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DEPARTAMENT DE FILOGIA ANGLESA I DE GERMANÍSTICA

**"Shifting Sands" of Identity: Racial Interactions
and the Question of Belonging in Nella Larsen's
Quicksand"**

Treball de Fi de Grau / BA dissertation

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I declare that this is a totally original piece of work, written by me; all secondary sources have been correctly cited. I also understand that plagiarism is an unacceptable practice which will lead to the automatic failing of this assignment.

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Wednesday, 12th of June 2024

TABLE OF CONTENTS

0. Introduction	1
0.1. Social Context of the Novel.....	3
0.2. The Harlem Renaissance Portrayed in the Novel.....	5
1. Chapter 1: Dissonance Over Black Identity in American Society	7
1.1. The Impact of Capitalism on Black Identity.....	8
1.2. Analysis: Capitalism's Impact on Helga's Perception of Black Identity	12
2. Chapter 2: Racial Interactions and Sense of Belonging	17
2.1. Analysis: Helga's Experiences in Different Social Environments	19
2.2. Helga Crane's Quest for Happiness: An Exploration of Her Journey	28
3. Conclusions and Further Research	30
Works Cited.....	34

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Abstract

The protagonist, Helga Crane, is a biracial woman, who navigates between the US and Europe, questioning herself where she can find genuine happiness. This journey explores her quest for personal and cultural fulfillment alongside with the search for a place where she could truly belong. However, due to her complex racial identity and social norms, it is problematic to determine if a particular location will fulfill Helga's desires.

Additionally, Helga is a complex and contradictory character who resist social conventions, embodying the typical heroine that Larsen often portrays in her writings. Her uncertainty about her race is dragging her into the quicksand of vulnerability and desolation, hindering her ability to accomplish her life's aspirations and objectives. By struggling with her unconformity regarding her identity in the liminal spaces between "blackness" and "whiteness", Helga faces the turbulent social unease and cultural epoch.

For this reason, this paper aims to explore the representation of racial interactions and the pursuit of belonging in Helga Crane's own experience, by examining her inner battles with alienation and identity construction. In doing so, I seek to explore the interplay of happiness, belonging, and self-fulfillment within various territories and social domains, shedding light on the intricacies of Helga's interracial story.

Key words: Nella Larsen, *Quicksand*, Helga Crane, belonging, self-fulfillment, race

0. Introduction

As Thadious M. Davis (2003) notes in the introduction to Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929), *Quicksand* (1928) is the earliest fiction in Larsen's collection of writings. It has been awarded several times for its sensational exploration and autobiographical narrative of the contemporary racial division, including how black Americans adopted their lives within the border of segregation while simultaneously, challenging the limits of urban, middle-class existence. The core of the novel is the life of a biracial woman, Helga Crane, who lives in a fictional city called Naxos, located in the South of the United States. The protagonist, apart from struggling with her identity, experiences uneasiness due to the propagation of corrupt conventions from which she attempts to set free. Her purposes and aspirations are isolated from the societal norms and stereotypes of the black community in which she lives. Consequently, she endeavors to deviate from the strict discipline of the established order and societal expectations by moving around different geographical locations between the US and Europe.

In this novel, Larsen does not inquire into the concept of New Negro racial identity, but rather portrays the experiences of an African American woman who grapples with her interracial identity. As a result, the protagonist faces an internal battle regarding her sense of belonging, in which she feels alienated from both the White and Black communities that comprise the nation, leading her to constantly change location in search of self-fulfillment and happiness. However, with the complexities of her racial identity, and constraints of social expectations, it is difficult to find the answer to the questions that come up while reading the novel. Some of these questions can be: "Where could Helga find self-fulfillment? — Is it a matter of location?", "Does she necessarily have to belong uniquely to one of the two communities?"; Larsen explores the intricacy of

interraciality and belonging amidst the social pressure and strict conventions arising from the prevalent racial norms at that time.

For this reason, by exploring the portrayal of racial interactions and conflicts, as well as the lack of sense of belonging and unhappiness reflected in Helga Crane's experience while grappling with her isolation and construction of identity, I will try to answer my thesis statement: "To what extent does Helga Crane's intrinsic and physical journey through different spaces impact her quest for happiness and identity construction? — is she ultimately destined to find self-fulfillment?"

To assess this statement, I will closely analyze the complexities behind Helga Crane's pursuit of belonging, as well as how her identity has been shaped throughout that sense of alienation from both white and black societies. I will uphold the analysis with textual evidence extracted from the book along with critical interpretations from external references to carry out a comprehensive investigation of the arguments that will be exposed in this project. I also pretend to delve into the social and historical context of the novel and the author to understand the meaning behind the book. To do this, I will center especially on the major elements and complexities of the Harlem Renaissance and the New Negro Movement, movements that emerged to accomplish the objective that both races, black and white, could live comfortably together, accepting the image of each other, as well as to share their social and cultural interests within the Black community. Then, I will also analyze the discord over Black identity in the US, and the impact of capitalism on Black identity, which in the story involves the disempowerment of black individuals, such as the main character, who are turned into objects, into machines. Moreover, I will conduct a close literary analysis of some excerpts taken from the primary source to illustrate and support the impact of capitalism from Helga Crane's own experiences, which might shape her understanding of Black identity. Eventually, I will explore racial

interactions, particularly, Helga's interactions in different environments, in addition to her journey to find a sense of belonging and self-fulfillment, which is difficult to comprehend due to her constant disappointment, pulling her further into the quicksand.

0.1. Social Context of the Novel

After World War I, numerous African American intellectuals along with diverse activists played an essential role in emphasizing the importance of addressing and establishing the African American identity as a central issue across the United States. Following Frances Richardson Keller's statement, the realization of Negro soldiers that were mistreated intensified by the inequalities between their nation's commitment to "Make the World Safe for Democracy", and its unwillingness to grant African Americans access to democracy's profits, reaching its culmination as Harlem writers sought a practical and empowering representation for the African American community (Keller, 31). Some of these racial problems that degraded and devalued the African American community concerned social segregation and marginalization, economic and educational inequalities, and the restriction of suffrage, among many other factors. This fact made many African American writers feel desperate to seek a "socio-psychological vacuum in the area of race relations in America's cities" (Keller, 29). This was the starting point that, not many years later, led to the emergence of the Harlem Renaissance¹ and the New Negro movement. As Alain Locke asserted, it was a representation of the "transracial experience of 'Americanism'" (Gosselin, 39). Through this cultural movement and the establishment of identity, writers and activists aimed to celebrate Black culture as well as to create an

¹ Harlem Renaissance: (1918-30s). It was a cultural, social and artistic flourishing that emerged in Harlem, New York City. This movement marked a significant moment in the cultural history of the African American population, fostering a new sense of racial pride and cultural identity (e.g. literature, music, art, etc.).

image that could provide both the ‘white’ and the ‘black’ races a sense of comfort, confidence, and common ground in their lives.

