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Race, Gender, and Imposed Identities in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*

Emily January Petersen

Alex Haley, famous for writing *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976)<1>, searched for identity by tracing his family history. After many years of researching his first African ancestor, he found his way to a small village in Gambia. When he arrived, he felt uncomfortable. He recounts, "Something was amiss, but I didn't know what it was. Then suddenly it hit me. Everybody else . . . was black. I was *brown*. I had this traumatic sensation that I was not pure. Never had I felt such a thing in my life" (Anderson 15). Haley had found the place from which he had come, yet did not feel as if he belonged because of the lightness of his skin. This feeling of being an outsider among one's own race is not new or unique.

Nella Larsen, one of the great and often overlooked African American authors of the Harlem Renaissance<2>, explores the same sensation Haley felt with her character Helga Crane in *Quicksand* (1928). Larsen is perhaps the greatest African American author on the subject of identity because of her attention to black identity as complicated by whiteness. In *Quicksand*, aptly titled, Helga Crane (the name Helga comes from her Danish mother) searches for her African American identity in the 1920s only to find that none fits, for she is an other among every group. Helga's search illustrates three complications associated with establishing one's identity: first, that navigating the racial line between and among black and white is liminal and suspended; second, that an unstable childhood can create a lack of clear identity and belonging; and third, despite racial identities, motherhood is the most difficult, if not impossible, identity to escape. We learn from Helga's experience that her identity as an other is imposed and unacceptable.

Helga tries on many identities with fleeting satisfaction; among them are teacher, niece, black woman (among both black and white communities), and wife/mother. As a teacher, she experiences life among blacks in the south who seem content to live white-imposed traditions and structures. As a niece, she is both rejected and accepted by her white relatives, neither of which satisfies her yearning to belong. As a black woman, she must straddle the racial line between being a mulatto among blacks and being an other among whites. Yet, once she tries on wife and mother, it is identity she cannot escape, much like her skin color. *Quicksand* explores the many complications of racial identity and female identity. This essay explores the treatment of identity, both African American and female, through the character of Helga Crane.

Motherhood is partly impossible to escape because of its ties to religion. Helga's motherhood is a result of her religious conversion, and the two identities demand the same adherence—to give up one's identity in order to find it. The song Helga hears in the church as she first experiences religion says, "Less of self and more of Thee," which is similar to the scripture in Matthew chapters 10 and 16, which contains the admonition to lose one's life for the sake of Christ in order to find it (113). After Helga's long search for her place in the world, this idea is comforting and she succumbs to its message. Previously, she has sought after self and has not found a satisfactory image; therefore, her conversion to Christianity seems to be the answer.

Religion promises to free her from the restraints of a male-imposed identity. The churchgoers call her "[a] scarlet 'oman" and say, "Come to Jesus, you pore los' Jezebel!" (113). For Helga to be a prostitute, she must first be the object of a man's desire and therefore assume the identity expected by men for women. Religion promises to rectify this, with the reverend saying, "Let him that is without sin cast de first stone" (113). She finds herself on equal ground,

a place where everybody has undesirable identities and where these can be rectified. Yet, religion ultimately strips her of freedom, imposing marriage and patriarchy. This is best controlled and reinforced by motherhood, imposed by Reverend Pleasant Green.

Yet, Helga's conversion takes time. At first she is disturbed by the "Bacchic vehemence" and the "frenzied women" (114). It seems to her an "unknown world" that she feels she must escape (114). Instead, she:

> watched and listened, [and] gradually a curious influence penetrated her; she felt an echo of the weird orgy resound in her own heart; she felt herself possessed by the same madness; she too felt a brutal desire to shout and to sling herself about. (114)

This description is not unlike sex, a connection she has been seeking with all previous male acquaintances throughout her search for identity. The women are "frenzied" and slinging themselves about (114). Helga feels the atmosphere penetrate her, much like intercourse. The use of the word "orgy" is also symbolic. The loss of control and the search for pleasure during the sexual act is what Helga seems to be feeling during her religious conversion.

