The Orientalist Accumulations of Helga Crane: Asian Commodity, Racial Belonging, and Postmodern Domesticity in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*

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Quicksand's epigraph poses early the ostensible problem of the novel: where, Langston Hughes' "Cross" asks, can a child torn between the "fine big house" of a white parent and the "shack" of a black parent find a final resting-place. To this problem of racially polarized real estate, however, Larsen's opening paragraph offers a decidedly lateral response, suggesting if one can have shack nor big house, one should consider pan-Asian boudoir. Yet, this attempt at escaping the fraught inheritance of black and white into a fantasy of Orientalist luxury does not reflect an arbitrary recursion into any third category. Instead, I argue that the Asian goods of Larsen's text represent for Helga an attempt to side-step the grimly determinist calculations of Hughes with a mode of domesticity focused not on genealogy but on commercial purchase. By favoring acquisition over inheritance, Helga's homemaking takes on a decidedly postmodern edge that, while defying a depth-reading for some essential origin, also proves deeply unsatisfying to her desire for stability. That the objects which underwrite Helga's attempt to decouple culture from heredity are identified as Asian hinges on the perception of the Asian as a commodity entirely available for purchase. Though Larsen never fully repudiates this commodification, she does quickly complicate her apparently redemptive model of cultural consumerism. By paralleling the desirability of Asian goods with the reduction of Helga to an object of similarly fetisized exoticism by her white relatives, Larsen casts the apparently benign employment of Asian goods as itself being akin to the very anti-black racism that Helga had been attempting to escape.

Home to a Postmodern Harlem

High among the list of critiques offered to the postmodern periodization constructed by writers such as Fredric Jameson, Edward Soja, and David Harvey is that it projects a timeline particular to a particular group onto the rest of society rather than acknowledging that, although white men may have only recently come to doubt the grand narratives of modernist progress, this makes their discovery neither unique nor initiatory. Instead, as Madhu Dubey and Doreen Massey argue, the loss of these meta-narratives more closely resembles the dispelling of a self-interested illusion of universality than a truly new fragmentation of society. Dubey writes, "the experience of place and time, home and history, has been fractured for centuries, so that what is being proclaimed as a novel feature of postmodernism has in fact been long familiar to the West's 'others'" (21). While Dubey's focus is on the African American community, Massey echoes this long familiarity with the postmodern for women of all races by noting the tradition of feminist scholars who have rejected the patriarchal elements of conventional modernity (239). She argues that this universalized origin of the postmodern was constructed with reference to the so-called "particular" groups that it excluded – namely those groups that Harvey, for instance, brackets off as distraction from the true universal[1] and who presumably had already experienced the particularizing influence of postmodernism (Massey 212-244). The loss of centralized authority, both argue, is disorienting only for those who previously had access to such authority.

Such arguments, however, can do more than the negative project of discounting theoretical work on the social and artistic effects of postmodern spatial practices in their entirety. Instead, I would suggest they can be used to make available the analytical tools of postmodernism in studying the writings of those like Nella Larsen who, while writing within the epoch of modernism, were nevertheless already distanced by race and gender from the overarching narratives of that time. It should nevertheless be noted that, because these writers about postmodernism present it as specifically the symptom (and preserver) of late capitalism, this move requires a degree of separation between their cultural observations and the economic causality they purpose to explain it. To say that Larsen explores questions of the postmodern is not to assert to an ahistorical emergence of late capitalism in 1930s Harlem but to note that her characters arrive at some of the critical issues of postmodernism through different means. In other words, I would propose that, though it goes by another historical label, Larsen's writing is intimately caught up in both postmodernism's project of eroding the apparent inevitability of communities and subject to the same desire for the certainty that it has destroyed.

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[1] This bracketing permeates Harvey's argument but is also typified by an entirely literal parenthetical list (42).

