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ARTICLES

From Tragic Mulatta to Grotesque Racial Horror: Epic/Exceptionalism and Larsen's *Quicksand*

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Abstract This article re-examines Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928), a major Harlem Renaissance and African-American literary canon novel, against the tendency to focus on it as a tragic mulatta story. Instead, I argue that Larsen—like African-American authors dating back to Charles W. Chesnutt and Pauline Hopkins of the turn-of-the-century—challenged the trans-Atlantic racial exceptionalism by using a far more expansive critical lens that recognized a different mode of being. This being, defined by the literary category of the grotesque (popular in the 1920s and 1930s), recognizes ancient (African) times and a biomorphic mode in which humans, animals, and nature overlapped ontologically. The unique aspect of this article is that it reveals how Larsen also taps Danish literature as part of her critique of normative modern modes of thought, esthetics, politics, and spirituality. Ultimately, Larsen uses *Quicksand* to expose Western myths, including the stork myth, as deleterious to the more ancient myths that she excavates.

Keywords Nella Larsen · Grotesque · Stork mythology · Race

When Zora Neale Hurston lyrically quipped in "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" (1928),[1] her widely anthologized autobiographical essay, that "I am not tragically colored," she did far more than deploy her famed mother-wit jocularity to rebuff the tragic mulatta/o trope and the racial struggle many blacks faced in 1920s America; she also claimed that "the world is to the strong regardless of a little pigmentation more or less" and that she was "cosmic Zora" ([1928] 1988, p. 1010), one who personally, divinely, transcended the trope.

[1] Originally published in the May 1928 edition of *The World Tomorrow*.

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What could occasion and perhaps even necessitate such a bombastic, "cosmic," rhetorical gesture? On the one hand, exceptionalism-saturated rhetoric was all-American: Donald Pease, tracing the etymology of "exceptionalism" to Joseph Stalin's comment on late-1920s America, linked it to an economy of personal "fantasy" and political "state fantasy" (2009, pp. 1–10) that was a priori to American nationhood. On the other, an intense *intra*-racial, anti-exceptionalism critique of racism received a splendid new literary voice when, two months before Hurston's essay, Nella Larsen published *Quicksand* (1928). One of the most celebrated novels of the Harlem Renaissance, *Quicksand* chronicles the efforts of Helga Crane, a beautiful and well-educated Afro-Danish American, to find her place in the racialized world of the 1920s. From a teacher at a highly respected school for blacks in the Deep South engaged to marry into an elite African-American family, to unemployed Chicagoan, to border and companion of socialite Anne Grey in New York City, to visitor in her mother's home country of Denmark, and finally into marriage and pregnancy in Alabama, Helga can never quite settle down with her happiness, even when she seems to have found it.

Despite some critics' disapproval, *Quicksand* was generally well-received and earned immediate praise as the "best fiction of Negro America" published in the twentieth century from no less than W.E.B. Du Bois.[2] An icon of exceptionalism himself as the first African-American to receive a Harvard University Ph.D. and the era's leading black intellectual, Du Bois wrote *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), an instant classic that invoked "the Sorrow Songs" and yoked them to a "foot-race" and fight for social acceptability fueled by a "bitter cry" against racism ([1903] 1999, p. 10). Contra Hurston's self-proclaimed, cosmic folk sense, Du Bois advanced a *classy*, education-based exceptionalism "predicated on … 'power'-oriented racial uplift" (Rutledge 2013, p. 131).

In short, exceptionalism dominated the late 1920s world Larsen inhabited. It is not surprising then that the exceptionalism of Hurston, Du Bois, and that of white supremacists implicates a trans-national and -temporal comparativist frame. Ultimately, this frame raises Paul Gilroy's weighty question, "What of Nella Larsen's relationship to Denmark?" (1993, p. 18), albeit with a critical extension: "What of Nella Larsen's relationship to exceptionalism and *Quicksand*?"

If the Jazz Age and Harlem Renaissance of the roaring 1920s are ideal for multiple Hollywood releases, then biopics about Harlem-based writers would also be equally glamorous and dramatic—with *Quicksand* as a novelized screenplay of the era. As Larsen wrote her autobiographical novel, at first titled *Cloudy Amber*, she and Hurston both kept company with two fixtures of the New Negro Renaissance: Walter White, novelist, activist, and NAACP head, and Carl van Vechten, the controversial celebrity novelist and patron of aspiring African-American writers. White and van Vechten are of particular importance here, Larsen biographers Thadious M. Davis and George Hutchinson reveal, because Larsen and Hurston joined them at Harlem cabarets in the summer of 1926 and both men were readers of *Cloudy Amber* by October and December 1926, respectively. Although Hutchinson notes, regarding their trips to the New World cabaret and particularly the one on June 11, 1926, that "Hurston would

[2] See Davis (1994) at pp. 252, 277–84; Hutchinson (2006) at pp. 275–86 and 292–93; and Tate (1995) at p. 237–38. Alaine Locke, another leading black intellectual and a major architect of the Renaissance, also praised it (Davis 1994, p. 251).

make this the setting for part of her now-celebrated essay, 'How It Feels To Be Colored Me,' not inconceivably based on this very episode" (Davis 1994, pp. 200–202, 219; Hutchinson 2006, pp. 204–205, 217), *Quicksand* itself relies on a similar scene to reach a conclusion antithetical to Hurston's.

Hence, although the leading literary biographies by Hutchinson and Davis[3] are silent on the relationship of these two ambitious women, Hurston and Larsen were sharing the same circle of friends, attending the same establishments (Davis 1994, p. 231; Hutchinson 2006, p. 204–205), and apparently arguing opposite perspectives in a manner clearly suggesting that their close proximity served to inspire their literary ideologies and strategies. Larsen's description of her novel as attending to "the mixedness of things" (Davis 1994, p. 212) is echoed by Hurston's "brown bag of miscellany" ([1928] 1997, p. 1010). In this New World-cabarets context, one Du Bois despised, Larsen's "mixedness" and Hurston's "miscellany" occupied two radically different textual landscapes. Recalling herself "sit[ting] in the drafty basement that is The New World Cabaret with a white person" (Hurston [1928] 1997, p. 1010), Hurston proceeds to boldly declare, in effect, her exceptionalism—arguably fleshed out by her literature for the next couple of decades[4]—in the same time frame represented by White's and van Vechten's reading, praise, and support of Larsen's manuscript, and Alfred A. Knopf's publication of *Quicksand*. Hurston directly attacks the tragic mulatta/o trope literally weeks after Larsen's *Quicksand* hit the shelves, her essay leveraging personal and political exceptionalism to ground her autobiographical flourishes.

Significantly, the autobiographical *Quicksand*, in keeping with Du Bois' notion of American/"Negro" "double-consciousness" and Larsen's US-Denmark lives, rejects exceptionalism not just once, but *doubly*. In this socio-literary context, if the obvious incommensurability between Hurston's short essay and Larsen's novel is suspended, left unexplored are the Larsen/Hurston and Larsen/Du Bois tensions and the generic incommensurability Larsen achieves in *Quicksand*. Personal tragedy—rebuffed by Hurston, who accepts the "I" but rejects tragedy, and apprehended by Helga Crane, who still rejects the fate of the tragic mulatta as the novel closes—is incommensurable to the grotesque horror the larger culture of exceptionalism performs. Is the tragic mulatto/a status, and how one individual personally feels about such even if she belongs to Du Bois' "talented tenth," ultimately irrelevant, hence the need for Hurston to posit a cosmic Zora who transcends it? This begs the question: what is the incommensurability Hurston may have read into *Cloudy Amber*—literally, if she somehow saw pages of Larsen's manuscript, or vicariously through White and van Vechten? Does credit go to Hurston's close reading (or listening) skills, if not her politics, for seeing through, and responding to, Larsen's racism-to-marriage-to-pregnancy plot when Harvard-educated Du Bois and modern scholars—focused on gender and reproduction and equipped with soft- and hard-scientific knowledge—misinterpret it or find it contradictory? To understand the source and outcome for the Larsen/Hurston-Du Bois tensions requires us to posit and explore the

[3] Davis does include information about how Larsen would have regarded Hurston's "outrageous antics," the widespread knowledge of Larsen's novel among her associates, and important dates. See, e.g., Davis (1994) at pp. 219–25, 236, 243, and 250–51.

[4] Epitomized by *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1933) and "High John de Conquer" (1943). For critical treatment of Hurston's use of epic-based exceptionalism during World War II, see Rutledge (2013) at p. 69–70.

incommensurability, literary irony, and allegory Larsen secretes in the life of Helga Crane, her modern-American, Afro-modernist tragic mulatta/o protagonist.

