“The Acceptance of Community and Sexuality in *Quicksand* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

By Amanda Haessler
In her essay “Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality,” Evelynn Hammonds states that, historically, black women have reacted to repressive discourses “with silence, secrecy, and a partially self-chosen invisibility” (Hammonds 132). While Hammonds statement may be true, there were, in fact, black women writers who wrote in opposition to these dominant stereotypes and repressive discourses; two such authors are Nella Larsen in her 1928 novel *Quicksand* and Zora Neale Hurston with her 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.\(^1\) Both novels are centered on young mulatta women, one from a well-educated, professional, and somewhat unstable middle class, and one from a lower, servile, and rural class – Helga Crane and Janie Crawford, respectively. Although, Larsen and Hurston used different techniques to write in opposition to the ignorance surrounding the black female community by informing readers what it means to be a black – or mulatta – woman, they both advocate for a better way of life for black women, one free of stereotyping, violence, exploitation, and hatred. Both authors employ race and class in their novels in order to demonstrate the unseen struggle that millions of African Americans endured; they also showed readers how, by truly uniting as one force, the black community could lead better lives than the ones forced upon them by the dominant white society.

Both Larsen and Hurston wrote during the height of the Harlem Renaissance, which began because of the Great Migration – thousands upon thousands of African Americans moving out of rural areas into urban ones for work, money, more equality, and safety. During the Harlem Renaissance, “African-American civil rights activists employed the artists and writers of their culture to work for the goals of civil rights and equality. Jazz music, African-American fine art, and black literature were all absorbed into mainstream culture, bringing attention to a

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\(^1\) Hereinafter referred to as *Their Eyes*. 
previously disenfranchised segment of the American population” (biography.com). In order to make awareness of their culture and plight widespread, civil rights activists used the creators of the times to demonstrate what it was like to be African American; naturally, black women authors would want to write about the struggles singular to black women since the primary focus of the artists was on the difficulties of men. While white women gained the right to vote with the nineteenth amendment in 1920, black women did not gain this right in many states because of the color of their skin. Dominant white society believed the black community incapable of rational thought, that they were primitive and unintelligent.

The idea of labelling another race of people as primitive and savage has existed since the first explorers discovered new lands and different civilizations; this idea was so prevalent that it found its way into literature authored by members of the black community. Since the discovery of new lands and people, Europeans have distinguished between two different types of new civilizations – the “barbarous infidels (such as the inhabitants of Russia, Central Asia, Turkey) and those who were constructed as savage (such as the inhabitants of the Americas and Africa)” (Loomba 94). Matthew Frye Jacobson wrote in Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race, “the fundamental distinction between civilization-as-whiteness and savagery-as-nonwhiteness retained tremendous power, even centuries after the original encounter” (Jacobson 148-149). The ideologies and racism of the first Europeans to encounter foreign races were powerful enough to last centuries – subjecting millions of people to hate and discrimination. No matter the country of origin, however, women who were not European were considered sexually deviant and brutal. Ania Loomba writes

The non-European woman also appears in an intractable version, as “Amazonian” or deviant femininity. The Amazons are located by early colonial writings in
virtually every part of the non-European world, and provide images of insatiable sexuality and brutality. Thus female volition, desire and agency are literally pushed to the margins of the civilised world. But not all margins are equally removed from the centre: skin colour and female behavior come together in establishing a cultural hierarchy with white Europe at the apex and black Africa at the bottom. (Loomba 131)

Not only did a sexist view of the world push women to the bottom of the cultural hierarchy, but also their skin color pushed African women to the very bottom. The lighter a woman’s skin, the more civilized and “pure” she was and the darker her skin, the more savage, sexual, and brutal she was. In some accounts of traveler’s logs, the male writer finds a dark-skinned woman attractive; his wife is unworried, however, because the dark-skinned woman is just that – dark-skinned, not worthy of jealous feelings because she is “less.” As time progressed, and these encounters became more commonplace, some black female authors took these encounters between white men and black women from history, and included them in their fictional tales as well. In *Quicksand* by Nella Larsen, Helga Crane is a young middle-class mulatta woman, who, at the beginning of the novel, is a teacher at the all black fictional school of Naxos. Helga becomes tired of the school and its politics, and travels back to her home town of Chicago; she does not remain there long, however, since she cannot find work that suits her, and she soon moves to New York City. Here, too, she becomes unhappy and decides to move to Denmark in order to live with her (white) aunt and uncle. When she is in Denmark, her dark skin is a novelty and she becomes an exotic object put on display. While attending a dinner party, the white married men were openly staring at Helga while their wives watched. Larsen wrote, “The women too were kind, feeling no need for jealousy. To them this girl, this Helga Crane, this
mysterious niece of the Dahl’s was not to be reckoned seriously in their scheme of things. True, she was attractive, unusual, in an exotic, almost savage way, but she wasn’t one of them. She didn’t at all count” (Quicksand 72). Although their husbands are clearly ogling Helga, they are unconcerned and unthreatened by her exotic beauty; her dark skin and background set her apart from the Danish. Helga is not a threat to the white women because she does not belong in their society.

Many dominant ideologies exist in black literature, and some authors, such as Nella Larsen, wrote their protagonists to believe wholeheartedly in those ideologies and stereotypes, essentially holding a fictional mirror up to a real society. Larsen’s aim was to force the black community to see how they were damaging their own community and cause. Many people believed that primitive, dark-skinned people were less intelligent than the European civilizations; they thought that the only driving factors in the non-European races were basic needs, instincts, and the pursuit of pleasure. European explorers and settlers thought other groups of people savages – they only wanted what would satisfy them immediately, they could not properly think for themselves, and were, obviously, not similar to the European nations in any way. In Quicksand, Helga has a similar stance when she and a group of her middle-to-upper-class friends go to a Negro club one night.

They danced, ambling lazily to a crooning melody, or violently twisting their bodies, like whirling leaves, to a sudden streaming rhythm, or shaking themselves ecstatically to a thumping of unseen tomtoms. For the while, Helga was oblivious of the reek of flesh, smoke, and alcohol, oblivious of the oblivion of other gyrating pairs, oblivious of the color, the noise, and the grand distorted childishness of it all. She was drugged, lifted, sustained by the extraordinary
music, blown out, ripped out, beaten out, by the joyous, wild, murky orchestra. The essence 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 hardened her determination to get away. She wasn’t, she told herself, a jungle creature. She cloaked herself in a faint disgust as she watched the entertainers throw themselves about to the bursts of syncopated jangle, and when the time came again for the partners to dance, she declined.

