their seats again when two black men appear on stage—”American Negroes undoubtedly, for as they danced and cavorted, they sang in the English of America an old ragtime song that Helga remembered hearing when she was a child” (82). The performance jars Helga, a black woman sitting in the midst of whiteness. Everyone around her, including Axel Olsen, is enjoying the performance, the narrator tells us, but “Helga Crane was not amused” (83). Indeed Helga is upset because it is as if these kind white people around her, the same people that noted her exoticism and still treated her like a human being, had finally shown her what they really thought. Instead of being pleased with the show, “. . . she was filled with a fierce hatred for the cavorting Negroes on the stage. She felt shamed, betrayed, as if these pale pink and white people among whom she lived had suddenly been invited to look upon something in her which she had hidden away and wanted to forget.” This “something,” I believe, is an identification of herself with blackness. It is at this moment that Helga cannot forget the way that people perceive her, or that this perception is part of who she is. It is after this performance (to which she returns numerous times) that Helga realizes “the jungle” those around her had seen all along. This performance of her color thrusts “into her plan for her life . . . a suspenseful conflict in which were fused doubts, rebellion, expediency, and urgent longings” (83). The disgust she feels with her race points clearly to the idea that she rejected Olsen not only because of the color of his skin, but also for the depth of his misunderstanding.

At this point I find myself in full agreement with Hazel Carby’s assertion that “the representation of black female sexuality meant risking its definition as primitive and exotic within a racist society” (174). What is
South is not a place for the celebration of life or tales, but a place of hardship; for women, this is a place for children and patience. Carby argues that Larsen "refused a romantic evocation of the folk" (175). This anti-romanticism situates Helga in a place where she is literally smothered by her sexuality. Helga’s death is not exotic, and because the final consummation of her sexuality is not primitive or exciting, Larsen most fully confronted the myths left intact by Stein in “Melanctha.” If in some way Melanctha belonged to “the folk” as invoked by Hurston, then Larsen’s pathetic folk call Melanctha to attention. More specifically, they call Stein to account for her portrayal of a folk through stereotypical ramifications.

Thus, to return to a discussion of authenticity, and to read it back into the works by Stein and Larsen, I find a compelling way to critique the performative blackface Stein puts on in “Melanctha.” To tell her story, Stein had to cross-dress and also put on blackface in order to lend authenticity to her narrative. However, this authenticity becomes like Josephine Baker as character—a move toward already written texts of the stereotypical. To put on blackface can be theorized as the desire to hide the fact of one’s whiteness while at the same time pointing out one’s whiteness. The black face does not hide the white body—indeed, I want to argue, it makes the white body more apparent. To follow this line of reasoning, the white body with black face not only appropriates blackness but mocks it at the same time. This is a move that is problematized by Larsen who, to tell her story and rewrite Stein’s, has to cross-dress twice—as both white woman and black man. This double move complicates authenticity and calls it more fully into question. The performance of race blurs the boundaries between what is real and what is fiction, and Larsen’s double perfor-
mance might call both positions to account for themselves by critiquing authenticity itself. The mocking faces Josephine Baker was known to make on stage may be understood to have signified her own dissatisfaction or comic distance from the construction she was participating in, just as Stein's performance of race may have participated in a deconstruction of the erotic already figured as exotic. But even if Baker's mocking faces may have been part of a stylized system of interrogation, the text of her body was still read as pleasure. Her faces of resistance were not marked, even by her biographer Phyllis Rose, as dissention. Relatedly, I do not believe that Stein problematizes the position from which she speaks; she does not seem to find her cross-dressed position troubling. Stein's position is instead questioned by Larsen's rewriting, by her reappropriation of the discussion of authenticity. Just as Baker's attempt to mock her status as exotic object was very difficult to read, any attempt on Stein's part to deploy stereotypes of the exotic for their deconstruction did not work.