The methods of the contemporary literary canon, bounded by modern time even though its practitioners are hyper-attuned to identity politics, are unsuited for finding and examining an incommensurability predicated on a much larger temporal scale. For example, Beth Widmaier Capo's study of contraception politics in American literature and culture establishes the connection between quicksand and motherhood as the essence of *Quicksand* (2007, pp. 101-02), the canonical perspective, voiced by Deborah E. McDowell in her introduction to the novel, that the title, *Quicksand*, reinforce[s] the point:

> Like so many novels by women, *Quicksand* likens marriage to death for women. Larsen dismantles the myth that marriage elevates women in the social scale; she suggests that for them the way up is, ironically and paradoxically, the way down. (1988b, p.xxi)

Notwithstanding her own explicit agreement with this perspective, Capo nevertheless finds that "Larsen sends a mixed eugenics message" because she rejects the pro-eugenics philosophy of African-American elites and yet shows the protagonists trapped as a result of uncritical marriage and pregnancy decisions (2007, p. 142). The ambivalence Capo shows toward Larsen in her study, which centers modern women's reproductive rights, and the motherhood-as-quicksand reading, directly conflicts with McDowell—who posits a feminist reading as answer to those critics who laurelled Larsen's writing but problematized her plot endings (1988b, pp. xi-xii)—because Capo vexes the ending once again. It would seem that some undefined incommensurability within *Quicksand* works against readings that situate Helga within modern gender and reproduction politics.

Here, it is telling that neither McDowell nor Capo leave the domain of feminist critique, even though the former identified Larsen's Naxos strategy and specifically associated it with the Saxon anagram and Zeus, ancient Greece' mythical icon of exceptionalism (1988a, p. 243, note 2). Along with foregrounding Larsen's Naxos, and the ancient temporality it represents, it seems that the pathway into charting this incommensurability, which eclipses the normative, realistic mode of color-line realism, lies in three mysteries—presented here as questions—that must be considered in tandem. First, if the "something else, some other more ruthless force, a quality within herself" that shapes and controls Helga's life is culture, why does Larsen, first, separate it and Helga from the "decorous stupid people that oppressed her" (Larsen [1928] 1988, p. 11) at Naxos? Second, why, if the story is significantly autobiographical, the unexplained naming of the heroine as Helga Crane—in effect a seemingly inexplicable pairing of "Helga," a common Scandinavian/Teutonic name which definitively signifies Larsen's Danish heritage, with "Crane," an obvious ornithological reference lacking clear African-American signification? Finally, why title the novel *Quicksand* (and change it to this from *Cloudy Amber*) since Hollywood's version of the African deathtrap does not literally appear, and only symbolically appears as references to a "quagmire" and "bog" in the penultimate pages of the novel when Helga is mired in marriage and

pregnancy in the American South (Larsen [1928] 1988, pp. 106, 133–134)? In other words, can three brief, passing references, wed to Helga's sexuality, serve the *entire* plot?

Larsen is conspicuously reserved on these critical questions, but the excavated answers which interconnect them violently undermine this reserve, readers' romanticism, the canonical centrality of the Harlem Renaissance as Afro-Modernism, and the notion of American exceptionalism that nourishes the romanticism. These literary ambitions may seem, frankly put, to be *grotesque*, or for the bird-brained female, but Larsen is a genius of novelistic incommensurability. Deploying her higher education, vocational training as nurse and librarian, triple identity as an Afro-Caribbean Danish American, Freud- and Du Bois-sensitive psychoanalysis, world literature (biblical, "classical," Danish, and African-American), and deep anthropological sense rooted in East Africa, Larsen might say, as she did in *Quicksand*, apparently conflating Helga's description of a cabaret with her own view on America, the world, and modern literary canons, "It was gay, grotesque, and a little weird" ([1928] 1988, p. 58).

Hence, a grotesque examination of *Quicksand* is an essential undertaking, for it reveals the sophistication of Larsen's epic/myth-attuned anti-exceptionalism esthetic and, by extension, contextualizes Hurston's politics amidst the late-1920s fierce ideological fault line of culture, race, and women's rights. While Larsen did deploy the tragic mulatta in *Quicksand*, she situates the trope in a genre of racial horror enabled by an autobiographical, intra-racial, and anti-exceptionalism confessional. Perhaps more significant, Larsen tropes "crane," a stork (myth) by another name, a strategy that rebuffs Hans Christian Andersen's Danish exceptionalism and invokes ancient Egyptian stork lore Andersen subsumed. Indeed, Larsen's re-writing of the Egyptian Helga from Andersen's "The Marsh King's Daughter" (1858) fairytale serves multiple purposes: It signifies on Andersen's racialized appropriation of the stork myth, collapses the divide between serious, classical literature and children's stories, and debunks the modern regard for oral myth (folklore) as the most juvenile of all. This comparative, trans-national, and trans-temporal reading of *Quicksand* recovers an Africa-oriented perspective that began with "New Negro" writers in the 1870s and continued robustly in the 1920s with literature like Langston Hughes' "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (1921), but has been rendered all-but invisible by domestic and international forces of canon-making that saw the 1890s rise and 1920s concretizing of American literature.

Critiques adhering to the divisions of labor the American canon fashioned—between American and non-English literature, literature and folklore, and adult and juvenile literature—make it impossible to give a complete answer to the question, "What of Nella Larsen's relationship to Denmark, exceptionalism, and *Quicksand*?" For example, the leading treatment of Larsen in relationship to Danish and Nordic literary modernism highlights Helga's "impressions of the fairy-tale-like tranquility and charm [of Copenhagen]—seemingly inspired by one of Hans Christian Andersen's stories;" likewise, it vexes her white-centric "phantasmagoria," a mode often associated with horror-related grotesque, because it blanches Denmark's imperial past and trans-Atlantic slave trade. But Arne Lunde and Anna Westerstahl Stenport's installation of Larsen among Nordic modernists following their attenuated reference to Andersen (2008, p. 231)—apparently dismissed as an author of children's fairytales, even though phantasmagoria frequents Andersen's stories—fails to register Larsen's Andersen-

based critique of Danish exceptionalism. Agata Lubowicka makes headway by noting that Larsen is "[s]till little known in Danish literary scholars' circles." However, although Lubowicka reads Larsen's life and *Quicksand* against the award-winning *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky* (2010) written by Heidi W. Durrow, a contemporary Afro-Danish novelist who counts Larsen *and* Andersen among her influences (Hurn 2011; Lubowicka 2011, p. 280), Andersen and Larsen remain Other to one another in her study.[5] This canonical Othering reifies instability as critics seek to locate Larsen and her equally elusive/allusive esthetic. In one case, Larsen is chided for failing to acknowledge what the critic believes to be her obvious literary indebtedness to Edith Wharton's *The Quicksand* (1904) short story (Brickhouse 2001, p. 535); in another, Claudia Tate turns to Freudian/Lacanian psychoanalytical theory to plumb the "objectionable horror of her identity" because "racial and sexual analyses of Helga's oppression do not wholly account for her fate" and her indecisive nomadism (1995, pp. 240, 242); most recently, Sianne Ngai deployed affect theory to explain Helga's instability, in effect, as a "strange 'irritability'" (2007, p. 174); in none of these critiques is Larsen's Danish literary heritage or investment in cranes pursued as a plausible alternative. Oddly, this remains true when Caresse A. John uses feminist theory to connect Larsen's "reiteration" of Helga's surname and her metaphorical "flight" to "Cranes," who "are long-legged, long-necked birds known for their long migrations and, (sic) they mate for life" (John 2011, p. 105). Nothing else comes of this passing reference. Trans-national readings—e.g., Helga as a different "*kind* of mulatto" who has "African-American travel subjectivity" (Gray 1994, p. 259), and *Quicksand* as a transnational novel that complicates racial/ethnic stereotypes and Du Bois' "double-consciousness" (Piep 2014, pp. 110, 113–117)—cede this opportunity by overlaying anti-essentialism on the framework long identified under the trope of the modern tragic mulatta. Even when a study is trans-temporal, places "Grotesque Bodies" in a Dionysian/Bacchic frame, and recognizes the ancient ritual significance of birds (in another author's novel), Larsen's *Quicksand* still remains fixed in the canonical straightjacket of mulatta "instability," anti-essentialism, and psychoanalysis (Anisimova 2008, pp. 176–181). Thus, this paper excavates the grotesque and explains why the classic, canonical treatment of Larsen's *Quicksand* as a tragic mulatta tale, while *sine qua non*, is substantively insufficient. Motivated by her critique of exceptionalism, Larsen mires Helga Crane in an ontology of exceptionalism carried by reconfigured ancient myths that distort fundamental structures of (re)productivity. Whereas tragic mulatta/o ideology is oriented toward acceptance in American democracy, Larsen foregrounds a mode of realized horror to question the (cosmic) premise of progress and exceptionalism.

