“Race or Other Thorny Subjects”: The Race Problem and Social Scenes in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* and *Passing*.

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Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of the

Graduate School of Vanderbilt University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

English

May 12, 2023

Nashville, TN

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Dedication

To the memory of my dear father, S.T.S Waluvengo. I miss you every day.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to my advisor, Emily J. Lordi, for her guidance and support. I also acknowledge my DGS, Vera Kutzinski, who is always invested in my success, thank you. A big thank you to Abram Connor for his resourcefulness as I navigated this process, and to my friends and colleagues in the English department who have been of major impact to my learning and growth. Thank you for everything, big and small, it means a lot.

Special thanks to my lovely mom, Azibeter, for the prayers you utter for me every single day, your love and care keep me going. To my dear husband, Dismus, thank you so much for your love and support, and for always being there for me despite the distance. Thank you to my sister, Joan, for your love and for being such an amazing cheerleader!

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Introduction

The 1920s Harlem Renaissance is renowned for its extravaganza, characterized by the enchanting rhythms of jazz and blues, the expressive art of dance, theatre, and film, captivating literature, painting and other art forms that enraptured enthusiastic individuals eager to immerse themselves in the richness of the Black American culture. Amid it all, a vibrant coterie of Black American writers produced literature that was revolutionary and transformative to the identity and culture of Black Americans. Langstone Hughes in his autobiography, *The Big Sea*, remembers it as the period when "the Negro was in vogue" as the cultural and social milieu kept both Black and non-black revelers hooked to Harlem (228). Harlem served as the symbolic epicenter of cultural renaissance realized in social spaces such as nightclubs, music halls, cabarets, speakeasies, ballrooms, and house parties, which made Harlem a popular nightlife destination. The social scenes were a strong influence on the work produced by the Black writers of the period. Hughes recalls his fascination with Saturday night rent parties with their impromptu night long entertainment, cuisine, and an assortment of revelers from different walks of life:

> I wrote lots of poems about house-rent parties, and ate thereat many a fried fish and pig's foot - with liquid refreshments on the side. I met ladies' maids and truck drivers, laundry workers and shoe shine boys, seamstresses and porters. I can still hear their laughter in my ears, hear the soft slow music, and feel the floor shaking as the dancers danced. (233)

Thus, the artist in the midst of the Harlem vogue composed and produced literature that celebrated the social and cultural expressiveness of Black Harlem. These writers were committed to consistent counter-narrative discourses of identity that challenged stereotypical representations of Black Americans within mainstream American culture and advocated for social, political, and economic equality. Shane Vogel in his monograph *The Scene of the Harlem Cabaret*, states that literary artists "sought on the whole to redefine the meaning of Blackness and racial identity in American popular consciousness and to forcefully assert the role of African-Americans in the shaping of American culture" (3). Additionally, the literature by and large rejected the normative politics of racial uplift and sexual respectability[1] and turned to create alternative narratives of racial identity and representation in response to white supremacist ideologies. The "cabaret School" which, according to Vogel, comprised of writers committed to providing "new ways of performing, witnessing, and writing the racial and sexual self," used the scenes of the Harlem cabarets as material for cultural activism (5). Among these authors, Vogel identifies Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay, and Nella Larsen, among others.

Nella Larsen's novels *Quicksand* and *Passing* are notable exemplars of the kind of social life that dominated the scenes in the 1920s among the Black community in Harlem. Both novels portray numerous social scenes such as house parties, dances, cabaret, tea parties, and dinners that were pivotal in fostering Black racial consciousness and solidarity.[2] Regardless of the extensive scholarship on both texts, there is little inquiry into the seemingly problematic situations that arise from social interactions. Most critics are preoccupied by individual character plights[3] as they negotiate intersectional identities of race, class, and gender in a hierarchically racialized space, and less attentive to the collective construction of racial identity revealed within social gatherings. A closer investigation into these social scenes, which comprise of entertainment venues where strangers meet spontaneously as well as gatherings among friends and family, will allow for a better understanding of the complexities surrounding Black social relations. The Harlem Renaissance is often celebrated for its lively meetings and influential social groups. However, Larsen's portrayal of these gatherings in her work reveals a more complicated and fraught reality, which challenges the commonly held view of the period. In *Quicksand* and *Passing*, social events are mainly attended by Black people. From the outlook, these events were intended to create spaces for Black Americans to engage in unfiltered conversations around race, foster Black racial consciousness and solidarity, and provide racial security. However, instead of unifying, social scenes become atomizing and alienating. The coming together of Black Americans brings out deep-seated differences that individuals are unwilling to confront. Despite the hopeful and optimistic relationships that emerge from the social spaces of Harlem, Larsen's vision highlights the fragility of these connections and undermines this hope by exposing their flawed foundations. I argue that Larsen draws attention to the differences between individuals, in an attempt to repair the fragmentation that plagues Black relationships. Regrettably, the attempts at reparation in the novels prove futile as the social settings eventually become alienating to a lethal extend. My analysis of these two novels demonstrates that racial solidarity cannot be taken for granted; instead, it must be deliberately and actively generated through actions that recognize, address, and accommodate individual differences.

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[1] See Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "Politic of Respectability" in *Righteous Discontent*: *The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920,* pp. 185-229 for an extensive discussion on the requirements of respectability and representation among African Americans at the turn of the century.

[2] See Langstone Hughes, "Parties" in *The Big Sea: An Autobiography by Langston Hughes* pp. 243-249. Hughes details how parties and other social events became spaces where members of the New Negro group met and often talked about their literature and read poetry.

[3] Deborah McDowell, Cherry Wall, Claudia Tate, and Jennifer Brody are some of the critics whose scholarship on Nella Larsen is fundamental to the understanding of how intersectionality operates in the texts.

In this particular context, racial solidarity refers to the acknowledgement of Blackness as a common identity that creates a sense of belonging and inclusivity within the Black community. This form of Black racial solidarity is motivated by a desire for social interaction and community building, placing emphasis on fostering a sense of acceptance, friendship, and understanding that creates a safe space for people to exist freely despite their individual distinctiveness. Communal relations among Black people hold great value in providing significant social interactions and a sense of community, which are essential prerequisites in the struggle against racial oppression and towards achieving social equality and justice. During the Harlem Renaissance, Black Americans in Harlem expressed their solidarity through social interactions at various social spaces like cabarets, nightclubs, jazz halls, house parties and similar spaces, which served as common ground for bringing people together and fostering a sense of community among them.

Larsen's novels reveal that the fiction of a unified race whose people are brought together by similar social and political pursuits can be imagined and maintained only from a distance. Although some of these moments are generally filled with entertainment and humor, beneath the veneer of casual talk and polite acquiescence are racial anxieties, tension, and insecurity often disguised in, or diffused by laughter. There is an underlying precariousness in the fabrics of social cohesiveness and the public expressions of Blackness. Larsen presents the Black community as compromised in particular ways in relation to collective racial identity and loyalty yet unwilling to acknowledge this compromise. As the bourgeoisie and middle-class Blacks convene in gaiety at tea parties and other social events, there is always the threat of racial violence, of being ostracized, or relationships on the verge of breaking in the background. Ultimately, social scenes become imperiling and a reminder of the inescapable precarity that the Black community is subjected to as propagated by individuals within and outside the race.

