ANTI-ASSIMILATIONIST POLITICS IN NELLA LARSEN’S *QUICKSAND* AND CLAUDE MCKAY’S *HOME TO HARLEM* AND *BANJO*

By

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На баба ми, Величка Пелова (1929-2007)

To my grandmother, Velichka Pelova (1929-2007)
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This thesis examines the gender, racial, class, and sexual politics of Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* (1928) and Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem* (1928) and *Banjo: A Story Without a Plot* (1928). I argue that Larsen and McKay both espouse what I call “anti-assimilationist” politics in their representations of race, sexuality, gender, and class, and that they do so by negotiating the marginal positionality of migrant expatriates of color who opt out of the related heteronormative and bourgeois imperatives to settle down, into either a geographical or family home. The novels represent characters whose migrations—both within and outside the boundaries of the United States—and sexual dissidence, queer or otherwise, pose a challenge to the constructs of race and nationhood as conceived within the framework of Western colonialism and the American racial uplift movement alike, and to the heteronormative gender and sexual roles that perpetuate colonial power relations.

Although Larsen and McKay share a commitment to anti-heteronormative and anti-colonial politics, they diverge significantly in their gender politics, particularly in their understanding of women and femininity in relation to negotiating social assimilation. McKay’s novels are marked by a tension between representing femininity as a fundamentally assimilationist subject position, complicit with colonial structures, and an awareness of women’s
fundamental disenfranchisement by those very structures. The ambivalence of McKay’s gender politics also informs the ambivalence of his sexual politics. On the one hand, by appointing Ray, a queer Haitian intellectual, and a central character in both of these novels, as his spokesperson against the related institutions of nationalism, colonialism, and the bourgeois family, McKay foregrounds queerness as a radically anti-assimilationist subjectivity. On the other hand, by often downplaying and subtextualizing Ray’s queerness, McKay suggests that queerness’s opposition to binary gender divisions is at odds with his project of mobilizing a kind of virile black masculinity against emasculating white colonial forces. Paradoxically, McKay can only espouse his ostensibly anti-heteronormative politics by marginalizing queer men and scapegoating women as unscrupulous participants in capitalism, colonialism, and heteronormativity.

Larsen’s *Quicksand*, on the other hand, represents, through its protagonist, a kind of femininity that consistently refuses assimilation by uplift and colonial frameworks alike. Reclaiming hysteria from its cultural history of pathologizing women and femininity, I argue, through a definition of hysteria much closer to Jacques Lacan’s than to Sigmund Freud’s, that Larsen uses hysteria as a literary device which mobilizes her anti-assimilationist heroine’s critique of the heteropatriarchal and colonial structures that violently interpellate women into subject positions invented to further the goals of imperialism and capitalism. Throughout *Quicksand*, the protagonist Helga Crane performs, briefly and unsuccessfully, a number of subject positions into which she is interpellated, including that of racial uplift pedagogue, middle-class Harlem professional, African exotic in Europe, “Jezebel,” and finally, wife and mother. Illustrating Judith Butler’s assertion that we can never perform the subject positions into
which we are interpellated with complete success, Helga’s repeated and often willful hysterical performative failures mobilize her emergence as an radically anti-assimilationist subject.

Finally, I argue that on a certain level both Larsen and McKay’s novels tellingly fail to assimilate their anti-assimilationist characters into a coherent symbolic logic. Larsen fails on the level of a coherent narrative plot (something McKay does not even attempt), while McKay fails to express consistent and viable gender, sexual, and even racial politics. Thus, though in vastly different ways, McKay and Larsen’s novels alike literalize and dramatize their anti-assimilationism.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

I haven’t any people. There’s only me, so I can do as I please.

—Nella Larsen, *Quicksand*, 41

[S]ociety is feminine.

—Claude McKay, *Banjo*, 206

I am easily assimilated.

—Old Lady in Leonard Bernstein’s *Candide*

In 1928, W.E.B. Du Bois, Harlem Renaissance leader and champion of racial uplift, published a review of Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem* (1928) and Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* (1928) in *The Crisis* that to this day continues to shape these novels’ critical reception. Du Bois accused McKay of pandering to white audiences’ fantasies about the lives of black working-class people by presenting a one-sided view of what both the black and white bourgeoisie saw as the sordid underside of Harlem—its prostitutes and the sexual lasciviousness of its cabarets. *Home to Harlem* made Du Bois feel “distinctly like taking a bath,” “cater[ing] to that prurient demand on the part of white folk for a portrayal in Negroes of that utter licentiousness which conventional civilization holds white folk back from enjoying.” In the same review Du Bois praises Larsen’s *Quicksand* for portraying “the new, honest, young, fighting Negro woman—the one on whom ‘race’ sits negligibly and Life is always first” (“Two Novels”).

The review succinctly summarizes the representational and cultural politics of Du Bois, whose commitment to racial uplift, or the social and economic advancement of African Americans, was coupled with an assimilationist bourgeois literary aesthetic. Du Bois’s remarks thus speak volumes about the class anxieties of the New Negro movement, but they are also
quite revealing with respect to Harlem Renaissance authors’ peculiar relationship to (oftentimes white) patronage and the sexual politics of these artist-patron dynamics. Given Du Bois’s positing of *Quicksand* as an antidote to *Home to Harlem*’s vulgarity and problematic primitivism, it might seem ironic that Larsen dedicated her second novel *Passing* (1929) to Carl Van Vechten, a white author whose novel *Nigger Heaven* (1926) notoriously exemplifies the white primitivist fantasies about black working-class sexuality that Du Bois accuses McKay of arousing. But Du Bois’s review is not interested in investigating these artist-patron dynamics. Indeed, his attitude toward Larsen in this review itself comes off as nothing short of patronizing. The majority of the review is devoted to a critique of McKay; the commentary on Larsen comprises the article’s last paragraph, ending with Du Bois’s exhortation: “buy [Larsen’s book] and make Mrs. Imes¹ write many more novels” (“Two Novels”). By foregoing a more sophisticated critical engagement with Larsen’s novel, Du Bois ignores the complexity of *Quicksand*’s treatment of racial uplift. While Larsen’s novels represent “respectable” middle-class blacks and in no way glorify primitivized black sexuality, they hardly advocate the black bourgeoisie’s “uplift” project; on the contrary, they convey an attitude of wry cynicism toward uplift while also expressing a profound ambivalence toward representational primitivism. Larsen’s ambivalence in relation to this primitivism-uplift binary makes her work difficult to pigeonhole for Renaissance literati of either camp, catering to the expectations of white patrons and black Renaissance leaders alike while also refusing to align itself with any one representational project.²

If Larsen’s work, because of its ambiguous representational politics, was hard to place in relation to the Renaissance’s dominant currents, McKay’s was in some ways outside the parameters of the New Negro movement. Gary Holcomb argues that McKay “was never truly a
member [of the Harlem Renaissance] in any unproblematic way” (71). The Jamaican author lived in Europe and North Africa between 1922 and 1934, and was thus physically very far from Harlem throughout the duration of its renaissance. McKay’s internationalism, according to Holcomb, also separates him from the movement’s “risk” of “enforcing an American exceptionalist ideology” (70). This internationalism defined McKay’s position in relation to patronage as well. His homoerotic relationship with his first patron, the gay British aristocrat Walter Jekyll, placed McKay within a particular racialized, sexualized, and colonial power dynamic, which his work continually negotiated.

Contrary to the opposition Du Bois establishes between the representational politics of these two authors, both McKay and Larsen are opposed to, or at least highly skeptical about, the rhetoric of Du Bois’s “Talented Tenth,” and both pose a challenge to bourgeois mores. Feeling “nauseate[d]” (“Two Novels”) by the frequent appearance of prostitutes and sex in McKay’s Home to Harlem, and impressed by the deeply psychological picture Larsen paints of African American femininity, Du Bois loses sight of the ways in which both authors challenge his privileging of black middle-class respectability. Larsen and McKay alike are in fact deeply interested in sexually transgressive figures such as the prostitute, the queer, and in Larsen’s case, also the hysteric, as representatives of the oppressed subject within a colonial and heteropatriarchal world order. Both authors use these figures to critique Western imperialism as well as the ideology of the uplift movement, thus demonstrating the parallels between colonial and uplift ideology.

This essay examines what I would like to call the anti-assimilationist politics of Larsen’s Quicksand, McKay’s Home to Harlem, and its sequel Banjo: A Story Without a Plot (1928). These works negotiate the marginal positionality of migrant expatriates of color who opt out of
the related heteronormative and bourgeois imperatives to settle down, into either a geographical or family home. The novels represent characters whose migrations—both within and outside the boundaries of the United States—and sexual dissidence, queer or otherwise, pose a challenge to the constructs of race and nationhood as conceived within the framework of Western colonialism and the uplift movement alike, and to the heteronormative gender and sexual roles that perpetuate colonial power relations. In this respect, both Larsen and McKay advance anti-assimilationist racial and sexual politics. Both authors explore the ways in which characters who are socially marginalized, on account of race, sexuality, class, or gender, negotiate the social symbolic’s attempt to assimilate them into dominant structures. Both take on anti-heteronormative and anti-colonial literary projects. However, McKay and Larsen diverge in their treatment of women, and femininity more generally, in relation to this negotiation of social assimilation. McKay’s novels are marked by a tension between representing femininity as a fundamentally assimilationist subject position, complicit with colonial structures, and an awareness of women’s fundamental disenfranchisement by those very structures. Larsen’s *Quicksand*, on the other hand, represents, through its protagonist, a kind of femininity that consistently refuses assimilation by uplift and colonial frameworks alike. Despite this important difference in their respective gender politics, both of these authors’ novels share their ultimate failure to contain their anti-assimilationist characters within a coherent narrative logic or representational symbolic. Thus McKay and Larsen’s texts perform the anti-assimilationism that their characters embody.

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1 “Imes” was Larsen’s married name.

2 Jeffrey Gray situates Larsen in relation to a primitivism-uplift binary in “Essence and the Mulatto Traveler: Europe as Embodiment in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*,” *Novel* 27:3 (Spring 1994), 257-70.

3 Sexual dissidence, as I use the term, suggests sexual practices and representations of sexuality that challenge or threaten sexual orthodoxies and structures such as bourgeois sexual mores, heteronormativity, and
marriage. Jonathan Dollimore defines sexual dissidence as a “kind of resistance, operating in terms of gender” that “repeatedly unsettles the very opposition between the dominant and the subordinate” (21). Holcomb repeatedly uses the term in reference to McKay and his characters.
CHAPTER 2
EASILY ASSIMILATED?: QUICKSAND’S HELGA CRANE

Leonard Bernstein’s operatic adaptation of Voltaire’s Candide (1952) features a song titled “I Am Easily Assimilated,” which playfully and poignantly draws a connection between cultural assimilation and the violence it does to women in particular. The song is sung by an old lady whose life story is characterized by the commodification of her body and the various kinds of violence done to her body as she is raped and sold into slavery. It is clear, as she tells her story, that she has been a prostitute in many different parts of the world—whether willingly or not. Her ability to be “easily assimilated” refers to both her adaptability to different cultures and the ease with which her body lends itself to sexual consumption by men around the world. Because of its plays on prostitution and social interpellation and assimilation as defining experiences for mobile women, I feel that this song resonates particularly strongly with the experience of Larsen’s heroines.

Larsen’s two novels, Quicksand and Passing, both address the predicament of women who embody social ambiguity by transgressing the color line, the public/private split, bourgeois sexual mores, and heteronormative sexual scripts. These characters are biracial, cosmopolitan, and, at least ostensibly, though not securely, middle-class women. Quicksand and Passing’s narrative trajectories are structured around these women’s migrations, both within the United States and across the Atlantic, and the migrations themselves are symptomatic of the heroines’ racial ambiguity, class instability and transgressive, anti-heteronormative desire. In an era marked by anxiety about women’s entry into the public sphere, and, particularly in the United States, anxiety about miscegenation, Quicksand’s Helga Crane and Passing’s Clare Kendry’s social transgressions and ambiguities trigger various reductive or incorrect interpellations, including interpellations as prostitutes.
The distinctions between prostitute, sexualized black woman, and public woman were far from clear in the European and American cultural imaginaries of this time. Black women’s bodies, whether conceived of as the bodies of former slaves or domestic workers or both, were often seen as always already public. In this context, the black middle class in America had its own anxieties about the bodies of black women and its investment in policing and domesticating black women’s bodies ultimately reinscribed the racist and sexist logic that pathologized these bodies in the first place. Thus, Du Bois’s disgust with McKay’s nearly monolithic identification of working-class woman with working girl, or prostitute, is understandable, but his attitude toward Larsen betrays a level of obliviousness to her adamant resistance against domesticating her heroines’ bodies. Whether they are wrongly interpellated as prostitutes, or as members of a class or race with which they do not identify, the dissonances between the subjectivities of Larsen’s protagonists and the external interpellations to which they must respond illuminate the short-sightedness of an uplift movement committed to maintaining strict racial, class, and sexual identity categories.

While both Passing and Quicksand explore the situation of racially ambiguous (im)migrant women of unstable class positions who must endure constant misrecognitions by the social symbolic, this paper focuses on Quicksand. Because Quicksand’s narrator has direct access to Helga Crane’s thoughts and feelings, I feel that Quicksand more directly facilitates an analysis of the subjectivity of its socially transgressive protagonist. Insofar as Passing, on the other hand, can provide insights into the psyche of its transgressive female character Clare Kendry, these insights can only be deduced from the projections of the relatively conservative middle-class protagonist Irene Redfield, with whose subjectivity the narrative voice is aligned. Irene’s projections onto, fantasies about, identifications with, and desire for Clare certainly allow
for fascinating psychoanalytic and queer readings, several of which already exist.² I focus on *Quicksand* because its narrative gives voice to a protagonist who is, in my view, radically anti-assimilationist.

Throughout *Quicksand*, Helga performs, briefly and un-successfully, a number of subject positions—including but not limited to a type of symbolic prostitution—into which she is interpellated. These positions include racial uplift pedagogue, middle-class Harlem professional, African exotic in Europe, “Jezebel,” and finally, wife and mother. Performing here does not refer to play-acting but to performativity as elaborated upon by Judith Butler. Butler defines the performative as “constituting the identity it is purported to be.” In the case of gender performativity, “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Gender Trouble 34). In other words, the gender we are assigned doesn’t constitute an identity that precedes the attributes of gender we perform. We do not speak, act, and dress in certain ways because we are women or men, but we are women or men because we speak, act, and dress in certain ways. Gender isn’t an identity but a performance. The performativity of gender, however, doesn’t make us into actors. The performance of gender isn’t one that “a prior subject elects to do”; rather, “gender… constitutes as an effect the very subject it appears to express” (“Imitation” 24, 28).

