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Yolanda M. Manora

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Papa's Baby, Mama's Maybe¹: Reading the Black Paternal Palimpsest and White Maternal Present Absence in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*

Yolanda M. Manora

"Who is it, Ida?" A woman's soft voice sounded from within.

"Someone for Mr. Nilssen, m'am." The girl looked embarrassed.

"She says she's his niece, m'am."

[The woman] came forward murmuring in a puzzled voice: "His niece, did you say?"

"Yes, Helga Crane. My mother was his sister, Karen Nilssen."

"Oh, yes! I remember about you now. I'd forgotten for a moment. *Well*, he isn't exactly your uncle is he? Your mother wasn't married, was she? I mean, to your father?"

"I—I don't know," stammered the girl, feeling pushed down to the uttermost depths of ignominy. (*Quicksand* 28)

1. Introduction

- 1 In his 2006 award winning monograph *In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line*, George Hutchinson illuminates the life of a writer long considered the "mystery woman of the Harlem Renaissance," shedding new light not only on the biographical facts of Nella Larsen's life as a biracial individual coming of age during an "era when 'race' trumped" all relationships, even those of family, but also on the effects these experiences had on her psychologically, especially on her ability to forge a relational life. He contends that "tangled feelings of love and abandonment, anger and self loathing, empathy, shame and powerlessness stamped Larsen's emotional development in childhood and shaped the attachment problems that would affect her until she died" (25). Given her socially and psychically untenable subject position as the "too dark to

pass" child in a white family and the sense of isolation and, ultimately, abandonment, that attended it, it's little wonder that Larsen's autobiographically-informed fictional narratives can be read as sites of relational failure.

- 2 In this article, I locate the narrative absences at the center of Larsen's first novel, *Quicksand*, and examine the manner in which they source the relational failures that render the protagonist, Helga Crane, incapable of fulfilling her promise as, in Deborah McDowell's words, a "daring and unconventional heroine" (xi). Not only does the palimpsestic presence of the black paternal impede Helga's quest for social legitimacy and place, the present absence of the white maternal, arguably a more critical lacuna, serves as the experiential and psychological source of Helga's fundamental "lack somewhere": her failure to develop a relational subjectivity.

2. The Name of the Father: Reading the Black Paternal Palimpsest in *Quicksand*

- 3 When Claudia Tate wrote "Desire and Death in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*" (1995), she offered arguably the earliest expressly psychoanalytic reading of the text, taking as her points of departure not concepts of race and gender as had critics before her, but theories of subject formation. In her reading, Tate used Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory to explore issues of identity in the text, specifically those related to *Quicksand*'s protagonist, Helga Crane. Rather than positing black identity as a strictly social construction, Tate read it within the matrix of psychic processes, the site and/or product of individual subject formation. While conceding that Helga's identity is undeniably shaped by the impositions of social definition and, especially, by the oppositional constructions of race, Tate asserted that Helga's more fundamental subjectivity is ultimately defined and later thwarted by her father's abandonment and the attendant, albeit subconscious, psychological trauma, "My father was a gambler, who deserted my mother, a white immigrant. It is even uncertain that they were married" (*Quicksand*, 20).
- 4 Tate's reading is a provocative one, and the text certainly supports it. In Tate's reading, Helga's capricious journey and her disappointing romantic encounters serve both as metaphors for and the consequences of her search for the elusive father in whose eyes, according to those psychoanalytic theories that locate the mirror stage as a critical process in identity formation, she would be reflected back to herself and, thereby, finally become a fully realized subject.²
- 5 While not discounting the Lacanian lack at the heart of Tate's reading, I contend that beyond the literal absence of the Black Father there is the figurative presence and incomplete erasure of the black paternal. Helga's unnamed black father, given America's One Drop Rule, bequeaths to the mixed-race Helga a social identity that is unequivocally black, and his abandonment brands her socially as being quite likely illegitimate. Helga's black paternity, then, can be read as the palimpsest for the text, determining as it does the communities through which Helga can freely move and the relationships to which she might lay claim.
- 6 In the first chapter of the novel, as Helga plots her escape from Naxos, the school where she teaches, she reflects upon her relationship with fiancé, James Vayle, and his family's likely response to her breaking their engagement: "The family of James Vayle,

in nearby Atlanta, would be glad. They had never liked the engagement, had never liked Helga Crane. Her own lack of family had disconcerted them. No family. That was the crux of the matter. For Helga it accounted for everything" (8). Larsen uses Helga's ruminations to offer a critique of African Americans of a particular social class:

- 7 Negro society, [Helga] had learned, was as complicated and rigid in its ramifications as the highest strata of white society. If you couldn't prove your ancestry and connections, you were tolerated, but you didn't 'belong.' You could be queer, or even attractive, or bad, or brilliant, or even love beauty and such nonsense if you were a Rankin, or a Leslie, or a Scoville; in other words, if you had a family. But if you were just plain Helga Crane, of whom nobody had ever heard, it was presumptuous of you to be anything but inconspicuous and conformable. (8)
- 8 As the text "names" the families in the highest strata of black society, it becomes clear that when Helga refers to her lack of family, she means she has no family name, more specifically, no socially recognizable or respectable paternal name. Her father is never named in the text, but, presumably, as Helga does not carry her mother's family name, Nillssen, his last name is "Crane," but it is not a name that signifies in a meaningful way socially. Rather, her father's name can only be recovered through Helga's name, serving as another marker of his palimpsestic presence; his name is legible only through hers, and it doesn't serve to make her more socially legible or legitimate. Helga moves toward, but not into the upper echelon of black society, the name of the father does not gain her entry, but rather consigns her to the margins.
- 9 In the scene with her uncle's new wife, the black paternal bars, then negates Helga altogether. Her father's racial identity and her parents' marital status converge, fusing in such a fashion that Helga's illegitimacy becomes incontrovertible. Having abruptly left her teaching post at Naxos, Helga arrives on the doorstep of her Uncle Peter's house in Chicago in desperate financial straits to find that the only relative who has ever been kind to her, albeit condescendingly, has married. For this new wife, who had "momentarily forgotten" about her husband's black niece, Helga's appearance is tantamount to the return of the repressed. When confronted with this niece, standing in the flesh before her, the woman must resolve this psychologically and socially untenable state of affairs by denying Helga any relational claim to her husband. To do so, Mrs. Nilssen applies what is, on the face, desperate and absurd logic: despite the fact that Helga's mother was indeed Peter Nilssen's sister, Helga cannot claim him as her uncle because "you mother wasn't married, was she? I mean to your father?" (28).
- 10 In the woman's alternative genealogy, Helga line of descent can only be traced from the black father; she is strictly "Papa's Baby." In nullifying Helga's claim to her husband, the woman denies Helga her mother, essentially delegitimizing the kinship bonds between mother and daughter. In this moment, Helga not only "loses" her uncle, the palimpsestic black paternal is used to subsume the white maternal, rendering Helga, who has always been fatherless, figuratively motherless.
- 11 Ultimately, the palimpsestic black paternal sources a great deal of the unease that characterizes Helga Crane and the text. The black father is not simply absent; he is a text, and that text, the black paternal is incompletely erased. In a most immediate and material sense, he can be read on Helga herself; it is clear from the text that she is too dark to pass, so her very body is a text that bears unmistakable traces of the black paternal. The black paternal sources and often thwarts Helga's journey to find a place where she belongs among people to whom she belongs; she is turned away from some

relational spaces, notably by her uncle's wife, and admitted into certain communal spaces, especially Harlem, because of her black paternity. Rather than being an absence, the black father is the spectral presence that accompanies Helga on each leg of her journey and that arguably portends each relational and communal failure.

- 12 Compelling in and of itself, Tate's psychoanalytic reading of *Quicksand*, reflecting critical shifts in African American literary scholarship in the late 1980s and 1990s, moves away from a social constructionist reading wherein African American characters and their real life counterparts are situated as objects, sites of intersecting, oppressive social forces, namely racism, discrimination, privation, and situates Helga Crane as the subject within her own narrative. In this way, Tate's reading was liberatory.
- 13 It is also critically provocative in another way. With "Desire and Death," a female centered, arguably proto-feminist text, one with a "daring and unconventional heroine" whose narrative begins an exploration of black female sexuality that later African American women writers would continue, becomes a male-centered narrative, a text written around a decidedly male Lacanian present-absence. *Quicksand* becomes a text invested in the power of the patriarchy, and Helga's quest becomes not a journey toward self definition, but rather for patriarchal validation.

3. Papa's Baby: Reading the Return of the Prodigal Father, Recasting the Return of the Prodigal Daughter

"Pa is not our Pa!"

(*The Color Purple*, Letter 67)

"My Pa loves me! My Pa still loves me! Except he don't know it."

(*The Color Purple*, film, 56:15)

- 14 African American women novelists of the last decades of the 20th century, most immediately those of the Renaissance of Black Women Writers, would indeed, to use Rachel DuPlessis's axiom, write beyond the ending of Larsen's *Quicksand*. But their inheritance of Larsen's black female-centered narratives and her daring and unconventional heroines came with another legacy; these later writers also inherited the texts beneath the texts, including the black paternal palimpsest.
- 15 In McDowell's introduction to *Quicksand and Passing*, she identifies Larsen as a "pioneer, a trailblazer in the Afro-American female literary tradition," beginning the narrative explorations of black female subjectivity that black women novelists of the 1970s and 1980s would bring to "franker and fuller expression" (xxxi). In tracing Larsen's literary genealogy, McDowell names several of the writers who take up Larsen's narratives and locates particular novels that belong to a line of descent that begins with Larsen's *Quicksand*. One of those writers is Alice Walker, and one of those texts is her most lauded work, *The Color Purple*.
- 16 While most literary genealogies quite rightly locate Alice Walker in the lineage of Zora Neale Hurston, whom Walker herself lays claim to as literary foremother, legendarily recovering and restoring Hurston to the American literary landscape, Walker's *The Color Purple* does indeed draw upon the imaginative stream that McDowell locates as Larsen's legacy to later writers. In many ways, *The Color Purple* picks up where *Quicksand* rather tragically leaves off, in the rural South with a black female protagonist mired in the quicksand that collects at the material and metaphysical site where racism, sexism, and economic privation converge. But, in keeping with the charge to write beyond the

ending, Walker's central character, Celie, supported by other women and nurtured and sustained by their love and examples, demonstrates her own unexpectedly indomitable will, emerging from this state of suspension by novel's end.

