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RICE UNIVERSITY

AESTHETIC DETAIL IN THE WORKS OF NELLA LARSEN

by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
MASTER OF ARTS

APPROVED, THESIS COMMITTEE

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May, 1995
ABSTRACT

Aesthetic Detail in the Works of Nella Larsen

by

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In the novellas *Quicksand* and *Passing*, Nella Larsen uses the often maligned detail to explore issues of gender, race, and sexuality. Female body parts, women’s clothing, and skin color are particularly reiterated and fetishized. These evocative descriptions function symbolically and at times act as a counternarrative. Larsen’s attempts to create a personal aesthetic are sometimes undercut by the text’s alliance with hegemonic standards of beauty and commodification.
In terms of current usage, "aesthetics" is a nebulous word; ironic, considering that it is derived from the most material aspect of our existence. In *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Terry Eagleton describes the "territory" of the aesthetic as "how the world strikes the body on its sensory surfaces, of that which takes root in the gaze and the guts and all that arises from our most banal, biological insertion into the world" (13). As Eagleton traces the historical and political development of "aesthetics" as a philosophy, he demonstrates how the most palpable (opposed to theoretical) experience of the world came to be associated with terms like "beauty" and "art."

Pinning down the word "aesthetic" to one definition has proved to be as difficult as pinning down Nella Larsen and her relationship to aesthetics. Indeed, as I will demonstrate, Larsen's work is an eloquent and evocative example of the slippage seemingly inherent in the idea and codification of the aesthetic. For example, in common parlance there is a slippage between the words "aesthetic" and "beautiful" to the extent that they generally share the same meaning. Defining aesthetics as "primarily an identification of beauty" (Gurr, Zirimu, 3) is commonplace; yet even in this brief definition the word "primarily" creates a sort of loophole, suggesting that the aesthetic may include something other than beauty.
When Eagleton says that "certain objects stand out in a sort of perfection dimly akin to reason" and that "these are known as the beautiful" (17), he suggests that the origin of the aesthetic is something "beautiful" in objective reality and, crucially, at least the majority of humans can identify it. For Eagleton, this shared vision of the beautiful is a perceptual anchor from which we can build other kinds of understanding and communication. Yet, as Pio Zirimu points out, one of the contradictions of the aesthetic is that "elite taste," rather than communal perception, often ends up "dictat[ing] aesthetic taste and values" and "condition[ing] aesthetic experience" (58). In many important ways, Larsen’s work demonstrates the crux of that contradiction.

Nella Larsen writes about black female bodies. Both Quicksand (1928) and Passing (1929) are notable for their lushly detailed descriptions of the female body and what might be described as female "space." Indeed, Larsen’s representation of black female bodies focuses on external beauty to such an extent that her characters become art objects decorating her texts. By this I mean that her characters exist outside or aside of the text in their ability to provoke a sensuous response in the reader -- not by what they say or do or feel, but because of the way they are described. Helga Crane, the protagonist of Nella Larsen’s novella Quicksand, has "skin like yellow satin" (2) and "biscuit-coloured feet" (11). The reader is invited to imagine and take pleasure in the
"pale amber loveliness of her face" (13) and her small hands, the texture and color of "cream" and "ivory" (86). Notably, Larsen compares Helga to things which are beautiful, precious and rare, even delicious.

Although Larsen's writing style is overall quite descriptive and sensuous, her details tend to cluster around three areas of specificity, all of which are "traditional" (canonical?) fetishes: female body parts, women's clothing, and skin color. Larsen's attention to, even obsession with, these fetishized areas cannot in any way be reduced to simple explanations or meanings; the more they are scrutinized, the more suggestive they seem. Larsen's details both align and alienate women from each other; alternately they seem to assert the sameness and the uniqueness of women; they are places of danger, and yet also safety; and finally, they seem to simultaneously present women as commodified sexual objects and yet want to deny that commodification.

On one hand, Larsen's interest in this kind of aesthetic detail -- for instance, the color and texture of a dress; a description which gives her a lot of pleasure if judging by the frequency and elaborateness of the detail -- aligns her writing firmly, and seemingly derivatively, with the feminine. As Naomi Schor recounts in Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine, the detail has long been associated with "the negative connotations of the feminine: The decorative, the natural, the impure, and the monstrous" (45). As I will relate, Larsen was
certainly criticized for her enthusiasm for and reliance on the decorative. On the other hand, the reader should not underestimate the emotional and political implications of describing the black female body as beautiful.

Although we more or less share the "birth" of the aesthetic -- our response to experience through the senses -- the concept of race demonstrates how the eye has been taught to qualify and valuate what it sees. Larsen's works are concerned with issues of gender, race, and sexuality -- all of which begin in, and are inextricably connected with, the body. As Larsen's writing demonstrates, our relationship to gender, race, and sexuality is a conundrum. On one hand, these aspects of our being are a purely biological inheritance. On the other hand, our relationship to these most immutable markers of the self are complexly mediated by society, culture, and history.

Recent theoretical discussions of Larsen's work have tended to concentrate on her treatment of gender and/or sexuality. I would like to focus on the aspect of race in her works, partly because I believe that race most crucially impacted her experience and writing. I am indebted to Thadious Davis's recently published biography of Larsen, titled *Nella Larsen: Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance*.

