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문학석사 학위논문

The Politics and Aesthetics of
Primitivism in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*

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Abstract

**The Politics and Aesthetics of
Primitivism in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand***

Yeseul Ryu

Department of English Language and Literature

The Graduate School

Seoul National University

During the Harlem Renaissance, employing primitivist tropes in writing carried with it many implications. The danger of essentializing, fetishizing and objectifying black culture and peoples was always inherent in the practice of primitivism, leading race leaders and black intellectuals to reproach such practice. Traditionally, Nella Larsen has been categorized as the more “genteel” group of writers who refrained from highlighting racial difference in her writing. Closely analyzing the primitivism used in *Quicksand*, however, this thesis argues that Larsen actively appropriated and revised primitivism so that it imagines new discursive possibilities at the interlockings of race and gender. More than aware of the repercussions and the ideologies of the primitivist discourse, Larsen uses primitivist tropes and aesthetics to engage in a queer politics of anti-normalization. While distancing herself from exotic primitivism that fetishize and objectify women’s bodies and struggling to untangle ideologies that were long intertwined in the primitivist discourse, Larsen also attempts to

acknowledge and rescue certain elements of primitivism that she found were meaningful - those which effectively capture and articulate unconscious female desire and those which pertain to African-American jazz.

Chapter 1 gives a detailed historical and cultural context to the discourse of primitivism. A historiography on the era's discourse gives a firm ground to my claim that Larsen was acutely aware of the repercussions and ideological implications of primitivism, and was actively engaged in its discourse.

Chapter 2 argues that Larsen appropriates and modifies white modernist primitivism to articulate female queer desire. By comparing a scene from *Nigger Heaven* with that of *Quicksand*, I conclude that Larsen's primitivism does not confine black women to existing notions of race and gender; rather, it writes against such confinement.

In Chapter 3, I study the novel's form in relation to the jazz aesthetics of repetition, syncopation, improvisation, the cut and restraint. Using jazz, its essentially queer and black spirit, its simultaneous drive towards freedom and control, Larsen promotes a "primitive" aesthetic, where she writes against normative assumptions of race, art, temporality and identity.

Keywords: Primitivism, Nella Larsen, *Quicksand*, Harlem Renaissance, jazz aesthetics, queer sexuality, primitivist discourse

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Introduction

Performing her famous *danse sauvage* in a skirt of jewel-studded bananas, Josephine Baker instantly rose to stardom when she debuted in 1925 for the show *La Revue Nègre*. With her ebony skin, exquisite costumes and her wild, gyrating body that seemed to emanate from the heart of the jungle, this eighteen-year-old black dancer infatuated the Parisians immediately and gave rise to a flux of terms such as “the Baker body,” “The Ebony Venus” and “La Bakaire.” Her performance offers a blending of exoticism, bestiality and eroticism as she dances her banana dance staged and propped with jungle decor. How did this peculiar dancer, with moderate dancing and singing abilities, come to captivate the minds of thousands of Europeans and catapult into a figure of *éclat* overnight? What exactly appealed to the European mind about this uncanny body performing its version of the primitive?

Baker’s popularity can be located within the larger trend of the era’s fascination towards the primitive. Indeed, Modernism was defined in part by its symbiotic relationship with primitivism. By the 20th century, more and more negrophile artworks were being produced in various parts of Europe and America, leading to such terms as “*l’art nègre*” and the “Negro vogue.” Such *negrophile* artworks often employed primitivist tropes to portray dark-skinned peoples and culture, associating them with racist typologies that were both derogatory and colonialist in nature.¹ As

¹ Gina Rossetti and Marianna Torgovnick, in each of their respective works of primitivism, argue that modernist primitivism was a collection of racist typologies formed within process of cultural appropriation. On the other hand, Carole Sweeney argues that modernist primitivism, or Negrophilie, as opposed to earlier

Sieglinde Lemke notes, “the term “primitive” is a “highly charged” term, frequently used to indicate the “antonym of discipline, order, rationality – the antithesis of “civilized”” (4). Predicated on a pile of essentialisms that designate fixed essences of racial identity onto the black race, white modernism’s engagement with cultural difference gradually opened up debates on race, cultural appropriation and representation of blackness. This debate hit its very peak when Carl van Vechten, a white novelist and patron of the Harlem Renaissance, published *Nigger Heaven*, an emblem of white primitivism at its most notorious extremity. Van Vechten focused on detailing the “squalor...and vice of Negro life” through his portrayal of underground Harlem bars and cabarets that reek of alcohol, tobacco, sex and blood. His appropriation of the exotic/primitive stereotype to describe Harlem life was enough to send black intellectuals and race leaders into a fit of fury. To quote the words of W. E. B. du Bois, the book was a “blow in the face” (Du Bois, *The Reader* 516-7).

Reacting to the crude, imagined model of primitivism used by white modernists and the ensuing question of whether racial difference should be highlighted or negated in art, the Harlem literati circle was divided into factions. Leaders of the racial uplift movement centered around Du Bois argued that whatever was culturally unique and distinctive run the risk of espousing a particular version of blackness. Du Bois advocated that in order for African-Americans to achieve racial equality, those differences should never be emphasized or aggrandized. As opposed to this cautious outlook,

forms of primitivism, marked a “shift from a crude, unreconstructed negrophilia that essentialised and reified the racial other to a more nuanced conceptualisation of racial subjectivity” (Sweeney 4).

other more daring and experimental writers such as Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston and Jean Toomer chose to celebrate those values associated with African-American culture. Jazz, primitivism, folk culture and the regional vernacular were wholly embraced as being able to capture the “authentic” black identity. The creative agency they gave to the rural Southerners was criticized by the more conservative intellectuals for “glorifying the lowest strata of Negro life, pandering to sensationalism, and succumbing to the influence of white Bohemia” (Bone 95).

That the Harlem Renaissance was complicit with white modernist primitivism is one reason why some scholars view the movement as a failure.² These scholars argue that the Renaissance, in order to please white patrons and audience, reproduced images of blackness that catered to their colonial fantasies. To borrow Marie Crawford’s words, it was “an artistic movement of African Americans frolicking with the oppressors” (Crawford 164). Indeed, black writers who were born and raised in America were equally vulnerable to essentialist, primitivist notions of the African race and

² Nathan Huggins calls the Harlem Renaissance movement unsuccessful since it was a form of cultural assimilation into white Modernism. Similarly, David Levering Lewis, in *When Harlem was in Vogue*, also challenges the success of the renaissance, deeming it a “forced phenomenon” structurally advocated by a small group of black bourgeoisie intellectuals who sought to relieve racism (xvi). Criticizing Huggins and Lewis of viewing the movement within the “limited parameters” of race, David Hutchinson argues that the accomplishments of the Renaissance “owe much to both its interracial character and its related intraracial diversity” (Hutchinson, *The Harlem* 3, 16). In her study *Women of the Harlem Renaissance*, Cheryl A. Wall directs her attention instead to the black female writers whose contributions have been unacknowledged beforehand. More recently, Brent Hayes Edwards, in his seminal work *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation and the Rise of Black Internationalism*, ambitiously analyzes the Harlem Renaissance as a form of black internationalism, a transnational and translinguistic process of negating difference across cultures and diasporic communities.

culture as did their white counterparts. Occasionally, the black writer's interest in the primitive went beyond the sensational, due to the requests filed by white patrons and publishers demanding primitivist novels, or simply because the writer, disillusioned by reality, sought escape in exotica.

Yet, like Josephine Baker, some black writers were drawn to primitivism not because it satisfied the demands of the white public, but because it provided the room for rebellion. Despite the risk primitivism held of reinforcing dominant codes of racial and sexual stereotypes, the same codes were used to subvert the dominant system through techniques of caricature, mimicry, parody and pastiche. As Caroline Sweeney tellingly argues, "from within versions of modernist primitivism, there opened up radically new spaces of articulation in which counterprimitivism and anticolonialism could emerge" (Sweeney 7). Josephine Baker's performance, primitive as it was, was never a simple reiteration of dominant values. Her dance performances, which embodied a mixture of the ultramodern and the primitive, the present and the past, the melancholic and the comical, the mysterious and the accessible, incorporated within them a transgressive force that unsettled the desire and gaze of the colonizer. This suggests that a wholesale indictment of primitivism for its appropriation of racial difference should be avoided. Rather, a careful analysis of the contexts and implications surrounding its use should be undertaken. Here, Tracy McCabe's insight into the "multifaceted politics of primitivism" is quite telling:

Primitivism – the promotion of the "not-civilized" – is not, however, a monolithic discourse that can be simply labeled

as either subversive or supportive of dominant ideology. It should be read as a local practice or event that takes on diverse and often contradictory meanings in its various social, historical, and literary contexts...Evaluation of the politics of any particular use of primitivism (and not only in the Harlem Renaissance) requires close analysis of its intended and unintended political aims and implications. The challenge facing cultural critics is not to crystallize the political meanings of primitivism in a single period, movement, or even text but to analyze the often tangled strands of resistant and hegemonic work in the history of primitivist discourse as well as in individual cultural texts. (McCabe 465-6)

McCabe implies that primitivism is neither racist or anti-racist, colonial or anti-colonial, ideologically dominant or resistant by itself. Instead, she urges that we expand the definition of primitivism beyond the racist version originating from white exoticism. The implications of a primitive trope employed by a white male primitivist, for example, would clearly differ from cases in which the same tropes are used by a black female writer. Context is what determines its meaning. As much as primitivism was a widespread artistic aesthetic practiced on a local and global level, the many layers of its rhetoric, content and intention with relation to other interrelated systems of gender, sexuality and class warrants closer attention. McCabe's call for an in-depth, nuanced analysis of primitivism and how it manifested upon individual modernist writing is in alignment with the work that this

thesis engages in, by my asking the following question: how are we to understand primitivism employed by an African-American female writer during the era of the Harlem Renaissance?

This thesis aims to explore Nella Larsen's relation to the primitive as shown in her first published novel, *Quicksand*. Roughly divided into four parts, *Quicksand* tells the story of a black bourgeoisie female, Helga Crane, and her sojourn among four different communities in Naxos, Harlem, Copenhagen and Alabama respectively. Each of these communities for different reasons fails to satisfy Helga's longing for acceptance, understanding and happiness, prompting her departure and disintegration from one community and resettlement in another. Constantly crossing regional and national boundaries, Helga's mobility ultimately becomes thwarted when she marries the Southern pastor Pleasant Green and moves to Alabama. Faced with a series of unwanted pregnancy, Helga Crane becomes forever chained to the rural South and what is described as its religious fanaticism and self-destructive motherhood.

My understanding of primitivism in this thesis incorporates all set of images, ideas and typologies that stress a certain characteristic, which is usually assigned to, or which is commonly *thought* to belong to "primitive" civilizations, whether it be a sense of irrationality, sensuality, abandon, spontaneity and simplicity.³ In *Quicksand*, primitivism serves as a thematic

³ Even as I try to loosely define the term primitivism, it must be acknowledged that there are no fixed criteria demarcating primitive art from other forms of art. This is because so many different artists have responded differently to the "primitive" in modern art. As Goldwater writes: "for Gauguin they were the Egyptian, the Indian and the Polynesian alike; for the fauves the "curious" phases of African sculpture...while for Picasso primitive meant Ivory Coast sculpture and the painting of Henri Rousseau" (252).

and aesthetic trope that on the one hand is encoded in the many racialized performances and artworks that Helga encounters during her journey and on the other hand is embedded in the structure of the novel itself in the form of breaks, gaps and affective jolts as Larsen mimics the aesthetics of jazz music. Robert Goldwater's classification of primitivism figured in modern art is especially helpful in understanding the term as used in this thesis. The four categories are: "romantic primitivism," "emotional primitivism," "intellectual primitivism" and "the primitivism of the subconscious." Well-portrayed in Gauguin's Tahitian paintings, the first category conveys a romantic yearning towards innocence and gaiety. "Emotional primitivism" interiorizes the concept of the primitive into the realm of the individual psyche. The creation of a certain feeling or emotion is far more important than an accurate depiction of the object, most clearly shown in Edvard Munch's "The Scream." In "Intellectual primitivism," structural and formal borrowings, inspired by the primitive, are undertaken. The drive towards abstraction, stylization and geometric composition – say for instance, Picasso's cubist paintings – is one outcome of intellectual primitivism. Lastly, "the primitivism of the subconscious" deals with personal desires, psychological trauma and paranoia, as commonly used in Dadaist and Surrealist art. Out of these categories, the last three are especially pertinent to my thesis. In the novel, Helga encounters multiple African-American performances such as the cabaret jazz and the church hymn which incites within her a certain visceral emotion bordering on atavistic fear and barbaric craze. The creation of this primitive mood can be a great example of emotional primitivism. I shall argue in chapter 2 how this primitive emotion that manifests upon Helga's psyche works to articulate her unconscious

desires and queer sexuality. Intellectual primitivism on the other hand is especially relevant to chapter 3, where I argue that Larsen is appropriating jazz structure and its rhythmic impulse towards the “primitive.”

This thesis argues that Larsen, more than aware of the repercussions and the ideologies of the primitivist discourse, actively appropriated and revised primitivism so that it imagines new discursive possibilities at the interlockings of race and gender. While distancing herself from exotic primitivism and struggling to untangle ideologies that were long intertwined in the primitivist discourse, Larsen at the same time attempts to acknowledge and rescue certain elements of primitivism that she found were meaningful – those which effectively capture and articulate unconscious female desire and those which are associated with African-American jazz. I argue throughout the course of my thesis that Larsen uses primitivist tropes and aesthetics to engage in a queer politics of anti-normalization. Unlike white modernist primitivism, Larsen’s primitivism does not postulate gendered and racialized identities as being the essence of African-American peoples and culture. Rather, it becomes the means to convey the non-normativity of queer subjects who defy racial, gender, sexual and literary norms.

In this thesis, I use the word “queer” to indicate not only the non-heterosexual, but also the non-normative. Judith Butler, in her famous queer reading of Larsen’s second novel, *Passing*, defines the word as “an array of meanings associated with the deviation from normalcy which might well include the sexual” (Butler 176). In deviating from the norm, queer subjects not only reveal inherent problems, inconsistencies and contradictions in the social order but also confuse boundaries and categories. Helga’s mere

existence as a mixed-race represents the non-normative itself. As a product of miscegenation “in an era in which race was associated with national difference,” Helga’s mixed-racedness symbolizes “the violation of racialized heteronormativity and its guarantee of American (i.e., ‘white’) racial purity” (Ferguson 34). More so, as I will go on to elaborate in chapter 2, the feelings of identification and sexual longing that Helga feels towards Audrey Denney in the Harlem cabaret unsettles the boundaries of hetero/homosexual desire. Lastly, Helga Crane’s ability to cross borders between various cities and communities, destabilizing discrete taxonomies of race, nation, class and gender, makes her an inherently queer figure. On a textual level, I examine in chapter 3, how Larsen’s intellectual primitivism – her deployment of jazz’s impulse towards freedom and spontaneity – pushes against traditional and normative notions of African-American art, race, narrative temporality and the reading process as a whole. In summary, the primitivist imagery, diction and aesthetics used in *Quicksand* are the effective means to convey the non-normativity of Helga, of Larsen and of the text itself, whose queer edge defies the forces that overdetermine identity, foster gender oppression through institutionalized forms of religion and heterosexual monogamy, and dominate normative perceptions of life in general.