In *Quicksand*, the heroine’s performativity of various subject positions functions in much the same way. Helga assumes these positions because she is thus interpellated; at the moment of interpellation, she has no choice in the matter. But an interpellated subject need not be assimilated into the identity categories of the social order that interpellates her. While Butler’s theory of performativity may sound deterministic in positing that we do not author or fully
control our performances, it does create a space for subverting the norms that determine our interpellation. “To the extent that gender is an assignment,” writes Butler, “it is an assignment which is never quite carried out according to expectation, whose addressee never quite inhabits the ideal s/he is compelled to approximate” (Bodies That Matter 231). The subject’s inevitable failure to correctly perform the position into which s/he is interpellated creates the possibility for the subversion of norms. I argue that in Quicksand, this failure is the key to Helga’s emergence as an anti-assimilationist subject, and that Larsen highlights this failure by hystericizing her heroine at key points in the narrative, where Helga enacts her inability to perform a coherent subject position by hysterically fleeing from the scene of interpellation.

Quicksand’s narrative is structured around a series of migrations, the most important of which occur when the narrative has hystericized its heroine. Hysteria, as I define it in the context of Quicksand, functions as a plot device that propels Helga from one scene of social misrecognition to another. Each time Helga becomes disenchanted with her social surroundings and other people’s attempts to assimilate her into their social structures she moves to a new geographical location. Three of her migrations are triggered at least in part by particularly traumatic clashes between an interpellation and Helga’s resistance to the interpellation: her initial migration from the American South to the North, her departure for Denmark, and her final return to the American South. In these three cases the migrations follow what we might call hysterical fits. Even when these fits are not the sole reason for Helga’s departure, they certainly contribute to her decision to flee and dramatize the intolerability of the interpellations that precipitate her flights. The connections among migration, flight, and hysteria thus become symptomatic of Helga’s anti-assimilationist instinct. Because the hysterical Helga migrates five times
throughout the novel’s 132 pages, this hysteria-as-plot-device also results in Larsen’s telling failure to assimilate her heroine within a well-unified narrative plot.

The story begins in the fictional town of Naxos, Alabama, where the twenty-three-year-old protagonist works as a teacher at a black college. Because Helga disagrees with and can no longer bear the uplift ideology underlying the school’s mission, she quits her job and moves to Chicago. In Chicago, Helga plans to ask her white Danish family for financial support, only to be turned away by an aunt who suggests that Helga is not “legitimately” connected to the family. Helga then moves to Harlem where she temporarily finds satisfaction in living and working among other African Americans. The racial separatism of her entourage, however, soon proves tiresome, and upon receiving money from her Chicago uncle in the mail, Helga boards a boat to Copenhagen, where she lives with her continental Danish family for several months. Helga initially enjoys her life in Copenhagen, thinking that racism is non-existent in Denmark, but eventually comes to realize that the Danes’ exoticist construction of her blackness is just as racist as the social injustices she experiences in the United States, and decides to return to Harlem and its African American population. In Harlem, Helga is seduced and then rejected by the former principal of the Naxos school. She becomes profoundly scarred by this experience and resorts to desperate measures for finding companionship. In Larsen’s perverse undoing of her heroine, Helga seduces and subsequently marries a Southern preacher and moves with him to his home village in Alabama. Helga gives birth to four of the preacher’s children, barely recovering from the fourth birth. The novel ends when Helga is pregnant with her fifth child and Larsen suggests that this fifth birth will kill the protagonist.

The novel’s opening in Naxos foregrounds Helga’s perpetual dissatisfaction with her social surroundings. The town’s very name suggests Helga’s feeling of estrangement from her
milieu—a feeling that will travel with her to every new geographical locale she inhabits. In Greek mythology, Naxos is the island on which Theseus abandons Ariadne. Deborah McDowell observes that “Naxos” is also an anagram for “Saxon,” suggesting “the school’s worship of everything Anglo-Saxon” (243 n2). Disillusioned with Naxos’ ideology of racial complacency, its commitment to the white agenda of keeping blacks in their social and political “places” in spite of their economic advancement, Helga decides to quit her job and move to Chicago. The hysterical episode that precedes Helga’s departure involves a refusal of a class interpellation by Naxos’s principal who, in an attempt to keep Helga at the school, calls her a “lady” of “dignity and breeding” (24).

The novel’s exposition also alludes to Helga’s interracial and possibly “illegitimate” parentage and connects it to her class ambivalence and disinterest in family life. Her decision to leave Naxos, she ponders, “would of course end her engagement” (11) to her fiancé James Vayle. “[S]he felt no regret that tomorrow would mark the end of any claim she had upon him…. The family of James Vayle,” which bears an established family name, “would be glad. Her own lack of family disconcerted them” (12). Since a marriage proposal, especially by a member of a “first family” (12), constitutes an interpellation by the familial institution, Helga’s engagement to James Vayle equates to a provisional acceptance of this interpellation. Her subsequent refusal to participate in the institution of marriage bears a strong symbolic relationship to her anti-assimilationist impulse; her nonchalant attitude toward leaving her fiancé and her privileging of the necessity to migrate over the bourgeois imperative to marry are symptomatic of her anti-assimilationism. Helga reflects on “how her maladjustment [in Naxos] had bothered [James]” who “was liked an approved in Naxos and loathed the idea that the girl he was to marry couldn’t manage to win liking and approval also” (11). Thus James and Helga’s
suggested incompatibility further conveys Helga’s social nonconformism and “unfitness” for marriage.

These early chapters also inaugurate Helga’s characterization as a hysteric, as they lead up to the hysterical episode that sends her to Chicago. The narrator’s remark that Helga “could neither conform, nor be happy in her unconformity” (11) and question “But just what did she want?” (14) both point to a fundamental inability or refusal to be satisfied central to the psychoanalytic definition of a hysteric. Her hysterical fit in Naxos, like her subsequent fits, combines sexual confusion, a violent reaction to an interpellation, and flight. When the school principal, Robert Anderson, first pronounces her name as she sits in his office, “she was aware of inward confusion. For her the situation seemed charged, unaccountably, with strangeness and something very like hysteria” (21-22). Helga’s intuitive response to Anderson foreshadows his role as an agent of her hystericization and sexual confusion throughout the novel. Anderson’s charisma almost keeps Helga in Naxos. Listening to Anderson, Helga feels “a mystifying yearning which sang and throbbed in her. She felt again that urge for service, not now for her people, but for this man who was now talking so earnestly of his work, his plans, his hopes…. It was not sacrifice she felt now, but actual desire to stay, and to come back next year” (23). But Anderson makes the mistake of ending a flowery speech about “service,” “aiming high” and Naxos’s need for “people with a sense of values” with interpellating Helga into a specific class positionality and positing her class identity as something inherent and outside the social.

“You’re a lady,” Anderson insists. “You have dignity and breeding” (24). The class interpellation causes “turmoil [to rise] again in Helga Crane.” “Trembling,” she informs the principal:

“If you’re speaking of family, Dr. Anderson, why, I haven’t any. I was born in a Chicago slum.”
The man chose his words, carefully, he thought. "That doesn’t at all matter, Miss Crane. Financial, economic circumstances can’t destroy tendencies inherited from good stock. You yourself prove that!"

Concerned with her own angry thoughts, which scurried here and there like trapped rats, Helga missed the import of his words. Her own words, her answer, fell like drops of hail.

"The joke is on you, Dr. Anderson. My father was a gambler who deserted my mother, a white immigrant. It is even uncertain that they were married. As I said first, I don’t belong here. I shall be leaving at once. This afternoon. Good-morning." (24)

Anderson’s desperate belief in the racial uplift ideology of “the talented tenth,” the inherently gifted black elite that can guide the black masses to assimilation into mainstream American society, blinds him to the separation between the natural and the social and to the ways in which the familial institution betrays that separation. Helga “misse[s] the import of [Anderson’s] words,” or, in other words, doesn’t buy into the uplift ideology that naturalizes class, because she is astutely aware of the fact that “good stock” and favorable “economic circumstances” are one and the same. Her own background disqualifies her from full membership in the “talented” black bourgeoisie. The “joke” played on Anderson lies in Helga’s performance of class—her ability to play the role of a “lady” and inadvertently fool Anderson into believing that she is “of good breeding,” or, in other words, that she comes from a stable heteronormative middle-class family. Helga’s hysterical fit is both a protest against the interpellation that privileges the heteronormative family and naturalizes class, and a symptom of the cognitive dissonance she necessarily endures in performing a class position of whose constructedness she is so painfully aware.

Helga’s experience in Chicago most strikingly underscores her lack of stable class or family belonging. In the Chicago section Helga is also interpellated as a prostitute, and this
interpellation links her lack of family and class instability to the figure of the prostitute, particularly in the middle-class Euro-American imaginary. When she arrives in Chicago, Helga heads for her Danish uncle’s house, hoping to pleasantly surprise him and ask him for money. Instead, she is introduced to her uncle’s unwelcoming wife, who immediately rejects Helga’s membership in her husband’s family. “Well, he isn’t exactly your uncle, is he? Your mother wasn’t married, was she?… ‘[Y]ou mustn’t come here any more. It—well, frankly, it isn’t convenient’ (31). Denied membership in the bourgeois family due to her rumored illegitimacy, Helga wanders the streets of Chicago, where she is interpellated as a prostitute by male passersby. “A few men, both white and black, offered her money, but the price was too dear. Helga did not feel inclined to pay it” (37). An encounter with one such passerby in particular, which occurs just after Helga’s confrontation with her uncle’s wife, also inscribes her as a hysteric. “[A] man, well groomed and pleasant-spoken, accosted her. On such occasions she was wont to reply scathingly, but, tonight, his pale Caucasian face struck her breaking faculties as too droll. Laughing harshly, she threw at him the words: ‘You’re not my uncle.’ [sic.] He retired in haste, probably thinking her drunk, or possibly a little mad” (32). The scene clearly enacts the white middle-class construction of the prostitute as hysteric, a construction that originates in nineteenth-century Europe, and thus also links Helga’s hysteria to her interpellation as a prostitute. The “well-groomed and pleasant-spoken” white middle-class man who interpellates Helga as a prostitute panics when Helga utters what to him is a nonsensical statement, jumping to the conclusion that this prostitute is also insane. The episode also poignantly demonstrates how being disowned by one’s white family amounts to a simultaneous denial of one’s whiteness and middle-class position. Helga’s declaration that the white middle-
class stranger is not her uncle constitutes a speech act that performs her expulsion from white middle-class respectability.

Working-class black women migrating to northern cities during this period had, for the most part, two options for employment—domestic service or prostitution. Helga, despite her expulsion from her family, is successful enough in performing middle-class femininity to pursue other options. When she approaches a clerk at the YWCA employment office with her teaching qualifications, the clerk plainly informs her that “our kind of work wouldn’t do for you [sic.]. Domestic mostly” (36). Although Helga is disqualified from working-class labor, the Chicago section of the novel foreshadows her downward class mobility. The possibilities for both domestic work and literal prostitution present themselves ominously, suggesting what Barbara Ehrenreich might call Helga’s “fear of falling.” Fortunately for Helga, she is “saved” by black women’s club activist and lecturer Mrs. Hayes-Rore, whom she accompanies to New York as a hired traveling companion. The trip to New York with Mrs. Hayes-Rore is pivotal in establishing the centrality of self-conscious race and class performativity for Helga, while also emphasizing the extent to which Helga is an anti-assimilationist figure. Mrs. Hayes-Rore is most likely based on Mrs. Eve Jenifer-Rice, founder of the Chicago South Side YWCA, and a philanthropist committed to the domestication of young migrant black women’s bodies. Naturally, Mrs. Hayes-Rore is curious about Helga’s history and her willingness to travel:

“Now tell me,” she commanded, “how is it that a nice girl like you can rush off on a wildgoose chase like this at a moment’s notice. I should think your people’d object, or’d make inquiries, or something.”

At that command Helga could not help sliding down her eyes to hide the anger that had risen in them. Was she to be forever explaining her people—or lack of them? But she had said courteously enough, even managing a hard little smile: “Well, you see, Mrs. Hayes-Rore, I haven’t any people. There’s only me, so I can do as I please.”
“Ha!” said Mrs. Hayes Rore.

... “If you didn’t have any people, you wouldn’t be living. Everybody has people, Miss Crane. Everybody.”

“I haven’t, Mrs. Hayes-Rore.” (41; ellipses in the original)

Helga’s lack of people, while threatening her financial stability, gives her not only the freedom to travel, but also on a certain level frees her from the obligation to marry and reproduce, which a middle-class woman belonging to a nuclear family could hardly escape. Being deeply invested in the bourgeois panic over the threat to collective morality allegedly posed by unattached migrant black women in cities, Mrs. Hayes-Rore is suspicious of Helga’s lack of people; Helga consequently feels compelled to confess the story of her origin. The philanthropist’s ensuing admonition that the story of Helga’s birth and upbringing “dealing as it did with race intermingling and possibly adultery, was beyond definite discussion” (42) reinforces the necessity for Helga to enact the performances expected of her in any given cultural context. As Mrs. Hayes-Rore explains, “among black people, as among white people, it is tacitly understood that these things are not mentioned—and therefore they do not exist” (42). This don’t ask, don’t tell policy of parentage and racial origin is, of course, exemplary of the theory of performativity as it relates to speech acts. As Butler states, drawing from the work of J.L. Austin, the performative “act is not primarily theatrical…. Within speech act theory, a performative is that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names” (BTM 12-13). Only a performative speech act such as the one Helga utters in front of Dr. Anderson—“My father was a gambler who deserted my mother, a white immigrant”—can bring her illegitimacy into being. Helga learns, from Mrs. Hayes-Rore, what not to say as part of her class performance. At the same time, Helga cannot take back her claim that she has no people, and this radical assertion situates her outside the networks of kinship that mobilize racial and class interpellation.
In Harlem Larsen complicates Helga’s race and class performativity by evoking the often conflicting representational tropes around which debates among Renaissance literati centered—primitivism versus uplift. For Helga this opposition takes the shape of a personal conflict surrounding the intersections of her own class and racial ambivalence with her non-heteronormative, and arguably queer, sexuality. An episode in a Harlem speakeasy illustrates Helga’s overlapping racial, class, and sexual ambivalences, and triggers her second major hysterical fit, which accompanies Helga’s departure for Denmark. On the level of plot, Helga decides to go to Denmark for what appear to be perfectly rational reasons: her uncle prematurely sends her her inheritance money and suggests that she visit her Danish family in Denmark because they will accept her much more readily than her Danish family in America; she can no longer tolerate the hypocritical and singularly themed speeches of her uplift-oriented entourage; and she can no longer work in a black-owned firm with exclusively black colleagues, a situation which constantly reminds her of black separatism’s inadequacy in addressing racial inequality.