I perceive apparent disunity within these social scenes that has been largely unaddressed by scholarship. This disunity, which I will analyze at length in this essay, is mostly unveiled through interpersonal interactions. The failure to address disunity and tension in the text proves fatal, as both texts depict individualizing death scenes at the end, where characters succumb to their alienation. Socially alienated, Helga Crane is entrapped in a spiraling loop of depression in

Quicksand. Clare Kendry in *Passing*, on the other hand, falls to her death during a Black house party in Harlem. Individual distinctiveness is expected in any group of people regardless of presumed similarities in cultural and racial identification. To build successful solidarity in the fight against white supremacy and racial oppression that is a common ill for all, such divisions must be confronted, and compromises reached for the accomplishment of this common goal. William T. Hoston in his study on Black solidarity and racial context, states that "Blacks view race as a factor that promotes loyalty, devotion, and pride of Blacks to bond against the social, political, and economic inequality in relation to Whites. In turn, Black solidarity propels an awareness of common racial identity, and the need for collective group action to further the interests of Blacks in America" (722)[4]. If viewed from this perspective, the predominantly Black Harlem provided grounds to foster solidarity and participation in initiatives aimed at promoting a united front against racial discrimination.

During the Harlem Renaissance, the neighborhood became a hub for both intellectuals and Bohemians who were interested in experiencing and learning about black culture. However, many were more interested in finding exotic thrills rather than truly engaging with the community. The cabarets and nightlife spots catered to this demand for "primitive" entertainment as Arthur P. Davis rightly claims (276). Langston Hughes was heavily influenced by this cultural milieu. However, Davis claims that Hughes depiction of Harlem in *The Weary Blues* reflected an "eternal emptiness…which depresses" and failed to capture the everyday life of the community (278). Davis suggests that Hughes, like many of his contemporaries, was too focused on the current trends of the New Negro Movement and failed to see the multi-dimensional reality of Harlem: "as charming and as fascinating as many of these poems undoubtedly are, they give a picture which is essentially false because it is one-dimensional and incomplete" (278). Davis discusses how Hughes' subsequent works witness an expansion of this picture to a three-dimensional one. For instance, poems like "Death in Harlem" and "Lenox Avenue" depict Harlem as fundamentally "marginal" and expose the precariousness of its economic foundations. The inhabitants of Harlem, which is now dull and sombre, "impress one as a beaten person" (279). Davis' analysis recalls Hughes' own admission in his autobiography that the "gay and sparkling life of the so-called Negro Renaissance of the '20's was not so gay and sparkling beneath the surface as it looked" (227). Larsen, a contemporary of Hughes, aimed to uncover the less visible side of Harlem. Despite its grandeur and glamour, the community did not always offer inclusivity and belonging to its residents. Larsen presents individual characters who belong to the race but are unable to reconcile their individuality with the collective identity consistent with racial loyalty and solidarity that the majority conform to. Through characters like Helga, James, Clare, Irene, and Brian, Larsen exposes the precarity of Black solidarity as she foregrounds difference that beckons attention and willingness to work through. Solidarity among the Black community might seem like a fiction in the way it crumbles frequently in the various social scenes I will examine; however, I see Larsen as exposing this fragility as an invitation to fashion alternative ways of forging stronger and more realistic relations among the Black community. Larsen's critique of the dominant social and cultural contexts, and skepticism towards the demands of racial loyalty brings to the fore the significance of engaged and critical dialogue necessary in establishing meaningful and effective connections.

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[4] William's study investigates the influence of racial context on Black solidarity and reveals several key findings. Firstly, Black individuals living in predominantly white environments showed greater levels of solidarity. Secondly, those who strongly identify with the Black community exhibit higher levels of solidarity, regardless of the racial context. Thirdly, Black individuals with higher levels of education tended to display lower levels of support for Black solidarity. Lastly, older Black individuals consistently showed higher levels of solidarity compared to younger Black individuals, irrespective of the racial composition of their environment.

I will proceed by analyzing the social dynamics in *Quicksand* and *Passing* respectively. *Quicksand* presents a clear racial divide in its social settings, with a predominantly Black population and a pointed critique of the place of whiteness. Essentially, in *Quicksand,* characters can view each other through the lens of their shared Black identity, and their interactions stem from this common ground. *Passing*, on the other hand, depicts more complex Black relationships, with fragmentation evident within interpersonal interactions. Racial passing, a more explicit theme in *Passing*, complicates the characters' racial positionality and challenges the composition of Black communal settings. Additionally, there are more white people in Harlem in *Passing*, and their presence is more accepted and integrated than in *Quicksand*.

From Vogue to Quicksand in *Quicksand*

Helga Crane in *Quicksand* is unable to blend in with the Black community in Naxos,[5] a boarding school in the South for African American girls where she teaches. She is part of, but separate from the common, seemingly unifying, social and racial ideology that the Naxos community subscribes to. Helga abhors the schools' emphasis on Anglo-Saxon conformity and the politics of racial uplift. These feelings of resentment are especially exacerbated by the "banal, patronizing, and even the insulting remarks" of a renowned white preacher who comes to Naxos (Larsen 2). Respectability politics preached in Naxos aspired to acculturate Black people to white standards of social and cultural life. Karen M. Chandler, who reads Helga as a melodramatic protagonist, notes that at the beginning of *Quicksand,* Helga demonstrates her rebellion against

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[5] Naxos is often read as a reflection of Tuskegee Institute, a historically black college in rural Alabama that was founded on the precepts of Booker T. Washington's philosophy of racial uplift. The institution was regarded by some progressive educators as the embodiment of contemporary educational theory. Nella Larsen served as assistant superintendent of nurses at Tuskegee from 1913 to 1914. See Deborah McDowell "Introduction" (xxxiv)
Also, Hutchinson, George, *In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line*. (91)

Naxos politics through "reading exotic literature that defies Naxos social conformity." Her apparent alienation and "difference from her enervative environment is designed to appeal to readers who are asked to endorse her quest for freedom from procrustean constraints Naxos has instituted" (Chandler 31). Larsen's portrayal of Naxos evokes the respectability and representational politics in Black culture in early 20th century.[6] Through Helga, Larsen is critical of the standards that are required to be upheld by an African American young woman in the era, standards which Naxos is designed to religiously inculcate in them. Helga is portrayed to be constricted by the meticulously controlled environment that Naxos is, in its restrictive orderliness and repressive shaping of character for its students and teachers. The demands for proper behavior, modest dress code, and moral correctness consistent with the respectability philosophy of the dominant social and cultural context produced a certain kind of Black person that is acquiescent and unthreatening to the prevailing status quo.

Generally, Helga feels alienated and is unable to establish residency in one place and her constant need to flee describes her restlessness and nonconformity to the Black social life of any given place. Chandler echoes Du Bois in reading Helga's "repeated conflicts and displacements" as typical of a fighting Black woman unbowed by delimiting circumstances and tenaciously unwilling to "surrender to hypocrisy and convention." Helga is thus "one representative of truth standing against society's hypocrisy" (Chandler, 32). Helga's restless and persistent lack of community building, which is crucial in fostering feelings of inclusivity and belonging, is reflective of the underlying precariousness of Black racial solidarity. Helga wanted to get away from Naxos "forever" (3), she "longed for immediate departure" (5) from "the South. Naxos. Negro Education" (3) which was fraught with hypocrisies, careless cruelties, air of selfrighteousness, and intolerant dislike for difference. Although Naxos is a formal academic institution for the Black Americans, Helga's departure (and eventually Dr. Anderson's) shows how the coming together in such a formal setting does not necessarily translate to unity of purpose.[7]

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[6] See Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "Politic of Respectability" in *Righteous Discontent*.

