

Improper politics: quicksand and black female sexuality

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The entertainment of a Harlem cabaret hypnotizes Helga Crane, the protagonist of Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*. She loses herself in the " sudden streaming rhythm" and delights in the sexually suggestive moves of the dancers. Helga is " blown out, ripped out, beaten out by the joyous, wild, murky orchestra" in a moment suggestive of a sexual climax. But when the music fades, Helga returns to reality and asserts that " she wasn't, she told herself, a jungle creature." Helga feels this struggle between sexual freedom and restraint throughout the novel. As Larsen shows in the cabaret, black women of the early twentieth century repressed their sexual desires so that white America would perceive them as respectable. In its fight for equality, the black social elite wanted women to emulate the conventions of mainstream society. Maintaining a good image was intended not only to produce change within the race, but also to combat white stereotypes that caused discrimination against black people. Thus, described as primitive and promiscuous since slavery, black women hid their sexuality under socially accepted behavior. But, as Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham refers to it, this " politics of respectability" had profound consequences.

The politics of respectability shifted the blame for racist stereotypes from whites to blacks. Instead of stopping whites from unfairly labeling black women, the ideology of racial uplift forced black women to change their behavior in response to stereotypes. As Kevin K. Gaines argues in his book *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century*, racial uplift supported an internalized form of racism. He writes, " Racial uplift ideology's gender politics led African American elites to mistake the effects of oppression for causes..." Larsen's *Quicksand* shows the

psychological consequences of repressing sexuality. Helga moves from place to place and searches for happiness without rationality. Her unhappiness arises because the politics of respectability prevented black women from defining the terms of their sexuality. They were either lascivious “jungle creature[s]” or the ideal Victorian lady. Thus, uplift stopped black women from embracing their sexuality in a healthy way. Although the politics of respectability had good intentions, it severely curtailed individual freedom and prevented black women from forming their own identities.

The black elite intended the politics of respectability to prevent discrimination. They reasoned that if whites saw that blacks had similar morals, they would have no basis for treating them unequally. The politics of respectability aimed at thwarting the dissemination of negative black images that occurred in films like D. W. Griffith’s *Birth of Nation* and other media. Among the most ingrained stereotypes-and therefore most contested- was the promiscuous black woman. Higginbotham argues that “black womanhood and white womanhood were represented with diametrically opposed sexualities.” She gives the example of a white woman quoted in a newspaper as saying, “I cannot imagine such a creation as a virtuous black woman.” Whereas American society saw white women as chaste, it viewed black women as sex-crazed and loose. Thus, the black elite sought to reinvent the image of the black female. They took on white society’s norms and morals and instructed black women on issues from proper conduct on streetcars to appropriate colors for clothing. But, as Larsen illustrates in *Quicksand*, the politics of respectability promoted strict conformity and

erased individuality. The black elite censured people who engaged in inappropriate behavior. The Shiloh Baptist Church in Washington, D. C., required individuals caught dancing and drinking to come before a church court. The black elite also attacked jazz, perhaps the most significant contribution to American culture at the time. Echoing the thoughts of Helga Crane in the cabaret, they said going to jazz halls amounted to “ a voluntary return to the jungle.” Black women were no longer free to enjoy themselves without judgment. They became, like Helga, psychologically incomplete, needing sexual fulfillment but denied this by dominant society.

The politics of respectability emphasized that the individual determined the fate of the race. The black elite believed that individual behavior reflected on everyone. Higginbotham writes about the fear that Baptist women had of nonconformity to their morals. “ The Baptist women spoke as if ever-cognizant of the gaze of white America, which in panoptic fashion focused on each and every black person and recorded his transgressions in an overall accounting of black inferiority,” she argues. To keep everyone in line, the social elite intruded into the family life of black women. They linked poor eating habits with “ chewing, smoking, and...drinking.” The woman who kept her house dirty became an “ enemy of the race.” Aside from nutrition and housekeeping, the black elite emphasized that the dignified individual required good parenting and lineage. For people like Helga who came from broken families, this expectation made them outsiders. Helga struggles with the tainted image that she inherits throughout Quicksand. When she wants to marry James Vayle, his parents disapprove of her lack of family.