This is no mistake, as Helga finds herself trapped because of sex. Helga marries Reverend Pleasant Green because of foolish seduction shortly after this religious orgy occurs. She is angry with Dr. Robert Anderson, who has rejected her, so she finds out what Reverend Green has to offer as "a chance at stability, at permanent happiness" (117). However, once she marries, she gives up her body to assume the identity of wife and mother.

The identity of wife is least desirable to Helga because it is the most oppressive. After the excitement of her decision has worn off, she feels "unconquerable aversion" and "that she hated this man" (130). She feels, "[a]t his every approach she had forcibly to subdue a furious

inclination to scream out in protest" (135). She wants to escape him and his imposed identity, to run away as she has previously, but she cannot because of her children. After four babies, she has lost herself, yet found nothing. It is her husband who controls her biology. He is the patriarch and she has become a non-identity, someone only to service his desires and clean his home. She cares for his babies, for which he has no responsibility despite his participation in creating them. His identity has not changed in marriage or fatherhood, but hers has inalterably changed.

Instead, Helga is most unhappy in the role of mother, yet she cannot escape it because of the children. Helga wants to leave, but "[t]he recollection of her own childhood, lonely, unloved, rose too poignantly before her for her to consider calmly such a solution" (135-36). In addition to the past and her own difficulties with being abandoned, this inability to leave her children is in turn caused by the coming of more children. The novel ends with despair, explaining that as soon as she has recovered from the difficult labor and losing her fourth baby, "she began to have her fifth child" (136). Thus, it is her role as mother that prevents her from changing her circumstance, and the news of this new baby is symbolic of her inability to search for identity any longer. Emotionally, she cannot leave her children, as "[n]o matter how often or how long she looked at these two small sons of hers, never did she lose a certain delicious feeling in which were mingled pride, tenderness, and exaltation" (124). She is a mother emotionally, despite this "horrifying vision of procreation" (Brickhouse 555). More significantly, the children hold her physically captive because they continue to come.

Before experiencing motherhood, Helga did not want to pass the fraught legacy of being an other onto her children. Before she marries, she says, "Marriage—that means children, to me. And why add more suffering to the world?" (104). She sees her future children as trapped

by race and patriarchy before ever being born. She has experienced the life of a woman with a Danish mother and black father. She does not want this racial confusion or lack of stability for her own children.

Although she cannot escape motherhood, she can reject Christianity. She complains of being "always so tired and half sick" from having children, which neighbors tell her is natural and "an act of God" (126). These neighbors are in line with religious thought concerning male-female roles, and culturally women belonged in the home during Larsen's time. During the Harlem Renaissance, the majority of women contributors to *The Messenger*<3> "emphasized that a woman's place was in the home" (McDowell 12). However, Larsen explores Helga's inability to reconcile the unfairness of her burden as a mother with the "compensations of immortality [that] seemed very shadowy and very far away" (126). Her religion promises that rewards will come, yet she is "less than content" (126). Losing herself physically and emotionally due to her new-found religion's precepts weighs on her sense of identity. "Her religion was to her a kind of protective coloring, shielding her from the cruel light of an unbearable reality" (127). This reality eventually captures Helga's attention, as she becomes ill during childbirth and retreats into "kind darkness" (129).

The reality of an imposed identity welcomes her back from her sickness, causing her to "set her reluctant feet to the hard path of life again" (129). She longs to reject this. She reflects on all of the people she has come to know during her search for identity and realizes her dissatisfaction with her current identity as wife and mother. She sees life, "for Negroes at least, [as] only a great disappointment. Something to be got through with as best one could" (131). She feels "disillusion" and "[c]haotic turmoil" when contemplating the "white man's God" (131). She feels she has believed "idiotic nonsense" about this God, who does not belong to her

race (131). Her rejection of this religion is very nearly a return to her rejection of identity as a teacher in Naxos at the novel's opening.