In addition, the *New Negro* movement was used as a revolutionary idea of the African American culture and identity winning respect, recognition, and privilege across the country, as well as to claim that race is a distinction without difference (Gosselin, 39). Among these authors, we encounter one of the most prominent figures of the Harlem Renaissance, Nella Larsen, a novelist and short-story writer who, among her various works, had only two short novels published, *Passing* and *Quicksand*. Her fictions stood out prominently and were influential in capturing and portraying the complexities of racial identity within societal norms. Seemingly, *Quicksand* marked the beginning of an innovative degree of speech on racial issues through the author’s insights into ethnic conflict and construction (Davies, 29). Furthermore, after the Plessy vs Ferguson rule was established during the latter part of the 19th century, the nation would segregate the population depending on their skin color. This landmark that upheld the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’, created an unequal environment from which black individuals wanted to escape. This led to an increase in the number of light-skinned people passing as white to lead a dignified life, akin to practices during the times of slavery, as they sought to confront these racial categorizations. Therefore, she escapes from Naxos and sets off to the North to abandon the oppression and alienation that persuaded her during all that time. In line with Jeanne Schepers’s viewpoint, Larsen depicts the effects of the American racism of that period on ‘mulatto’ individuals who were forced to relocate themselves to flee from racial and social structures, as well as socioeconomic backgrounds. In short, within the social context marked by racial inequalities, those individuals classified as colored middle-class, sought to traverse the racial division by relocating themselves to northern territories. Through this journey, they aimed to escape

from the interconnection of color with lower status and acquire the privileges and opportunities that were denied to them by law (Scheper, 683).

0.2. The Harlem Renaissance Portrayed in the Novel

In 1925, there was an explosion of artistic creativity in the black community of Harlem, which was promoted by Alain Locke². According to Charles R. Larson, Harlem became a place to be, to live, to distract oneself, to enjoy the harmony of its music and culture, and Larsen was very much part of it (Larsen, 7).

Nella Larsen worked as a librarian at the New York City Public Library, and some years later, after she quit, she became a writer. As we have seen, *Quicksand* has been commemorated and widely recognized in the literature of the *Harlem Renaissance*, identifying Larsen as a great American modernist author whose writings contributed significantly to this period (Davies, 10). *Quicksand* is a great work of the Harlem Renaissance that reflects the problems many biracial individuals experienced. The inability of a Black middle-class woman to find her place in the contemporary world, embarking on national and even international journeys to find self-realization and happiness, is a quest so persistent and frenetic that it may seem almost unimaginable in its complexity. The protagonist has been portrayed as the most authentically and compelling African American woman in modern American fiction.

Helga Crane's struggle with her identity becomes the centerpiece of the novel, and this is seen from the very beginning; however, unlike *Passing*, the phenomenon of passing is indirectly seen through Helga Crane's character since her desire to be 'white' is not explicitly mentioned, as it is in Clare Kendry's case, but it is represented by her actions and emotions. Helga Crane's desires and aspirations do not adhere to societal

² Alain Locke conceived the Negro Renaissance, many credit him as the theorist of the "Harlem Renaissance" due to his influential role in forging the African American identity and promoting its culture and intellectual artists.

norms and stereotypes, disrupting the notion of the 'black idols', i.e. those individuals who conform to predefined roles and conventions based on their race. Consequently, she, as a 'mulatta' who is, as Anthony Dawahare asserts: "too optically black to pass for white" (Dawahare, 29), manages to disassociate herself from the black working class of the South by moving towards the North. In addition to Dawahare's perspective, Georgy J. Hampton proposes that: "With the introduction of the protagonist Helga Crane, Nella Larsen began to disrupt the notions of black idols with a realistic portrayal of a black woman very much invested in the ambiguity of her racial identity as well as her gender and sexuality" (Hampton, 163).

Although Davis believes that Nella Larsen "emerged as the premiere novelist of the New Negro movement, particularly compared to the first wave of novelists such as Walter White, Rudolph Fisher or Wallace Thurman" (Davis, 28), she does not appear to investigate and portray explicitly the modern idea of the New Negro racial identity, but rather the topic of females who are racially confused and confront their interracial identities which were shaped by the 'tragic mulatto' stereotype, which is, as Penelope Bullock defines accordingly to what is popularly believed, "a Negro with a very obvious admixture of white blood"; or as "a cultural hybrid, as a stranded personality living in the margin of a fixed status. [...] resolving the conflict between two different cultures and 'races' that still have not overcome the incompatibility in American society" (Bullock, 78). Paying special attention to *Quicksand*, the protagonist, who is presented as a solitary biracial woman, whose origins come from her white mother and her black father, seems to be afraid of being associated with the Black working class and the disadvantages that it entails. Helga's perception of blackness is shaped by the imposition of capitalist beliefs that associate wealth and freedom with whiteness, which makes her feel neither comfortable nor happy with herself or the society surrounding her. In addition, following

Dawahare's ideas, the New Negro movement in *Quicksand* is considered unsuccessful in defying the concretization of blackness as a symbol of working-class inferiority. Subsequently, supporters of "black pride" are entangled in the racial semiotics of capitalism (Dawahare, 25), leading to emotions of solitude, alienation, sorrow, and despair, as portrayed in the heroines of these novels.

1. Chapter 1: Dissonance Over Black Identity in American Society

Many African American individuals decided to emigrate, at least for a certain time. They relocated to some European cities finding refuge from the social pressures and racial inequalities of the American Society that oppressed them. One of the most prominent cities of that time was Paris, considered not only the "City of Love", but also of artistic creativity, the "City of Lights". Its heterogeneity and great diversity called the attention of Black individuals to expand their intellect, culture, and creativity freely, bringing a piece of Harlem to the French city: "Paris, the "City of Lights", became a key destination for African Americans who sought a more liberal and racially integrated environment and a greater intellectual and cultural freedom" (Gardner & Niani, 89). Some of the artists that went through this journey included Eleanor Taylor, who drew comparisons between the new artists, writers, and intellectuals of the New Negro movement in the District, and their ties to the Parisian cultural landscape; Alain Locke, the promoter of the New Negro movement, Langston Hughes, the creator of jazz poetry and a social activist of the Harlem Renaissance, W.E.B DuBois, a contributor to the development of the anti-racial and anti-imperialist movement in the United States, or Nella Larsen, the author of this book, whose personal and professional disruptions drove her to move around Spain and France. In Paris, many African American intellectuals found a sense of belonging and acceptance that was often denied to them in their homeland. They were able to escape the suffocating

grip of racial oppression and deprivation, and instead, thrive in an environment that celebrated diversity and embraced their talents, contributions, and cultural exchanges.

The New Negro movement and racial pride were seen by Locke as not only national but also international, therefore, African American intellectuals expanded their spiritual and artistic maturity across the country and overseas (Gosselin, 39). Many authors, such as the previously mentioned, went abroad to study and immerse themselves in the diverse cultural landscapes of Europe, finding inspiration and forging multicultural connections that enriched their work, contributed to the global revolution of African American and international black culture, and served to freely explore their race and identity.

Relating the concept of the controversy of black identity in American society with the novel I am analyzing in this project, the protagonist feels forced to flee from the strong sense of racial nationalism and integrate in the European state of Denmark. Additionally, as Ann Rayson suggests, the autobiographical novel reflects the experiences of the author living in America and Denmark, however, both stories, Helga's and Larsen's, make unsatisfactory choices facing racism and constructing their identities since they cannot accept being seen as exotic or as objects in neither the American nor Danish societies (Rayson, 92).