Thus, though any number of critics have productively read Larsen against more canonically modernist contemporaries, an excessive adherence to the tropes of modernism can also prove inadequate to capture the extreme disconnection of her wandering heroines. Mary Esteve, in particular, draws on crowd psychology to argue for a vision of urban anonymity as a "nonmodern" escape from the burden of individual responsibility, only to classify it as ultimately providing the "source of modernity's vitality" (284). Similarly, in her focus on the importance of "unsheltered rootlessness" as Helga's home, Esteve turns to the flâneur, a figure of comparable restlessness perhaps, but one which does little to explain the fleeting nature of Helga's contentment with even the movement of Harlem, nor the deep discontent that accompanied her journeys (277).[2] Jeanne Scheper makes a useful modification of the concept of the flâneur with the female-gendered flâneuse, describing how Helga appropriates the freedom of the flâneur as a tactic for defying the bounds set on her because of her race and gender; Helga's wavering path, she argues, is not her tragic descent, but the momentum that preserves her. While I agree with much of their arguments, both Scheper and Esteve's descriptions of Helga as flâneuse rely on a quite direct correspondence between her time meandering the streets of New York and her larger scale trips across the U.S. and to Denmark. While the first certainly comes very close to the carefree urbanity of the flâneur, it most occurs during the intervals when Helga has a relatively stable anchor in a New York home; Larsen writes that it is only after she is “established, secure, comfortable that Helga became “thoroughly absorbed” in her explorations of the city (45). These smaller urban outings, then, actually represent windows of relative fixity and more closely correspond to the freedom that comes from a sense of belonging to a space more than alienation from it. By contrast, Helga’s mobility is more generally marked by an almost pathological desire for the permanence of a home, so that each arrival signals in Helga’s mind a chance for that “somewhere else where she would be permanently satisfied” (56-7).

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[2] Cherene Sherrard-Johnson draws a similar comparison between the flaneur and *Passing*'s Clare Kendry (852).

What Helga desires of the home is belong to it so utterly that her identity becomes inseparable from it, thereby allowing her the belief in some authentic, rooted self; thus, she dreams of coming home as “that strange *transforming* experience [my emphasis]” which is able not only to provide acceptance for who she is but also to reify “who she is” into a stable quantity (43). In short, she dreams discovering what Gaston Bachelard calls the oneiric home, a memory more than a place, but one which grants each subsequent, transient home with the ability to secure the self from dissolution (103). The ability of Bachelard’s primal home, however, to anchor a coherent sense of self across time rests crucially on a mystification of its precise nature – he writes “the first, the oneirically definitive house must retain its shadows” – for an exactly schematized conception of the home could not accommodate the daydreams of all moods and stages of life (13). In *Quicksand*, however, all of Helga’s intense yearning for an originary home is matched by the growing certainty – first, on the part of the reader and, subsequently, of Helga herself – that she will never find such a place because she lacks the genealogical placement that naturalizes a home into a birthright.[3] As early as Naxos, Helga agonizes over her apparent lack of family as "the crux of the whole matter" because "Negro society […] was as complicated and as rigid in its ramifications as the highest strata of white society" and without the social sanction of a pedigree, "you were tolerated, but you didn't 'belong'" (8). Though she eventually comes to believe in a dual belonging to her Danish family and, more diffusively, to the African American crowds of Harlem, the split forces her to imagine a future of always moving "shuttle-like from continent to continent" without ever resolving the two into a single homeplace (96).

As this transatlantic variation of the tragic mulatta suggests, the elusive sense of belonging promised by genealogy follows much the same logic as that of racial essentialism. Indeed, precisely the moments when Helga feels herself to be the most at home tend to feature much the same mystification of blackness as her most extreme repulsion of being determined by race herself. Where in one moment, she feels "shut up, boxed up, with hundreds of her race, closed with that something in the racial character which had always been to her inexplicable, alien" (54-55), in another that feeling of a fundamental, inescapable bond becomes a source of comforting intimacy as "the ties which bound her forever to these mysterious, these terrible, these fascinating, these loveable, dark hordes" (95). This oscillation between agoraphobia and claustrophobia stems from Helga's internalized compulsion to judge belonging or non-belonging on the basis of some deeper, shared origin – form of depth-reading she describes as "ties that were of the spirit. Ties not only superficially entangled with mere outlines of features or color of skin. Deeper. Much deeper than either of these" (95). In other words, the mystification necessary for Helga to posses that romantically hazy oneiric home described by Bachelard – phrased in its final instance as a “sink[ing] back into the mysterious grandeur and holiness of far-off simpler centuries” (114) – follows the channels of an internalized racism.

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[3] This is, of course, not to deny the reality of Helga's biological family – as one well-meaning character attempts to persuade her, "everybody has people" – but rather to point out that, without social recognition, Helga feels herself to be entirely alone (38).