- 17 Walker inherits Larsen's narratives and, at least in *The Color Purple*, writes the black female protagonists beyond the conventional endings to which they are in McDowell's words, "sacrificed" in Larsen's novels. But in the process, Walker also reveals the manner in which black women's stories, as portrayed by fictional black female protagonists, were often narratives written on top of other narratives, some enriching and affirming, others, not. In the case black paternal palimpsests, the texts underneath the texts, often, but not always, serve to fortify the patriarchal strictures that circumscribe black women's lives.
- 18 With the very first words of *The Color Purple*, "you better not never tell nobody but God," spoken by "Pa," the novel's first father, Walker signals the presence and oppression of the black paternal in the text. Celie is sexually abused and silenced by "Pa," Alphonso, the man whom she believes to be her father and, later, verbally and physically by Mr. _____, the man to whom Alphonso gives her when the former seeks the hand of Nettie, Celie's sister, in marriage. Nettie then becomes the object of Pa's predation, coming to live with Celie and Mr. ____ until she's forced to leave because he, too, attempts to take advantage of her sexually.
- 19 Both sisters, then, are subjected to the will of the father. But, later, in one of the most startling moments in the novel, Nettie writes to Celie from Africa with a critical, life altering revelation: "Pa is not our Pa!" (Letter 67).
- 20 Like Helga, Celie and Nettie's story is written over a paternal palimpsest. The text beneath their text is more thoroughly erased, however; Alphonso, the black paternal imposter, erases the rightful black father, writing his own story over the original text, usurping the other man's place, laying claim to his progeny and their legacy, an inheritance that he denies them until his death. Learning their true paternity and the story of their biological father, a successful business owner who was lynched by white men because of his burgeoning economic success, is revelatory and transformative for the sisters. Knowing that they are not related by blood to the man they call "Pa," that Celie's children by him are not products of incest, frees them. Ultimately, after Alphonso's death, the paternal palimpsest becomes recovered text, allowing Celie to claim her inheritance from her biological father and to use it to fund her creative enterprise; she builds her own business and achieves economic autonomy, a rare boon for an early 20th century black woman, one that frees her from patriarchal rule.
- 21 Unlike Helga for whom the paternal palimpsest proves socially debilitating, Celie and Nettie's recovery of the paternal palimpsestic text is restorative; in both the novel and the filmic adaptation, the sisters' newfound status as "Papa's Babies" allows them to lay claim to a liberatory legacy. However, in the film, Shug Avery, the most daring and unconventional of the novel's female protagonists, is, in a sense, sacrificed to a conventional ending as her redemption, her salvation, rather than taking place within the womanist woman centered healing and redemptive spaces that Walker creates for the female characters in the novel, can only be granted by the Father.
- 22 In the white male scripted film adaptation, Shug Avery, a blues woman and certainly the most transgressively noncompliant female character in *The Color Purple*, is not only estranged from her father, who, in an interesting departure from the film has been recast as the pastor of the local church, she is shunned by him. In her first scene in the

film, Shug proudly declares to Celie, her lover's wife who is nursing her back to health, "my Pa loves me! My Pa still loves me!" before sinking into tearful rumination, "except he don't know it" (56:15-56:25). It is only upon her return as the Prodigal Daughter in one of the two climatic reconciliation scenes at the end of the film, when the preacher father recognizes and opens his arms to receive the blues woman who is his daughter, that Shug is restored, once again "Papa's Baby." But the reconciliation requires one last thing of her. As the blues song shapeshifts into a rousing gospel song, the Black Pastor and the Blues Woman, the Black Father and his Prodigal Daughter stare into one another's eyes; as a tear runs down his cheek, Shug runs to him, flings her arms around her his neck, and, both confessing and seeking absolution, whispers: "see Daddy, even sinners got soul" (2:22:24). And with that the penitent Prodigal Daughter is forgiven for her sins. Her father raises his arms, for a moment captured in the Messianic posture of the Good Shepherd, and embraces her, and she is thereby tearfully restored to wholeness, redeemed; she is saved.

- 23 The thematic axis, reconciliation and redemption within the relational, is certainly compelling. But it's not unproblematic. For while women-centered relationships, often emerging from a sisterly-maternal ethos, serve as both the source of and the relational matrix for redemption, reconciliation, and reunion in Walker's novel, in the filmic adaptation by a white male filmmaker, Steven Spielberg, it is the recognition and embrace of The Father that redeems the transgressive, then prodigal daughter, bringing her fully into the communal. In the signifying system of the film, the Logos that the Preacher embodies and expresses through his sermon drawn from Biblical scripture is further enacted by the film's antagonist, Mr. _____, when he goes to Immigration and Naturalization to arrange for the return of Celie's sister and her family from Africa; he must affirm that they are Americans, and in effect, it is his money and word, the word of the Father, that opens the relational space for the film's final climactic reunion between Celie and Nettie.
- 24 The filmic adaptation of Walker's *The Color Purple* makes transparent the manner in which, no matter whether the late 20th century's "daring, unconventional heroines" were sacrificed to "conventional endings," as were Larsen's, or not, they were often cast or recast, read or reread into narratives that were invested in patriarchal recognition and validation. In ways that mirror the journey of Larsen's Helga Crane, for the black daughters in *The Color Purple*, specifically for Celie and her sister, Nettie, who do not know their true paternity, their restoration to their rightful place, personally, socially, and socioeconomically, depends upon recovering the name of their father. But in the film, for Shug Avery social legitimacy is predicated not upon the name, but upon the (gestural) word of, the Father.
- 25 Nearly thirty-five years after the film's release, the question that begs to be asked is this: in these narratives about women's lives, where are the mothers? In a way that serves as a legend for the remainder of this article, in the filmic adaptation of *The Color Purple*, a woman-centered and woman-authored text becomes one that's invested in the patriarchy, turning upon the absence, presence, power and word of The Father. In both the novel and the film, the mothers are absences. Celie's mother descends into madness after her first husband is lynched, marries the predatory Alphonso, bearing him a number of children while failing to protect Celie from him (in fact, Alphonso implicitly blames the mother for his raping Celie: "you gonna do what your mother won't") and then dies, "cursing and screaming." Shug's mother, referenced in the novel, is

seemingly disappeared from the film. Shug's father, fathers in general, are foregrounded. Even Shug herself, a character who is often read as an arguably quasi-feminist figure or leastways, in Walker's overview of the developmental stages of black women (see: interview with Mary Helen Washington), beginning with suspension, a self-actualizing emergent woman, in her first moments of dialogue says, "Never knew a child to come out right unless there's a man around; children got to have a Pa" (55:53-56:10) portending the subsequent the erasure of the mother.³

- 26 Likewise, both Tate's location of the Black Father as a site of a Lacanian lack and my contention that the black paternal is the palimpsestic text underwriting the narrative in *Quicksand* make of Helga Crane's journey a quest in the name of the father, giving rise, of course, to the question: what about the name of the mother?

