

Colonialism: an identity eraser in 'quicksand' and in the poetry of cullen and be...

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Works of the Harlem Renaissance frequently explored themes relating to identity, culture, and heritage. Artists attempted to reconcile their identities with the limited amount of knowledge they had about their cultural identities as African people. As exemplified in *Quicksand* by Nella Larsen, “Heritage” by Countee Cullen, and “Heritage” by Gwendolyn Bennett, Western cultural domination due to white supremacy, the slave trade, and colonialism prevents African people from understanding their identities and their culture.

Helga Crane’s late conversion to Christianity in *Quicksand* by Nella Larsen reflects how Western cultural domination erases her racial and cultural identity. Historically, Christianity was forced upon enslaved African people in Western colonized areas. Many were forced to convert, leaving behind their traditions and culture. At the end of *Quicksand*, after living in multiple places and existing with various types of people, Helga feels unhappy and discouraged, until stumbling into a church and having a religious experience. She then

gave herself up to [faith....] Faith was really quite easy. One had only to yield. To ask no questions. The more weary, the more weak, she became, the easier it was. Her religion was to her a kind of protective coloring, shielding her from the cruel light of an unbearable reality (Larsen, 1928, p. 126).

Larsen describes Helga as “giving herself up to” Christianity, which can be interpreted as Helga giving up her identity, her self, to Western religion, which historically was used to justify slavery, suppress Black people, remove African identity and tradition, and regulate their actions through emphasizing

Western values and norms. To Helga, religion only required two things of her: “to yield” and to “ask no questions.” Christianity acts as a mode of regulation, forcing its followers to follow or yield to Western norms, ideals, and values. Also, it prevents African people from “asking questions” about themselves, because this White colonial religion does not have room for an African narrative. Thus, Christianity erases African history, heritage, culture, and identity. Taking into the context that this novel is titled *Quicksand*, one can easily connect the concept of quicksand to the feeling that the narrator describes in this passage. As Helga fights and searches for happiness and connection, she grows “more weary, more weak,” because in quicksand, the more one struggles, the faster one sinks. Quicksand can be interpreted as these White-dominated colonial systems that oppress Black people. Due to the exhaustion of constantly battling these oppressive structures, Helga submits or “yields” to Western religion, which represents white cultural domination as a whole. Religion then becomes “a protective coloring” for Helga, which implies a change of color due to this acceptance of Christianity. This new color “protects” her from her previous color, her blackness, by making her reject her racial and cultural identity. This White-dominated Christianity prevents Black people from exploring and accepting their racial identity through its historical erasure of African heritage.

Cullen’s emphasis on Christianity in the latter half of his famous poem “Heritage” reflects what Black people lost in terms of cultural identity when many were forced into converting to Christianity under White colonialist domination. In this lengthy poem, Cullen tries to reconcile an identity that he

cannot completely understand due to purposeful omission of African culture in historical Western narratives. Cullen reflects on Christianity: “ My conversion came high-priced;/I belong to Jesus Christ” (Cullen, 1925, p. 557). Cullen calls his conversion to Christianity “ high-priced” because of the historical context of enslaved African people being forced to convert to Christianity, reject their traditional African beliefs, and leave behind their heritage, thus leaving behind an extremely large portion of their identities. Along with this sacrifice, Cullen states that he “ belongs to Jesus Christ;” the word “ belong” evokes associations with property. A person owns property; the property belongs to the person. Cullen’s use of the word “ belong” emphasizes the context of enslaved peoples belonging to their White owners, who forced them to sacrifice their identities and convert to Western religion. Later in the stanza, Cullen states that he “ wish[es] He I served were Black [...] Lord, I fashion dark gods, too.” (Cullen, 1925, p. 557). In these phrases, Cullen attempts to reconcile and understand his identity with the knowledge that he has access to. Because of the lack of knowledge available to him about his heritage as an African person, Cullen can only use Christianity, a symbol of Western colonialism, as a means to understand himself and his blackness. Because he wishes for a Black God, Cullen emphasizes the need to understand his blackness and heritage through seeing himself in his religion. Due to the lack of images of Black people in society, Cullen’s ability to understand himself is compromised. Thus, his modes of understanding himself and his culture is limited through the omission of blackness in American culture, which is heavily based on the values of colonialism and white supremacy.

Unlike the two previous texts with their emphasis on Western religion as a means of restricting African people from understanding their cultures and identities, "Heritage" by Gwendolyn Bennett is devoid of Biblical imagery; however, Bennett portrays Africa as a utopian society due to colonialism omitting any realistic images of Africa from history, leaving the narrator of the poem to create images of Africa for herself in order to make sense of her cultural identity. In this fairly short piece, Bennett (1923) refers to Africans as a "strange black race," in which the word "strange" refers to unfamiliarity (p. 508). Bennett reflects on how Black Americans feel disconnected to their African roots, mainly because they do not know about their exact heritage or culture, and American society makes it difficult or impossible to find out information about it, due to the omission of African culture from mainstream American society, which again, is highly intertwined with colonialism and white supremacy. Overall, this poem focuses on images that verge on utopian, depicting "slim palm trees," "sunset[s]," and "the stars." Because Bennett has no access to information of her actual heritage, she must imagine it herself, leaving it up to her interpretation. The only African history that made its way into mainstream American knowledge is the history of Ancient Egypt, which Bennett refers to through "the Nile" and "the Sphinx." Through utopian and Egyptian imagery, Bennett attempts to understand an identity while she does not have access to all of the knowledge about the identity due to historical erasure.

In Quicksand by Nella Larsen, "Heritage" by Countee Cullen, and "Heritage" by Gwendolyn Bennett, the authors attempt to understand themselves and

their culture with the limited knowledge that is available to them. Due to white colonialism and the historical erasure of people of color, the modes of understanding are compromised due to the omission of information, and thus prevent people of color from fully understanding their identity, especially in relation to culture and heritage.

References

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