Much of Davis's biographical information on Larsen helped me elucidate my own observations concerning Larsen's writing. From Davis I learned that
Larsen had an obsession with beautiful clothing in her life as well as her writing. Although Larsen's response to color and texture was purely sensuous, and her writing certainly provides proof of this, her response to beautiful things and people was not unmediated by "elite taste." In my opinion, biographical material is a useful tool for excavating the complexity and contradictions of that mediation at its source.

Nella Larsen wrote in the 1920s in the context of the Harlem Renaissance. According to Davis, Larsen was quite conscious of being a participant in a special historical moment for the Negro race. Although much of the external attention focused on Harlem was sensationalistic -- a fascination with the exotic, racy cabaret scene still associated with that time -- the byproduct of that interest was an increase in publishing opportunities for black writers. Jessie Fauset, one of Larsen's contemporaries, said of the two of them and another writer, Walter White: "We reasoned, 'Here is an audience waiting to hear the truth about us. Let us who are better qualified to present that truth than any white writer, try to do so'" (quoted from Davis, 152). The difficulty of presenting the "truth of being black and female in the midst of stereotypes and literary tropes cannot be underestimated.

There is no doubt that the "elite taste" which "dictate[d] aesthetic values" and even "conditione[d] aesthetic experience" in Nella Larsen's time was a white
one which prized "white" or Anglo facial features and coloring, and denigrated "black" or Negroid appearance. (Many would argue that this white elite taste continues to dictate standards of beauty, despite the Black Aesthetics movement of the 1960s, which espoused the idea that "Black is Beautiful."). In *Passing*, the character Irene Redfield, who is herself white enough to pass, comments on the relationship of "blackness" to beauty.

Observing the "emotional excitement" generated by the sight of someone "unusually dark," Irene says: "You know, the sort of thing you feel in the presence of something strange, and even, perhaps, a bit repugnant to you; something so different that it's really at the opposite end of the pole from all your accustomed notions of beauty" (205). The content of this comment is doubly ironic -- not just because it is made by a "black" woman, but also because the occasion is the Negro Welfare League dance which Irene has a hand in organizing. Larsen's meaning is further complicated by the fact that Irene is speaking to the white man Hugh Wentworth (who was modeled on Carl Van Vechten, Larsen's friend and supporter). Larsen certainly was not unaware of any complicity with "elite" aesthetics, no matter to what extent they did indeed form her ideas about beauty.

Black women writers from Toni Morrison to bell hooks have written about the psychic damage resulting from white standards of beauty being
imposed upon or even held up to black women. Davis writes that "the whiter the individual was in color, the greater his or her chances of transcending class stratification and racial prejudice" (130). As I will show, Nella Larsen did profit from the hegemonic aesthetics of the time; she suffered from it too.

Like her fictional character Helga Crane, Nella Larsen acknowledged her biracial background. In an Author's statement for Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., Larsen wrote: "Nella Larsen is a mulatto, the daughter of a Danish lady and a Negro from the Virgin Islands" (Davis 22). Davis points out that Larsen's use of the term "mulatto" was unusual in the African-American communities of the time, but more prevalent among the black Virgin Islanders. This term is not irrelevant, for it shows that although Larsen was confined to the black community for all practical purposes, she chose to differentiate herself -- to distance herself from blackness as a categorization. This tension is explored in both Quicksand and Passing, in which the characters of Helga Crane and Clare Kendry do not feel themselves to be wholly black or white.

Many observers of the Harlem Renaissance noted that Larsen emphasized her white, European parentage. In When Harlem Was In Vogue, David Levering Lewis writes:
Some of her fellow Virgin Islanders thought she capitalized on her mixed Danish-African heritage and held aloof from people who were not well-connected. Her letters to White reveal a quick-witted opportunism, and those to Van Vechten were often conspiratorially condescending about the race. (231)

The fact that Lewis aligns Larsen, who was born and grew up in Chicago, with "fellow Virgin Islanders" illustrates just one of the myths Larsen perpetuated about herself in an attempt to psychically, if not physically, remove herself from black America.

Larsen's marriage to the eminent African-American scientist Elmer S. Imes provides what is probably her most obvious profit from the white standard of beauty. Davis writes that the "invidious emphasis on color as a measure of value perhaps contributed to Elmer Imes's initial attraction to the 'mulatto' Nella Larsen, who had straight, or 'good,' hair and features that were more Caucasian than Negroid" (130). Although Larsen, like Imes, was smart and ambitious, her lack of family -- she presented herself as orphaned -- differentiated her from Imes, who belonged to a prominent, well-educated, and genteel African-
American family. In *Quicksand*, Larsen writes of the importance of "family" at the highest strata of black society:

No family. That was the crux of the whole matter.

For Helga, it accounted for everything, her failure here at Naxos, her former loneliness in Nashville. It even accounted for her engagement to James. If you couldn't prove your ancestry and connections, you were tolerated, but you didn't "belong." (8)

At a time in which "marrying light" was "marrying up," (Davis points out that Larsen was lighter-skinned than her husband), Larsen's relatively white skin compensated for her lack of family connections. There is abundant evidence, both in Larsen's life and in her work, that she was extremely conscious of the currency of "whiteness," be it parentage, manners, or skin.