Lamenting the black social structure, Helga claims that “ Negro society, she had learned, was as complicated and as rigid in its ramifications as the highest strata of white society. If you couldn’t prove your ancestry and connections, you were tolerated, but you didn’t ‘ belong.’” By scrutinizing every aspect of personal life, the politics of respectability eliminated the individual in favor of the collective. It placed so many burdens on black women that Helga tries to escape her race. When she leaves Harlem for Copenhagen, Helga delights in “ that blessed sense of belonging to herself and not to a race.” But, as she quickly realizes, she could not sever her racial ties by changing location.

Larsen also dealt with the oppression of racial uplift and infused Quicksand with her personal experience. Like Helga, she had parents of different races. Her mother was Danish and her father was West Indian. Like Helga, Her mother later married a white man who looked down on Larsen because of her race. Larsen studied science at Fisk University in Tennessee and also took classes at the University of Copenhagen. In 1915, she went to the South and became the superintendent of nurses at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. She left Tuskegee because she disliked its teaching methods and went to New York City, where she began to write several years later. She published her first novel, Quicksand, in 1928. As an author of the “ New Negro” period, Larsen wrote for an audience that expected her to conform. Many leaders of the race believed that black literature should combat white stereotypes. In the “ New Negro,” Alain Locke argued that African-American literature should promote race pride. W. E. B. Du Bois wrote a review of

Quicksand for “ The Crisis” in which he compared the novel to Claude McKay’s Home to Harlem. He applauds Larsen for a “ fine, thoughtful and courageous piece of work,” but criticizes McKay for his emphasis on sex. DuBois describes the book as nauseating and says that it made him “ feel distinctly like taking a bath.” Du Bois enters the debate on sexuality and uplift in his review. He condemns Home to Harlem for playing into “ that prurient demand on the part of white folk” and praises Quicksand for portraying “ honest, young fighting Negro women.” He thus promotes the idea that blacks should suppress their sexuality to combat white stereotypes of their promiscuity. Du Bois shows that the black elite preferred to address sexuality indirectly or not at all.

Despite her conservative audience, Larsen criticized the goals of uplift and dealt seriously with female sexuality. Social expectations constrained her, but she asserted that black sexuality could not be ignored. Deborah E. McDowell, in the introduction to Quicksand, writes, “ Larsen wanted to tell a story of the black woman with sexual desires, but was constrained by a competing desire to establish black women as respectable in black middle class terms.” McDowell adds that because of the second consideration, Larsen could only deal with sex “ obliquely.” Larsen used Helga to express her thoughts on uplift and sexuality. She based the fictional Naxos on Tuskegee and had the same criticisms as Helga does of its social rules. Helga finds the social environment of Naxos oppressive and rigid. She believes that, although it was founded with good intentions, Naxos has turned into a machine. Helga claims that “ it was... now only a big knife with cruel sharp

edges ruthlessly cutting all to a pattern, the white man's pattern." Naxos teaches its students to give up their individuality, and associated sexuality, in favor of a respectable image. Larsen shows that even the smallest expressions of sexuality could not exist in this environment. The female faculty wears dull-colored clothing and becomes uncomfortable when Helga puts on "dark purples, royal blues, rich greens, [and] deep reds." Unwilling to accept social convention, Helga leaves Naxos when Dr. Anderson calls her a "lady," a loaded term in her mind. For Helga, it means giving up her individuality and being untrue to herself.

Although Helga defies social convention by leaving Naxos, she retains a preoccupation with "ladylike" behavior. In a situation reminiscent of the Harlem cabaret, Helga watches a Copenhagen vaudeville show in which two American blacks perform. Their "loose" movements embarrass and repulse Helga, who attends the show with her white friends. "She felt ashamed, betrayed, as if these pale pink and white people among whom she lived had suddenly been invited to look upon something in her which she had hidden away and wanted to forget," Larsen writes. The thing that "she had hidden away" is her sexuality. Helga wants to challenge the white stereotype of primitive, lascivious blacks, but she also wants to express her own sexuality. She shows that the politics of respectability prevented black women from releasing their sexual tensions. Instead, it bottled up their physical desires and allowed them to reach a near-boiling point. Higginbotham demonstrates that African-American women in the early twentieth century felt social obligations similar to Helga's. "Respectability, too, offered the black Baptist

women a perceived defense of their sexual identities,” she claims. Just as the white audience put Helga in a defensive position, black women fought a society that placed them in a negative role. The Woman’s Convention, Auxiliary to the National Baptist Convention, argued that the black woman “ must become a tower of moral strength and by her reserve and dignified bearing, defy and cower her aggressors.”

