# The Feminist Difference

*Literature, Psychoanalysis, Race, and Gender*

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ern literature, by non-white characters. (In pointing this out, I am, of course, prolonging the colonizing gesture of *equating* race and class.) The two most-cited capsule descriptions of black characters in white American fiction, I think, are that of Topsy, who "just grew," and of Dilsey, who "endured." This is another way of denying a character the status of figure, reserving that status for the figures that are foregrounded as if it were a natural right and not an effect of the contrast, and confining the characters in the margins to the ground. Topsy has no origin; Dilsey has no end; they have no story, no history, nothing to put into figure. Anne Tyler, in her novel *Searching for Caleb,* plays upon the invisibility—the purloined-letter status—of the black characters that occupy the ground of much white American literature. In that novel, a white family searches for a son who has disappeared, and cannot trace him until someone finally thinks to ask the black couple who were working for the family. They possessed the knowledge all along, but were never asked.

In short, there are many other invisible men and women trapped in the wallpaper of the Western canon or caught in the divisions of labor that neither psychoanalysis nor feminist theory has taken sufficiently into account—figures that have often remained consigned to the background of discussions of feminism and psychoanalysis. Could one of these figures be discerned through a reading of another birthmark, the birthmark imprinted on the face of Toni Morrison's Sula? Perhaps, but that would have to be the beginning of another essay.





# The Quicksands of the Self: Nella Larsen and Heinz Kohut

Nella Larsen's first novel, *Quicksand,* was published in 1928, at the height of that period of black migration from the rural south to the urban north which led to an explosion in cultural and artistic creativity known as the Harlem Renaissance. The novel was immediately greeted with enthusiasm: it won second prize in literature from the Harmon Foundation, and W. E. B. Du Bois called it "the best piece of fiction that Negro America has produced since the heyday of Chesnutt."[1] Readers then and now have indeed read the novel as a dramatization of racial double consciousness,[2] in the form of the all-too-familiar topos of the tragic mulatto. Nathan Huggins, in his book *The Harlem Renaissance,* writes: "Nella Larsen came as close as any to treating human motivation with complexity and sophistication. But she could not wrestle free of the mulatto condition that the main characters in her two novels had been given. Once she made them mulatto and female the conventions of American thought—conditioned by the tragic mulatto and the light-dark heroine formulas—seemed to take the matter out of the author's hands."[3] In other words, Larsen's attempt to present the inner life of her main character was subverted by the force of a literary cliche

designed to rob her of any inner life by subjecting her to a tragic "condition."

The mulatto image, a staple of nineteenth-century literature both by white "plantation school" writers and by black and white abolitionist writers, is less a reflection of a social or sociological reality than it is a literary and mythic device for both articulating and concealing the racial history of this country. Critics like Barbara Christian, Hazel Carby, and Hortense Spillers have analyzed the ways in which the mulatto represents both a taboo and a synthesis, both the product of a sexual union that miscegenation laws tried to rule out of existence and an allegory for the racially divided society as a whole, both un-American and an image of America as such. In an essay entitled "Notes on an alternative model—neither/nor," Hortense Spillers writes:

> Created to provide a middle ground of latitude between "black" and "white," the customary and permissible binary agencies of the national adventure, mulatto being, as a neither/nor proposition, inscribed no historic locus, or materiality, that was other than evasive and shadowy on the national landscape. To that extent, the mulatto/a embodied an alibi, an excuse for "other/otherness" that the dominant culture could not (cannot now either) appropriate, or wish away. An accretion of signs that embody the "unspeakable" of the Everything that the dominant culture would forget, the mulatto/a, as term, designates a disguise, covers up, in the century of Emancipation and beyond, the social and political reality of the dreaded African presence. Behind the African-become-American stands the shadow, the unsubstantial "double" that the culture dreamed *in the place of* that humanity transformed into its profoundest challenge and by the impositions of policy, its deepest "un-American" activity.[4]





Nella Larsen herself suggests that her novel should be read through the grid of the mulatto figure by choosing as her epigraph a stanza from a Langston Hughes poem entitled "Cross":

> My old man died in a fine big house.
> My ma died in a shack.
> I wonder where I'm gonna die,
> Being neither white nor black?[5]

Where one might expect a both/and, we find, as Spillers and Hughes suggest, a neither/nor. Nella Larsen's project in *Quicksand* is to tell the story of the neither/nor self from within.