Larsen's fiction is filled with examples of the relationship of hegemonic aesthetics to economic prosperity. In Helga Crane's movement through society there is a direct correlation between appearance/manners/values and socioeconomic status. When Helga is a teacher at Naxos -- described as a "show place in the black belt, exemplification of the white man's magnanimity,
refutation of the black man's inefficiency" (4) -- she enjoys a relatively high standard of economic security, "relatively" being the key word. Although Naxos prides itself on being one of, if not the best black school, its status is subject to many constraints. Larsen uses clothing as a metaphor to describe how blacks are limited by Naxos. Helga perceives Naxos as a "big knife with cruelly sharp edges ruthlessly cutting all to a pattern, the white man's pattern" (4). Helga's love of bright colors and rich fabrics get her into trouble in a place where any sign of individuality or creative expression is discouraged. The official (and officious) promotion of "drab colors" as "the most becoming colors for colored people" (18) is interpreted rightly by Helga as a symbolic example of the school's conspiracy with white society. "Relative" success, relative in terms of poverty, is purchased at the price of keeping black people in circumscribed place.

When Helga abandons Naxos for the greater economic and social opportunities of New York City, she eventually discovers that the price of those opportunities is an even more thorough adaptation of hegemonic coloration. Mrs. Hayes-Rore, "a plump lemon-colored woman" (35), is her ticket into the world of the economically successful black bourgeoisie; and Anne Grey, who has the face of a "golden Madonna" (45), is Helga's guide. Anne Grey's name is as descriptive of her diluted blackness as Mrs. Hayes-Rore's "lemon" skin is a
diminution of her blackness. The fact that both women are purported to be great "race" women demonstrates Larsen's perception of the conflicted racial attitudes of the black bourgeoisie.

Mrs. Hayes-Rore coaxes Helga into revealing the "secret" of her white parentage, and then hypocritically counsels her to conceal it. Ironically, the "concealed" white mother then becomes Helga's entree into Anne Grey's home, as Mrs. Hayes-Rore introduces Helga as "a little friend of mine whose mother's died" (42). In another sense, this entree is as "ironic" as the white mother is "concealed;" which is to say, not very. Larsen makes it clear that Anne and Helga are able to become close friends because they share a similar appearance and sense of aesthetics. There is no question of the allegiance of those aesthetics. Helga is quite aware that Anne "apes" white "clothes," "manners," and "gracious ways of living" (48). Helga is not so much opposed to white aesthetics as she is to the hypocrisy of verbally supporting black aesthetics while personifying white aesthetics. Helga notes:

While proclaiming loudly the undiluted good of all things Negro, she [Anne] 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.

Like the despised people of the white race, she
preferred Pavlova to Florence Mills, John
McCormack to Taylor Gordon, Walter Hampden to
Paul Robeson. (49)

Anne Grey has completely internalized "white" aesthetic taste -- to the extent
that it is the only measure for beauty that she can appreciate or understand --
despite her claims of political and personal devotion to all things "black."

Helga's "social climbing" reaches its apex when she leaves New York
City to live in Denmark with her white Aunt Katrina and Uncle Poul Dahl. Her
life becomes one of leisure and luxury: she spends her days shopping, having
tea, being admired. Yet when Larsen describes Helga as "awakening in the
great high room which held the great high bed on which she lay, small but
exalted" (67), she hints at the sacrifices Helga must make to attain that life of
luxury. The exaltation has a high price; being "raised" in society also means
being "enclosed" -- the proverbial life in a gilded cage. Significantly, she is
described as "small"; the trade-off for exaltation is diminishment. Although this
diminishment refers to Helga's physical self, more importantly it pertains to her
own image of her self.
In Copenhagen, Helga's relationship to blackness, even her own blackness, is further destabilized and defamiliarized. Most obviously, she is surrounded by white people, the less sophisticated of whom overtly respond to "her dark, alien appearance" as an "astonishment" (73). Furthermore, she herself plays the role of a "secluded young miss, a Danish frokken" (71). Perhaps even more than her national identity, Helga's former self-sufficiency suggests the foreignness and strangeness of that role. Yet ultimately, Helga's adoption of the Danish language and upper-class manners are not as alienating as the fact that her own blackness is determined for her.

Helga soon realizes that her status in Copenhagen is that of a "decoration" or "curio" (73) paid for and owned by her aunt and uncle and meant to be exhibited and even traded (through marriage) for their social benefit. Her aunt and uncle dress Helga up like a "peacock" (73), emphasizing her foreignness and blackness in revealing clothes made of "screaming colors, blood-red, sulphur-yellow, sea-green" (74) and exotic fabrics like batik. They buy her earrings and glittering shoe-buckles and bracelets that make her feel like a "veritable savage" (69). Helga's Danish relatives clothe her in their own stereotypes of "blackness": the primitive, the exotic, the jungle -- none of which have any relation to either Helga's experience or what she describes as the "perfection of her own taste" (69).
In *Black Looks*, a collection of essays on "race and representation," bell hooks discusses the high price exacted from black people in exchange for economic success. hooks is concerned that "cultural, ethnic, and racial differences will be continually commodified and offered up as new dishes to enhance the white palate" (39); in other words, blackness is reduced to a sort of "spice," and then easily consumed. She suggests that blacks economically trade on the commodification of their own blackness, or what the hegemonic culture wants to inscribe as "blackness." hooks writes:

The commercial nexus exploits the culture's desire

(expressed by whites and black) to inscribe blackness as "primitive" sign, as wildness, and with it the suggestion that black people have secret access to intense pleasure, particularly pleasures of the body.

