# The Objectification of Helga Crane: Color and Sexuality in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*

In Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*, Larsen critiques the objectification of black womanhood through Helga Crane's melodramatic story as a biracial woman. In an attempt to locate herself in society, Helga travels from Naxos to Chicago to Harlem to Copenhagen, yet her physical mobility does not free her from her existential and racial anxieties. Ultimately, Larsen characterizes Helga as the tragic mulatta who "could neither conform nor be happy in her unconformity," and this restlessness leads her to an oppressive marriage (307). Despite Helga's travel, the narrative begins and ends in the south, thus creating an illusion of progress. This cyclical structure alludes to the inescapable stereotypes that black and mixed-race women face, such as the stereotype of the "sexually voracious black woman" (Barnett 577). With the reader positioned as an observer, Helga becomes a spectacle defined by her surroundings, clothes, and sexuality. Helga is like an object in a still-life painting, and Larsen uses color and imagery to symbolize her conflict and track her emotions. Beginning with bright colors and an explorative attitude, Helga's outlook on life eventually morphs into the dark browns of motherhood and oppressive gender roles; this shift in tone and color speaks to the suppression of black female sexuality and identity prevalent throughout the 1920s.

*Quicksand's* opening scene portrays Helga "alone in her room" in a picturesque setting where color, light, and shadow surrounds her "in a soft gloom" (301). The sheer number of colors and textures included in this scene immediately evoke the reader's senses and center the story around Helga's physical appearance and surroundings. While the novel later focuses on her constant movement, *Quicksand* begins with stillness, for Helga "sat motionless" in her room for hours (303). Due to the lack of movement and action within these opening pages, Larsen relies on symbolic imagery to establish thematic motifs. In her essay "'My Picture of You Is, after All,

the True Helga Crane:' Portraiture and Identity in Nella Larsen's 'Quicksand,'" Pamela Barnett writes that "in each of Helga's surroundings she is focused on as a spectacle and described in vivid detail by the narrator" (577). The first few pages of *Quicksand* create a spectacle out of Helga's deep contemplation. While she meditates on her unhappiness as a teacher in Naxos, she—like the colors and objects that surround her—becomes a symbol of a woman conflicted. Larsen masterfully uses symbolism and imagery within these first few pages to contextualize Helga's internal racial conflict as something perpetuated by the environment, specifically by the social constructs of race inferiority.

Throughout *Quicksand*, Helga uses clothing as a method of self-expression, and this attempt to control her self-image with material things is in response to anxieties about her biracial identity and her unchangeable genetic history. Larsen captures the tragic mulatta's strife through detailed, colored images; in Helga's bedroom, the room is "dimmed by a great black and red shade" and the objects in the room include a "blue Chinese carpet," brightly covered books with crisp white pages, a brass bowl, "many-colored nasturtiums," and "oriental silk" (301). Rather than begin with Helga's description, Larsen brings the reader's attention to the setting, thus establishing an observational tone and implying that these colors and objects will impose their symbolic meaning onto Helga. The red and black lamp shade represents Helga's blackness, for the red symbolizes blood—both the bloodshed of slavery and Helga's bloodline—and the black reflects her darkened features. The red and black lamp shade obscures the white light beneath it, much like how Helga's mixed-race skin obscures her identity. Within this symbolism, Larsen blurs the distinction between light and dark to create ambiguity around Helga's racial identity. Despite this ambiguity and whiteness, her blackness ultimately projects onto both the room and the reader: "where Helga sat was a small oasis in a desert of darkness" (301). While

Helga tries to find lightness within herself and her surroundings, Larsen ultimately shrouds the room, and Helga, in darkness, thus alluding to how even one drop of black blood labels Helga as "other" and ostracizes her from both white and black communities.