The question of that neither/nor of racial designation is tied, both in the epigraph and in the novel, to the question of *place:* shack or big house, North or South, Europe or America. In the Hughes poem, the father is white; the mother black. This corresponds to the historical realities of the sexual abuse of slave women by white slaveholders. Nella Larsen's protagonist's parentage, however, is reversed: her mother is a Danish immigrant and her father is a black American. This, I think, further complicates the question of race and place, both socially and geographically. The first sentence of the novel, "Helga Crane sat alone in her room," echoes not only

the "in's" of the epigraph but even its very rhythm. The last clause of the opening paragraph of the novel continues that rhythm: "Helga Crane never opened her door." It is as though the novel originates within the "stanza" (which etymologically means "room") of its epigraph. The question of place thus intersects with a question of space, of personal space, of the inside/outside boundaries of the self. Helga Crane's closed door circumscribes a space filled with small luxuries: a Chinese carpet, a brass bowl, nasturtiums, oriental silk. Her room symbolizes the issue of the self as container (of value, positive or negative). And the title, *Quicksand,* extends the metaphor of space in a nightmarish direction: the self is utterly engulfed by the outside because there is nothing outside the engulfing outside to save it.

What, then, is the nature of the quicksand into which Helga Crane sinks in Nella Larsen's novel? Critics have offered various answers. Hiroko Sato writes: "The title, *Quicksand,* signifies the heroine Helga Crane's sexual desire, which was hidden beneath her beautiful and intelligent surface and came up at an unexpected moment and trapped her."[6] For Deborah McDowell, Hortense Thornton, and Cheryl Wall, on the other hand, it is not Helga's sexuality that has trapped her but rather her attempts to disavow it—her own and society's contradictory responses to it. To be respectable as a "lady" is to have no sexuality; to have sexuality is to be a jungle creature, an exotic primitive, or an oppressed wife and mother. These readings which focus on the centrality of black female sexuality are responses to earlier readings (mostly by male critics) which focused on the problems of the biracial self. As





Deborah McDowell puts it explicitly, "In focusing on the problems of the 'tragic mulatto,' readers miss the more urgent problem of female sexual identity which Larsen tried to explore" (p. xvii). And Cheryl Wall writes, "Helga's interracial parentage—her father is black and her mother white—troubles her too, but it is not the primary cause of her unease. Her real struggle is against imposed definitions of blackness and womanhood. Her 'difference' is ultimately her refusal to accept society's terms even in the face of her inability to define alternatives . . . *Passing,* like *Quicksand,* demonstrates Larsen's ability to explore the psychology of her characters. She exposes the sham that is middle-class security, especially for women whose total dependence is morally debilitating. The absence of meaningful work and community condemn them to the 'walled prison' of their own thoughts . . . As these characters deviate from the norm, they are defined—indeed too often define themselves—as Other. They thereby cede control of their lives. But, in truth, the worlds these characters inhabit offer them no possibility of autonomy or fulfillment."[7] As these quotations make clear, *Quicksand* is a complex analysis of the intersections of gender, sexuality, race, and class. It seems, therefore, somehow regressive and discordant to ask what use a "self-psychological" psychoanalytic perspective might be in understanding the novel. How can any insight be gained into all these structures by focussing on intra-psychic processes? Yet the inside/outside opposition on which such scruples are based is one that the novel constantly forces us to reexamine. It will also, I hope, force us to reexamine that opposition in the assumptions and interpretive frames of psychoanalysis.

As we have seen, critics often praise Larsen for her psychological sophistication, but then go on to interpret the novel in social, economic, and political terms. Such readings illuminate many aspects of the novel, but there are certain questions that they leave untouched. How, for example, can one account for the self-defeating or self-exhausting nature of Helga Crane's choices? At several points, Helga achieves economic autonomy—when teaching in a Southern black college or when working for an insurance company in New York—but she seems each time all too ready to flee to dependency. Economic autonomy does not provide something which economic dependency seems to promise. Then, too, Helga repeatedly reaches states of relative contentment—in Harlem, in Denmark, in Alabama—only to fall into depression again for no obvious reason. Chapter breaks often occur where psychological causation is missing. It is the *lack* of explicit precipitating cause that calls for explanation. And it is the difficulty of defining the causes of Helga's suffering that leads to irritation in many readers. Mary Helen Washington summarizes a common reaction to the novel, before going on to critique the terms of such a reaction:

> Nella Larsen . . . published two novels, *Quicksand* and *Passing*, which dealt with this same problem: the marginal black woman of the middle class who is both unwilling to conform to a circumscribed existence in the black world and unable to move freely in the white world. We may perhaps think this a strange dilemma for a black woman to experience, or certainly an atypical one, for most black women then, as now, were