(34)

When Helga describes being "incited" to make "a voluptuous impression" and "to inflame attention and admiration" (74), the language leaves no doubt that the frisson "incited" by her exotic clothing is sexual.
Hooks extends her aesthetic metaphors from taste to sight when she describes blackness -- or "a bit of the Other" -- as "enhanc[ing] the blank landscape of whiteness" (29). This metaphor perfectly describes Helga's relationship to the Danish artist Axel Olsen. Helga serves as a living mannequin for Olsen, who as "artist," will "transform" her. He drapes her in the clothing and decorations of his choosing and then literally objectifies her in his painting. Olsen arrogantly declares that "his" picture (both painting and mental category) -- described by Helga as "some disgusting sensual creature with her features" (89) -- is "the true Helga Crane" (88).

In his marriage proposal to her, Olsen clearly states the binaries of their relationship as he views it: artist/muse, owner/object:

"It may be that with you, Helga, for wife, I will become great. Immortal. . . . 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." (87)
Helga notes that although Olsen claims to be "disturbed" and "maddened" by her physical charms, her "deliberate lure" (86), his behavior is calm, measured, decorous, and certainly very calculated. Her darkness and sensuality, as he literally represents it, is meant to serve as a foil and enhance his own whiteness and restraint. Ultimately, Helga is meant to add lustre and texture to his reputation, and he hopes, legend.

The proposal of a white man, and the imagined life this would entail -- "if we were married, you might come to be ashamed of me, to hate me, to hate all dark people... My mother did that." (88) -- is a turning-point in Helga's story. Prior to this moment, her story has been a gradual social incline in which economic prosperity and diminished blackness have been directly related. Helga's marriage to a poor black preacher from the deep South is a swift reversal. Unfortunately for Helga, experiencing the poverty of black rural existence does not authenticate black identity for her or revive it within her. Davis points out that "Southern 'folk' culture and rural subsistence do not empower Helga or liberate her from anxiety" (270). Certainly the blackness of Clementine Richards, "a strapping black beauty of magnificent Amazon proportions and bold shining eyes of jet-like hardness" (119), is no more native to Helga than the stereotypical primitivism that the Danish imposed on her. Davis asserts that because she "could find only blockages in the black and white
worlds, Helga mistakenly anticipates finding her inspiration among the common, ordinary folk of the rural South, as some in the Harlem Renaissance clearly believed" (275).

In the 1920s there was a huge influx of blacks into Harlem, turning that modern "promised land" into an overcrowded slum with desperately high unemployment. Even as blacks moved to the northern cities in increasing numbers, seeking economic opportunities unavailable to them in the rural South, there was still a prevailing idea that the South -- or the "journey" South, as it functioned as a literary myth -- could be restorative or regenerative for "blackness." Larsen was highly critical of that myth, as Helga's foundering in *Quicksand* demonstrates.

Generally avoiding the rural, Southern character and milieu, Larsen writes about what she knew best: the urban landscapes of Chicago and New York City and the light-complexioned, well-educated black bourgeoisie who inhabited those cities. Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry, the main characters of her second novel, *Passing*, are perfect examples. Both women are light enough to pass for white; Irene does so situationally for convenience and comforts, and Clare does so as a way of life. As with the character of Helga Crane, Larsen uses Irene and Clare to demonstrate the connection between a white appearance and manner and economic success in racist America.
In "Aestheticism, Feminism, and the Dynamics of Reversal," Amy Newman argues that "aestheticism provides a pleasurable haven from the unbearable tension which builds up in response to an unrelentingly oppressive social and historical reality (and thus the mode of immediacy advocated is at the same time a dissociative mode of being)" (196). Newman's statement illuminates Larsen's relationship with aesthetic detail. Oppressed by a society which denigrated blackness and rewarded whiteness, Larsen probably could not help but collude with the hegemonic aesthetics. As I will demonstrate, Larsen appropriates these aesthetics in order to "prove" to detractors that black women could be beautiful, intelligent, and cultured -- even by hegemonic standards. Like many writers during her time, Larsen believed that "art" was the best means of attacking racial prejudice and remaking "blackness" in the eyes of society. Probably the eye that mattered most to her was the one she had internalized from familial rejection.