*(Quicksand 61)*

While the music is playing, Helga is unthinking, uninhibited, and lets the music take her away; she enjoys herself and the atmosphere around her. Once the music stops, she realizes what she is doing, how she is acting, and calls herself a “jungle creature.” Not only is she referring to herself as an animal, but she is also referring to the jungles of Africa and the Amazon, places where deviant sexuality is rampant and uncontrolled – places and actions Helga fears. The dancing and pleasure that filled the air is “primitive” and when she finally does regain control of herself, she “cloaked herself in a faint disgust” as she watches the people around her. To Helga, “the crossing of boundaries appears as a dangerous business” where “‘going native’ is potentially unhinging” (Loomba 117). Helga does not ever want to lose control of herself in such a way that she would cross the boundaries from a “respectable” black woman to a “jungle creature.” To Helga, crossing those boundaries would be a horrible act against her class – in her mind, only lower-class blacks acted in such an uninhibited manner. She knows the stereotypes concerning her gender, race, and the lower class, and she tries to counter them with all that she has. Helga
does not realize, however, that she is not helping her race; by subscribing to dominant society’s standpoints, she gives those viewpoints and ideologies more power.

Helga Crane is not the only character in *Quicksand* to believe in the popular stereotypes; predictably, the white characters do as well. After “discovering” new lands and new peoples, there were some adventurous people who wanted to explore these new places; after a while, one thing that European travelers seemed to expect on their journeys was an encounter with a dark-skinned sexually deviant woman, simply because their culture was less repressive than the European one. The women in the new lands were not forced by their menfolk to be covered from neck to toe, wear restricting corsets, or their hair pulled tightly back as the women of Europe did. Loomba asserts, “but while sexual relations in non-European cultures were often less repressive than in Christian Europe, for most European travelers and colonialists the promise of sexual pleasure rested on the assumption that the darker races or non-Europeans were immoral, promiscuous, and always desirous of white people” (Loomba 134). Of course, these dark strangers would be “desirous of white people!” How could they not desire a superior race that destroys their native culture and forces a different way of life upon them? These assumptions of the white Europeans reveal more about their cultures and their desires than they do of the darker skinned races. This assumed promiscuity is also present in *Quicksand*. While Helga is looking for a job in Chicago, men approach her on the streets

At one spot, for a moment less frequented than others, she stopped to give heed to her disordered appearance. Here 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. (*Quicksand* 32) […]
A few men, both white and black, offered her money, but the price of the money was too dear. Helga Crane did not feel inclined to pay it. (Quicksand 37)

Undeniably, what these men are after is a sexual liaison with an attractive black woman. Even though Helga is well dressed and well groomed, they still approached her for sex; Helga does not do or say anything to these men to make them believe that she wants them to approach her for sex or that she is a prostitute. Her skin color is the determining factor in these men thinking her a prostitute – something that Helga Crane would never become, something she looks down upon. Believing dark-skinned women promiscuous and prostitutes was only one stereotype that black women were forced to endure.

The stereotypes that black women faced and this presumption that all black women are desirous of white men was not a phenomenon singular to America. Where it originated in Europe, so it remained. When Helga arrives in Denmark, her aunt and uncle dress her up and set her up with influential people; one of these people is an artist named Axel Olsen. Axel Olsen is a famous artist who paints portraits, but “won’t do everybody” (Quicksand 73). He is very influential and many people are eager to please him. After he decides he is going to paint Helga, he accompanies Helga, her aunt, and her uncle on a shopping trip, suggesting clothing for Helga to wear, while her aunt buys everything he selects. After spending time with Helga (while painting her and escorting her around town), Olsen decides and expresses that he would like to have a sexual relationship with Helga, not once pausing to think that Helga might not want to sleep with him. During their final encounter, Helga is insulted and, finally, tells Olsen how she feels.
In his assured, despotic way he went on: “You know, Helga, you are a contradiction. You have been, I suspect, corrupted by the good Fru Dahl, which is perhaps as well. Who knows? 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.” He stopped, contemplating her, lost apparently, for the second, in pleasant thoughts of the future. […]

And, suddenly, she didn’t care at all. 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. Even by you.” (Quicksand 89)

The only reason that Olsen wishes to marry Helga is because she refused his offer of becoming his mistress. Although she never gave any evidence to support his statement, Olsen claims that Helga has “the soul of a prostitute” and will only sell herself to the highest bidder, which, he believes, is himself because he is white, respected, an artist, and offered to marry her. Perhaps he believes that no one else would make her such an offer and she would be a fool to refuse. What Olsen does not realize, however, is that, contrary to popular stereotypes, black people are capable of higher thought. Perhaps Olsen does not realize that Helga knows that he is insulting her; again, the only reason Olsen asks Helga to marry him was because she would not become his mistress. Because of this, Helga does not care for propriety any longer, as she tells him that she will not marry him. She knows that Olsen does not love her and is only seeking a sexual relationship; she feels that this is a form of ownership and, understandably, she does not want to be owned. Of this scene, Ann duCille writes, “full of himself and a generous dose of racialism and primitivism, he is oblivious to his own offensiveness and taken aback at Helga’s rebuff”
(duCille 95). Perhaps, because his ideals are so commonplace in society, Olsen does not realize that he is offending Helga or that he is attempting to lower her self-esteem in hopes that she will accept his offer, but he is blind-sided when Helga refuses his proposal. It did not occur to him that she would reject his most “generous” offer; he does not know how to respond to this rejection, so he insults her in what is, to Helga, the worst way possible – by comparing her to a sexual creature, and having sexual desires. Helga does not understand, and even rejects, that sexual desires are part of human nature. She cannot comprehend that human beings are sexual creatures.

Axel Olsen’s portrait of Helga is worth a thousand words against Olsen and whatever “feelings” he may harbor towards Helga. Moments before Olsen leaves Helga’s life forever, he says to her “‘I think that my picture of you is, after all, the true Helga Crane’” (Quicksand 91). Helga did not like Olsen’s statement, because she did not like the portrait of her: “The picture – she had never quite, in spite of her deep interest in him, and her desire for his admiration and approval, forgiven Olsen for that portrait. It wasn’t, she contended, herself at all, but some disgusting sensual creature with her features. […] Anyone with half an eye could see that it wasn’t, at all, like her” (Quicksand 91). The portrait, in Helga’s eyes, represented some “disgusting sensual creature,” a creature unworthy of note, and not Helga Crane in any aspect. Helga is repulsed by the sensuality she sees in the portrait, because she feels it buried within even though she tries with all her might to suppress it. She is denying herself desire because she does not want to fit into the stereotype of her race and gender, stereotypes which not even time has truly erased.