Despite Larsen’s acute handling of a wide range of social paradoxes, not many critics acknowledged her authorial competence during the early 20th century. Rather, male-centered readings of Larsen’s work relegated her to the backdrop of the Harlem Renaissance (Hutchinson, *In Search* 284). These readings engaged in a narrow interpretation of *Quicksand* by applying the “tragic mulatta” formula to interpret Helga’s quagmire. The tragic

mulatto, or the tragic mulatta trope is a stereotyped way of reading novels that have mixed-blood African-Americans as their main protagonists. Sterling Brown, in his essay “Negro Characters as Seen by White Authors,” defines this formulaic reading where the mulatto is seen as “a victim of a divided inheritance; from his white blood come his intellectual strivings, his unwillingness to be a slave; from his Negro blood come his baser emotional urges, his indolence, his savagery” (Brown 194-5). Robert Bone commits this fallacy by reading *Quicksand* as the “tragic effect of miscegenation on [Helga’s] own life” (Bone 103). However, as Mcdowell notes, “in focusing on the problems of the “tragic mulattos,” the readers miss the more urgent problem that Larsen tried to explore” (Mcdowell, “That Nameless” 83). Bone’s reading is problematic in that it looks more to the biological cause of miscegenation than to the contradictions inherent within society in order to explain Helga’s sense of unconformity. Nowhere in the book does Larsen suggest that Helga’s inability to fit in stems from her mixed racial parentage. Rather, I would suggest that the mulatta figure is a tactful device Larsen employs to allow her protagonist to be “both inside and outside” of race issues (Carby, *Reconstructing* 171). That is, through her biracial status, Helga is able to experience the contradictory social structures of both white and black society.

Another reason Nella Larsen’s novels were relatively underestimated was that it dealt with elite, bourgeoisie individuals placed in an urban environment. During the 1960s, many race leaders, with their anti-assimilationist and culturalist impulses, sought to build a distinctive black identity based on cultural difference and communal solidarity. Consequently, they directed their attention to the lowly communal life of

the “rank and file,” to use the words of Alain Locke.⁴ Naturally the works of Zora Neale Hurston, with their attention to the folk songs and the vernacular dialects of the rural South, were reconsidered as key novels of the Harlem Renaissance, while those of Larsen, dealing with middle-class individuals struggling for self-definition, were relatively shrouded in obscurity. Mary Helen Washington effectively summarizes a common critique *Quicksand* garnered regarding its middle-class values: “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 Idlewilde 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?” (Washington 46) These criticisms relegated Helga’s problems to nothing more than an “arrogant” and a “spoiled tantrum” of grown up dream children, hardly germane to African-American experience.

However, those who view Larsen’s novels as tangential to black experience in comparison to the “genuine” novels of Hurston and Hughes engage in a narrow interpretation of women’s experiences. As an attempt to reverse criticisms against the *Quicksand*’s “conservative” or “elite” values, Hazel Carby argues in *Reconstructing Womanhood* that *Quicksand* confronts the more pressing and realistic issues of race, sex and class in an

⁴ In “The New Negro,” an essay signalling the start of the New Negro Movement, Alain Locke attempts to direct attention away from the frameworks of black bourgeoisie elite leadership towards the creative agency of the rural folk as representatives of the African-American experience. He says: “The answer is in the migrating peasant...In a real sense it is the rank and file who are leading, and the leaders who are following” (Locke, *The New* 7).

urban environment.⁵ The series of problems that Helga faces in the urban milieu, she contends, were beginning to be far more representative of black lives at the turn of the century when the Great Migration brought thousands of rural workers from the South to the Northern cities. While there is no denying that Hurston's legacy stands resolute in the tradition of African-American literature, claiming the folk as the sole bearers of the "authentic" black experience leaves little room for articulations of other, equally pertinent, black experiences.

Following the black feminist movement in the 1960s, efforts to acknowledge *Quicksand*'s due place in the canons of American, African-American literature has continuously been undertaken. As Cheryl Wall asserts, "[t]oo often critics...have...relegate[d] women writers to the "Rear Guard" of the movement, or to the so-called "Best Foot Forward" or "genteel" schools" (Wall 9-11). She argues, "The Harlem Renaissance was not a male phenomenon" (9). The dominant critical trend in reading *Quicksand* has been to focus on its complex treatment of black female sexuality amidst a racially and sexually oppressive atmosphere.⁶ To use

⁵ Carby's reading of *Quicksand* as an "urban confrontation" established the novel as a vanguard in a distinctive genealogy of black women's fiction (Carby, *Reconstructing* 166). Following Larsen's lead, writers such as Ann Petry, Gwendolyn Brooks and the more famous Toni Morrison, later inherited the tradition of urban novels.

⁶ Many critics use the framework of repression to analyze Helga's sexuality. Kimberly Monda reads the novel as a critique of white racist constructions that have inhibited black women from expressing and experiencing their sexual desires. She writes: "Unable to acknowledge her sexual desire because of racist constructions of black peoples' allegedly primitive natures, Helga also fails to experience her subjectivity" (37). Mcdowell explains that the novel uses and works out the "tension between sexual expression and repression, in both thematic impulse and narrative strategy" ("Introduction" xvii). She is more skeptical of the text's liberatory force, arguing that the text does not successfully resolve this tension between repression and expression. Cheryl Wall analyzes Helga's constant

Carby's often quoted phrase, the novel contains the "first explicitly sexual black heroine in black women's fiction" (Carby, "Blues" 473).⁷ While their relative foci have differed, most critics have generally agreed that Helga's tragedy should be understood at the intersection of racial and gender discourse.⁸ The experiences Helga faces in her journey occurs to her not because she is black, or because she is a woman, but because she is black and woman. Helga's repression of certain desires and emotion stems not only from her struggle against the sexual objectification of women but also from her conflicting race consciousness – to avoid looking "primitive." In this context, primitivism becomes a convenient lens to examine Larsen's politics at the intercrossing of both racial and sexual discourse.

At cursory glance, *Quicksand* seems to shy away from primitivism. In the polarized battle between the "cabaret school" writers who actively

roaming by focusing on her relationship with Anderson and her inability to come to terms with the sexual desire she feels toward him. Rebutting the repression-centered readings of the novel, Sianne Ngai argues that "far from being unacknowledged by Helga, or stifled by Larsen's prose, sexuality is overtly and even graphically displayed in the novel" (382).

⁷ *Quicksand*'s articulation of sexuality amidst a socially restrictive atmosphere is also considered as "something of a pioneer, a trailblazer in the Afro-American female literary tradition" ("Introduction" xxxi). In talking about black women's sexuality, Larsen's novel precedes works such as Gayl Jones's *Corrigedora*, Toni Morrison's *Sula* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, all acclaimed for their complex treatment of the topic.

⁸ Mcdowell and Thornton focus more on sexism in their explanation of Helga's dilemma. Because Helga refuses Olsen's proposal by an affirmation of her race, Mcdowell sees racism as a "mask for the deeper, more unsettling issues of sexuality" ("Introduction" xxvii). Thornton argues along the same lines: Helga's "acknowledgment of race is used as a mask for her sexual repression" (299). In contrast, Wall and Hostetler put equal emphasis on racial and gender discourse in their examination of the novel. Cheryl Wall maintains that "[b]oth *Quicksand* and *Passing* contemplate the inextricability of the racism and sexism that confront the black woman in her quest for selfhood" (89). Ann Hostetler also acknowledges that "themes of race merge with concerns of gender, for Helga's destiny is shaped as much by her sex as by the problematics of race" (35).

pursued a “distinctively black” aesthetic and the “uplift” advocates who pursued “genteel” values, the novel tended to be grouped into the latter along with the works of Countee Cullen and Jessie Fauset.⁹ Du Bois was instrumental in categorizing *Quicksand* as an “uplift novel.” On its publication, he had called it “a fine, thoughtful and courageous piece of work,” easily “the best piece of fiction that Negro America has produced since the heyday of Chesnut.” Then, he goes on to put it in direct contrast with McKay’s *Home to Harlem* and alongside Jessie Fauset’s *There is Confusion*. Under his evaluation, Helga Crane is idealized as a “new, honest, young fighting Negro woman—the one on whom ‘race’ sits negligibly and Life is always first” (Hutchinson *Search* 284). However, although Du Bois “effectively subordinated Larsen’s novel to his own agenda” and paved future critical tendencies, it is hard to classify *Quicksand* as the more reserved and reticent piece of Renaissance writing (284-5). Far from championing the genteel values of racial solidarity and middle-class values, Helga remains thoroughly aloof from the uplift ideals and the nationalist zeal of the Naxos and Harlem society. Du Bois’s idealization of Helga as the “still master of her whimsical, unsatisfied soul” even as she dies fails to consider the complexity of her characterization and the threat of her primitivism. To use Posnock’s words, Du Bois fails to acknowledge “the extremity and risk of [Helga’s] primitivism” and turns her into an “anti-race race woman” (85). Thus, while Larsen has been conventionally

⁹ Wall sets Larsen apart from Jessie Fauset since Larsen “did not agree with Fauset that the New Negro woman’s freedom to be virtuous was worth celebrating” (117). Hutchinson also distinguishes Larsen from Fauset arguing that the latter’s literary circle was “rather exclusive both racially and socially—and quite straitlaced— whereas Larsen’s closest relationships tended to be with people of a more bohemian character” (*Search* 164).

grouped together with the more conservative and moderate writers of the movement, I argue throughout my thesis that her innovativeness and willingness to experiment with primitivism, jazz and African-American expressive cultures, is proof that she too, along with Hughes and Hurston, can be viewed as the more original and daring “cabaret school” of writers.

Recent attempts to analyze *Quicksand* in relation to primitivism have stopped short at reading the novel as a criticism of exotic primitivism. Amelia Defalco, detailing the “repercussions of modernist primitivism on black subjectivity” reads the novel’s metaphor of quicksand as “the cultural web of primitive fetishization that ensnares the protagonist” (19). According to her analysis, Helga becomes a passive, self-defeating object of fetishization as she internalizes and capitulates to prevalent white notions of race. Debra Silverman gives the novel a more liberatory power. Claiming that it “works against exotic primitivism...a familiar trope in modernist literature,” she argues that the author’s repositioning of the black female body transforms the novel from an already “readable text” to an “alternate text” (607, 601, 600). In a similar vein, Gina Rossetti reads *Quicksand* as a critique of not only “early-twentieth-century literature’s fascination with primitivism” but also the “black uplift rhetoric” and “its equally limiting social formula” (162). Lastly, Pamela Barnett views Larsen’s use of primitive tropes as “parodically ‘primitive’,” intentionally exaggerated to highlight the “always mediated nature of representations” (597, 577). Situating *Quicksand* in the era’s dispute over representation, race and art, all of these scholars have concluded that the novel in one way or another “points to” (Defalco), “challenges” (Silverman), “questions” (Rossetti) or

“explores the limitations of” (Barnett) the overdetermined representations of the black body as the primitive Other.

Nonetheless, it is hard to view *Quicksand* as a complete rejection of primitivism. What then, to say of the scene where Helga, after a fit of passionate repentance and convulsion, suddenly turns religious among the wildly gesticulating congregation? Of Helga’s absurdly whimsical, primitive disposition which protrudes out of the textual surface in the form of moods, affect and emotion? Of its repetitive form that derives its roots from the African-American musical cadence and culture? Although the critics above have offered ample evidence of how the text resists exotic primitivism, they fail to acknowledge, or else, provide an in-depth analysis on the text’s drive towards the primitive. Out of these scholars, only Barnett has undergone an analysis of Helga’s conversion scene. However, even she chooses to settle on a brief and conclusive statement regarding this “frenzied, sexual, Bacchic conversion,” simply treating it as a form of parodic primitivism. This is because these critics all view primitivism within the limited parameters of exoticism that derives from white modernism. In examining Larsen’s appropriation and revisionary myth-making of white primitivism, this thesis aims to reveal the ways with which Larsen redefines modernist primitivism, how intercultural exchanges, the process of how ““marginal” black cultures have shaped the center, and how the center has shaped those cultures,” have formed and enlarged the definition of modernist primitivism (Lemke 7). As I shall demonstrate, modernist primitivism was the product of a mutual correspondence between marginal and dominant cultures, rather than being the product of white modernism’s lop-sided exploitation of racist stereotypes. Black writers

exploited and made use primitivist tropes too, but for a variety of different reasons that require individual scrutiny. For Larsen, primitivist tropes were used to signal that some force of the non-normative, the queer, the aberrant was in process.

Of course, the fact that Larsen capitalized on primitivism may seem to some that she capitulated to certain racist neologisms and essentialist notions. These were the criticisms that many cabaret school writers had faced. Indeed, Larsen does not completely discard racial differences that primitivism may perpetuate. In turning Helga religious, she certainly resorts to racially atavistic and regressive forces that risk the reinforcement of racial stereotypes. The dangers underlying such repetition of dominant representations of race is well noted by Mae Henderson in her analysis of Josephine Baker's dance performances. She writes:

...when mocking, satirizing, parodying, or otherwise subverting and calling into question the dominant and hegemonic signifying system, the employment (or re-deployment) of these available signs and codes unavoidably risks validating, if not indeed valorizing, the original system of signification...In a performance vocabulary based on repetition with a difference--- that is, repeating the dominant structures of signification but with an articulation of transgressive difference---the repetition runs the risk (depending on the reader, the reading position, and the scene of reading) of reinforcing dominant codes, while the

difference often gets diminished or overshadowed.

(Henderson 207-8)

My aim in this thesis is to highlight these *differences* of signification rather than the *repetition*: the little adjustments made to existing tropes of primitivism, the individual contexts underlying its risky use and, if there is one, the subversion and re-signification of dominant racial and sexual stereotypes (Henderson 208). For, Larsen's primitivism is never an easy re-deployment of fetishistic, essential tropes. The subtle changes that she makes in her appropriation of primitivist tropes is, as Henderson aptly claims, what creates a fissure in the dominant structure. In the process of actively appropriating, revising and adjusting modernist primitivism, Larsen proves herself more than capable of discerning what part of primitivism are reconcilable with her race and gender politics and what part of it deviate from it. She especially calls into question the sort of primitivism which violate women's bodies and oppress their desires.

In the first chapter, I give a detailed historical and cultural context to the discourse of primitivism, the "complicated web of discourses" in which the black women's body was caught during the early twentieth century (Silverman 600). A historiography on the era's discourse gives us a firm basis to claim that Larsen was acutely aware of the repercussions, effects, and ideological implications of primitivism and negotiated her creativity amidst a complex period. In Chapter 2, I argue that Larsen appropriates and modifies the traditions of primitivism to articulate female queer desire. Larsen's primitivism does not confine black women to existing notions of race and gender, rather, it writes against such confinement. In discussing

Larsen's politics of primitivism, I bring in *Nigger Heaven* to my discussion. The novel being an emblem of white primitivism at its extremity, my comparison of the two novels will especially shed light on Larsen's racial and sexual politics and how the author criticizes Van Vechten's primitivist fancies. Chapter 3, by studying the novel's form in relation to jazz aesthetics, argues that Larsen's primitivism promotes a distinctively queer black aesthetic. Appropriating the techniques of syncopation, improvisation, repetition and the cut, Larsen imitates jazz's simultaneous drive towards freedom and control, a drive that disrupts normative expectations of time, order and narrative structure. At the same time, she uses the techniques of "restraint" to preserve gaps and lapses of meaning in her narrative, making her text intrinsically queer.

I. The Primitivist Discourse in a Modern Context

In this chapter, I detail the cultural forces that influenced and are reflected in *Quicksand*. The complex social, political milieu of the 1920s made it increasingly difficult for a black female writer such as Nella Larsen to write openly about black sexuality. By delineating the various utterances of the Renaissance era that contributed to the age-old discourse on primitivism and black representation in art, I demonstrate the repercussions, inherent dangers and ideologies related to the primitivist discourse. A lengthy treatment of this topic in this chapter will deepen our understanding of what it meant for Renaissance artists to exploit primitivism and what part of it was especially problematic.

Ranging from Picasso's *l'art nègre* to Josephine Baker's *danse sauvage*, modernist cultural works have frequently associated the black body with primitivism. Social Darwinism, which emerged at the turn of the century, applied the theory of natural selection to ethnology and established a hierarchy between the "advanced" white civilization and the "primitive" peoples of color. With the field of eugenics and evolutionary biology at its backdrop, primitivism took on the form of yet another racism against the African-Americans, associating them with a set of physiological defects, derogatory values and unreliable myths that originated from Western perceptions of tribal culture. As Lemke notes, the term 'primitive' is a "highly charged" term (4), an amalgam of exoticism, cannibalism, voodoo, fauvism, cubism, amateurism, demonism and eroticism as closely associated with dark-skinned peoples and culture. Predicated on a pile of essentialisms,

primitivism produced fictitious images of blackness and reduced the black body to false and many times degrading racial essences.