The pleasure Larsen derived from aesthetic detail was not merely sensual, although it was that; more significantly, this pleasure resulted from being able to access and "own" symbols of beauty prized by the very culture that had rejected and manipulated her on the basis of skin color. In America, everyone is welcome to participate in consumerism. The point of owning status objects -- things of luxury and rarity -- is that their value may be conferred upon oneself.
As Camille Paglia states in *Sexual Personae*, "the west objectifies persons and personalizes objects" (37). Wearing status objects is a way to enhance one's appearance, and thus, one's "worth." In a materialistic society, economic value and self-value cannot be separated. Thus, Larsen's appropriation of aesthetic commodities ultimately contributes to a "dissociative mode of being"; she cannot keep the commodity separate from the process of commodification.

Aesthetics and commodification come to have a powerful collaboration in women's clothing. Particularly in the case of Clare Kendry, clothing is used to convey consciousness; indeed, Larsen seems to use clothing as a form of characterization itself. Irene recalls that as a child living in poverty, Clare had to scrimp from her own meager wages to buy "the material for that pathetic little red frock" (144). As an adult married to a wealthy white man, Clare has the money for the many beautiful dresses that seem almost compulsively described by Larsen and that form the essence of Clare's appearance (in both senses of the word) in the text. In *Black Looks*, bell hooks writes that "Clare chooses to assume a white identity because she only sees blackness as a sign of victimization and powerlessness" (18). Poverty is so implicated with both "victimization" and "powerlessness" that it is difficult to differentiate one from the other; in a practical sense, the terms are basically synonymous.
Larsen associated the most intense forms of poverty and degradation with the South. Interestingly, Larsen's only direct contact with the South was through the best that Black education had to offer. In 1907, Larsen attended Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee for one year. Then in 1915, she was employed as head nurse at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. Of Larsen's brief tenure at Tuskegee Davis writes:

Larsen arrived at Tuskegee open-minded about
Booker T. Washington's great racial experiment.
She departed so disillusioned that for the rest of her
life she was cynical and contemptuous of all programs
for racial uplift and suspicious and condemning of
anyone espousing such programs. (90)

Davis suggests that Larsen's disappointment with Tuskegee, which later became the model for her fictional school "Naxos," was partly due to her high expectations. Tuskegee was meant to be a redemptive experience for Larsen: "a chance to refute negative stereotypes of African Americans, and a chance as well to prove to her white family her worth as a person of color" (90).
Larsen's complex emotional relationship with racial issues, partly revealed by her use of aesthetic detail, cannot even begin to be grasped without a fuller understanding of her family background. Davis writes that "the paternal legacy that she carried out of Chicago was the emotional baggage of familial rejection and color consciousness, and her maternal legacy was emotional ambivalence toward women and African Americans" (4). As this passage suggests, Larsen's formative years left a lot of emotional damage which impacted both her adult life and her fiction.

When Davis began unearthing "The Mystery of Nella Larsen," (as she titles the introduction to Larsen's biography), she had little to go on in terms of concrete fact. Larsen had left a suspect biographical description of herself and contradictory oral versions of her family background. As a result, according to Davis, "numerous misconceptions had become so entrenched that even careful scholars reinscribed them" (xvii). Davis uses the term "self-fashioning" to describe the transformations of Larsen's identity. For Davis, this term is the key to understanding Larsen's creative project. In a very real sense, Larsen's fiction is an extension of her self; certainly both were carefully crafted by Larsen, probably from much of the same material.

In many ways, Larsen and her family resisted being pinned down to a coherent and consistent identity. For one, that most obvious sign of an identity,
a name, proved to be a slippery slope. At various times in her life, Larsen used
the following names: Nellie Walker, Nellye Larson, Nellie Larsen, and Nella
Larsen. This list does not even include the various combinations she made out
of her married name Imes. Larsen used the name Imes for most of her adult
life, excepting the brief years of her writing fame when she used Larsen.
Interestingly, she resumed using her married name after her divorce from Imes;
indeed, she continued to use the name even after Imes's death, when the ending
of her alimony payments forced her to resume nursing.

Larsen's mother used the names Mary, Marion, and Marie; her surnames
included Hanson, Hansen, Walker, Larson, and Larsen. Larsen's father(s)
was(were) Peter Walker and Peter Larson/Larsen. Although Larsen always
claimed to have had a "black" father that died and was replaced by a "white"
father, Davis hypothesizes that Peter Walker and Peter Larsen may have been
the same man. Davis suggests that "in her version of her parentage, Nella
Larsen could well have been symbolically addressing an even more grievous
alienation from a father who, while passing himself, sent her off to become a
completely black person" (49).

The biographical information found in the chapter on Larsen's childhood,
"Beginning in Chicago," is so confusing that I had to read it over several times
in order to begin to make sense of it. Few facts are absolutely fixed. The
picture that emerges is this: Larsen's parents were immigrants, one or both from Denmark, who moved to Chicago before Nella or "Nellie" was born in 1891. Larsen had a sister named Anna, who was white, and born in 1893 -- the year that Larsen later appropriated as her own birth date. Larsen spent her early years in a largely immigrant and mixed-race neighborhood, but in 1907, the family moved to an entirely white neighborhood; probably not coincidentally, 1907 was the year that Larsen was sent to Fisk University, an all-black school in Tennessee.