All women are different, and these differences often caused groups of women to be treated differently from others, a fact Hurston and Larsen were well aware of. Before the Civil
Rights movement, black women were regarded as less than a white woman; lower class black women were viewed as even less, sometimes as sub-human. Many qualifiers are used to describe women of all types. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler states, “the very subject of women is no longer understood in stable or abiding terms” (Butler 2). A woman is not only a woman: she belongs to a class, to a race, to a sexual orientation. Butler continues

> If one “is” a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered “person” transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. (Butler 4-5)

A woman is not just a woman: she is a middle class Italian lesbian, for example; we are more than just women. Unfortunately, in a racist society dominated by whites, when women were fighting for equal rights with men, those rights only applied to white, sometimes only middle and upper class, women. Women could not unite under the title of “Women,” because all of the other qualifiers separated them from each other, preventing them from being truly united.

Racism was rampant in the women’s movement and the white women running the campaigns for equal rights often excluded women of color. In *Cultures of Babylon: Black Britain and African America*, Hazel V. Carby writes that when white women “write their herstory and call it the story of women but ignore [black women’s] lives and deny their relation to us, that is the moment in which they are acting within the relations of racism and writing history” (*Babylon* 79). By using race to ignore the needs and desires of non-white women, white women effectively slowed down their movement. If a women’s rights organization was “friendly” towards non-white women,
they were often added as an afterthought and still viewed as outsiders, as less than a white woman, not as the equals they were. The feminist movement has attempted to force black women “into patterns which do not apply and in the process has labeled many of them deviant” (Babylon 83). The patterns forced upon these women were those of middle-to-upper class society; it is nearly impossible to take a group of working women and force them to live a sexually pure life, since, for many women, their livelihood was dependent on sexuality – whether voluntary prostitution or coercion from their employers. Non-white women are different from white women, but it is only because their culture and traditions are different, not because one group is naturally superior to another. Everyone is different: it is no excuse to label a person or groups of people as deviant, because they are not the same as anyone else. Both Hurston’s and Larsen’s novels force readers to realize that the protagonists (and other characters) are no different from themselves. There may be racial or class differences, but these fictional people want what anyone wants: to be happy, to be accepted, to feel safe, and to be loved.

Since Janie Crawford is a lower-class black woman living in the South, she is, to the dominant white society, the basis of many stereotypes; that is to say, the women Janie represents are the basis of many stereotypes. One stereotype of black women – all black people, in fact – was the one that labeled them as animals, consequently rendering it acceptable to use them as if they would use an animal. Bell Hooks maintains, “in the eyes of the 19th century white public, the black female was a creature unworthy of the title woman; she was mere chattel, a thing, an animal” (Hooks 159). By deeming black women as less than human, white society produced an easily exploited commodity. A popular idea of the times was that black women were the equivalent to mules. Concerning this popular ideology, Patricia Hill Collins writes, “as dehumanized objects, mules are living machines and can be treated as part of the scenery”
(Collins 43). Like animals, black women were essentially helpless (at least against the white dominant society), rendering them unable to fight their oppression, and unable to change the way in which they were treated – similar to actual animals. Collins writes, “animals can be economically exploited, worked, sold, killed, and consumed. As ‘mules,’ African-American women became susceptible to such treatment” (Collins 171). Under this belief system, black women were used and treated as if they actually were animals – perhaps even worse, since most work animals are properly taken care of, given an adequate amount of food, rest, and proper shelter where they would be safe from the elements or other creatures that would harm them. Animals – and women – are property to be used however their owners please.

While Zora Neale Hurston and Nella Larsen employ distinctly separate techniques, both authors had their protagonists overcome different forms of abuse and stereotypes before the novels’ end. Janie Crawford, the protagonist of Zora Neale Hurston’s novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, is a lower-class girl under the care of her watchful Nanny; Janie grew up with white children because Nanny was a caretaker of a wealthy family. Since Janie did not have to work to help support her small family (as many people did), she had time to wander about. In the beginning of the novel, while Janie is wandering and relaxing one afternoon, Hurston describes a nature scene that drives Janie into a realization of sexuality:

> She was stretched on her back beneath the pear tree soaking in the alto chant of the visiting bees, the gold of the sun and the panting breath of the breeze when the inaudible voice of it all came to her. She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was a marriage! (Eyes 11)
It is obvious that this depiction is a representation of sex – for a tree, it is reproduction; not only is it a representation of sex, but it shows the reader that sex (and sexuality) is a natural and beautiful part of life. For Janie, marriage is what occurs between the bee and the pear tree. From a young age, Janie sees the beauty in nature, in sexuality, and her dream is to find someone with whom she can embrace that beauty. It is because of her dream, and her difficulty in fulfilling it, that she marries three different men. All of Janie’s relationships with men are either abusive – whether physically or emotionally – or would be abusive if she had stayed long enough. In all of Janie’s marriages, she either is viewed as property or is equated with animals. In *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins, states

Hurston uses the love and trouble tradition to lay the foundation for a Black feminist analysis of domestic violence. Tea Cake and Sop-de-Bottom see women as commodities, property that they can whip to “reassure their possession.” Janie is not a person; she is objectified as something owned by Tea Cake. Even if a man loves a woman, as is clearly the case of Tea Cake and Janie, the threat of competition from another male is enough to develop an “awful fear” that Janie will choose another man and thus deem him less manly than his competitors.

Whipping Janie reassured Tea Cake that she was his. (Collins 188)

In this instance, Tea Cake and Sop-de-Bottom – Janie’s third husband and his friend, respectively – believe that it is acceptable to abuse their wives because she belongs to him; because he wants to reassure himself that Janie “belonged” to him, he whipped her, even though she did nothing wrong. She is viewed as property, as an animal is, by a man who supposedly loved her. In *Their Eyes*, as in reality, it is not just the men who feel this way – there are women
who know the way the world works, even if they do not like or agree with it. Early in the novel, Janie’s grandmother told Janie something that she would never forget

“Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it’s someplace way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don’t know nothin’ but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don’t tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see.” (Their Eyes 14)

Racism and “superior” knowledge and weaponry allowed the white men to tell black men to work for men, but rampant sexism has relegated women to a role akin to that of animals. The black women must do whatever anyone tells her because of her skin color, which makes her “less” than a white person, and her gender, which makes her “less” than a man. Janie’s second husband Joe Starks also equates Janie and all other women to animals. While working in the store Joe built, Janie and Joe argue about a misplaced bill – Joe blames Janie when it goes missing, while Janie maintains that if it is not on the nail, it is on his desk; he tells her “‘Somebody got to think for women and chillun and chickens and cows. I god, they sho don’t think none theirselves’” (Their Eyes 71). In Joe’s mind, just by Janie being a woman, she is not capable of thinking for herself, and cannot make a correct decision about anything, because she is similar to an animal that is only driven by its basic needs. Amiable Twagilimana, in her book Race and Gender in the Making of an African American Literary Tradition, states

The interesting development here is that Joe equates women with children and, more significantly, with animals (chickens and cows), which means that women
do not have a mind to think and understand things. It is also an image of hierarchy and domination similar to that foisted by slave-owners on slaves […]. This attitude probably justifies Joe in his treatment of Janie, refusing her voice and enjoyment of the comic scenes that take place on the porch. (Twagilimana 152).