Helga Crane: A Stork by An-Other Face and Name

"Joe 'Stork,' who lives on the 'Enchanted Mesa,'" notes George Herriman's unnamed narrator in the first panel of the Sunday, June 11, 1916 Krazy and Ignatz strip,[6] "goes out early this morning. The lump of coal in the corner is 'Krazy-Kat' who was out late

[5] See Jessica Labbe (2007) at pp. 78–79, which briefly references Andersen's "Little Mermaid" (1837) short story in association with *Quicksand* (2009). Labbe's published article, based on this, drops Andersen altogether.
[6] The eighth full-page one published.

last night." Herriman, a cartoonist of Creole-New Orleans extraction who relocated to Coconino County, Arizona, places two icons that recur in the strip: Krazy, a black cat, in the bottom-left corner, where he says, "Ko-Vadis?," and before the left-to-right flight of Joe, who has a white face and black feathers, a black crescent (See Fig. 1).[7] Although Joe Stork is secondary to Krazy and Ignatz—a Creole-speaking easy-goer and do-gooder of indeterminate gender, and the sadistic middle-class male mouse who is always trying to brick Krazy's head, respectively—he is likewise present in the first panel of the first Sunday strip that newspaper publisher William Randolf Hearst nationally syndicated on April 23, 1916 (Blackbeard 2010, p. 9).

In many respects, the first panel of the June 11th strip visualizes the Afro-Modernist sensibilities existing at the outset of the Harlem Renaissance. Krazy-Kat appealed to modernists like Pablo Picasso, E. E. Cummings, Gertrude Stein, and Charlie Chaplin, who were Herriman fans (Blackbeard 2010, p. 10) presumably because Herriman's visual language, narrative irony, and astute play with words and symbol worked together beneath the surface and around the domain of blackness, then present as a "vogue." Epitomizing the "many possible worlds" comics represented decades before Scott McCloud ascribed these traits to the genre (McCloud 1993, p. 23), Krazy-Kat's esthetics of incommensurability imposes itself on the modern reader of *funny pages*. A black cat, long associated in the Western imaginary with necromancy, first confirming such racialized expectations as a "lump of coal," but then uttering, "Ko-Vadis?" (*Quo vadis*? Latin: "Where are you going?" or "Whither goes thou?"), a phrase attributed to Saint Peter by Christian tradition? An "Enchanted Mesa" and a black crescent moon in the morning sky?

Interpolating *funny pages* into a study of tragic mulatta/o fiction and exceptionalism seems inappropriate, but Herriman's ostensible strategy of innocently appropriating and Americanizing a centuries-old myth as Joe Stork is critical to understanding Afro-Modernists' views and methods. More particularly, Herriman's Joe Stork strip is relevant here because it prefigures Larsen's Helga Crane, and both clearly target the extraordinary, sacred role of myth—the stork myth—in Europe and America, where scholars and laypersons alike have been under its influence. For example, taking as the *raison d'être* for their psychoanalytical investigation Sigmund Freud's 1910 remarks that by the age of three precocious children begin the "infantile sexual investigations" that lead them to refuse the "mythological and so ingenious stork-fable" ([1910] 1916, p. 12), Marvin Margolis and Philip Parker could open their 1972 study with the following: the stork-fable has declined steadily because of advances in biology and public education, "Yet it is still almost universally known at all levels of our culture" (1972, p. 494). Though framed by Freud, and still largely supported by Margolis and Parker, as "infantile sexual theories" (1972, p. 504), it was anything but innocent as a debate of deadly dimensions, driven by exceptionalism, raged in the USA in the decades immediately before and after the publication of *Quicksand*. A fervent eugenics controversy, over "defective" babies, appeared on the silver screen as *The Black Stork* (1915), a case study of a specific doctor's controversial medical practices (Pernick 1996), only to be followed 23 years later by an even more controversial one, *The Birth of Babies* (1938). Immediately implicating the connection between the "sacredness of

[7] In the public domain. The full strip can be found at http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Krazy_Kat_1916-06-11.jpg.

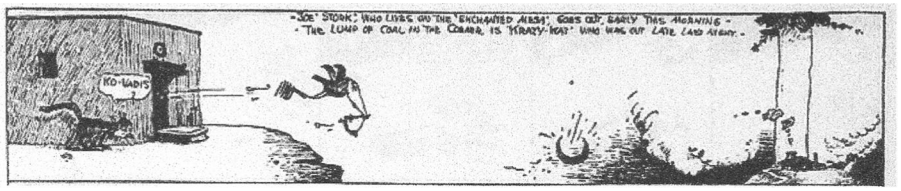

Fig. 1 George Herriman. Krazy Kat. June 11, 1916

motherhood," the cherished role of the stork myth, and even the massive legacy of *The Birth of a Nation* (1915),[8] the hallmark of white supremacist cinema in America, sociologist Geraldine Sartaine focused squarely on the deadly irony of this myth: America's infant and mother mortality rates (almost 150,000 *per annum*) were among the highest of industrialized nations because, she argued, of the stork myth (Sartaine 1938, p. 142).

Although logical because the stork myth denied many women, couples, and parents information—provided by the film—about "the maturity of woman, fertilization, pregnancy, and delivery with detailed facts on pre- and postnatal care of mother and baby" (Sartaine 1938, p. 143), the validity of Sartaine's claims are less important here than the fact that Larsen, trained as a nurse between 1912 and 1915, would have been particularly keen to these matters. Later, as an aspiring writer whose "one drop" of African blood in many ways burdened her just as much as it did other African-Americans, the role of myth—particularly Homeric myth[9] *combined* with the stork myth, a sanitized, Christianized, modernized version of fertility myths—must have been a tantalizing prospect indeed.

Since the silence of Davis' and Hutchinson's exhaustive Larsen biographies on the genesis of this particular epiphany suggest that its exact origin may never be known, it would seem that Helga Crane's conceptual birth occurs through Larsen's own form of stork delivery. Since a "crane" is "popularly, any of various herons and *storks*" (Webster's New World Dictionary, 2nd Coll. Ed. 1986, p. 330; italics mine), Larsen's first-page introduction of "Helga Crane" (the first two words of the novel) and "her slim feet" ([1928] 1988, p. 1) concretizes the ornithological metaphor by the end of the second sentence of the novel. Helga Crane's surname, then, suggests both a wading bird that is grounded, stuck in the gray, "soft gloom" of her room, and yet a flying bird, a widely popular myth, that is destined through Judeo-Christian mythology to deliver babies: just as Helga is literally in the early process of delivering "her fifth child" as the novel closes ([1928] 1988, p. 135).

Larsen's "slim" gesture toward this ornithological metaphor shifts quickly to a trope that enfleshes Helga's surname. Storks have for millennia been known as a migratory species that travels from Europe to Egypt in North Africa—the Middle East—in winter and serves, ironically, both as a "harbinger of spring" and, in Homer's Greece, the approach of winter (McCartney 1922, pp. 4–6; Russell 1833, p. 308); likewise, the

[8] According to Sartaine, "Almost overnight, *The Birth of a Baby* became the most discussed picture since *The Birth of a Nation*" (1938, p. 144).

[9] For an examination of the role of heroic epic mythology in shaping American society and literature, see generally Rutledge, *The Epic Trickster* (2013). His discussions of Charles W. Chesnutt's and Pauline Hopkins' epic-performance-centered, East-Africa-oriented allegories are useful for understanding the literary genealogy predating Larsen's *Quicksand*.

crane has a special place in Asian culture, as indicated by Yamagiwa (1936) and Mayer (1981), two studies that treat the crane in Japanese lore. Larsen immediately deploys a modernized vestige of this trope by surrounding Helga with an Oriental décor—Far and Middle Eastern elements, including a "Chinese rug," "oriental silk," "a small oasis," "yellow satin," and "Marmaduke Pickthall's *Saïd the Fisherman*"—in the "sultry hot Southern spring" ([1928] 1988, pp. 1–2). Although modern American students often find Helga to be frustratingly indecisive, or worse, it characterizes her Jim Crow-era struggles with her "white"/"negro," Danish-American/Afro-Caribbean-American "double-consciousness" and, true to her storkness, natural migratory urges. Often, they are complementary, a fact Larsen uses early on to underscore Helga's "hot anger and seething resentment" against the patronizing, racist, Christian preaching Naxos apparently indulged regularly, and the "considerable applause" which had concluded the remarks: "The South. Naxos. Negro education. Suddenly she hated them all. … She wished it were vacation, so that she might get away for a time." Maybe a vacation might suffice, if it were simply a matter of escaping the accommodationist racial philosophy—championed by Booker T. Washington and opposed by Du Bois—of Naxos, and racist and patronizing Christian theology. But having spent too much time at Naxos for her liking, *irrespective* of its conservative racial politics and theology, it is no surprise that Helga's migratory, nomadic impulse reinforces her ideological disdain. Thus, to her own suggestion that she needed vacation "time," Helga immediately retorts "aloud," "'No, forever!'" ([1928] 1988, p. 3).

