

American Women Writers

QUICKSAND AND PASSING



NELLA
LARSEN

EDITED BY
DEBORAH E. MCDOWELL

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AND

PASSING



NELLA LARSEN

Edited and with an Introduction by

DEBORAH E. MCDOWELL

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INTRODUCTION

Until the early 1970s when previously “lost” work by women writers began to be recovered and reprinted, Nella Larsen was one of several women writers of the Harlem Renaissance relegated to the back pages of that movement’s literary history, a curious fate since her career had such an auspicious beginning. Touted as a promising writer by blacks and whites alike, Larsen was encouraged by some of the most influential names on the 1920s arts scene. Walter White, onetime director of the NAACP, read drafts of *Quicksand* and urged Larsen along to its completion. Carl Van Vechten, popularly credited with promoting many Harlem Renaissance writers, introduced the novel to his publisher, Knopf. These efforts paid off. Larsen won second prize in literature in 1928 for *Quicksand* from the Harmon Foundation which awarded outstanding achievement by Negroes. *Quicksand* was also well received by the critics. In his review of the novel W. E. B. DuBois, for example, praised it as the “best piece of fiction that Negro America has produced since the heyday of Chesnutt.”¹ *Passing* was equally well received. One reviewer gave the novel high marks for capturing, as did no other novel of the genre, the psychology of racial passing with “consummate art.”² Due largely to the success of these first two novels, Larsen won a Guggenheim in 1930—the first black female creative writer to be so honored—to do research on a third novel in Spain and France. That novel was never published.

NOTES TO INTRODUCTION

1. W. E. B. DuBois, *Voices of a Black Nation: Political Journalism in the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Theodore G. Vincent, reviews of *Home to Harlem*, and *Quicksand* (San Francisco: Ramparts, 1973), p. 359.
2. "The Browsing Reader," *The Crisis* 36 (July 1929): 234.
3. For the full accusation and the explanations that Larsen and her editor provided, see "Our Rostrum," in *The Forum* 83 (1930): 41.
4. For additional biographical information, see Mary Helen Washington, "Nella Larsen: Mystery Woman of the Harlem Renaissance," *Ms.*, December 1980, pp. 44-50; Adelaide Cromwell Hill's introduction to *Quicksand* (New York: Collier-Macmillan, 1971); and the definitive biography of Nella Larsen by Thadious Davis forthcoming from LSU Press. I would like to thank Thadious Davis and Charles Larson for new information about Larsen that allowed me to correct errors in this fourth printing.
5. See for example, Hiroko Sato, "Under the Harlem Shadows: A Study of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen," in *The Harlem Renaissance Remembered*, ed. Arna Bontemps (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1972), p. 84, and Amritjit Singh, *The Novels of the Harlem Renaissance* (University Park and London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976).
6. Jessie Fauset, *There Is Confusion* (1924; rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1974), p. 292.
7. "The Gilded Six Bits" in *Spunk: The Selected Short Stories of Zora Neale Hurston* (Berkeley: Turtle Island Foundation, 1985), pp. 54-68.
8. Zora Neale Hurston, *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948; rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1974), pp. 310, 311.
9. During the nineteenth century, black women formed a network of clubs throughout the country, in which politically minded black women were com-

Notes to Introduction

mitted to racial uplift (or Negro improvement). The clubs were largely unaffiliated until they convened in Boston in 1895 for their first national conference and became the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) in 1896. Predating both the NAACP and the Urban League, the NACW was the first national black organization with a commitment to racial struggles. For a detailed description of the activities of the organization see "Black Feminism versus Peasant Values" in Wilson J. Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1978), 103-31.

10. Founded and edited by Mrs. Ruffin, a social activist, *The Woman's Era* was the first magazine in the United States to be owned, published, and managed exclusively by black women.

11. Quoted in Moses, *Golden Age*, p. 115.

12. Though Harriet Wilson's recently discovered novel, *Our Nig* (1859), predates these novels influenced by the efforts of the club movement, the emphasis on the priceless gem of virginity is still strong. See the Vintage edition of the novel edited and with an introduction by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., New York, 1983.

13. For a discussion of black women blues singers see Michele Russel's "Slave Codes and Liner Notes," in *But Some of Us Are Brave*, ed. Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (Old Westbury: The Feminist Press, 1982), pp. 129-40.

14. *The Messenger*, 9 (September 1927), p. 150.

15. Carole Vance, "Pleasure and Danger: Toward a Politics of Sexuality," in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole S. Vance (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 1. For an excellent discussion in Vance's anthology, of the sexuality of black women, see Hortense Spillers, "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words," pp. 73-100. See also Rennie Simson, "The Afro-American Female: The Historical Context of the Construction of Sexual Identity," and Barbara Omolade, "Hearts of Darkness," both in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow et. al (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983).