The Asian Commodity and the Constructed Home

As the close of the novel (if not the title alone) makes clear, Larsen views this approach, in which home is a sinking down into a supposed origin, as a fatal error. With an ending that clearly marks off this mode of domesticity as untenable, *Quicksand* drive the reader to look retrospectively for alternative models elsewhere in the text. If the moment when Helga finally gives herself up to this self-annihilating mode of belonging is also staged as a moment of conversion, it is useful to examine earlier moments when she is at best agnostic about the reality of the oneiric home. In the stead of a determining origin, Helga is driven to define herself through ownership, so that her introduction to the affluent household of the Dahls is presented as a satisfaction of a needs as much existential as material:

> To Helga Crane it was the realization of a dream that she had dreamed persistently ever since she was old enough to remember such vague things as day-dreams and longings. Always she had wanted, not money, but the things which money could give, leisure, attention, beautiful surroundings. Things. Things. Things (67).

That the intangible trappings of wealth – the list of “leisure, attention, beautiful surroundings” – gives way to the more relentless chorus of undifferentiated “things” attests to the fact that Helga’s true desire is less for any namable object but for the experience of ownership itself and for the identity that can be extrapolated from a collection of objects when it cannot be tied to a home. Helga’s supplement, in other words, to the lack of a clear inherited home is the desperate accumulation of possessions, an adoption of a commercial domesticity which replaces belief in the home as source of some primal authenticity with something much closer to postmodern descriptions of superficiality.

Rather than the temporal depth of such racialized concepts as origin and genealogy, such a model of the unknowable, secret self has no place in postmodernism. Indeed, the contrast of the internal against the external (the gap between self and universe bridged by the home in Bachelard) collapses into pure surface that has nothing behind it. What Harvey describes as postmodernism's "fixation with appearances, surfaces, and instant impacts" (58) and Jameson as "a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense" (9) subverts Bachelard's concept of the home as sanctum of the private self into a collection of constructed and interchangeable signifiers for a home that has no reality. The accompanying awareness that home is always artificial prevents satisfaction with any single home, leaving to a transience joined with a heightened desire for that which has been denied them, for their recognition that, to recall Harvey's quote, the desire for a home leads to one that exists only "as an image, as a simulacrum or pastiche" by no means ends their desire for a home (303). To the contrary, as Jean Baudrillard argues, the proliferation of images (and the corresponding loss of a privileged "reality") intensifies the yearning for something beyond an image, writing that "when the real is no longer what it was, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a plethora of myths of origin and of signs of reality – a plethora of truth, of secondary objectivity, and authenticity" (6-7). This nostalgia which knows its own delusion is marked by its desperation to collect signifiers of the non-existent stability, mementos to stand in for memory.

Such nostalgia for the security of a homeplace leads, in turn, to an attempt to accumulate the material markers of home and to set about constructing the home they wish to have, a project aided by the market's willingness to sell symbols of culture to replace an undermined belief in authenticity (Harvey 303). Thus, when Larsen first begins to describe Helga, she does so through an inventory of the accessories decorating Helga's room – with the eye shifting from a "blue Chinese carpet," the "bright covers of the books" removed from their "long shelves," "the shining brass bowl crowded with many-colored nasturtiums […] on the low table," and "oriental silk which covered the stool" – until, at last, getting a glimpse of her feet, which nevertheless is presented almost as an afterthought to the description of the silk stool on which they rest (1). Helga has projected her sense of self so intently on to this temporary homeplace furnished with an "intensely personal taste" (1) that it supersedes even her own body. This displacement occurs to such an extent that, much as her mental life has turned to the figures of the Asian, as can be seen in her choice of Orientalist reading material,[4] Helga's exterior appears to have become of a piece with the rich fabrics of her décor, with skin that Larsen describes as being like "yellow satin" (2). Regardless of this apparently fundamental continuity between room and self, because this connection was so consciously constructed, the space offers none of the stabilizing influence that Helga seems to need as evidenced by her hasty decision to leave it (5).

Nor is it incidental that the objects which Helga appears most to desire are signifiers of a particularly Oriental luxury. As Thomas Kim argues, the rise of American consumerist culture in the early twentieth-century was closely bound up in the encoding of the Orientalist good as the widely available object of cosmopolitan desire. Thus, it is to some extent a matter of historical accuracy that the apartment of Anne Grey, a space that Larsen writes of as being "in complete accords with what [Helga] designated as her 'aesthetic taste,'" is full of Asian or Asian-associated objects which pile up in Larsen's prose into a lavish catalog of "brass-bound Chinese tea-chests, luxurious deep chairs and davenports, tiny tables of gay color, a lacquered jade-green settee with gleaming black satin cushions, lustrous Eastern rugs, ancient copper, Japanese prints, some fine etchings, a profusion of precious bric-a-brac, and endless shelves filled with books" (44). Coming as contrast to more conventionally American trappings of wealth – such as "old highboys, tables that might be by Duncan Phyfe, rare spindle-legged chairs" – that Larsen classes as the "historic things" of the room, Anne's Oriental purchases mimic what Kim describes as "the signification of the Oriental object as the distillation of exchangeability itself, as a formal array that constructs an apolitical, ahistorical, and even immaterial knowledge of the Orient" (389). In other words, the Asian products have been so thoroughly commodified that no conception of authenticity remains; they are more a style than a reference to anything like a culture to which human bodies belong. This model of culture in which class and class-articulated taste replace birth as gatekeepers would have considerable appeal for those who, like Anne and Helga, view their own ties to blackness with what is at best ambivalence.