Her experience in the speakeasy, however, explicitly hystericizes her and quite literally “sets her in motion.” The scene does this by violently disrupting a set of binary divisions upon which her performances of race, gender, and class so desperately depend: whiteness/blackness, primitivism/uplift, respectability/sexual abandon, legitimacy/illegitimacy, self-control/hysteria, love/prostitution, and finally heterosexuality/homosexuality.

Debra Silverman argues that Helga feels a danger of losing herself in the music and dancing of the Harlem cabaret, a danger of “the recognition of her own sexuality” (6). For a woman of color in the 1920s, according to Silverman, this kind of recognition could easily equate to “hav[ing] one’s sexuality examined and put on display as the ‘savage,’” as Josephine Baker in Paris” (6-7). Helga momentarily abandons herself to the music, is subsequently
shocked by her participation in primitivism, and makes an effort to forcibly disentangle herself from the cabaret’s “jungle” atmosphere:

She was drugged, lifted, sustained, blown out, ripped out, beaten out, by the joyous, murky orchestra. The existence of life seemed bodily motion. And when suddenly the music died, 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 wasn’t, she told herself, a jungle creature. (61)

Here Larsen self-consciously plays with the tension between primitivist and uplift representational conventions and the passage demonstrates that she is hardly the model uplift author Du Bois interpellates her as. The fact that she does not explicitly align this opposition with class tensions but instead with debates surrounding racial solidarity in Harlem might explain why her ambivalence escaped Du Bois.

Helga’s friend Anne Grey, fiercely critical of the racial mixing that occurs in Harlem speakeasies, functions as a caricature for a certain faction of the black bourgeoisie that tied the uplift project to a politics of racial separatism. Anne condemns Audrey Denney, the “lovely” “alabaster”-colored young woman in the speakeasy whom Helga dreamily observes from afar, for “go[ing] about with white people” (62). The woman, according to Anne, is a “disgusting creature” who holds “positively obscene” mixed race parties where white men dance with women of color, and who “ought to be ostracized” (63, 62). Audrey Denney, who for Anne embodies unspeakable transgressions against racial purity and bourgeois sexual mores, proves to be of particular interest to Helga for those very reasons. Denney’s appearance distracts Helga from her awareness of Robert Anderson’s uncanny presence in the speakeasy and Helga’s enamored observation of Denney momentarily transports her away from her conflicted feelings about jungle music.

[The woman’s] brilliantly red, softly curving mouth was somehow sorrowful.
Her pitch-black eyes, a little aslant, were veiled by long, drooping lashes and summoned by broad brows, which seemed like black smears. The short black hair was brushed severely back from the black forehead. The extreme décolleté of her simple, apricot dress showed a skin of unusual color, a delicate, creamy hue, with golden tones. “Almost like an alabaster,” thought Helga.

Bang! Again, the music died… Anne had rage in her eyes… “There’s your Dr. Anderson over there, with Audrey Denney.”

“Yes, I saw him. She’s lovely. Who is she?” (62)

Helga naturally finds Anne’s tirade against Audrey Denney’s “treacherous” lifestyle unsettling. As Laura Doyle points out, “Helga herself, of course, always and involuntarily ‘goes about with white people’ in her very genealogy, inwardly suffering the ostracization Anne fantasizes for Audrey Denney” (553). Helga chooses to ignore Anne’s “revolting insinuations” [sic.] and redirect her attention to the alabaster-skinned woman who for her embodies the beauty of racial hybridity. “She felt that it would be useless to tell [Anne and her friends] that what she felt for the cool, calm girl who had the assurance, the courage, so placidly to ignore racial barriers and give her attention to people, was not contempt, but envious admiration. So she stood silent, watching the girl” (63). While Larsen initially characterizes Helga’s investment in Denney as “disinterested curiosity,” when Denney begins to dance with Anderson, Helga falls into what Doyle appropriately terms a “sexual panic” (553) that constitutes her second major hysterical fit.

[T]hat feeling was now augmented by another, a more primitive emotion. She forgot the garish, crowded room. She forgot her friends. She saw only two figures, closely clinging. She felt her heart throbbing. She felt the room receding. She went out the door. She climbed endless stairs. At last, panting, confused, but thankful to have escaped, she found herself again out in the dark night alone, a small crumpled thing in a fragile, flying back and gold dress. A taxi drifted toward her, stopped. She stepped into it, feeling cold, unhappy, misunderstood, and forlorn. (64)

In the next chapter, immediately after Helga’s escape from the scene of hystericization in the taxi, Larsen installs her heroine in a vehicle that takes her on journey of much greater magnitude—a boat sailing for Denmark. As Helga sits on this boat, the text disingenuously
suggests that her panic attack is caused by her attraction to Anderson and jealousy of Denney. “She wasn’t, she couldn’t be, in love with the man,” Helga tells herself as she sits in a boat to Denmark in the next chapter (66). We can make the obvious inference that she can and very much is in love with Robert Anderson, but we should not let that prevent us from surmising that she is also in love with Audrey Denney. Given the centrality of Audrey Denney’s beauty, elegance, fascinating alabaster color, and untroubled transgression of racial and sexual taboos, and the careful attention Helga pays to the woman’s “legs,… hips,… and back, all swaying gently” (64) in the chapter that ends with Helga’s hysterical escape from Harlem, it is hard to believe that Helga’s observation of Denney is in any way “disinterested.” The sexual confusion that sets in as a result of her simultaneous attraction to a man and a woman leads Helga to the height of her hysteria in this episode. This disruption of the binary of sexual orientation complements and perhaps even augments the already sexually inflected disruptions of the racial and class binaries that hystericize Helga.

The strict racial and class demarcations of Copenhagen initially bring Helga relief from the confusions of Harlem. If Helga’s performances of race, gender, and class up until this point have largely adhered to the theory of performativity articulated by Butler, her performances in Copenhagen are much more self-consciously theatrical. Larsen’s Copenhagen is an explicitly theatrical space, portrayed, as Lena Ahlin notes, as a rational “Old World” city that stands in stark contrast to a chaotic modern “New World” city such as New York. Ahlin writes: “Larsen’s version of Copenhagen seems almost clinically clean. Here is neither the threat nor the allure of the modern, bustling, and busy American cities. Instead, what we see is the principle of rationality, which informs the entire Copenhagen episode” (96). Along with Copenhagen’s Old World rationality comes a binary colonial racial division that is in some ways regimented much
more strictly than the division marked by America’s imaginary “color line.” “In the scrubbed
and shining whiteness of Copenhagen,” Ahlin observes, “Helga’s blackness is made even more
conspicuous and strange” (96). The hypervisibility of Helga’s racialized body in Copenhagen
turns her self-aware race performativity into self-conscious theatricality.

While the delight Helga’s family and their friends express about her presence initially
suggests to Helga that Danes are not racist, the excitement of her family and their entourage is
soon revealed to be a symptom of white colonial exoticism. Helga and her family attend a
minstrelsy show at the circus in Copenhagen that enacts a meta-performance of race, which, as
Zackodnik argues, parodies white constructions of blackness. “[T]his vaudeville performance
act is a hybrid construction of African American cultural forms and their masking, of parodied
sterotypes that are so exaggerated they mock white notions of blackness rather than African
Americans themselves… [T]he [white] audience unknowingly laughs at itself as object of the
performance’s parody” (141). Helga, however, is initially too repulsed by the performance and
by the Danes’ reception of it to laugh at the spectacle as a joke on white people. “Helga Crane
was not amused. Instead she was filled with a fierce hatred for the cavorting Negroes on
stage…. And she was shocked at the avidity at which [the Danish artist Axel] Olsen beside her
drank it in…. [W]hy their constant slavish imitations of traits not their own?” (85). Zackodnik
interprets Helga’s response as an example of her tendency to mistake racial performance for
essence, seeing in the act “an aspect of herself, of her identity, that she prefers stay ‘hidden’”
(141). What Helga is not terribly eager to advertise, I would argue, is not any “essential”
 element of her blackness but her own conscious performance of her racial interpellation.9 Helga
is in fact perversely fascinated by the minstrelsy show, secretly returning to it multiple times to
ponder its complex double parody and meta-performative character.
“[S]he returned again and again to the Circus, always alone, gazing intently and solemnly at the gesticulating black figures, an ironical and silently speculative spectator. For she knew that into her plan of life had thrust itself a suspensive conflict in which were fused doubts, rebellion, expediency, and urgent longings.

“It was at this time that Axel Olsen asked her to marry him” (85; my emphasis).

Helga is all too aware of her own participation in a kind of minstrelsy, its instrumentality, and its subversive potential. “Urgent longings,” for both sexual satisfaction and financial stability, tempt her to perform the role of exotic objet d’art for Axel Olsen, the artist who is painting her, in order to arrive at the expedient solution of marriage. Helga allows Olsen to select her clothing before painting her portrait as she notes her “exact status in her new environment” as “[a] decoration. A curio. A peacock” (75). Olsen picks out an outrageous selection of extravagant exoticist apparel, including “batik dresses,” “a leopard-skin coat, a glittering opera-cape,” “turban-like hats of metallic silks, feathers and furs, strange jewelry, enameled or set with odd semi-precious stones, a nauseous Eastern perfume,” and “shoes with dangerously high heels” (75-6). Fashioned with the ornaments of imperialist and orientalist European aesthetic taste and painted by Axel Olsen, Helga is complete in her exoticist commodification.

It is Helga’s awareness of the blatant theatricality of the performance into which she is interpellated that fuels her rebellion—her rejection of the expediency of selling herself into marriage. Olsen’s proposal magnifies his characteristically affected and pompous demeanor, rendering the theatricality of the scene absurdly conspicuous.

“‘I, poor artist that I am, cannot hold out against the deliberate lure of you. You disturb me. The longing for you does my work harm. You creep into my brain and madden me…. It may be that with you, Helga, for wife, I will become great. Immortal. Who knows? I didn’t want to love you, but I had to. That is the truth. I make of myself a present to you. For love.’
His voice held a theatrical note. At the same time he moved forward putting out his arms. His hands touched the air. For Helga had moved back. (88-89)

Olsen interprets Helga’s cool reception of his proposal as a disenchanted acknowledgment of marriage as mere spectacle, but he cannot at first conceive of her response as a rejection.

In his assured, despotic way he went on: “You know, Helga, you are a contradiction…. You have the warm impulsive nature of the women of Africa, but, my lovely, you have, I fear, the soul of a prostitute. You sell yourself to the highest buyer. I should of course be happy that it is I. And I am.” (89)

Helga’s racial hybridity is not what makes her a contradiction for Olsen. That his portrait of Helga amounts to a primitivist caricature of excessive African sexuality (91) suggests that he sees her as primarily, if not exclusively, African. This classification is also in line with the strictly binary understanding of race that Ahlin attributes to Danes as they are represented in *Quicksand*. In articulating his white exoticist fantasy of black female sexuality, Olsen quite accurately pinpoints Helga’s position in relation to racial primitivism, uplift, and prostitution. White Western modernity, here embodied by Olsen, cannot reconcile her blackness with her middle-class position, and can therefore only read Helga as a contradiction. Imperialist logic does not expect African primitives to partake in the calculating tendencies of capitalist mentality, which middle-class men and women regularly exhibit.

The contradiction Olsen sees in Helga is actually a projection of a contradiction within imperialist logic. On the one hand, if the African woman is outside market relations, then, as Olsen assumes, she cannot be a prostitute. At the same time, the white colonial imaginary has systematically conflated the figures of black woman, public woman, and prostitute. In tracing the construction of the prostitute in European modernity, Anne McClintock notes that prostitutes were seen as “the metropolitan analogue of African promiscuity” (56). Olsen’s separation of black woman and prostitute, then, is largely opportunistic. McClintock suggests as much.
“Inhabiting, as they did, the threshold of marriage and market, private and public, prostitutes flagrantly demanded money for services middle-class men expected for free” (56). In a colonial scheme wherein black women are considered the public property of white middle-class men, the prostitute is the pathologizing label for the black woman who insists on being compensated for her labor. In separating black woman from prostitute, then, Olsen actually expresses nostalgia for an earlier moment in colonial and capitalist history when the “contradiction” of the modern prostitute did not exist.

Helga’s middle-class standing allows Olsen to momentarily set aside the racialized construction of black prostitute as contradiction and interpellate Helga as a participant in the distinct category of middle-class prostitution, as it is embedded in the institution of marriage. Olsen understands that in order to take full advantage of the opportunities for cultural capital that marriage to Helga promises, he must separate her self-conscious participation in commodity capitalism from his fantasy of her primitive blackness. Helga, however, is fully aware that these strategic categorical distinctions do not ultimately do away with the colonial dynamics of the proposed arrangement. Even though Olsen is disabused of the belief that Helga, as an African primitive, will automatically welcome his proposal with her warm sensuality, he nonetheless hopes to purchase and display her as an exotic African commodity.

In this scene with Olsen, Larsen foreshadows the conditions for her heroine’s ultimate demise. As she listens to Olsen, Helga feels a vague premonition, sensing the ominous connection between marriage and her primitivization. “Abruptly she was aware that in the end, in some way, she would pay for this hour. A quick brief fear ran through her, leaving in its wake a sense of impending calamity. She wondered if for this she would pay all that she’d had” (89). Helga courageously proceeds with her intended rejection of Olsen, in spite of her presentiment of
the inevitability of being punished for her rebellion against white imperialist heteropatriarchy.

“She said, lightly, but firmly: ‘But you see, Herr Olsen, I’m not for sale. Not to you. Not to any white man. I don’t at all care to be owned’” (89). Like her insistence that she has no people and can therefore do as she pleases, this declaration is for Helga a rare moment of coherent, non-hysterical assertion of her anti-assimilationist sensibility.