Although the black elite wanted to fight stereotypes, they often accepted them unwittingly. The politics of respectability assumed that blacks gave white people reasons to treat them unequally. Higginbotham argues that “ the politics of respectability equated nonconformity with the cause of racial inequality and injustice.” In this way, uplift made discrimination about supposedly improving black morals rather than combating white bias. Gaines claims that the emphasis on family life also shifted the blame for sexual misconceptions to black women. “ Such emphasis on family life as a racial panacea often treated the problem as a failure of blacks to conform to Victorian sexual mores, instead of an outgrowth of ongoing, systematic repression,” Gaines writes. Inspired by the black elite, this self-reproach contributed to a confused racial identity. Helga fluctuates between looking down on blacks and feeling connected to them. “ She didn’t, in spite of her racial markings, belong to these dark segregated people,” Helga claims. “ She was different. She felt it. It wasn’t merely a matter of color.” Helga goes to Copenhagen to escape her race, but finds that color is important there, too. Her Danish relatives support the stereotype of the exotic black female and make Helga into a sex object. Her aunt and uncle put her in bright

revealing clothes and exhibit her to their friends. Unwilling to accept this new role, Helga returns to Harlem and yearns to be apart of her race again. “ How absurd she had been to think that another country, other people could liberate her from the ties which bound her forever to...these lovable, dark hordes,” Helga muses when she returns to Harlem. The inability to define her own sexuality causes Helga’s vacillation between the races. In Harlem, she must repress her physical desires to be respectable. In Copenhagen, her relatives transform her into an object of lust.

When Helga returns to Harlem, she begins to express her sexuality, but in bizarre and misguided ways. Soaked and looking for shelter, Helga finds refuge in a church and has an experience that is both religious conversion and sexual liberation. Larsen blurs the lines between religious fervor and passion in this intense scene. She writes, “ as Helga watched and listened gradually a curious influence penetrated her; she felt an echo of the weird orgy resound in her own heart.” After releasing her sexual frustration at the church, Helga seduces a preacher who helps her home. But her decision has far-reaching consequences. She enters a loveless marriage and becomes pregnant five times. Larsen equates motherhood with a slow death as each child increases Helga’s suffering. All hopes for her happiness end when she has her first child. “ She had ruined her life. Made it impossible to do the things that she wanted, have the things that she loved, mingle with the people she liked,” Larsen claims. Thus, Larsen argues that black women had to sacrifice their dreams to satisfy their physical desires. She criticizes the politics of respectability for offering either a non-sexual existence or

domestic servitude. McDowell argues that “Larsen castigates the dual price-marriage and pregnancy/childbearing- that women must pay for sexual expression.” By ending *Quicksand* with Helga pregnant once again, Larsen attacks social convention for the burdens that it placed on black women.

Helga’s mixed background further complicates her search for sexual satisfaction and happiness. She is unsure of where she belongs and how the politics of respectability affect her. When she leaves Copenhagen, Helga laments not feeling a part of either race. “Why couldn’t she have two lives, or why couldn’t she be satisfied in one place?” she thinks. At times, she wants to escape other black people and to forget the ties to her race. But when she travels to Copenhagen, she realizes that her white relatives treat her as only an exotic curiosity. Helga’s confusion is similar to what Du Bois refers to as double-consciousness. Du Bois argues that white perceptions of black people influenced how blacks saw themselves. Du Bois writes, “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself in the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.” Because Helga is a person of mixed background, the feeling of double-consciousness becomes pronounced. When Helga describes the Harlem nightclub as a jungle, she looks at the scene through white eyes. She accepts the stereotype of the savage black and stops herself from enjoying the dancing. Larsen writes, “She cloaked herself in a faint disgust as she watched the entertainers throw themselves about to the bursts of syncopated jungle.” Larsen shows the power of white stereotypes in black life. Helga lives with the fear of being

watched and analyzed. Even when she is free to enjoy herself, white ideas still influence her behavior.