In Naxos, Helga is a teacher at a school for black students; the conditions are unbearable to her because they are imposed by white values and traditions. Many scholars note that "Saxon" is the reverse of Naxos<4>, but more importantly is the symbolism in the way the school is run. The school's students and teachers are "herded into the sun-baked chapel to listen to the banal, the patronizing, and even the insulting remarks of one of the renowned white preachers of the state" (6). In this environment, "Naxos Negroes knew what was expected of them" (7). The preacher also "sincerely hoped . . . that they wouldn't become avaricious and grasping" and spoke to them of "contentment" (7). His purpose is to keep the blacks in their place in white, southern society. The school adheres to this "white man's pattern" (8). Helga rejects this pattern and this imposed identity. After leaving the school, she goes in search of a place where she can reside as both black and white.

Helga's identity as a teacher can also be juxtaposed with her identity as a mother. Of the south, she calls it "hardly a place at all. It's more like some loathsome, venomous disease" (22). She also dislikes her colleagues and the environment of hypocrisy and backbiting. She describes any workplace environment, where employees compete for promotions. A scholar interested in radical American literature, Anthony Dawahare describes Naxos as a "machine" associated with "a capitalist industrial enterprise" (25). He suggests that Helga seeks reprieve from the environment because it is "repressive and exploitative work relations legitimized by notions of discipline and service" (26). It is a corporate mentality that Helga dislikes, symbolic of her dislike of being a working woman. This can be compared with her role as mother, which also requires "discipline and service" (26). In present day, women tend to choose between these

two identities or struggle to combine them. Of this struggle, Matthew Henry, in his feminist analysis of popular adult cartoon *The Simpsons*, says women are "in a conflicted state, torn between very traditional and stereotypical ideas about who and what they ought to be and rather progressive and liberating concepts of who and what they can be" (274). Helga is experiencing this ambivalence herself, as she takes on both roles, disapproving of her working milieu, yet arriving at motherhood and not appreciating that either.

It is after Naxos that Helga's search for identity begins, and it is not necessarily unique to her circumstance of being a woman or being African American. Identity is always changing. Although many people would like to consider themselves to be constant, they are not. Human experience demands that we reconstruct our identities according to environment, experiences, social situations, and perspectives. Helga encapsulates this constantly emerging identity, described by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, editors of journal *Interfaces*—which explores women, autobiography, image, and performance—as follows: "What may be a meaningful identity, on one day or in one context, may not be culturally and personally meaningful at another moment or in another context" (33). Because identities change, it follows that they are also constructed. We want to believe that we know who we are and that we are in control. However, identity is subject to change and therefore construction. Russian theorist M. M. Bakhtin argues that consciousness, or identity, is dialogical (33-34). This means that it is developed through our interactions with others; Helga's self regard and perceptions change as she places herself in new environments. She is, like us, essentially an actor in a play that is never complete. Because we never know what will happen next, we must shift who we are to continue to play a role in the larger world.

This struggle for identity is well illustrated through Helga, who seems to be a representation of Larsen herself. Larsen's own mother was a Danish woman and "her father was from the Virgin Islands, formerly the Danish West Indies" (Wall 91). Their marriage, if there was one, did not last, and Nella became a step-daughter. Cheryl A. Wall, a specialist in black women's writing, notes, "Along with the alienation she experienced at home, she was ostracized at school" (91). Thadious M. Davis, Larsen's biographer, points out that Larsen had "experience as a stigmatized female child . . . who had keenly felt isolation and disconnection throughout much of her youth" (242). From these beginnings, Larsen made sense of herself; Helga, seemingly autobiographical, also investigates her identity. Of this exploration, Cynthia Merrill compares autobiography to the Lacanian mirror stage, in which a child recognizes itself as other and starts to develop an independent identity. *Quicksand* is likely an attempt by Larsen to make sense of her own experiences as a daughter of a white woman and of a black man. Merrill suggests, "Seeking to connect the past to the present, simultaneously subject and object in her own discourse, the autobiographer inevitably confronts her doubleness as well as her identity" (12). Helga experiences this in her separation from family and her search for identity.