For a woman, especially a woman of color, living in 1920s America, the refusal to “have people” or “be owned” equates to completely opting out of participation in heteronormativity. When Helga returns to Harlem, the reemergence of Audrey Denney, the racially hybrid and socially transgressive object of Helga’s queer desire, foregrounds the possibility for a non-heteronormative, and possibly even satisfying life for Helga. Upon her return, Helga asks to be introduced to Audrey Denney at a party, without, of course, being too obvious. “I wish you’d introduce me,” she tells the hostess. “Not so—er—apparently by request, you know” (100). The much anticipated introduction to the racially ambiguous woman who embodies the comfortable controlled performance of a non-heteronormative, cross-racial, cross-class identity that Larsen does not allow Helga to achieve, is sabotaged, as Doyle notes, by Robert Anderson’s momentary seduction of Helga.

She… stepped out into the hall, and somehow, she never quite knew exactly how, into the arms of Robert Anderson…. And then it happened. He stooped and kissed her, a long kiss, holding her close. She fought against him with all her might. Then, strangely, all power seemed to ebb away, and a long-hidden, half-understood desire, welled up inside her with the suddenness of a dream. Helga Crane’s own arms went up about the man’s neck. (105)

Doyle argues that this moment of heterosexual seduction precludes a queer plot movement, and thus leads to the heroine’s ruin. “Helga collides physically with Anderson… which keeps her from meeting Denney and ultimately leads to her final undoing near the end of the book” (554).
Doyle situates Anderson’s kiss within the history of Atlantic modernist literature, maintaining that “these kisses mark the heroine’s discovery of her own desire, and they seem to open to her a world of unencumbered transnational freedom; but as it turns out they also constitute the very event that steals her desire and turns it into an experience of violation and ruin” (555). While Doyle makes a convincing case for the ideological work done by such scenes of seduction in Atlantic modernist literature in general and *Quicksand* in particular, I don’t see how the idea of desire theft applies to Helga Crane. If Robert Anderson steals Helga’s desire, then this suggests that her desire is rightfully meant for someone else. Doyle implies that this person is Audrey Denney, and this argument appears to be based upon a flawed underlying assumption that there exists a rightful ownership of, singular direction for, and exclusive object of desire.

Jacques Lacan’s formulations of desire, hysteria, and desire’s relationship to hysteria make it difficult to conceive of how anyone, but especially Helga, can have a grasp on her desire to such an extent that she can have her desire “stolen” from her. A fundamental aspect of the structure of human desire, as theorized by Lacan, is its ultimate unlplaceability and unknowability. For Lacan, desire is a continual displacement (Fink 22). Nowhere is this principle of desire more evident than in Helga Crane’s trajectory. Helga is a hysteric, and as such she is fundamentally unsatisfied and perpetually displaced as a result of her dissatisfaction.10 No place, be it Naxos, Chicago, Harlem, or Copenhagen, is good enough for her. At the end of the novel we still have no idea of what Helga really wants. To attempt to pin down her desire, then, is to grossly undermine what Doyle calls Helga’s “straying, queerly sensuous self” (545). Helga’s desire is queer not only because it is at times directed toward Audrey Denney, but also because it is impossible to place.
Furthermore, because of Anderson’s initial role in bringing Helga’s desire for Denney to light, he can hardly be singled out as the perpetrator who undoes her queerness. Helga’s admiration of Denney in the speakeasy remains entirely calm until Anderson enters the scene, begins to dance with Denney, and turns Helga’s admiring curiosity into a full-blown sexual panic. Rather than a thief of Helga’s queer desire, Anderson actually functions as a stand-in for a queer object choice. While Helga is in Denmark, Anderson marries Anne Grey. After her encounter with Anderson at the party, Helga makes the conscious decision to pursue an affair with Anderson. Such an affair would be anything but heteronormative, taking place outside the structures of marriage and reproduction. Additionally, entering Anderson’s social circle could easily provide Helga with the opportunity to become acquainted with the “lovely” Audrey Denney, the confident transgressor of racial and sexual boundaries. In the end, it is not Anderson’s seduction, but rather, his refusal of Helga that sabotages her queer trajectory and induces in her the temporary insanity that brings about her fatal fall into religion, marriage, and inordinate participation, despite all of her previously stated wishes, in the heteronormative reproduction of racialized identity.

Anderson, despite his association with the likes of Audrey Denney, turns out to be too personally invested in bourgeois respectability and heteropatriarchal institutions to subvert those structures by having an affair with Helga. Helga runs into Anderson at another party, where he appears to make a proposition: “I want very much to see you, Helga. Alone” (107). But his meeting with Helga in a hotel reception room does not turn out the way Helga expected. Instead, Anderson apologizes “for acting such a swine at the Tavernor’s party” (108). Helga rewards this expression of bourgeois hypocrisy with a “savage” slap, and hysterically storms out of the hotel.
Anderson’s rejection forecloses on the possibility of a queer, or even simply non-heteronormative plot. This foreclosure leads to the heroine’s final and fatal hystericization, which appropriately takes the form of an outrageously theatrical hysterical acting out. Larsen sets up this explosive spectacle with the image of Helga on a rainy day, “stretched out on her bed… so broken physically, mentally, that she had given up thinking…. For days, for weeks, voluptuous visions haunted her. Desire had burned in her flesh with uncontrollable violence. The wish to give herself had been so intense…” (110). Fleshly, “uncontrollable violence” is central in this chapter and remains central for the rest of the novel. From here on out, the text only does violence to Helga’s body. Helga undergoes a profound psychological, physical, and figurative transformation in a matter of hours, as she goes from “lady” to “Jezebel,” and from a sophisticated, sarcastic middle-class Harlemite to a pious, complacent, and provincial Southern preacher’s wife. Helga’s hystericization thus simultaneously sexualizes her, primitivizes her, and re-situates her as working-class.

The transformation begins with her clothing. When Helga goes out on a walk in an attempt to snap out of her depressive state, the elements destroy her dainty attire. “Rain and wind whipped cruelly about her, drenching her garments and chilling her body. Soon the foolish little satin shoes which she wore were sopping wet. Unheeding the physical discomforts, she went on, but at the open corner of One Hundred and Thirty-eighth Street a sudden more ruthless gust of wind ripped the small hat from her head” (111). As the stock image of her hat blown away signals the beginning of Helga’s downward class mobility, the storm’s assault on her body forces her to break out of her self-reflexive fixation on her psychic state and confront material realities. “[F]orgetting her mental torment, [she] looked about anxiously for a sheltering taxi.” Hailing a taxi proves unsuccessful and as “another whirl of wind lashed her and, scornful of her
slight strength, tossed her into the swollen gutter,” Larsen once again inaugurates the figurative inscription of Helga as a working-class prostitute that she introduced in the Chicago section. The figuration of Helga as a working-class prostitute in this chapter is the closest Larsen comes to depicting the material realities of prostitution. Confronted with real and threatening physical discomforts, Helga must fight for her survival, thus momentarily occupying the position of an actual working-class woman. “Now she knew beyond all doubt that she had no desire to die…. Death had lost all of its picturesque aspects to the girl lying soaked and soiled in the flooded gutter” (111).

Helga Crane’s hystericization at the end of *Quicksand* enacts a racialized version of the prostitute as embodiment of mass hysteria over the specter of sexual degeneracy. Having had her hat blown off, having been literally thrown in the gutter, and wearing a now soaking wet red dress, Helga could not be closer in her appearance to the image of the “working girl” in the popular imaginary of the time. Helga finds shelter from the storm in a storefront revival church in Harlem. Soon after entering the church, she finds herself laughing uncontrollably at the “appropriateness” of hearing a hymn that sings of “showers of blessings” and “the ridiculousness of herself in such surroundings” (112). Helga has neither chosen this mise-en-scène nor intentionally selected her costume. For the first time in the novel, Helga engages in completely unintentional performativity and can do nothing to refuse her interpellation as a fallen woman in need of saving by the congregation. This interpellation, coupled with the congregation’s collective hysteria in singing “endless moaning verses” about surrendering oneself to the mercy of the Savior, progressively hystericizes her (112). Following the example of “a woman [who] had begun to cry audibly,” “Helga too beg[ins] to weep” and inevitably resigns herself to uncontrolled cathartic emotional release (112-13). “It was a relief to cry so unrestrainedly, and
she gave herself freely to soothing tears, not noticing that the groaning and sobbing of those about her had increased, unaware that the grotesque ebony figure at her side had begun gently to pat her arm to the rhythm of the singing and to croon softly: ‘Yes, chile, yes, chile’” (113). Helga quickly loses her bearings and performative self-consciousness.

Barbara Johnson comments on how the lyrics of the hymn sung in this scene reflect “the logic of self-erasure in a merger with the omnipotent other” (258). Through the duration of the performance, the hymn’s refrain changes from “All of self and none of Thee” to “Some of self and more of Thee” to “Less of self and more of Thee.”

At the moment Helga surrenders to the conversion, the moment the text says, “She was lost—or saved,” the hymn’s final refrain is acted out, but not stated:

None of self and all of Thee,
None of self and all of Thee. (258)

Helga’s religious conversion momentarily annihilates whatever subjectivity she has independent of the role of a repentant “scarlet ‘oman” or “pore los’ Jezebel,” as announced by one member of the congregation (113). Kimberley Roberts asserts that throughout the novel Helga’s psychological and sexual torment arises out of her refusal to perform the role of “angel” or “whore,” “critiqu[ing] a system that has no room for an individual woman’s existence” (112). Her acceptance of the interpellation as “Jezebel” toward the end of the novel is symptomatic of the psychological breakdown of Helga’s resistance to performing normative sexual roles. In surrendering her insistence to articulate her sexuality on her own terms, Helga momentarily loses the self-conscious dimension of her performativity. As the heroine reflects, “the thing became real” (115). This loss of critical distance causes Helga to simultaneously perform the roles of angel and whore at the end of the novel, enacting Larsen’s scathing exposure of a hypocritical racial, class, and heteropatriarchal order that in fact desires women who are both angels and
whores. Christianity, in its more conservative forms, is particularly complicit with heteropatriarchy’s construction of Helga’s “hysterical” fallen sexuality. The double meaning of conversion—its religious connotation and its synonymy with hysteria—seems only fitting in this context. Religion becomes a form of socially sanctioned hysteria, which, in Larsen’s representation, produces pathological female sexuality.

Larsen’s final hystericization of Helga is perverse—not because it excessively sexualizes Helga but because it allows the heroine’s heretofore anti-assimilationist hysteria to be co-opted by heteropatriarchy. As with her interaction with Axel Olsen, Helga yet again considers an “expedient solution” to her sexual longings, need for companionship, and apparent social “maladjustment.” This time, however, Helga actually chooses the expedient solution. “And so in the confusion of seductive repentance Helga Crane was married to the [church’s presiding] grandiloquent Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green” (119). Before the spell of religious hysteria wears off, Helga-as-Jezebel seduces and must therefore marry the reverend with a name synonymous with death.

Larsen’s condemnation of the hypocrisy of religion in its role of shoring up oppressive class, gender, sexual, and race relations is most damning when it illustrates the fatality of the fall into social conformity that Helga’s religious hystericization enables. The novel’s denouement sends Helga back to Alabama, this time as a preacher’s wife, struggling to survive the damage done to her body by the birth of her fourth child. In this final scene, Helga plans to fully recover and run away from the spiritually and physically abusive prison of marriage and domesticity to which she has been confined. Larsen, however, ultimately refuses the sustainability of Helga’s existence: “And hardly had she left her bed and become able to walk again without pain, hardly had the children returned from the homes of the neighbors, when she began to have her fifth
child” (136). Larsen thus concludes the novel with Helga’s impending death at the hands of institutional heteropatriarchal violence.

In the end, Larsen does not seem to know what to do with Helga Crane. Helga is so completely inassimilable that the narrative can only kill her off. Throughout the novel Helga forcefully and often hysterically resists the racial, class, and sexual interpellations of a heteronormative and colonial social order. Her shockingly heteronormative and racially complacent demise seems uncharacteristic at best. Ultimately, Helga’s end represents a caustic critique of the psychopathology of a social order that violently enforces the reproduction and naturalization of its fictitious identity categories. Larsen’s mobilization of an anti-assimilationist protagonist toward this critique proves so successful that in the end Larsen herself finds it impossible to assimilate her heroine within a coherent and plausible narrative.


2 See Blackmore, Butler, Carr, Hanlon, and Johnson, to name a few.

3 My conceptualization of hysteria has very little to do with floating wombs or similar pathologizations of women’s bodies. I understand Helga’s hysteria as a figurative symptom of her perpetual resistance to social assimilation.

4 See, for instance, Freud, Lacan, Gallop, Findlay, and Leeks. Findlay makes the case for the hysterical refusal to be satisfied as a distinctly queer sensibility.


6 See Carby.


8 See Carby.

9 Zackodnik and Jeffrey Gray both argue that Helga falls into the trap of mistaking the construct of race for an essential category to which she belongs. I maintain that Helga is ambivalent about the intrinsic value of a racial essence as well as her own belonging to a particular race, and am more interested in the ways in which Helga’s subjectivity resists this kind of essentialism.