It can be suggested that the death of both Melanctha and Helga speak to a similar desperation about the ways in which they have been constructed by the society around them. Both characters find little pleasure in their masculinity — neither Melanctha nor Helga experiences desire in any way that is fulfilled. It is as if their desires are constructed for them. Melanctha's wandering is scripted for her, and her desires are put forth as needs. To return to the above analysis, Melanctha, in Stein's formulation, needs to wander; her urges are uncontrollable. There is little consciousness that this urge is one that has been constructed from the outside, both for Stein and her character. Melanctha's death is easily read as a punishment: She has not been victimized, but has received what she deserves. On the other hand, Larsen constructs the ending of the novel to make clear the victimization of Helga. When she gives herself up to childbearing, she becomes a victim of a system which makes it perfectly clear that procreation takes precedence over a woman's pleasure. I believe that Larsen, by Helga's de-eroticized death, firmly removes her protagonist from her societally prescribed place of exotic. Melanctha, to the contrary, is unable to move beyond the exoticism Stein has reinscribed.

1. bell hooks suggests that Rose's biography is frequently condescending, especially, it would seem, in the unproblematized description of Baker's body. hooks's implicit argument is that, when Baker shook or used specific parts of her body to entice her audience, she "prefigured movements popular in contemporary black dance" ("Selling" 63). Yet, taken in conjunction with the rest of hooks's analysis of the marketing of black women's bodies, it is evident that Baker's seeming disembodiment was very disturbing. Accentuating a specific part of the body disembodies the black body on stage, turning it into objectified parts.

2. Aldon Nielsen, in his examination of images of nonwhites in literature, rightly suggests that Stein's novel "repeats with little variation the same images of the nonwhite which [other] propagandistic fictions brought over from the nineteenth century into our own" (21).

3. In "Representing Whiteness," bell hooks suggests that seeing Wim Wender's film Wings of Desire "made [her] think deeply about white culture, though not simply in terms of skin color — rather whiteness as a concept underlying racism, colonization, and cultural imperialism" (166). Stein's passing is related to this — there is a recourse to whiteness in her text in the very stereotypes she deploys. The "disguise" she employs creates a space of discontinuity: Stein claims access to a space which is not her own through an assumption of blackness. However, instead of marking this in the text to interrogate her problematic position, she closes up the space by dressing up, by using
whiteness as her source of information. hooks might argue that Stein is deploying what she calls "otherness as an authentic expression of our desire to see the world anew," though she would take Stein to task for not exploring her own "cultural blindness" ("Representing" 171). On this cultural blindness, see also Morrison.

4. Barbara Johnson defines stereotypes as "already read texts" (Critical 3). This is suggestive of a reproduction of what is already available for consumption. That Stein worked from the "text" that was already available is vital to my argument.

5. See Wall for an interesting discussion of the complexities of the jungle as metaphor. Wall suggests that, as Larsen's novels "navigate between racial and cultural polarities, Larsen's protagonists attempt to fashion a sense of self free of both suffocating restrictions of ladyhood and fantasies of the exotic female Other" (98). In her desire to distance Helga from any identification with being a jungle creature, Wall moves from this assertion to a very compelling analysis of the Jazz Age cabaret. This helped inform my thinking, but simultaneously Wall's article illustrates what I think readers of this text miss—the complex way in which Helga is inextricably connected to the image of a jungle creature. What is difficult and dangerous is to acknowledge this in a way that does not reify the negative construction of black women as animalistic and exotic. To do this, Helga has not just to refute the jungle but to recognize it in herself.

6. Cf. Nielsen: "When we hear the moralizings of Jefferson Campbell, we are hearing what Milton Cohen has called 'the voice of the white bourgeoisie coming through a black manikin.' When we hear the libidinous blues of Melanchta in response, we are hearing the stirrings of white desire passed through a fictive veil of blackness, a passage which has been integral in the most despicable of racist cant... Melanchta sings her blues and then simply dies away, fading from the white view behind a narrative veil, unable to answer for herself." (28).

Works Cited