These “primitivist tropes,” or in Marianna Torgovnick’s definition, words which have “slipped from their original metaphoric status to control perceptions of primitives,” have constantly been reproduced and exploited in Western art and literature, evolving into a set of aesthetic themes and artistic images (8). By the twentieth century, primitivism became a predominant thread of Modernism. Caroline Sweeney, in her study *From Fetish to Subject*, offers the two predominant tropes within primitivism as they are figured in modernist art: a “regressive, untamed atavism” and “the state of plenitude and harmonious simplicity of the exotic primitive” (13). In both cases, the primitive is defined in opposition to the intellectual and the civilized. While the first trope is purely negative and demeaning in nature, the second is based on a more romantic desire for a return to the origin where awaits the hope of rejuvenation and plenitude. T. S. Eliot’s remarks on primitive art as a source of revivification does well to exemplify the latter case. He writes in “War-paint and Feathers”:

And as it is certain that some study of primitive man furthers our understanding of civilized man, so it is certain that primitive art and poetry help our understanding of civilized art and poetry. Primitive art and poetry can even, through the studies and experiments of the artist or poet, revivify the contemporary activities. The maxim, Return to the sources, is a good one” (Eliot 122)

Eliot's vision against primitive art lies in its ability to work as a means to understand civilized art and also as a source to rejuvenate contemporary European activities. Either vision is problematic in that in both cases "the primitive man" is always objectified and consumed to fit the desires and needs of "the civilized man." When the primitive works as a mirror against civilization, its reflections are reversed so that primitive man is always what the civilized man is not, vice versa. When the primitive becomes a source of rejuvenation, it becomes the object of consumption by the civilized man. Eliot's manner of approaching the primitives is in alignment with what George Frederickson calls "romantic racialism," which endeavors to find in the African-American character some racial trait that "[seem] tragically lacking in white American civilization" (Frederickson 108), and also with Robert Coles and Diane Isaacs's notion of "cultivating primitivism," which sought to provide an alternative to modern technological society. Either way, the primitive man is silenced and appropriated.

Sharpley-Whiting's study *Black Venus: Sexualized Savages, Primal Fears and Primitive Narratives in French* is especially useful in providing us with the psychological and cultural impulses behind such constructions of black identity in white societies. Tracing the continuum of the Black Venus narrative (or primitive narrative as he calls it) in the French literary canon, he argues that it was the French male's primal fear towards the sexual and racial difference of the black female that led to such fad in primitivism. On a national level, he contends, the French empire institutionally exploited images of the "happy savage" and the "civilizing French force" to gain support for its colonial expansion and reestablish its position as a colonial superpower. This suggests an important point: the

representation of blackness has always occurred in ways that mirror the dominant culture's particular desires and needs. Borrowing Torgovnick's words, "The primitive can be – has been, will be – whatever Euro-Americans want it to be" (5). Whether it be for the purpose of a nation-wide political propaganda or for the rebuilding of white masculinity, encoded within the black body were some of the "deepest obsessions" of Western society (18).

It is important to note how discourses of primitivism are almost always gendered. Marianna Torgovnick's argues that "gender issues always inhabit Western versions of the primitive...those familiar tropes for primitives become the tropes conventionally used for women" (17). Indeed, the adjectives prescribed to primitives ("pure", "irrational", "atavistic", "physical") were interchangeably used to describe women. As Huggins aptly notes, "[primitivism] is especially a male fantasy" (Huggins 188). For many white men, black females represented the sexually hyperactive, lascivious and erotic. These women, faced with the problems of sexism as well as racism, were doubly limited with cultural and social stereotyping.

The association between black women and primitivism is the product of many different historical and cultural forces that project false identities onto the body of black women. Barbara Christian argues that the myth of the black women's licentiousness stems from the fabricated sexual identity of the female slave (7). She maintains that historically, the image of the black female slave has been defined in binary opposition to the image of the white Southern lady. If the plantation mistress were to follow what Barbara Welter refers to as "the cult of true womanhood," black slaves "existed in an antithetical relationship with the values embodied in the cult"

(Christian 32). If the white lady was to be virginal and sexless, the black woman had to be lascivious and hypersexual. If the white lady was to be delicate and sensitive, the black woman had to be tough and enduring. If the white lady was to be religious and pious, then the black women had to be superstitious and heathen. Thus invented were the constructed images of the loose black woman who was naturally and inherently licentious, the Black Mammy who was able to perform the daily duties of motherhood with strength and contentment and the Conjure Woman who corresponded with evil and dark forces. Through the forging of a black sexual identity under what du Cille refers to as the “cult of true primitivism” (du Cille 73), the values of true womanhood were defined in return. More importantly, these images of the loose black women justified the institutionalized rape of the female slave from their white masters, accusing these victims of being “not entirely unwilling accomplices, if not outwardly inviting a sexual attack” (*Reconstructing* 39). The relegation of black female slaves to eager participants in illicit sexual activity not only reinforced the power of the plantation owner but also strengthened the slave system as a whole.

Another cultural iconography that associated black women with primitivism was the image of the Hottentot. Saartjie Baartman, otherwise known as the Hottentot Venus, was brought from colonial South Africa to London in 1810, where her nude body was crudely put on exhibition. What seemed to Europeans the unusual features of her physiognomy – her buttocks and genital anatomy – became the object of eager attraction for white audiences to consume. Even after her death, her female body parts and genitalia were dissected and individually put on display. Sander Gilman, recounting the tragic personal history of Saartjie Baartman,

contends that this body of the Hottentot came to represent the black female in general throughout the 19th century. Europeans started to associate the 'primitive' form of Baartman's female genitalia with her unbridled sexual appetite and also with the various pathologies entailing such rampant sexual activity. Gilman, through a comprehensive examination into the areas of literature, art, anthropology and science, concludes that a collective European perception equating black females with primitivism, sexuality and pathology had formed the dominant discourse in black identity.

As a result of such stereotyping of black peoples as primitive and sexual beings, a large part of the African-American intellectual and cultural movement that had occurred throughout history had formed in ways that challenged and resisted the dominant culture's representation. For instance, in response to the assumption that black women were sexually and erotically rampant, black women reformers of the nineteenth century chose to remain silent about their sexualities. Abiding by the norms of middle-class propriety and denying their desires altogether, these reformers believed that if black womanhood was defined in opposition to white womanhood, it was best that they follow the same cult and earned their rightful places as "ladies" of the American society. However, as Hammonds points out, the ineffectuality of this "politics of silence" lay in that it sealed off all possible means of articulation through which black female sexuality could be named, voiced and represented (98). Black women, both in society and in literature, had to compromise their standing as sexual subjects in order to avoid looking primitive.

The larger current of the New Negro and the uplift movement in the early 20th century can also be interpreted as an effort to dispel existing

images of blackness. The New Negro movement, with the black cultural elites and race leaders at its forefront, directly confronted the racist treatment of African-Americans in art and literature and sought to fashion a new image of the black race. This racial self was to dismiss any existing stereotypes crafted within the long history of slavery and reproduced as stock images in blackface minstrelsy, Southern antebellum novels, vaudeville shows and the Hottentot. The era was a point of departure from the Old Negro – the “vulgar slave” from the Jim Crow South – to a New Negro that displayed an outward respectability. Alain Locke was the first person to articulate these values in a series of essays published under an anthology entitled *The New Negro*. He solemnly asserts, the “day of “aunties,” “uncles” and “mammies” is...gone. Uncle Tom and Sambo have passed on...” (Locke 5). Instead, he calls for a newly founded racial self, based on a “renewed self-respect and self-dependence” (4). However, redefining a new racial self meant that a new image had to be concocted, one that was distinctive enough to disintegrate existing ones. Henry Louis Gates Jr. notes how the New Negro was as much of a trope as the Old Negro was: “[t]o counter [the] racist stereotypes, white and black writers erred on the side of nobility, and posited equally fictitious black archetypes” (131). Gates makes a fitting point in suggesting that the black racial self promoted by New Negro leaders existed “‘only’ as a coded system of signs complete with masks and mythology” (133-35). In other words, the New Negro self was the product of an equally fictitious forging of group identity.

In the process of reconstructing a new image for black women, the racial uplift values were equally debilitating and oppressive. Behaviors of black women that displayed the slightest hint of immorality and promiscuity

were strictly under surveillance. Under the communal values of racial solidarity and race consciousness, individual black women were expected to fulfill their duties as race women by maintaining social demeanor and middle-class respectability. Hazel Carby argues that the “reformist zeal” of black middle-class organizations and agencies played a huge role in the “policing of black women’s bodies” (“Policing” 745). Taking on the role of maternity, these institutions focused on taking disciplinary measures towards the sexual and moral conduct of migrating black women. Black sexuality was now displaced onto a “terrain of the political responsibility of the black woman” (“Blues” 473). This is problematic in that it shifts the burden of ideological contradiction and structural racism to the responsibility of individuals. As Carby appropriately points out, strict controlling measures in the urban milieu are always directed towards the bodies of black women, and not towards the structural contradictions of the job market where black women are not given equal standing: urban threats are always seen as a “problem located in the black women themselves” (“Policing” 741).

As one of the most fervent proponents of the racial uplift movement, W. E. B. du Bois, in “The Damnation of Women” asserts that “The uplift of women is, next to the problem of the color line and the peace movement, our greatest modern cause” (Du Bois, *A Reader* 309). His most often quoted phrase severely condemns the sexual violence undertaken by the white South against black women since the ages of slavery. He wrote: “I shall never forgive, neither in this world nor the world to come... [the white’s] wanton and continued and persistent insulting of the black womanhood which it sought and seeks to prostitute to its lust” (304). As an attempt to

free black women from this unjust treatment, Du Bois argues that they be liberated from domesticity and obligatory motherhood and that a newly found black womanhood based on strength, intellect, and economic independence be established. What would be interesting to note is his use of adjectives to describe “the daughters of my black mothers” (312). As if to echo the cult of true womanhood, he uses phrases such as “sweetly feminine,” “unswervingly loyal,” “desperately earnest” and “instinctively pure” to eulogize what he believes to be true black womanhood (Lewis 312). In attempting to draw black women out from the stereotype of the Black Mammy and the Black Venus, Du Bois transforms black women into types all over again, that of the Black Madonna. Under his uplift ideals, black women become fixed under a whole new construction of themselves.

In a 1926 symposium held under the title “The Negro in Art: How Shall he be Portrayed,” Du Bois posed a series of questions that started a fervent discussion amongst artists and intellectuals. The questionnaire deserves our attention:

1. When the artist, black or white, portrays Negro characters is he under any obligations or limitations as to the sort of character he will portray?
2. Can any author be criticized for painting the worst or the best characters of a group?
3. Can publishers be criticized for refusing to handle novels that portray Negroes of education and accomplishment, on the ground that these characters are no different from white folk and therefore not interesting?

4. What are Negroes to do when they are continually painted at their worst and judged by the public as they are painted?
5. Does the situation of the educated Negro in America with its pathos, humiliation and tragedy call for artistic treatment [that is] sincere and sympathetic?
6. Is not the continual portrayal of the sordid, foolish and criminal among Negroes convincing the world that this and this alone is really and essentially Negroid, and preventing white artists from knowing any other types and preventing black artists from daring to paint them? (Du Bois, "The Negro in Art" 219)

These questions address the links between race, color and culture. What Du Bois calls attention to is whether black artists are freely entitled to pursue their own artistic ends, or whether they have the moral obligation and the political responsibility to work for the social and political ends of black liberation. If certain images denigrated the status of the African- American race in America, should it be deemed as good art? If culture will grant the black race higher standing in American society, should not artists endeavor to draw a more exemplary group of people, instead of "the sordid, foolish and criminal" who belong to "the underworld"? Put differently, Du Bois had raised the question of art's liability for propaganda. More specifically, in the Chicago convention of the NAACP, Du Bois echoes his famous speech: "all art is propaganda and ever must be...I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda" (Du Bois, *The Reader* 514). Later published under the title "Criteria of Negro Art," the essay demands that

“beauty” should give way for “truth” that instigates “universal understanding” and “goodness” that generates “sympathy and human interest” (513-4). He demands for the moral and political responsibility of art, bent on producing an “authentic” representation of African-American life with “good” political and social purpose. He laments the situation where the white public demands from its artists “racial prejudgment which deliberately distorts truth and justice” (514). For Du Bois, aesthetical representations of the black race should work to achieve political purposes of uplifting the race and overthrowing white racism.

Responding to Du Bois’s “art as propaganda” argument, Alain Locke aimed his appeal instead for a “Negro aesthetic” that realizes the full literary potential of African-American material. Locke believed that black literature should be free to pursue its aesthetic goals rather than serve its social and political purposes. In “The Negro Youth Speaks,” he calls for the young artist’s “happy release” from “the hampering habit of setting artistic values with primary regard for moral effect – all those pathetic over-compensations of a group inferiority complex which our social dilemmas inflicted upon several unhappy generations” (Locke, *The New* 48). Aside from referring to the Talented Tenth as a group of several unhappy generations, he deems Du Bois’s warning against unrestrained artistic self-expression as a symptom of “a group inferiority complex.” Instead Locke argues that culture speak for itself. Based on a newly established racial pride in the folk tradition and the African material, Locke believed that artistic expression will gain African-Americans political and social standing in American society. He pleads that artists be released from “the arid fields of controversy and debate” to the more “productive fields of creative

expression” (15). The “cultural recognition” artists garner would in turn lead to a “reevaluation of the Negro” bringing a “further betterment of race relationships” (15). Artistic accomplishments, based on cultural pluralism and nationalism, was directly connected to the political advancement of the black race.

A white writer and a patron of the Harlem Renaissance, Carl van Vechten also avidly participated in the Symposium. Published as a short article in the March edition of *The Crisis*, the essay includes Van Vechten’s opinion that placing restrictions upon the art’s subject matter impedes artistic development: it is an “attitude completely inimical to art” (*Crisis* 219). He sides with Alain Locke and galvanizes young black writers to deal with distinctly Negro material: “Are Negro writers going to write about this exotic material while it is still fresh or will they continue to make a free gift of it to white authors who will exploit it until not a drop of vitality remains?” (*Crisis* 31.5, 219)

As if to put his words into immediate action, he published his *Nigger Heaven* in 1926, white primitivism at its most notorious extremity. Fully indulging in the “squalor ... and vice of Negro life,” *Nigger Heaven* was emblematic of white primitivism at its most notorious extremity. The novel tells the story of Mary Love, the chaste and restrained librarian who never “let[s] herself go”, and Byron Kasson, a black would-be writer struggling to overcome the color line and prove himself as a competent writer. Although the two Harlemites fall in love after meeting in a social gathering, it soon ends when Byron, unable to find a promising job and indulging instead in the underground decadence of Harlem life, ends up having an affair with Lasca Sartoris, the legendary femme-fatale of Seventh Avenue. When Lasca

abandons him for the powerful billionaire Randolph Pettijohn, Byron gets involved in a gun fight and ends up firing two bullets into the dead body of Pettijohn out of spite. The novel ends with Byron getting arrested by the police and losing all hopes for a promising future.

While it is not my purpose here to attempt a detailed analysis of *Nigger Heaven*, it is important to understand the amount of controversy the book had helped spark upon the literary scene of the 1920s and consequently the influence it had over *Quicksand*. *Nigger Heaven* was the crux in the discourse of primitivism and the aesthetical debate on representing blackness. Aside from its provocative title, what became the novel's most controversial issue among race-conscious leaders was its appropriation of the exotic/primitive stereotype to describe Harlem life. Van Vechten writes:

The music shivered and broke, cracked and smashed. Jungle land. Hottentots and Bantus swaying under the amber moon. Love, sex, passion, hate. Lef' side, right side! Git off that dime... The dancers swayed from one side to the other like sailors heaving an anchor. Black, green, blue, purple, brown, fan, yellow, white: coloured people. (*Nigger* 281)

In the underground dance halls of Carl van Vechten, "Hottentots and Bantus" sway under "Jungle land," women fight over men screaming "I ain't interested in your man" and "pleasure seekers" dance to the "tortured music from the depths of hell" (*Nigger* 281, 164, 254). The association of the primitive with depravity, sensuality, perversity, and atavism fills his

depiction of Harlem nightlife. Because many of the scenes in the novel take place in this kind of underground Harlem bars and cabarets that reek of alcohol, tobacco, sex and blood, a flood of reviews questioning its literary accuracy and political correctness spewed.¹⁰ W. E. B. du Bois in his December review of the book in *The Crisis* explicitly calls the book a “blow in the face” (Du Bois, *The Reader* 516-7), expressing fury at its “immorality” and “untruthfulness”. He contends: the “majority of black folk” in Harlem “never go to cabarets” but is an “every day laborer, attending church, lodge and movie and as conservative and as conventional as ordinary working folk everywhere” (516-7). For Du Bois, Carl van Vechten had painted a false and fragmentary picture of African-American life, a “mass of half-truth” that bolstered racial misconceptions and stereotypes (516).