Finding identity proves difficult for Helga because of her family. "If you couldn't prove your ancestry and connections, you were tolerated, but you didn't 'belong'" (Larsen 12). One of the key features of Helga's identity is that she has "[n]o family" (12). She is a young woman, capable of working as a teacher and supporting herself, but without a family "it was presumptuous of you to be anything but inconspicuous and conformable" (12). This truth is revealed when Helga tells her new employer Mrs. Hayes-Rore, "I haven't any people" (Larsen 41). Mrs. Hayes-Rore has a hard time believing this and responds that, "Everybody has people, Miss Crane. Everybody" (41). To this, Helga spills out her story, explaining "[p]assionately,

tearfully, incoherently" her family situation, which includes "race intermingling and possibly adultery" (42). These confessions embarrass Mrs. Hayes-Rore, for "these things are not mentioned –and therefore they do not exist" (42). The social propriety of the time puts Helga in a difficult position. She does not have people to whom she can look for support or good breeding, yet if she explains her situation, others do not want to hear it. Not only did people pretend that such shocking things did not exist, but Mrs. Hayes-Rore ignores Helga's tearful outburst and changes the subject. It is as if Helga does not exist, for she cannot acknowledge her own beginnings. Her lack of people creates a lack of identity and separates her from proper society.

This complicated sense of identity also becomes clear in Helga's confrontation with Dr. Anderson when she leaves Naxos. His speech at first mollifies her desire to leave the school, yet he appeals to her "dignity and breeding" (24). For Helga, these words do not evoke pride, but anger. Anderson, in an attempt to qualify what he has said as an appeal to Helga, who has told him that she has no family, states that, "Financial, economic circumstances can't destroy tendencies inherited from good stock. You yourself prove that!" (24). This further distresses Helga, who replies, "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" (24). To her, these words confirm her inability to remain at Naxos because she is different. She feels as if she does not belong because her background doesn't lend itself to conformity to the "white" standards imposed on the blacks of the school.

Not only does society reject Helga's beginnings as proper, but her childhood creates a lack of identity for emotional reasons as well. Her childhood is not only marked by a white mother and a black father, but a step-father and step-siblings who displayed "savage

unkindness" because of Helga's skin color (26). As a result, "[t]he tragic cruelties of the years had left her a little pathetic, a little hard, and a little unapproachable" (26). I contend that such years also left her uncertain of who she was or where she belonged. She did not fit into her own family, and once her mother died she was left to the care of her white Uncle Peter, who sent her to "a school for Negroes" (26).

She has never known happiness or security as a child; therefore, "[d]iscontent for which there was no remedy crept upon her" (27). This discontent is evident throughout Helga's search for identity. She never finds a place in which she can relax or appreciate herself and her place in the larger bands of society. According to Craig H. Hart, professor in the School of Family Life at Brigham Young University, children from psychologically abusive or unstable families "don't learn how to regulate their emotions and their behavior from the inside rather than from external pressure, and that makes for a difficult adjustment to adulthood" (Bergin). Helga is experiencing this difficult transition, and she does not fit in and has never fit in, not since her birth. As she thinks about her background, she repeats: "Angry half-truths— Angry half—" (Larsen 29). Helga is acknowledging that what she knows and feels about her childhood are half-truths, yet it also represents her own identity, which is half black and half white. It is this line that she cannot navigate or cross without turmoil about who she is or where she belongs.