4. Mama's Maybe: The Name of the Mother and White Maternal Present Absence in *Quicksand*

Helga Crane sat alone in her room.... She visualized her [mother] now, sad, cold, and —yes, remote. The tragic cruelties of the years had left her a little pathetic, a little hard, and a little unapproachable. (*Quicksand* 1, 23)

- 27 Her name was Karen Nilssen,
- [A] fair Scandanavian girl in love with life, with love, with passion, dreaming and risking all in one blind surrender. A cruel sacrifice. In forgetting all but love she had forgotten, or perhaps never known, that some things the world never forgives. But as Helga knew she had remembered, or had learned in suffering and longing all the rest of her life. (23)
- 28 Karen Nilssen is Helga's mother. Her name, inscribed but once in the novel and then immediately "erased," makes a palimpsest of the text, both of Helga Crane's story and of Helga herself.
- 29 In a critical scene early in the novel, the only scene in which the name "Karen Nilssen" is spoken, Helga meets her Uncle Peter's new wife for the first time. Helga speaks her mother's name both to identify herself and to affirm her relationship to her uncle. In an absurd, yet wrenchingly cruel exchange, the name of the mother fails her:
- [Peter Nilssen's wife] came forward murmuring in a puzzled voice: "[You're] his niece, did you say?"
- "Yes, Helga Crane. My mother was his sister, Karen Nilssen."
- "Oh, yes, I remember about you now. I'd forgotten for a moment. *Well*, he isn't exactly your uncle, is he? Your mother wasn't married, was she? I mean to your father?"
- "I—I don't know," stammered the girl, feeling pushed down to the uttermost depths of ignominy.
- "Of course she wasn't." The clear, low voice held a positive note. (28)
- 30 The moment is evocative. The mother's name—"Karen Nilssen"—is spoken, but not only does it fail Helga, rather than rendering her "legitimate," the name points to her possible illegitimacy and denies her claim not only to her uncle, but in a significant sense, to her mother as well. In this scene, Larsen underscores the tenuousness of Helga's quest for a relational subjectivity, as the maternal, the first relational site and the supposed source of the feminine's power and generative potential, is negated. For with the "aunt's" utterance, the name "Karen Nilssen," is arguably erased from the daughter's text. With this erasure of the name of the mother, the daughter's text

becomes a narrative written upon and around a present absence, that absence of the maternal feminine.

- 31 Indeed, by allowing Karen Nilssen only a shadow presence, the text itself seems to obey the injunction imposed upon Helga when she arrives at the next point in her journey, Harlem. Mrs. Hayes-Rore, her benefactress, cautions her:

And, by the by, I wouldn't mention that my people are white, if I were you. Colored people won't understand.... what others don't know can't hurt you. I'll just tell Anne that you're a friend of mine whose mother's dead. That'll place you well enough and it's all true.... She can fill in the gaps to suit herself and anyone curious enough to ask. (41)

- 32 With this, Mrs. Hayes Rore makes Helga an accomplice in the disappearing of her mother, and the most curious textual "gaps" develop around the enigmatic present absence of Karen Nilssen, both as Helga's mother and as the signifier for the maternal feminine.

- 33 Certainly Karen Nilssen's virtual absence from her daughter's narrative holds significance in and of itself, paralleling as it does her absence from Helga's life in a way that must serve as the critical point of departure for an examination of the failure of the relational in the novel. Karen Nilssen's name appears but once in the novel whereupon it is immediately erased; her story, however, appears twice, but in both cases, she is less the subject in her own narrative than a figure in the stories others tell. There is the "tragic" tale of the "fair Scandinavian girl," a romantic, even melodramatic, Martyred Madonna tragedy, refracted through the lens of Helga's memory, revealing the daughter creating a narrative in an effort to understand and, thus, lay claim to an otherwise unfathomable, "unapproachable" mother. Later, when Helga leaves Harlem for Copenhagen, her aunt Katrina, Karen's sister, casts her into another story, that of the Devouring Mother.

Your mother was a fool. Yes, she was! If she'd come home after she married, or after you were born, or even after your father—er—went off like that, it would have been different. If she'd left you when she was here... [But] she wanted to keep you, she insisted on it... she loved you so much, she said.—And so she made you unhappy. Mothers, I suppose, are like that. Selfish. (78)

- 34 In both narratives, the Martyred Madonna and the Devouring Mother, the maternal feminine emerges as a force of negation, turned inward to create an emotionally and relationally damning despair or expressed outwardly in "selfish," all consuming mothering, rather than as a source of powerful, generative potential. Indeed the enigmatic present absence of Karen Nilssen in her daughter's narrative and of the maternal principle for the greater part of the novel serves as a critical point of departure for an examination of the maternal as a force in the failed formation of a fully realized relational female subjectivity.

- 35 But before Helga Crane, there is Nella Larsen. In his 2006 award winning monograph *In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line*, George Hutchinson illuminates the life of a writer long considered the "mystery woman of the Harlem Renaissance," shedding new light not only on the biographical facts of Nella Larsen's life as a biracial individual coming of age during an "era when 'race' trumped" all relationships, even those of family, but also on the effects these experiences had on her psychologically, especially on her ability to forge a relational life.⁴ He contends that "tangled feelings of love and abandonment, anger and self loathing, empathy, shame and powerlessness stamped Larsen's emotional development in childhood and shaped the attachment problems

that would affect her until she died.”⁵ Given her socially and psychically untenable subject position as the “too dark to pass” child in a white family and the sense of isolation and, ultimately, abandonment, that attended it, it’s little wonder that Larsen’s autobiographically-informed fictional narratives can be read as sites of relational failure.⁶ (Manora 1)