10 For Lacan’s views on the relationship between hysteria and desire, see Fink 20-24.
CHAPTER 3
CLAUDE MCKAY, THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN, AND THE ASSIMILATION OF THE QUEER

McKay’s *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo* affirm the centrality of black masculinity and sexual dissidence in his transnational anti-colonial project. The novels exemplify McKay’s investment in the intersections of black working-class solidarity and anti-heteronormative sexuality, and their role in creating alternative social networks that resist Western capitalist and colonialist power relations and the hegemonic organization of nationality and sexuality that reproduces those relations. McKay’s political project in these novels is thus twofold: to assert a potent black masculinity that refuses emasculation by colonial forces and to resist heteronormative colonial ideologies. I argue that these two dimensions of McKay’s project are necessarily in tension with another for several reasons. First, McKay’s celebration of virile homosocial pan-Africanism depends upon a subjugation and allegorization of women that in many ways resembles the allegorization of women in heteronormative colonial discourse. Second, McKay’s representation of women, particularly of prostitutes, not only objectifies women but actually scapegoats them as complicit with Western imperialism. And third, because, as queer theory has shown, the structures of binary gender and heteronormativity reinforce one another, an exuberant assertion of triumphant masculinity can only go so far in resisting the heteronormative order.1 While McKay represents both heterosexual and queer masculinities, *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo* celebrate the sexual freedom of heterosexual men while subordinating expressions of queer sexuality to the level of metaphor and subtext. These novels are blatantly anti-heteronormative in their celebration of sexually dissident characters who reject family life, but their privileging of heterosexual masculinity and their exclusion of women from the anti-colonial project ultimately impede their imagined queer subversion of colonial structures.
Ray, the queer Haitian intellectual protagonist of *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo*, is also the most explicitly anti-nationalist character in these novels. As these narratives work to assimilate Ray into their homosocial pan-Africanism, he becomes a site of tension; in certain contexts Ray vehemently objects to the constructs of race, nationhood, and their heteronormative reproduction, while in other contexts he functions as McKay’s spokesperson against interracial marriages and their role in the dissolution of the black African race. Tellingly, when Ray objects to nationalist ideology or to solidarity and community-building based solely upon a shared racial identification, he does so from a distinctly queer positionality. When, on the other hand, he articulates McKay’s critique of European greed by making broad pronouncements about “feminine” white civilization and opportunistic black and white women who corrupt black racial solidarity, Ray appears to assume the normative male subject position within heteronormative discourse. Because of this tension, Ray queers McKay’s texts in a way McKay, despite his purported commitment to non-heteronormative representational politics, could not have anticipated. *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo*, in advancing McKay’s anti-colonial project, ostensibly also advance a politics of inclusivity that makes room for various kinds of marginalized subjects—among them, sexual minorities. But these novels’ gender and sexual politics are deeply problematic because, by subtextualizing and thus also desexualizing Ray’s queerness, they perform the work of not only assimilating queerness into a homosocial order but also of mobilizing that queerness toward a homosocial exclusion of women that ultimately reinscribes the heteronormative social order. The inconsistency of the racial and sexual politics espoused by Ray signals the ambivalence of McKay’s own racial and sexual politics, as well as the text’s ultimate inability to fully assimilate this queer character into its pan-African homosocial social organization.
Home to Harlem’s narrative follows a tripartite structure. In the first part, Jake, a black working-class American man, has just returned to Harlem after deserting his military service in France because of the military’s institutionalized racial segregation. In this section Jake meets and falls in love with a prostitute who returns his money after a one-time encounter. She then disappears, and Jake’s quest to reunite with her continues until the end of the novel’s rather loosely structured plot. In the second section Jake works as a waiter on a Pennsylvania Railroad train, where he meets and forms a strong homosocial bond with Ray. Ray comes back to Harlem with Jake in the third part, where Jake finally finds the woman from the first section, learns her name (Felice), and elopes with her to Chicago, while Ray, who, as we find out, is engaged, ponders his resentment of married life and its attendant reproduction of racialized identity. In order to put off marriage, Ray takes a job on a freighter en route to Australia and then Europe.

In Banjo, Ray has temporarily settled in Marseilles. Banjo depicts the lives of a community of vagabond working-class black men from the African diaspora—referred to as the “beach boys”—in the French port town. As the novel’s subtitle, A Story Without a Plot, suggests, Banjo’s narrative is structured even more loosely than Home to Harlem’s. The story revolves around the proletarian men’s collective efforts to earn money from panhandling, playing music, occasionally taking odd jobs, and playing the role of “sweetmen” in relation to women whose incomes most often come from prostitution. The protagonist Lincoln Agrippa Daily, a.k.a. Banjo, is a working-class African American who plays the banjo, sometimes in an orchestra with his friends. All of these transnational men in some way embody anti-nationalism: Banjo throws out his passport upon arriving in Marseilles, and at least two of his friends carry papers stamped with the British government’s “Nationality Doubtful” designation; others carry no papers at all.
Queerness, Women, and the Domestication of Sexuality in Home to Harlem

The homosocial bond Jake and Ray form in the second section of Home to Harlem serves as a model for these novels’ articulation of black homosocial solidarity. The train as a setting for the formation of this relationship allows McKay to simultaneously articulate a critique of colonialism and capitalist industrialism and play out an imagined anti-heteronormative resistance to imperialist structures. Besides its obvious phallic symbolism, the train, where an all-black and largely Southern crew serves white passengers, represents capitalism and imperialism’s geographically and racially asymmetrical schema of industrial development. The “stream-roller of progress” (155)—Ray’s term for American civilization, particularly in relation to its devastating impact on Haiti—could also be applied metaphorically to the train. At the same time, the train is not simply an instrument of brutal industrialism; rather, it functions as a site of negotiation between the forces of imperialist and capitalist “progress” and the black proletarian manpower that executes its day-to-day operations. As a massive, phallic, mobile steel construction that connects industrial centers, transports countless raw materials and goods, and contains within it a homosocial black working-class space, the train is loaded with all the appropriate symbolism for the articulation of McKay’s vision of a masculine black working-class solidarity.

As a liminal space that enables contact between black working-class men from disparate and distant geographical locales, the train is also a fitting place for the formation of transnational alliances. Jake’s introduction to Ray is also an introduction to the possibility for revolution in the African diaspora, outside the U.S. When Jake first meets Ray, he expresses surprise and incredulity at the revelation that French can be a black man’s native language. Ray, in response, narrates a brief history of Haiti and the Haitian Revolution. Hearing “for the first time… the name Toussaint L’Ouverture, the black slave and leader of the Haytian slaves,” Jake exclaims:
“A black man! A black man! Oh, I wish I’d been a soldier under such a man!” (132). Michael Maiwald sees Jake’s exclamation as illustrative of a “personal commitment to a political movement [that] is inseparable from the sentimental desire for another man” and “a result of… [Jake’s] libidinal attraction to Ray’s narrative construction” (844). As Ray and Jake bond over their common investment in the narrative of a black male leader who frees other black men from colonial oppression, the text foregrounds McKay’s commitment to a homoerotic pan-African revolutionary solidarity.

In *Home to Harlem*, Ray himself embodies the homoeroticism inherent in McKay’s vision of a transnational anti-colonial revolution. Ray vehemently objects to racialized nationalist politics and the heteronormative reproduction of races and nations. One night, as Ray battles insomnia in the crew’s lodgings in Pittsburgh, a series of loosely connected thoughts evokes the connection between his queerness and anti-nationalist sentiment. “Race,” he muses. “Why should he have and love a race? Races and nations were things like skunks, whose smells poisoned the air of life” (153-4). Significantly, this thought comes to him after he has given up hope that “love would appease this unwavering angel of wakefulness,” for “he could not pick up love easily on the street as Jake,” (152) and after he attempts to comfort himself by picturing a tableau of phallic vegetation from his tropical homeland: “All the flowering things he loved… a thousand glowing creepers, climbing and spilling their vivid petals everywhere… Giddy-high erect thatch palms, slender, tall, fur-fronded ferns, majestic cotton trees, stately bamboos creating a green grandeur in the heart of space” (153).³

Ray’s homoerotically inflected fantasy of the natural splendor of Haiti constitutes a dream of a postcolonial existence independent from the perils of Western industrialization. “[S]omeday,” he hopes, as he dreams of his homeland, “Uncle Sam might let go of his island and
he would escape from the clutches of that magnificent monster of civilization and retire behind the natural defenses of his island, where the steam-roller of progress could not reach him” (155). But in the meantime, the sleepless Ray drugs himself with the cocaine he finds in Jake’s pocket in order to escape from the material reality of the sordid “quarters that the richest railroad in the world provided for its black servitors” (156). Thus Ray’s escapist homoerotic reverie reaches full bloom. He becomes “a gay humming-bird, fluttering and darting his long needle beak into the heart of a bell-flower” and a “young shining chief” waited on by “gleaming-skinned black boys bearing goblets of wine and obedient eunuchs waiting in the offing” (157-8). In juxtaposing Ray’s escape to a prelapsarian dreamland of homoerotic pleasures with his rejection of heterosexual love (the kind Jake would pick up on the street) and of love for nations and races, McKay envisions a utopian queer world of sexual freedom that lies outside the orbits of the modern nation-state and its implication in the proliferation of Western capitalist “progress.”

Despite the occasional passages in which McKay figuratively conveys Ray’s queerness, *Home to Harlem* generally portrays Ray’s sexuality as repressed at worst and sublimated at best. In this episode, the novel comes closest to granting Ray sexual fulfillment. His dream of “gay humming-bird[s]” and “obedient eunuchs” is framed by images that betray his desire for Jake. Before he indulges in his cocaine binge, Ray finds solace in looking at Jake “who is sleeping peacefully, like a tired boy after hard playing, so happy and sweet and handsome” (157). That morning Ray awakens in Jake’s arms, shouting for Jake, as “a thousand pins were pricking [his] flesh… All his muscles were loose, his cells were cold,” and he feels “the rhythm of being arrested” (158). This description of Ray’s body, as Suzette Spencer argues, suggests that his “cocaine reverie ends in orgasm” (191), but his orgasm occurs in a state of sickness, and he is immediately taken to the hospital. Thus even the singular sexual release that McKay allows his
queer character in this “in-between” space of the novel’s narrative is encoded in a symbolic of pathology. While the virile heterosexual Jake can easily handle indulging in various excesses, Ray, the impotent queer intellectual, must be hospitalized after partaking in his one-man orgy. The celebration of Ray’s queer sexuality through its connection to McKay’s anti-colonial vision and its simultaneous pathologization are symptomatic of McKay’s conflicting attitudes toward queer masculinity.

The evolution of Jake and Ray’s friendship negotiates this tension in McKay’s representations of masculinity and queerness. When the two men are initially introduced, Ray is reading Alphonse Daudet’s Sapho.

“[Sappho’s] story gave two lovely words to modern language,” said the waiter [Ray].
“Which one them?” asked Jake.
“Sapphic and Lesbian… beautiful words.”
“Not all. And that’s a damned ugly name,” the waiter said. “Harlem is too savage about some things. Buldyker,” the waiter stressed with a sneer.
Jake grinned. “But tha’s what they is, ain’t it?”
He began humming:
“And there is two things in Harlem I don’t understan’
It is a buldyking woman and a faggoty man….”. (129; McKay’s ellipses)

Maiwald, noting that Jake hums the popular tune about queers in Harlem as he looks through Daudet’s novel, connects the discussion of queerness to Jake’s new knowledge about the diversity of diasporic blackness.

This congruence suggests that sexual and linguistic formations of otherness are being addressed at the same time and that Jake’s subsequent incredulousness at Ray’s fluent French is a displacement of his shock at Ray’s coded admission of his own homosexuality. Jake’s fearful question—‘Ain’tchu one of us, too?” [in response to Ray’s explanation that he is a native French speaker]—only makes sense if it applies to something beyond the French language that Jake cannot reconcile to his own conception of blackness. (843)
Jake’s humming alludes to the song’s performance in the first section of the novel. The song’s lyrics are an adaptation of Bessie Smith’s “Foolish Man Blues,” rumored to have been banned by the police. The original lyrics are: “There's two things got me puzzled, there's two things I can't understand / A mannish actin' woman and a skippin' twistin' woman actin' man” (Garber 320). McKay’s replacement of Smith’s relatively innocuous designations of queers read through a model of inversion with the much more sexually explicit but also arguably homophobic terms “bulldyking woman” and “faggoty man” is simultaneously indicative of his intent to confront queerness bluntly and his uneasiness with the challenge to black masculinity (and femininity) posed by Harlem queers who invert normative gender presentations.

Jake and Ray’s conversation illustrates that Jake harbors homophobic sentiments and sees black masculinity as heterosexual and American when he first meets Ray. As Maiwald shows, these beliefs concerning black nationality and sexuality are most succinctly expressed by Jake’s question “Ain’tchu one of us too?” (McKay 131). Jake’s acquaintance with Ray progressively attunes him to both the national and sexual diversity of blackness. The story of the Haitian Revolution quickly convinces Jake of the value of the transnationalist project, but his acceptance of Ray’s queerness is a more gradual development. The change in Jake’s attitudes toward queer black sexuality begins when Ray orgasms as he shouts out Jake’s name. After he sends Ray off to the hospital, Jake tells himself that “[w]e may all be niggers aw-right but we ain’t nonetall the same” (159). This insight suggests a more enlightened view of queer sexuality on Jake’s part that allows him to more fully accept Ray as “one of us.” McKay thus articulates a politics of inclusivity that necessitates an understanding of black masculinity that must make room for sexual as well as national diversity.4
The chapter “One Night in Philly” marks a shift in McKay’s representation of Ray’s queerness, dissociating it from perversity and aligning it with a kind of primal folk sexuality. When Jake takes Ray to a party at his friend Madame Laura’s brothel, his intuitive understanding of Ray’s sexuality leads him to remark to the hostess: “Mah friend’s just keeping me company… He ain’t regular, you get me? And I want him treated right” (191). At first Ray appears incapable of dancing to blues music and McKay ties his inability to feel the rhythm to his inhibited sexuality. Ray initially refuses a young woman’s invitation to dance: “Tickling, enticing syncopation. Ray felt that he ought to dance to it. But some strange thing seemed to hold him back from taking the girl in his arms” (195). After Ray and the woman order a drink, she makes another advance. “[T]he carnal sympathy of her full, tinted mouth, touched Ray. But something was between them” (196). In both cases, the “something” that holds Ray back is his queerness, but this time McKay momentarily dissociates this queerness from its alignment with Ray’s perverse disinterest in women. Immediately after we are told that “something was between them,” we are presented with Ray’s distraction by the piano player’s dim, far-away, ancestral source of music. Far, far away from music-hall syncopation and jazz, he was lost in some sensual dream of his own. No tortures, banal shrieks and agonies. Tum-tum… tum-tum… tum-tum… The notes were naked acute alert. Like black youth burning naked in the bush. Love in the deep heart of the jungle…. The sharp spring of a leopard from a leafy limb, the snarl of a jackal, green lizards in amorous play, the flight of a plumed bird, and the sudden laughter of mischievous monkeys in their green homes. Tum-tum… tum-tum… tum-tum… tum-tum…. Simple-clear and quivering. Like a primitive dance of war or of love… the marshalling of spears or the sacred frenzy of a phallic celebration.