When Peter Larson moved his family to the 143 West 70th Place address in 1907, he changed the spelling of his surname to "Larsen" and "virtually disappeared into Chicago's white West Side" (Davis, 43). At that time he was employed as a conductor on the city's railway system; a job reserved for white men. Davis believes that he altered his identity, and very possibly concealed his race, in order to move up in social class. Davis writes:

Yet by means of work, thrift, and opportunity, Peter Larson/Larsen assimilated into the ranks of the lower-middle class of whites, and with him he took his wife, now "Marie" rather than "Mary," and daughter Anna. He did not, however, move his daughter
Nellie upward socially with him or affirm her place within the family group. Her skin color precluded assimilation. She entered young adulthood futureless in his world and threatening to it. (49)

The immigrant dream of a socially fluid society was true only up to a point; it stopped at race.

Although Larsen may indeed have benefited from her obvious white ancestry -- and certainly she emphasized and utilized her relatively white looks and European background in order to establish herself within the ranks of the black bourgeoisie -- she must have suffered even more powerfully from not being white "enough."

Like all blacks living in a racist society, Larsen had to contend with discrimination; unlike most blacks, at least those belonging to the social class to which she aspired, Larsen did not benefit from the safe haven of family. Larsen's precise relationship to her family during her childhood years is not known, although Davis was able to uncover a few clues. For some reason, Larsen was not enrolled in school until she was almost ten -- about three years later than the norm. Davis believes that she spent at least one of those school-age years as a "child inmate" of the Erring Woman's Refuge for Reform (29).
This is one of the two "holes" in Larsen's life; gaps in which she disappears from all censuses and records of public life. The other "hole" is a four-year period beginning in 1908, when she was withdrawn from Fisk by her mother, "Marie Larsen."

The emotional rejection which Larsen seemingly experienced during her childhood became a more overt rejection by Larsen's late adolescence. Two facts about Larsen's adult relationship with her family are known: first, in the 1910 Illinois census, Marie Larsen "claimed to have given birth only once and that she had one living child" (36), Anna Larsen; and second, when Anna Larsen inherited Nella Larsen's estate after the latter's death, Anna claimed, "Why I didn't know that I had a sister" (448). In other words, Larsen's family completely denied her existence, even in situations where they had nothing to lose by acknowledging her.

We have no way of truly assessing the impact of familial rejection on Larsen's psyche. Yet what could be more violent, more injurious, to the self than being denied by one's own mother, apparently on the basis of skin color? According to Davis, "Despite the evidence of her own formative years, one part of Larsen's being insisted on denying suffering caused by racist practices" (12). If denial was one defensive, self-protective move, then Larsen's rewriting of her past and other forms of "self-fashioning" were another. Certainly Larsen's
fiction provides more clues by testifying to the difficulty of creating a positive identity out of a vacuum. Race further problematizes identity formation by subjecting it to a circular logic which is relentlessly negative. In a society where blackness is negatively defined, Helga Crane (or Nella Larsen, for that matter) is never allowed to differentiate herself from her own blackness.

Race seemingly makes a mockery of the idea that there can be an objective aesthetic judgment about human beauty. Terry Eagleton observes that "Without some standard of objectivity, the subject is reduced to conferring value upon itself, in what is at once the defiant boast of the modern ('I take value from myself alone!') and its hollow cry of anguish ('I am so lonely in this universe!')" (71). Eagleton's formulation eloquently expresses Nella Larsen's dilemma. Denied approval of her own worth by her family, Larsen seeks validation elsewhere. Unfortunately, as her fiction will reveal, she recreates her own quandary.

The opening paragraphs of Quicksand, the reader's introduction to Helga Crane, are meant to be a private moment (which is nonetheless voyeuristically shared with the reader). This contradiction hints at Helga's (and presumably, Larsen's) predicament: ultimately, Helga needs the appreciation of others in order to value herself. Nella Larsen immediately establishes her particular aesthetic interests with a richly detailed and evocative description of Helga
Crane. Helga is alone, enclosed in her small room with its Oriental furnishings; thus, both room and text become an elaborate frame through which to peruse and consider Helga:

An observer would have thought her well fitted to that framing of light and shade. A slight girl of twenty-two years, with narrow, sloping shoulders and delicate, but well-turned, arms and legs, she had, none the less, an air of radiant, careless health. In vivid green and gold negligee and glistening brocaded mules, deep sunk in the big high-backed chair, against whose dark tapestry her sharply cut face, with skin like yellow stain, was distinctly outlined, she was—to used a hackneyed word—attractive. (2)

Larsen continues to detail Helga's face for another paragraph, noting her "sensitive and sensuous lips" with their "slight questioning petulance and a tiny dissatisfied droop" and her "curly blue-black hair" which is "wayward" and "falling unrestrained about her face and on to her shoulders" (2). The description is minutely particular and overtly erotic; if read out of context, one might assume that Helga is an elegant prostitute, waiting for the evening's client. I offer this musing in order to emphasize that Helga's appearance seems
calculated to please, even stimulate; yet, alone in the "small oasis" (1) she has created, Helga's appearance is meant only to please herself. She alone derives pleasure from the beauty she has cultivated; she, and the voyeuristic gaze of the reader.