> struggling against much more naked and brutal realities and would be contemptuous of so esoteric a problem as feeling uncomfortable among black people and unable to sort out their racial identity. We might justifiably wonder, is there anything relevant, in the lives of women who arrogantly expected to live in Harlem, in the middle-class enclave of Sugar Hill, to summer at resorts like Idlewild in Michigan, to join exclusive black clubs and sororities? Weren't the interests that preoccupied Larsen in her work just the spoiled tantrums of 'little yellow dream children' grown up?[8]

The Harlem Renaissance was indeed the literary coming of age of the black middle class, but, as Hazel Carby and others have pointed out, it was as much a critique of middle class values as an espousal of them. But the description of Helga Crane's problems as "esoteric," "arrogant," and "spoiled" suggests to me a parallel with the vague, ill-defined complaints of the middle-class patients treated by Heinz Kohut under the category of "narcissistic personality disorders." I will therefore turn to the work of Kohut as a framework for understanding what Larsen understood about the psychological effects of social conflicts, and then I will take Nella Larsen as a framework for questioning the limits of Kohut's description of the phenomenon he calls narcissism. But first, a summary of the novel and of Kohut's theory of narcissism.

The novel opens with Helga Crane's resolution to leave Naxos, the stifling black school where she teaches, because rather than stimulating growth and creativity in its students, it teaches confor-

mity, low horizons of expectation, and imitation of middle class white values. She goes to the office of the principal, Robert Anderson, to hand in her resignation, and is momentarily tempted by his discourse of service into reconsidering, until he inadvertently insults her and she flees to Chicago, where her white uncle, her mother's brother, Peter Nilssen, lives. Hoping to enlist his support while she looks for a new job, she encounters his new white wife, who wants to have nothing to do with her husband's sister's mulatto daughter. Thrown on her own resources, Helga is rejected for a library job because she lacks "references" and for domestic work because she is too refined. Eventually she gets a job as a speech editor for a prominent "race woman," Mrs. Hayes-Rore, through whom she finds work in an insurance company in New York. In New York, Helga lives with Mrs. Hayes-Rore's elegant niece, Anne Grey, through whom she gets to know Harlem's glittering society life, and, for a time, feels quite contented. But her contentment doesn't last, and, when a check arrives from the remorseful uncle Peter, Helga sails to Denmark, where she lives with her mother's relatives the Dahls. There, she is treated as an exotic treasure, dressed and wined and dined in splendor, and courted by the famous painter Axel Olsen, who paints her portrait, propositions her sexually, and then, in the face of her non-response, asks her to marry him. Insulted by the way in which the proposal expresses his generosity and her objectification, she refuses. Homesick for Harlem, she returns to New York for the marriage of Anne Grey and Robert Anderson. Later, at a party, Anderson kisses her, and she is overwhelmed with desire. At a later meeting she intends to





give herself to him, but he wants only to apologize and re-establish distance. In despair, she walks into a church, has an intense conversion experience, sleeps with the black minister, Rev. Pleasant Green, marries him, and goes south with him to his rural congregation, where she is soon buried in the physical exhaustion of bearing and caring for four children. As the novel ends, she sees nothing in her environment to value, and is pregnant with her fifth child.

Heinz Kohut is known for having developed a psychoanalytic theory of what he called "Self Psychology." This theory has been seen by Lacanians as itself an example of entrapment in the fictions of the autonomous self as generated by the mirror stage. While such a critique may be justified, I would prefer to see Kohut's work as a parallel and much richer exploration of structures of mirroring of which the mirror stage is one example.

What does Kohut mean by a self? The self, he writes, should not be confused with the ego. The self is not a subject. The self is an image, a representation. Indeed, there may exist simultaneous contradictory self-representations in the same person. "The self, then, quite analogous to the representations of objects, is a *content* of the mental apparatus but is not . . . one of the *agencies* of the mind."[9] How is the self formed? Kohut answers: through empathic mirroring. The self is the internalization of the gaze of the other, generally the mother in Kohut's account. Instead of Lacan's statuelike visual self-representation in the mirror, for which the mother serves only as a baby stand, Kohut's self-representation derives from the approval-conveying "gleam in the mother's eye." In the early stages of the formation of the self, therefore, other people are not

perceived as separate, true objects, but as parts of the self, as selfobjects. The function of selfobject can continue to be played by other people throughout an individual's life, including sexual partners, and especially, for Kohut, psychoanalysts.