Helga attempts to create an identity connected to her white family in Chicago. Instead of a warm welcome, she discovers that her uncle has married a woman who does not approve of Helga's skin color. She rejects Helga, telling her, "And please remember that my husband is not your uncle. No indeed! Why, that, that would make me your aunt! He's not—" (31). Mrs. Nilssen is ashamed of Helga's existence. She rejects the notion that Helga is even a relative, stripping her of her identity as a niece, and ultimately as a member of a family. Helga's uncle

had always been kind, but because of racism Helga's relationship with him is severed. It seems she would have happily continued to play her role as niece, but it is denied her. She is not allowed to be part of her own family because Mrs. Nilssen imposes a lack of white identity on Helga.

When testing her place in the black world, Helga learns to hide her white identity. Mrs. Hayes-Rore says, "I wouldn't mention that my people are white, if I were you. Colored people won't understand it, and after all it's your own business" (44). Helga is supposed to keep half of her identity to herself because she is not like the people who surround her despite their similar appearances. She accepts this, thinking of whites as "[s]inister folk . . . who had stolen 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" (48). She decides to be complicit in suppressing her identity in the hopes that she will find ease and comfort in her Harlem life. Charles R. Larson, who has written extensively on African fiction, notices that Helga "has been conditioned to regard herself as a cultural half-caste, trapped between the races" (70). Because Helga is part of both worlds, she does not belong in either one; she walks like a funambulist between the two, unsure of her rightful place.

She adopts this hidden identity, only to find "restlessness" and "discontent" (50). She finds her new friend, Anne Gray, adds to this "estrangement and isolation" because Anne "hated white people with a deep and burning hatred" (50-51). Although Helga has adopted this black sensibility in Harlem, she cannot remove the whiteness from her blood. Anne's attitude disturbs Helga because it is essentially an attack against her. Among blacks, Helga is an other despite having brown skin. Helga feels this in Harlem, the sensation of being "othered," despite the "gradations within this oppressed race of hers" (61).

This feeling of not belonging comes to a denouement in a Harlem night club that gives Helga "a shameful certainty that not only had she been in the jungle, but that she had enjoyed it" (61). She does not like this imposed identity of primitiveness and savagery, yet she sees those around her as "a fantastic motley of ugliness and beauty, semi-barbaric, sophisticated, [and] exotic" (61). It is in this scene that she sees Dr. Anderson again, but he is with Audrey Denney, with skin like "alabaster" (62). Helga connects with Audrey because they are alike. They are both pale and beautiful. But Anne despises Audrey because "she goes about with white people" (62). Anne again rejects this part of Helga's identity. Anne says of Audrey's socializing with white people: "It's worse than disgusting, it's positively obscene" (63). However, Anne's last name, Gray, "in Larsen's novels becomes another sign of racial ambiguity" (Wall 87). This makes Anne's vehement hatred of Audrey and "othering" of Helga ironic.

Helga's discomfort with her race is justified; Helga, too, is obscene in their eyes. Helga's existence verifies the sexual connection between the races, the mixing of black and white. In opposition to Anne, Helga feels "it would be useless to tell them that what she felt for the beautiful, calm, cool girl who had the assurance, the courage, so placidly to ignore racial barriers and give her attention to people, was not contempt, but envious admiration" (63). Helga appreciates and envies Audrey's navigation of the racial line and wishes to do the same. But the "jungle" atmosphere brings out "another . . . more primitive emotion" when Helga sees Audrey with Dr. Anderson (64). She is jealous of Audrey's sexual power over the man she truly loves. Ultimately, Helga cannot create an identity to rival Audrey or to reveal her feelings to Dr. Anderson. Instead, she rejects the people in Harlem and decides to leave in search of her white roots.