In her essay, "When Privilege Is No Protection: The Woman Artist in Quicksand and The House of Mirth," Linda Dittmar writes that Helga's life, like Lily Bart's, "register[s] an aesthetic sensibility and practice" (141). She suggests that these women take part in an "ornamental and performing" art:

For them, bodies, clothes, possessions, and even chance locale are the raw materials of fantasy; their sense of color, texture, and line yields arrangements that make those who view them (and their own self-viewing) resonate to implied narratives of pleasure and transcendence...Encoding themselves through dress, motion, prose, and set, they turn life itself into a heightened aesthetic production, with all the symbolic and sensory resonance associated with such performance. They are indeed artists—active participants in the production of cultural scripts. (141)
At best, Helga's aesthetic styling parallels the psychological state of her character and augments the narrative with its symbolism. One of Larsen's most effective scenes involving female clothing is Helga's personal "bon voyage" to Harlem -- ostensibly the occasion of her roommate Anne Grey's return. Knowing that everyone else would wear white, because of the hot weather, Helga stresses her own difference and uniqueness by choosing a "cobwebby black net touched with orange" (56).

On one hand, the outfit expresses Helga's sense of beauty, even artistry -- a scene earlier in the novel mentions that "one of the loveliest sights Helga had ever seen had been a sooty black girl decked out in a flaming orange dress" (18). On the other, it expresses the dynamics of Helga's sexual identity. Although she considers the dress "too decollete" and "too outré" (56), she seems determined to test, even flaunt, the erotic implications of her choice. Simultaneously, the dress manages to convey an impression of sexual entrapment --"cobwebby"-- that Helga associates with her own beauty and sexuality and "the air of something about to fly" (56). Over and over again, we see Helga hovering near her own desires, only to retreat. Of course, Helga is about to "fly" (flee) to Denmark, and she enjoys this private joke. Yet another ironic significance of her dress choice is its color, black, as Helga is about to abandon black Harlem for white Denmark.
Ostensibly assenting to the cultural dictum that the black female body is meant for someone else’s pleasure, rather than one's own, Helga reacts to sexual rejection by what will amount to throwing her body away in terms of the narrative. Indeed, it is not so much her body as the self which she had used her body to symbolize; but then Helga had never really been able to differentiate between the two. Before debasing her body, Helga adorns it. "Distracted, agitated, incapable of containing herself, she tore open drawers and closets trying desperately to take some interest in the selection of her apparel" (emphasis added, 110). Although Helga’s interest in clothing at this juncture seems like one of the more perverse narrative moments, in this scene seemingly trivial details are loaded with symbolism. Despite the fact that a storm is raging outside, Helga chooses "foolish little satin shoes" which are soon "sopping wet" (110) -- obviously an inadequate defense for both the weather and her fragile ego -- and a "clinging red dress" (112). In this outfit, she makes her way to a religious revival where she is immediately taken to be a "scarlet 'oman," "a pore los' Jezebel" (112). It is a role for which she has dressed herself.

Although Dittmar questions the ultimate content of these "cultural scripts" -- "illusion-production that caters to male voyeurism" (145), "the power she derives from such art rests on her willingness to collude with her own apparent objectification" (143) -- she does not question the actual value of this aesthetic
endeavor in terms of the heroine's life. Yet if the aesthetic production carried out on her own body does not ultimately free Helga, even in terms of her own sexual pleasure, much less in terms of the society which attempts to negatively define her, to what purpose is it?

The "heightened aesthetic production" of Larsen's texts surely intend more than titillation, whether its heroine's or its reader's. Indeed, many of the seemingly gratuitous, even excessive, textual details have symbolic content (in highly variable degrees of obviousness). Although some of the symbolism Larsen employs has a sort of common cultural value -- for instance, a red dress carries connotations of sexual danger -- other details derive their meaning from Larsen's narrative. Rather than detract or distract from Larsen's treatment of race and gender, her details augment and to some extent provide their own counter-narrative.

For instance, returning to the initial framing moment of Helga, although Larsen's narrative dwells on the fact that Helga is a mulatto, Larsen's textual details elaborately evade such categories. Although "mulattoness" was a real enough cultural reality in Larsen's time, she attacks that construct through aesthetic detail. In "The Aesthetics of Race and Gender in Nella Larsen's Quicksand," Ann E. Hostetler writes:
In *Quicksand* the emphasis on color advances a thematics of race…

Her (Helga's) hatred for 'the race problem' barely masks the agony of facing color as division rather than fruitful multiplicity.

Through her love of color Helga attempts to create a spectrum rather than an opposition, a palette that will unify her life rather than leave it divided. (35)

Color is indeed glorified in a scene which takes place in a Harlem nightclub and marks the narrative highpoint of Helga's feeling of union with the "lovable, dark hordes" (95). Rather than being divided from each other and from her by gradations of skin color, these citizens of Harlem who are "sooty black, shiny black, taupe, mahogany, bronze, copper, gold, orange, yellow, peach, ivory, pinky white, pastry white" are united in one "swirling mass" (59). The visual description manages to emphasize sameness and difference without privileging one -- or one color -- over the other. Also, it refutes the notion of "blackness" as some simple categorization.