1.1. The Impact of Capitalism on Black Identity

Larsen explores racial identity within the structure of the capitalist economy. That is to say, the author depicts the fact that the capitalist economy of America influences racial identity, dividing them by the color line. According to Dawahare, Helga Crane prefers being part of the bourgeoisie to being associated with the powerless, exploited, and marginalized black working class. This is a clear example of how their class associations are shaped by race, showcasing how institutions and conventions of capitalism emphasize

race as a marker of social value. This fact is already seen at the beginning of the novel in Naxos, where the protagonist works as a teacher in an African American college, depicting this institution as a 'capitalist industrial enterprise'. She feels alienated from her role as a teacher because the members of that community and institution are treated as "mass phalanxes" and "automatons", where the ideas of Helga Crane are powerless, and where she lives along with the rest of the individuals under repressive and exploited 'work relations': "the students are organized, commodified, and described in economic terms, which compares them to products" (Gavitt, 87).

Because of capitalism, along with the complex social processes and ideologies comprising consumerism, class, gender, and race, Helga's perception of freedom lies in material consumption, of purchasing and consuming goods rather than being a mere exploited producer under capitalism; additionally, she equates freedom with whiteness, which she interprets as a synonym of wealth. Therefore, in this novel, the commodification of black women and realization of racial identities within the American capitalist society seems to be unavoidable since, as Dianne F. Sadoff contends, the desire to escape from this racist society, which exploits the black working class, through adopting middle-class identity, is intrinsically connected to the ideologies of a capitalist state:

Nella Larsen rejects the new code of black middle-class morality, rejects the ideology of racial uplift and black intellectual leadership, and, during the crisis of representation. In the 1920s, analyzes ideologies of capitalism, consumerism, and sexuality to show that romance narrative fails to express the experience of black women. Larsen's mulatto heroine in *Quicksand*, then, is the modern, alienated individual. (Sadoff, 122)

Therefore, Nella Larsen, as has been mentioned, does not address the New Negro racial identity, instead, she explores the experiences of black women who feel racially confused and alienated confronting their two opposing identities shaped by the 'tragic mulatto' convention. Amidst the crisis of representation in the 1920s, she examines capitalist

ideologies, consumerism, and sexuality, revealing the deficiency of romantic narratives in capturing the essence of black women's experiences. In *Quicksand*, as Pamela E. Barnett utters, the mulatto protagonist emerges as a modern, disenchanted individual, emblematic of alienation. Larsen's "mulatto heroine", Helga Crane, criticizes the racial uplift³ while being in Naxos, where she proclaims herself as a "despised mulatto", and Harlem, where she finds herself alienated from race, and advocates her autonomy by distancing herself from the idea of belonging to a race (Barnett, 580). Barnett also alludes to the epigraph of the novel extracted from Langston Hughes' poem "Cross" to support this idea of identity conflict due to interraciality:

"My old man died in a fine big house.

My ma died in a shack.

I wonder where I'm gonna die,

Being neither white nor black?"⁴

In this verse, the speaker complains about "the mulatto" persona, representing it as a lament, in which the narrator is a victim of his divided inheritance from which will never be capable of deciding between being white or black (Hubbard, 14). Additionally, in this quatrain, which is the last one of the three that comprise this poem, the persona expresses puzzlement for not fitting in, for feeling alienated from the rest, for not belonging, the same feeling that internally consumes Helga Crane: "As a mulatta, Helga is hung on this "cross": she is too optically black to pass for white and therefore cannot escape from the black/shack or black/worker equations" (Dawahare, 29).

³ Racial uplift: It represented the advancement of Black individuals through strategies employed by African Americans' to effectively achieve civil rights, economic stability, racial equality, and progress. It was important to counteract racism and discrimination, as well as to empower dignity and power within the African American community.

⁴ Cross: This poem was first published in his poetry's book "The Weary Blues" (1926). This poem reflects the double consciousness experienced by those African Americans possessing Black and White identities in a society with racial prejudice.

The connection between Langston Hughes' poem and Helga Crane's experience is that both suffer from objectification and rejection due to their mixed race and hybridity which deprives them of constructing an identity. And, as Rafael Walker declares: "Hughes' poem provides the perfect distillation of Helga's impossible predicament" (170). Nonetheless, Crane is not the only one who can see herself reflected in this poem, but also the author herself. Both Larsen and Crane are the outcomes of white and free mothers, but they also remain uncertain about their racial identity and social instability. "Neither woman knows her social destiny despite the race and gender of their parents" (Hampton, 172).

The notion of essence is emphasized in Langston Hughes' literary creations, especially, concerning race and ethnicity, underscoring the importance of how they are given to human beings, as well as the fact that we should not forget but embrace our roots. Through the lens of essentialism, race is determined and fixed, however, in "Cross", the narrator cannot determine whether his identity is white (like his father's) or black (like his mother's) since he cannot conform to a predefined race, thus defying the notion of uniform racial divisions established by society. His biraciality makes him feel detached from his two different backgrounds and challenges the belief of essentialism regarding race as innate and unchangeable, which is also represented in Helga Crane's emotional journey in which, from a constructivist perspective, she attempts to assimilate with either one of the two communities in order to construct her racial identity and find happiness. Larsen, according to constructivism, represented identity as fluid, transformative, and evolutionary (Davies, 28).

According to Amritjit Singh, Hughes' literary creations serve as platforms for reflecting on the artist's connection to race and class, realistically representing the challenges inherent in these categories and their role in shaping identity (Singh, 38).

Moreover, as Nies reflects on her analysis of eugenics and racial ideology in the literature of the 1920's, Hughes positions whiteness as a "symbol of all the virtues," which middle-class black citizens attempt to imitate or adopt, much like Larsen does in her stories, as in the case of Clare Kendry in *Passing*, or Helga Crane in *Quicksand*, in which they perform their racial identities.

1.2. Analysis: Capitalism's Impact on Helga's Perception of Black Identity

As we have previously seen, Helga Crane is deeply influenced by the racial ideologies of capitalism, which has an impact on her perception of black race pride, seeing it as a useless effort to confront the association of blackness with working-class inferiority. This can be observed in the following extract from the beginning of the novel, in which the narrator describes the inner thoughts of the protagonist while she is alone in her room: "This great community, she thought, was no longer a school. It had grown into a machine. It was now a showplace in the black belt, exemplification of the white man's magnanimity, refutation of the black inefficacy. Life had died out of it" (Larsen, 45). As Gregory Alan Phipps argues, the community of Naxos is structured by racism and patriarchy where there exists no room for the creative and independent experience of democracy (Phipps, 142); it turned out to be a place filled with commodities instead of human beings exploited by the whites (Phipps, 150). Helga underscores the exploitation and dehumanizing effects of materialism and industrialization, reducing individuals to machines valued more for their economic output than their humanity.