Stuck between her blackness and whiteness, Helga relies on vivid colors and exotic fabrics to express herself and define her femininity. Although it appears that Helga is another object in her bedroom, she takes great care in decorating her room with "rare and intensely personal taste" (301). Moreover, Helga's particular way of furnishing a room or picking out an outfit grants her agency that she otherwise lacks as a biracial woman (301). Specifically, Helga embraces colorful fabrics to signify her sexuality: "in vivid green and gold negligee and glistening brocaded mules… her sharply cut face, with skin like yellow satin, was distinctly outlined, she was—to use a hackneyed word—attractive" (301). Here, Larsen dresses Helga in green and gold to connote growth, new beginnings, and wealth, thus depicting Helga's body as beautiful and full of potential. The luxury and sensuality in this opening scene, such as Helga's "sensitive and sensuous lips" and the ease with which she sits in stillness, places the narrative on a threshold: Larsen sets Helga up to escape Naxos and find greener, more progressive ways of life (301-302). In Naxos, Helga's colorful clothing stands out amongst "the dull attire of women workers," and she views her clothing as a way to celebrate her race and sexuality (316). Helga wonders why her fellow colleges in Naxos "yapped loudly of race… yet suppressed its most delightful manifestations, love of color" (317). Although Helga resents the way her biracial identity labels her as different, she embraces bright colors, exotic fabrics, and lavish accessories. She even finds amusement in the way her Naxos colleagues "held their breaths until she had made her appearance;" furthermore, Helga's relationship with fashion could characterize her as

the New Negro woman who is unafraid of her sexuality and proud to celebrate her body with bold colors (317).

Helga's love of colorful clothing goes against the Old Negro stereotype that "'bright colors are vulgar'" and that black women should only wear "'black, gray, brown, and navy blue" (316). Throughout *Quicksand*, Larsen uses color to distinguish between the Old and New Negro, for Harlem is full of vivid colors, yet the south contains drab neutral colors. Through Helga, Larsen critiques the suppression of black femininity and the exoticization of the black body. The black, female body holds with it the history of slavery, and after years of social invisibility, writers and artists finally began to celebrate, define, and uplift black womanhood during the Harlem Renaissance. However, according to Barnett, "black women writers of the nineteenth century and then of the Harlem Renaissance often avoided depicting black female sexuality for fear of creating representations that would resonate with the existing racist typology of the voracious black female (590). Despite the pressures to create black female representations that are not overtly sexual, Helga argues that "the inherent racial need for gorgeousness told her that bright colours were fitting," thus suggesting that black female sexuality is beautiful rather than voracious (316). In line with Helga's thoughts that external self-expression could facilitate racial uplift, Jeanne Scheper's essay "The New Negro Flâneuse in Nella Larsen's 'Quicksand,'" suggests that "clothing does not simply stand in for materialism or for surface, but material objects and their aesthetics become the means of working through interior emotion and an avenue of female representational agency that resists the tragic ending or fixed frame" (684). Clothing serves as a way for black women to define their image, yet there is still controversy surrounding how they should dress and fears of being viewed as a primitive, overly sexualized women. When Helga decides to wear a black net dress with orange detailing that gives her "'the

air of something about to fly,'" she consciously makes herself into a symbol of the new, progressive black woman; her exterior appearance mimics her internal desire to fly (354).

While Helga's clothes provide her with a way to exhibit her sexuality, later in the novel, Larsen uses clothing and color to objectify and exoticize Helga. When she visits her aunt Katrina in Copenhagen, her biracial identity is transformed into a spectacle when Aunt Katrina dresses her in for an evening party. Helga loses agency when Aunt Katrina insists that she wear a revealing gown and lavish accessories; Helga recounts feeling "like a veritable savage" as her white relatives dress her to become the stereotypical "voracious black female" (Zafar 366, Barnett 590). Whereas Helga previously found joy in wearing colorful clothes and Larsen portrayed her sexuality in positive terms, this scene in Copenhagen twists Helga's sexuality into a negative, derogatory representation. Barnett writes about this shift by concluding that "while Helga may experience authentic desire, there is no mode of representation or any legitimate space within society in which black women's sexuality can be expressed" (580). At the party, despite Helga's confidence and appreciation for the flattery and admiration, "no other woman in the stately pale-blue room was so greatly exposed," and by the end of the night, Helga "sat effectively posed on a red satin sofa" (367). Recalling the opening scene in *Quicksand*, Larsen repositions Helga in another still-life-like position, but this time, she is positioned on a sofa in front of a white audience. Larsen purposefully objectifies Helga to critique the stereotypes of overly sexualized black women perpetuated by white people—she transforms clothing and fashion into a symbol of suppression.