As for Alain Locke, his opinions on *Nigger Heaven* is less easy to conclude. He did not express his opinion publicly yet wrote a letter to Carl van Vechten just a few days after its publication saying that

Nigger Heaven (thanks so much for the copy) is for me quite the unexpected. It's art --- but at the same time subconscious propaganda. I believe it will be quite effectual but really I haven't expected you to be so carefully serious and so

¹⁰ Amritjit Singh, in his study *The Novels of the Harlem Renaissance*, recounts the various reviews that *Nigger Heaven* accrued. To introduce a few of the more interesting: *The New Republic* thought it was more a “traveler’s guide to Harlem” than a novel. J. A. Rogers suggested that a better title would be “Van Vechten Heaven” since Harlem was a “release of soul” for Van Vechten and not for the “niggers” themselves. See Singh, 24-5. As for a detailed controversy surrounding the book’s title and contents, see Vechten, ix-xxxix.

unsatirical. But perhaps you were wise – certainly you were chivalrous, in stepping aside a bit from your usual style. For in my judgement you have brought us a step nearer the flesh level of Negro material in American Art in this good corrective sketch for the white reader who takes Negro life underseriously and for the black reader who takes it over-seriously.... I'm not curious to know what the reactions are – of course some of them stupid – Laska is wonderfully charm – I wonder if after all she isn't the crux of the white situation - both the white and the black world will bite their thumbs at her – the society approaches at least made – for the first time. (Kishimoto 37-8)

While Locke praises the novel for its stylistic audacity and for having brought the black race “a step nearer the flesh level of Negro material in American Art,” his use of words such as “unexpected”, “quite” and “perhaps” hints a note of cautiousness and reticence. That Van Vechten was an important figure of the Harlem Renaissance and Locke’s close acquaintance makes it difficult to take his assessment at face-value.¹¹ Locke closes his letter by saying that he would publish a review of *Nigger Heaven* but he never keeps his word, which suggests further that a more complex mixture of feelings underlies this positive review.

It is well noted by her two biographers – Hutchinson and Davis – that Larsen had also paid great attention to the publication and reception of

¹¹ For a detailed account of Carl van Vechten’s influence upon the Harlem literati, see Kellner.

Nigger Heaven. Carl van Vechten was not only one of Larsen's most intimate friends but also her spiritual mentor, financial supporter and her access to the black literati circle. With a wide range of personal connections, he had introduced Larsen to the publishers of *Quicksand*, Blanche and Alfred Knopf, and Larsen would later dedicate her second novel *Passing* to Van Vechten and his wife. On reading *Nigger Heaven*, Larsen writes to Van Vechten about her impressions:

It is a fine tale, this story of the deterioration and subsequent ruin of a weakling who blames all his troubles on that old scapegoat, the race problem. Dangerous too. But with what exquisite balance you have avoided the propagandistic pitfall. But of course, you would....I don't think that, just now, I can tell you all that I feel about the book, because I really don't know myself....You see, it's too close, too true, as if you had undressed the lot of us and turned on a strong light. Too, I feel a kind of despair. Why, oh why, couldn't we have done something as big as this for ourselves? Fear, I suppose. It is big, big in its pity, big in its cruelties. (*In Search* 210)

While she flatters the writer that it is a "fine tale," Hutchinson notes of how she "hedges" through the end of her letter. Did she really mean it when she said the book successfully avoids the "propagandistic pitfall," when it so obviously imposes upon the reader a series of dogmatic rantings about the "race problem"? Could her metaphor of "undressing the race" have hinted at

Van Vechten's abusive treatment of the subject? Could she have felt violated, or worse betrayed at the "cruelties" of his portrayal? As I will go on to argue in chapter 2 of my thesis, a closer look at how Larsen builds on and modifies the rhetorics and primitive tropes of Van Vechten suggest that she was rather critical of his depictions of Harlem life. The relationship Nella Larsen built with Carl van Vechten was a close one, but it was one that could not be gauged simply by the fondness one had toward the other or by the similarity in perspectives. Considering the complex relationship that the two writers had built and the mutual respect they had for one another, it would have been difficult for Larsen to comment truthfully about Van Vechten's new book, especially when he was distressed with the flood of unfavorable reviews being published. She would have wanted to encourage him.

As much as primitivism rested on a bundle of racist typologies, it must also be emphasized that it was used by writers, both white and black, to espouse an aesthetic. One reason behind this was because modernist primitivism "worked" to satisfy the public's taste. *Nigger Heaven* had clearly proved this. Despite being severely criticized within the literary and intellectual arena, Van Vechten's novel nevertheless enjoyed a wide range of white readership, selling over 100,000 copies and being published into several editions. Along with the proliferation of jazz music, it directed a huge amount of attention to Harlem and its underground cabarets, turning the place into a popular cultural tour site. In other words, the book had proved that the "primitivistic formula" of providing the white readers with stock images of Harlem was the way to commercial success (Singh 25).

With the public and the publishing agency's favor at its back, *Nigger Heaven* became the model book for white primitivism.

Since the financial and commercial performance of a novel, which was more directly influenced by the white public's taste, was crucial for every black writer in getting his or her work published, many black writers exploited the primitivist formula either wittingly or involuntarily. Thus, the white patrons of the time, while supporting black writers financially, encouraged them to write about black material that would meet the demands of the white public. For instance, Charlotte Mason, the "godmother" of the Harlem Renaissance, demanded young black writers that were under her financial support to meet certain requirements, "[t]hey were to live in Harlem; they were to emphasize in their work what she identified as folk culture or primitivism, and they were to eschew subjects she judged as didactic or smacking of social reform" (Kellner 57).¹² As Bruce Kellner argues, the white patronage system was a form of "refined racism" (58) in that it, in a way, reinforced the public image of black people as primitive.

In 1926, Langston Hughes published his essay, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." In this bold manifesto, he resolutely asserts that he would steer away from cultural stereotypes enforced by both white and black communities. He writes placidly:

¹² Langston Hughes writes of Charlotte Mason in his autobiography, "She possessed the power to control peoples lives...She wanted me to be primitive and know and feel the intuitions of the primitive. But unfortunately, I did not feel the rhythms of the primitive surging through me, and so I could not live and write as though I did. I was only an American Negro - who had loved the surface of Africa and the rhythms of Africa - but I was not Africa" (Hughes 242-3).

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves. (Hughes 412)

In this short passage, Hughes declares that he will be unperturbed by the reviews he receives from both his white and black readers. His words are a powerful declaration of independence from the “undertow of sharp criticism and misunderstanding from his own group” and the “unintentional bribes from the whites” (Hughes 411). The questions that he throws are very much pertinent to the dilemma that many Harlem Renaissance writers faced. I see, echoing from his words, the questions that Nella Larsen had to wrestle with in her writing of *Quicksand*. These were: how to make room for her creativity while not offending various groups with which she associated; how to reconcile the two poles of approaching blackness, how to search for a space outside of representation where the black female selfhood is no longer bound and trapped. Consequently, her representation of black females and their sexuality, lies upon the complicated space where a both a certain level of primitivity and restraint were achieved.

In this chapter, I have outlined the details of what can be loosely termed the primitivist-versus-uplift debate, whose contesting ideological

forces prevail within the narrative of *Quicksand*. I have demonstrated not only that black female identity has been constructed within the historically and culturally complex mechanism of racist and sexist discourse, but also that Harlem Renaissance women writers, plagued with the responsibility for “correct” representation, had little creative outlets that went beyond societal and cultural limitations. A historiography given in this chapter lays the ground for my next chapter, where I argue that Larsen was fully aware of the colliding values and ideologies that formed the primitivist debate and was actively engaged in the discourse.

II. The Politics of Primitivism:

Articulating Queer Desire

In this chapter, I examine Larsen's politics of primitivism by specifically analyzing *Quicksand's* representation of racially and culturally charged performances or artworks. Helga encounters various artforms during her journey, those which are commonly associated with primitivism: a painting by a white artist, a vaudeville show featuring blackface minstrelsy, a jazz performance in an underground Harlem cabaret and a group spiritual sung by a black church choir. By analyzing Larsen's politics of primitivism through the lenses of other related systems such as sexuality, gender and class, this chapter argues that it opens up the possibility for queer subjectivity. While distancing herself especially from those elements of primitivism which objectify and fetishize women's bodies, Larsen at the same time appropriates certain primitivist tropes to convey the non-normativity of queer sexualities. Larsen's use of a "more primitive emotion" to capture and represent Helga's unacknowledged desire is her effort to write against the racial and sexual politics of heteronormativity which designates fixed spaces and roles for women (*Quicksand* 62).

Through a satiric sketch of Helga's experiences in Denmark as the racial Other, Larsen clearly distances herself from the white modernist primitivism that has formed the dominant discourse in the representation of blackness. Larsen gives a biting critique on white primitivism that exotifies and objectifies black women based on their racial difference. On moving to Copenhagen, a city where peoples of dark color seldomly roam about, Helga finds that "her exact status in her new environment" is that of "[a]

decoration. A curio. A peacock” (*Quicksand* 73). Under the financial provisions provided by her aunt and uncle, Helga enjoys a life of extravagance and luxury, while submitting to her role as the exotic Other. To the Danes, Helga represents exotic beauty bordering on savagery. Decked out like a creature on display, Helga dresses up in the fancy accoutrements chosen by her Aunt Katrina and attends home parties and afternoon tea. As her aunt insists, she is to wear “bright things to set off the color of [her] lovely brown skin. Striking things, exotic things” (68). The black Manila shawls, leopardskin coats, glittering opera capes, turbanlike hats of metallic silks Helga dresses herself in make her an aestheticized object of gaze. Having access to the “things which money could give,” Helga “gave herself up wholly to the fascinating business of being seen, gaped at desired” (67, 74). In exchange for the “[t]hings. Things. Things” that satiate her materialist desire and realize her ambition for social standing, Helga even assumes the role of the cultural Other for a momentary period, playing to the stereotypical script. She maintains her own image of exoticism by sticking to her “slow, faltering Danish” since “[i]t was, she decided, more attractive than a nearer perfection” (74).

Axel Olsen’s painting of Helga is most emblematic of how black females have served to fulfill white racist fantasies in modernist art. A figure of pomposity and high-flown behavior, Olsen is a droll caricature of European modernist artists such as Gauguin and Picasso. His obsession with Helga’s racial difference and exotic beauty is a frank reminder of the modernist infatuation with the primitive. On encountering Helga first at a party, Olsen at once becomes attracted by her exotic beauty. His comments on her features (“Superb eyes...color...neck column...yellow...hair...”);

Quicksand 71) break her up into anatomical structures, much like the way the Hottentot Venus was dissected into bodily parts and put up for display in the nineteenth century England. Thus, it is not a surprise that the finished product of Olsen's work contains not Helga, but a "disgusting sensual creature with her features" (89). While Olsen confidently reassures her that the painting is "the true Helga Crane" after all, Helga finds herself vehemently protesting: "It isn't, it isn't at all...Anyone with half an eye could see that it wasn't, at all, like her" (89). By denying the association between herself and the painting, Helga ardently resists being forged into the primitive creature that dominant discourse has created as the "true" representation of black identity. The fact that this painting attracts so many flattering attention and unanimous praise calls into question the many "primitive" paintings of modernism. The preposterous and grandiose words that Olsen uses to propose marriage to Helga underscore his function as an object of parody and satire. Naturally linking black women with sexual availability, he says: "You have the warm impulsive nature of the women of Africa, but, my lovely, you have, I fear, the soul of a prostitute. You sell yourself to the highest buyer. I should of course be happy that it is I" (87). Helga denies the racist and sexist notion underlying this absurd comment by curtly replying "I'm not for sale" (87).

Helga becomes more and more aware of her role as the cultural Other upon seeing a minstrel show performed in a vaudeville house. Here, Helga sees "two black men, American Negroes" pouncing upon the stage as they "danced and cavorted, they sang in the English of America an old ragtime song" (*Quicksand* 82). Her immediate reaction is that of discomfort and shame since she sees, reflected in their performance, a caricature of

herself as the primitive Other: “how the singers danced, pounding their thighs, slapping their hands together, twisting their legs, waving their abnormally long arms...how the enchanted spectators clapped and howled and shouted for more...Helga Crane was not amused” (82-3). Even becoming prey to essentialist notions of her racial difference (“it became quite clear to her that all along [the whites] had divined its presence, had known that in her was something, some characteristic, different from any that they themselves possessed. Else why had they decked her out as they had? Why subtly indicated that she was different?” 83) Helga returns again and again to the circus as an “ironical and silently speculative spectator,” trying to make sense of her place and identity in relation to the minstrel performers. This incident, coupled with Olsen’s insistence on marriage, gives rise to “her old unhappy questioning mood” (83). The realization that she had been playing the role of the cultural primitive instills within her defiance, leading her to leave Copenhagen and back to her life in Harlem.

Helga’s resistant agency lies in her ability to defy the limited spaces given to her, spaces where race and gender conventions narrowly define, limit and proscribe her with fixed roles. Helga’s refusal of a series of male lovers, and her sudden decision to leave one place in search of another can all be viewed as part of her agency. Yet, past critical works have been hesitant to give Helga the resistant agency she deserves. As Hutchinson observes in *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*, past interpretations of Helga have tended to focus on her tragic lack of agency. This is mostly because of the moribund and almost brutal nature of the ending, where Helga, forced into multiple unwanted pregnancies, becomes tied to marriage and its shackles. Overall, the symbolic death of Helga

indicates that her circular and repetitive journey has finally and conclusively settled on a negative denouement, thereby cancelling out any positive aspects of her journey. Recently, Jeanne Scheper, in “The New Negro *Flâneuse* in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*” convincingly defines Helga as a female subject of modernity – “the quintessential figure of modernism, the *flâneur*, the public stroller and mobile observer of modern effects” – creating spaces with her mobility, which was a strategy of resistance that many modernist women adopted (Scheper 679). As a woman on the move, Helga resists the limited spaces given to her and refuses that her movements be policed.¹³ Adopting Scheper’s defense of Helga’s resistant agency, I shall argue that Helga’s subjectivity lies in her ability to create spaces, not only within the limited physical space given to her, but also within the tight narrative space of racial and sexual normativity. As I shall demonstrate, Helga’s status as a queer figure violates of the normative structure of heterosexual love. In this context, Larsen’s primitivism becomes the effective space where this queer desire is poignantly captured and represented.

The underground Harlem bar scene is another fitting place to examine the “packaging of manufactured blackness” as commonly represented in print media, advertisements and pop culture (Wall 100). Due to the proliferation of the primitivist tropes to describe Harlem nightlife, a prevalent stereotype that many people, both black and white, had against the Harlem club was that it was a place for sensual pleasure and ignoble vice.

¹³ In relation to the Great Migration, Hazel Carby writes that “[t]he movement of black women between rural and urban areas and between southern and northern cities generated a series of moral panics” (“Policing” 739).