If readers still find the Helga Crane-as-stork trope dubious, careful re-reading of *Quicksand* reveals that Larsen visually reinforces it at the very moment when Helga, in migratory mode because of Harlem's racial politics *and* her own inexplicable desire, has decided to leave the USA and visit her mother's family in Copenhagen, Denmark. Feeling a sense of impending liberation but still bound by the social obligations of an evening party, Helga's preferred choice of attire, her hostesses' censure regarding such, and Helga's inner monologue work together to reinforce the trope. "What should she wear?" she asks herself, deciding against white, green, and blue in sequence, before she realizes:

> There was that cobwebby black net touched with orange, which she had bought last spring in a fit of extravagance and never worn, because on getting it home she and Anne had considered it too *décolleté*, and too *outré*. Anne's words: 'There's not enough of it, and what there is gives you the air of something about to fly,' came back to her, and she smiled as she decided that she would certainly wear the black net. For her it would be a symbol. She was about to fly. ([1928] 1988, p. 56)

Though this "about to fly" passage clearly vindicates Helga's Crane-ness, albeit with a "net" that negates the flight, this gesture runs a risk: Larsen's readers could conclude that Helga, based on her attitude here and throughout the novel, is indeed a flighty bird-brain—stork or no-stork figuration. Since any female who behaves this whimsically during a racially violent era that would dictate a sober mien is, this logic suggests, best suited to be a vessel of stork-myth maternity, Larsen must have established another frame to absolutely squelch this reading. As the limited, gradual results of centuries of anti-slavery and -racism efforts of many "race" men and women who lived before would attest, Larsen knows the cardinal lesson of the past: Unless besieged by war,

revolution, some natural disaster, or something equally cataclysmic, changing a whole culture is difficult.

Thus, merely debunking the deep roots of a centuries-old myth, even one as sacrosanct as the stork myth, without attending to the larger and older context that grounds its salience, seems doomed to failure. The other institutions and myths flowing within the culture would, arguably, merely do what every culture does daily, naturally: Adapt, fill the gap, and perhaps become stronger—or at least longer-lived—because of the loss. The incommensurability Larsen captures in *Quicksand*, relative to the stork myth, originates in this. Beneath what seems to be, on the surface, a well-written novel but typical application of the tragic mulatta/o and color-line *leitmotifs*, lies the stork myth and exceptionalism. Larsen's higher education, trained-nurse sensibilities, and research abilities as a librarian apparently served her Afro-Modernist esthetic well. A student nurse who likely witnessed the high pregnancy mortality rates first hand, it would have been relatively easy for her, as a trained librarian, to research the stork myth and discover not the exact origins, but two critical facts nevertheless. First, while the stork myth itself *was* centuries old, and ubiquitous in its Judeo-Christian European habitat, the symbolic importance of storks and their association with fertility rites stretch back millennia to *pre*-Christian North Africa and the Orient. Second, and in immediate proximity to this discovery, her aspirations as a novelist would have directed her to Modernists' re-evaluation of mythology, the references to stork migration and ancient "Ethiopia's blameless race" in Alexander Pope's translation of Homer's *Iliad*,[10] and, consequently, an East-African genesis for stork narratives. Because the ancient stork lore was not preserved in records left by ancient Ethiopians but in obscure references from ancient Greek historians, and because their monuments and Homer's praise implicated the highest racial stakes, objective assessment of the African origins are distorted by the modern stork myth and the exceptionalism underlying European/American Humanities and science canons.

Just how, then, could Larsen structure *Quicksand* to be both incommensurable—*beyond* encyclopedic—and yet strategically responsive to exceptionalism? The ultimate assessment of the success of *Quicksand* should depend on how well it accomplishes this and yet manages to mask it with fine prose. Larsen's answer to this challenge seems to be *doubly* signaled, by the opening locale of the story (Naxos) and the two-part act involving Helga's decision, at mid-novel, to "fly" to Denmark: The act of wearing the "too *décolleté*, and too *outré*" dress in anticipation of such, and her tragic return act. Davis (1994, p. 258) and Hutchinson (2006, p. 227) read Naxos through the myth of Dionysus, Theseus, and Ariadne, but Naxos doubles as a genesis for *Quicksand* and Zeus, the Ür father of Greek exceptionalism who, according to mythology, spent his youth in Mt. Zas, a cave on this actual Greek island. Naxos inaugurates Helga's tragedy, for its "Saxon" anagram performs the act of *mis*translating Greek mythology—though ancient Greek culture was not understood by Anglo-Saxons, and far more ancient world culture even less, Greek texts were praised as the world's Classics[11]—and, insofar as Helga herself once coveted a teaching post at the school, identifies the "ruthless force … within herself" as a willful participation in the mistranslation. Helga's personification of the stork here, then, paralleling her identification with Zeus, actuates

[10] Russell (1833), at 18, quoting Pope's translation of Homer's *Iliad* (1859), at p. 215.
[11] For discussion, see Rutledge (2013) at pp. 80–105.

a doubly conscious mistranslation whose outcome can only be a too-flat fertility narrative and culture-wide rite—the stork myth. Helga and her fertility are always already conquered, for in the midst of her abundant Orientalism is a colorful symbol, *it seems*, of her own need for color and life in contrast to the black, brown, gray, and navy-blue chromatic preference of Naxos' well-bred staff: "the shining brass bowl crowded with many-colored nasturtiums" ([1928] 1988, pp. 1, 17–18). But nasturtiums, introduced in seventeenth-century Europe by Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus, was first called *Tropaeolum minus* because the flower reminded him of the Roman's practice of placing on the field a *tropaeum*,[12] a trophy-pole bearing the accoutrements of the conquered. Similar to the way Helga's mistranslation-personification symbolically devours the beauty of the flowers and folds them into ancient Roman imperialism and exceptionalism, the round leaves reminded Linnaeus of shields and the flowers, somehow, of bloody helmets (Perry 1972, pp. 298–300). The "sun streaming in a golden flow through the yellow curtains" (Larsen [1928] 1988, p. 10) of Helga's room in the morning would seem to dispel this line of reasoning, but Larsen, mindful of exceptionalism, has symbolized one of two episodes from Greek mythology, if not both: Godly rape, in the form of Zeus, who streamed into Danaë's prison as a "golden rain" (Hamilton [1940] 1969, p. 142); or the opening episode from the *Iliad*, which features an angry Apollo shooting his arrows, like sunbeams, down upon the Greeks, causing the decay of vegetal and animal matter and pestilence (Homer 1859, p. 211). Helga, a conqueror and a trophy of conquest who was once for and is now against Naxos culture, is not simply a realistically limned tragic mulatta/o trapped by the color-line and patriarchy. Although Larsen does deploy the tragic mulatta trope, Helga's significance lies in how she vivifies an incommensurability—clearly connected with ancient fertility lore—that modern, educated people like her cannot apprehend.

Naxos, one might argue, represents the heritage of the South's agrarian, pro-Arthurian patriarchs, which explains Helga's Deep-South tragedy. But this alone cannot logically account for the Homeric elements that frame Helga's decision to "fly" to Denmark, which she does at the midpoint of *Quicksand*, and then essentially fly from Denmark to the Deep South. Initiated when her Danish uncle unexpectedly gives her money, the pivotal flight impulse concretizes when Helga, Anne Grey, and others attend an unnamed cabaret fashioned by Larsen, using fairly conventional literary irony, as equivalent to the ancient Greek underworld. Having already donned, for the last dinner party, the stork-attire that personified the stork-myth even more, it is her traumatic experience here that sends her off to Copenhagen with "no regret" ([1928] 1988, p. 63). The second act, her return from Denmark for Anne's wedding to Dr. Robert Anderson, the former principal/director of Naxos and the clear soul mate of Helga in the novel, also implicates Homer. This occurs in New York, at a party hosted by none other than Mrs. Helen Tavernor, who deploys "malicious glee" ([1928] 1988, p. 99) akin to the whimsy of ancient Olympus, or her Helen of Troy namesake in *deciding* to be kidnapped by a Trojan prince. Helen's "glee" lies in thrusting together Helga and Robert, a fateful encounter so sexually charged *and* frustrating for her that it initiates the tragic—and yet untragic, since nomadism is her nature—end of her odyssey.