The psychological structures appropriate to the earliest phase in the development of the self, according to Kohut, are the grandiose exhibitionistic self ("I am perfect") and the idealized omnipotent selfobject based on the parent ("you are perfect but I am part of you"). "The need of the budding self for the joyful response of the mirroring selfobject, the need of the budding self for the omnipotent selfobject's pleased acceptance of its merger needs, are primary considerations." If the child is not appropriately mirrored, is not given the message "what you are is valuable" at this stage, then the grandiose self and the desire to merge with the idealized selfobject do not fade away but become split off and retain their archaic demands. Rather than being progressively reality-tested and integrated, they keep the unfilled hunger for validation intact as an open wound. This, I think, is what Helga refers to as "a lack somewhere." Like Helga, the patients Kohut analyzes often have considerable talent and strong aesthetic investments. And, like Helga, they have a tendency to "react to sources of narcissistic disturbance by mixtures of wholesale withdrawal and unforgiving rage" (p. 65). Periods of heightened vitality and contentment are followed by a renewed sense of depletion, often brought about either by the anxiety that arises from an uncomfortable degree of excitement or by a rebuff or merely a lack of attention from the environment. Kohut's theory is, among





other things, a revaluation of the moral valence of the term "narcissism," which is based not on self-satisfaction but on hollowness. Helga's apparent selfishness is based not on an excess of self but on a lack of self.

What does the novel tell us about the origins of Helga's narcissistic deficit? What kind of early mirroring does the novel describe? Her father, a black man she refers to as a gambler and a "gay suave scoundrel," deserted her mother, a Danish immigrant, before Helga could form any definite relation to him. The mother, "sad, cold, and remote," remarried, this time to a white man who treated Helga with malicious and jealous hatred. Helga thus has no early relations with black people except the image of her father as both desirable and unreliable, and she has increasingly negative relations with the white people that are her only family. But instead of becoming enraged at their lack of empathy for her, she actually learns to empathize with their view of her as a problem *for them*. "She saw herself for an obscene sore in all their lives, at all costs to be hidden. She understood, even while she resented. It would have been easier if she had not" (p. 29). In other words, she learns to identify with the rejecting other, to desire her own disappearance. Intimacy equals rejection; the price of intimacy is to satisfy the other's desire that she disappear. To be is not to be. It is no wonder that Helga's mode is flight, and that her first spoken words in the novel are "No, forever." The culminating scene of orgasmic conversion in the church is a stark acting out of the logic of self-erasure in a merger with the omnipotent other. As the church service begins, a hymn is being sung:

Oh, the bitter shame and sorrow
That a time could ever be,
When I let the Savior's pity
Plead in vain, and proudly answered:
All of self and none of Thee,
All of self and none of Thee. . .

As the hymn continues, the refrain changes:

Some of self and some of Thee,
Some of self and some of Thee. . .

Then:

Less of self and more of Thee,
Less of self and more of Thee. . .

Then, at the moment Helga surrenders to the conversion, the moment the text says "she was lost—or saved," the hymn's final refrain is acted out, but not stated:

None of self and all of Thee,
None of self and all of Thee.

The religious conversion, the merger with the omnipotent self-object, momentarily overcomes the self's isolation but at the cost of the self's disappearance. The narcissistic plot here merges with the Oedipal plot: Helga's life, like her mother's, is drastically transformed by a moment of blind surrender.





This ecstatic disappearance is only the culmination of a series of encounters in the novel which present the narcissistic logic in other, less drastic, terms. Each time, Helga's vulnerable and defensively haughty self approaches a potential mirror and is, or perceives herself to be, mis-mirrored. I will analyze two of these moments, the opening encounter with Robert Anderson and the encounter with the Danish painter Axel Olsen.

Robert Anderson is the principal of the black school in which Helga is teaching at the start of the novel. She has become enraged at the school for its compliance with the low and self-denying expectations it has placed on its educational mission—complying with the image of blacks as hewers of wood and drawers of water, which has just been repeated to the assembled school by a white preacher. Helga has decided to leave the school immediately, and must tell Anderson her reasons. As she waits for him to receive her, she thinks about the school's disapproval of her love for bright colors and beautiful clothes. Upon entering his office, she sees "the figure of a man, at first blurred slightly in outline in that dimmer light." She feels confusion, "something very like hysteria," then a mysterious ease. She begins to explain her resignation to Dr. Anderson in an exchange that very much resembles an initial psychoanalytic session—he remains detached, prompting her to elaborate on her remarks, probing for her thoughts. She explains that she hates hypocrisy and the suppression of individuality and beauty. He then begins a discourse of wisdom, telling her that lies, hypocrisy, injustice are part of life that dedicated people put up with when the goals are so high. The text describes Helga's reactions to his words as follows:

> Helga Crane was silent, feeling a mystifying yearning which sang and throbbed in her. She felt again that urge for service, not now for her people, but for this man who was talking so earnestly of his work, his plans, his hopes. An insistent need to be a part of them sprang up in her. With compunction tweaking at her heart for ever having entertained the notion of deserting him, she resolved not only to remain until June, but to return next year. (p. 20)

In this scene, then, Helga enters with a sense of her embattled grandiose self (her aesthetic difference, her individuality and creativity) but is drawn toward the appeal of the omnipotent selfobject, the merger with the idealized other. That merger can only exist, however, on the basis of perfect empathy. Anderson inadvertently breaks that empathy in the very words he uses to solidify it:

> "What we need is more people like you, people with a sense of values, and proportion, an appreciation of the rarer things of life. You have something to give which we badly need here in Naxos. You mustn't desert us, Miss Crane."
>
> She nodded, silent. He had won her. She knew that she would stay. "It's an elusive something," he went on. "Perhaps I can best explain it by the use of that trite phrase, 'You're a lady.' You have dignity and breeding."
>
> At these words turmoil rose again in Helga Crane. The intricate pattern of the rug which she had been studying escaped her. The shamed feeling which had been her penance evaporated. Only a lacerated pride remained. She took firm hold of the chair arms to still the trembling of her fingers.
>
> "If you're speaking of family, Dr. Anderson, why, I haven't any. I was born in a Chicago slum."
>
> The man chose his words, carefully he thought. "That doesn't at all matter, Miss Crane. Financial, economic circumstances can't destroy tendencies inherited from good stock. You yourself prove that!"
>
> Concerned with her own angry thoughts, which scurried here and there like trapped rats, Helga missed the import of his words. Her own words, her answer, fell like drops of hail.
>
> "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. As I said at first, I don't belong here. I shall be leaving at once. This afternoon. Good-morning." (pp. 20–21)





In his act of delivering a compliment, Anderson puts his finger on a wound. By juxtaposing the words "lady" (which at Naxos signifies the denial of sexuality) and the word "breeding" (which for Helga is the name both for forbidden sexuality and for lack of family), he shows not only that he is not omnipotent (since he does not really know anything about her) but that what he wants to value in her is something she thinks she does not and cannot possess. The mirror breaks, the pattern in the rug loses its design, Helga fragments into chaotically scattering pieces, and she departs in a narcissistic rage.

In Denmark, Helga is drawn to the symmetrically opposite kind of narcissistic satisfaction. There, it is her grandiose exhibitionism that is initially mirrored, rather than her desire to merge with the idealized other. Whereas Helga's difference and fine clothes have been met with hostility and disapproval in the United States, the Danes are fascinated. They urge her to become more exhibitionistic, more exotic, more sensuous. Yet they are at the same time cold and detached. Instead of being repressed, Helga's exhibitionism is instead being expropriated, objectified, commodified, alienated. This process comes to a head in her relation to Axel Olsen, the portrait painter. When she looks at the portrait he has painted of her, she says to herself: "It wasn't herself at all, but some disgusting sensual creature with her features. Bosh! pure artistic bosh and conceit! Nothing else." This has often been read as her refusal to acknowledge her own sexuality. But I think that, far from constituting a mirror designed to confirm her sexuality, this mirror gives her only someone else's narcissistic appropriation of it. She refuses the painter's offer of marriage out of a refusal to be owned by a white man. It is in Denmark that she first feels homesick for Negroes and identifies with, and forgives, her father for the first time. She returns to Harlem.

Several times in the novel, the potential mirror is not a person but a race, a "world." When Helga first arrives in Harlem, she feels keenly a "joy at seeming at last to belong somewhere." When she first arrives in Denmark, too, she says to herself, "This, then was where she belonged." Yet each time the surrounding mirror is incapable of sustaining the role of selfobject which she asks of it. The