Twagilimana brings up an interesting aspect of black family life when she equates this hierarchy with the one employed in slavery; it is, essentially, the same, with the obvious exception that it is the black man in the role of the white man and the black woman in place of all of the slaves. Similar to the white society’s view of black people in general, it is this line of thinking that allowed Janie’s various husbands to dominate and abuse her and that gave Janie little to no power to change her deplorable situation. She was able to leave her first husband because another man gave her the means to do so; she was unable and unwilling to leave her second and third husbands until their deaths.

While Janie and Tea Cake are on the muck, jealously and suspicions of infidelity run rampant between the two. At one point, Tea Cake is enraged that another black woman brought her brother to meet Janie with the hope that Janie would leave Tea Cake and marry her brother.

When Mrs. Turner’s brother came and she brought him over to be introduced, Tea Cake had a brainstorm. Before the week was over he had whipped Janie. Not because her behavior justified his jealousy, but it relieved that awful fear inside him. Being able to whip her reassured him in possession. No brutal beating at all. He just slapped her around a bit to show he was boss. (Eyes 147)
Tea Cake was so jealous that, even though Janie did nothing but meet this other man, he whipped Janie to show that he was in control of her, that he owned her. In his mind, if you own something, you can do with it whatever you please. As time passed, however, Janie grew more confident in herself. There were times when Janie would fight back against Tea Cake, particularly if she thought he was cheating (*Their Eyes* 136-138), demonstrating to the reader that black women are not the weak and meek creatures who live to make other people happy.

In order to understand the potency of *Their Eyes* and *Quicksand* fully, it is important to examine the history and stereotypes Hurston and Larsen were writing in opposition to. Another form of abuse and oppression was a sexually based one. The sexual exploitation and rape of black women was used as a method of oppression; it is hard to think of yourself positively when the majority of people see you as less than human and take advantage of your sexual vulnerabilities. Because of the patriarchal teachings ingrained in the dominant white society’s mind, there was a level of detestation of the female sex in men, whether or not the man shows evidence of his animosity. In her book *Ain’t I a Woman*, Bell Hooks writes

> As American white men idealized white womanhood, they sexually assaulted and brutalized black women. Racism was by no means the sole cause of many cruel and sadistic acts of violence perpetrated by white men against enslaved black women. The deep hatred of woman that had been embedded in the white colonizer’s psyche by patriarchal ideology and anti-woman religious teachings both motivated and sanctioned white male brutality against black women. (Hooks 32)
Rather than direct their anger and hatred of women towards the women who were “suitable” for marriage and motherhood, white men directed it to the women who were “unsuitable,” “sub-human,” and regarded as “animals.” Even though black women were seen as animals and non-human, rape was “one fundamental tool of sexual violence directed against African-American women” (Collins 176). So long as the rape victim was black, no crime was committed; in the dominant society’s mind, an “animal” could not be raped.

Slave women had a lower status than slave men did, even though they could further the economic gain of their owners even more than the men could – they could produce more slaves. All too soon after the enslavement of African people

Planters recognized the economic gain they could amass by breeding black slave women. […] Unlike the offspring of relationships between black men and white women, the offspring of any black slave woman regardless of the race of her mate would be legally slaves, and therefore the property of the owner to whom the female slave belonged. As the market value of the black female slave increase, larger numbers were stolen or purchased by white slave traders. (Hooks 16)

The hardships particular to the female slave increased as her rape produced economic gain for her master. According to testimony found in Black Women in White America: A Documentary History edited by Gerda Lerner, small allowances were made for pregnant women:

Women are generally shown some little indulgence for three or four weeks previous to childbirth; they are at such times not often punished if they do not finish the task assigned them…. They are generally allowed four weeks after the birth of a child, before they are compelled to go into the field. Then they take the
child with them, attended sometimes by a little girl or boy, from the age of four to six, to take care of it while the mother is at work. When there is no child that can be spared, or not young enough for this service, the mother, after nursing, lays it under a tree, or by the side of a fence, and goes to her task, returning at stated intervals to nurse it. (From the “Narrative of Nehemiah Caulkins” Gerder 47)

According to this testimony, a mother was not allowed adequate time to properly bond with her child before she had to, potentially, surrender care to a five-year-old child. This slightly more humane treatment for the pregnant mother was great, even though it was only done to protect the future investment of the master, but more often than not, the fetus did not make it to full term. Another testimony from Lerner’s compilation provides an account of a white mistress taking complaints from the female slaves on the plantation. About one of these slave women, the mistress wrote, “She had had sixteen children, fourteen of whom were dead; she had had four miscarriages; one had been caused with falling down with a very heavy burden on her head, and one from having her arms strained up to be lashed” (Lerner 49-50). It is unknown whether the slaver who lashed this slave woman knew that she was pregnant, but it is obvious that harsh and cruel conditions caused two miscarriages for this one slave. This narrative also provides a look at the high mortality rate of slave children. In order for the masters to make a profit, they would often cause the rape of female slaves so that they were perpetually pregnant, in an attempt to counter balance the high mortality rate. Occasionally, however, slave owners would provide “incentives” for female slaves to conceive on their own, such as a lesser workload, more food, and more adequate lodging. Regardless of the manner in which a slave conceived, “breeding was oppressive to all fertile black slave women. Undernourished, overworked women were rarely in a physical condition that would allow for safe easy childbirth. Repeated pregnancies
without proper care resulted in numerous miscarriages and death” (Hooks 41). Forced to conceive until their bodies would not allow them to, slave women were like breeder animals, essentially giving birth to profit for their oppressors.