Helga is frustrated and disillusioned with the hypocrisy and cruelties she encounters within the community as is captured in the following passage. Helga also feels alienated and unable to help her students because of the moral superiority and disapproval towards cultural, ideological or racial diversity:

Helga Crane had taught in Naxos for almost two years, at first with the keen joy and zest of those immature people who have dreamed dreams of doing good to their

fellow men. But gradually this zest was blotted out, giving place to a deep hatred for the trivial hypocrisies and careless cruelties which were, unintentionally perhaps, a part of the Naxos policy of uplift. Yet she had continued to try not only to teach but to befriend those happy singing children, whose charm and distinctiveness the school was so surely ready to destroy. Instinctively Helga was aware that their smiling submissiveness covered many poignant heartaches and perhaps much secret contempt for their instructors. But she was powerless. In Naxos between teacher and student, between condescending authority and smoldering resentment, the gulf was too great, and too few had tried to cross it. It couldn't be spanned by one sympathetic teacher. It was useless to offer her atom of friendship, which under the existing conditions was neither wanted nor understood. Nor was the general atmosphere of Naxos, its air of self-rightness and intolerant dislike of difference, [...] She was a failure here. [...] How good, she thought, to go now, tonight! and frowned to remember how impossible that would be. "The dignitaries," she said, "are not in their offices, and there will be yards and yards of red tape to unwind, gigantic, impressive spools of it. (Larsen, 47)

As can be seen in this excerpt, Helga Crane initially aims to help the black community of Naxos through teaching in order to contribute to the improvement and progress of the society. However, she desists from doing so since she cannot endure the dehumanization of the colored students and teachers, where the educational system is predisposed to "destroy" their uniqueness which distinguishes them from one another, thus creating a depersonalized and rigid society. Her subjective perspective and sensitivity before these practices alongside the hypocritical policies is not universal as it is not perceived the same way by all her colleagues.

Furthermore, Helga Crane is aware of how black individuals have internalized submission and obedience to white supremacists who exploit them, as well as how their identities are shaped by their conformism to the strict codes dictated by Naxos, because as Kedon Willis states: "Her bouts with poverty give her a clear-eyed perspective on the power structures that dehumanize the majority working class. For instance, Helga transforms a school in Naxos into a machine that molds black students into commodities for the labor market" (Willis, 68). Helga realizes that the socioeconomic forces of capitalism assert control over the marginalized black individuals who are reduced to commodities for the market, and she cannot be an accomplice of this corrupted system

where education is going backward instead of progressing. For this reason, she decides to leave the city, she aspires to search and construct her identity since she is unsatisfied with the racial structures constructed by the 'red tape' that solidifies the influence of capitalism and power imbalance between the two communities. She just wanted to leave behind the regulations of the formal and rigid rules which hindered her from teaching and expressing herself freely:

The goose step began. Left, right. Left, right. Forward! March! The automatons moved. The squares disintegrated into fours. Into twos. Disappeared into the gaping doors of Jones Hall. After the last pair of marchers had entered, the huge doors were closed. A few unlucky latecomers, apparently already discouraged, tugged halfheartedly at the knobs, and finding, as they had evidently expected, that they were indeed barred out, turned resignedly away. (Larsen, 53)

In this case, the narrator delineates how students head to the educational institution as if they were soldiers constrained by the powerful representatives of that community. Students and teachers must adhere and conform to societal norms and expectations, thus representing the dehumanization of the black community, as well as the exploitation and racism of the repressive structures of the capitalist system. Helga Crane is exhausted from operating within the systems and powers of this institution which consumes her until destroying her autonomy and self-identity. As Erika Gavitt asserts, the only way she feels capable of rebelling against this situation is when Helga's physical agency pushes her to quit the job and move towards the North to break free from that 'cage' (Gavitt,83). However, as we will see later on, Helga will not get free from Naxos, since this place will never let her go regardless of being physically in another place. She is desperately trying to detach herself from the ideas and influence of the South, but it will always remain in her consciousness. As Gavitt explains in her article, Helga Crane is pathologically doomed to repeat and spread the ideologies she opposes. Helga's journey and her inability to outrun the influence of Naxos and its ideologies show the political power and corruption that extend beyond Helga, and beyond the American South (Gavitt, 85):

“Heaven forbid,” answered Helga fervently, “that I should ever again want work anywhere in the South! I hate it” (Larsen, 58).

Additionally, when considering abandoning Naxos and seeking help from Peter, her uncle from Chicago, she acknowledges the unfortunate idea that his support would derive from his belief in her mixed racial background, since from his viewpoint, black identity is associated with inferiority, undermining her ability to accomplish her ambitions in life: “Even so, Helga Crane knew that he would be more likely to help her because her need would strengthen his often repeated conviction that because of her Negro blood she would never amount to anything, than from motives of affection or loving memory” (Larsen, 48). Therefore, here we can see how capitalism reinforces ethnic prejudices, racial distinctions, and the internalization of stereotypes such as the association of blackness with inferiority.

Another example of capitalism playing an important role on identity construction is portrayed in Helga’s desire for material success and social status:

Of that white world, so distant, so near, she asked only indifference. No, not at all did she crave, from those pale and powerful people, awareness. Sinister folk, she considered them, who had stolen her birthright. Their past contribution to her life, which had been but shame and grief, she had hidden away from brown folk in a locked closet, “never,” she told herself, “to be reopened.” Someday she intended to marry one of those alluring brown or yellow men who danced attendance on her. Already financially successful, any one of them could give to her the things which she had now come to desire, a home like Anne’s, cars of expensive makes such as lined the avenue, clothes and furs from Bendel’s and Revillon Frères, servants, and leisure. (Larsen, 83)

As we can observe, Helga Crane longs for a lifestyle like the one that Anne Grey enjoys. Helga, from whom we can observe a slight shift in identity and personality concerning consumerism and race, believes that materialistic possessions, a luxurious lifestyle, and financial success will eventually provide her happiness and self-fulfillment. Anne has become her referent, her idealized archetype whose life seems to be “perfect” and “calm” thanks to her wealth and materialistic abundance, therefore, it is quite different from the

restless life of Helga accompanied by internal conflicts, disillusionment, and lack of a sense of belonging. As Willis argues, she seems to be comfortable with the consumerist values of the liberal capitalist society of Harlem (Willis, 64). Nonetheless, Helga faces the constraints and complexities of being seen as the ‘Other’⁵, or as an ‘outsider’, within a dominant white ideology that molds socio-economic norms in the American and European communities, “as their structures were built and continue to thrive on the expropriation of black bodies for labor and wealth creation (and not acquisition)” (Larsen, 72); she underscores the limitations that black individuals confront in attempting to adhere to these capitalist societies which continue to take advantage of black individuals for economic profit, rather than creating a sort of common ground and letting them enjoy the same privileges. Despite her attempts to understand and accept her black origins in order to define her identity, she eventually reverts to the same conclusion concerning the notions of black identity and community, remaining in conflict with her biracial identity within the societal constraints and racial inequalities.

Nella Larsen represents class stratification in both *Passing* and *Quicksand*. As Cheryl A. Wall reports, the author scrutinizes the psychology of her protagonists, exposing the truth behind the supposed middle-class security for women who are economically and socially reliant on their husbands and families, making them feel imprisoned by their thoughts. According to the experiences of Helga and Clare, refusing to conform to the false identities constructed by middle-class communities, does not lead them to success. In contrast, they are referred to as the Other since they deviate from societal norms. The society they live in will prevent them from autonomy and self-realization (Wall, 109). In addition, the ideologies perpetuated by the economic systems,

⁵ The “Other”: a term used to refer to individuals or groups who are marginalized or considered different from what is established by societal norms.

such as the reduction of human beings' value to economic worth and racial beliefs, do also reflect Helga's perception of her struggles with self-acceptance of her biracial identity.