16. Singh, *Novels of the Harlem Renaissance*, p. 25.

17. Nathan Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 188-89.

18. In a statement well known to students of The Harlem Renaissance, DuBois argued, "All art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists." ("Criteria of Negro Art," in *W. E. B. DuBois: The Crisis Writings*, ed. Daniel Walden [Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett, 1972], p. 288). In a section of this essay which has interesting implications for Larsen's treatment of black female sexuality, DuBois describes two plays, "White Cargo" and "Congo." In the first,

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A NOTE ON THE TEXTS

This edition of Nella Larsen's two novels has been reset, based on original editions. *Quicksand* was originally published by Alfred A. Knopf in 1928, and *Passing*, also issued by Knopf, appeared in 1929. The only significant editorial emendation occurs on p. 182 of *Passing*, where the word "sardony" in all likelihood is a mistake for "irony" and has been changed accordingly.

To make these texts from the 1920s more accessible to the contemporary student reader, brief annotation of unfamiliar references has been provided, although some obscure references (for example, "John Wellinger's suit" in *Quicksand*) could not be identified.

QUICKSAND



PASSING



For Carl Van Vechten and Fania Marinoff

*One three centuries removed
From the scenes his fathers loved,
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,
What is Africa to me?*

—Countée Cullen¹

Part One

ENCOUNTER



For the first time she was aware that Bellew was not in the little group shivering in the small hallway. What did that mean? As she began to work it out in her numbed mind, she was shaken with another hideous trembling. Not that! Oh, not that!

"No, no!" she protested. "I'm quite certain that he didn't. I was there, too. As close as he was. She just fell, before anybody could stop her. I—"

Her quaking knees gave way under her. She moaned and sank down, moaned again. Through the great heaviness that submerged and drowned her she was dimly conscious of strong arms lifting her up. Then everything was dark.¹⁰

EXPLANATORY NOTES

QUICKSAND

1. From "Cross" in *The Weary Blues* (New York: Knopf, 1926), p. 52. Langston Hughes (1902-67), known popularly as the poet laureate of Harlem, was one of the most prolific and versatile writers of the Harlem Renaissance. Primarily a poet, he published fiction, drama, autobiography, and journalism as well. The epigraph, featuring a speaker of mixed parentage, captures one aspect of Helga Crane's dilemma in *Quicksand*.

2. Naxos in Greek mythology is an island in the Aegean Sea, noted as a center for the worship of Dionysus, the God of the vine and youngest of the Olympian gods. Snatched from the womb of his mortal mother, Semele, Zeus sewed the unborn Dionysus in his thigh from which he was born. Because Dionysus was taken from his mother and also from Zeus, he was sometimes called the child of "the double door." Perhaps Larsen draws on this image of duality in her creation of Helga, the child of "double" origins. Naxos is also where Theseus forsook Ariadne (daughter of King Minos) after she had helped him out of the labyrinth. This theme of an abandoned woman has added implications for *Quicksand*. But more interesting than these speculations is the possibility that Larsen used the Naxos allusion as an anagram of "Saxon," to suggest the school's worship of everything Anglo-Saxon. See note 23 of my introduction.

3. Marmaduke Pickthall (1875-1936), English orientalist novelist. *Said the Fisherman* (1903) has Eastern color, movement, and sharp authenticity. Perhaps Larsen intends an ironic contrast to the dull sobriety and sterility of Naxos.

Explanatory Notes

4. Negro Women's League of Clubs: a reference to either the National Federation of Afro-American Women or the National League of Colored Women. The two groups united to form the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) in 1896, an organization committed to racial uplift (or Negro improvement). See note 9 of my introduction.

5. Wendell Phillips (1811–84) was a major United States abolitionist, orator, and reformer, born in Boston. Frederick Douglass (1817–95), distinguished antislavery leader and orator, was born a slave in Tuckahoe, Maryland. Booker T. Washington (1856–1915), black educator and reformer, was the founder and first president of Tuskegee Institute. W. E. B. DuBois (1868–1963), author, editor, and Negro leader, born in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, was considered one of the greatest American intellectuals of the twentieth century.

6. Anna Pavlova (1881–1931), celebrated Russian ballerina. Florence Mills (1895–1927), an internationally celebrated black dancer of the 1920s, was best known for her performances in *Shuffle Along*, the musical comedy by Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake, and in *Blackbirds* by Lew Leslie. John McCormack (1884–1945) was an Irish tenor and famous opera singer, while Taylor Gordon was a black singer during the 1920s. Walter Hampden (1879–1955) was a famous Shakespearean actor. Paul Robeson (1898–1976), black singer and actor, was famous for his performance in such Broadway plays as Eugene O'Neill's *All God's Chillun Got Ways* in 1924 and *The Emperor Jones* in 1925.