Like many Black Americans in this period, Helga moves North to Harlem which presents a befitting alternative for her:

> Thus established, secure, comfortable, Helga soon became thoroughly absorbed in the distracting interests of life in New York. Her secretarial work with the Negro insurance company filled her day. Books, the theater, parties, used up the nights. Gradually in the charm of this new and delightful pattern of her life she lost that tantalizing oppression of loneliness and isolation which always, it seemed, had been a part of her existence. (45)

Although Helga's move North is more by chance than by design, her initiation and acclamation to the social setting is swift and magnetic. She is taken over by the vivacity of the Harlem social scenes and a lively nightlife. The initial impression that Helga has is characteristic of the Newcomers to Harlem who were bewildered by the freedoms and entertainments that Harlem afforded. Langstone Hughes recalls how Harlem was alive in many ways, which characterized the daily lives of its residents and revitalized Black culture and art in a spectacular fashion. In the chapter titled "Black Renaissance," Hughes notes how the social and entertainment scenes in Harlem were attractive not just to locals but foreigners who streamed in to witness the spectacle that had Black people at the center of it all. He highlights the lodge parties, funerals, cabarets, weddings, drag balls, rent parties and so forth that kept multitudes streaming in to partake of the cultural vibrancy that took Harlem by storm. In *Quicksand*, Harlem was indeed in Vogue, and

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[7] The program at Tuskegee was criticized for conceding the supposed inferiority of the African American race. See Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*, 50-51

Helga thrived in it. The words “established, secure, comfortable” from Helga’s perspective depict a nature that is unlike her initial positionality in Naxos, and generally elsewhere in the novel.

However, this does not last as the restless Helga finds the social life, which was enchanting and thrilling at first, to be concurrently alienating. Helga started making “lonely excursions to places outside Harlem. A sensation of estrangement and isolation encompassed her. As the days became hotter and the streets more swarming, a kind of repulsion came upon her. She recoiled in aversion from the sight of grinning faces and from the sound of the easy laughter of all those people” (47-48). Helga feels the pressure to conform to normative social groupings with assumed racial homogeneity, which takes a toll on her. This is especially challenging as she feels like an outsider due to the conflict between her initial attraction to the superficial charm of Harlem and her sense of individuality. She sees herself as distinct from “all those people” immersed in the Harlem cultural atmosphere. Helga’s specific sources of repulsion are particularly evident in social settings where Black Americans gather for various events. There is a glaring disparity in their worldview which is often glossed over or disregarded by most. First, Helga does not subscribe to racial politics of allegiance which is a main subject of social meetings. Secondly, she finds the obsessive focus on race, which she soon discovers to harbor underlying hypocrisy, repulsive. The numerous tea meetings that Helga attends in New York fail to stir in her the passion that most members of the Black community seem to hold concerning racial solidarity and loyalty. Helga finds the meetings “boring beyond endurance, insipid drinks, dull conversations, stupid men” (51). She abhors the preoccupation that the attendees of such gatherings have with topics of racial discrimination. She wonders why they didn’t find “anything else to talk about” and why the race problem always crept in (52). For being a period when Black people were being recognized more and their work published as well as their cultures widespread through art, music, performance, and so forth, race was an inevitable topic at such gatherings. It is of interest, therefore, that Larsen's protagonist resists the very foundational engagements with social issues perceived to be instrumental in challenging white supremacy and racial oppression. Through Helga, Larsen perceives a gap in the way Black identity and community is constructed. Helga seems to have a desire to belong to a group of Black people – a community within which she could feel safe and create sustainable connections. However, whatever she seeks is inaccessible and instead of feeling welcome, she fears the judgement that could potentially arise from her expression of conflicting views.

The feeling of alienation slowly but steadily separates Helga from the community exposing her to otherwise avoidable ruination. Belonging to a particular group can provide a sense of security, but this security is contingent upon recognizing and respecting individual differences. Tommie Shelby argues for the rejection of the notion that Black emancipation requires cultivating a collective Black identity. While Black solidarity is crucial to the fight against racial injustice, forging bonds among blacks does not necessitate a collective identity which she perceives as creating "undue constraint on individual freedom, and is likely, in any case, to be self-defeating" (235). She further argues for the disentanglement of the call for Black solidarity from the call of collective identity by focusing on the shared experience of antiblack racism and a joint commitment to ending it. This way an emancipatory Black solidarity that is not tied to a particular racial, ethnic, cultural, and/or national identity can be cultivated.[8] Shelby's claim presents an alternative for individuals like Helga to become productive members of the Black community in

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[8] Shelby is a proponent of common oppression theory which proposes that "Blacks should unite and work together because they suffer a common oppression; and they can overcome or ameliorate their shared condition only through black solidarity" (232).

Harlem while maintaining their individual personalities and identities. This form of unity transcends individual distinctiveness in pursuit of a common good.

Anne Grey, Helga's friend and host, is obsessed with racial politics and the conditions of the Black people in the United States. Helga is revolted by how Anne is "obsessed by the race problem" in the way she "frequented meetings of protests subscribed to all complaining magazines, and read all the lurid newspapers…she talked, wept and grind her teeth about the wrongs and shames of her race" (48). Conversely, Anne is depicted as pretentious and hypocritical by the way she "hated white people with a deep and burning hatred. . . But she aped their clothes, their manners, and their gracious ways of living. While proclaiming loudly the undiluted good of all things Negro, she yet disliked the songs, the dances, and the softly blurred speech of the race" (48)[9]. Helga's reluctance to question the flimsy fabrics of racial loyalty located in characters like Anne, nor confront her own conflicted views regarding racial identity, fails to disrupt the structures of hypocrisy and division among the Black community. As such, the structures of racial solidarity flounder.

An important scene in *Quicksand* is the cabaret that Helga and her friends attend in Harlem. The Cabaret, an important phenomenon of the Negro vogue, celebrated Blackness, and Black culture in expressive ways. In his discussion of the cabaret scenes, Shane Vogel claims that among the African Americans, there were those who treated the Cabaret culture with suspicion for being at "odds with the project of racial self-definition" (Vogel 3). This was largely in relation to the tendency of the Negro vogue "to watch black sensuousness, exhibitionism, primitivism, and sensationalism" which was seen to contradict the advocacy for Black respectability and representation (Vogel 3). Concurrently, the Cabaret culture became material to critique the racial, sexual, and gender normativity within Black culture, and created alternative narratives of Black selfhood. The cabaret scene in *Quicksand* highlights the differences in perception among Black people towards racial loyalty and solidarity. Helga has a sarcastic reaction on entrance into the cabaret, "[she] smiled, thinking that this was one of those places characterized by the righteous as hell" (58). Her initial attitude predetermines her resistance to engaging in conversations around race and respectability that are bound to happen in such a venue. Although seemingly in tune with the occasion through her initial high-spirited dancing, Helga feels immensely alienated. For a moment, Helga enjoys the music and dancing. However, she is suddenly repulsed by her engagement in the gay entertainment, which she thinks of as primitive and her carefree dancing shameful: "she dragged herself back to the present with a conscious effort; and a shameful certainty that not only had she been in the jungle, but that she had enjoyed it, began to taunt her. She hardened her determination to get away. She wasn't, she told herself, a jungle creature" (59).[10] Helga's reluctance to become fully absorbed in the events of the night, and her sharp disapproval of the occasion highlight the advocacy for respectability standards of being, and the critique of the cabaret culture as stereotypically primitive. Vogel writes that for the elites within the Cabaret school, "the culture of the cabaret represented a regression and negation of the achievements of the race" that they hoped to oppose through counter-narratives of respectful self-presentation (9). Helga's attitude also brings to the fore the diverse opinions held by individuals towards the seemingly harmonious Black milieu.