2. Chapter 2: Racial Interactions and Sense of Belonging

Quicksand reflects the challenges of the traditional color division, and an analysis of how African Americans adapted their identities to the segregated society. This fact marked her as a significant author in literary exploration and innovation within modernism (Davies, 28). As Davies asserts, Larsen developed a deep interest in modernist authors and texts while training as a librarian at the Library School of the New York Public Library (1922-1923) and working at the 135th Street branch library (1923-1926), where "New Negro" authors, such as Jessie Fauset, W. B. Du Bois, Gwendolyn Bennet, and Langston Hughes, among many others, met for readings. Therefore, by the end of 1920s, Larsen's exploration of racial interactions and cultural conflicts in *Quicksand* developed a more complex and intricate level of speech on racial issues. Through the influence of these artists, Nella Larsen interpreted racial identity not just as performative, but as a dynamic, negotiated, artificial, and evolutionary practice (Davies, 28). In her exploration of racial interactions and identity formation, Larsen, as noted by Davies, navigates through the problematic appeal to whiteness from those categorized as 'the talented tenth of race' by Du Bois, who while expressing pride in their cultural heritage, they venture to whitewash their appearances (Davies, 19); even though these individuals may feel proud of their origins, as a consequence of racism, they also feel pressured to adopt features associated with whiteness.

During the 1920s, when Nella Larsen wrote *Passing* and her earlier autobiographical novel *Quicksand*, the advantages connected to having white skin were widely recognized. As the black middle class expanded across the country and the modern

race novel gained prominence, the phenomenon of passing as white became increasingly noticeable in comparison to the past (Davies, 10). Therefore, black individuals negotiated and constructed their identities according to the social dynamics of the white environment, managing the complex intersection of race and class, among other social factors, to escape from the segregated and unequal world, and belong to the white community.

In her novels, Nella Larsen primarily centers on female “mulattas” who are confused about their race and struggle with their hybrid identities in a country deeply divided and categorized by the color line (Dawahare, 23). In the case of Helga Crane, her contradictory feelings about her identity are deeply influenced by social hierarchies and class inequalities, as well as the discriminatory boundaries based on color and gender which extend throughout the entire country (Dawahare, 29). Due to her mixed heritage, Helga Crane cannot fulfil her dream of belonging to a particular community. She is unable to decide between being part of the black or white communities, therefore, she experiences a profound sense of alienation and isolation because of not managing to develop the feeling of belonging and pride towards her racial identity. As Walker notes: “Quicksand traces its biracial heroine’s difficult search for self-realization. Helga Crane’s desperate efforts to become a self-defined agent result repeatedly in her objectification. With each attempt to assume the position of self-conscious subject, Helga is stymied by the objectifying gazes of those around her” (Walker, 169). Despite Helga’s attempts to construct her identity, she consistently finds herself objectified by others, encountering ideologies based on dehumanizing individuals.

On the one hand, *Quicksand* portrays the reality faced by biracial individuals during the Jim Crow era, who lived under racial liminality. Helga permanently lives in a space of nonexistence, since she cannot determine whether she belongs to one race,

another, or both; on the other hand, in *Passing*, the author scrutinizes the complexities of interracial identity, in which she addresses the issue of biracial women who combine the black and white identities; that is to say, women who decide to pass as white based on spaces, settings, or other social factors (Walker, 176), however, as Karthicka states, Nella Larsen does not offer any final resolution for the protagonists' inner racial struggles (525).

2.1. Analysis: Helga's Experiences in Different Social Environments

Helga Crane restlessly navigates various social environments, from national territories to transnational cities including Naxos, Chicago, Harlem, Copenhagen, and Alabama in her quest for belonging and happiness. However, she faces the complexities presented in each of these countries where the protagonist is unable to confront or escape from her internal struggles regarding identity and belonging.

In Naxos, Helga witnesses the hypocritical and oppressive conventions about segregation and discrimination within the Naxos educational institutions. She could not belong there:

Her resolution to end her stay in Naxos would of course inevitably end her engagement to James. She had been engaged to him since her first semester there, when both had been new workers and both were lonely. Together they had discussed their work and problems in adjustment and had drifted into a closer relationship. Bitterly she reflected that James had speedily and with entire ease fitted into his niche. He was now completely "naturalized," as they used laughingly to call it. Helga, on the other hand, had never quite achieved the unmistakable Naxos mold, would never achieve it, in spite of much trying. She could neither conform nor be happy in her unconformity. (Larsen, 48)

Helga is aware of James' rapid and effortless assimilation and adaptation into the community of Naxos, and her inability to fit in that society. She could not feel happy with the unconformity of living where she could not reconcile her identity and self-fulfillment with the societal expectations of that place. Furthermore, Helga concluded that by no means she could be happy or make a name for herself without family or social background: "No family. That was the crux of the whole matter. For Helga, it accounted

for everything, her failure here in Naxos, her former loneliness in Nashville. It even accounted for her engagement to James” (Larsen, 50). Even James' family was not satisfied with their commitment since the lack of family upset them; hence, she reflects on how social status is determined by familiar connections, by one's roots: “Negro society, she had learned, was as complicated and as rigid in its ramifications as the highest strata of white society. If you couldn't prove your ancestry and connections, you were tolerated, but you didn't ‘belong’” (Larsen, 50). To be fully accepted by society and belong to a particular community is fundamental to have a family, but apart from this, kinship is also important in shaping one's identity, and perhaps this is another reason why Helga finds it so complex and challenging to construct her identity.

The repressive ideologies from the South will follow her throughout her journey shaping her behavior and beliefs, as well as aiding her inner self to collapse. The next destination is Chicago, where she is eager to create a new life far away from the oppressive politics of Naxos: “[...] for it would more clearly have marked the contrast between this freedom and the cage which Naxos has been to her” (Larsen, 66). Nonetheless, as Anna Brickhouse claims, Helga's encounter with her white relatives and her whole experience in Chicago provoke in her a sense of discomfort and distress (Brickhouse, 547). Being unwelcome by her white relatives and their prejudices brings about her internal struggles with identity and sense of belonging:

But at last the knob had turned in Helga's fumbling hand. She gave a little unpremeditated laugh and slipped out. When she was in the street, she ran. Her only impulse was to get as far away from her uncle's house, and this woman, his wife, who so plainly wished to dissociate herself from the outrage of her very existence. She was torn with mad fright, an emotion against which she knew but two weapons: to kick and scream, or to flee. (Larsen, 67)

Helga's immediate reaction after this uncomfortable scene is to flee and seek refuge in another place, particularly to escape the rejection coming from her uncle and his wife, whose racial prejudices make them not accept her in the white family. As she runs into

the street, Helga feels anxious, trapped and helpless, unsure how to deal with the intense emotions emerging inside her.