The end of slavery did not herald the end of the exploitation of the black woman; it continued as black women performed domestic work for white families. Bell Hooks claims, however, “white people did not perceive black women engaged in service jobs as performing significant work that deserved adequate economic reward. They saw domestic service jobs performed by black women as being merely an extension of the ‘natural’ female role and considered such jobs valueless” (Hooks 91). Since domestic work was “natural,” it seems that it was acceptable to exploit black female employees with long hours and wages too low to support families. Not only were black women not valued for their services, but it was also very difficult for them to find jobs to begin with. In an account of the experience of job hunting, Louise Mitchell writes, “every morning, rain or shine, groups of women with brown paper bags or cheap suitcases stand on street corners in the Bronx and Brooklyn waiting for a chance to get some work. Sometimes there are 15, sometimes 30, some are old, many are young, and most of them are Negro women” (Lerner 229-230). Mitchell refers to these corners as the “slave market.” She continues her narration by describing what would happen if a woman was hired:

Once hired on the “slave market,” the women often find after a days backbreaking toil that they worked longer than was arranged, got less than was promised, were forced to accept clothing instead of cash and were exploited beyond human endurance. Only the urgent need for money makes them submit to this routine daily. (Lerner 230)
Since the women hired in this fashion were often not paid, the new job market is referred to as a “slave market,” rather than a job market; the women in the slave market were economically exploited in manners similar to slave women. More often than not, domestic work, even when the black women were paid, was not enough to support a family. In *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present*, Jacqueline Jones writes that black women “tried to turn their special talents into a secure means of making a living. Nevertheless, former slaves were too poor to pay much for the services of midwives and seamstresses, and whites at times did not pay at all. Most freedwomen had to piece together seasonal or part-time labor in any case” (Jones 56). Even by standing on the slave market and performing domestic work when hired, black women did not make enough to support themselves or their families. Jones also states that the “largest single category of grievances initiated by black women under the Freedmen’s Bureau ‘complaint’ procedures concerned nonpayment of wages, indicating that many workers were routinely – and ruthlessly – defrauded of the small amounts they had earned and then ‘run off the place’” (Jones 54). How were black women supposed to support themselves and their families if they were not paid the wages they earned? The pattern of working and not being paid forced black women into a kind of second slavery. The system was set up to keep black women oppressed and working for the white dominant society.

Repeatedly tested, black women never passed the test of “true womanhood.” According to Hazel V. Carby in *Reconstructing Womanhood*, black women were “measured against the sentimental heroines of domestic novels” and “repeatedly failed the test of true womanhood because she survived her institutionalized rape, whereas the true heroine would rather die than be sexually abused. Comparison between these figurations of black versus white womanhood also
encouraged readers to conclude that the slave woman must be less sensitive and spiritually inferior” (Reconstructing Womanhood 34). Because the black woman was able to endure her rape and sexual exploitation (as if she was given a choice), she was inferior to the white woman who would, apparently, not be able to survive. Rape is not about sex, but about control and oppression; just by surviving and continuing their lives, however difficult it may have been, was a form of rebellion, of revolt.

Rape and sexual abuse were not the only occurrences that black women had to endure; they were also subjected to the same violence as black men. White men – and, sometimes, black men – abused and brutalized black women unlike any other group of people. Patricia Hill Collins claims “violence against Black women tends to be legitimated and therefore condoned while the same acts of violence visited on other groups may remain nonlegitimated and nonexcuseable” (Collins 177). In other words, if the acts that black women were forced to endure were visited on another group, it would not be acceptable – there would probably even be a trial against the perpetrators. After generations of legitimized violence against women, some thought that it was natural; Collins claims, “because of its everyday nature, some women do not perceive of themselves or those around them as victims” (Collins 187). This manner of thinking is a classic example of an abused woman – except, instead of being abused by a spouse or family member, black women were abused by large groups of people, society as a whole, even.

Many middle-class black women in the early 1900’s sought to change their “destiny” of violence, unpaid labor, and rape by emulating the “superior” and un-abused white woman. If by being black and “acting” black, they were treated as sub-human, then, surely, “acting white” would help their situation. In her article “Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality,” Evelynn Hammonds writes, “by the projection of the image of a ‘super-moral’ black
woman, they [middle-to-upper-class black women] hoped to garner greater respect, justice, and opportunity for all black Americans” (Hammonds 133). Not even imitating the “super moral” behavior of white society, however, helped with the discrimination and stereotypes that black women – and men – faced on a daily basis.

Trying to dispel the myth that all black women were sexually loose, they emulated the conduct and mannerisms of white women. But as manumitted black women and men struggled to change stereotypical images of black female sexuality, white society resisted. Everywhere black women went, on public streets, in shops, or at their places of work, they were accosted and subjected to obscene comments and even physical abuse at the hands of white men and women. […] A black woman dressed tidy and clean, carrying herself in a dignified manner, was usually the object of mud-slinging by white men who ridiculed and mocked her self-improvement efforts. They reminded her that in the eyes of the white public she would never be seen as worthy of consideration or respect. (Hooks 55)

From this passage, it seems as if white society would do anything to keep black society oppressed, even though they were acting “white,” going against the stereotypes forced upon them, and becoming increasingly similar to white middle-to-upper-class society in every way except skin color. Both racism and sexism were in play regarding how white men treated black women. In Cultures of Babylon, Carby states “history has constructed our sexuality and our femininity as deviating from those qualities with which white women, as the prize objects of the Western world have been endowed” (Babylon 67). The dominant white male society are the group of people who began the myths and stereotypes surrounding black women and black
women’s sexuality; it was by their lead and ideology that black women and men were treated horribly, that black women were sexually assaulted and raped. Mimicking white society was such a widespread notion, that some felt some black women who “deviated” must be taught and policed.

Generally, the women who “deviated” were those of the lower classes and who migrated to the city, a movement known as the Great Migration, which began around 1910. These migrating women were viewed as a threat to the pre-existing society. Hazel V. Carby writes, “the migrating black woman could be variously situated as a threat to the progress of the race; as a threat to the establishment of a respectable urban black middle class; as a threat to congenial black and white middle-class relations; and as a threat to the formation of black masculinity in an urban environment” (*Babylon* 24). *Some* lower class black women who could not piece together a “legitimate” living turned to prostitution; these are the type of women that the middle-class wanted to “police” in order to protect the race as a whole, since most, if not all, of the stereotypes were based off this class of people. Well-intentioned white agencies wanted to help the black race, and developed a theory that if they helped to police black women, the race would advance, perhaps gaining the respect of the majority. These white people, however, were not the only group with these thoughts: “the need to police and discipline the behavior of black women in cities, however, was not only a premise of white agencies and institutions but also a perception of black institutions and organizations, and the black middle class” (*Babylon* 24). Because of the actions of a few women, an entire class and type of people were accused of holding the race back as a whole. Hazel V. Carby devotes an entire chapter of *Cultures in Babylon* to the subject of “policing” black women’s sexuality. Carby writes, “the movement of black women between rural and urban areas and between southern and northern cities generated a series of moral
panics. One serious consequence was that the behavior of black female migrants was characterized as sexually degenerate and, therefore, socially dangerous” (*Babylon* 23). Since these women were thought of as “sexually degenerate and socially dangerous,” many people and different organizations – both white and black – favored a whole movement and ideology of policing another person’s actions and body. Before Civil Rights were hard won by the black community, racial uplift was the most important part of life for many; because of the many and harsh stereotypes perpetrated by white society, the black community was forced to work that much harder to achieve success as a whole. Women who were also fighting for women’s rights were forced to put that aside in favor of the race movement. The middle-to-upper-class black community viewed the lower-class black community as the weight holding them back, as hindering their success.