- 36 Indeed, relational failure is at the center of *Quicksand*, creating the critical textual lacuna and sourcing the narrative’s centripetal force. Larsen situates a present absence at the center of the novel, using it as the space in which to conduct a gendered exploration of the modernist failure of the relational, specifically in the formation of black/biracial female subjectivity.⁷ This space, this present-absence, is the literal and figurative maternal feminine. “Larsen was always on the cusp of the modernist transformation... just as she always was positioned or deliberately positioned herself on the precarious racial boundary that recent studies suggest was crucial to literary modernism” (Hutchinson 11-12). As Hutchinson notes, Larsen and her work engaged the boundaries of race, but her work actually serves to disrupt those racial boundaries; her two novellas feature mixed race protagonists whose very existences are transgressive, representing the permeability of all such boundaries. Helga Crane, like Clare Kendry in *Passing*, is the product of an interracial union. But, unlike the mixed race characters most frequently depicted in Harlem Renaissance literature, including the speaker in the Langston Hughes poem that Larsen uses as *Quicksand*’s epigraph, products of unions between white men and black women, unions that were not infrequently in fact sexual assault/rapes, Helga’s mother is white and her father, black. The physical site of racial transgression, psychically racked by seemingly irreducible binary of “black” and “white,” Larsen’s mixed race characters, in keeping with the critical project of the Harlem Renaissance’s vanguard, served to question, if not upend, the racial categories, deconstructing them so as to renegotiate the place of African Americans in America’s social order.
- 37 To read *Quicksand* simply as a tragic mulatto tale is critically shortsighted, however. Such a reading neglects the intricate interplay of race and gender in the text and in Larsen’s treatment of female subjectivity. It is this interplay that makes the novel both a canonical work of the Harlem Renaissance and a quintessentially modernist text.
- 38 In *Rich and Strange: Gender, History, Modernism*, Marianne DeKoven argues for a gendered reading of modernist texts, a reading that explores the sharply divergent manners in which male and female modernist writers encountered what Richard Elman and Charles Feidelson described as Modernism’s “dialectic of contradictions, its apocalyptic sense of crisis and belief in a new beginning” (8). DeKoven’s study proves an elaboration upon Elman and Feidelson’s pronouncement, as she asserts that even as modernist writers were engaged in the project of interrogating social orders and political systems, moving toward the “wholesale revision of culture,” they experienced an anxiety, an “irreducible self contradiction” that she terms “sous rature” (DeKoven 25). But, according to DeKoven, male modernists and female modernists experienced this moment of cultural upheaval in markedly different ways. “[M]ale modernists generally feared the loss of their own hegemony implicit in such wholesale revision of culture, while female modernists generally feared punishment for their dangerous desire for such revision” (DeKoven 20).
- 39 DeKoven’s analysis of the manner in which modernist writers work out the gendered dialectic of Modernism in their narratives turns upon her location of the feminine-

maternal/maternal-feminine as the recurring site for the negotiation of this dialectic. She posits that this principle, which she imagines as the force of fluidity and the rush of water, serves as the source of the feminine's power and generative potential; the maternal feminine is, then, a creative force, one to be reckoned with or, as she argues, subjugated and appropriated. For it is the maternal feminine, with its capacity to create or to engender life, which serves as both the threat to the "patriarchal hegemony of reason" and as the means through which the feminine is controlled, "subdued into an icy reflection of masculine self-representation if it is to maintain itself" (DeKoven 32).⁸ DeKoven's (en)gendered modernism offers a lens for a critical reading of the curious present absence of the maternal feminine in Larsen's *Quicksand*.

- 40 Nella Larsen's presence and place within the cultural and literary milieu emerging with the convergence of American Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance is clear; she was very much a part of the black elite during the Renaissance, partly because of her marriage to noted physicist Elmer Imes, but also socially and professionally through her association with such luminaries of the period as Walter White and Jessie Fauset. Her friendship with Carl Van Vechten, a white writer and an important figure on the Harlem Renaissance scene, led to the publication of her first novel, *Quicksand*. That novel gained her the attention and praise of the cultural leaders and critics of the day. As Deborah McDowell notes in her introduction to *Quicksand*, W.E.B. DuBois called it the "best piece of fiction that Negro American has produced since the heyday of Chesnut" and Alaine Locke regarded it as a critically important social document that took black fiction into theretofore uncharted territory. Larsen went on to write a well-received second novel, *Passing*, and to win a Guggenheim for her work in 1930, assuring her place as a member of the Harlem Renaissance black intelligentsia and literati.
- 41 Larsen's recreation of the milieu and manners of the New Negro, her depiction of distinctly middle class protagonists whose life stories seem to be determined primarily by their bourgeois affiliations and aspirations, clearly situates *Quicksand* and *Passing* in the Harlem Renaissance canon. The broader cultural moment and literary movement that was American Modernism also serves as a rich context for reading Larsen's work. *Quicksand*'s Helga Crane becomes more and more a Prufrockian character as the novel progresses, the quintessential alienated figure traveling across a fragmented modern landscape in search of place, incapable of relationship. As an unapologetic striver making her way on enigmatic beauty and a willingness to transgress the rules of society, Clare Kendry in *Passing* has much in common with Willa Cather's *Lost Lady*, Marian Forrester. The characters in both Larsen novels would not be out of place in the dark, psychological landscape of Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood*. In her treatment of female subjectivity and outlaw female sexuality, Larsen is clearly in the company of these modern women writers. And like the female protagonists in Cather's and Barnes' novels, who move from city to frontier and across various city's nightscapes respectively, Helga's modernity is marked by her near constant motion. But Helga's travels are of a different sort than Marian's and Robin's. As Larsen relates early on in the novel: "When possible, [Helga Crane] preferred to flee. That was all." Helga's tendency to flee defines the entirety of the novel. Tate posits this flight as being towards paternal identification, but Marianne Hirsch lays the groundwork for a compelling alternative reading in *The Mother/Daughter Plot*: "[In] conventional nineteenth-century plots of the European and American tradition the fantasy that controls the female family romance is the desire for the heroine's singularity based on a disidentification from the fate of women, especially women" (10). But this process of

maternal denial moves inexorably towards affirmation. "In modernist plots, this wish is supplemented by the heroine's artistic ambitions and the desire for distinction which now, however, needs to include affiliation with both male and female models" (10).