Similar to Haley's experience in Africa, Helga is the only brown person in Denmark, her mother's homeland. She arrives and "smile[s] a little at the thought that her aunt, or anyone waiting there in the crowd below, would have no difficulty in singling her out" (67). Yet at first, she feels comfortable among the Danish people. "She liked it, this new life. For a time it blotted from her mind all else" (69). This fleeting contentment changes once Aunt Katrina begins dressing Helga for social events and gatherings. In Denmark, Helga becomes savage and exotic. Aunt Katrina tells her, "[Y]ou're a foreigner, and different. You must have bright things to set off the color of your lovely brown skin. Striking thing, exotic things" (70). This attitude is opposite of what she faced in Naxos with its southern, white-imposed restrictions on manners. There the dean of women had said, "Bright colors are vulgar . . . Dark-complected people shouldn't wear yellow, or green or red" (20). In Denmark, Helga is allowed to dress in flashy frocks and encouraged to love "color with a passion that perhaps only Negroes and Gypsies know" (70). Despite Helga's pleasure in "Things. Things. Things," she is already being treated as an outsider (69). Helga's adornment leads to the "self-alienating power of consumerism" (Monda 32). She is already different, and accentuates that through exotic dress.

Aunt Katrina imposes new accessories, such as jewelry and buckles, on Helga that best illustrate this exoticism. Once wearing the accessories, she "felt like a veritable savage . . . This feeling was intensified by the many pedestrians who stopped to stare at the queer dark creature" (Larsen 71). When Helga blushes because of the attention, her aunt approves, saying, "A high color becomes you" (71). Instead of realizing Helga's feeling like a "strange species of pet dog being proudly exhibited," her aunt encourages such differences (71). Helga becomes an accessory herself, one meant to help her Aunt Katrina and Uncle Poul climb the social ladder.

As to Helga's clothes, Aunt Katrina has them reduced and restructured. She dresses

Helga in "the prized green velvet" that Helga describes as "practically nothing but a skirt" (72). Because of this exposure of her skin, similar to that of what uncivilized savages would wear in the jungle, Helga "was thankful for the barbaric bracelets, for the dangling earrings, for the beads about her neck. She was even thankful for the rouge on her burning cheeks" (72). The accessories become reassuring because they cover parts of Helga despite her great exposure. Helga's new look is repeatedly associated with the words "exotic" and "savage" (72). Helga is not meant to blend into her white, European upper class surroundings. Instead, she is reduced to being the uncivilized African, a curiosity meant to draw attention to the kindness of her aunt and uncle. Helga is unsure of her aunt's characterization of her as a "foreigner" and "different" (74). Helga isn't "so sure that she liked that. Hitherto all her efforts had been toward similarity to those about her" (74). Yet the color of her skin makes this striving impossible in Denmark.

Reducing Helga to the stereotyped image of an African imposes an identity and draws the attention of Axel Olsen, a famous painter. Helga's reduced status as "A decoration. A curio. A peacock" catches the painter's eye, which is what her aunt and uncle were hoping (75). He agrees to paint her portrait, which looks like "some disgusting sensual creature with her features" (91). The maid hesitantly tells Helga that the picture "looks bad, wicked" (91). Through Olsen's gaze, Helga is a temptress and an exotic sexual object. He does not respect who she really is, but is instead attracted by "delight in her exotic appearance" (79). When she rejects his marriage proposal, he refuses to allow her to reclaim her identity and instead declares that his picture of her is "after all, the true Helga Crane" (91). Instead of allowing her to forge an identity independent of his gaze, he imposes the alluring and savage identity upon her without regret or remorse.

This "othering" in white Denmark becomes pronounced to Helga once she sees "two black men" at the circus "danc[ing] and cavort[ing]" (84). It is as if she can see herself and the ridiculous act she has put on by letting Aunt Katrina dress her. The men "danced, pounding their thighs, slapping their hands together, twisting their legs, waving their abnormally long arms, throwing their bodies about with a loose ease!" (84). The men act like savages, their bodies performing a primitive or uncivilized dance. Their arms are described as too long, similar to the arms of apes. These men allow themselves to be viewed as "others" rather than as part of society because of their skin color. They are conforming to white European stereotypes about what Africans should be. Helga realizes that she has done the same, allowing herself to be viewed the way her aunt and uncle prefer, rather than forging her own identity based on who she really is.