The diction used to describe Helga's entrance into the club was commonly used by white modernists in their representations of Harlem. Here, Larsen uses one common primitivist trope in likening Helga's entrance into the club to a descent into hell: "[e]ntering the waiting doorway, they descended through a furtive narrow passage, into a vast subterranean room. Helga smiled, thinking that this was one of those places characterized by the righteous as a hell" (*Quicksand* 58). In the dancing hall, Helga comes across a "swirling mass" that embodies the ultimate primitive, whereby she loses all control of her self-restraint (59). Her participation in the dance is likened to a submergence in a quicksand:

They danced, ambling lazily to a crooning melody, or violently twisting their bodies, like whirling leaves, to a sudden streaming rhythm, or shaking themselves ecstatically to a thumping of unseen tomtoms. For the while Helga was oblivious of the reek of flesh, smoke, and alcohol, oblivious of the oblivion of other gyrating pairs, oblivious of the color, the noise, and the grand distorted childishness of it all. She was drugged, lifted, sustained, by the extraordinary music, blown out, ripped out, beaten out, by the joyous, wild, murky orchestra [...] when suddenly the music died, she dragged herself back to the present with a conscious effort; and a shameful certainty that not only had she been in the jungle, but that she had enjoyed it, began to taunt her [...] She wasn't she told herself, a jungle creature. She cloaked herself in a faint disgust... (*Quicksand* 59)

This representation of the dancing mosaic as faceless, oblivious and wild, is what Du Bois feared would cater to white misconceptions of the black race: the image of the African-American as jungle creatures. It is unfettered civilization at its zenith; it is the ultimate manifestation of primitivism. Cheryl Wall locates the Harlem nightclub in a historical context where the fad in black culture led some African-Americans to “increase their own identification with their traditions.” However, because they were “ignorant of these traditions as anyone else,” they “embraced the popular imitations instead” (Wall 100).¹⁴ The cabaret’s dancing crowd enacts just this formulaic and commercialized kind of black dance that is propagated by mass media; it is another trope of blackness formed by dominant ideology and unwittingly reproduced by black Americans. Attributed to the dancing crowd are quicksand-like qualities; Helga’s body is “drugged,” “lifted,” and “sustained” to a state of numbness as she yields to the given construction of black identity. Her participation is drawn as a disappearance into oblivion where she momentarily loses all body control, being “blown out, ripped out, beaten out, by the joyous, wild, murky orchestra.” Using Carby’s term, this is a moment where a “quicksand of representation” momentarily impedes and violates the self (*Reconstructing* 163).

However, Helga is soon able to distance herself and remain critical

¹⁴ In contrast to the complex approach that Larsen takes against such popular imitations, Zora Neale Hurston is less cautious about the dangers entailed in these primitive images. In her autobiographical essay “How it feels to be colored me,” Hurston presents a similar cabaret scene where she dances exultingly and shamelessly to the sound of jazz. While Hurston’s depiction corresponds to the primitivist impulse of the era, it has been criticized by many black intelligentsia for reinforcing racist stereotypes.

of the stereotypical dancing that the crowd engages in. As soon as the music stops, she regains her consciousness and slips out of the dancing crowd with the impending guilt that she had been the “jungle creature” (*Quicksand* 59). She feels a “faint disgust” at having lost control of herself and given way to the music unrelentingly, while expressing horror at this fetishized image of African-American culture that pertains to white and black fantasies alike. Her distress stems from a recognition of “her own complicity in acting out a stereotypical script,” where she plays the role of the cultural primitive (Hostetler 40). As Helga’s “interest in the moving mosaic waned,” her wandering gaze becomes immediately fixated on the pair across the dance hall: Robert Anderson dancing with Audrey Denney, the light-skinned bohemian who associated with both the white and black community and thus despised by many of the Harlemites. Unable to take her eyes off of Denney, Helga “studie[s]” her “brilliantly red, softly curving mouth,” her “pitch-black eyes” that were “veiled by long, drooping lashes” and the “*décolleté* of her simple, apricot dress” that betrayed shoulders of “delicate, creamy hue” (*Quicksand* 60; emphasis original). Through Helga’s eyes, Audrey’s features and dancing body are described in terms suggestive of sexuality:

Languidly the girl followed his movement, a faint smile parting her sorrowful lips at some remark he made. Her long, slender body swayed with an eager pulsing motion. She danced with grace and abandon, gravely, yet with obvious pleasure, her legs, her hips, her back, all swaying gentle, swung by that wild music from the heart of the jungle.

(*Quicksand* 62; emphasis added)

Following Helga gaze “[a]cross dozens of tables, littered with corks, with ashes, with shriveled sandwiches, through slits in the swaying mob,” the readers are led to direct their attention away from the swirling crowd to the individual dancing figure (60). At that moment, Audrey replaces the spectacle of the crowd and obliterates the racial stereotype of cabaret primitivism. To borrow the words of Shane Vogel, Audrey “becomes the cabaret scene” (Vogel 94). Contrasted with the group’s dance, Audrey’s dance occupies the complicated space between “the primitive” and “the civilized,” between grace and abandon. Her dance is described in oxymorons: she is neither laughing nor drooping; a “smile” is coupled with a “sorrow”; she has the “grace” of a lady yet also the “abandon” of the African-American spirit; she dances both “gravely” and with “pleasure,” “gentle” and “wild” at the same time; she has agency over her dance movements, “swaying” her body to the music, but at the same time is devoid of control, “swung” by the music. Audrey’s dance is a mixture of seemingly contradictory and antithetical forces that cannot be defined into the confined parameters of cabaret primitivism.

Drawing from the archetype of the black dancer commonly used in modernist fiction, Larsen revises the racist and sexist primitivist formula assigned to these stock characters in her description of Audrey Denney. These characters are sexually voracious Jezebels and heinous femme-fatales, who, with their erotic beauty and seductive powers, physically and spiritually destroy their male lovers. In *Nigger Heaven*, Lasca Sartoris plays this stock role, embodying sexual power in its most dangerous and potent

form. In fact, Van Vechten's schematic portrayal of his female characters in his novel has been well noted by critics. Du Bois notes in his review how "[h]is women's bodies have no souls," though he does not elaborate much further. More recently Hazel Carby, in her essay "Policing the Black Woman's Body in an Urban Context," aptly points to the novel's use of stock images to represent women. The two female characters, Mary Love and Lasca Sartoris, between whom the indecisive Byron Kasson constantly wavers, respectively assume the figure of "virginal purity" (747) and the figure of "overt and degenerate sexuality" (749). In either way, they both become "the means by which male protagonists will achieve or will fail to achieve social mobility and as signs of various possible threats to the emergence of the wholesome black masculinity necessary for the establishment of an acceptable black male citizenship in the American social order" (747). In choosing Lasca over Mary, Byron loses all future hopes and standing as a black male citizen. His failure is thus portrayed as resulting from a bad choice in women. Larsen, as if to problematize Van Vechten's use of stock female characters, reinvents Lasca Sartoris into a character that veers away from such cultural stereotypes.¹⁵

That Larsen is building on the relational dynamics and the rhetoric of *Nigger Heaven* becomes strikingly more apparent when the two texts are read next to each other. According to Davis, the fervent debate surrounding *Nigger Heaven*, which Larsen had avidly kept track, prompted her to adjust

¹⁵ In her letter to Van Vechten, she interprets Lasca as one "who so superbly breasts the flood of racial prejudices (black and white)." Regardless of whether there is a note of truth in this comment, Larsen's words indicate that she was well aware of the white and black racial stereotypes that inundate and engulf the black female selfhood. Her refusal to represent Audrey in any definitive or stereotypical way is proof of this awareness.

the manuscript by rewriting the “section that dealt with Harlem” (Davis 212). Directly influencing the writing and revision process of *Quicksand*, the publication and reception of *Nigger Heaven* drove Larsen to make amendments to certain scenes in Harlem. Not surprisingly, this moment in the cabaret reverberates a similar scene in Van Vechten’s novel when the protagonist Mary Love visits a Harlem party and stands reflecting on the variety of skin color that fills up the dance hall.¹⁶ The diction used in the two passages are rather congruent:

Mary, as always, was fascinated by the variations in colour in the faces of the men, the shoulders of the women: black shoulders, brown shoulders, tan shoulders, ivory shoulders.... Gaiety and charm everywhere; gaiety and charm and rhythm. Primitive! Thought Mary, exulting. Savage! (*Nigger* 153-64)

For the hundredth time she marveled at the gradations within this oppressed race of hers....There was sooty black, shiny black, taupe, mahogany, bronze, copper, gold, grange, yellow, peach, ivory, pinky white, pastry white. There was yellow hair, brown hair, black hair; straight hair, straightened hair, curly hair, crinkly hair, woolly hair. She saw black eyes in white faces, brown eyes in yellow faces, gray eyes in

¹⁶ Ngai explains that a paean to skin color was a common trope used in Harlem Renaissance novels. She writes: ““skin” functions much more ambivalently as an ideologeme by which racial identifications are both negated and asserted through aesthetic position-takings; it produces contempt and disaffiliation in one instance, and self-esteem and solidarity in the other” (Ngai 205-6).

brown faces, blue eyes in tan faces. Africa, Europe, perhaps with a pinch of Asia, in a fantastic motley of ugliness and beauty, semibarbaric, sophisticated, exotic, were here.

(*Quicksand* 59-60)

Building on and making variations to its diction, Larsen parodies and subverts *Nigger Heaven*'s representation of race. While Mary is "fascinated" by the "variations in colour," Helga "marvel[s]" at its "gradations." It is important to note how the different colors are repeated with much variety through Helga's eyes, stressing the more racially diverse nature of the crowd. The black colors are diverged into sooty black, shiny black; the browns into taupe, mahogany, bronze and grange; the ivory into pinky white and pastry white. The chunky distinction of black, brown and ivory becomes a nuanced, subtly differentiated palette of identity in Larsen's narrative. On seeing the crowd, Mary feels "gaiety and charm," thinking exultingly, "Primitive!" and thereby prescribing it with the racially-charged values of modernist primitive discourse. However, Larsen clearly distances herself from such depiction by having Helga Crane stand "purposefully aloof" and a "little contemptuous" of the motley, remaining "blind to its charm" (*Quicksand* 60). Larsen poses the question that the commercialized, racialized descriptions frequently ascribed to African-American peoples and culture is a false and deeply problematic picture. By using a nightclub scene, "an almost obligatory feature in Harlem novels", Larsen deconstructs the popular notions of cabaret primitivism and dismantles its racist ideology (Wall 100).

More so, the multi-layered emotional relationship that Helga builds

with Audrey also clearly contrasted with that of Mary and Lasca. Mary's jealousy towards the dancing couple instigates within her a certain "primitive impulse" to "spring at Lasca's throat, tear away the collar of sapphires, disfigure that golden-brown countenance with her nails" (*Nigger* 166). Here, their relationship is distinguished mostly by the one woman's raw jealousy and contempt towards the other; hence, "two creatures tearing and scratching over "mah man"" (Lewis 517). In contrast, Helga Crane feels a more complex mixture of emotions toward the dancing girl, a combination of awe, sexual yearning, wonder and envious admiration. In fact, for Helga, her surging anger is directed towards Anne Grey in this particular scene. A beautiful and successful race woman, a "golden Madonna," Anne expresses her strong distaste for the "offending Miss Denney" for "go[ing] about with white people...and they know[ing] she's colored" (*Quicksand* 45, 60). She goes on to curtly state: "That's what's the matter with the Negro race. They won't stick together" (61). Upon hearing Anne expounding on "her favorite subject, race" Helga feels a sudden "idiotic impulse" to run out of the place and leave her presence. Helga had a "sickish feeling, and a flash of anger touched her" (61). She then gives her demure defense of Audrey: "'I'm afraid I don't quite see, Anne'" (60). Here, Mary's anger towards Lasca is modified so that it becomes not the petty feeling of jealousy towards a fellow woman rivalling for the possession of a male lover, but a caustic critique against the uplift ideology and its values of racial solidarity. As Helga admits to herself, "what she felt for the beautiful, calm, cool girl who had the assurance, the courage, so placidly to ignore racial barriers and give her attention to people, was not contempt, but envious admiration" (62). Helga's identification with Audrey, and the emotional solidarity created at

once between these two women speak against the relational dynamics of Van Vechten's novel.

The relationship that Helga and Audrey build together opens up a whole new discursive possibility when framed under lesbian narrative. Helga, on seeing the intimate relationship between Denney and Anderson, ends up feeling a pang of jealousy and runs out of the party: “[w]hile she still felt for the girl envious admiration, the feeling was now augmented by a another, more *primitive emotion*” (*Quicksand* 62; my emphasis).

She forgot the garish crowded room. She forgot her friends. She saw only two figures, closely clinging. She felt her heart throbbing. She felt the room receding. She went out the door. She climbed endless stairs. At last, panting, confused, but thankful to have escaped, she found herself again out in the dark night alone, a small crumpled thing in a fragile, flying black and gold dress. A taxi drifted toward her, stopped. She stepped into it, feeling cold, unhappy, misunderstood, and forlorn. (*Quicksand* 62)

While the situation is ostensibly defined as a love triangle with the two females fighting for the man's affection, a closer look at the relationship between Audrey and Helga calls for a disposal of the heteronormative lens frequently used to analyze not only this scene but the entire novel. Not many critics have used homosexuality to explain this relationship.¹⁷ Despite Butler's Freudian queer reading of Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry's

¹⁷ Refer to Doyle, Wagner and Vogel for queer readings of *Quicksand*.

relationship in *Passing*, *Quicksand* has been far less analyzed under the rubric of queer desire than under the framework of heteronormativity in the critical arena. Out of the few who do so, Laura Doyle labels Helga's encounter with Audrey as a critical "moment of racial and sexual crisis," which catalyzes Helga's first "transnational migration" (Doyle 553, 532). The sexual panic, the "more primitive emotion" that ensues from the explosive contact between the two women does indeed act as a catalyst in driving Helga away to Copenhagen in the next chapter (*Quicksand* 62).

Rather than associating the primitive rhetoric and setting with commercialized vice and the stereotypes that reinforce racial preconceptions, Larsen uses her primitivism to challenge social norms and open up the possibility for queer racial subjectivity. The swaying, pulsating body of the sensual dancer and the lesbian narrative that these two women create disrupt the racial and sexual politics of heteronormativity. Under the transgressive power that their relationship embodies, the Harlem cabaret is no longer a bastion of unfettered primitivism; it is a place where "another possibility of racial and sexual subjectivity opens up for [Helga] in the space of desire between women – and in the face of both Anne's petty viciousness and the primitivist stereotypes of the Negro vogue" (Vogel 95).

Having moved back to Harlem from Copenhagen, Helga Crane meets Audrey Denney once again at a social gathering a few years later. Here, Helga musters up the courage to ask the host, Helen Tavenor, to introduce her to the exquisite bohemian dancer whom she has first encountered years before. However, she never does get the chance to talk to her. Doyle has noted how "Helga's movement toward Denney" at the party is "interrupted by the two men (by the "masculine" that "surrounds"

Denney).” These two men are James Vayle, who barges in on Helga as she moves toward Audrey and strikes up a conversation on race, and Robert Anderson, whom she suddenly bumps into and ends up kissing. This is a kiss that changes everything and consequently instigates Helga’s permanent relocation to Southern Alabama, as the wife of a priest. Doyle’s interesting observation gives more pretext to my argument in the sense that, although hegemonic masculinity and heteronormative family structure, as symbolized by Helga’s marriage to Greenwood, tamper with and ultimately hinder the full development of the lesbian narrative, Larsen still makes enough space for the manifestation and the articulation of female desire upon her textual surface.

In this context, Helga’s “primitive emotion” becomes the means to effectively capture, articulate and represent female desire and attraction (*Quicksand* 62). This becomes more evident when lesbian desire is used to frame what seems like the most primitive, problematic and absurd scene in the novel – Helga’s religious conversion. After being sexually rejected by Anderson, the distraught and rain-soaked Helga wanders into a storefront church where its members are singing a religious hymn. Strikingly reminiscent of the previous cabaret scene in terms of tone, mood and diction, the conversion scene is also abounding with primitivizing rhetoric. Just like the “furtive, narrow passage” that led to the “vast subterranean room” of the cabaret dance hall, the “unknown world” of the religious ceremony that Helga accidentally comes across is also characterized by unspecificity and regressiveness, a remote place that exists somewhere in the past, with its participants “singing a song she was conscious of having heard years ago – hundreds of years it seemed” (*Quicksand* 58, 113, 110-

11). Helga “felt herself in the presence of a nameless people, observing rites of a remote obscure origin” that “exacted beyond time and reality” (113).