Some black women, both in novels and reality, detest that they belong to the black race; both *Their Eyes* and *Quicksand* have characters who despise their own race. The black citizens that belonged to the middle-and-upper class were disdainful of lower-class black people and of black popular culture. They call for equal rights for all, but emulate white society and reject their own race, customs, and culture. Patricia Hill Collins writes, “By claiming that they are not like the rest some African-American women reject connections to other Black women and demand special treatment for themselves” (Collins 84), which cuts the women rejecting their race off from a large community that could potentially support them through difficult times. In *Quicksand*, while Helga is working in New York City, she receives a letter from her uncle Peter. The letter contained a check for five thousand dollars, but also stated that the letter was to be their last correspondence, because Peter’s new wife is disdainful of Helga since she is mulatta. As soon as she receives the check from her uncle, she realizes that she hates the hundreds of
black faces around her. Helga poses the question in her mind “Why, she demanded in fierce rebellion, should she be yolked to these despised black folk?” (*Quicksand* 57). She leaves work to take a walk so she can get away from others of her race. Her mind is racing and she thinks “she didn’t, in spite of her racial markings, belong to these dark segregated people. She was different” (*Quicksand* 58). The only thing that changes is her monetary status; with five thousand dollars, she is “better” than they were. Although seemingly unaware of herself, Helga is very aware and critical of those around her, including her beneficiary in New York City, Anne Grey, an upper-class woman who allowed Helga to live with her: “Helga was […] critical of Anne’s continual preoccupation with the problems of race, and disparaging of the hypocrisy of the emerging black middle class. This class, she felt, condemned white racism while imitating white middle class behavior and adopting their values and moral codes” (*Reconstructing Womanhood* 168). Carby reaffirms that the black middle class, while working towards racial equality, mimicked their white counterparts, condemning the majority of the race they were attempting to further. Whereas Helga dislikes belonging to a race that is despised and treated like vermin, Anne dislikes everything about the race:

She hated white people with a deep and burning hatred, with the kind of hatred which, finding itself held in sufficiently numerous groups, was capable someday, on some great provocation, of bursting into dangerously malignant flames.

But she aped their clothes, their manners, and their gracious ways of living. While proclaiming loudly the undiluted good of all things Negro, she yet disliked the songs, the dances, and the softly blurred speech of the race. Toward these things she showed only a disdainful contempt, tinged sometimes with a faint amusement. (*Quicksand* 51)
What readers may fail to realize is that Anne is not a characterization of one specific person, but a representation of the majority of an entire class of black men and women. Aloft in her nice home, not having to work to support herself or a family, Anne does not know what it is like to be a poor black person, and she has always had a refined, middle-to-upper-class upbringing, creating a disconnect between her and the lower-class black community that she shuns and despises. While she is fighting for equal rights, because that is what is expected of her, she cannot really know what she is fighting for; essentially, she is just as wrong as white society, labeling those who belong to the lower classes as primitive and savage. By writing her characters to embody hatred and disdain for their own race, Larsen is cutting them off from the majority of the black community. Anne is stuck in a never-ending cycle of hate: she hates white people for their domination over the black community, and, in turn, she shuns the larger part of the black community for being dominated. She turns her back on the suffering of the lower classes (except to further her status in the middle-to-upper-class black community by claiming that the wealthy black community needs to fight for the rights of those unable to do so), and mimics the white people she hates so much. Helga hates her own race, because they are treated as sub-human, yet she does not mind the wealthy black community (most of the time). She does not want to be chained to a community that, in her mind, is unable to stand against the machine of white society. Because of her disdain for her own race, Helga is unhappy wherever she goes. She is constantly reminded of her self-loathing based on her black ancestry, and believes that wealthy people and fancy material possessions will make her happy.

In *Their Eyes*, the character Mrs. Turner has similar feelings as Anne Grey and Helga Crane. Mrs. Turner owns a diner out on the muck – placing her as a business owner and, therefore, above those who worked in the fields – and has distinctly “white” features
But Mrs. Turner’s shape and features were entirely approved by Mrs. Turner. Her nose was slightly pointed and she was proud. He thin lips were an ever delight to her eyes. Even her buttocks in bas-relief were a source of pride. To her way of thinking all these things set her aside from Negroes. That was why she sought out Janie to friend with. Janie’s coffee-and-cream complexion and her luxurious hair made Mrs. Turner forgive her for wearing overalls like the other women who worked in the fields. *Their Eyes* 140

For Mrs. Turner, her “white” features are a source of pride, while her “black” ones are a source of shame. While speaking to Janie, she says “‘Look at me! Ah ain’t got no flat nose and liver lips. Ah’m uh featured woman. Ah got white folk’s features in mah face. Still and all Ah got tuh be lumped in wid all de rest. It ain’t fair. Even if dey don’t take us in wid de whites, dey oughta make us uh class tuh ourselves’” (*Their Eyes* 142). She hates that she is “lumped in” with other African Americans, the ones who have African features. She feels shame and anger that she cannot be a part of white society, or, at least, a mulatto society. The stereotypes of African Americans are so ingrained into Mrs. Turner’s mind that she despises her own race and even harbors resentment against white society for not allowing her and others like her to be a distinct entity from those black people who have no white features. Mrs. Turner is similar to Helga Crane and Anne Grey, because she is also isolated from the larger community; she differs from them, however, because she is the only one in her community who feels shame and anger for being African-American. The field workers are just happy to have work, they enjoy playing music and gambling, and they are, more or less, content with their lives. They know who they are and their heritage: they accept it, it is a part of their being. It is because the field workers
accept who they are and those around them that they are happy. Janie, unlike Helga, Anne, and Mrs. Turner, does not care about racial markings or social and class status.