- 42 *Quicksand*, an early twentieth-century text, serves as an intermediary work, one that incorporates the transition from the conventional nineteenth-century romance to the modernist narrative. Helga Crane, the transitional daughter-artist figure, moves through disidentification to affiliation with and, finally, tragic consumption by the maternal feminine.
- 43 In Larsen's text, the maternal feminine comes to serve as the quicksand for which the novel is named. The principle is prefigured by Karen Nilssen who is simultaneously a site of maternal absence and presence in her daughter's narrative. Through Karen's paradoxical present absence, Larsen reveals the way in which maternity negates female subjectivity in women's narratives. Karen is voiceless, nearly nameless, represented only in relation to others, alternately cast as the abandoned lover or the distant, selfish mother. She serves as a marker for that space around which Helga must negotiate in her movement toward her own subjectivity. That movement is both away from the subject positions that damned her mother, the conventional constructions of femininity and female sexuality, and toward a subject position that her mother failed to embody, a liberatory, yet relational subjectivity.
- 44 While modernist women writers of the early decades of the twentieth century crafted narratives that centered on the nature of women's lives, feminist psychoanalytic theorists of the second half of the century began to examine the nature of women's becoming. Recognizing that drive models of human development and subject formation were based almost exclusively on studies of the psychological development of males, especially in relation to the father, they began to formulate new models and paradigms for the study of the development of women. Working with object relations, closely associated with relational models, their work explored the gendered, specifically relational nature of women's becoming. Feminist psychoanalytic theorist Nancy Chodorow, one of the leading figures in the crafting and articulation of these female-centered models of development, posited that elementally different relationships with and to the mother create developmental processes for males and females that are so distinct as to ultimately yield altogether different psychological beings. "The selves of women and men tend to be constructed differently—women's self more in relation and involved with boundary negotiations, separation and connection, men's self more distanced and based on defensively firm boundaries and denials of self-other connection" (Chodorow 2). Chodorow anchors the female child's developmental process in the identification of the child with the mother. In focusing on the mother, feminist object relations breaks in a profound way from traditional male-centered models of development which are invested in the power of the father. In these traditional models, notably Freud's monolithic mythology-psychology, the Oedipal Complex, the mother is allowed but one critical moment in the developmental lives of her offspring, and, then, only her male offspring. In the resolution of the Oedipal Complex, the male child not only confronts and resolves his desire for the mother, he separates from her, not only to identify with the father, but to become an autonomous being. He achieves in this process, the desired outcome of the identity formation process according to traditional Western ideals; he forms an individuated self. In the process, the relational complex itself is, as Chodorow puts it, "smashed to pieces" (156).

- 45 Object relations theory, on the other hand, posits that it is the relationship with the mother that creates this individuated male person. The male child experiences himself as “different from” rather than the “same as” the first other, the mother, and thus develops a sense of self that is defined by separation and autonomy. The female child, however, experiences herself as the same as the mother, continuous with her and, through her, with the objective world. Unlike the individualized subject that emerges from drive theory oriented models and even from object relations theory models when the subject is male, for the female subject the processes of attachment, identification, and affiliation lead to a relational self. In a way that is in direct contrast with drive theories’ individuated self, created through detachment and the negation of identification, for the female subject, a relational subject, the very experience of connection and relationship with others creates and defines subjectivity.
- 46 In the case of *Quicksand*, however, the theory does not hold. Nothing if not an alienated, detached individual, Helga Crane embarks upon a quest that is arguably defined by her desire for and inability to experience a sense of relatedness with others. Such a seemingly damaged subjectivity suggests that the process of attachment, identification, and affiliation with the mother was at best a flawed and at worst, a failed one for Helga Crane.
- 47 “Helga Crane sat alone in her room” (*Quicksand* 1). The novel opens on Helga at Naxos, a school for African Americans in the New South, and follows her on her journey to Chicago and, soon thereafter, to Harlem where she lives for a while before proceeding on to Copenhagen for a time then back to Harlem and finally to rural Alabama. Helga’s quest might well be read as a liberatory one. From the novel’s opening chapter, Larsen seemingly appropriates the male-biased quest script that allows men to experience the process of defining themselves as both a guiding principle in their lives and as a physical journey. Men are allowed physical mobility during their psychic quest toward self-awareness and self-definition. Women, on the other hand, are expected to experience their quests in a strictly psychic sense; any quest they would undertake must first take other people’s needs and expectations as the primary consideration. Larsen wrote during a period when any other depiction of black women was, in Trudier Harris’s words, literary taboo. “Portraits of black women in the early to mid-twentieth century depict them as generally long suffering, bound by the structures of the church or the men in their lives, and not overly concerned about any urges to self-realization and self-fulfillment.... Sacrifice was the key trait for black women” (Harris 495). Women, according to their quest script, are to define themselves in relation to others, discovering their sources of strength, acceptance, and redemption in their families, in their communities, and in their faith.
- 48 These scripted expectations are not met in Larsen’s novel. In *Quicksand*, Helga Crane defies the personal quest script first and foremost by taking her search for fulfillment as the central motivating factor in her life. For most of the novel, she does not allow anyone or anything to keep her from defining and redefining herself in different cities, in different countries. This is the second way that Helga defies the female quest script; she makes her quest a mobile one. By moving from Naxos, to Chicago, to New York, she experiences her spiritual search as a physical journey. Larsen, then, infiltrates a decidedly-male domain by situating her female protagonist in the picaresque quest narrative. Such a reading may be somewhat misguided, however. Helga’s quest is shaped by a certain autonomy, but that autonomy is defined by her aloneness, and her

quest is, albeit unconsciously, a quest for community, a quest toward a relational subjectivity.