Soon, the performance turns into a grotesque group orgy, taking on an almost “Bacchic vehemence” (*Quicksand* 113). While Helga tries to escape the congregation, their “contact of bodies,” “concerted convulsions,” and their “wild appeal for a single soul. Her soul,” she soon helplessly succumbs to the wailing crowd (113). Similar to the force of the cabaret’s dancing mosaic that anesthetizes and takes control of Helga’s movement, the congregation’s quicksand-like qualities render Helga devoid of control and restraint. Whereas at the cabaret, she is able to distance herself from the primitive crowd after a momentary submergence in the group dance, the sick and weary Helga is now unable to escape the groping hands of the church members. In other words, Helga’s primitivist experience this time is uninterrupted by her recognition that she is becoming the “jungle creature” (59).

And as Helga watched and listened, gradually a curious influence penetrated her; she felt an echo of the weird orgy resound in her own heart; she felt herself possessed by the same madness; she too felt a brutal desire to shout and to sling herself about. Frightened at the strength of the obsession, she gathered herself for one last effort to escape, but vainly. In rising, weakness and nausea from last night’s unsuccessful attempt to make herself drunk overcame her. She had eaten nothing since yesterday. She fell forward against the crude railing which enclosed the little platform.

For a single moment she remained there in silent stillness, because she was afraid she was going to be sick. And in the moment she was lost – or saved. The yelling figures about her pressed forward, closing her in on all sides. Maddened, she grasped at the railing, with no previous intention began to yell like one insane, drowning every other clamor, while torrents of tears streamed down her face. She was unconscious of the words she uttered, or their meaning: “Oh God, mercy, mercy. Have mercy on me!” but she repeated them over and over.

From those about her came a thunder-clap of joy. Arms were stretched toward her with savage frenzy. The women dragged themselves upon their knees or crawled over the floor like reptiles, sobbing and pulling their hair and tearing off their clothing. Those who succeeded in getting near to her leaned forward to encourage the unfortunate sister, dropping hot tears and beads of sweat upon her bare arms and neck.

The thing became real. A miraculous calm came upon her. Life seemed to expand, and to become very easy. (*Quicksand* 113-4)

The sexual connotation of Helga’s moment of convergence is apparent. It is as if Helga is engaging in some kind of sexual act: the musical foreplay and the ensuing penetration causing her to cry out in ecstasy as she shouts for God’s mercy; the women undressing and crawling upon the floor, dripping beads of tears and sweat upon Helga’s bare body; the consummation finally

brought to an end by a “miraculous calm.” Deborah McDowell argues that this is a moment where “sexual desires, pent-up throughout the novel, finally explode” through the simulation of “sexual excitement and orgasmic release” (“Introduction” xix-xx). Like McDowell, most critics assume that the primitive rhetoric used in this scene articulates Helga’s sexual desires hitherto “repressed” and “unacknowledged” by the protagonist herself all along. Thus, the scene is symbolically reenacting a sexual consummation and its orgasmic release that are otherwise forbidden by social and cultural norms for black females to actively seek. In this sense, it is only through marriage that Helga’s sexual desires can be satiated. As McDowell claims: “[t]he only condition under which sexuality is not shameless is if it finds sanction in marriage” (“Introduction” xxi).

However, what I would like to focus on in the above scene is not so much the sexual desire but the homoeroticism that frames Helga’s primitive experience. For not only is a great portion of the congregation women, but also those who directly close in and press on Helga as she experiences religious ecstasy are also described as female figures. Helga herself becomes aware of the predominance of women. First, she notices a “tall angular black woman under a *queer* hat,” to whom she sits next and who suddenly “threw off her hat” as the mood intensified, “clutching at the girl’s soaked coat” (*Quicksand* 111, 112; my emphasis). Then, Larsen writes: “[p]articularly [Helga] was interested in the writhings and weepings of the feminine portion, which seemed to predominate” amidst the “zealous shoutings and groanings of the congregation...Behind her, before her, beside her, frenzied women gesticulated, screamed, wept and tottered” (113). Later these women, crawling over the floor like reptiles, drool all over Helga’s

bare body droplets of tears and sweat until fainting into “inert masses,” their voices “spent” (114). There is definitely a strong suggestion of homoeroticism in this scene, as Helga reenacts a sex orgy with the female mob.

The symbolic reenactment of a lesbian orgy creates a fissure, or to borrow the words of Esteve, a “narratologically violent mark” upon the otherwise smooth surface of the novel, a novel that seemingly professes the heteronormative romantic plot (Esteve 168). This fissure works as a threat to the racial and social norms of the conventional romantic narrative with which Larsen frames her novel. On the surface, *Quicksand* follows the traditional romance plot of heterosexual love, sex and marriage. Helga’s rejection of a series of male lovers each time she becomes affiliated in a community gives the sense that her unhappiness is due, in part, to a failure in finding the right man. However, underlying such conventional plotline, is unquestionably a lesbian narrative that Helga, as a queer subject, writes. One important detail to note, is the fact that Helga’s participation in the lesbian orgy occurs in between her relationship with two men; one, a failed attempt at a sexual consummation with Anderson and two, the physical relationship she literally has with Greenwood. The group sex that Helga figuratively reenacts in the church causes a disruption in Helga’s move from one man to another, or put differently, Helga’s move towards heteronormativity (Or as Wagner noted, one could also say that Helga metaphorically loses her virginity by these women, before sleeping with the Reverend himself in the next chapter). Of course, just like Helga’s move towards Audrey becomes disrupted by the “masculine” figures, the lesbian narrative of the novel eventually does become absorbed and annihilated by

the novel's heterosexual romance plot. However, the sheer possibility of a queer narrative in the form of Helga's primitive experience leaves an indelible mark upon the surface of the text. Through the queer racial subjectivity Helga exercises, Larsen writes against the limited narrative possibilities given to black females and uses her primitivism to create a narrative space where the desire between women is represented if not fulfilled. Just as she did with the space of the cabaret, Larsen revises the conservative space of the church, so that it is no longer a site of overdetermination for the black female subject, but a site of transgressive possibility.

Soon after her religious revelation, Helga marries the Reverend and suddenly relocates to the "tiny Alabama town" where he was "pastor to a scattered and primitive flock" (*Quicksand* 118). The last chapters of the novel are a biting criticism against the various social institutions that confine and prescribe women with fixed identity and roles. These include institutionalized forms of marriage, religion and patriarchy. Wagner convincingly argues that Larsen's framing of Helga's Christian convergence into a lesboerotic orgy is a direct critique against "Christianity and its covenant with heterosexuality" (Wagner 148). That is, by giving the homoerotic scene a Christian context, a blasphemy that is "perverse even by contemporary standards," the novel subverts Christianity's patriarchal and heterosexual norms. The sardonic cynicism that the novel suddenly takes on in the last few chapters of the novel highlight Larsen's stark skepticism toward Christianity as an apostle of heterosexual marriage.¹⁸ This becomes

¹⁸ By collapsing the integration between Helga's consciousness and the third-person narration, one interesting narrative technique that persists all throughout the

clearer as Helga is forced into incessant childbirth, bearing three children in the course of twenty months. While her husband reassures her that reproduction is a “natural thing, an act of God,” Helga begins to be offended by the slightest of his behavior, “that he consumed his food, even the softest varieties, audibly” and that his “stale garments” gave off a disgusting “odor of sweat” (125, 121). Soon, her offense towards Greenwood takes the form of a “deep and contemptuous hatred,” as she realizes more and more the manacles of marriage (134). Condemning the immorality of marriage with relation to Christianity, Helga retorts: “Marriage. This sacred thing of which parsons and other Christian folk ranted so sanctimoniously, how immoral...it could be!” (134) Through her portrayal of Helga’s married life, Larsen shows that marriage is far from “sacred.” It is no surprise that the now faithless Helga, undeterred by the “obscuring curtain of religion,” asks her nurse to read out “The Procurator of Judea” as she falls into slumber (130). This short story by Anatole France, is renowned for its anti-Christian sentiments. Hence, the ironic ending, as Miss Hartley reads out loud: “Jesus? ...Jesus – of Nazareth? I cannot call him to mind” (132). Larsen’s bleak criticism of heterosexual marriage, Christianity and its oppression against women takes on a note of brutal irony in the last sentence of the

novel’s last chapters, Larsen explicitly gives her satire of Helga’s life in rural Alabama. The change in narrative tone is startlingly apparent. Up until Helga’s conversion, the narrator has remained sympathetic and faithful to her troubles and foils. However, the depiction of Helga’s religious and rural life is done with a note of acerbic irony and critical distance by the use of hyphens and pauses. Depicting Helga’s life as a Reverend’s wife, the narrator contends: “To be mistress in one’s own house, to have a garden, and chickens, and a pig; to have a husband – *and to be “right with God”* – what pleasure did that other world which she had left contain that could surpass these?” (120; emphasis added) There is definitely a hint of sarcasm here, especially when Helga’s religious sentiment is bracketed off with hyphens and a quotation mark to double the irony.

novel, where all hope for Helga's future gets thwarted due to another pregnancy:

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. (*Quicksand* 135)

The ending draws on more meaning when examined within the framework of class. That the novel associates the rural South and its folk with sordidness, ignorance and crudeness has been criticized by a number of critics. Hosteler contends that the folk tradition is presented only through the "corrupt form of the minstrel performance, mediated through the Harlem jazz club, or refracted through the stereotypes of black perpetuated by Danish or white American culture" (44). While Larsen's disaffection and hostility towards the folk does seem apparent, it does not seem any more parodic than her caricature of Helga's experiences in Copenhagen, nor does it seem any more astringent than her criticism towards the uplift values of Naxos. As Favor aptly remarks, rather than choosing to buttress either class values, "[Larsen's] critique of "faux" middle-class authenticity is balanced by her distaste for the "essential" folk" (88).

More so, the derogatory values associated with the "primitive flock" of Alabama is a deconstruction of the notions of authenticity. The cynical and realistic picture of Helga's life in Alabama is a fervent protest against romanticized representations of the folk and the primitive South. Indulging in what Raymond Williams calls an attraction to the "vitality of the naive,"

black writers, most notably Zora Neale Hurston, Jean Toomer and Claude Mckay, engaged in black primitivism of their own, depicting the Southern rural folks as the “authentic” harborers of blackness (58). Disillusioned by the corrupt middle-class values and the urban landscape, these writers sought refuge in the “rank the file,” their vernacular dialects and cultures. Helga’s regression into the Southern landscape from the urban milieu is “a journey to Hurston’s folk” (Silverman 612). However, unlike the happy, diligent and dignified peasants of Hurston’s novels, the “teeming women” of the Alabama flock are dull, ignorantly contented and blindly faithful (*Quicksand* 132). Helga begins to despise the people of her little community – “She hated their raucous laughter, their stupid acceptance of things, and their unfailing trust in “de Lawd”” (134). Through the palpable reality that Helga faces, a reality devoid of vitality and exuberance, filled with bodily sores, sleepless nights and perpetual pregnancy, Larsen strips bare the romanticized myths of the South.

In this chapter, I have analyzed Larsen’s politics of primitivism in *Quicksand*, arguing that it is the difficult space of both an appropriation and a contestation of primitivism. While Larsen clearly criticizes those elements of primitivism which situate black females within the limited parameters of race and gender, she rescues those other elements which cogently imagine, recover and voice the repressed queer desires of black females. Thus, Larsen’s primitivism becomes the narrative space where black females are not racialized fetishes but emerges as queer subjects, refusing to be contained and pushing against tradition.

III. The Aesthetics of Primitivism:

Demystifying and Queering the “Hot” Rhythms of Jazz

This chapter highlights the presence of black cultural expression in *Quicksand* by examining its form in relation to the jazz aesthetics of repetition, improvisation, syncopation, the cut and restraint. In doing so, I argue that Larsen is engaging in a process of demystifying jazz and its primitivist myth, contributing to the era’s debate on primitivism, a debate raised by her male contemporaries. More importantly, however, she uses the jazz form to promote a distinctly queer black aesthetic based on equivocations, lapses and discontinuities in the narrative.

In a 1925 letter to Carl Van Vechten, Nella Larsen writes:

What things there are to write, if one can only write them.
Boiler menders, society ladies, children, acrobats,
governesses, businessmen, countesses, flappers, Nile green
bath rooms, beautifully filled, gray moods and shivering
hesitations, all presented in an intensely restrained and
civilized manner and underneath the ironic survival of a
much more primitive mood. Delicious. (Davis 146)

In her letter, Larsen lists a catalog of people, objects and emotions that serve as captivating topics for literary representation. More importantly, Larsen goes on to stress the manner with which these subjects should be presented: a “restrained and civilized manner” which gives rise to the “much more primitive mood” lurking beneath. Larsen’s insistence on a restrained

aesthetic that limits yet subtly gives life to primitivity at once creates a tension between two seemingly contradictory impulses: the drive towards civility and primitivity, restraint and abandon, towards narrative contraction and relaxation, surfaces and depth.

Larsen's call for such a restrained aesthetic is, at the same time, a take on the primitivist myth, which typically assumes restraint as inherently lacking in African-American peoples and culture. No other artform during the 1920s was more vulnerable to this myth than jazz.¹⁹ Jazz, much like primitivism, had rested on a heap of racial signifiers that either exotified, essentialized and demonized blackness. The twenties, otherwise known as the Jazz Age, was when this new music form had first started finding its way into the underground cabarets of Harlem and to the ears of the white public. Due to the decade's vogue for exotic primitivism, however, Harlem bars and jazz music were coded with countless racial stereotypes and misinformation. Jazz, to the minds of the white Americans, was associated with barbarism, animalism and brutality. Lemke, in *Primitivist Modernism*, devotes a chapter to jazz and its early reception, explaining that the apocalyptic fear that jazz was endangering the Western civilization led many conservative Americans to strongly resist the music. The anxiety white Americans had against syncopated music is well portrayed in Anne Shaw Faulkner's essay, published in 1921 and titled "Does Jazz Put the Sin

¹⁹ Gioia raises the question of whether the Primitivist myth served jazz well or disparaged it. She asks: "Perhaps at some earlier stage in the music's development, it played an important part in romanticizing and popularizing an art form that was hindered more by neglect than by critical excesses. But today, such a mythology of jazz has long outlived its questionable usefulness. Now, uncritically assumed in so much thinking and writing of jazz, it threatens to become a self-fulfilling prophecy, creating a music which fits its unrelenting stereotype of an intellectually void and unreflecting art form" (Gioia 143)

in Syncopation?” In her essay, she associates jazz with evil forces alleging that its savage instincts will negatively influence popular culture and the minds of the younger generation: “Jazz disorganizes all regular laws and order; it stimulates to extreme deeds, to a breaking away from all rules and conventions; it is harmful and dangerous, and its influence is wholly bad” (15). As such, the white peril and the anxiety against the West’s decline had degraded jazz to a degenerate and immoral form of art.

Meanwhile, those white Americans who wanted a first-hand experience in the primitive, flocked to Harlem to immerse themselves in the underground “jungle.” The cultural fad in the primitive had created yet another cultural zeitgeist – the cult of jazz. Romantic primitivism had encoded within jazz the notion that it could rejuvenate and liberate hidden desires, emotions, instincts and creativity. In order to satisfy the demands of the white consumers who sought Harlem, many black jazz musicians focused on stressing the music’s African origins, the “rampant” and “hot” rhythms of jazz devoid of restraint and control. Much like Carl van Vechten and Claude McKay who used tropes of primitivism to exotify and celebrate certain aspects of African-American peoples and culture, these early jazz musicians were also greatly criticized by black intellectuals for capitalizing on racist stereotypes and promoting the fad in the primitive (McCabe 475). As Lemke asks, “Are these early, black jazz musicians, then, in some way equivalent to the European primitivist artists?” (61). As shown, discourses on primitivism and jazz were inextricably intertwined.