Although Helga becomes an exoticized object in Copenhagen, she still has the power to leave, but she loses this mobility once she marries. Using clothing and color, Larsen transforms Helga's narrative into a depressing, cautionary tale; the most drastic change in tone and color

comes with Helga's marriage to Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green. Within marriage, Larsen subverts the opening scene of *Quicksand* to express how "marriage is ultimately as strangling as the image of sexuality in her scenes of representational objectification" (Barnett 598). The green and gold imagery at the beginning of *Quicksand*, which symbolizes growth and endless possibilities, ironically reappears in Helga's husband's name: Pleasant Green. Larsen implies that Helga's mobility or personal growth is now tethered to a patriarchal, oppressive marriage where her future consists solely of childbirth, housework, and church. The green and gold clothing that once adorned Helga's body symbolized self-empowerment, beauty, and agency, but within marriage, her bodily desire is tied to childbirth. In response to Helga wearing a "nightgown of filmy crêpe" that "slipped from one carved shoulder," her husband flinches as "Helga's petulant lip curled" (425). Her "petulant lip" directly contradicts Larsen's initial description of Helga's "sensitive and sensual" lips, and whereas Helga's exposed body would have elicited arousal, it now makes Helga and her husband disgusted and uneasy (425, 301-302). Larsen twists Helga's sexuality into an undesirable thing, thus creating a counterargument to the critique that a black woman's body is inherently promiscuous. In Helga's tragic story, Larsen illustrates how in addition to racial discrimination, black women must also contend with how conventional gender roles suppress their freedoms.

Within her marriage, Helga lives in a "dreary structure" and grows used to "the odor of sweat and stale garments;" her passion for clothing and luxury diminishes as she accepts her bleak future (417). While Scheper writes that "Larsen's representation of tragedy at the novel's conclusion functions as a devastating critique of compulsory heteronormativity," it is important to note that Larsen is explicitly critiquing the suppression of black womanhood (681). Larsen critiques how marriage confines women's sexual expression to childbirth, but she, more

importantly, critiques how the combination of race and gender leads Helga to this tragic end. Importantly, Helga's life in Alabama with Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green is defined by neutral colors: Helga's "ugly brown house" with "oak furniture" and stark decorations, "the dark undecorated women," the "dirtiest, brown child," and her husband with fingernails "rimmed with black" (417). Her life in Alabama is characteristically black, and it opposes her initial distaste for the dreary women in Naxos. The brown and black color scheme in Alabama contradicts the colorful, expressive color scheme she experiences in Harlem, signifying a change in mood. Whereas Helga previously embodied the New Negro woman that wore bright colors and went to racially mixed parties, she transforms into a stereotypical Old Negro woman where traditional colors, drab fashion, and religious duties define her life. Even though Helga is partially white, her future in Alabama solidifies her blackness; ultimately, Larsen depicts her tragic mulatta story as a narrative about the suppression of black womanhood.

Throughout *Quicksand*, color acts as a symbol for Helga's internal racial conflict, and Larsen uses color and clothing to critique the way society attempts to control female sexuality. With much debate about how black women should dress, Larsen provides her readers with two cynical options: firstly, that black women who dress in colorful clothing perpetuate negative, primitive stereotypes, and secondly, that black women who dress more traditionally will end up in an oppressive marriage. Finding a balance between suppressing female sexuality and objectifying or exoticizing the female body proves to be a difficult task, and Helga's story perfectly embodies this difficulty. *Quicksand* begins with Helga symbolizing a youthful, promising woman who uses color and clothing as a way of positive self-expression. However, as the novel progresses, her experiences in Copenhagen subject her to exoticization, for her white relatives transform her into a sexual object. Then, in Alabama, her sexual expression is

suppressed by her responsibility to bear children. Although the novel ends with Helga hopeless and weak, Larsen purposefully creates a depressing ending to convey to the readers how society, as it is, cannot continue; she calls for social change. Larsen uses Helga's story to show how black womanhood is not given the space it needs in America and how the larger structures of race and gender suppress female sexuality and objectify black womanhood.

Works Cited

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