Furthermore, Helga learns in Chicago that she is seen merely as a commodity: “[...] are at heart consumers who quickly learn the difficult lesson that they themselves are commodities: Helga discovers in the big city the "smallness of her commercial value" (Larsen, 73); consequently, Helga realizes how little she is valued in such a materialistic society. The citizens of Chicago are reduced to the economic worth of the city, being dehumanized by the prevailing economic culture. The notion of being perceived as a commodity is also depicted in her other novel, *Passing*, where Irene wanders through the calid streets of Chicago, although in this case, it is reflected in the act of going shopping, in the interest of material possessions. Additionally, being seen as a commodity in *Passing*, is something inherently represented in women, since as Scheper asserts, “the woman on the street was always herself a commodity, the object of consumption for the (male) gaze. The woman walking the streets is always imagined as a woman with an aim -- a commodity looking for commerce” (687). Helga, despite knowing that Chicago treats her as a commodity, feels forced to traverse the streets of the city “in a desperately lonely and discouraging search for work” (Brickhouse, 540). Helga, due to her economic circumstances, impatiently takes a job as a librarian, in which she indirectly, by regulating knowledge, becomes part of the same system that oppresses individuals. Therefore, even though she wants to flee from these conventions, they will always be there: “The reason why Helga looks upon the building with a sense of bitterness is that she recognizes that it bears, in its objective to regulate and manipulate knowledge and learning, a similarity to Naxos” (Gavitt, 88). The researcher Karin Roffman indicates that, Helga does not attempt to assimilate to the library and its representation of how knowledge is manufactured, but in the end, she feels compelled to sacrifice her ideologies to sustain

herself (Gavitt, 88). Once again, despite changing spaces, she does not fit in a community, or that cannot be more than simply accepted because of not having a family. These facts drive her to continue her journey in search of a fulfilled and meaningful life.

When she moves to Harlem, where she is surrounded by its remarkable cultural, intellectual, and political environment, Mrs Hayes-Rore, an African American wealthy widow who delivers speeches about the problem of race, introduces her to the community where she is welcomed and feels comfortable. There, she meets Anne Grey, who she considers a companion, with whom she shares common interests, and who acquaints her with the black bourgeoisie circle (Scheper, 683). For Helga, Anne Grey represents the type of woman she aspired to be, for her she was “almost too good to be true” (Larsen, 82). Helga is amazed by Anne’s physical appearance, manners, lifestyle, social status, and independence; through these characteristics, Helga could finally start to feel a sense of conformation and belonging to the community from which she used to feel alienated:

Thus established, secure, comfortable, Helga soon became thoroughly absorbed in the distracting interests of life in New York. Her secretarial work with the Negro insurance company filled her day. Books, the theater, parties, used up the nights. Gradually in the charm of this new and delightful pattern of her life she lost that tantalizing oppression of loneliness and isolation which always, it seemed, had been a part of her existence. (Larsen, 83)

As seen, Helga seems to have found the stability and self-realization she had been longing for. She is finally able to engage in different social activities and distract herself to the point of not feeling oppressed, lonely, or isolated anymore. She has found the perfect place where she can shape her identity and, at last, be able to belong in a community. Although everything seemed to be going much better than she could have ever expected, soon these emotions would vanish. During spring, Harlem does not appear to be what it previously was: “But it didn’t last, this happiness of Helga Crane’s. Little by little the signs of spring appeared, but strangely the enchantment of the season, so enthusiastically, so lavishly greeted by the gay dwellers of Harlem, filled her only with restlessness.

Somewhere, within her, in a deep recess, crouched discontent” (Larsen, 84). Helga’s emotions do not align with the vibrancy typically associated with spring, such as vitality, hope, or optimism, but rather she feels discontent, dissatisfaction, and restlessness that inherently, and sometimes unconsciously, persist in her inner self, prompting her to begin distancing herself from the community. To a certain extent, Helga is agitated by Anne’s activism and obsession with the racial issue which, as George Hutchinson suggests, may stem from Anne’s shame about her background and guilt over her association to the white community (Hutchinson, 551), alongside her attempts to incite the protagonist to embrace her black identity and cease navigating the racial border, resulting in feelings of uneasiness and alienation for Helga. The protagonist constantly reminds herself that she was different from the black community of Harlem: “[...] she didn’t, in spite of her racial markings, belong to these dark segregated black people. [...] It wasn’t merely a matter of color. It was something broader, deeper, that made folk kin” (Larsen, 92). According to Helga, belonging was not solely determined by physical appearance, but also sharing broader social features such as values, ideologies, and affiliations. She feels disassociated from the black community because of not sharing a common ground, a similar worldview, or feeling represented by their culture.

Furthermore, she explicitly rejects being seen as “a jungle creature” (Larsen, 95), a term which is interesting to analyze, particularly in how she applies it to describe the nightlife of Harlem. The concept of “jungle” is interesting because it brings us back to the beginning of the novel, where Helga, then residing in Naxos, overhears Miss MacGooden urging the black students to be punctual and display proper manners: “And please at least try to act like ladies and not like savages from the backwoods” (Larsen, 52). Initially, Helga opposes the racial biases of Naxos’ educational institution for addressing its students in such derogatory terms as “savages from the backwoods”.

However, when she uses the term “jungle” in Harlem, it suggests that there has been a shift in her perspective toward African American society, hinting a disparaging view that degrades the community. This shift in her viewpoint might be caused by, as Walker suggests, the collective rejection and objectification of women by the black community in Harlem, solely because of their interracial relationships and interactions. Therefore, she feels incapable of fitting in a place where she is misunderstood, unhappy, and lonely (Walker, 172). For this reason, she finally decides to begin her transatlantic journey proceeding towards Copenhagen, where she gets reunited with some of her white relatives.

Denmark seems to be the ideal place to escape from the racial pressures and ideologies of the United States, to liberate herself from the repressive social norms of the country. Consequently, “she gave herself up to daydreams of a happy future in Copenhagen, where there were no Negroes, no problems, no prejudice, [...]” (Larsen, 92). In Denmark, Helga expected to achieve fulfillment, feel a sense of identity, and belong to a society, as the main problems she believed were disturbing her, such as Negroes, and the racial and social prejudices it entailed, would disappear there. Nevertheless, nothing appeared to be what she imagined. Although there can be some slight changes from one society to another, Helga quickly realizes that she is perceived as an exotic figure, and she “felt like nothing so much as some new and strange species of pet dog being proudly exhibited” (Larsen, 105). Despite the great affection of her aunt and her husband towards the protagonist, she is used as a tool “to advance the social fortunes of the Dahls of Copenhagen” (Larsen, 104). She feels they are using her physical appearance, which is described as “attractive, unusual, in an exotic, almost savage way” (Larsen, 106), to enhance their social standing. Following Arne Lunde and Anna Westerstahl’s point of view, Helga is presented as a delocalized foreigner of a dark complexion who is coded as

an exoticized and eroticized Other (Lunde & Westerstahl, 232). Thus, we return to the conclusion that, due to her different and sophisticated physical characteristics, she is not treated as an individual with values and identity, but as an object of fascination, an experience that reminds her of the discrimination that she suffers because of her racial identity, and marginalizes her despite being in a completely different social setting far from the United States. (Hampton, 165).