[12] *Tropaeum*, from the Greek *tropaion*, is source of the English "trophy."

Helga: "The Marsh King's Daughter" and Her "too *décolleté*, too *outré*" Twin

Why Denmark? Naturally, because of Larsen's Danish ancestry, critics assume that *Quicksand* is dictated by autobiography, the easiest way of realizing the fiction-writer's dictum, "Write what you know." Like all else in the novel, such easy characterizations circumscribe content incapable of vindicating a simplistic model. American exceptionalism, Larsen's implicit Old-to-New World and New-to-Old-World back story and subplot suggest, cannot be understood without its precursors, a comparative-mythological frame inclusive of European culture and, at the very least, its own exceptionalism. While European metropoles receive substantial scholarly attention as slave traffickers and colonizers, Nordic countries enjoy another form of exceptionalism that exempts or gentrifies their similar roles (Loftsdóttir and Jensen 2012, p. 2), which can be extensive. Denmark is itself a Nordic metropole whose empire, for centuries, included Norway along with regions like Greenland as part of its "self-promotion as a benevolent and caring colonial power." This specific rhetoric and ideology, Christina Petterson maintains, which owes itself to mass media, popular culture, and scholars, obscures the violence inherent in "benevolent" colonialism and more disturbing imperial secrets: Denmark's slave trade was the "sixth or seventh largest" among European countries at one point and "Denmark was as brutal as any other colonial regime" with respect to its West Indies colonies (2012, pp. 29-31). In this regard, the admixture of water and land, America and Denmark, human and fowl that Larsen metaphorizes early as a "ruthless force" (comprised of racism, family, Christianity, and education), becomes clearer when Helga embarks for Denmark.

Larsen, as one conversant in written and spoken Danish who lived in the country, *did* know Denmark all too well. Her West-Indian and Danish identities map empire and exceptionalism because, Hutchinson writes, "Danish colonies in the Caribbean were part of what made Denmark an empire." While acknowledging that she experienced racism as a child living in Denmark from 1895 to 1898, "It could not have been all bad, however," he reasons, "since Larsen would later return to Denmark for an extended stay. She did, in short, 'have fun.' Denmark prided itself on its children's culture. The national hero was not a politician, playwright, or general, but Hans Christian Andersen." Indeed, as a child arriving with her mother in 1895, Larsen must have sailed by a statute dedicated to Andersen's "The Little Mermaid" story (Hutchinson 2006, pp. 31–34, 141). This perspective, which fails to realize that racism and "fun" locales are not mutually exclusive, but commonplace, misses a more important observation: Writers, who had an "extended stay" somewhere in the past, often mine those experiences for deeper associations. In this case, although Hutchinson, Davis, McDowell, and other Larsen scholars have missed or ignored it, Andersen's oeuvre begs for attention. While Hutchinson acknowledges that modern Scandinavian literature influenced Larsen's fiction and that one of Larsen's first publications was a translation of "Danish children's riddles" (2006, pp. 2, 200, 226), he overlooks Andersen's fairytales. In particular, the critical similarities between Andersen's short story, "The Marsh King's Daughter", and Larsen's *Quicksand* are striking. Helga's trip to Copenhagen, heart of the Danish empire, symbolically represents Larsen's life-and-death struggle with forces of American and Danish exceptionalism—represented by Andersen and the canons of arts and sciences—over the meanings of the Old World and of storkness.

"The Marsh King's Daughter", in plot and structure, represents the grotesque or, as Harold Bloom writes in his bicentennial treatment of Andersen, a mastery of "phantasmagoria" whose "sublimity" lies in its "uninterpretable" quality (2005, pp. 411-412). It is one of two ancient stories—the other being Moses, which "[e]very one knows"—told by storks "to their little ones." Stork storytelling frames the story, then, but it is not a frame story proper because the unnamed narrator relates their story while the stork family's descendants, two generations removed, close it with dialogue. What the narrator tells is of a "stork-mamma" and "stork-papa" who lived, apparently, in the age of Moses and, like actual storks, migrated to and from the Nile Valley of Egypt to the land of Vikings. They are direct witnesses to the story of one Egyptian princess from their land who, along with two other princesses, flew in swan feathers to northern Europe to find a lotus flower for her ailing father. When she removed her plumage, the others take it and abandon her. Her tears inexplicably moisten a tree stump, which morphs into a horrible tree, causing her to run and sink down in the "wavering, undulating, marshy ground of the moor" of the Marsh King. Although she is lodged there for decades, a child-bearing flower spouts from the very spot, and the stork-papa takes the infant to a Viking raider's castle, where she is adopted by his wife. This girl is cursed—by day she is a beautiful, evil girl given to sadistic impulses, but dusk transforms her into an ugly frog with human tenderness and understanding. The Viking husband adores the girl, named Helga, while his tender wife comes to love the frog. One day, a young Christian priest—spreading the "new faith" in a land still bound in Norse mythology—is captured by the Viking. He is to be sacrificed, and Helga wishes to help in this act, but her frog-self releases him, and they escape into the forest on horseback. Even when the frog becomes Helga, she is calmed by his Christian words, for "his language was the darkest magic to her." She seems to be bound for Christian salvation, but they are waylaid by robbers who kill the horse and the priest. However, the horse and priest return to life, a miracle that suddenly reveals to Helga her own past iniquity. She wishes to join him and to "reach the holy mountains," but he says she cannot do so until she has "remove[d] the thick veil with which the waters of the moorland are shrouded, and bring forth from its depths the living author of thy being and thy life." In other words, she discovers after riding the horse with the resurrected, cross-bearing priest into the swamp, and singing hymns in harmony with him, she must find her mother who, she discovers, is her identical twin. Explaining her sleep over the years, the mother speaks of a dream Andersen leaves the reader to interpret: The tree trunk that first frightened her had "clefts and wrinkles" that "took the form of hieroglyphics. It was the mummy case on which I gazed. At last it burst, and forth stepped the thousand years' old king, the mummy form, black as pitch, black as the shining wood-snail, or the slimy mud of the swamp. … He seized me in his arms, and I felt as if I must die."

The stork papa, who has been trying to help for years, finally does by bringing them the swan suits he had secured years earlier. Helga is filled with remorse for her adopted Viking mother, because of her love, but returns home with the flower and heals her father. The happy ending one expects, however, takes another sudden twist. The narrator reveals that as Helga is about to be married to an Arabian prince with the stork family in attendance, suddenly there appears in the sky the priest, floating "purer than the air." Speaking of heaven's glory, and praying "more earnestly" than ever before, she, too, is lifted and witnesses it. Though the priest says "'we must return,'"

she stays too long and finds that ages have passed and all she knew are dead. Helga discovers this when she saw storks and addressed one, who turns out to be the stork papa's grandson. Understanding this suddenly, as the "sun burst forth in all its glory," Helga is transfigured: "so now, bathed in light, rose a beautiful form, purer, clearer than air—a ray of brightness—from the Source of light Himself. The body crumbled into dust, and a faded lotus-flower lay on the spot on which Helga had stood."

Although this synopsis elides many minor details, questions such as, "Is a coherent interpretation … possible, that is to say, persuasive?" and not an impenetrable "bog" (Bloom 2005, p. 411), and does this story, like others, "actually reflect Andersen's 'racist tendencies'?" (Hugus 2006, p. 223) seem to be mute. Instead of a mere "aesthetic blemish" and "half-hearted" form of Christian allegory in an otherwise "superb work" (Bloom 2005, p. 409–411), the obvious resurrection and transfiguration motifs—along with a Judgment Day battle, reference to "Providence," transposition of a "beautiful" Norse god ("Baldur") with Jesus, symbolic marriage with heaven instead of an actual swarthy Arabian—are rather transparent. Indeed, the name Helga, from *heilagr* in Old Norse, means "holy" or "blessed."