Larsen not only deals with double-consciousness, but also grapples with what it means to be black. She examines whether being black can be a choice in *Quicksand* and her other novel *Passing*. Helga moves between black and white communities to find where she belongs. She attempts to move in with her uncle in Chicago, but the thought of having a black person in the family terrifies his wife. Rejected and desperate for work, she goes to Harlem, where she stays with Anne. But she grows tired of talking with Anne about the “ Negro problem.” Helga believes that discussion of the Negro problem only emphasizes black oppression. “ She wanted to be free from this constant prattling of the incongruities, the injustices, the stupidities, the viciousness of white people. It stirred memories, probed hidden wounds, whose poignant ache bred in her a surprising oppression,” Larsen claims. Unable to accept her inferior position in America, Helga leaves for Copenhagen to embrace her white relatives. Although her Danish relatives treat her nicely, they do not regard her as equal. “ True she was attractive, unusual, in an exotic, almost savage way, but she wasn’t one of them. She didn’t at all count,” Helga thinks at her relatives’ dinner party. Helga wants to return to Harlem when she realizes that she is different from her white friends. Because Helga needs to associate with black people, Larsen suggests that blackness is innate even for people of mixed backgrounds. Helga’s separation from her race is impossible.

Similarly, Larsen's connection to the black middle class affected her work. Because Larsen was a part of this class, she could not criticize the politics of respectability freely. McDowell argues that "however much Larsen criticizes the repressive standards of sexual morality upheld by the black middle class, finally she cannot escape those values." Although Larsen attacks the morals of racial uplift, she deals with sexuality within its framework. Larsen makes marriage and pregnancy the inevitable consequences of expressing physical desire. She writes after Helga sleeps with Reverend Green, "And so in the confusion of seductive repentance Helga Crane was married to the grandiloquent Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green." Helga's "repentance" suggests that she must atone for fornicating with Reverend Green. She never accepts Christianity in her heart, but uses it to cloak her guilt. The marriage also has inappropriate motives. Helga feels that she must marry Green because Christianity demands it. She neglects her husband and despises both motherhood and marriage. "For the preacher, her husband, she had a feeling of gratitude, almost amounting to sin. Beyond that, she thought of him not at all," Larsen writes. By ending with Helga unhappy and pregnant again, Quicksand suggests that no appropriate place for black sexuality exists. Larsen implies that escaping society's morals was impossible. Helga challenges them but succumbs to their consequences in the end.

The repression of black sexuality still occurs today. Cornel West argues that it is still a taboo in his book *Race Matters*. He regrets that black families, churches, and schools have ignored black sexuality. West believes that these organizations have neglected black sexuality to gain the acceptance of white

America. West writes, “struggling black institutions made a Faustian pact with white America: avoid any substantive engagement with black sexuality and your survival on the margins of American society is, at least, possible.” This “Faustian pact” has caused many black women to treat their physical desires with apprehension and disgust. Helga feels the psychological damage that the politics of respectability inflict. She searches for sexual fulfillment throughout the novel, and when she finds it, social expectations suffocate her. The title “Quicksand” alludes to the hopelessness of Helga’s search for happiness. The more she struggles, the faster she sinks. Ironically, the politics of respectability could neither inhibit white stereotypes of black sexuality nor improve race relations. More than seventy years after Larsen published *Quicksand*, West discusses the same assumptions that whites have of black sexuality. Because stereotypes are not always based on truth, the public-image campaign, promoted by black elites, could only achieve so much. Uplift also increased racial misunderstanding. The politics of respectability put black sexuality under the rug, but, by leaving it unaddressed, fostered contradictory images of black women. They were either sex-crazed or sexless. In this way, the politics of respectability obscured the fact that sexual desire is natural and failed to engage in a realistic dialogue.