This stance, driven by the senses of exoticization and eroticization, contributes to her commodification, probably leading her to internalize their perception and using her beauty as a commodity in turn. This fact leads the artist Axel Olsen to become interested in painting her, as Walker suggests:

Axel Olsen sets his sights on Helga. Olsen is the picture of the avant-garde modernist—eccentric, masterful, and obsessed with the primitive. Struck by her exotic allure, Olsen arranges with Helga’s aunt and uncle, without consulting her, to paint her portrait, underscoring the extent to which this milieu views her more as an object to be passed around than a self-determining subject whose wishes ought to be considered. When Olsen eventually proposes to Helga, she refuses him because, by this point, she has come to see the admiration so liberally bestowed by Olsen and the other Danes for what it is: not the confirmation of her unique subjectivity that she had initially assumed but, rather, more of the same suppressing of her personhood that she had just fled in Harlem. (Walker, 173)

The notion of objectification is reiterated by the fact that Olsen arranges with Helga’s relatives to secure confirmation to paint her, without soliciting her consent. She is considered a decorative exotic object rather than a subject with her agency. She finds herself once again experiencing the same feelings she felt in Harlem, she is unable to shape and develop her personhood if agency is taken away from her. She cannot refrain from grappling with a society that does not value her as a person but views her through the lens of her exoticism. After two years of living in Denmark, and confronting Axel Olsen, who feels a strong sexual desire towards her, Helga decides to return to her homeland before selling herself as if she were a sexual commodity to a white man who would treat her as such: “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” (Larsen, 122). Axel Olsen reflects the sexual objectification of Helga, devaluating her through derogatory and racist stereotypes and prejudices associated with her African heritage. “[...] I’m not for sale. not to you. Not to any white man. I don’t at all care to be owned” (Larsen, 123). She denies being controlled by racism and sexism, especially by white men. It seems that Helga Crane has surrendered on the quest of forging an identity and belonging to a society, the white society, that authentically does not represent her own. Helga suddenly starts recalling memories of her life in Harlem, of the music and culture of the community; it seems that Helga can find the reason why she does not feel comfortable in Copenhagen, and it is because of that feeling of incompleteness, of being so far away from Negroes, from her race:

“New World Symphony” had been wonderfully rendered. Those wailing undertones of “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” were too poignantly familiar. They struck into her longing heart and cut away her weakening defenses. She knew at least what it was that had lurked formless and undesignated these many weeks in the back of her troubled mind. Incompleteness.

“I’m homesick, not for America, but for Negroes. That’s the trouble.” (Larsen, 128)

Therefore, Helga transforms her desire of fleeing to Copenhagen because of the Negroes and the racial problems of America into yearning to return due to her feelings of melancholy and homesickness for the black community. This shift in her perspective reflects a transition from modernist perspectives about Negroes to more essentialist and traditional ideas.

Helga finds herself back in Harlem, where she undergoes through different mixtures of feelings, she feels a sense of belonging and connection to her own cultural and racial identity, but a short time after, she maintains a sense of detachment from Harlem’s atmosphere, believing that America, after all, is too restrictive and uncertain for African Americans: “[...] was for Negroes too cramped, too uncertain, too cruel; [...]” (Larsen, 131). She eventually comes to realize that while Europe would provide her physical

freedom, America would contribute to spiritual freedom (Larsen, 132); therefore, what she lacked in one place, she would find in the other, and since she does not have everything she needed in one single place, she could not either belong to a place, determine her identity, nor find happiness.

At end of the novel, Helga departs from the urban capitalism and returns to the South, the territory that she had vowed never to step on again. This time, she goes with a preacher she had met in Harlem and got married to. Despite seeming to have achieved attainment after stabilizing her life through marriage and realizing her sexual desires, Helga concludes that she will never be happy no matter how hard she tries since, as Irina Anisimova states: “For Helga, this gratification of sexual desire leads to the loss of control over her body. Sexual fulfilment results in a descent into poverty and a departure from urban sophistication” (Anisimova, 179). Therefore, following the argument of Anisimova, by leaving behind “the material-fashioning black urban female body” (Anisimova, 180), she is not capable of experiencing self-realization:

After the first exciting months Helga was too driven, too occupied, and too sick to carry out any of the things for which she had made such enthusiastic plans, or even to care that she had made only slight progress toward their accomplishment. For she, who had never thought of her body save as something on which to hang lovely fabrics, had now constantly to think of it. (Larsen, 186)

Additionally, in the South, Helga’s perception of her body becomes something different, reinforced by the biological functions, aligning it with the realities of black rural women and distancing it from the Northern bourgeoisie (Anisimova, 180):

With this Helga was in full agreement. It seemed hundreds of years since she had been strong. And she would need strength. For in some way she was determined to get herself out of this bog into which she had strayed. Or—she would have to die. She couldn’t endure it. Her suffocation and shrinking loathing were too great. Not to be borne. Again. For she had to admit that it wasn’t new, this feeling of dissatisfaction, of asphyxiation. Something like it she had experienced before. In Naxos. In New York. In Copenhagen. This differed only in degree. And it was of the present and therefore seemingly more reasonable. The other revulsions were of the past, and now less explainable. (Larsen, 166)

At the end of the story, while Helga is giving birth, she confronts her enduring feelings of dissatisfaction and suffocation, which had been accompanying her across various contexts and spaces, and which had never been able to explain. Helga is aware that despite her persistent efforts to find happiness and self-fulfillment, she will always be confined within her mental state of dissociation and discontent. Throughout her life, she has been fighting against her internal struggles concerning identity, belonging, and the complexities of her emotional journey. She knows that the unbearable sensations of suffocation and asphyxiation will always be intrinsic to her nature, as she juxtaposes them with past experiences, becoming a cyclical state in her life, from which she will never be able to escape. According to Karthicka's suggestion, Helga embarks on a journey of mental destruction by determining her identity within the black race and settling into the role of a black preacher's wife in a rural Southern village. Once she stops struggling between two races, Helga's racial identity becomes unchangeable (Karthicka, 525).

In conclusion, Helga's inability to find satisfaction stems from the series of complex circumstances she endures. As we have seen, one of the main problems for which this happens is the objectification that Helga suffers in every place she visits, hindering her to be one of them. As Walker suggests, how the protagonist is commodified varies depending on the location. In America, it is because of the country's obsession with racial purity and discrimination, while in Copenhagen, it is due to the homogeneity, because as she has physical features that differ from those of the rest of Scandinavians, she is treated as an exotic object (Walker, 174). Through this experience, Larsen reflects a thorough understanding of how different cultures behave towards interracial women.