All Janie wants is to be happy – happy in life and happy in marriage. She craves the beauty of sex and sexuality. Throughout Their Eyes, Hurston employs beautiful imagery that surrounds the notion of sex and sexuality. Ann duCille writes, “The use of such imagery links Their Eyes to a long-standing tradition of women’s writing in which bees, birds, and blossoms are standard tropes used to signify both sexuality and the inherent inequality of heterosexual relations” (duCille 117). Hurston sets the reader up to believe that the novel will be about a beautiful sexuality, but contrasts it later with ugly domination and abuse. After Janie learns of sexuality and the beauty of it through the pear tree, Nanny witnesses Janie kissing a boy, after which she decides that it is time for her to marry Janie off. Nanny does so to protect Janie, not wanting men to use her granddaughter as many men have used women for centuries. Janie does not approve of the man Nanny has chosen for her; she does not love him, does not grow to love him, and the spark that Janie so desperately craves is missing from their marriage. When she meets Joe Starks, she finds her spark. While daydreaming about him, she thinks “from now on until death she was going to have flower dust and springtime sprinkled over everything. A bee for her bloom. Her old thoughts were going to come in handy now, but new words would have to be made and said to fit them” (Their Eyes 32). After meeting Joe, Janie believes that she will be able to fulfil her dream of a natural marriage, one similar to the bee and the pear tree, not knowing the trouble that awaits her. Instead of finding the love and sexuality she so desires, Janie lives in a loveless marriage that is based upon monetary gain and a higher social status. As is later proven with her third husband, Janie does not care much about money and social status.
Since her “sexual awakening,” Janie covets the beautiful and natural marriage of the bee and the pear tree.

While Hurston often uses imagery of nature to describe the beauty and utter naturalness of female sexuality, she also shows that it can be used as a crippling weapon against a man; Hurston’s tactic reverses the already established roles of men using a woman’s sexuality against her. One night while in the store, Joe becomes angry with Janie, because, according to him, she is not cutting tobacco correctly; he says that since she has been in the store “‘til she get old as Methusalem’” (Their Eyes 78), she should be able to do it properly. Throughout their marriage, Joe never realizes that Janie does not care about the store or cutting tobacco “properly.” Janie becomes angry with Joe for bringing up her age in front of the townsfolk and always putting her down and, finally, retaliated against him and his control over her

“Naw, Ah ain’t no young gal no mo’ but den Ah ain’t no old woman neither. Ah reckon Ah looks mah age too. But Ah’m uh woman every inch of me, and Ah know it. Dat’s uh whole lot more’n you kin say. You big-bellies round here and put out a lot of brag, but ‘tain’t nothin’ to it but yo’ big voice. Humph! Talkin’ ‘bout me lookin’ old! When you pull down yo’ britches, you look lak de change uh life.” Their Eyes 79

At first, Joe does not understand what Janie just said, but the men listening do: she insulted Joe’s manhood by stating that he could not achieve an erection, and she said it in front of other men. Janie gives Joe a fatal hit to his ego. After a few of the men exchange remarks, Joe finally understands Janie’s insult
Then Joe Starks realized all the meanings and his vanity bled like a flood. Janie had robbed him of his illusion of irresistible maleness that all men cherish, which was terrible. The thing that Saul’s daughter had done to David. But Janie had done worse, she had cast down his empty armor before men and they had laughed, would keep on laughing. […] And the cruel deceit of Janie! Making all that show of humbleness and scorning him all the time! Laughing at him, and now putting the town up to do the same. Joe Starks didn’t know the words for all this, but he knew the feeling. So he struck Janie with all his might and drove her from the store. *Their Eyes* 79-80

Joe is mortified by what Janie has done, that she has –figuratively – publically castrated him, and he attempts to regain any sign of maleness and beats his wife until she flees from the store. He believes that Janie has set him up for this, for this scene of embarrassment in front of the town, not realizing that she was retaliating in the only way she knew how – with a quick wit and sharp words. Joe does not seem to realize, nor care, that he insulted and embarrassed her first; he does not realize that he set himself up for Janie’s revenge. Hurston employs male sexuality – or lack thereof – as a weapon, just as countless men used women’s sexuality and stereotypes of that sexuality against women. In *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women’s Fiction*, Ann duCille writes that “it is significant, of course, that Janie reckons her sexuality by the male measurement of inches and makes it clear to all present that Joe’s shriveled penis doesn’t stand up” (duCille 119). Just as maleness is stripped from Joe, the measurement of manhood is given to Janie; Hurston implies that if women actually took charge of their sexuality like men do, instead of repressing it as they are taught and forced to do, they would have more power in their communities and relationships. Men have realized the power of sexuality and
created stereotypes of certain women, vilified whole races and classes of women, and created an unattainable ideology of true womanhood, all operating within a system structured to keep women beneath men. It is impossible for Janie to be happy – truly happy – in this world.

Janie’s third marriage is by far her happiest, though it is far from perfect and ends in tragedy. Soon after Janie destroys Joe’s manhood, he gets sick and dies at home. After the funeral, the men in town start trying to court Janie, but she does not accept their offers because she likes being alone and free. That is when Janie meets Tea Cake and has similar thoughts to when she first met Joe – “He looked like the love thoughts of women. He could be a bee to a blossom – a pear tree blossom in the spring. He seemed to be crushing scent out of the world with his footsteps. Crushing aromatic herbs with every step he took. Spices hung about him. He was a glance from God” (Their Eyes 106). All that Janie wants is to be happy and to have the beauty that is a sexual relationship, and she believes that Tea Cake will be the man to finally give her what she has wanted since she was a teenager. Tea Cake takes Janie to places she has never been, and she begins to fall in love with him. When he leaves to make a living on the muck, Janie goes with him, eager to start the marriage of her dreams; they spend years there together with Janie happier than she has even been. Yet Tea Cake dominates and abuses, with him hitting her for senseless things, and things that are not even her fault. Janie learned, however, from her public argument with Joe that she is not the poor, meek creature Joe was always telling her she was. Her argument with her now deceased husband gave her a newfound confidence, which she uses in her marriage with Tea Cake. If he attacked her, she defended herself, even starting physical fights with him when she believes him unfaithful. Overall, however, Janie and Tea Cake were as happy as anyone in their community. Then the storm came and flooded all that was on the muck. As Janie and Tea Cake attempt to reach high ground, a rabid dog bites Tea
Cake while he is protecting Janie from it. He himself becomes rabid and attacks Janie, who is forced to defend herself

The pistol and the rifle rang out almost together. The pistol just enough after the rifle to seem its echo. Tea Cake crumpled as his bullet buried itself in the joist just over Janie’s head. Janie saw the look on his face and leaped forward as he crashed forward in her arms. She was trying to hover over him as he closed his teeth in the flesh of her forearm. They came down heavily like that. She struggled to a sitting position and pried the dead Tea Cake’s teeth from her arm.

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Forced to kill her husband to save her own life, Janie lost the one man who fulfilled her desire of a natural marriage. She is distraught at what she has done and, after receiving treatment for her bite wound, is put on trial for murder. She is acquitted by the white courtroom, but outcast by the black community on the muck. Seeing no other options, she returns to Eatonville alone, but free from abuse and domination. Just as she had enjoyed her aloneness and freedom after Joe died, in time, she will enjoy it again because she is a vibrant woman who sees the beauty in all things and has a strong will to live. Unfortunately, not all women – real or fictional – had this sort of freedom available to them, including Helga in *Quicksand*.