- 49 Helga defies the implicit edict in women's quest narratives that requires women to experience their quest psychically, rather than physically, within the contexts of the families and communities to which they belong, not necessarily by choice, but by virtue of origin. Helga's journey takes her across psychic and material landscapes, yes, but while it's tempting to read this mobility as liberating, in defiance of social and cultural scripts and an assertion of agency, that freedom, paradoxically, signals a lack. Helga has neither family nor community to call her own, so she simply does not have the option of engaging in her quest within such spaces. Her denial of the female quest script, then, is not a matter of choice, but a symptom of her lack of place.
- 50 For Helga, this lack of place is an unfortunate birthright, a consequence of illegitimacy and abandonment. Like the author who created her, Helga is the daughter of a Scandinavian and a black father. Helga is obviously uncertain about the facts of her birth. She rejects another character's praise of her dignity and breeding with a seemingly self-loathing remark: "The joke is on you.... my father was a gambler who deserted my mother, a white immigrant. It is even uncertain that they were married" (21). While Helga later regrets the "insidious implications" of her statement, others are only interested in the implications of illegitimacy. In the critical scene wherein Helga encounters her uncle's new wife who, in a desire to deny any ties to her husband has to his black niece, his sister's daughter, applies a rather hysterical and absurd bit of reasoning—if her mother wasn't married to her father, then her mother's brother isn't really her uncle—to negate a socially untenable relationship, severing the ties between her husband and his niece, thus repudiating and dismissing Helga by alluding to Helga's possible illegitimacy.
- 51 Helga feels deeply this uncertainty about the nature of her birth. The issue of abandonment is much more clear. As she herself says, her father deserted her mother. Later her aunt, her mother's sister, mentions, with obvious embarrassment, her father "er—[going] off like that." Once her mother, emotionally absent in life, dies, Helga is abandoned by her white relations, with the exception of Uncle Peter, who sends her to a school for blacks and, for all intents and purposes, forgets her. For Helga, her possible illegitimacy and resounding lack of familial ties account for everything: "No family.... If you couldn't prove your ancestry and connections you were tolerated but you didn't 'belong' (8). This profound lack of family, of "belonging," drives Helga's quest for a relational subjectivity.
- 52 Because of her lack of legitimacy, Helga is not only socially displaced, but culturally disconnected, as well. Helga has no relationship with or connection to a black community for much of her life. She is raised, albeit as an outcast, in a white family. Not until her mother's death when she is fifteen does Helga come into real contact with other black people when her uncle sends her to a "school for Negroes, where for the first time she could breathe freely, where she discovered that because one was dark, one was not necessarily loathsome, and could therefore, consider oneself without repulsion" (23). But, as is the case for Helga throughout her life, happiness "[eclipses] always into painful isolation."

As she grew older, she became gradually aware of a difference between herself and the girls about her. They had mothers, fathers, brothers, and sisters.... They went home for vacations.... They visited each other.... She was glad almost when these

most peaceful years which she had known came to an end. She had been happier, but still horribly lonely. (24)

- 53 Helga is ever and always aware of this difference between herself and others. It is her awareness of being different, more than the difference itself, that so thoroughly sets her apart. This difference, what Helga is so aware of, between herself and the girls about her, the source of Helga's sense of herself, and her failure to psychologically or socially develop a relational or communal self, comes down to a single fact: "they had mothers."; Helga does not, and it's the absence of the mother around which the daughter's narrative turns.
- 54 As Karen Nilssen emerges as a present absence, by turns an erasure, a gap, and a dark maternal archetype in Helga's narrative, Larsen seemingly decries the maternal feminine as the source of potential and power for women, instead rendering motherhood a text which holds the potential to negate female subjectivity. Voiceless, nearly nameless, represented only in relation to others, cast as abandoned lover and distant, selfish mother, Karen Nilssen becomes a cipher, a signifier, a marker for that space, the space of the maternal, that Helga herself must negotiate in the process of becoming a self defining subject and, too, in her quest toward a relational subjectivity.
- 55 Helga's subconscious search for a subject position which encompasses the relational moves her through many communities, each one seemingly disallowing difference and requiring conformity, especially conformity to gender imperatives, in exchange for the communal. Her constant changing of milieu might well be read as a series of movements away from the conventional scripts which so failed her mother, a quest, then, not in search of the father, nor in the name of the mother, but a journey away from the space of the maternal feminine.
- 56 In the final section of *Quicksand*, however, Helga does become a mother, three times over, in the course of twenty months. Her hasty marriage and move to the rural South having propelled her into what Kimberly Monda refers to as "a nightmare of domestic self-sacrifice" (Monda 23). Helga finds herself spiritually and psychically spent, exhausted from a continuous series of pregnancies and childbirths and, too, from her role as mother; "the children use her up" (Larsen 123). In labor with her fourth child, she suffers a physical, emotional, and mental collapse. "While she had gone down into that appalling blackness of pain, the ballast of her brain had got loose and she hovered for a long time somewhere in that delightful borderland on the edge of unconsciousness, an enchanted and blissful place where peace and incredible quiet encompassed her" (128). When she returns from this borderland, she looks at her life and sees it as a "quagmire," a "bog" into which she has allowed herself to slip. The text's final tableau suggests that she has indeed slipped, falling into a literal and figurative space from which she will not escape: "And hardly had she left her bed and become able to walk again without pain, hardly had the children returned from the homes of the neighbors, when she began to have her fifth child" (135).
- 57 Hortense Thornton writes, "[Helga's] womb entraps her so much that through childbearing she is left a tragic, lifeless shell" (300). As the novel concludes, along with Helga Crane's quest, the womb becomes synonymous with the "quagmire," the "bog," the titular quicksand, and it becomes clear that they are all merely ways of naming the space of the maternal feminine.
- 58 And, as the novel closes, after having given birth to "two great healthy boys," Helga, herself, becomes the mother of a girl child, a "delicate" daughter, "not so healthy," nor,