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[9] The black middle class occupies a critical position in the social class hierarchy of the Black community, as it represents a level of success that many Black individuals strive to achieve, and it is often seen to aspire for middle-class lifestyles and behavior patterns of White Americans. Also see Shelby 250.

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[10] While in Denmark, Helga was repulsed by the performance of two African American men during a circus act, which she considered primitive. This performance reflexively reminded her of the 'jungle-ness' within herself that she detested.

It is within this social scene at the cabaret that Anne's hypocrisy regarding racial solidarity is unveiled. The transient façade of unity in thought crumbles over the case of Audrey Denney, a Black woman who can pass for white and, allegedly, frequently socializes with white people. Anne is enraged by the presence of Audrey Denney at the cabaret. She considers Audrey Denney a "disgusting creature… [who] ought to be ostracized" (60). Anne claims that Audrey's behavior is outrageous and treacherous: "That's what's the matter with the Negro race. They won't stick together. She certainly ought to be ostracized. I've nothing but contempt for her, as has every other self-respecting Negro" (61). Anne's diatribe expresses the idea that being physically considered Black entail an inherent obligation to exhibit unwavering racial loyalty with Black people. Her disdain and animosity towards Audrey stem from this fundamental expectation. This scene highlights the inclusivity of the communal Black space, which welcomes Black people like Audrey, who acknowledge their racial ambiguity while still desiring recognition and involvement within the black community. However, the very space in which Black people need to feel safe, becomes a potential environment for violence and humiliation. The idea of ostracizing the likes of Audrey dangerously borders racial violence. The rest of the group, except Helga, "seemingly agreed with Anne" which implies their refusal to challenge Anne rather than their acceptance of her claims(62). Helga disagrees with Anne's viewpoint and challenges the generalization that all Black people should hate people like Audrey Denney. Helga feels "envious admiration" towards Audrey who had the "courage, so placidly to ignore racial barriers" (62). Racial passing, although not explicitly engaged in *Quicksand*, becomes a point of contention in a typical Black only space. The refusal and intolerance of people like Audrey who can traverse the color line, and the reluctance to have amicable conversations around the topic of race create a rift among the Black community. It is material for hushed gossip rather than open conversation. This forecloses the possibilities of concession and accommodation integral to racial solidarity. Moments like these call for a re-evaluation of Black identity and unity in a critical way that fails to take root within the text. In an era when proper racial behavior conformed to particular standards of modesty, propriety, and conventional racial and gender standards, Audrey Denney symbolizes a regression. Audrey becomes an element of nonconformity and ambivalence which, for people like Anne, represented a counter-narrative to the politics of respectability and racial solidarity. The reader is not privy to Audrey's perspective, but her disruptive presence and her disregard of the same in her persistence in attending Black events despite being unwelcome suggests her yearning to belong, which is consistently denied. The racial tension, anxiety, and hatred for whiteness that Anne harbors is said to have the potential of "bursting into dangerous malignant flames" (48); a situation that is, unfortunately, more palpable in such social settings meant to be safe spaces for Black people.

Helga, although among friends and acquaintances, feels out of place, isolated, and opposed. This is coupled with her admiration of people like Audrey who refuse to be limited by racial allegiances. Ultimately, a "cold, unhappy, misunderstood, and forlorn" Helga runs not only out of the cabaret in New York, but eventually out of America to Denmark (62). From a distance, the scene of the cabaret looks indeed spectacular. However, when examined closely, the coherence crumbles as something more mundane and incongruous is revealed under the superficial performance of normative race and gender identities. To an extent, such gatherings are problematic because they are composed of people who assume they are Black and ought to talk and behave in a certain way, instead of feeling that they should be Black together. A social space of acceptance and belonging is rendered impossible since individuals are not willing to acknowledge and confront their differences in the interest of racial solidarity. Individual distinctiveness, which is inevitable in any group of people, is symbolized by the descriptive language enumerating the revelers at the cabaret: “A dozen shades slid by. There was sooty black, shiny black, taupe, mahogany, bronze, copper, gold, orange, yellow, peach, ivory, pinky white, pastry white” (59). As the people gathered in such spaces are a tapestry of different tones and complexions, they might, if allowed to speak their mind, reveal as much difference in ideas and opinions regarding Black identity. Larsen presents the precarity and fiction of Black solidarity and pursues the need to acknowledge differences as preliminary to the possibilities of more realistic relations among Black people.

On her return to New York from Denmark, Helga immerses herself back into the Harlem social life, which is now witnessing more white revelers. Although common among the Blacks in New York, newcomers, like James Vayle at the Tavenors’ party are shell-shocked to witness the mixing of races in an otherwise Black space. James, Helga’s ex-fiancée who is now the Assistant Principal at Naxos, is a strong proponent of racial allegiance and exclusive Black racial cohesion. Unlike many newcomers who take to Harlem like fish to water, James does not like the “rush, lack of home life, the crowds, the noisy meaninglessness of it all” (102). James particularly despises the presence of white individuals among African Americans. Similarly, Anne and several other people at the party exhibit their disapproval and discomfort towards the attendance of white guests. The feelings towards this mixing especially in Black spaces, are however, not openly confronted, or are dismissed casually in the way Helga identifies Hugh Wentworth as an acceptable African American ally.[11] James perceives the encroachment of whiteness into such spaces as a threat to the unity and identity of Black Americans.[12] His attitude implies that racial oppression operates on a collective level, necessitating absolute Black cohesiveness as a vital component in advancing the struggle against racial oppression.

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[11] It is worth to note that there is a commonly held belief that the character of Hugh Wentworth who appears in both *Quicksand* and *Passing,* is based on Carl Van Vechten, a close friend of Larsen.

[12] See Mary Herring, et al. “Pro-Black Doesn’t Mean Anti-White: The Structure of African-American Group Identity.”

James, perhaps given his former familiarity with Helga, to whom he was previously engaged to marry, brings up the question of marriage and childbirth and a fascinating conversation that highlights conflicting perceptions ensues. For Helga, Negro progeny is sinful as it means "adding unwanted, tortured Negroes to America" who are doomed to endure wounds to the flesh and spirit as other Black Americans have endured (103). James, on the other hand, feels strongly about Black Americans, especially those of higher economic and social standings, having children in order to raise a generation with better bargaining power in a white dominated society. Such discrepancies are not apparent outside of social gatherings and 'difficult' conversations. Often, people tend to avoid engaging in discussions about race that may bring up uncomfortable topics or reveal their biases and personal opinions to others. In this scene, Larsen attempts an intervention by providing an opportunity for Black Americans to acknowledge and talk through their differences. The aim is not necessarily to agree to one way of thinking about race and its social and individual implications, but to acknowledge that there is division which, if it remains unaddressed, can lead to drastic consequences. Following James and Helga's conversation, a point of concession can only be reached in cases where people are able to have amicable conversations without need for pretense and polite conformity. Larsen demonstrates that social events attended by Black people have the potential to initiate racial solidarity and protest that push back against normalized narratives of racial identity presentations. Helga rejects the idea of marrying James due to his alignment with racial politics of respectability and presentation which she does not agree with[13]. Seemingly, none of them is willing to compromise.