More significant for a discussion of "The Marsh King's Daughter" is that it, in the short-story economy, locates Egypt as an original site for the ancient stork stories and is evidence of the process by which Western writers folded it into Judeo-Christian whiteness. Indeed, Jack Zipes, in his study of the "bourgeois essentialist ideology" informing Andersen's fairy tales and how they became paragons of instruction for nineteenth-century children, provides context for this reading: "No other writer of literary fairy tales in the early nineteenth century introduced so many Christian notions of God, the Protestant ethic, and bourgeois enterprise in his narratives as Andersen did. All his tales make explicit or implicit reference to a miraculous Christian power that rules firmly but justly over His subjects" (2005, p. 58). Not surprisingly, the story has a double-frame in that Andersen intertwines stork-lore with Genesis and Revelations: Reference to the storks' Moses lore opens the story, which closes with Helga's eternal life, described by the stork-papa grandson as a "new ending" and "very good ending." Larsen's apparent re-writing of Andersen's Helga, which makes Helga Crane her "too *décolleté*, too *outré*" twin, indicates that she rejects this ending—Helga's marriage to Rev. Pleasant Green is a "quagmire" and "bog"—and knows the teleological import of the "faded lotus-flower" left where Helga last stood. Larsen also exposes and problematizes Western treatment of the ancient African cultures—pre-dating the Moses story by thousands of years—that originated stork lore. Michael Russell, motivated to study Nubia and Abyssinnia in the 1830s because of Homer's references to ancient Ethiopia, described how ancient storks migrated, were venerated, and showed "extreme attachment to their young" unto the point of sacrificing themselves (1833, p. 308). Larsen accepts this older Africa provenance, with a satirical gesture to Andersen's mummy king—Helga cannot bear the "lifetime" of "sleepless nights" she would have because she'd hear her children's "cry of 'Mummy, Mummy, Mummy'" (Larsen [1928] 1988, p. 135)—but would have found Russell's efforts to praise ancient Ethiopia and Egypt, remove the "negro" contribution, and Christianize the history (1833, pp. 15–22, 202) contradictory.

Still, Andersen and Russell are mere examples of a ubiquitous cultural dynamic. Interpreting Leonardo da Vinci's childhood memory of a vulture as "phantasy" derived

from his readings about an Egyptian fertility goddesses and knowledge of stork mythology, Freud showed that he was unaware of the actual diffusion of culture. The "religion and culture of Egyptians were subjects of scientific interest even to the Greeks and Romans" (1910), he wrote, but apparently not *sources* for the Greco-Roman cultures. Margolis and Parker avoided this Freudian slip, as they found the origins of the stork myth to be "more subtle survivals of the pagan fertility goddess religions" dating to the ancient precursors of Greece. However, the progress toward Christianity and the "white stork" is natural and logical in their genealogy because of the "malevolent" and "sadistic" nature of the ancient fertility goddesses reflected in negative stories from stork lore: "these less well-known, malevolent characteristics have been obscured for very good reasons" (1972, pp. 495, 500-508).

Thus, the past societies' manifold connections to fertility myths and rich cultural logics collapse into Margolis and Parker's Freudian, Judeo-Christian reading. In this modern context, the sexual vivacity of ancient cultures so central to the grotesque are policed out by modern privileging of the individual's psyche. Not surprising, then, is Larsen's strategy of appropriating the grotesque and linking sexuality, myth, and unspeakable horror.

Slow-Dance of Death: The Horror, the Grotesque, the Unspeakable

Despite its "disharmonious and disjunctive" tendency and "disregard of verisimilitude and orientation toward the subconscious," the grotesque literary mode, Dieter Meindl argues, tends to be ignored by critics because of its "nature." Part of this arises from the pairing of "humor and horror, … laughter and fear" that characterizes this mode. More importantly, it proceeds out of an ancient ontology which Meindl sees rooted in the primordial, "pre-individual dimension of existence," a salutary disorder extant long before and in direct antithesis to the modern canons of order. Indeed, its ontology "commingles the animate and inanimate and conflates such classifications as plant, animal, human." Since modern "individual as individual" recoils from this—the world-body—in horror, the ancient, life-affirming grotesque fades (1996, pp. 2-6, 14-19). Mikhail Bakhtin's canonical notion sums up the literary grotesque: "Contrary to modern canons, the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits."[13]

Grotesque is a necessary term in the American canon, from Henry James to Sherwood Anderson's "The Book of the Grotesque" in *Winesburg*, *Ohio* (1919), but even its description as the "totality of life" cannot escape the racial legacy of centuries-old exceptionalism. Although its etymology derives from fifteenth-century excavations of a once-buried Roman palace, James Goodwin's argument that *grotto* references "a place of shade or semi-darkness unearthed, brought to life" also suggest European anxiety with darkness and death, *negro* and *necro*. Meindl's and Goodwin's studies of the grotesque seem sharply opposed—Meindl's valorization of pre-individualism is the very element Goodwin, grounded in the European classics, finds "unserviceable"—but both, agreeing with Meindl's observation that the "phenomenon of the grotesque is thus much older than its name," elide Africa *and* essential discussion of Europe's racial

[13] Meindl (1996) at p. 17, quoting Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* ([1965] 1994), at p. 50.

imaginary: Meindl when he traces the "grotesque archetype" to "Paleolithic cave drawings," Goodwin when he omits them from his discussion of the grotesque in world art history and analysis of the interplay between necromancy, "grotesque metamorphosis," and blackface minstrelsy in the novel *Ormond*; *or*, *The Secret Witness* (1799) by Charles Brockden Brown (Goodwin 2009, pp. 3–4, 6–9, 18–19; Meindl 1996, pp. 15–16).

This doubleness—*grotesque*, a necessary canonical descriptor that must simultaneously be transcended to find the "phenomenon … much older than its [canonical] name"—demands a greater temporality, but under what name? Ishmael Reed, in *Mumbo* Jumbo (1972), a lecture disguised as a post-modern murder mystery set in the 1920s Jazz Age, calls it "Jes' Grew" ([1972] 1996)—the essence of life which, like jazz, just grows and flows and moves from its genesis, which he traces back to ancient Egypt. In the mid-nineteenth century, art educator and classicist, Mary Ann Dwight, tracing the same movement in the fertility rituals of ancient Egypt's Eleusis, goddess of agriculture, said they were called "mysteries" (1849, pp. 38-39). But "Jes' grew" and the "mysteries" are inadequate, as Michael Russell indicated in *Nubia and Abysinnia* (1833), because a "cloud hangs over the horizon" of "Western Ethiopia" from the absence of documentary records (1833, pp. 15-16), *and* racialized works like his, which simultaneously obscure the past and set the canonical foundation.

In light of this, and Larsen's own association of the grotesque and death," Toni Morrison's notion of the "unspeakable" is useful. Meant originally as a critique of post-Civil Rights Humanities scholars' erasure of race after centuries of racial trauma (Morrison 1989, p. 3), and the racial horror immanent in the gesture, the "unspeakable" also has a positive connotation. Immanent in Morrison's "unspeakable" is an incommensurability that serves as a marker for an Africanist canon whose temporal, genealogical, and esthetic scale engulfs the negative in a broad healing life force. Critics, following the lead suggested by the quicksand trope, foreground Helga Crane's *modern* marriage to Rev. Pleasant Green as the logical, tragic conclusion of Larsen's efforts. However, the temporality and incommensurability of the unspeakable—performing a mysterious rite comprised of fertility and heroic myths—allows Larsen to offer up, instead, a slow dance in the middle of *Quicksand* that is perhaps the most remarkable, visually stunning, and important scene in the novel: The brief, intensely sultry, almost-cinematic dance of Dr. Robert Anderson with Miss Denny, a biracial Harlem socialite. Though unspeakably potent, this visually arresting moment is not surprising, given the influence of cinema on Modernists writers seeking to recover lost ancient knowledge and find a universal, ethical esthetic that would span most-ancient past, far-distant future, and the present.