Perceptions on jazz have now greatly changed. Over time, the European symphonic traditions blended with the rhythms of Africa to create what Lemke refers to as “sanitized jazz” (66). It has since been continuously

loved by Americans and granted due place as a distinctly modern form of music. However, Gioia writes that even now there is

a general impression among musicians, both established and aspiring, that discipline is not required to learn or perform jazz; that a firm technical mastery of one's instrument is either unnecessary or positively to be avoided as stifling the creative impulse; that emotional immediacy is to be preferred over clarity and sophistication.... Excesses of all kinds are apparently to be encouraged. Restraint, discipline, reflection, self-criticism are for artists in the decadent Western tradition, and have little to do with primitive art and, by implication, with jazz. (Gioia 143)

As Gioia notes, the primitivist myth has even now promulgated the biased notion amongst the larger public that jazz lacks discipline, sophistication, and control; these values were thought to belong to Western civilization only and were incompatible with syncopated music.

However, contrary to the belief that black artforms lack control, deliberation, and formal consideration, one can see that many African-American art including jazz are strictly governed by the principle of restraint. Zora Neale Hurston points to this aesthetic of restraint as an integral part of black performance in her essay "The Characteristics of Negro Expression." She writes:

The difference in the two arts is: the white dancer attempts to express fully; the Negro is restrained, but succeeds in gripping the beholder by forcing him to finish the action the performer suggests. (Hurston 65)

In her comparison of the two dancers, white and black, Hurston emphasizes the latter's ability to restrain bodily movement so that a modicum of abandon is achieved. The tendency of black cultural expressions to skillfully balance the poles of control and freedom stems from the African-American penchant for "controlled abandon" (Crawford 168). Here lies a crucial discrepancy between white imitations of blackness and actual performances by black artists. White imitations of black art – as shown in Larsen's portrayal of the jungle dance – revel only in its primitive manifestations. In other words, "[t]he sense of control is what is lost when white subjects perform a stereotype of black dance" (167). Contrary to these stereotypes, however, black art actually professes a skillful mastery of the "civilized" values of deliberation and discretion. As can be seen, images of controlled abandon in black cultural artforms can be an effective way of thinking about an aesthetic that is starkly distinguished from whiteness. Turning to *Quicksand*, I argue that the novel's borrowing of jazz aesthetics affirms its orientation towards not only "primitive" impulses such as spontaneity, abandon and improvisation, but also the "civilized" values of control and restraint.

At even a cursory glance, one can easily see that *Quicksand* is characterized by many distinctive structural features such as repetition, formal gaps, abrupt chapter breaks and affective jolts, all of which I shall

soon elaborate. However, critics tend to overlook the fact that the novel's structural peculiarities are the result of careful deliberation and formal manipulation on the part of its author. Much like jazz, which was not considered as serious music during the early twentieth century, *Quicksand*'s formal gaps and elisions have easily been regarded as symptoms of repression than Larsen's mastery of craft. Linda Dittmar's analysis of the text's "reluctance to utter" as a form of "stylistic repression" is most illustrative of such reading. She argues that Larsen's laconic writing style is a form of repression, suggesting the text's "held-back anger" and "struggle to inhibit emotion" (145). She locates Larsen's "stylistic repression" within the context of the era's confining atmosphere: "The holding back which pervades her text concerns the effect of her historically constituted *"positionality" as a black woman...writing about racism from a position of personal ambivalence and within a social context that inhibits protest*" (145; my emphasis). Dittmar's argument, in making Larsen thoroughly ambivalent and conflicted, associate both the author herself and her work with repression. And repression tends to denote a tragic lack of agency. Used in diametrical opposition to expression, repression hardly ever signifies liberation. Hazel Carby has famously noted how the female blues singer's explicit articulation of sexuality was a threat to dominant structure (Carby, "Blues" 482). This suggests that while articulation and expression are usually associated with a subversive force, repression is hardly ever granted the same power.

Problematizing such repression-centered readings which has come to form the dominant, if not the only, critical discourse surrounding the novel, Sianne Ngai, in *Ugly Feelings*, contends:

While expressive gaps or discontinuities are often cited to bolster the aesthetic credentials of other modernist novels (say, by Hemingway and Faulkner), these same gaps in *Quicksand*—famous, as we have seen, for its refusal to provide explanations for Helga’s mood swings or their dramatic consequences for the novel’s jagged plot—have tended to be treated less under the aesthetic rubric of formal innovation than under the psychological rubric of “repression.” (Ngai 178)²⁰

In viewing the text’s “expressive gaps or discontinuities” as a kind of formal innovation, Ngai provides this chapter with a firm ground on which to base its analysis. Agreeing with Ngai, I argue that what was traditionally viewed by many of its critics to be signs of repression is rather Larsen’s manipulation of restraint, an important element of African-American culture. To say this is not to deny the complex environment of the period – as Dittmar puts it, the social context of “racism” that “inhibits protest” – which made it increasingly difficult for Larsen to speak about sexuality. Yet, there are aspects of the text’s structural peculiarities which suggest that these gaps cannot simply be reduced to Larsen’s personal ambivalence and conflicted judgment. By enacting a formal reading of *Quicksand*, this

²⁰ Ngai goes on to argue that *Quicksand*, by preserving what she terms as “blank spots” (emotional vacancies that leave the subject neither identified nor disidentified with given constructions of black identity), is a manifesto on the “rights and entitlements of African-American art—and on its right not to express, and to preserve its expressive vacancies in particular” (201).

chapter serves to recover Larsen's authorial agency by arguing that, far from being conflicted and caught between the social paradoxes of time, she explored the possibilities of a queer black modernist aesthetic based on discontinuities and gaps.

Not many critics have suggested that *Quicksand* derives its structural roots from the African-American culture and cadence. In fact, Hutchinson repeatedly links *Quicksand* with the arabesque form developed within the white literary tradition in his biography of the author (*Search* 226). Anne Hosteler also puts Larsen in direct contrast with Hurston and claims that "the vernacular is totally absent from Helga's vocabulary, entering Larsen's novel as a kind of shadow in the final chapters set in the rural South" (44). As such, unlike Hurston and Hughes who pursued a "distinctly black" aesthetic, Larsen has usually been perceived to be less interested in the vernaculars and rhythms of Africa. Recently, however, in "'Structure Would Equal Meaning': Blues and Jazz Aesthetics in the Fiction of Nella Larsen," Lori Harrison-Kahan intriguingly argues that *Quicksand* draws its form from blues and jazz. She writes: "[e]schewing a progressive structure of linear narration for the circuitous effects of repetition, variation, improvisation and syncopation, *Quicksand* mimics the meanings and rhythms of jazz, placing Larsen in direct dialogue with blues and jazz musicians and writers such as Hughes and Hurston whose poetry and prose similarly took their inspiration from the African American vernacular." She points to various parts in the book – to give one example, the musical cadence created by the verses from Hughes' poem in the epigraph ("My old man died in a fine big house / My ma died in a shack") coupled with the first sentence of chapter one ("Helga Crane sat alone in her

room”) – as evidence of the novel’s orientation towards musicality and the African oral tradition (*Quicksand* 0-1). Building on Harrison-Kahan’s suggestion, I hope to argue that chapter breaks, formal gaps and Helga’s affective upturns also contribute to the realization of a jazz aesthetic.

Larsen draws from the jazz tradition *Quicksand*’s repetitive structure. Narrating Helga’s sojourn in four different communities, the novel is divided into four parts that strangely parallel and reverberate each other in terms of plot, characters and affect. For instance, as much as Helga wishes to escape the stifling atmosphere of Naxos, she feels the same sort of asphyxiation in Harlem: “I can’t stay in this room any longer. I must get out or I’ll choke” (*Quicksand* 110). When she moves to Copenhagen, however, she becomes once again dissatisfied with her surroundings. In other words, Helga goes through a similar emotional pattern each time she settles in a new environment; the cyclical pattern of satisfaction, asphyxiation, dissatisfaction and movement. Moreover, each community has its own set of possible male lovers (the fellow Naxos teacher James Vayle, the Naxos principle Robert Anderson, the Danish painter Axel Olsen and the rural pastor Pleasant Green whom Helga eventually marries) and female characters who serve as ideological counterparts to Helga (the Naxos matron Miss MacGooden, the golden Madonna Anne Grey, the bohemian dancer Audrey Denney and the religious Clementine Richards) so that Axel Olsen’s proposal and Helga’s sense of rivalry towards the spiritually inclined Clementine seem like recurrences of similar events that happened somewhere else in the novel. In other words, although Helga is constantly on the move, the plot does not seem to move linearly onward and progress into a conclusion; rather, Helga’s journey is incessantly subjected into a

stultifying cycle of repetition: a “changing same” frequently used in black musical expression (Harrison-Kahan 281).²¹

Quicksand's repetitive structure betrays the normative assumptions expected of *Bildungsromans* or, novels in general. James Snead, in “Repetition as Figure of Black Culture,” argues that European and African-influenced cultural artforms clearly differ in their respective “handling of repetition” (220). According to Snead, while repetition inevitably pervades in all cultures, Western cultures tend to cover them up with the illusion of progress, control and growth. Black cultures, on the other hand, embrace and acknowledge the “often non-progressing temporal movement” of history while at the same time paying attention to the difference within the repetition (219). Snead sees jazz as a good example of such affirmation of repetition and the novel, with its penchant for linear progression, as a disavowal of it. In fully appropriating the repetitive structure of jazz music, *Quicksand* refuses to be subsumed under the normative notions of temporality as a linear progression. As the novel takes on a jazz temporality of the “changing same”, the expected rhythm of conventional narrative is disrupted. Despite taking on the form of a *bildungsroman*, the novel turns against the common belief expected of such genres, the belief that the narrative should end with the growth of either the protagonist or the plot. Helga neither grows out of her unhappiness and dissatisfaction nor come to terms with it. The plot merely ends with her death in marriage, a state of

²¹ Many critics have noted the repetitive nature characterizing the novel and have generally concluded that it is the exact embodiment of the traumatic African-American experience. Stringer's Freudian reading of *Quicksand* is most emblematic of such reading. According to Stringer, the novel embodies “the compulsive repetitions of a psychic and literary trauma” (Stringer 82).

stasis. The conventions of the *bildungsroman* are challenged as Helga is placed into an endless cycle of repetition, one that has no progress, maturation or a resolution.

Amidst all its repetitions, however, *Quicksand* constantly offers improvisational variation to Helga's journeys: hence "repetition with a difference." One interesting way Larsen does this is by using Helga's affective upturns, which, through a continuous process of waxing and waning, of dilation and containment, of sinking and surfacing (as if in quicksand), occasionally bursts out of the textual frame at unpredictable times and sets up an unstable mode of reading. "Affective jolts and interjections" are central to Larsen's characterization of Helga Crane, which "jar the smooth surface of her aestheticized life" but also the smooth surface of the text itself (Esteve 158). As a quick-tempered, capricious woman, Helga is frequently seized with sudden gushes of strong emotion such as anger, resentment and hysteria. More often than not, she feels the compulsion to laugh or hurt for no apparent reason. For instance, when Helga is on her way to discuss her resignation with the Naxos principle, Robert Anderson, she becomes discomforted by a "sudden attack of nerves," which she manages to disguise with her "outwardly indifferent" poise (*Quicksand* 17). Helga's fickle emotion, however, manifests itself once again in Anderson's office for no reason: "[s]he was aware of inward confusion. For her the situation seemed charged, unaccountably, with strangeness and something very like hysteria. An almost overpowering desire to laugh seized her" (19). This sudden upsurge of hysteria is again checked by Helga so that "miraculously, a complete ease, such as she had never known in Naxos, possessed her" (19). It is only when Anderson, in an

effort to dissuade Helga from leaving, appeals to her dignity and breeding with the words “You’re a lady,” that Helga loses herself altogether (21). Recoiling at this compliment (“[a]t these words turmoil rose again.”), which works as a trigger of some sort, Helga finally lets go of her control against rage. Retorting back to Anderson with what she later refers to as “angry half-truths” about her family and upbringing, Helga turns to leave the school altogether.

Helga’s rage at this point in the novel seems puzzling to the readers. What should have been received as a casual compliment, or, given Helga’s touchiness against her personal background, at most with annoyance, Helga responds with fury. On her way to Chicago, Helga recounts reflects on her morning interview with Anderson, one that had catapulted into an “explosive contact”:

Just what had happened to her there in that cool dim room under the quizzical gaze of those piercing gray eyes? Whatever it was had been so powerful, so compelling, that but for a few chance words she would still be in Naxos. And why had she permitted herself to be jolted into a rage so fierce, so illogical, so disastrous, that now after it was spent she sat despondent, sunk in shameful contrition? (*Quicksand* 22)

Despite attempting to explain her rage, Helga finds that she cannot possibly put it into words, only the fact that it was so “powerful” and “compelling” as to prompt her leave. Helga’s fierce indignation towards Anderson’s

innocuous words seems even more outlandish considering her response to the white preacher's racist remarks just prior to this incident. Recalling her encounter with a white preacher who condescendingly asks the Naxos students, to "stay in their places" and "know when and where to stop," Helga does not seem angry *enough*, simply referring to this incident as a "distasteful... annoying... affair" (*Quicksand* 2). The readers find it hard to sympathize with the protagonist because Helga's emotional turns are so out of place. Ngai has also noted that an affective deficit or surplus pervades the novel. That is, Helga does not feel the "appropriate" response to racist vehemence, reacting only with irritation and annoyance where anger *is* adequate, while at the same time feeling *too* much anger against trivial things.²² She writes:

Helga's irritation is both an excess and a deficiency of anger: in response to the memory of the white preacher's racism, she does not seem sufficiently angry; in response to clunky china and bad smells, she seems far too angry. As an insistently inadequate reaction, one occurring only in conspicuous surplus or deficit in proportion to its occasion, Helga's irritation marks the very opposite of "having the correct capacity for anger." (Ngai 182)

²² While many scholars have interpreted this as a sign of repression, Ngai goes on to reverse these claims, arguing that this form of "inadequate" affect poses the question as to whether there is ever a "sufficient" response to racism: "Does our irritation at Helga's inadequate one imply that the appropriateness or legitimacy of emotional responses to racist sentiments should be evaluated on the basis of adequacy?" (188).

What Ngai terms as an “inadequate reaction” or an incorrect “capacity for anger,” I argue that it is the author’s formal play on syncopation. As one of the most widely used element in African-American musical tradition and an important part of jazz solo improvisation, syncopation stresses beats that are otherwise unaccented in order to create rhythm and instability. By musical definition, syncopation involves a “deviation from the ‘normal’ placement of an accent” and a “displacement” where an accent is shifted from its original position to another (Temperley 20). If the listener were to listen to syncopated music while casually tapping with his or her foot, the beats would most likely betray the foot-tapping listener and stress the beats while the foot is in the air. In effect, syncopated beats, by abandoning the ‘normal’ European metrical structure, interrupts the steady flow of melody and produces tension and discordance.²³ Likewise, instead of the subtle and imperceptible flow of affect, *Quicksand* chooses to highlight its affective nodes. The waxing and waning of Helga’s emotions mostly produced by her conscious effort to repress yield a very peculiar effect. The peculiarity is heightened further since the novel, like it is with syncopated music, accentuates the *wrong* parts of its events, using Helga’s affective upturns that are never onbeat: they are always one tempo early or late. Helga’s “sudden attack of nerves” which erupt upon the textual surface with no seeming causality, unsettles the rhythm and continuity of the narrative and disrupts the normative expectations of the readers.

²³ Faulkner comments distastefully on the effects of syncopation. She writes: “The melodic line is disjointed and disconnected by the accenting of the partial instead of the simple tone, and the same effect is produced on the melody and harmony which is noticed in syncopated rhythm. The combination of syncopation and the use of these inharmonic partial tones produces a strange, weird effect” (15).

The rhythm of Helga's life pulsates in its own very unique time structure much like jazz. Accentuated by her emotional gradations, this rhythm quintessentially deviates from the four-beat metrical structure and the reader's "normal" perceptions of life. To the average reader, Helga becomes angered by the most trivial of occasions, and she decides to move with no plausible and logical precipitating reason. Since the pattern of Helga's mood swings does not fit entirely into the affective rhythm of the readers, a discordance in the reading process is produced. Very similar to the effect syncopated notes give, Helga's intense, differentiated and irregular sense of events turns her inherently aberrant, wayward and quaint, hard to sympathize with and even harder to fathom.