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[13] See McDowell "Introduction" (xx)

Despite Dr. Anderson's previous sexual advances towards her, Helga is disappointed when he rejects her desire for a more intimate relationship. This rejection deeply humiliates her, and she feels a sense of disconnection from the Black community since she has not formed any strong friendships within it. Feeling alone and mentally tormented, Helga seeks refuge from a heavy downpour by entering a church. Her miserable, forlorn self, encounters a transformational moment in a social setting that is dramatically disparate from the nightlife social scenes of Harlem she frequented. Helga's hysterical laughter is inspired by the "ridiculousness of herself in such surroundings" and the irony of the song "showers of blessings" (111). Helga "felt herself in the presence of nameless people, observing rites of a remote obscure origin" (113), which compares to her feeling at the cabaret whose sensuality and eroticism she considered primitive and jungle. Helga's physiological incompetence is compounded by her disorientation amidst an overwhelmed and overwhelming congregation which interprets her posture and mannerism for repentance and willingness to join the 'flock.' Helga, the new convert, symbolically transitions from one form of the Harlem social system to the other, whose members unanimously claim her: "From those about her came a thunder-clap of joy. Arms were stretched toward her with savage frenzy" (114). Helga's moment of reflection, after the dramatic and primitive conversion, is a major turning point: "The thing became real. A miraculous calm came upon her. Life seemed to expand, and to become easy. Helga Crane felt within her a supreme aspiration towards the regaining of simple happiness, a happiness unburdened by the complexities of the lives she had known" (114). Helga's embrace of religion could be interpreted as a way to satisfy her longing for acceptance and a sense of belonging that has plagued her throughout the novel, propelling her from one place to another.

The precipitate decision to marry Reverend Green and relocate to Alabama, leaving "the sins and temptations of New York," becomes Helga's quicksand. She is lured in with the promise of both sexual freedom[14] and spiritual fulfillment, which she was unable to find in Harlem, but ultimately becomes entrapped by poverty, illness, uncertainty, regret, immobility, and the familiar feelings of dissatisfaction and asphyxiation. Although she yearns to regain the freedom of movement she once enjoyed and leave the depressive state, her "too weak, too sick" body exacerbated by the physical strain of successive childbearing, combined with her obligation to her children dooms her to ruin (135). McDowell states that "*Quicksand* likens marriage to death," a condition within which Helga is enmeshed as she gets "entombed once again" with successive childbearing (xxi). I read Helga's predicament as resultant from the failure of accommodation in the social sphere of Harlem. Her decision to relocate to Alabama is motivated by a mix of personal aspirations and restlessness as illustrated earlier, as well as the inability to reconcile her own individual identity and views on racial solidarity with the collective norms prevalent in the social circles of Harlem. Helga is symbolically ostracized by the social system that fails to recognize and understand her distinctiveness. In the final moments of *Quicksand*, Helga is in labor with her fifth child, which predictably sends her back "down into that appalling blackness of pain" experienced in her previous childbirths (128). This ongoing, cyclical situation represents the sense of alienation and isolation that she has endured throughout the novel, ultimately leading to this grim struggle that seems inescapable.

"The Burden of Race" and the Crisis of Fragmentation in *Passing*

My interpretation of *Passing* differs slightly from that of *Quicksand* due to its distinctive construction of individual identity and social relations. In *Quicksand*, the racial color line is clearly defined, with the assumption that everyone present in a given place is Black, and any White people present are easily distinguished from the rest. For instance, Audrey Denney's tendency to pass for white is common knowledge among her associates. However, in *Passing*, Blackness is portrayed as more fractured, to the extent that it becomes difficult to determine who is Black. As characters traverse the color line back and forth, potential solidarity is disrupted by even deeper fractures in identity and social relations. In *Passing*, Larsen utilizes the plot of racial passing to present a variety of subplots that highlight the tensions and struggles of race, sexuality, class, and identity among Black people. Most criticism on *Passing* focus on race and sexuality as the main concerns of this complex narrative. Cheryl Wall, who reads *Passing* as a tragic mulatta story, argues that *Passing* represents "both the loss of racial identity and denial of self required to women who conform to restrictive gender roles" (358). This argument which identifies race as the major focus of the novel is supported by Jennifer Brody, who argues that *Passing* is a "mediation of race in relation to sexuality and class," proposing that race is the centerpiece of the other themes like sexuality and class evident in the novel (394). Deborah McDowell, on the other hand, chooses to analyze *Passing* from a purely sexual angle asserting that the racial passing plot hides underneath it the "most dangerous story...of Irene's awakening sexual desire for Clare" (xxvi). According to McDowell, Larsen's implicitness on the issue of a lesbian relationship between Irene and Clare is because it is "too dangerous a move" to explore during this period in time. McDowell concludes that Clare at the end of the novel becomes "a kind of sacrificial lamb on the altar of social and literary convention," whose death signifies the futility of constructing a non-conforming identity (xxx). Examining the events that surround Clare, finally leading to her death, McDowell overlooks the fact that, underneath this seeming admiration and seduction, lies deep ideological conflicts and misunderstanding between Clare and Irene. Moreover, as I illustrate, these conflicts are realized in social settings that reveal underlying frameworks to the construction of racial unity and community among Black Americans in Harlem.

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[14] Deborah McDowell posits that Helga decides to marry Reverend Green because she is "preoccupied with the issue of legitimacy." Sexual relations are perceived to be shameful and "the only condition under which sexuality is not shameful is if it finds sanction in marriage." Her marriage to Rev. Green, a preacher, is therefore, "legitimacy redoubled" (McDowell xxi)

In *Passing*, the Black community in Harlem engages in ritualistic tea parties, dances, and other prim and proper social events, especially among the middle class. These events, however, instead of unifying, only serve to expose glaring differences in the construction of racial solidarity, as well as a reminder of the inescapability from their predicament as always at the verge of racial insecurity. The social settings depicted in *Passing* range from chance encounters between Black individuals to more planned events like house parties and dances. Unlike *Quicksand*, *Passing* has more moments of levity and laughter, yet communal relations are more fractured. The laughter is not genuinely lighthearted, but rather serves to defuse moments of tension, cover up precarity, or displace the fear of being exposed as passing. Instead of confronting moments of disagreement and tension, the characters opt to laugh it off. As such, the unity in *Passing* is presented as much more fraught due to the characters' need to perform their identity in a particular way, constantly aware of the potential of being observed. As I will demonstrate, their laughter reveals their vulnerability and exposes the fragility of the social structures they are trying to uphold. Despite their attempts to maintain appearances, the characters' precarious situations are all too apparent.

During social gatherings of the Harlem Renaissance, laughter was often seen as a symbol of camaraderie – a way to express happiness about being together – and a marker of friendship and understanding. However, in Larsen's portrayal, this is not the case. There is looming danger disguised in moments of laughter and humor in the various social gatherings in the text. From the moment Irene recognizes Clare through her laugh which is "like a trill...like the ringing of a delicate bell fashioned of precious metal, a tinkling" (151), to the grim moment of Clare's death which brings to an end "the ringing bells of her laughter" (159), Larsen presents social moments of entertainment and humor not to construct friendships and mutual understanding, but rather to extend the tensions of race, class, and identity. The meeting by chance between Clare and Irene on the roof of the Drayton Hotel is a risky one because both women are passing and there is the possibility of getting caught. While passing affords access to spaces that are typically inaccessible to Black individuals, laughter – which is an outburst that draws attention – can jeopardize this opportunity and eliminate the potential for their Black identity to blend in with the whiteness of their surroundings. However, laughter, and in this case, communal laughter among Black people, denotes presence, but not necessary visibility. For to be seen for who they really are is dangerous to both women.[15] The meeting between Clare and Irene harbors underlying tensions carefully concealed in their cautious conversation in this public, social space. Irene's unfinished thought, "she's really almost too good-looking. It's hardly any wonder that she ____," (156) acknowledges the common fact of their passing but cannot name this action, even in thought. This kind of silence, which becomes complicity, attenuates the possibilities of mutual understanding and construction of racial solidarity. Irene's reflection on the contradictory attitudes towards passing as being both disapproved of yet condoned, condemned yet admired, avoided yet protected, reveals the division among Black people that remains below the surface of their assumed cohesiveness (186). It underscores the reluctance to confront and transcend the differences for the construction of meaningful communal relations.