2.2. Helga Crane's Quest for Happiness: An Exploration of Her Journey

Throughout the novel, Helga seeks to find happiness, reflecting her complicated and tumultuous emotional journey through different cultural and social settings. From her

initial unconformity in Naxos to her disappointment in Harlem and Copenhagen, Helga's pursuit of fulfillment is marked by her internal struggles. She believes that the most effective way to escape from those intrusive thoughts is by acting, by actively doing something: "Helga defines happiness by escape" (Lay, 478). Consequently, she embarks on a spiritual and physical journey, immersing herself in different communities and cultures across different spaces. Every move she makes, driven by the hope of finding a place where she truly belongs, ultimately leads her to confront the deeply ingrained societal stereotypes and pressures that hinder her happiness. As Chip Rhodes claims, alluding to the title of the novel, one can only escape from the quicksand with an external agent, therefore, Helga, who keeps sinking deeper and destructing herself with her intrusive emotions and thoughts of isolation, will not be able to get out without external aid. i.e. she must embrace the collective ideologies and cultures of the social structures instead of distancing herself from the rest; when Helga attempts to understand her feelings of strangeness, she frequently contemplates the possibility that the problem comes from her, hence, she must change her mindset to achieve happiness. For this reason, Larsen provides evidence that Helga's sentiment of otherness stems from the discrepancy between this idealistic notion of the individual and the social structures that shape the reality of her existence (Rhodes, 201); in addition, according to Addison Gayle, "Helga Crane is incapable of achieving self-realization due to a lack of understanding about the true essence of her racial identity, which is provoking her a "mental quicksand of despair and helplessness" (Gayle, 133).

Furthermore, Robert Bone argues that due to her constant feelings of restlessness, asphyxiation, and dissatisfaction because of the social issues that surround her, she is incapable of getting rid of that state of unhappiness (Bone, 104). Therefore, to what extent is it justifiable to argue Bone's perception regarding Helga Crane's incapacity to attain

self-fulfillment? It is suggested that Helga cannot attain self-fulfillment and a sense of belonging because, despite living in the liminal identities of "blackness" and "whiteness", she grapples with her nonconformity and the societal expectations amidst the turbulent social and cultural unrest. Helga is driven by emotions of alienation, deriving from various forms of racism, classism, and sexism embedded within the sociopolitical conventions of the US and Europe. Additionally, as we have seen, her experiences with the dehumanization and commodification of capitalism, lack of lineage, as well as sexual and physical objectification also contribute to her profound sense of displacement and disconnection.

3. Conclusions and Further Research

Helga Crane experiences the complexities of constructing an identity through a spiritual and corporal journey across different territories and social settings that shape her inconclusive understanding of her inner self and her place in the contemporary world. Her quest for belonging and self-realization is marked by an incessant search for fulfillment amid the overt social pressures and prejudices of American society, as well as the covert racial othering of Denmark. However, were racial issues the real problem behind her discontent? Oliveira suggests that perhaps the issue truly lies within her personal feelings and emotions rather than in race: "For Helga, the huge problem of her life is race. In fact, the tragedy of Helga lies in her inability to recognize her real problems, which are more emotional than racial ones. And that misconception led her to a bad end" (Oliveira, 217). Therefore, despite attributing her unfulfillment to social factors such as racial issues that make her feel like a 'despised mulatto', Helga overlooks deeper sentimental and emotional complexities that significantly contribute to her mental state.

Despite the differences in racial dynamics and efforts to assimilate into these two communities, she is always perceived as an outsider due to her biracial identity. Helga, as an interracial woman in the early 20th century, is constantly confronted with the constraints of social expectations, where she is unable to fully belong to either white or black societies due to her profound feelings of alienation and otherness. Internalized racism deprives her of achieving self-fulfillment and contentment in any of these places. Regardless of her efforts to form social relationships with women such as Anne Grey, or men such as Axel Olsen or the preacher, and to feel comfortable and happy in her surroundings, she cannot escape from her loneliness and sense of dissatisfaction. She is a victim of her interracial lineage problem which she will be unable to overcome, perpetuating a deep sense of self-doubt.

Helga struggles with a profound dilemma as she seeks acceptance within the social circles of characters like Mrs. Hayes-Rore and Anne Grey. Despite their purported activism for racial pride, Larsen suggests that their authentic sentiments emerge from their embarrassment regarding their black roots and guilt regarding their association with whiteness. Helga's interactions with these women illuminate the entanglement of racial identity, revealing the internal conflicts experienced by those striving for validation in a society deeply obsessed with racial dynamics (Hutchinson, 551). This struggle is further compounded by Helga's disdain for her mixed heritage, which perpetuates her sense of self-loathing and prevents her from forging meaningful social and romantic connections (Larsen, 9).

Through the analysis of diverse key points to ascertain whether Helga can find the happiness she seeks and if she will ever feel a sense of belonging in any of the places she traverses, I have concluded that race and capitalism will always shape her life, inevitably impacting her perceptions and making it difficult for her to attain her goals:

“But the tragic endings of the novels also suggest that the overdetermination of racial values by the political economy of capitalism presents a no-win situation” (Dawahare, 25). Helga’s sense of entrapment and disappointment with racial prejudice and exploitation lead to a series of ineffective attempts to accomplish her goals of finding happiness and fulfillment. Simply by examining her final move to the South, and her marriage to a preacher, it is evident that the protagonist is incapable of escaping from the pervasive impact of the conventions of capitalism, whether driven by racism or economic profit, making self- fulfillment and liberation unattainable for her. Therefore, she will never achieve genuine happiness or create an identity with which she could be fully satisfied, especially in the South, where everything started. Her final journey, rather than leading to liberation, circles back to reinforce the futility of seeking fulfillment within a system that inherently denies her the freedom to define herself. Despite Helga’s attempts to disassociate herself from the African American population, she is destined to adopt her essentialized identity, the one that belongs to the Southern rural black community (Anisimova, 180). As Bone asserts, “Quicksand is an authentic case study which yields readily to psychoanalytic interpretation. Each of the major episodes in Helga’s life is a recapitulation of the same psychological pattern: temporary enthusiasm; boredom, followed by disgust;” (104).

For further research about the complexities of what constitutes African American identity, I would like to recommend analyzing African American artists who have experienced this situation throughout their lives and have had the opportunity to portray it in their autobiographical works. The first author that I have the pleasure to mention in this project is Langston Hughes, “the poet-laureate of Harlem” (Davis, 276), whose poetry reflects the lifestyle and culture of Harlem accompanied by the rhythm of blues, embracing this genre as a mean of expression for the Black American working class. His

poetry is a symbol that gives voice to the aspirations and frustrations of the Black community of America, but also, a symbol of consciousness of the limitations of his race (seen in *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain*), and the intricacies of the construction of biracial identity (seen in *Cross*). He observes the assimilation of the Black middle class into the American standardization, yet he maintains the African American culture in his writings in which he depicts the realities of racism and ethnic prejudice experienced by Black individuals.

Another author that I would like to introduce in order to explore the experiences of passing for white and grappling with the challenges of black identity is Allyson Hobbs, whose book, *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life* (2014) contains personal experiences of African American individuals leaving behind relatives, communities, and roots to adopt a white identity. Comparing Hughes' poetry and Hobbs' autobiographical stories with Larsen's fiction would be useful to deepen your understanding of the historical and contemporary conflicts with racial determination and sense of belonging.

And finally, another interesting author, who in this case, deals more precisely with interracial heroes or heroines is Kate Chopin. This artist addresses the experiences of the "tragic mulatto", which is the main topic of her short story *Désirée's Baby* (1893), in which we encounter an unexpected plot twist regarding the lineage of the protagonists, underlining the irony and tragedy of racial prejudice. As can be seen, Chopin's writings are also very fascinating and efficient to explore this matter.

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