On a slightly different note, pronounced chapter breaks in the novel can be explained by the musical strategy of the "cut" frequently applied in black music. As a huge part of jazz improvisation, the "cut" is an "abrupt, seemingly unmotivated break" where the "soloist will depart from the "head" or theme and from its normal harmonic sequence" to another new beginning (Sneed 220, 222). Sneed, in viewing the presence of the "cut" as another major difference demarcating black culture and European culture, writes:

Moreover, European culture does not allow "a succession of accidents and surprise," but instead maintains the illusions of progression and control at all costs. Black culture, in the "cut," builds "accidents" into its coverage, almost as if to control their unpredictability. Itself a kind of cultural coverage, this magic of the "cut" attempts to confront accident

and rupture not by covering them over, but by making room for them inside the system itself. (Sneed 220)

Black music, in continually “cutting” back to the start, not only draws attention to its own repetitions but also “sets up expectations” only to “[disturb] them at irregular intervals” (222). In other words, the “cut”, by assimilating “accidents and rupture” into the system and allowing for its control, goes against the normative consciousness of linear progression and indicates the black orientation towards surprises.

Quicksand's conspicuous chapter changes, its “sharp turns,” function as this role (Ngai 180). These moments are when the narrator discards the steady unraveling of events and moves hastily forward. The formal arrangement of chapter 10 and 11 attests to the fact that Larsen is intentionally using the cut. In chapter 10, a three pages long narration accounts Helga's thought process as she, on receiving a fortune from Uncle Peter, decides to visit her aunt in Copenhagen. Happily, absorbed in her thoughts, Helga “began to make plans and to dream delightful dreams of change, of life somewhere else...With rapture almost, she let herself drop into the blissful sensation of visualizing herself in different, strange places, among approving and admiring people, where she would be appreciated and understood” (57). However, rather than sending her off on a ship to Denmark in the next chapter and finalizing her train of thought, the textual flow becomes suddenly intercepted by an odd happening at an underground cabaret. It is only after the cabaret scene that Helga is seen cruising down the Atlantic. Chapter 11 seems out of place when considering the whole flow of narration and seems to have been inserted rather unfittingly. A more

natural and anticipated approach would be to change around chapters 10 and 11, so that an expression of dissatisfaction would directly precede her relocation. Larsen, however, chooses to change around the formal arrangement of chapters so that cause and effect are deliberately negated, connection between thought and action are deferred, and accidents are built into the text's coverage. The resulting effect is a sudden departure from the Harlem streets to Copenhagen, causing a rupture in not only the textual surface but also the reading process as a whole. The abrupt endings of *Quicksand*'s chapters, rather than being the result of repression as Dittmar argues, is in fact Larsen's "willed return to a prior series" (Sneed 220).

In consciously cutting back to the start of yet another of Helga's journeys and highlighting the novel's repetition Larsen brings attention to the state of buoyancy that Helga is able to maintain through her physical mobility. For, as Sneed emphasizes, the cut "overtly insists on the repetitive nature of the music, by abruptly skipping it back to another beginning which we have already heard" (221). In *Quicksand*, a lot of the chapter breaks are soon after followed by instances where Helga is engaged in the act of moving. Chapter 4 starts with Helga looking over "the flying landscape" at "the train rushing north" to Chicago. Chapter 8 recounts Helga's "year thick with various adventures" since she had "set out away from Chicago.... for New York" (43). Chapter 12 begins with Helga traveling overseas on a liner: "Helga Crane felt no regret as the clifflike towers faded" (63). As I argued in Chapter 2 of my thesis, mobility was the key means with which Helga enlarges and resists the confined spaces given to her. In other words,

Helga's "shuttling" movement, her exertion of subjectivity as a modern flaneur, is obsessively accentuated by the "cut" itself (Scheper 689).²⁴

Yet, the same formal gaps in the narrative have frustrated many critics who have endeavored to interpret just what the novel is really about. As soon as Helga, in a fit of jealousy and anger, runs out of the cabaret hall and stands in the Harlem streets "cold, unhappy, misunderstood and forlorn", we see her in the next chapter suddenly on board a liner traveling overseas to Denmark (62). The abruptness of the first sentence of the chapter ("[She] felt no regret as the clifflike towers faded," 63) is in no way reader-friendly, since the rift in time and place startles the readers and leads them to fill out the missing gap. This happens again in chapter 17, when Helga goes back to Harlem from Copenhagen. The chapter opens with the chunky time shift: "A summer had ripened and fall begun" (94). After the hasty departure from Copenhagen and the series of last-minute goodbyes in the previous chapter, the novel fast-forwards to a time where Anne and Anderson had come back from their honeymoon and Helga had moved out of Anne's apartment accordingly. These abrupt chapter changes, by curtailing any psychological motive and causation, have the effect of heightening the illegibility of Helga's actions. As Barbara Johnson writes: "[c]hapter breaks often occur where psychological causation is missing. . . . And it is the difficulty of defining the causes of Helga's suffering that leads to irritation in many readers" (Johnson 42). Where she should give a detailed elaboration on Helga's mentality, Larsen simply replaces it with

²⁴ Travel was also one popular mode of resistance that early twentieth century black female blues singers adopted to refuse being contained and "being left behind" by their male lovers (Carby, "Blues" 476).

chapter breaks. Because the author does not provide a clear reason behind Helga's countless relocations, the exact impetus behind the protagonist's disaffiliation in any one community remains obscure all throughout the novel.

Larsen's use of vague diction and elusive concepts also contribute to the text's difficulty. When Helga tries to deliberate on exactly what she really wants in life, she finds that she is unable to fathom it: "There was something else, some other more ruthless force, a quality within herself, which was frustrating her.... kept her ... But just what did she want? Helga Crane didn't know, couldn't tell." Similarly, in trying to give Uncle Poul a reason for turning down Olsen's marriage offer, Helga finds that she is unable to give a tangible explanation for the refusal.

"Just what is it, Helga" he asked again, because the pause had grown awkward for him.

"I can't explain any better than I have," she had begun tremulously, "it's just something – *something deep down inside of me.*" (*Quicksand* 91, my emphasis)

This answer echoes a similar reasoning Helga gives for deciding to move to Copenhagen in the first place. After a prolonged stay in Harlem, Helga had once before reached the conclusion that "[s]he didn't in spite of her racial markings, belong to these dark segregated people. She was different.... It wasn't merely a matter of color. It was *something broader, deeper*" (*Quicksand* 55; my emphasis). Larsen refuses to elaborate on exactly what that "something broad" and "something deep" means, just as she refused to

define Helga's "lack somewhere."²⁵ Larsen's vague diction and elusive narration leave the readers bewildered, with so many unanswered questions: Just what exactly triggers Helga's flight? Why can't Helga Crane forever be satisfied?

I argue that Larsen, by intentionally writing in elusive terms and establishing gaps in the narrative, provokes misreadings and opens the text up to various different interpretations. The epigraph taken from Langston Hughes' poem, "Cross," initially serves to open the novel up to a wide variety of interpretational possibility, cogently intertwining issues of race, gender and class. More importantly, because Helga's flights coincide with multiple incidents spread out over various frameworks of race, gender and class, the exact precipitating cause of her restlessness becomes impossible to pin down. First, there is the problem of marriage since Helga rejects a series of lovers each time she moves from one place to another. Then, a problem of race ties in to her predicament, for Helga's relationship with Anderson, Olsen and Vayle are also all inextricably linked to issues of race and ideology. Issues of identity and representation also become relevant, since Helga encounters some sort of artwork each time she decides to leave

²⁵ In fact, there are so many instances where Larsen chooses to be vague by using "some" to describe Helga's situation, her thoughts and her reasoning. Here are some examples: "The uneasy sense of being engaged with *some* formidable antagonist, nameless and ununderstood, startled her...There was *something* else, *some* other more ruthless force, a quality within herself, which was frustrating her, had always frustrated her, kept her from getting the things she had wanted" (*Quicksand* 10-1; my emphasis), "For *some* reason she had liked [Anderson], although she had seen little of him..." (16), "And for *some* inexplicable reason she was a little frightened and embarrassed, so that when he had finished speaking, for a short space there was only stillness in the small room, into which Aunt Katrina had tactfully had him shown." (85), "And Helga, for *some* idiotic reason connected with race, had refused [Olsen]" (90).

her community.²⁶ Meanwhile, class issues pitch in, for Helga's movement from the North to the South certainly connotes her displacement from the urban areas of middle-class life to the rural and its folk way of living. As evident from the already teeming frameworks of analysis that have formed the critical reception of *Quicksand*, the "holding back" which pervades the text allows it to skillfully avoid the negation of any of these interpretations (Dittmar 145).

Then why does Larsen leave "expressive gaps" in the narrative? Why does the text elude a fixed interpretation and resist being grasped? Why does it open itself up to so many different interpretations? In a way, by resisting an easy definition, *Quicksand* embodies a certain queerness on a textual level. Eve Sedgwick argued in *Tendencies* that queerness is "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically" (8). This suggests that any "gaps" "dissonances" or "lapses" in meaning that heterogeneity may provoke is another way with which queer sexuality can influence texts. *Quicksand's* crisscrossing of a multiple identities – as either a race, gender, class, queer novel or all of these simultaneously –, its blurring of the distinction between different taxonomies are a biting criticism against normative notions of identity, precisely those forces which project fixed roles and gendered/racialized stereotypes upon Helga's selfhood. By skillfully avoiding both the absolute

²⁶ Harrison-Kahan argues that "Helga's experiences with music often signal the transformative moments that solidify her decisions to change her situation" (283).

affirmation and the total negation of various critical interpretations, *Quicksand* eludes totalizing claims about its narrative identity. The text's refusal to be overdetermined, categorized and pinned down, reflects the aberrant and queer persona that Helga exhibits all throughout the novel.

In this chapter, I have illuminated the jazz aesthetics employed in *Quicksand*. The jazz temporality, structure and techniques appropriated by Larsen give both Helga and the narrative a certain queer twist; queer as both an aesthetic and a way of life. Using jazz, its essentially queer and black spirit, its simultaneous drive towards freedom and restraint, Larsen writes against normative assumptions of race, art, temporality and identity. Her efforts to borrow from the delightful cadence and rhythm of jazz, reinvent it as a form of structural innovation and engage in a revisionary myth-making can be considered as a process that is inherently anti-normalizing in nature.

Conclusion

Departing from an interest in modernist primitivism and the many layers of its complicated discourse, this thesis has attempted to highlight elements of primitivism present in *Quicksand*. Analyzing the text on both a thematic and aesthetic level, I conclude that primitive tropes in *Quicksand* signify that some force of the non-normative, the aberrant, the queer is in process. Thematically, Helga Crane's homoerotic desire towards Audrey Denney is framed within the rhetoric of primitivism; aesthetically, the text's spontaneous, improvisatory and queer form derives from the nature of jazz and its drive towards structural primitivism.

The issues of sexuality, gender, class and race that I have struggled to untangle from and within discourses of primitivism work to underscore the "multifaceted politics of primitivism" that many scholars have overlooked in past critical work (McCabe 475). These critics, in their respective studies of Harlem Renaissance literary works, have always been ready to label and classify novels into categories of the primitive/counterprimitive, dominant/resistant, oppressive/subversive dichotomy. While jumping up and down and pointing their fingers at authors who exploit racial difference, they easily see parody and pastiche as signs of the text's transgressive power. Underlying this argument is the tendency for a sweeping incrimination against literary primitivism and its racist typologies. However, this sort of blanket criticism makes it hard for a nuanced understanding of the complex and sometimes contradictory nature of not only different versions of primitivism but also of humans themselves.

For writers are at most inevitably human and are exposed to inconsistencies of their own. Nella Larsen severely criticized the use of exotic primitivism in one part of her novel, but at the same time, she actively used elements of primitivism to a different end elsewhere. Thus, *Quicksand* is both her participation in, and disruption of existing primitive narratives. Is this gesture inherently subversive and impeccably emancipatory? Individual circumstances in the novel do give me the grounds to claim, for certain, that it *does* produce new meaning, while undoing others.

On a larger context, I also want to conclude that marginalized cultures have also contributed to defining modernist primitivism. As Larsen reinterprets *Nigger Heaven*, her starting of a conversation between texts, her talking back to the center, her “repetition with a difference” radically de-crystallizes the static definition of primitivism and enlarges its potential. In a process of appropriation and re-appropriation, signification and re-signification, deconstruction and re-inscription of dominant representations of blackness, the boundaries of modernist primitivism have continually been explored, modified and expanded through a myriad of different cultural forces and interactions, a process in which Renaissance writers have played a huge and conspicuous part.

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국문초록

넬라 라슨의 『퀵샌드』에 나타난

원시주의의 정치성과 미학

본고는 넬라 라슨의 『퀵샌드』에 드러난 원시주의를 역사적 맥락과 미학적 차원에서 다각적으로 분석한다. 1920년대 할렘 르네상스의 맥락에서 흑인 여성 작가의 원시주의 표현 양식 차용은 매우 큰 함의를 갖는다. 동시대의 다수 백인 모더니스트들은 야만성, 순수함, 이국성, 타락성 등 문명 이전의 원시 시대를 연상케 하는 일련의 가치들을 흑인 민족과 문화 특유의 본질주의적 특성으로 환원시켰다. 라슨은 흑인 여성의 몸을 대상화, 신비화하는 백인 모더니스트들의 원시주의에는 비판적 거리를 유지하면서도, 동시에 흑인 여성을 주체적으로 재현하는 데에 있어 유용한 원시주의의 요소들은 적극적으로 활용했다. 본고는 라슨의 원시주의가 정상성의 개념에 도전하는 퀴어 정치성을 구현함으로써 인종과 젠더의 교차점에서 흑인 여성 주체를 위한 새로운 가능성을 모색한다고 주장한다. 소설 속에서 원시주의는 여성의 동성애적 욕망을 포착하고 언어화하기 위한 서사적 수단이자, 재즈의 기법을 소설 형식에 반영하기 위한 하나의 미학적 도구이다.

본론 1장은 20세기 초반의 원시주의 담론을 역사화한다. 할렘 르네상스 시기의 원시주의 담론의 주요 쟁점과, 해당 담론이 흑인 여성의 정체성과 섹슈얼리티, 욕망의 문제와 어떻게 연결되는지 자세히 살피는 작업이 주를 이룬다. 당대

원시주의를 둘러싼 이념과 그 사이에서 전개된 갈등 양상을 살펴보는 이 장은, 라슨이 원시주의 담론에 얽힌 여러 이데올로기적 모순과 한계를 예리하게 포착하고 있으며 동시에 『퀵샌드』를 통해 그 담론에 적극 개입하고 있음을 밝힌다.

본론 2장은 원시주의와 빈번히 결부되어 온 민스트럴쇼, 재즈, 흑인 교회 성가 등의 예술 형식들이 소설 속에서 활용되는 방식을 살펴본다. 라슨은 그녀의 가까운 동료이자 백인 모더니스트 원시주의의 대표 작가였던 칼 벤 벡튼의 소설의 한 장면을 재해석함으로써, 흑인 여성을 억압하고 단편적으로 규정하는 원시주의가 아닌 그들의 동성애적 욕망을 재현하고 가시화하는 원시주의를 구사한다.

본론 3장은 라슨이 재즈 형식을 소설 장르에 어떻게 전용하는지 탐구한다. 반복, 당김음, 즉흥 연주와 같은 재즈 기법의 차용은 독자들의 규범적 기대와 대립하며 읽기 과정에서의 긴장감을 조성한다. 또한 ‘절제’ 기법을 통해 라슨은 재즈가 원시적 음악이라는 편견을 허물고 의미를 교란시키는 퀴어 미학을 구현한다.

주요어: 벨라 라슨, 『퀵샌드』, 원시주의, 흑인 여성, 재즈, 할렘 르네상스, 퀴어
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