Black lovers of life caught up in their own free native rhythm, threaded to a remote scarce-remembered past, celebrating the midnight hours in themselves, for themselves, of themselves, in a house in Fifteenth Street, Philadelphia…. (196-97; McKay’s ellipses)
I’ve excerpted the passage in its entirety in order to maintain the full effect of the text’s hyperbolic performance of primitivism. The passage overrides the earlier suggestion that the queer Ray is somehow deficient in his ability to feel the sensual rhythm of black music. On the contrary, Ray not only feels the same rhythms as the other, presumably heterosexual, “black lovers” at Madame Laura’s, but is actually more closely attuned to them. While the other lovers and dancers in the Philadelphia house feel “remotely” connected to the primitive past, Ray is able to clearly envision and lose himself in an entire mise-en-scène of phallic jungle rituals. It is this disparity in attunement to primal rhythms that constitutes the unbridgeable gap between Ray and the woman who pursues his company. Rather than alienating the queer Ray, McKay’s primitivist aesthetic actually naturalizes his sexuality and aligns it with a kind of “authentic” folk blackness, as his trancelike reverie transports him to a “sacred frenzy of a phallic celebration” that transcends the intimation of “music-hall syncopation and jazz” pervading the atmosphere at Madame Laura’s. As in the speakeasy scene in *Quicksand*, the rhythms of African American music, the kind of music sung by the queer performer Bessie Smith, create a space of possibility for queer sexuality and for sexual expression that cannot be contained by the parameters of uplift or bourgeois respectability.⁵

*Home to Harlem* thus allows a form of symbolic expression for Ray’s queerness, but this expression does not ultimately challenge the novel’s privileging of heterosexual masculinity. The text suggests that Ray is queer, but it also suppresses the consummation of his sexuality. What “really” happened to Ray that one night in Philly can only be pieced together by reading between the lines and filling in the blanks of *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo*’s intertextual narrative. Ray’s hypnotic fantasy of primitive dances and phallic celebrations at Madame Laura’s in *Home to Harlem* ends with ellipses and is ostensibly interrupted by a resounding announcement that a
policeman is raiding the establishment. The alarm turns out to be false, as the policeman happens to be a friend of Madame Laura’s. Jake later returns to the quarters to find Ray “sleeping quietly” and asks him the next morning if the policeman’s intrusion scared him (199). Ray does not remember a policeman’s presence and surmises that he must have “left before that” (200). Since there is no suggestion in the text that Ray’s trance was deep enough to ignore the arrival of the policeman and since it seems impossible that anyone present could have remained oblivious to this disruption, Ray must have in fact not been there at the time. The distant phallic celebration into which he escaped, then, was more likely literal than just a fantasy.

Banjo supports this hypothesis. In Banjo, Ray runs into a man with whom he worked on the Pennsylvania Railroad, who insists that Ray join him and his friends for drinks at the Senegalese bar. “The acquaintance between Ray and the railroad waiter, now turned ship steward,” we are told, “was slight. They had never worked on the same dining-cars, but had met each other casually at the railroad men’s quarters in Philadelphia. Yet they met now and acted like old and dear friends. Meeting like that was so unique, it stirred them strangely” (189). It should not require too great a stretch of the imagination to surmise that Ray’s mysterious disappearance from Madame Laura’s establishment, his sensate participation in a “phallic frenzy,” and his sound sleep upon Jake’s return (contrasted with his frustrated sleeplessness in the “Snowstorm in Pittsburgh” chapter), all have something to do with his “casual” encounter with the stranger staying at the men’s quarters. The two men’s reunion in Marseilles moves them because it parallels the randomness of their original “unique” (one-time) sexual encounter in Pittsburgh. The literal consummation of Ray’s vagabond queer sexuality occurs in transnational spaces where proletarian strangers meet, undetected by policemen, co-workers, and unreliable narrators.
The manifest narrative presents us with a rather different scenario. The morning after the night at Madame Laura’s Jake asks Ray why he left the party early when “one o’ the little chippies” who was “some piece to look at” was clearly interested in him. Ray explains that her perfume “turned mah stomach,” to which Jake responds, “Youse awful queer, chappie” (200). Jake then comments on the differences between French and American brothels and women, and Ray admits that he “lump[s] all those ladies together, without difference of race” (202). Jake’s subsequent reflection on the diversity of women and sexual experiences that the world offers affirms his authoritative position in speaking about (hetero)ssexual matters. His assertion that “there’s all kinds a difference in that theah life” (202) comes off as ironic in light of the monologue’s ostensible function as an affirmation of the universality of heterosexuality. Jake promises to take Ray to a gathering in New York where he can meet “some real queens” (203), and the connotations of “queen” offer yet another subtextual queering of the narrative. But ultimately, the point of Ray and Jake’s conversation is that Ray must be in need of (hetero)ssexual education, a point underscored by the chapter’s concluding with Jake’s allusion to “a li’l piece o’ sweetness I picked up in a cabaret the first day I landed from ovah the other side” (203), which he will one day tell Ray about.

Though McKay expresses ambivalent attitudes toward queer masculinity in Home to Harlem, the narrative gradually comes to accept Ray’s queerness and even suggest that a queer sensibility can be a useful addition to anti-colonial politics. Thus, the narrative moves a way from a phobic view of queerness and eventually presents a relatively enlightened view. The same cannot be said for the novel’s representation of women. Jake’s view of women is structured around a dichotomy between women in general, and the woman, or his woman, Felice. Before Jake can reunite with Felice, he has to confront a number of aggressive, violent, or
otherwise castrating women. Significantly, these women tend to be mulattas, and their vilification is thus consistent with McKay’s general attitudes toward mulattos. Jean Wagner claims that McKay believed that “moral degradation” was “the price [mulattos should] pay for denying their black ancestry,” and that their “lack of racial pride placed them… irredeemably beyond pale” (Wagner 216 in Hathaway 61). *Home to Harlem* portrays several mulatta women as cold, manipulative, and sexually perverse. I focus on two in particular.

Congo Rose is a singer and dancer at the Congo, one of the few black-owned clubs in Harlem. A “real throbbing little Africa in New York,” the Congo “remained in spite of formidable opposition and foreign exploitation” (29). The Congo does not admit white people. Black-owned and patronized almost entirely by working-class blacks, the Congo represents a self-sustained community that survives against all odds at a time when ninety percent of Harlem clubs were white-owned. We are told that even “high yallers,” or light-skinned mulattos, “were scarce there” (30). Jake and his friend Zeddy head over to the Congo, “the best pick-me-up place in Harlem” (35), after “a raging putty-skinned mulattress” (33) starts a fight at the Baltimore where Jake has gone to look for Felice. On the way to the Congo, Jake tells Zeddy: “I ain’t much for the high-yallers after having been so much fed-up on the ofays. [sic.] They’s so doggone much alike” (36). Zeddy, alluding to Rose, in turn suggests to Jake that “a sweet-lovin’ high-yaller queen” (36) can have more in common with them than she does with whites.

Not surprisingly, Jake ends up going home with Rose at the end of the night at the Congo. Jake subsequently begins what might be called a relationship of convenience with her. Rose provides him with a place to stay and “the mulattress was all a wonderful tissue of throbbing flesh” (42). But Jake ultimately finds Rose overly masculine and expresses an anxiety about being emasculated by a “sweetman” situation. “I’ve never been a sweetman yet,” he tells
Rose. “Never lived off no womens and never will” (40). The self-sufficient Rose in turn begins to lose interest in Jake because “she felt no thrill about the business when her lover was not interested in her earnings” (114). Rose also turns out to be bisexual and McKay indirectly connects her bisexuality to her sexual perversity. When Jake comes home one night and finds evidence that Rose has had a visitor, he supposedly “hadn’t the slightest feeling of jealousy or anger, whatever the visitor was. Rose had her friends of both sexes and was quite free in her ways” (113). Yet he nonetheless calls her a “slut” and “everybody’s teaser” (115). The bisexual Rose then intentionally starts a physical fight with Jake because she gets a thrill out of being hit by her male lover. When Jake, to his own horror, does deliver what Rose “asks for,” Rose is relieved. “I almost thought he was getting sissy,” she tells her friend. “But he’s a ma-an all right” (117; italics in the original). Disgusted with Rose’s perversity and its corruption of his conception of his own masculinity—“I don’t like hitting no womens” (118)—Jake packs his suitcase and moves out of Rose’s.

Rose is just one of the many women whom McKay represents as having a natural tendency to incite violence. McKay self-contradictorily represents women as not only men’s territory but as active perpetrators of racial and imperialist conflict. According to McKay, women quite consciously and deliberately incite riots among men around the world. One could of course ask how this subject-as-territory—herself a paradox, since there are few more objectifying gestures than being territorialized—could possibly have that kind of agency. The answer is complex, and it depends upon a dynamic play of inversion and mystification of gendered power dynamics.

Miss Curdy, a middle-class Brooklyn woman, is another vilified mulatta figure in Home to Harlem. She also happens to be a particularly unattractive mulatta whose face has “purple
“There’s many nice ways of spending a sociable evening between ladies and gentlemen.”

“Got to show me,” said Jake, simply because the popular phrase intrigued his tongue.

“And that I can.”

Irritated, Jake turned to move away.

“Where are you going? Scared of a lady?”

Jake recoiled from the challenge, and shuffled away from the hideous mulattress. From experience in seaport towns in America, in France, in England, he had concluded that a woman could always go further than a man in coarseness, depravity, and sheer cupidity. Men were ugly and brutal. But beside women they were merely vicious children. Ignorant about the aim and meaning and fulfillment of life; uncertain and indeterminate; weak. Rude children who loved excelling in spectacular acts to win the applause of women.

But women were so realistic and straightgoing. They were the real controlling force of life. Jake remembered the bal-musette fights between colored and white soldiers in France. Blacks, browns, yellows, whites…. He remembered the interracial sex skirmishes in England. Men fought, hurt, wounded, killed each other. Women, like blazing torches, egged them on or denounced them. Victims of sex, the men seemed foolish, ape-like blunderers in their pools of blood. Didn’t know what they were fighting for, except it was to gratify some vague feeling about women…. (69-70; McKay’s italics and ellipses)

Miss Curdy’s physical undesirability and sexual forwardness allow McKay to easily disqualify her from a vast pool of passive, objectified, territorialized women, and offer an inverted view of global sexual politics, where women become the agents rather than objects of territorial struggles. Even though fights over women among men of different racial, national, and class backgrounds posit women as territorial sites for racial and class conflicts whose subjects are
supposedly men, here women are scapegoated as the cause of these conflicts. The passage thus mystifies not only women but also racial and class struggle. Rather than attempt to disentangle intersecting sites of colonial violence, McKay represents women and racial or class-based violence alike as mysterious and mysteriously complicit “controlling force[s] of life.” The added scapegoating of mulattas further mystifies racial and class dynamics, and I will explore this problem in my analysis of Banjo.

Jake’s disgust with women who incite riots makes him think of the one woman who doesn’t: the beautiful prostitute who returned his money after a one-night encounter.

Jake’s thoughts went roaming after his little lost brown of the Baltimore.
The difference! She, in one night, had revealed a fine different world to him. Mystery again. A little stray girl. Finer than the finest! (69-70)

Being a woman, Felice too is a mystery, but, at least in Jake’s imagination, not a cause of violence. When, toward the end of the novel, a fight does erupt over Felice between Jake and his friend Zeddy, Jake does not blame Felice, but rather “sex”—a disembodied but nonetheless feminized emasculating force. “These miserable cock-fights,” Jake reflects, “beastly, tigerish, bloody. They had always sickened, saddened, unmanned him. This wild, shrieking mad woman that is sex seemed jeering at him” (328). While, in contrast to the previous passage, here McKay foregrounds racial conflict and holds men accountable for the violence in which they engage, he continues to scapegoat women. “[H]e was infinitely disgusted with himself to think that he had just been moved by the same savage emotions as those vile, vicious, villainous white men who, like hyenas and rattlers, had fought, murdered, and clawed the entrails out of black men over the common, commercial flesh of women….” (328; McKay’s ellipses). The image of clawed out entrails in particular evokes lynchings and the institutionalized colonial and racial violence they emblematize. The descriptions of white men as hyenas and rattlers invert the racist
animalization of black men and reassign the label of monstrosity to the perpetrators of violence. Yet the representation of women’s bodies remains problematic. The flesh of women may indeed be common and commercial, but McKay offers no demystification of the colonial, capitalist, and heteropatriarchal structures that thus commodified it.

_HOME TO HARLEM_ provides the narrative closure of a national romance. As Jake and Felice elope, leaving behind the dangers of Harlem, their heterosexual union acts as an allegory for the nation. Ray, his queer desire, and anti-nationalist sentiments seem to disappear as quickly as they surfaced in the novel’s middle section. Ray must in fact leave the nation, and he emerges out of _Home to Harlem_ as the queer remainder of representable sexuality, the nation, and the narrative. The post-nationalist narrative of _Banjo_ is where that queer remainder enacts a much more visible crisis of representation.

“SOCIETY IS FEMININE”: THE CONFLICTING POLITICS OF _BANJO_

Ray assumes a much more central role in _Banjo_ than he does in _Home to Harlem_. A substantial portion of the story is told from Ray’s point of view, and the frequency of Ray’s politically themed conversations makes his function as spokesperson for McKay’s anti-colonial and anti-heteronormative politics fairly blatant. Significantly, the views on gender, sexuality, and race, and their relationship to colonial ideology and anti-colonial struggle, that Ray and McKay express at various points in the novel can be puzzlingly self-contradictory. I see this self-contradiction and ideological inconsistency as indicative of the greater complexity of the gender and racial politics espoused in _Banjo_ as opposed to in _Home to Harlem_, and also as symptomatic of McKay’s self-critique, particularly with respect to his representations of women and femininity.

In _Banjo_, in contrast to _Home to Harlem_, Ray’s sexuality appears to be a non-issue. Ray appears rid of sexual neuroses, yet, as in _Home to Harlem_, the text’s manifest content does not
allow him to consummate his queer sexuality. *Banjo* in fact works to assimilate Ray’s queerness within McKay’s pan-African homosocial/homoerotic discourse, and, toward the end of the novel, McKay even makes a disingenuous attempt to heterosexualize Ray. I see this oblique gesture toward heterosexualization as symptomatic of *Banjo*’s ultimate failure to assimilate Ray’s queerness. Because, in *Banjo*, Ray embodies McKay’s ideological contradictions, the failure to assimilate Ray further symbolizes McKay’s shortcomings in advancing an anti-assimilationist political agenda.