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[15] Diego Millan examines Larsen's use of laughter as conceiving intimacy among women as opposed to exclusively addressing laughter as the expression of suppressed sexual desire. According to Millan, "At the same time, Larsen offers a space for thinking through laughter's relation to interiority rather than overplaying laughter's outward-facing subversive capacities." (107). Also given the twentieth-century modernist associations between primitive laughter and Blackness, laughter becomes a major trope with important resonances in African American literature in this period.

Larsen presents Harlem as a cocoon of Blackness, protected from toxic whiteness.[16] As such, Irene perceives Clare, who passes for white, as an intruder in Harlem, more so because of the underlying danger in case her racist white husband discovers Clare as passing. However, to Clare, Harlem signifies freedom, happiness, and safety. She desires to mingle with the Black people, "to see negroes, to be with them again, to talk with them, to hear them laugh" (200). Clare, to Irene's vexation, flaunts her passing and is not afraid in case her clandestine escapades in Harlem are discovered. Clare's passing gives her mobility and personal autonomy. She is free of the demands for conformity present in the Black culture and does not feel constrained by the requirement for racial solidarity and loyalty as Irene does. However, Clare's predicament is complicated by her refusal or unwillingness to choose a side. She wants to remain in her marriage on the white side as well as participate socially in the Black side in her elaborate doubleness. I perceive the social events in Harlem among the Black community as meant to signify racial solidarity, loyalty, and security. It is, however, within these settings that characters are not only divided in thought, but at the verge of racial violence and the threat of being ostracized. As the characters interact in social settings in which "race or other thorny subjects" (170) are suspended, there is often moments that offset this transient façade of tranquility, unveiling glaring differences in purpose, presenting disunity in matters of racial identity and politics, and reminding readers of the omnipresent threat of racial insecurity. Communal laughter insulates potential danger, jokes are volatile, and conversations are filtered to hide underlying disapproval.

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[16] A study by Bledsoe, Timothy, et al. "Residential Context and Racial Solidarity among African Americans." conducted in 1995 focuses on the influence of residential context – specifically living in predominantly black or racially diverse neighborhoods in urban or suburban areas – on feelings of racial solidarity among Black Americans. Their findings suggest that increased racial integration in America's large cities could potentially reduce Black solidarity.

The three old friends, Clare, Gertrude, and Irene meet for tea in a space where they are all unified by the fact that they can, and are, passing for white. Both Clare and Gertrude are ignorant of Irene's perception on "the hazardous business of passing" (157) as they regard her as an ally who also passes occasionally for convenience. Married to white husbands, Clare and Gertrude express their horror of having a dark child. Clare admits having "nearly died of terror the whole nine months before Margery was born for fear that she might be dark…the strain is simply – too hellish" (168). Gertrude, in complete comprehension, chimes in "[Fred and his mother] don't know like we do, how it might go way back, and turn out dark no matter what color the father and mother are," she says. "It is awful the way it skips generations and then pops out…nobody wants a dark child" (168). This horror is intensified by the revelation that one of Irene's sons is dark and her husband could not exactly "pass" (168). Gertrude is petrified: "Gertrude jumped as if she had been shot at. Her eyes goggled. Her mouth flew open. She tried to speak but could not immediately get the words out" (168). This conversation, which happens in a social setting and between old friends, ends up unveiling disparities in racial ideologies. Irene, a glorified race woman, does not subscribe to Clare and Gertrude's perpetual anxiety over the possible "popping up" of a dark child in the family lineage. She struggles "with a flood of feelings, resentment, anger, and contempt…a sense of not belonging to and despising the company in which she found herself" (168). The discrepancy in perception between the three women highlights a division that runs deep within the Black community but is complicated by the aspirations for whiteness by some Black Americans. Clare defuses this edgy moment with her "seductive caressing smile," dismissing Irene's concerns by ironically taking on the preposition "we" in reference to colored people, yet separating herself as "a deserter" at the same time (169). Irene objects the apparent tendency in the two women to condone the degradation of their own race simply because they have chanced to cross the color line. She is enraged and disapproves of the mocking of Claudie Jones while Gertrude and Clare roar with laughter at the thought of a black Jew. Clare and Gertrude participate in the stereotypical presentation of Black people whose attempt to develop and define an individual identity, like Claudie Jones, is scorned upon or ridiculed.

Sensing the tension, Clare steers the conversation "away from anything that might lead towards race and other thorny subjects" (170). Her brilliant "conversational weight-lifting" is violently interrupted by the entrance of Jack, Clare's white husband, also referred to as John Bellew. Jack, in his ignorance, refers to Clare as Nig. The supposed joke about how Clare, was "getting darker and darker" and might wake up one day to find "she's turned into a n*gger" (171) is perilous not only for Clare but to all three as representatives of Black women in the moment. The laughter shared by the three women, joining Jack's boisterous one, is not only due to the absurdity of the situation where Jack is the butt of the joke for his ignorance, but also insulates the potentiality of racial violence in this treacherous moment. Clare's ringing "bell-like laugh", Gertrude's "shrill" one, and Irene's uncontrollable "gales of laughter" are a befitting response expected by Jack from his presumed allies (171). Although Irene disagrees with Clare and Gertrude at multiple levels, she has to act along not only for her own security, but for the racial allegiance she owes to the two women. Candice Jenkins explains:

> By refusing to speak in the moment of Bellew's onslaught, Irene's black self is literally disappeared from the room, leaving only her "white" body to signify for her. Without her voice to constitute her blackness, however, that body can only "speak" whiteness, producing a crisis of identity for Irene, a self-identified "race woman," which cannot easily be resolved. (139)

The laughter of the women reinforces Jack's assumption of power, as he perceives their reaction to his joke as a validation of his racial beliefs. This severely impairs his ability to reflect critically on the suspicious and unusual nature of the laughter. Irene's prolonged, sarcastic laughter can also be interpreted as a form of opposition to the white supremacist beliefs embodied by Jack. There is a disruption of power in the ability to impulsively find humor in the insecurity that proximity to toxic whiteness imposes on Black bodies. Laughter is a talking back in the space and condition where any other form of verbal communication is denied. Additionally, Irene is laughing at Jack's arrogant white naivete which makes her laughter dangerous because carries it the power to displace white supremacist threats on Black identity. Glenda Carpio in the introduction to *Laughing Fit to Kill,* posits that "For black Americans, humor has often functioned as a way of affirming their humanity in the face of its violent denial" (5).[17] From this viewpoint, Irene's laughter can be seen as a testament to her humanity, which Jack menacingly denies her and her community.

While Irene is depicted as being deeply committed to matters of racial loyalty and uplift, her interactions with other Black people can be seen as hypocritical and exclusionary, as the social divisions and tensions present in public spaces begin to seep into her own domestic life. Clare's friendliness with Irene's Black servants disturbs Irene immensely. Diego Millan argues that "Irene's preference for stasis, an extension and consequence of her middle-class sentiments, is why she reserves her social wit for mundane social gatherings among other members of the Black middle class and why she "secretly resent[s]" Clare's familiarity with both her sons and especially her housekeepers" (114). Irene's life is preoccupied with dutiful attendance at middle class tea parties and other social events in Harlem. She is also charged with selling tickets for the Negro Welfare League dance. Clare's entrance into her life disrupts Irene's equilibrium and becomes a point of constant discomfiture which she is, at first, unwilling to confront. Irene is forced to acknowledge the present of the Black Americans of a lower stratum in her home. The existence of social divisions within the Black community along class lines highlights the harmful disparity that undermines efforts to combat the racial inequalities upheld by the systems of stratification.[18]

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[17] Carpio discusses the incongruity theory of humor in relation to Black laughter. This theory, which suggests that "we laugh when our expectations are somehow disturbed," can be used to understand the implications of Black laughter. It allows for "us to see the world inverted, to consider transpositions of time and place and to get us, especially when the humor is hot enough to push our buttons, to question the habits of mind that we may fall into as we critique race" (6).