promise of belonging flips over into a pressure to conform. Each mirror limits even as it embraces. But instead of seeing that therefore she herself is composite, a mixture, a process rather than a product, that wholeness itself is a fiction—the problem and not the solution—she goes on believing that both she and the environment can be perfected, whole, non-self-different. For Helga, there is no middle, no compromise, no gray area—the only satisfaction must be total, pure, and therefore unreal, short-lived. She seeks to fill her narcissistic deficit with the environment, not for its own properties but in the attempt to substitute for a missing part of the self. The line between remedy and poison is a thin one—the magical selfobject must inevitably oppress and disappoint. What is different about Nella Larsen's treatment of these dynamics is that she shows race itself to be a kind of selfobject from which a self can derive both positive and negative mirroring. Kohut occasionally suggests as much, as when, in a footnote, he writes: "It may be helpful to say that the grandiose self . . . has such analogues in adult experience as, e.g., national and racial pride and prejudice (everything good is 'Inside,' everything bad and evil is assigned to the 'outsider'), while the relationship to the idealized parent imago may have its parallel in the relationship (including mystical mergers) of the true believer to his God" (p. 27). As an analysis of the narcissistic roots of racism and race pride, this is quite convincing. But it fails to account for the fact that what is a narcissistic structure for the individual is also a social, economic, and political structure in the world. Racial pride and prejudice are not merely interpersonal phenomena, but institutionalized structures in history and culture. In dealing with individ-

ual patients, Kohut generally neglects or subsumes the *social* mirroring environment in favor of the dynamics of the nuclear family. The following is a fairly striking example:

> Over and over again, throughout his childhood, the patient . . . had felt abruptly and traumatically disappointed in the power and efficacy of his father just when he had (re-) established him as a figure of protective strength and efficiency . . . After an adventurous flight via South Africa and South America, the family had come to the United States when the patient was nine years old, and the father, who had been a prosperous businessman in Europe, was unable to repeat his earlier success in this country . . . Most prominent among the patient's relevant recollections of earlier occurrences of the idealization-disappointment sequence concerning his father were those of the family's last years in Eastern Europe . . . Suddenly the threat that the German armies would overrun the country interrupted their close relationship. At first the father was away a great deal, trying to make arrangements for the transfer of his business to another country. Then, when the patient was six, German armies invaded the country and the family, which was Jewish, fled. (pp. 58–60)

The minor role played in this last sentence by the fact that the family was Jewish is an indication of Kohut's overestimation of the nuclear family as the context for psychic development. What Nella Larsen does is to articulate the relation between the mirroring environment of the nuclear family and the social messages from the





environment which *also* affect the construction of the self. It is as though, for Kohut, the child has no independent experience of history, no relation to the world that is not filtered through the parental imagos. Yet the social world can indeed set up an artificially inflated or deflated narcissistic climate for the child. Racial privilege would offer an unearned archaic narcissistic bonus which, when threatened, would lead to the characteristic narcissistic rages of racism just as surely as the undeserved narcissistic injury resulting from the insertion of a black child into a hostile white environment would lead to the kinds of precarious self-consolidation Larsen documents in the absence of a strong black mirroring environment.

No matter how empathic a mother or father might be, he or she cannot always offset the formative mirroring of the environment. Indeed, in Kohut, the burden of good mirroring falls, again and again, on the mother. His case histories sound like accusations against the mother whose own context or needs are not analyzed. What Nella Larsen does is to locate the failures of empathy not in the mother but in the impossible ways in which the mother finds herself inscribed in the social order. Neither for Helga's mother nor for Helga herself as mother at the end of the novel is the social order nourishing, or even viable. And the split between fathers—the absent black father and the rejecting white father—cannot be understood apart from the stereotypical overdeterminations of such a split in American society as a whole.

The therapeutic desire to effect change in the self alone amputates the energies of change from their connections with the larger social and economic world. As Hazel Carby has written of *Quicksand*,

> Alienation is often represented as a state of consciousness, a frame of mind. Implied in this definition is the assumption that alienation can be eliminated or replaced by another state of consciousness, a purely individual transformation unrelated to necessary social or historical change. Helga does question the possibility that her recurrent dissatisfaction with her life could be due to her state of mind and that if she could change her attitudes she could be happy. But against this Larsen has placed an alternative reading of Helga's progress, that her alienation was not just in her head but was produced by existing forms of social relations and therefore subject to elimination only by a change in those social relations.[10]

As this quotation makes clear, Larsen herself does not ask the reader to *choose* between a psychic and a social model, but rather to see the articulations between them. To see Helga purely from the inside or purely from the outside is to miss the genius of the text. It is the inside/outside opposition itself that needs to be questioned.