7. John Wellinger, probably an invented reference. The Garvey movement or the Back-to-Africa movement, headed by the Jamaican leader, Marcus Garvey (1887–1940), was considered the largest black mass movement in American history.

8. All these references are to places in the heart of Copenhagen.

9. Niels Wilhelm Gade (1817–90), Danish composer, is considered the founder of the modern school of Scandinavian music. Peter Arnold Heise (1830–79), was a Danish composer and song writer. Carl August Nielsen (1865–1931), Danish composer, is the best known today of the three.

10. "Everybody Gives Me Good Advice" was written by Alfred Brian, James Kendiss, and Herman Paley. Published by Mills Inc. in the early 1920s, it probably was an early vaudeville tune.

11. Kongens Nytorv (King's New Square), the former center of Copenhagen, was built along with the Charlottenborg Palace in the seventeenth century.

12. Antonin Dvorák (1841–1904), Czech composer. The *Symphony no. 9* (1893) "From the New World," his best-known work, includes many motifs from spirituals, including "Going Home" and "Swing Low Sweet Chariot."

Explanatory Notes

13. "Showers of Blessings," a hymn taken from Ezekial 34: 26, "There will be showers of blessings," was set to music by David Whittle (1840-1903) and James McGranaham (1840-1907).

14. Anatole France (1844-1924), French novelist and critic. "The Procurator of Judea" is considered his most memorable short story. Popularly regarded as anti-Christian and blasphemous, the story serves the ending of *Quicksand* well, for Larsen blasts the role of Christianity in the oppression of women.

PASSING

1. "Heritage," from a collection entitled *Color* (New York: Harper, 1929). Countée Cullen (1903-46) ranked with Langston Hughes as one of the most prolific poets of the Harlem Renaissance. Though written in almost every form of English verse, much of Cullen's poetry has for a theme questions of racial identity.

2. Idlewild, a summer resort in Michigan.

3. sons and daughters of Ham and Noah, a reference to the story in Genesis 9: 20-27, which justifies the Hebrews' enslavement of the Canaanites. Ham, the progenitor of the Canaanites and one of Noah's three sons, discovers his father drunk and naked in his tent. Noah curses Ham and condemns him and his descendants to be servants to Ham's two brothers and their descendants. In the Creation legends of black slaves, in punishment for laughing at his father's nakedness, Ham and his descendants will be "hewers of wood and drawers of water" and known by their dark skin.

4. The general strike in England occurred in 1926 and involved several industries, principally railways, road transportation, iron and steel, building, and printing. The strike lasted nine days.

5. "shine," generally an offensive term for a Negro; "sheba," a beautiful, often flirtatious young woman.

6. dicty: pretentious, snobbish; "fay" or "ofay" refers to a white person.

7. Josephine Baker (1906-75) was a black singer who started her theatrical career in the chorus of *Shuffle Along*, the musical comedy by Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake. Ethel Waters (1900-77), actress of stage and screen, was best known for her performances in DuBose Heyward's *Mamba's Daughters* (1938) and Carson McCullers's *Member of the Wedding* (1950).

8. "Kip" Rhinelander, of a prominent New York family, married a black woman, but divorced her because of his family's disapproval. My thanks to James

Explanatory Notes

E. Jong for this information.

9. C. P. time, or colored people's time, refers to being late.

10. In 1971 Macmillan issued an edition of *Passing* that ended with the following final paragraph, which was not included in the original 1929 Knopf edition:

Centuries after, she heard the strange man saying: "Death by misadventure, I'm inclined to believe. Let's go up and have another look at that window."

This closing paragraph does not seem to alter the spirit of the original in any way.



"*Quicksand* and *Passing* are novels I will never forget. They open up a whole world of experience and struggle that seemed to me, when I first read them years ago, absolutely absorbing, fascinating, and indispensable."

—Alice Walker

"A tantalizing mix of moral fable and sensuous colorful narrative, exploring female sexuality and racial solidarity."

—*Women's Studies International Forum*

Nella Larsen's novels *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929) document the historical realities of Harlem in the 1920s and shed a bright light on the social world of the black bourgeoisie. The novels' greatest appeal and achievement, however, is not sociological, but psychological. As noted in the editor's comprehensive introduction, Larsen takes the theme of psychic dualism, so popular in Harlem Renaissance fiction, to a higher and more complex level, displaying a sophisticated understanding and penetrating analysis of black female psychology.

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