Although Irene disapproves of Clare's 'white' presence in Black social events, she approves of white attendees at the Negro Welfare League dance. To Clare's curiosity to why the white people come to Harlem, Irene responds flippantly "same reason you're here, to see Negroes" (198). Irene's response calls to attention the white spectatorship that was common in Harlem at the peak of the Harlem vogue. Although fond of the social and entertainment scenes that Harlem presented, there are Black residents who disapproved of the white audience that transformed Black people and their expressive culture into a spectacle to be gazed upon. Langstone Hughes writes, "Ordinary Negroes [did not] like the growing influx of whites toward Harlem after sundown, flooding the little cabarets and bars where formerly only colored people laughed and sang, and where now the strangers were given the best ringside tables to sit and stare at the Negro customers – like amusing animals in a zoo'' (224-25). Although clearly discomfiting, the presence of white revelers at Black events was tolerated acquiescently. Irene specifies why "hundreds of white people of Hugh Wentworth's type" came to Harlem and attended events like the N.W.L dance. She tells Clare, "A few purely and frankly to enjoy themselves. Others to get material to turn into shekel. More, to gaze on these great and near great while they gaze on the Negroes" (198)[19]. Irene's response is elaborate. First there are those who are seen to be "purely and frankly" coming to find entertainment, 'innocently' it might seem, without other motives. The second group brings into play a form of economic returns by extracting profit through transforming Black people's culture into a trade commodity. Lastly, there are the spectators who view Black people as mere spectacles for viewing pleasure.

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[18] Sharon Collins argues that the black middle class holds a valuable but limited market position because it arose from specific political and legal safeguards. Despite their access to well-paying jobs, high incomes, and desirable residential areas, racial discrimination and inequality persists, limiting their power and influence (360). As such, they are still implicated in the systematic oppression of Black people as a whole which makes class distinction inconsequential.

In reference to Drag shows, Langstone Hughes notes how spectatorship turned Black performers into objects to be gazed at from a vantage point by the bourgeoisie and middle class patrons, "it was fashionable for the intelligentsia and social leaders of both Harlem and the downtown area to occupy boxes at this ball and look down from above at the queerly assorted throng on the dancing floor, males in flowing gowns and feathered headdresses and females in tuxedoes and box-back suits" (273). The up-down gaze that is produced in such a scenario does not only transform Black bodies into objects for viewing pleasure but also brings class difference into play. The rising middle class and bourgeoisie Black participate in the objectification of fellow Black bodies instead of being Black together with them. This recalls Irene and Wentworth at the Negro Welfare League dance event who sit and gaze at the others on the dance floor[20]. Sitting in her box next to Wentworth, Irene marvels at the crowd below: "Young men, old men, white men; youthful women, older women, pink women, golden women; fat men, thin men, tall men, short men; stout women, slim women, stately women, small women moved by" (204). The descriptive distinction of the masses below reveals an array of difference among the Black people. Although mingled with white guests, the dance scene recalls the cabaret scene in *Quicksand* which brough together distinctively different individuals. As revealed through the conversation between Irene and Wentworth in *Passing*, the influx of white attendees at Black events in Harlem, and the presence of Black characters who can pass for white, makes it difficult to establish the racial identities of some of the dancers as Blackness is no longer dominant. Therefore, the fragility of Black solidarity is more apparent.

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[19] Langston Hughes in *The Big Sea* states that the Negro vogue was "a period when , at almost every Harlem upper-crust dance or party, one would be introduced to various distinguished white celebrities there as guests" (227).
[20] Shane Vogel notes how during the Negro Vogue "the multiplicity and heterogeneity of Harlem's nightlife helped constitute both a normative white middle-class gaze and a normative black middle-class gaze" (10-11).

It is implied that the willingness to accommodate white companions in Black parties is partly motivated by the financial benefits that white attendees bring through the purchase of tickets. According to Hughes, "Non-theatrical, non-intellectual Harlem was an unwilling victim of its own vogue. It didn't like to be stared at by white folks. But perhaps the downtowners never knew this— for the cabaret owners, the entertainers, and the speakeasy proprietors treated them fine— as long as they paid" (229). Emily Bernard also discusses the implications of this situation. She states, "White interest in Harlem created the central paradox of the New Negro Movement. White financial support was essential to the success of the Harlem Renaissance, but it also forced restraints on black creative expression" (33). The influence of White visitors to Harlem affected the literature of some writers who "ceased to write to amuse themselves and began to write to amuse white people" which distorted their writing that was filtered so as not to offend "their American brothers of a lighter complexion" (226-227). *Passing* presents a fragmentation of Black cohesiveness at various levels, as the Black community's need for a consistent sense of responsibility to foster racial solidarity is complicated by the tendency to appease the white people in their midst.

Brian, Irene's husband, is critical of the influx of white spectators in Harlem, especially in events initially only meant for Blacks. He remarks that "Pretty soon the colored won't be allowed in at all, or will have to sit in Jim Crowed sections" (198).[21] Brian's attitude illustrates Hughes' claim about the discomfort that some Blacks expressed towards the attendance of white people in their parties noting how "The Negroes said: "We can't go downtown and sit and stare at you in your clubs. You won't even let us in your clubs." But they didn't say it out loud—for Negroes are practically never rude to white people" (225). Brian strongly disapproves of the white attendees as they threaten the security and homogeneity of places designated for Blackness and is openly skeptical about racial loyalty during private conversations. However, in pretentious solidarity, he dutifully accompanies Irene to the numerous social events around Harlem and is not seen engaging in any discourse that could challenge the racialized hegemonies that threaten the structures of Black expression and experience. Retrospectively, Brian is depicted as an escapist who desires flight from the racially charged ecosystems such as New York and America at large, to a less violent and discriminatory environment.[22] The presence of white patrons at the N.W.L dance, a traditionally Black-only event, highlights the ongoing influence of white individuals in Harlem. This also means that there were few spaces where Black people could congregate and enjoy each other's company without having to perform their identity in a certain way for the white spectator. Furthermore, the N.W.L dance appears to exacerbate differences in social status, class, and opinion within the Black community, potentially undermining the foundations of Black solidarity.

Irene disapproves of Clare's frequent visits to Harlem, and especially her home, which become a threat to her marriage and social status. Irene status as a middle class black woman is depended on her marriage to Brian. To Brian, Irene was "only the mother of his sons. That was all. Alone she was nothing. Worse. An obstacle" (221). It is at a social gathering – a tea party at Irene's house – that Irene plots on how to expel Clare, or the influence of whiteness, from the community of Black people. Irene's anger at the suspicion of an affair between Brian and Clare leads her to break a cup. Irene tells Wentworth a tongue-in-cheek story about how the cup was "the ugliest thing that [Wentworth's] charming Confederate ancestors ever owned" (222), and explains that she had never been able to figure out a way to get rid of it until the moment she broke it. She says, "I had an inspiration. I had only to break it, and I was rid of it forever. So simple!" (222). However, beneath Irene's outward composure, is boiling rage and deep hurt and hatred. I interpret the cup as a symbol of Clare, and just as Irene got rid of the irredeemable cup, she finds a way to rid herself of Clare. This could also signify the fragility of the threads that bind the Black community together, which can tear irreparably.