> Helga Crane was not amused. Instead 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. (85)

Helga's shame and anger is not echoed by her companions. Axel Olsen "drank it in" as he has with Helga's imposed identity (85).

At Helga's first meeting with Axel Olsen, he looks her over, as if she is a statue, and decides that she will do as a model for his paintings. Helga has no control or choice in the matter. She becomes his muse and plays this role to please her aunt and uncle. She even thinks she may love Olsen, and at one time hopes for a proposal. She does not see herself as an easily conquered woman, and because Axel does she rejects him and ultimately that identity. His gaze

forces this identity on her, and not only does he expect this in her behavior, but he represents her as an exotic to everyone else through the portrait.

When his proposal comes, Helga realizes that he does not love her, but himself. She is expected to be some sort of prize or trophy. When he offers her marriage, "he moved forward putting out his arms. His hands touched air. For Helga had moved back" (89). After this rejection, he confirms his opinion of her by saying, "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" (89). She feels his distance in these words and realizes that she wants to escape his imposed identity. She responds, "I'm not for sale. . . . I don't at all care to be owned" (89). She asserts her own strength in this moment, realizing that his identity would trap her. She does not want to be exotic.

When Helga rejects Olsen's marriage proposal, it isn't only a rejection of him—an "amusing, if conceited, man" (79)—but a rejection of "othering" and imposed identity. She rejects the label of savage. Along these lines, she also rejects slavery. She says, "I'm not for sale. Not to you. Not to any white man" (89). She is responding to his insinuation that she is a "prostitute," but also responding to the label she has worn since arriving in Denmark. She refuses any longer to be identified as a savage or an "other." She rejects the "stripped, naked feeling under [Olsen's] direct glance" (88). He has exerted his white, male gaze long enough, and she holds her ground as a "decent" girl (88).

Similar to Olsen, her aunt and uncle cannot accept her rejection of their imposed identity. They are disappointed with her rejection of Olsen because of their own social loss. When Helga explains her situation to Uncle Poul, he thinks, "this strange exotic niece of his wife's was indeed charming" (93). However, his approval of her charm disintegrates when Helga weeps

because of the distress she feels at having lost the confidence of her family. Uncle Poul sees her weeping and immediately thinks she is “Charming, yes. But insufficiently civilized. Impulsive. Imprudent. Selfish” (93). He attributes savage traits to her because of the label he and his wife have applied to her. He does not allow a more human identity to emerge, but instead “others” her without actually seeing her.

The excitement of Denmark ebbs and Helga decides to return home to America because of a sense of “incompleteness” (94). Interestingly, she makes this decision while listening to Dvorák’s “New World Symphony” which has “wailing undertones of ‘Swing Low, Sweet Chariot’” (94). It is as if Helga’s African American and spiritual roots are calling her home to the United States. In this longing for home, she comes to forgive her father. “She understood and could sympathize with his facile surrender to the irresistible ties of race, now that they dragged at her own heart” (94). It is this forgiveness and knowledge that allows Helga to move forward in her quest for identity as an “almost sacred importance” (94). She regrets not having “two lives” or “one place” but continues to try to navigate her identity between black and white (95).

In her second attempt at living in New York, Helga realizes, “*These* were her people” (97). She is “bound . . . forever to these mysterious, these terrible, these fascinating, these lovable, dark hordes” (97). Helga accepts other African Americans as part of her heritage, and ultimately she is accepting that part of herself. This comes after forgiving her father because of “his facile surrender to the irresistible ties of race” (94). Helga’s acceptance of her father’s choices and identity should allow her to accept her own identity. This epiphany is spiritual in nature, as she describes her ties to the people of Harlem as “of the spirit” (97). She also feels “as if she had passed from the heavy solemnity of a church service to a gorgeous care-free

revel” (97). However, she cannot accept her identity nor construct one because Helga’s “plight does not arise solely out of her racial heritage but more importantly out of her gender” (Gray 258-59).