In addition to questioning the inside/outside opposition as an adequate model for the relation between the self and society, Larsen's novel also provides material for a critique of the conception of the self as a locus of value. Throughout this paper, I have echoed and extended Kohut's economic vocabulary of narcissistic investments, deficits, and assets, emphasizing the ways in which Helga Crane alternates between surplus value and lack, grandiosity and worthlessness, between an image of herself as a luxury item and an image of herself as garbage. What luxury and garbage have in





common is that each is a form of excess with respect to an economy of use or need. Thus, for instance, after humiliating rejections by Uncle Peter's new wife and by the library personnel, Helga spends what little money she has on a book and a tapestry purse, "which she wanted but did not need," and resolves to go without dinner, attempting to fulfill a narcissistic hunger in preference to a physical one. As long as need is ignored, however, the narcissistic imbalance cannot be rectified. This emphasis on the isolated self as a locus of value (positive or negative) risks duplicating, in the psychological realm, the structures Marx identified as "the fetishism of the commodity"—the belief that the commodity, abstracted from both labor and use, "contains" value in and of itself. Both Larsen and Kohut indeed analyze a self that is very much structured like a commodity. This returns us to the perceived middle-classness of both Larsen and Kohut: it may well be that both the concept of the self and the analytical framework through which we have been discussing it can themselves be analyzed as artifacts of class.

I would like to pursue this question indirectly by turning to a domain that lies in an intermediary position between the psychic and the social and economic. This is the domain of cultural forms. Kohut often mentions the role of aesthetic investments in consolidating a cohesive self, even in the face of early traumatic environments (an incubator baby, children from concentration camps). Larsen has often been criticized for her lack of investment in African-American cultural forms, which appear in ambivalent or degraded guises in her novels (the black church, the rural folk, the black educational establishment, the cabaret, the singers Helga sees

in Denmark). But these forms also exert a powerful attraction in the novels, which is what gives them so much power to disappoint. Hearing the strains of "Swing low, sweet chariot" in Dvorak's "New World Symphony," Helga is overwhelmed with the desire to be carried home.

The final chapter in Larsen's life as a writer is instructive in this context as a bringing together of questions of culture, narcissism, and economics. After her two very successful novels, Larsen wrote a short story entitled "Sanctuary," in which a black woman harbors a fugitive from justice only to find out that the man she is protecting has killed her own son, Obadiah. The last paragraph of the story reads:

> It seemed a long time before Obadiah's mother spoke. When she did there were no tears, no reproaches; but there was a raging fury in her voice as she lashed out, "Git outen mah feather baid, Jim Hammer, an' outen mah house, an' don' nevah stop thankin' yo' Jesus he done gib you dat black face."[11]

The character and the plot were an unusual affirmation of black folk speech and racial solidarity for Larsen. But upon its publication she found herself accused of plagiarism: another writer, Sheila Kaye-Smith, had published a strikingly similar story entitled "Mrs. Adis" about white laborers in Sussex eight years earlier. Larsen responded by saying that she had heard the story from an old black patient in the hospital where she worked as a nurse, and her publisher produced several of her drafts. She was more or less exonerated. Mary Dearborn, in her book *Pocahontas's Daughters,* raises questions about the nature of ethnic authorship on the basis of this event:





> Whether Larsen plagiarized from "Mrs. Adis," was influenced by or unconsciously borrowed from it is not the point . . . Rather, it is significant that Larsen's choice of material left her open for such a charge in just this way. Again, ethnic authorship seems to hinge on the ownership of stories. Does the woman who sets down a folk tale then own the tale? Are folk tales fit matter for fiction? Because Larsen set down a story told to her by another woman, is she then the author of that fiction? If Larsen had set it all down as it happened—recounting her meeting with the black patient, then the story—would "Sanctuary" be fiction?[12]

What becomes clear in this discussion is that the question of the boundaries of the self can arise in ways that transcend the purely psychic domain while still opening up the possibility of a devastating narcissistic wound. If authorship is ownership, how can folk material be one's own? When oral sources are written down, to whom do they belong? (This question could indeed be asked of the debt psychoanalytic theory owes to the oral histories of analysands.)[13] What is the property status of a common heritage? In this case, it is not even clear that the story "belongs" to the black tradition, since the other version concerns white workers. If Larsen was writing out of a sense of still precarious loyalty to a tradition and a people about whom her other works express more ambivalence, then there is an ironic parallel between the story and its publication. Like the protagonist of the story, Larsen, out of an act of racial solidarity, has harbored a fugitive who turns out to take away

her own literary offspring. This is not the fault of the sanctuary, or of the fugitive, but of the laws of ownership and cultural heritage that define the self as property and literature in terms of the authorial proper name. We will never know what Nella Larsen might have written next, or what other stories her patients told her. After the exposure and shame of her aborted "Sanctuary," she travelled on a Guggenheim fellowship to Europe to write her third novel, but never published again.[14]

Nella Larsen has often been conflated with her heroines, whose narcissistic predicaments she is seen to share. In ending my discussion with her silence, I am making the same equation. But while her disappearance from the publishing world may well be a narcissistic withdrawal, I think it is important not to equate her novels with her psyche. As fully realized representations of intricate social and psychic structures, they are more like analyses than like symptoms. The Helga Crane of the novel is never in a position to write the novel *Quicksand*. As is the case for many similar writers—Baudelaire and Dostoevsky come immediately to mind—it is, after all, Nella Larsen that provides all the insight that enables readers to feel that they understand more about Nella Larsen than Nella Larsen does. Which does not mean that the insight is the cure. The literature of narcissism does not satisfy the desire for a workable program for social change, but it does offer the warning that any political program that ignores the ways in which the self can refuse to satisfy need or can seek self-cancellation in place of self-validation will not understand where certain resistances are coming from.