Dr. Robert Anderson, head of the Naxos school located somewhere just outside of 1920s Atlanta, is isolated in his office. He is also defined by his office—meaning both space and official role—in that physiologically, he enters the story in his office bearing peculiar "gray" eyes (Larsen [1928] 1988, p. 20). Perhaps because Larsen makes him, at least ethically, second only to Helga, Robert's gray eyes suggest complexity in a "black"/"white" world, and even an exotic element appropriate for someone of Helga's particular sensibilities and esthetic preferences. But the Anderson surname, which is a nominal orthographical variant on Andersen—as in Hans Christian—indicates the nature of the "ruthless force … within [him]self." Despite his positive attributes which, Larsen intimates, would naturally blossom if only Robert and Helga could consummate

their mutual interests in each other, the racial logic of Andersen's fairy-tale stories seem to be paired with Anderson for reasons not easily discernible. He is, after all, *consciously* associated with racial uplift. But Larsen deploys psychoanalysis to seek the unconscious performance of culture, and makes possible a remarkably subtle racial nuance that is also clearly grounded in the logic of Langston Hughes' "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926) essay: Opposed to racism he is and yet *within himself* therein lurks "unconsciously a symbol of all virtues," namely the "Nordic manners, Nordic faces, Nordic hair, Nordic art (if any)" that makes him cold, rational, detached. "Nordic" exceptionalism disciplines the household of the "'high-class' Negro" Hughes assays (2013), the Western children of Andersen's fairy tales, and the Naxos school children Anderson heads. Though not racial doubles, Andersen and Anderson are, figuratively speaking, trans-racial brothers *and* birds of a feather by "virtue" of the "Nordic" fairytales. Their politics bogged down in a deadly mythology unmistakably at odds with a truly healthy regard for all children, Andersen's stories are contact lenses directing Anderson's gray eyes toward a foreordained narrative: The onset of winter, his male infertility, un(re)productive land, and thus the approach of death. Robert's fate, like Helga's, is sealed: Following *Miss* Crane's lead, *Dr.* Anderson flees the bureaucratic entanglements of Naxos, seeking less informality and more fertile ground in the urban North, but his efforts mire him deeper in quicksand, ultimately represented by a toxic marriage to the equally acidulous and covertly covetous socialite widow, Anne *Grey*. Certainly, though Larsen leaves the issue to the reader's own reasonable ability to project the future portrait of Dr. and Mrs. Anderson/en, the end-credits here are clear: A gray-eyed father who dissertates against natural sexuality, and a Grey-named mother whose class consciousness poisons racial justice, can only produce gray-type offspring who live among the cold, gray, northern streets and structures of New York City. Is this not, at least in terms of color symbolism, a more transparent and literal foreshadowing of Rev. Mrs. Helga Green's *un*pleasant fate at the end of the novel?

But grayness-as-death symbolism, even if effected as ironic satire directed against Hans Christian Andersen's story, is insufficient because it is ground so well-trod as to be—for the Modernist eye—as hackneyed as the death-comes-soon metaphor of an old man's or woman's gray locks. Gray does more than serve as anticipatory metaphor for death because it also works doubly to convey an effect meant for the loved ones left behind by their departed, who have moved from grayness to death—*either* as blackness or wintry, Nordic whiteness. For those left to follow, the grayness of old age and decay lingers everlasting as a gray barrier, a veil that prevents us from piercing the ultimate mystery before our time. The *literary* form of this completes the trope, for grayness foreshadows Helga's figurative death at the same time Anderson's gray eyes, thwarting those who would gaze into the windows of his soul, obscures and confuses. Larsen's brilliance here lies in subtle interpolation of ancient temporality and symbolism at once grotesque and horrible, a two-step literary strategy veiled by doubled grayness: First, Larsen teases Helga and her readers with the life-giving possibilities of the ancient African "unspeakable," a "Jes' grew" slow dance, and then, just as quickly removes it—Anne Grey's authoritative gaze and voice harshly censor it—leaving Helga in a barren, confused state. The key figure here, sinuous as a serpent and bearing a pallid, sexually potent complexion that ostensibly turns Helga's interest from heterosexuality to lesbianism, is the mysterious Audrey Denney.

Equally at ease among "white" and "black" gatherings, Denney is the most loaded figure in the novel given her brief appearances and her function as a carrier of both forms of the "unspeakable"—canonical territorialization and deterritorialized life force—in a world dominated by the canons of race and exceptionalism. An unspeaking slow dancer, with Dr. Anderson, and Helga's and Anne's gazes, Miss Denney's inter-racial function is narrated through and framed by the combination of Helga's fascination and Anne's excessive and inexplicable spleen: She felt "rage" and a "cold hatred," powerfully contradictory since Anne's charges also apply to her own conduct,[14] "indicating an abhorrence too great for words." Helga objects, and notes Aubrey's "sorrowful lips" ([1928] 1988, pp. 60–62), both for reasons which Larsen largely leaves unexplained even after she intentionally piques the reader's desire to know a sad back story never provided. In short, there is, surrounding this modern character, albeit an exotic and mysterious one, an incommensurability that begs readers to investigate through the presence, dance, and effect of Audrey Denney.

The compelling impulses Miss Denney performs and channels for Helga and the reader are not because she is a biracial member of the modern African-American social elite, but instead because she transcends modern time as a symbol of the ancient reproductive forces—twisted in modernity by exceptionalist fantasies of white supremacists *and* people like Anne—working both to deracinate the modern formalities entrapping Dr. Anderson and Miss Crane and allow them, *Robert* and *Helga*, to recover their lost selves. Over-arched by a cabaret-Underworld and the house of Helen (Tavenor), Denney's sexuality is rooted in the "ruthless force" of exceptionalism, when seen through (Anne's) Grey, merciless eyes, the novel's bellwether of African-American women's manners and etiquette. Though her sad lips substantiate this reading, which fixes her in 1920s Harlem, it is important to note that Denney is a pure ironic figure whose back-story lies in ancient culture, tragic and deadly—*not* an individual person, not someone's life. The contrast here is the story Larsen sketches for Anne Grey, who has a relative Helga meets and a past marriage ended when WWII widowed her and left her, apparently, alone and affluent in a nice home. Consequently, it might be more accurate here to say that Denny slow dances in everyone's life, on a cosmic scale, particularly here in what may be one of the most horrible, grotesque moments in literature. Death, in the sultry form of Denney, unbeknownst to the *characters* despite the fact that Helga's interest in her is immediately "studied" and "watching," has entered the lives of Robert Anderson and Helga Crane, and is slow dancing just for them. Keeping with the "gay, grotesque, and a little weird" space of the cabaret, Larsen's introduction of Denney is a ready-made instance of "grotesque" realism that is perfect for the big screen:

> She was pale, with a peculiar, almost deathlike pallor. The brilliantly red, softly curving mouth was somehow sorrowful. Her pitch-black eyes a little aslant, were veiled by long, drooping lashes and surmounted by broad brows, which seemed like black smears. The short dark hair was brushed severely back from the wide forehead. The extreme décolleté of her simple apricot dress showed a skin of unusual color, a delicate, creamy hue, with golden tones. 'Almost like an alabaster,' thought Helga. …

[14] This is literally and ironically true in a more intimate way. Anne's dislike of Aubrey is later revealed to be her association with "Nordics! Lynchers!" (Larsen [1928] 1988, p. 99). Anne's eventual marriage to "Nordic" Robert, who even danced with Aubrey, folds the literal into the ironic.

> At the next first sound of music Dr. Anderson rose. 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 an obvious pleasure, her legs, her lips, her back, all swaying gently, swung by that wild music from the heart of the jungle. Helga turned her glance to Dr. Anderson. Her disinterested curiosity passed. While she still felt for the girl envious admiration, that feeling was now augmented by another, a more primitive emotion. 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. ([1928] 1988, pp. 60, 62)

The not-so-subtle allusions that situate the cabaret as an underworld—"they descended through a furtive, narrow passage, into a vast subterranean room" that would be "characterized by the righteous as a hell" ([1928] 1988, p. 58)—are later masked by Larsen before she introduces Denney. Several paragraphs later, Larsen makes the same hellish gesture, but this time, she uses Helga's scientific, objective gaze around her, and a well-known rhetorical strategy introduced by James Weldon Johnson in his faux-autobiographical novel, *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* ([1912] 1990), to cloak the brimstone. "For the hundredth time she marveled at the gradations within this oppressed race of hers," Larsen writes, using quantitative logic and Johnson's strategy to disarm the reader at the very moment she delivers a remarkable literary *coup*: "A dozen shades slid by." Naturally, a list follows of different "shades" of hair, skin, and eyes, a variety that presses the intellect to hold and process it, but Larsen has already made her point: "A dozen shades" *from the Greek underworld* "slid by." The penchant of enlightened, educated moderns for quantification is used by Larsen against them and toward establishing the realistic, literally objective list of humanity—of "Africa, Europe, perhaps with a pinch of Asia, in a fantastic motley of ugliness and beauty, semi-barbaric, sophisticated, exotic" ([1928] 1988, pp. 59–60)—that comprises Denney's entrance.