The eponymous protagonist Banjo acts as *Home to Harlem* Jake’s double, which allows Ray to relive his experience from the first novel in a new cultural setting where a different set of rules and sexual conventions facilitate a re-imagining of homoerotic and homosexual possibilities. When Ray meets Banjo, he immediately befriends him; that “Banjo’s rich Dixie accent went to his head like old wine and reminded him happily of Jake” (64) plays no small part in Ray’s attraction to him. Furthermore, the meeting takes place at the beginning of the second and middle section of *Banjo*, in a chapter tellingly titled “Meeting-Up,” and thus structurally parallels Jake and Ray’s introduction in the second and middle section of *Home to Harlem*. McKay thus sets up *Banjo* as a revision of *Home to Harlem* that gives Ray the sexual freedom he lacked in the first novel.

Ray’s re-introduction to the story is couched in descriptions of his exuberant optimism about his new life in the international port town of Marseilles where “any day he might meet with picturesque proletarians from far waters whose names were warm with romance” and admire the “sweat-dripping bodies of black men” who work at the docks, “naked under the equatorial sun” (67). From the start, McKay allows Ray to think, in his conscious, rational, waking state, about the bodies of actual men, living in the here-and-now, thus representing his
queerness much more explicitly than he does through Ray’s fantasies and dreams of primitive phallic imagery in *Home to Harlem*. Banjo’s echo of the dislike for reified national and racial political frameworks that Ray expresses in *Home to Harlem* is similarly colored by a sense of exuberant queer eroticism. In Banjo, as in *Home to Harlem*, Ray explicitly connects antinationalism with anti-heteronormativity. At the same time, McKay’s figuration of the migrant, expatriate sensibility and its opposition to being domesticated by the nation-state, depends upon a traditional imperialist gendered symbolic that stands at odds with McKay’s antiheteronormative project. A conversation with an American man whose sojourn in Europe “had taught him to be patriotic… had taught him that he was an American,” and who is therefore preparing to return “to America to settle down to the business of marriage,” leads Ray to silently reflect on why he is utterly uninterested in “settling down” in any nation (137; ellipses in the original): “Man loves individuals. Man loves things. Man loves places. And the vagabond lover of life finds individuals and things to love in many places and not in any one nation. Man loves places and no one place, for the earth, like a beautiful wanton, puts on a new dress to fascinate him wherever he may go” (137).

As Brent Edwards notes, this vision of “vagabond internationalism” (198) is gendered. The imagery that Edwards sees as representative of this gendering—“the earth dresses ‘like a beautiful wanton’ to fascinate ‘him’” (Edwards 206)—implies that Ray’s vision is also heterosexualized. Certainly, the repetition of “man” as the subject who loves in a context of traveling the world resonates with the tired imperialist trope of male exploration of territory, where the latter is always gendered female. But Ray’s articulation of his distaste for “settling down”—in the context of a conversation with a man whose imminent settling down fully reverberates with the term’s double connotation of committing not only to permanent residence
in a particular place and nation but also to heterosexual marriage and domesticity—does not completely square with a heterosexist symbolic logic. Additionally, Ray’s rumination that “it seemed a most unnatural thing to him for a man to love a nation” (137) resonates with the fact that it also seems a most unnatural thing for Ray to love a woman. Ray, as a “vagabond lover of life,” is not only promiscuous but also decidedly queer.

Yet Ray’s queerness does not fundamentally alter the traditional scheme of gendering the citizen, the explorer, the nation, and the earth in nationalist and imperialist discourse. Ray may not be interested in settling down with a woman or in any particular place on earth called a nation, but the earth still wears dresses for the satisfaction of the male explorer. The earth, like Helga Crane, is flexible in its choice of wardrobe, depending on where and for whom it is performing. Ray’s adherence to a traditional imperialist symbolic of heteronormative gendering in Banjo is a possible step toward the novel’s heterosexualization of its queer protagonist.

This imagined “vagabond lover of life” appears to be McKay’s ideal anti-colonial proletarian black male subject. He resists assimilation by the nation, the bourgeoisie, and its imperative to marry, and loves people of all nationalities and shades. Given this image of the vagabond lover, coupled Banjo’s celebration of the communitarian spirit of vagrants from all parts of the African diaspora and the cosmopolitan mixing of strangers of various shades, the strong anti-miscegenation views Ray later espouses are somewhat puzzling. Ray disapproves of sexual or marital affiliation between black women and white men, and black men and white women, because he feels that “race-conscious” blacks should demonstrate racial solidarity in keeping to their own race (206-07). Furthermore, he seems to think that only black men are capable of being “race-conscious.” In a conversation with his friend Goosey, Ray explains his views on women’s participation in miscegenation:
In the West Indies, where there are no prohibitory laws, the Europeans have all the black and mulatto concubines they need. In Africa, too. Woman is woman all over the world, no matter what her color is. She is cast in a passive role and she worships the active success of man and rewards it with her body. The colored woman is no different from the white in this. If she is not inhibited by race feeling she’ll give herself to the white man because he stands for power and property. *Property controls sex.*

When you understand that, Goosey, you’ll understand the meaning of struggle between class and class, nation and nation, race and race. You’ll understand that society chases after power just as woman chases after property, because *society is feminine.* And you’ll see that the white races today are ahead of the colored because their women are emancipated, and that there is greater material advancement among those white nations whose women have the most freedom. (206; my italics)

McKay constructs his anti-colonial black proletarianism in opposition to a greedy feminine white bourgeois society. Black women who marry white men engage in a form of prostitution—the kind Helga Crane might have participated in had she married Axel Olsen—symptomatic of both women and the bourgeoisie’s complacency and social opportunism. All women are, through outrageous generalization, aligned with the bourgeoisie, and the “feminine” is uncritically represented as all that is morally weak, assimilationist, and inclined toward prostitution. Interracial relations—sexual or otherwise—are not scrutinized for their potentially messy power dynamics, but exhibited as just another example of the treachery of the feminine, of its disregard for any kind of racial or class solidarity.

Significantly, in *Banjo,* McKay draws the connection between whiteness, prostitution, the bourgeoisie, and greed most clearly not through any particular female character, but through a white French chauffeur who supplements his income by pimping. The money he earns from prostitution helps him afford a home in the suburbs, marry a middle-class woman, and assume a hypocritical position of moral superiority in relation to those who live in or frequent the Ditch (the prostitution district). As Leah Rosenberg notes, McKay “presents the Chauffeur’s
hypocritical respectability as indicative of the larger hypocrisy of European respectability” (225). As the working-class chauffeur makes a place for himself within bourgeois respectability, he aligns himself, as Ray observes, with “the entitled and ennobled and fashionable and snobbish gentry of this age who have the roots of their fortunes in the buying and selling of black bodies” (*Banjo* 289 in Rosenberg 225). It is not the prostitutes, but the chauffeur who climbs up to bourgeois respectability through profits from prostitution. This poignant example of the bourgeoisie’s implication in colonialism, and in the capitalist exploitation of black people and women seems to contradict Ray’s assertion that “society is feminine.” On the contrary, it appears that a white “masculine” society, embodied by the chauffeur is most directly implicated in the kind of social climbing that disregards class solidarity and takes advantage of women and people of color.

While the subjective lives of prostitutes are not the novel’s primary focus, when McKay does address this topic in *Banjo*, he expresses an unexpected level of sympathy with the plight of prostitutes. I see the passage below as self-aware commentary on the problems of representing bourgeois society as feminine and scapegoating women as the sellouts who corrupt racial and class solidarity. When Malty tells a story about Indian sailors who were cheated out of their money at a “love shop” (250), Banjo explains to Ray that the corruption surrounding these establishments is not the fault of the women who work there, and that their work is in fact quite dangerous:

“[I]t’s the mens them that make the stuff such hard business. I know more about it than you does, pardner, ‘cause Ise been moh low-down rough-house than you. And you don’t know nothing of all what a pants-wearing bastard will do between welching on a bargain and running off and not coming across. Tha’s why the womens carry guns in them ahmpits and keep a lot a touts foh protecting them. You mustn’t fohget that their business ain’t no picnic. It is hard labor.”
Ray could not reply to this. He felt that there was something fundamentally cruel about sex which, being alien to his nature, was somehow incomprehensible, and that the more civilized humanity became the more cruel was sex. It really seemed sometimes as if there were a war joined between civilization and sex. (252)

This explicit acknowledgment that prostitution is “hard labor” stands in contrast with McKay’s treatments of both femininity and prostitution as compromised positions complicit with Western capitalism and imperialism. The intersectionality of racial, class, gender, and sexual violence literally enacted on the bodies of prostitutes of all races overrides Ray’s conspiratorial speculations about femininity and its conniving nature.

The passage offers a revision of views on the relationship between sex, gender, and civilization espoused elsewhere in these novels. Sex is no longer a madwoman who controls the actions of ignorant men; rather, sex emerges as an instrument developed by white male civilization to keep everyone else in check. The instrumentality of sex for white civilization explains McKay’s pathologization of white sexuality. Ray “inferred… that white people had developed sex complexes that Negroes had not. Negroes were freer and simpler in their sex urge, and, as white people on the whole were not, they naturally attributed over-sexed emotions to Negroes” (252). McKay reverses the colonial construction of black sexuality by positing white sexuality as pathological and black sexuality as natural. By shifting the blame for sexual conflict away from women—“This wild, shrieking mad woman that is sex seemed jeering at [Jake]” (Home to Harlem 328)—and toward the racist sexual fictions of white colonialism, McKay is able to offer a more accurate representation of the connection between gender, sexual exploitation, and racial conflict.

The sexual cruelty upon which Ray reflects is notably of a uniquely heteronormative variety. Ray’s queerness is what makes this version of sex “alien to his nature,” but the passage can also quite easily be (mis)interpreted to propose that sex more generally is alien to his nature.
Ray’s subsequent reflection about his “close observation of Negro sex life” (252) suggests just this. McKay asexualizes Ray, situating him as the beholder of an anthropological gaze that observes sex as an institution of which he will never be a part. While the subtextual evidence of Ray’s queerness hints that there is yet another alternative to the colonial and heteronormative sexual order, McKay never explicitly offers Ray’s own sexual experiences as an antidote to the sexual cruelty of Western civilization. Despite the problems with its exclusion of women, the beach boys’ homosocial community emerges as the most viable alternative to heteronormative colonial sexual dynamics.

The communitarian living of the beach boys does in many ways offer a much more forward-looking vision of social organization than does *Home to Harlem*’s national romance. The beach boys form a self-sustained homosocial community and share their food, beverage, and financial resources with one another. Even when they do find themselves in sweetman situations, they tend not to share the anxieties about emasculation that Jake feels in *Home to Harlem*.

The band does include one female member, Latnah, an orientalized North African prostitute. The men think of Latnah as their “pal” (32) and, as Heather Hathaway observes, “she serves an important role in maintaining the group,” often providing her friends with food, cigarettes, and money, and “protect[ing] both them and herself in the face of danger, being willing in one instance… to fend off an attacker with a dagger hidden in her clothing” (Hathaway 73). At the same time, however, Latnah is quite explicitly othetered through orientalist representation and is also portrayed as a dangerous castrating woman. Demonstrating how she would defend herself if attacked,
She slipped from her bosom a tiny argent-headed dagger, exquisitely sharp-pointed, and showed it to [her friend] Malty. He recoiled with fear and Latnah laughed. A razor or a knife would not have touched him strangely. But a dagger! It was as if Latnah had produced a serpent from her bosom. It was not an instrument familiar to his world, his people, his life. It reminded him of the strange, fierce, fascinating tales he had heard of Oriental strife and daggers dealing with death. (29-30)

Even though Latnah is provisionally accepted in the community, her difference is represented as inassimilable. The self-sufficient, exotic, oriental, hyper-sexualized, Medusa-like Latnah clearly poses a threat to the masculinity of McKay’s black proletarians. Significantly, only Ray is able to truly bond with Latnah—she is in fact the only woman in both novels he is shown to be sexually interested in (Banjo 283-84)—and only Ray sees Latnah as a viable member of a transnational community that McKay seems happy to keep solely between men.

Although Banjo predominantly connects white prostitutes with calculating capitalism—employing white prostitutes as a symbol of European greed—Latnah too is represented as a capitalist, one who potentially threatens the utopian communitarianism of the vagabond beach boys. Latnah’s capitalist tendencies are also tied to her racial difference. While Latnah is African, she is described as “Oriental,” and repeatedly represented as someone who does not entirely fit in with the beach boys’ African community. We are told that Latnah “once tried to collect sous in her tiny jade tray” (46) at a bar during one of Banjo’s musical performances. Latnah learns not to attend these performances thereafter. “[S]he could not enter into the spirit of that all-Negro atmosphere of the bar. Banjo was glad she stayed away…. Sous! How could he respect sous? He who had burnt up dollars. Why should he care, with a free bed, free love, and wine?” (46). In dismissing Latnah as a tactless penny-grubber, Banjo forgets that this North African prostitute’s business sense is what provides him with a free bed and food much of the
time. Ironically, Latnah both sponsors the beach boys’ relatively carefree vagabond existence and offers a critique of the ultimate unviability of living entirely outside of capitalism.

Latnah represents a revision of the misogynist scapegoating found throughout *Home to Harlem* and in some parts of *Banjo*. As an economically savvy prostitute of color who protects herself with her dagger, she looks neither to whites, nor to the bourgeoisie, nor to men for status or protection. Yet her racial difference allows McKay to marginalize her within the beach boys’ community. Ray is the only member of this community who doesn’t see Latnah as “other,” and Ray and Latnah’s shared marginality in relation to the novel’s homosocial pan-Africanism allows them to bond.

McKay’s assimilation of Ray’s queerness into his politics of homosocial pan-African solidarity necessarily leaves much out from Ray’s personal life. What McKay chooses to include is in itself quite revealing. Latnah is the one woman in both of these novels in whom Ray shows any interest, and Ray’s sexual encounter with Latnah is, unsurprisingly, the one relatively unambiguous representation of the consummation of his sexuality with which we are presented. Like Ray’s phallic primitivist fantasies in *Home to Harlem*, this encounter occurs in a state of intoxication. A cloud of opium colors the episode in unmistakably orientalist hues.

Ray and Latnah’s opium-colored evening speaks to the expression of the racial and sexual otherness that McKay’s novels cannot assimilate. Their shared “orientalism” represents the queer and the prostitute’s inassimilable alterity. When Ray implies that he is familiar with opium, Latnah surmises: “I think is leetle Oriental in you” (282). The conversation then turns into a discussion about racial origins and “mixedness.”