# The Re(a)d and the Black: Richard Wright's Blueprint

It is not surprising that this novel plumbs blacker depths of human experience than American literature has yet had.
*Dorothy Canfield Fisher*

In the fall of 1937, Richard Wright published an essay entitled "Blueprint for Negro Writing" in *New Challenge,* a little left-wing magazine he was helping Marian Minus and Dorothy West to edit. In that essay he characterized previous Negro writing as "humble novels, poems, and plays, prim and decorous ambassadors who went a-begging to white America."[1] He urged Negro writers to abandon the posture of humility and the bourgeois path of "individual achievement," and to develop a collective voice of social consciousness, both nationalist and Marxist. "The Negro writer must realize within the area of his own personal experience those impulses which, when prefigured in terms of broad social movements, constitute the stuff of nationalism . . . It is through a Marxist conception of reality and society that the maximum degree of freedom in thought and feeling can be gained for the Negro writer" (pp. 43, 44). Negro writing, in other words, could fulfill itself only by becoming at once black and red.

Three years later, Wright published a novel that seemed to carry out this design, one that transformed the avuncular diminutions of

14. Isak Dinesen, "The Blank Page," *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women,* ed. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (New York: Norton, 1985), p. 1419.

## 2. The Quicksands of the Self

1. Quoted in Deborah McDowell's introduction to Nella Larsen, *Quicksand and Passing* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1986), p. ix. All references to *Quicksand* are to this edition.

2. Cf. Du Bois's famous formulation from *The Souls of Black Folk:* "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (*Three Negro Classics* [New York: Avon, 1965], p. 215).

3. Nathan Huggins, *The Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 236.

4. Hortense Spillers, "Notes on an Alternative Model—Neither/Nor," in *The Difference Within,* ed. Elizabeth Meese and Alice Parker (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1989), pp. 165–166.

5. Epigraph to Nella Larsen, *Quicksand,* in *Quicksand and Passing,* ed. Deborah McDowell (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1986). All references to *Quicksand* are to this edition.

6. Hiroko Sato, "Under the Harlem Shadow: A Study of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen," in *The Harlem Renaissance Remembered,* ed. Arna Bontemps (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1972), p. 84.

7. Cheryl Wall, "Passing for What? Aspects of Identity in Nella Larsen's Novels," *Black American Literature Forum* 20:1–2 (Spring–Summer 1986), p. 109.

8. Mary Helen Washington, *Invented Lives* (Garden City, N.J.: Anchor, 1987), pp. 159–160.





9. Heinz Kohut, *The Analysis of the Self* (New York: International Universities Press, 1971), p. xv.

10. Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 169.

11. Nella Larsen, "Sanctuary," *The Forum,* January 1930, p. 18.

12. Mary V. Dearborn, *Pocahontas's Daughters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 57.

13. I would like to thank Beth Helsinger for suggesting this.

14. While the plagiarism episode may indeed have cast a long shadow on Larsen's writing, it is clear from Thadious Davis's biography (*Nella Larsen: Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance* [Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1994]) that there were many other reasons for Larsen's failure to publish. She did apparently complete at least one manuscript, of which no copy survives.

## 3. The Re(a)d and the Black

1. Reprinted in *The Richard Wright Reader,* ed. Ellen Wright and Michel Fabre (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), p. 37.

2. Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York: Harper & Row, 1940), pp. 391–392.

3. James Baldwin, "Alas, Poor Richard," in *Nobody Knows My Name* (New York: Laurel, 1961), p. 151.

4. Richard Wright, *Black Boy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1945), pp. 132–133.

5. See Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

6. Richard Wright, review of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston, *New Masses,* October 5, 1937, p. 26.

## 4. *"Aesthetic" and "Rapport" in Toni Morrison's* Sula

1. Renita Weems, " 'Artists Without an Art Form': A Look at One Black Woman's World of Unrevered Black Women," in Barbara Smith, ed., *Home*