Larsen brilliantly uses sexuality in this novel. By repressing it and denying it, it led to Helga’s death; her sexuality was only used to fulfill her biological duty to bear children and give her husband the heirs he “deserves.” When Helga finally does decide to marry and she acknowledges her sexuality, the result is tragedy. Throughout the novel, Helga represses any sexual desires that she may have; even when she thinks about the sexuality of others, she is
repulsed. After Helga decides to leave Naxos and informs Dr. Anderson, she begins thinking
about her past – how her white mother married a black man who left her with a broken heart, her
mother’s second marriage to a man who despised Helga, how her uncle Peter sent her to a school
for Negroes, and her engagement to James Vayle. While remembering an encounter with her
former fiancé, “acute nausea rose in her as she recalled the slight quivering of his lips sometimes
when her hands had unexpectedly touched his; the throbbing vein in his forehead on a gay day
when they had wandered off alone across the low hills and she had allowed him frequent kisses
under the shelter of some low-hanging willows” (Quicksand 27). She is disgusted and becomes
physically ill when she remembers that Vayle had sexual desires and desired Helga; to Helga,
this is abhorrent. While constantly repressing her own desires and sexuality, she cannot do the
same for others. Helga finds any sexual desires beneath her, and believes that they should be
beneath others with a “proper” social status. It is important to note that when Helga finally does
accept her sexuality and desires, she selects a reverend – a lower-class man who sweeps her
away from urban society into a rural one. It is clear that Helga felt she could only have a sexual
relationship with a member of the lower-class, otherwise she could have found a middle-to-
upper-class man (other than Dr. Anderson) to marry. After her marriage to Reverend Pleasant
Greene – a not so pleasant man –, Helga bears many children. At first, she is happy, but she
soon becomes unhappy as she is weighed down by childbirth and, it seems, post-partum
depression. After she gives birth to her fourth child, she is unable to walk; her children are sent
to neighboring households so she can recover. In this poor, rural environment, community and
cooperation are important; without it, the members would not be able to survive, which is a
representation of the black community as a whole. In this novel, the ways of the middle-and-
upper-class divide and segregate members from each other in any meaningful way, while the
actions of the lower-class create a closer knit community. This community takes care of and helps its members who are in need of it. Helga remains aloof in her own world, not integrating into her community, and, therefore, does not benefit fully from it.

Helga’s troubles did not end with her fourth child. After the birth of her fourth child, Helga becomes pregnant again: “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” (Quicksand 136). It is assumed that, since her fourth child almost killed her, that this fifth child will end Helga’s life. Helga is unhappy and dying because she has resigned herself to her “proper place” in the world, and has given up the will to live life (if she ever had it to begin with). Unlike Janie, Helga wants nothing to do with her sexuality and desires; she wanted to be the epitome of true womanhood, that unattainable goal set forth by the dominant white society. In Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman, Hazel V. Carby wrote a thought provoking statement about Quicksand and Helga’s experience with sexuality

Consider the metaphor of quicksand; it is a condition where individual struggle and isolated effort are doomed to failure. Helga’s search led to the burial, not the discovery of the self. The only way out of quicksand is with external help; isolated individual struggle ensured only that she would sink deeper into the quagmire. (Reconstructing Womanhood 173)

Life and the discovery of self is quicksand for many people: if you do not seek or receive help, you will sink lower and lower until buried alive. This is what happened to Helga: she was so determined to live a life free of stereotypical sexuality, that she rarely asked for help and refused
to let anyone get close enough to her in order to help. She feared becoming the stereotypical jezebel so much, that she would not allow herself to feel desire or sexuality at all. Her first sexual encounter, and marriage, is with an almost perfect stranger, because she held out too long on her true feelings, which led to her utter unhappiness and her, presumably, painful death. She refused to become a part of a society she thought beneath her; if she had truly integrated into her community, had asked for help instead of remaining aloof, she would not have had such a painful death. Perhaps she could have been happy if she had accepted sexuality as a natural part of human nature.

Both Zora Neal Hurston and Nella Larsen wanted to reveal to their readers the double oppression black women were forced to endure every day of their lives. If women gained their rights, black women would not have those same rights because they are black; likewise, if the black community gained their rights, black women would not have the same rights because they are women. Knowing that they would not have equal rights if one of the movements failed, black women worked diligently towards both. Average black American citizens worked towards equal rights for all, alongside black female artists; the decision of these women to fight for equality on all grounds was not always accepted by men. In *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women’s Fiction*, Ann duCille writes, “This particularized, gendered sense of racial purpose and politics often put black writers at odds with a nationalist, masculinist ideology of uplift that demanded female deference in the cause of elevating black men” (duCille 30). Women who wanted equal rights both as female and black were looked down upon because some men believed that everyone should work towards racial uplift and not be bogged down with women’s rights; what they did not understand, however, is that both
movements were linked for black women fighting for freedom from oppression. duCille continues with

Instead, much of the prescriptive literature of the era, which addressed itself to gender conduct, not only placed these women firmly in the private sphere but also made it the black woman’s duty to home, hearth, and black humanity to offer her husband unconditional support in pursuit of his manhood rights: suffrage in the public realm and dominion in decision making, discipline, and fiscal affairs in the private. (duCille 50)

Magazines and newspaper articles emphasized the importance of black men receiving their rights, for black men to be equal to white men, with no mention of black women at all. It was the woman’s job to support her husband while he received equal rights and “that black women owed it to the race to allow their men to feel tough and protective at all costs as part of the effort to uplift the race by uplifting its male members” (duCille 50). It did not seem to matter that black women suffered as well – perhaps more than black men did – for the women’s feelings had to be set aside in order for the men to feel important. Both Hurston and Larsen showed readers how the stereotypes and the horrible treatment of black women affected the women individually, and how they affected the community as a whole. They show that if they work together with everyone in mind, their whole community could thrive and be happy. Happiness is not based on mimicking the dominant white society, but accepting themselves and each other for who they are – human beings with human desires.

Black women, along with black men, faced horrid cruelty because of the color of their skin; black women, however, were also forced to endure horrors particular to her gender – rape
and sexual assault. Because of the stereotypes that all black women were promiscuous, some black women felt it was necessary to “act white,” and police the “rampant” sexuality of the lower classes of black women, hoping to uplift the race. Unfortunately, some of the stereotypes that black women had to face before the Civil Rights movement are still strong today, such as the welfare mother. As a society, we need to realize that we do not know everything about everyone, we need to stop assuming that just because someone is black, or a woman, or poor, or speak a certain way, and that they must fit into a certain stereotype. Hopefully, one day, the people of the world will realize that we are all people; yes, we are different, but we are all human beings, and we must treat each other with the kindness and respect that we wish to be treated with ourselves.


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