“Maybe. There’s a saying in my family about some of our people coming from East Africa. They were reddish, with glossy curly hair. But you have the same types in West Africa, too. You remember the two fellows that used to be at the African Bar during the summer? They looked like
twins and were heavy-featured like some Armenians.”

“I think they were mulattres,” said Latnah.

“No, they weren’t mixed—not as we know it between black and white today. Perhaps way back. I heard they were Fulahs.”

“We all mixed up. I’m so mixed up I don’t know what I am myself.”

“You don’t? I always wonder, Latnah, what you really are. Except for the Chinese, I don’t feel any physical sympathy for Orientals, you know. […] But you are different. I feel so close to you.”

“My mother was Negresse,” said Latnah. Sudanese or Abyssinian—I no certain. I was born at Aden. My father I no know what he was or who he was.” (282-83)

The word “mixed” is central in this dialogue. Initially Ray reserves the word for mulattos, though he quickly retracts this assignment. “Mixed,” because of its association with mulattos, carries a negative connotation for him. Latnah astutely points out that everyone is “mixed.” There is no such thing as racial purity and her own heritage exemplifies this. Significantly, despite his dislike for the kind of mixing that produces mulattos, it is Latnah’s mixedness, her unplaceable ethnicity, that draws Ray to her.

Latnah also articulates her and Ray’s difference from the rest of the gang. “‘You beaucoup Oriental,’ said Latnah. ‘Banjo never touch anything strange like us. Il est un pur sauvage du sang. [He is a pureblood savage].’ She sighed” (283). The only other place in the two novels where Ray is aligned with orientalism is in the description of his primitivist phallic fantasies during his sleepless night in Pittsburgh in Home to Harlem. Ray, unlike Latnah, cannot be easily labeled as an ethnic “Oriental.” His inscription in orientalist terms is therefore figurative and, as both of its instances illustrate, tied to his sexuality. In Western imperialist discourse orientalism functions as a trope that feminizes the colonized other, representing him as dark, mysterious, and wholly alien to civilized Western society. McKay modifies this orientalist
trope and uses it to represent racial identification and sexuality that do not quite fit into the representational schema of his pan-Africanism. McKay does not disentangle orientalism from its feminizing connotations, nor does he necessarily reappropriate the trope to challenge Western imperialism. Ray’s dreams and fantasies may be phallic, but they also feature the figure of the eunuch—the feminized oriental other par excellence. McKay simply uses orientalism to represent the inassimilable. Ray’s queerness and Latnah’s femininity and racial otherness unsettle the coherence of McKay’s virile masculine pan-African symbolic.

Banjo’s conclusion solidifies Latnah’s exclusion from McKay’s anti-colonial pan-African project and makes a final attempt to assimilate Ray into this homosocial symbolic. While Home to Harlem’s narrative closure is that of a national romance, Banjo, as Rosenberg argues, is an example of a different genre, a “romance of the race,” which “McKay constructs in opposition to a national romance…. The romance ends not in a marriage symbolic of national unity but with the pairing of two strong men, Ray and Banjo, setting off together to vagabond through Europe. Their homosocial and homoerotic partnership symbolizes the need for a black international solidarity” (223). Banjo’s question for Ray as they set off on this journey—“You gwine with a man or you ain’t?” (325)—is particularly emblematic of this black homosocial/homoerotic solidarity. When Ray asks if they can take Latnah along, Banjo’s admonition, “Don’t get soft ovah any wimmens, pardner. Tha’s you big weakness,” interpellates Ray as heterosexual in order to articulate a homosocial and anti-heteronormative project that is at the same time not queer. Given Home to Harlem and Banjo’s ambivalent representations of Ray’s queerness, McKay’s disingenuous heterosexualization of Ray in the final paragraph of Banjo is symptomatic of these novels’ inability to fully assimilate Ray’s queerness into their homosocial symbolic. Additionally, Banjo’s claim that “a woman is a conjunction” (326) further
signifies the problematic exclusion of women from McKay’s anti-colonial project. Yet the conclusion of Banjo also points to McKay’s awareness of the failure of his representation of women—a failure to which he alludes earlier when Banjo sympathizes with the plight of the working-class prostitute. Latnah can’t come along because, “theah’s things we can git away with all the time and she [as a woman] just kain’t” (326). Banjo is likely alluding to the hypervisibility of women’s bodies and the social restrictions on the kind of work women can do. In other words, Latnah can’t come along not because women cause trouble by virtue of being women, but because laws, governments, and the larger social structure of which they are a part pathologize women, their labor, and their mobility. Just as vagabond men can get away with things women cannot, McKay demonstrates an awareness that he too may have gotten away with a rather skewed representation of women, condoned by the existing representational symbolic.

1 On the mutual reinforcement between heteronormativity and binary gender, see the preface to Butler’s Gender Trouble.


3 For a thorough analysis of the homoeroticism of this imagery, see Suzette Spencer, “Swerving at a Different Angle and Flying in the Face of Tradition: Excavating the Homoerotic Subtext in Home to Harlem,” CLA Journal 42.2 (1998), 164-93.

4 Criticism on Home to Harlem has variously articulated similar concepts. Heather Hathaway writes of the novel’s “ethics of inclusion” (60), whereas Holcomb argues that Home to Harlem performs a “Marxist insistence on inclusiveness” (135).

5 For a discussion of Bessie Smith and other queer female blues performers in Harlem, see Garber.


8 According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “society,” at the time when these novels were written, referred to respectable or fashionable society.
CHAPTER 4
CONCLUSION: MCKAY, LARSEN, DUBOIS, AND THE PRICE OF “UPLIFT”

In 1929, Du Bois published a review of *Banjo* and *Passing* that in many ways mirrors his review of *Home to Harlem* and *Quicksand*. Du Bois’s reaction to *Banjo* reiterates his distaste for McKay’s representation of characters who lack respectability and restraint, especially in sexual matters. “Here are a lot of people whose chief business in life seems to be sexual intercourse, getting drunk, and fighting” (136). The review of *Passing* repeats the conclusion of the *Quicksand* review—“[Y]our job is clear. Buy the book”—and its tone is more explicitly patronizing than that in the review of the earlier book. “Nella Larsen is learning how to write,” Du Bois assures his readers, “and is acquiring style” (137). The review differs from that of the previous year in its more favorable evaluation of McKay’s novel and its lengthier and more serious engagement with Larsen’s. (Du Bois in fact devotes a more or less equal amount of space to each novel.) On the one hand, *Banjo* offers “a continuation of experiences like Jake’s in *Home to Harlem*,” and “there is nothing intriguing” about this aspect of the novel (136). On the other hand, Du Bois finds the novel’s “race philosophy” to be “of great interest.” While *Home to Harlem*’s conscious expression racial politics seems to have escaped Du Bois, fortunately the blatant presence of Ray’s didactic street-corner race “philosophy” in *Banjo* has not. Yet, instead of offering an analysis of this philosophy, Du Bois simply excerpts long block quotes from *Banjo*, prefacing each with a largely uninsightful one-sentence commentary, such as “[McKay] defends plain talk about Negroes” (136). Though Du Bois gives *Banjo* a more favorable review that he does *Home to Harlem*, he yet again demonstrates how his position as a Renaissance intellectual is worlds apart from McKay’s. The only passage on which Du Bois makes a critical judgment deals with the Harlem bourgeoisie’s “ridiculous pretenses of belonging” (*Banjo* 116) to an upper class, which according to Ray, does not exist for blacks in America. Du Bois dismisses
Ray’s scathing critique of the black bourgeoisie’s delusions of belonging to “high society” in America as a symptom of McKay’s uninformed outsider position vis-à-vis America’s social structure. “With the characteristic reaction,” notes Du Bois, “of the West Indian who does not thoroughly know his America, [McKay] is bitter about ‘society’ Negroes” (137). Tellingly, the final passage Du Bois cites, when taken out of context, appears to favor the social organization of American blacks over that of Africans in other parts of the diaspora, suggesting that African Americans’ unique historical circumstances have allowed them to achieve more “racial progress” than non-American blacks.

All the things you say about the Negro’s progress is true. You see race prejudice [in America] drives the Negroes together to develop their own group life. American Negroes have their own schools, churches, newspapers, theatres, cabarets, restaurants, hotels. They work for the whites, but they have their own social group life, an intense, throbbing, vital thing in the midst of the army of whites milling around them. There is nothing like it in the West Indies nor in Africa, because there you don’t have a hundred million strong white pressure that just carries the Negro group along with it. (qtd. in Du Bois 137)

Du Bois designates this final passage as one that offers “evaluation and comparison,” implicitly interpreting Ray’s nod to the de facto social benefits of oppressive institutional racial segregation in America as an advocation of the mythology of American progress, and fallaciously situating the discussion of African American social organization at the center of McKay’s race philosophy. Du Bois concludes his review of Banjo by privileging an educated middle-class version of racial philosophy, which he reductively associates with Ray, and abjecting the eponymous working-class protagonist to a position of socio-political irrelevance. “The Home to Harlem aspect,” Du Bois observes, “the dirt of the docks and the maudlin indulgence, fades away as the book evolves, and Banjo himself becomes almost a forgotten person when he returns from working in coal to take up his role as hero” (137; my emphasis). Banjo in fact reclaims his
central position at the end of the novel, leading Ray on a vagabond homoerotic journey through Europe, but Du Bois earnestly wishes that the black proletarian who has no need for his American passport be forgotten. Du Bois’s review of Banjo not only fails to seriously engage with the novel on an analytical level, but also offers a distorted digest of McKay’s politics, borne out of a fantasy of cleaning up the “dirt” of his characters’ sexual lives and working-class labor.

While Du Bois patently misses the point of Home to Harlem and Banjo, and offers limited insight on the cultural work performed by Quicksand, his review of Passing is much more sophisticated. Unlike McKay, Du Bois can be sympathetic with a mulatto woman such as Clare Kendry who “has been brutally kicked into the white world, and has married a white man, almost in self-defense” (138). In contrast to the review of Banjo, in the review of Passing Du Bois’s expertise in African American sociology allows for an analysis that McKay’s black (inter)nationalist polemics cannot provide. Du Bois also seems more willing to engage with Passing analytically than he is with the other three novels because Passing has a coherent narrative plot. The fact that “whole chapters… are inserted [in Home to Harlem] with no connection to the main plot” is almost as serious a charge against the novel as the objection to its “dirty subject” (“Two Novels”). Banjo, of course, is explicitly “A Story Without a Plot,” of which Du Bois cannot make heads or tails, as his block-quote-heavy review suggests. While Du Bois’s brief remarks on Quicksand comment on the novel’s “delicately woven plot,” the novel’s narrative feels rather disjointed when compared to Passing’s finely crafted three-act story.

The opening of the Passing review functions as an assurance that Larsen’s second novel is much more coherent than the first. Larsen is not only “learning how to write” and “acquiring style,” but she is also “doing it very simply and clearly,” writing “a good close-knit story” (137). Du Bois suggests that the combination of Passing’s simple, well-constructed story and its
insightful exploration of the psychology and sociology of passing for white make *Passing* a novel that could effect real social and political change. “If the American Negro renaissance gives us many books like this, with its sincerity, its simplicity and charm, we can soon with equanimity drop the word ‘Negro’” (138). However, by focusing on the novel’s sincerity, simplicity, and charm, Du Bois is telling only one half of *Passing*’s story. Its cynicism, sarcasm, and irony are surely at least equally defining elements of the novel’s tone and message, so defining, in fact, that they may easily override the novel’s “sincerity.” Given that the novel presents us primarily with a highly unreliable narrator’s fantasies about and projections onto a woman whom she doesn’t trust, I would even go as far as to argue that there is nothing sincere about *Passing*. This lack of sincerity, does not, however, in any way detract from the astuteness of the novel’s social commentary. *Passing* isn’t insincere; rather, it presents a certain kind of sincerity as an impossibility in racially schizophrenic 1920s America.

*Passing* then, like *Quicksand*, is sufficiently damning of the complicit institutions of patriarchy and racism to inspire change, but it does so not though any kind of honest, naïve “charm,” but through scathing social commentary. While Du Bois recognizes the novel’s import and sophistication, his patronizing characterizations of Larsen’s second “adventure in fiction” (136) are both inappropriate and inaccurate. Du Bois may understand the psychology and sociology behind the social-climbing tendencies of bourgeois African Americans, as does Larsen, but where Du Bois is sympathetic toward these tendencies, Larsen is highly critical.

That Du Bois’s reviews of McKay’s novels miss the mark by a longshot is hardly surprising. The two Renaissance intellectuals diverge dramatically in ideology as well as national and class sympathies. Equally unsurprising is the fact that Du Bois’s reviews of Larsen, a middle-class black writer living in Harlem at the same time as Du Bois, are much more on
target. But Du Bois also co-opts Larsen’s work in the service of a middle-class ideology which her novels bitterly critique. “Uplift,” as Larsen makes clear, comes at a price. In *Passing*, “uplift” grants her heroines the luxury to sit silently or laugh nervously as their passing friend’s husband hurls vicious invectives toward their race (39-41). It also allows their passing friend to call her husband’s brutal, potentially murderous racism a “pet aversion” (41).

*Passing* emerges out of this paper as an afterthought because *Passing* is the story of uplift and assimilation. Of the four novels, only *Passing* is capable of fully assimilating a socially transgressive protagonist into a coherent narrative plot and a normative social symbolic. Clare Kendry’s fate constitutes the best possible scenario for a white heteropatriarchal American social order: she is first rendered racially invisible, and eventually made to disappear completely. *Home to Harlem, Banjo,* and *Quicksand*’s attempts to assimilate their queer and hysterical characters do not even come close to the magical disappearing act performed by *Passing*’s seamless narrative. *Passing* spells out the price of the assimilation it enacts. *Quicksand, Home to Harlem,* and *Banjo,* on the other hand, are anti-assimilationist through and through, insisting on social contradiction and refusing to participate in Faustian transactions with the hegemonic order.
LIST OF REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Velina Manolova received her Bachelor of Arts, with First Class Honours in English, from McGill University in Montreal, Canada in 2006. Her research interests include twentieth-century American literature, American modernism, the Harlem Renaissance, gender studies, queer theory, psychoanalysis, postcolonial studies, cultural studies, and, more recently, Alan Turing. In addition to Florida and Canada, Velina has also lived in Northern Virginia and Bulgaria, where she was born and spent the first eleven years of her life. She loves traveling and has found the experience of living in several vastly different cultural climates personally and intellectually enriching. Though highly adaptable, Velina is not easily assimilated.