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[21] This was a reality in high end places such as the Cotton Club and Connie's Inn where "visitors to Harlem could take in spectacular Broadway-quality black revues designed to appeal to white audiences" (Vogel 2). Also see Hughes *The Big Sea*, 224.

[22] Although Helga in *Quicksand* is an escapist too, she does not demonstrate her sentiments in a similar fashion as Brian, who rudely articulates his desires to Irene.

Although Black people are presented as socially coherent, there are inconsistencies on individual perceptions of what Black unity should look like. Irene carefully veils the apparent disparity between her private and public expression of racial loyalty, something that weighs her down internally. Beneath the veneer of Irene seemingly polite tolerance of Clare's presence, are deep-seated conflicts between personal interest and racial allegiance. Irene's reluctance to let out Clare to her husband, Jack, is foreclosed by this conflict. Irene "was caught between two allegiances, different, yet the same. Herself. Her race. Race! The thing that bound and suffocated her. Whatever steps she took, or if she took none at all, something would be crushed. A person or the race. Clare, herself, or the race. Or, it might be, all three" (224). This dilemma unveils Irene's anxieties and burdened interiority over racial loyalty: "Sitting alone in the quiet living-room in the pleasant fire-light, Irene Redfield wished, for the first time in her life, that she had not been born a Negro. For the first time she suffered and rebelled because she was unable to disregard the burden of race" (225). This quote indicates that Clare's passing is not a problem for Irene, she is still in allegiance to Clare because she is part of the race. However, Clare's presence in her life, and her whiteness in Harlem are what Irene wants to purge.

It is, therefore, not surprising that Clare is expelled precisely while attending a party with the Blacks at the Freeland house. A social setting that is supposed to provide security – even from Jack – ends up eliminating Clare. When accosted by the hostile Jack, Clare reacts with absolute composure. This is a moment of triumph for Clare who takes pride in the synergy of the Blackness that surrounds her. Clare "seemed unaware of any danger or uncaring. There was even a faint smile on her full, red lips, and in her shining eyes" (239). Clare wanted to be free and was in just the right place to actualize her freedom. The statement that Irene, "couldn't have Clare Kendry cast aside by Bellew. She couldn't have her free" implies that Irene pushed Clare out of the window to her death (239). Irene needed to stay married, to maintain her "true woman" identity; in the same way, she wanted to be the proactive race woman by banishing the influence of whiteness from her race. The tension built up in the novel finally explodes as a setting that should be a source of entertainment and good humor for the Blacks in Harlem, turns out to be a grisly manifestation of racial insecurities. The reluctance of the characters to reckon with the differences among them and construct meaningful relationships despite these differences becomes imperiling in the end. Instead of being instances of genuine friendship and entertainment, social events highlight the vulnerability of the characters to fall victim to the peril of racism instigated by white intruders or insecure Blacks willing to stop the encroachment of whiteness into Black spaces at any cost. At the end of *Passing*, Clare dies sprawled on white snow in a Black neighborhood, and everything goes dark for Irene (242). This is reflective of the imminent blackness of pain that is about to engulf Helga at the end of *Quicksand*. Larsen ends both novels on a bleak note in which the characters are ostracized by the community that consistently refuses to accept their desire to belong. The characters themselves sometimes contribute to their alienation by failing to confront the aspects about the construction of Black racial solidarity that isolate them.

Conclusion

The impact of the Harlem Renaissance on America was far-reaching and long-lasting as the movement brought widespread attention to the extraordinary works of African American art. The portrayal of African American life, identity, and culture that emerged from Harlem reached a global audience, challenging the stereotypical presentation of African Americans. This transformed the perception of African Americans' cultural heritage, leaving an indelible mark on American society. However, a close look at Larsen's two novels indicates that there are other viewpoints that emerged from the social relations within the Black American community. Night clubs, music halls, cabarets, speakeasies, balls, and house parties were spaces where Black Americans convened and constructed connections that went beyond the individual to the collective identity. Through *Quicksand* and *Passing*, Larsen puts to trial the very foundations of racial solidarity and loyalty as social gatherings do not construct friendships and understanding, but rather reveal the tensions of race, class, and identity. Through her critique, Larsen does offer avenues through which the viability of a unified Black community can be upheld. For instance, through critical reflections advanced by Helga at the cabaret, the uncontrived conversation between Helga and James, or Brian's candid comments on how the Black community is compromised. However, the possibilities of constructing a safe community to which these Black people can turn, or return to, are very grim. Black Americans, especially Black women, in their interaction with others, seem to seek certain kinds of relationships within the Black community.

However, what they seek – be they casual social relationships or friendships or even romantic liaisons – is not fulfilled or accessible within the community of Black Americans in Harlem. These characters are either thoroughly alienated, lonely and broken individually, or always at the verge of violence. It is, therefore, no wonder that Helga Crane ends up a disillusioned mother of five stuck in a spiraling wave of depression and hopelessness, while Clare Kendry ends up dead.

Of Nella Larsen as a member of the Harlem literati, Cheryl Wall writes that “She never felt completely at home in Harlem, yet she lived there during its heyday” (11), and that after the publication of her novels *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929) “she disappeared from Harlem and from literature. She had been an outsider all her life” (11-12). Wall’s presentation of Larsen’s role in the Harlem Renaissance and her subsequent exit from the scene does shed light on the critique that I see her performing on the sociality of the period. The Harlem Renaissance was indeed spectacular, “It was the period when the Negro was in vogue,” Langstone Hughes states (228). Just like fashion, the Harlem vogue did not last. Hughes points out this contradiction in his frank reflections admitting to having thought of the period as interim: “For how could a large and enthusiastic number of people be crazy about Negroes forever?” (228). There were, however, those who thought this was the redemption they had always wanted. That the big break for the African American was finally here. However, both *Quicksand* and *Passing* give us a different picture at the end. The structures that keep racial injustice in circulation and disavow the possibilities of Black progress are so ingrained that the protagonists in both novels are unable to escape the predicaments of this broken system. The reluctance of Black Americans to engage in candid conversations about difference and confront head-on the issues that cropped up in their midst keeps racist exploitation of Black culture in circulation, as well as fails to construct racial solidarity that accommodates differences. Instead of unifying, social scenes become atomizing and alienating.

In addition, social events present moments of potential violence, racial tension, and toxic racism, either camouflaged in the humor of entertainment or pretentious conformity to the overarching assumed racial allegiances. There is often a transient façade of unity, which collapses unexpectedly, reminding readers of the disunity that exists among the community and the perils of racial violence. As such, social events among the Black community do not offer a distraction from their fears and anxieties; instead, coming together reminds and agitates the characters about their struggles with race, class, and identity. Despite many of the characters in the novel being part of the middle-class Black community, Larsen conveys the fact that none of them is exempted from the "race problem." The frustrations, disappointments, and sense of failure that accompany attempts to unite the Black community demonstrate that racial solidarity cannot be assumed but ought to be produced through concrete critical and political practices. Acknowledging and highlighting differences is crucial to achieve genuine racial solidarity and understanding. Although Larsen's representation of fractures within social groups aimed to promote unity, her fiction consistently demonstrates the failure of such efforts. This failure underscores the need to reevaluate the implications of social gatherings during the Harlem Renaissance and their potential to foster genuine racial relations.

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