Helga’s identity search continues because of her gender and consequently her feelings for Dr. Anderson. He has married her friend Anne, and upon Helga’s return, “Helga knew that Anne disapproved of her” (Larsen 99). This stems from distrust between them, as Anne realizes the feelings that exist between Helga and Anderson, although nothing has happened. Anne’s distrust of Helga is also the reason Anne dislikes Audrey Denney. “The mere sight of Audrey is enough to send [Anne] into a frenzy for a week” (100). Anne is threatened by sensuality and whiteness. That exotic identity attracts men, as we have seen with Axel Olsen. Anne’s feelings are validated when Helga finds herself in “the arms of Robert Anderson” (105). They kiss, but “anger seize[s] her” (105). Helga knows why he is attracted to her; he likes her for her sensuality, just as Axel Olsen did.

Although Helga wishes to accept Dr. Anderson’s imposed identity, he rejects her. The next time she sees him, they are “looking at some examples of African carving,” symbolizing their primitive attraction to one another (107). When they are alone, Helga looks “down at her hands and inspect[s] her bracelets, for she had felt that to look at him would be, under the circumstances, too exposing” (108). She is vulnerable to him as an object of desire. She does not want to be objectified, but instead want to be “something special” to him (109). This does not happen. Dr. Anderson has already chosen Anne, the sensible wife with the concern for race. When Dr. Anderson rejects her, she becomes savage. “A sort of madness had swept over her” (108). She feels “belittled and ridiculed” and responds by slapping him “savagely . . . with all her might” (108). She realizes that her actions reveal too much of her feelings for him. Her

anger reveals her identity, but his rejection reveals his selfishness, like Olsen. "[H]e was not the sort of man who would for any reason give up one particle of his own good opinion of himself" (109). Helga knows that she is only an exotic object to him, just as Audrey Denney was earlier. It is this realization and her "mortification" that lead her into the arms of Reverend Pleasant Green (110).

Helga's relationship with men is complicated because of the identities each one imposes on her. The first man in her life imposed an identity on her from birth—for even her skin color is bestowed by an absent father. For men to impose identities on women leads to confusion and entrapment, as illustrated by Helga's journey in *Quicksand*. Poet and scholar Ann E. Hostetler recognizes that "Helga's destiny is shaped as much by her sex as by the problematic of race" (35). Helga never discovers a comfortable identity, racially or as a woman, but is trapped and can no longer go in search of self at the novel's end. In fact, she is further from discovering a place in which she is not objectified. None of the imposed identities fit, and motherhood, to which she is now tied, nearly kills her. Helga's search for identity ultimately fails because of her tumultuous and possibly abusive childhood, the difficulty of finding her place between black and white racial boundaries, and the imposed identity of motherhood, from which she cannot escape. Her identity is fraught with complications that cannot be resolved. However, we can learn from Helga's experience that the tragedies of her life are unacceptable. Larsen warns us that racial and gender boundaries are difficult to navigate, but to impose restricted ideas of identity on others is immoral, unacceptable, and inappropriate.

Notes

1. Haley's book, which spent 46 weeks on The New York Times best seller list, became a popular television miniseries in 1977.
2. Larsen is one of the few women of the movement to have actually lived in Harlem for "any length of time" (Wall 10). For a detailed description of Larsen's time in Harlem, see chapter 8 of Thadious Davis's *Nella Larsen: Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance*.
3. One of the "little" magazines published during the Harlem Renaissance. The magazine often focused on black women's issues. See McDowell.
4. Among those who have observed Naxos as an anagram of Saxon is Anthony Dawahare, Jeffrey Gray, and Deborah McDowell. Thadious M. Davis asserts that Naxos is "[d]erived from Larsen's reading of Greek mythology . . . as a student at Fisk [University]" (258).

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