more significantly, “so loved” (Larsen 123). With this, the maternal feminine fails for a new generation, falling away to reveal the present absence that has been bequeathed by Karen Niilsen to her daughter, who passes it on. Like her mother before her, this girl child will have to negotiate a relational female subjectivity in the absence of the mother whose presence would serve as the Urtext for her becoming, for, as *Quicksand* concludes, Helga Crane is subsumed by the space of the maternal feminine and succumbs to her own erasure.

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NOTES

1. Famously used as the title and point of departure for Hortense Spiller's landmark 1987 essay, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Baby" is an American proverb or adage used, in part, to express or cast doubt upon the paternity and thus legitimacy of a child.
2. While the mother-child dyad is understood to be the fulcrum for the mirror stage, arguably, for the mixed race child, specifically one of African descent, this developmental process cannot be fully realized with the white parent, regardless of whether that parent is the mother, because s/he cannot serve as a true mirror for a person of color; the black parent, then, be it the mother or the father, is the necessary mirror, one who can reflect and therefore validate the child, allowing for the formation of a subjectivity informed by their shared racial identity.
3. Walker outlines this historical overview of black women's progression from suspension through assimilation to emergence in an interview with Mary Helen Washington for the latter's article "Teaching 'Black Eyed Susans': An Approach to the Study of Black Women Writers" which appears in the landmark collection *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave* (1982).
4. *In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line* was named 2006 *Booklist* Editor's Choice, received the 2007 Christian Gauss Award for literary scholarship or criticism from the Phi Beta Kappa Society, and was recognized in both the 2006 Professional/Scholarly Publishing Annual Award Competition (Honorable Mention, Biography/Autobiography) and the 2007 Independent Publisher Book Awards (Finalist, Biography).

5. Quoted in Evelyn C. White's "Passing Glory: The Re-Examined Life of a Harlem Renaissance Luminary."

6. Before Hutchinson's treatise, Thadious Davis's *Nella Larsen, Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance: A Woman's Life Revealed* was the literary biography of record on Larsen. Her monograph, the first of its kind upon its publication in 1994, was long held to be the authoritative source along with, to a lesser extent, the work of Larsen editor and biographer, Charles Larson. Hutchinson, writing in the "Introduction" to *In Search of Nella Larsen*, noted that, despite the critical reception their biographical works, especially Davis's, received, "at critical junctures the evidence seemed lacking and the conclusions unwarranted," especially as related to Larsen's autobiographical accounts and her racial self-positioning (3); his project is both a literal search—his location of and use of archival records is remarkable—and a figurative one, as he attempts to locate a figure who "like her most important fictional characters, nearly always occupied a space between black and white, by necessity and by choice.... That space, her fiction itself testifies, is hidden" (9).

7. Helga's individual relational failure may also be read as a cultural analogue for the broader communal failure that Larsen locates in the black elite's inability to forge authentic relational and communal ties with the Folk, the black masses for whom they were notionally responsible, and their mannered and moribund approach to renegotiating African American identity and social place.

8. In DeKoven's study, she pairs modernist texts, one male authored with one female authored, beginning with Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" and Henry James's "The Turn of the Screw," to examine the manner in which modernist writers work out the (en)gendered dialectic of modernism in their narratives. Despite her attention to race in readings of such texts as Gertrude Stein's "Melanctha" and Joseph Conrad's *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, her study does not include a consideration of a comparable pair of African American modernist texts. The coupling strategy is, however, an effective and engaging one for exploring the gender dialectic at work in African American modernist texts, and the "companion piece" to this study of modernity and maternity in Larsen's *Quicksand* is my 2008 essay, published in *Obsidian III*, "'She was in the family way': The Dialectics of Modernity and Maternity in Jean Toomer's *Cane*."

ABSTRACTS

In his 2006 award winning monograph *In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line*, George Hutchinson shed new light not only on the biographical facts of Nella Larsen's life as a biracial individual coming of age during an "era when 'race' trumped" all relationships, even those of family, but also on the effects these experiences had on her psychologically, especially on her ability to forge a relational life. Given her socially and psychically untenable subject position as the "too dark to pass" child in a white family and the sense of isolation and, ultimately, abandonment, that attended it, it's little wonder that Larsen's autobiographically-informed fictional narratives can be read as sites of relational failure. In this article, I locate the narrative absences at the center of Larsen's first novel, *Quicksand*, and examine the manner in which they source the relational failures that render the protagonist, Helga Crane, incapable of fulfilling her promise as, in Deborah McDowell's words, a "daring and unconventional heroine" (xi). Not only does the palimpsestic presence of the black paternal impede Helga's quest for social legitimacy and place, the present absence of the white maternal, arguably a more critical lacuna, serves as

the experiential and psychological source of Helga's fundamental "lack somewhere": her failure to develop a relational subjectivity.

INDEX

Keywords: Nella Larsen, Quicksand, race, gender, paternity, fathers, maternity, mothers, Harlem Renaissance, American Modernism, Claudia Tate, Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*

AUTHOR

YOLANDA M. MANORA

Yolanda M. Manora, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor in the Department of English at The University of Alabama where she is also an affiliated faculty member in the Department of Gender and Race Studies and a Senior Fellow in the Blount Scholars Program. An Americanist, she focuses on issues related to race, gender, sexuality, and subjectivity in the works of twentieth- and twenty-first-century women writers of color.