Larsen does not repeat the term "grotesque" explicitly, but her narrative makes this speech act redundant at the same time the "fantastic motley" of myth-indexed "shades" makes it absolutely necessary to tear asunder the veil of realism that now has a firm grip on Helga. This is the epitome of *Quicksand*, of Greek epic mythology and modern realism—*epical realism*—sutured together as horror in its purest, most-sexy essence. Incommensurability, here, is a dance: Anderson's literal dance with the character, his literal dance with a force of death, and a metaphorical dance meant for Helga and the reader. It is a dance because, Larsen seems to argue, the deleterious effects of Homer- and Christianity-based exceptionalism on an entire culture can only be cast in sexy, shifting metaphor that reproduces itself.

Denney performs a slow-dance because Larsen, in this most horrible moment, allows us to see Helga being driven *stork*-mad with unrequited love and desire. The simultaneous appropriation and embodiment of fertility and heroic

myths, a dynamic further distorted by Judeo-Christian beliefs operating in tandem with mind-over-body dualism, creates a culture of sexually repressed exceptionalism. Exceptionalism is key here because *Quicksand* seems to target not male patriarchs, but the modern elites. In response to racist stereotypes, particularly hyper-sexuality, too many African-American female *and* male opinion leaders, Larsen argues, over-compensate by sublimating their sexuality until it distorts their own decision making and physically manifests itself. James Vayle, her fiancé from Naxos and member of an elite family of African-Americans in Atlanta, has trembling lips and a "throbbing vein in his forehead" when he kisses Helga. Anderson, who trembles when he touches Helga, does surrender to a kiss. However, instead of consummating it, when Helga—also trembling and going weak—desires the same, Anderson wills himself into a "long dissertation on African sculpture" ([1928] 1988, pp. 24, 106). Likewise, because of Christianity and intra-racial politics that make the brighter-complexioned Helga more attractive to him, Rev. Green is himself subject to the same explosive sexual desire.[15]

This explains Denney's slow-dance form then, but it is also meant for readers to see the slow diffusion and harmful results of exceptionalism as it destroys the regenerative life-force of the body-politic. The realism of the portrait, Larsen's ingenious literary masquerade for something truly horrible, is a direct statement to the reader: Your real world, occupied by "sorrowful" sexy women who can dance "with grace and abandon," is gyrating to the same slow-dance. It is no surprise here that Larsen, an "astute social critic," bases Denney on Blanche Dunn, an "alabaster-skinned beauty known in the 1920s for her unique ability to do nothing and to do it better than anyone else" (Davis 1994, pp. 234–36, 272–73).

Conclusion: Epitaph, for the Birds

> Apparently, as a result of ecological changes, the white stork is on its way to becoming extinct in Western Europe. According to the *New York Times* (1970), there are now only 70 pairs of storks in Denmark, whereas there were 10,000 only a hundred years ago. The stork is already extinct in Sweden.
>
> —Marvin Margolis and Philip Parker (1972)

There remains an important question left unanswered by Larsen experts, with regard to her original title, which she changed because she agreed with van Vechten that it was not good (Davis 1994, p. 219): Why did she select *Cloudy Amber* in the first place, and why did she—out of all the possibilities—change it to the more terse *Quicksand*? *Quicksand* is often interpreted to reference the conclusion in which Helga Crane finds herself mired in a marriage to a

[15] See Larsen ([1928] 1988) at pp. 115, 129.

southern minister, burdened with multiple children, and thus left with no escape. Considering her rapid movement throughout the novel, this interpretation makes sense, but only if one forgets that the ostensible "role of Christianity in the oppression of women"[16] is a presence that actually overshadows all of Naxos—Helga, for sure, but also the "hundreds of students and teachers [who] had been herded into the sun-baked chapel to listen to the banal, the patronizing, and even the insulting remarks of one of the renowned white preachers of the state" (Larsen [1928] 1988, p. 2). However, Larsen tropes "quicksand"—never explaining her meaning, or even using the term in the narrative—in the mythological context of an established racial trope that Hollywood would intensify with movies like Johnny Weissmuller's *Tarzan and the Amazons* (1945). In movies before and after Larsen's novel, Hollywood directors, keeping with the prevailing racial imaginary centuries old, foregrounded quicksand as a topographical feature especially common to the backwards, uncivilized, and unpaved Africa. In cinema of the 1930s,

> there were the legions of Black extras who put on loincloths and bone jewelry to portray African savages in countless adventure pictures like the long-running Tarzan series. Their role was usually just to make the White actors look noble, brave, God-fearing and intelligent, in stark contrast to their bestial, cowardly, pagan and cannibal ways. If they were carrying the Whites' luggage, they were always ready to drop everything and run away at the slightest sign of trouble. If they were attacking the Whites, they were ever prepared to give themselves up by the score to varieties of grisly deaths; no African adventure flick was complete without having at least one Black savage come to an ignoble, screaming end in the jaws of a lion or crocodile, or under the foot of an elephant, or in the embrace of a python *or a pit of quicksand*. These films were the inspiration for the racial slur "spearchucker." (Strausbaugh 2006, p. 232) (italics mine)[17]

Larsen exploits the fear of quicksand as *terra* incognito that Hollywood mythmakers helped to conjure up. But instead of the emphasis being on sight (its failure because quicksand passes for normal earth), Larsen gets to the quick of the real danger: Immersion in its fluid, suffocating bowels. *Quicksand* reverses the racial topography, sending Helga on a northern odyssey through the West while the quicksand thickened about her as she heroically struggled. By selecting quicksand, a super dense flow, Larsen displaces the Zeitgeist with viscous, vicious spirits that look normal, like *terra firma*, but offer an entrapping dynamic that increases in direct proportion to one's own resistance.

Because Larsen transposes this Zeitgeist with quicksand, then, extending her trope from "quicksand" to "amber" may be a logical and necessary stretch: After all, Larsen has exquisitely preserved Helga in the cultural spirits of 1920s America and Europe. In

[16] See McDowell (1988a), note number 14, at p. 245.

[17] Strausbaugh also references the movie *Trader Horn* (1931), a somewhat more "progressive" Hollywood version of the same (2006, pp. 232–234). It is appropriate to note that Larsen and Richard Wright, who uses *Trader Horn* in his *Native Son* (1940) epic novel, share similar thoughts, though Wright's quicksand metaphor is more conventional. See *Native Son* ([1940] 1998) at p. 402.

this regard, *Cloudy Amber* signifies against Katharine Lee Bates' "America the Beautiful" (1913),[18] a patriotic poem-turned-anthem—

> O beautiful for spacious skies,
> For amber waves of grain,
> For purple mountain majesties
> Above the fruited plain!

—as Larsen transposes the golden spiritual glow Bates lyricized with an amber-colored quicksand. Indeed, just as an amber glow comes to represent the modern act of longingly gazing back on Greco-Roman antiquity, *Quicksand* reaches into the depths of Greco-Roman mythology. The deepened, pre-Olympian amber, which informs *Quicksand* from the opening lines and surrounds Helga's freedom, is a living spirit that coopts her body to reproduce itself in a high parody of American imagining of the virgin birth: Her fourth son is born, after the singing of a spiritual about freedom, a "dab of amber humanity which Helga had contributed to the despised race." This son lives only a week, a crucified innocent whose entire life is "futile torture and lingering torment." Sickly and bedridden for weeks, she herself is just beginning to recover "when she began to have her fifth child" (Larsen [1928] 1988, pp. 127, 131, 135).

Larsen literally ends the novel with Helga's "fifth child," but readings limited to her burden as an individual female fail to consider the incommensurability this paper has established by virtue of the Crane-ness—storkness—that is far older and more significant that any one protagonist. In 1972, the fabled storks, widely valued as harbingers of good luck in Europe and protected by European laws, were themselves facing their own quicksand: Thanks to the ruination of their ecosphere, the threat of extinction in Europe, including Andersen and Larsen's Denmark (Margolis and Parker 1972, pp. 497, 499). Despite efforts to reverse the trend, the destruction of European wetlands had, 80 years after *Quicksand* and almost 150 years after "The Marsh King's Daughter," led to the extinction of storks in Denmark's wetlands.[19]

Instead of narrating the demise of a tragic mulatta, then, Larsen presents her novel as a meticulously crafted study of how figurative quicksand is a tragically colored, amber-colored, byproduct of exceptionalism. This all-encompassing quicksand, arguably the real protagonist or subject, slowly suffocates birds, exceptional individuals—those most surrounded by an amber glow of possibility—and even life itself, which turns hither and thither in, ultimately, a slow-dance and futile struggle at once horrible, grotesque, and unspeakable.

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[18] Composed in 1893 and first published on July 4, 1895, Bates revised the poem in 1904 and 1913.
[19] See, e.g., Powley (1990) at p. 25 and Hyndman (2010).

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