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[4] Both of the two pieces of literature which Helga consumes, Marmaduke Pickthall's *Saïd the Fisherman* and Anatole France's "The Procurator of Judea," contain Orientalist themes.In particular, the hero of Marmaduke Pickthall's 1903 novel, a clever but untrustworthy man who leaves home to travel across much of the Middle East and Europe and finally dies after joining a religious mob, offers some intriguing parallels to Helga's own life.

What prevents Larsen's text from becoming straightforward adaptation of an existing mode of consumerist Orientalism to the desires of upper-class African Americans, however, is her subsequent reframing of cultural consumption as akin to certain modes of anti-black racism, for when Helga reaches Denmark, her race, too, is identified with the amorphous exoticism characteristic of Orientalism. Hence, when her aunt reviews Helga's wardrobe, she rejects every conventional garment until arriving at a dressing-gown of "Chinese red," a color which she declares "suits" Helga (68), replacing the unacceptably conservative garments with a dizzying array of such imports as "batik dresses," "a black Manila shawl," "turban-like hats." "strange jewelry," and "a nauseous Eastern perfume" (74). Following a joint routine of trivializing and sexualizing, such that Helga is treated at once as "some new and species of dog" (73) and as though she had "the soul of a prostitute" (87), she feels herself not made Asian but transformed into one on of the Oriental commodities that she had prized: her "exact status in her new environment," she thinks to herself, was as "a decoration. A curio. A peacock" (73).[5] Where the exoticism of her purchases had, in the US, guaranteed that they be interpreted only as relatively superficial traces of her retail habits, in Denmark, they are naturalized into being themselves a racial heritage and, so, interpreted as signifiers of some inner essence. Moreover, Larsen throws considerable doubt ability of global capitalism to shear cultural objects from their particular contexts and reproduce them as commodities somehow "clean" of any physical referents. For, while never introducing the presence of a non-commodified Asia, she does display the damage done when a stereotyped version of African American culture is itself commodified when Helga witnesses a Danish audience's gleeful reaction to a touring minstrel show. As songs which she remembers from her childhood are consumed for their exotic novelty, she becomes "profoundly disquieted" by the feeling that she has been implicated in parodied version of her nostalgia for Harlem and by a renewed awareness of the distance between her own "ironical and silently speculative" spectatorship and the unquestioning enjoyment of Danish audiences (83).

What this spectacle finally suggests, then, is the sinister side of Larsen's postmodern -- the racist asymmetry still implicit in consumer cosmopolitanism, which allows dominant groups freely lay claim the particularities of non-dominant groups for their value as emblems of a global connoisseurship. That is, much as Helga is able to seize upon the Asian product as a symbol of her rootlessness because neither the Asian nor the Asian American body has had any presence in her experience, the postmodern home creates and privileges the category of the exotic as a marker of its own cosmopolitanism according to market standards of the norm that are themselves built upon material inequalities between races. Thus, where the exoticism of her accumulations had, in the US, guaranteed that they should be interpreted only as a superficial, in Denmark, Helga's identity is interpreted as itself exotic and therefore collapsed into an array of commodified racial markers, each interpreted as making visible the "true Helga Crane" (89). As her time in Denmark suggests, even Helga's attempts to escape the cultural logic of racism continue to be built upon a racist logic of a slightly modified form directed against another group; her alternate domesticity, then, fails not only in its inability to hold Helga but also in its persistently exploitative nature.

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[5] As John Tchen observes more generally of its etymology, "curio" already contains the traces of an Orientalism made explict by "peacock," originally denoting East Asian goods. As a result, Helga's observation that she is a "curiosity […] at which people came and gazed" (71) also contains an Orientalist legacy of mobility, for, as Tchen explains, "*curiosities* defined objects that could be owned, collected, and taken away from their original environment" (99).

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