"Black" as a description and designation can be a black hole, absorbing all other signs of individualism. Larsen's description of the many varieties of blackness, most of them not black at all, point to the inaccuracy and inadequacy of that racial designation. "Black" and "mulatto" and "white" all have equal
value in this color spectrum, which is decidedly not hierarchical. Indeed, by reducing race to color Larsen mocks the idea that racial judgments may be made on the basis of skin color. Is yellow better than blue or red?

One of the problems associated with using "black" as a racial designation is the negative aesthetic connotations. In "Black Aesthetics," Aloysius M. Lugira writes that "by exotic concepts of aesthetics, Black is a symbol of death and of the underworld" (52). Lugira is writing from an African perspective; for him, Western aesthetics -- those that have linked black with evil -- are "exotic."

The word "exotic" immediately destabilizes, defamiliarizes; it exposes meaning for what it is: not something inherent, but something ascribed.

Larsen invents an "anti-missile missile;"\(^1\) through aesthetic detail, she attempts to reascribe blackness. For instance, Helga's skin is not "black," it is "yellow satin" (2). It is more than a color; it is a texture, too -- one that is prized, valuable. By associating "blackness" with prized Western commodities, Larsen appropriates the commodity's value for her own enhancement. "Diverse colored faces" are the colors of precious metals and woods: "ebony, bronze and gold" (4), or elsewhere, "gleaming bronze, gold, and copper" (51).

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\(^1\) Lugira's paper was taken from a Colloquium on Black Aesthetics held at the University of Nairobi in 1971. The introduction to this collection, written by Andrew Gurr and Pio Zipimia, describes the infiltration of Western aesthetics in African culture as "cultural missiles." The authors ask: "Is it not in order for the blacks to invent cultural missiles, and anti-missile missiles too, as a measure of self-defense?" (3).
Unfortunately, there are drawbacks to this strategy. According to Dittmar, "women's very potential for self-definition ends up betraying them... [if] they allow their art to be absorbed into patriarchal agendas that valorize material consumption and an aesthetic of rareness" (141). Clare is admired and noticed, as Irene herself says, "for her decorative qualities" (216), the result being that Clare seems to be little more than a precious object decorating the text. She is repeatedly described as "golden": "Clare, exquisite, golden, fragrant, flaunting, in a stately gown of shining black taffeta, whose long, full skirt lay in graceful folds about her slim golden feet" (203); "Clare fair and golden, like a sunlit day" (205); "She was wearing a superlatively simple cinnamon-brown frock which brought out all her vivid beauty, and a little golden bowl of a hat" (220); "One moment Clare had been there, a vital glowing thing, like a flame of red and gold. The next she was gone" (239).

Ultimately Clare's "golden" beauty does not redefine or redeem blackness; rather, it supports an aesthetics which suggests that the whiter the skin, the more beautiful. As Davis writes, "The logical extension of her [Irene's] black bourgeois life-style and ideology, which Larsen does not entirely condemn although she satirizes it, concludes in an elevation of Clare's whiteness -- blond, pale, ivory -- to the level of icon" (326). However, to be fair to Larsen, her portrayals -- no matter how seemingly superficial -- are never
straightforward or uncomplicated. As a classic unreliable narrator, Irene's valuation of Clare is suspect. An irony of Larsen's text is that while embodying whiteness, Clare embraces blackness. Indeed, bell hooks suggests that Clare's "desire" for "blackness" -- "so threatening, so serious a breach in the fabric of the social order" (9) -- is the reason she is eliminated from the text.

Helga Crane's fate has a similar textual irony to it. Helga was sacrificed by her family in favor of economic prosperity, yet she consistently values material objects above people. For instance, Helga's attempts to confer value upon herself depend almost on entirely on adorning herself with beautiful clothes and thereby making herself into a precious object. This reliance on the very aesthetic standards of beauty which lead to her initial rejection tragically backfires. The envy her physical appearance elicits may temporarily boost her self-esteem, but ultimately only furthers her sense of alienation. In fact, Larsen suggests that Helga's methods for accreting value lead directly to her loneliness:

She was herself unconscious of that faint hint of offishness which hung about her and repelled advances, an arrogance that stirred in people a peculiar irritation. They noticed her, admired her clothes, but that was all, for the self-sufficient
uninterested manner adopted instinctively as a
protective measure for her acute sensitiveness, in her
child days, still clung to her. (34)

Helga's loneliness leads to fears about her worthlessness, yet her attempts
to counteract the feeling of worthlessness only renew the vicious cycle. While at
Naxos, she acknowledges that her "craving," her "urge for beauty" had "helped
to bring her into disfavor at Naxos" -- "pride" and "vanity" her detractors called
it (6). Yet the ending of the novel reveals that Helga still has not fully realized
the extent to which she uses her commodified body as a barrier between herself
and the rest of the world.

Having been failed by an aesthetics of beauty, Helga tries the "anti-
aesthetic" of those same standards. She deliberately embraces religion, which is
described as "this anaesthetic satisfaction for her senses" (118), and the
grotesque "rattish yellow man" (118) who becomes her husband. In other
words, she embraces numbness, coarseness, ugliness -- the antithesis of the
aesthetics to which she had previously subscribed. Mentally and physically
destroyed by incessant child-bearing, Helga is trapped in bed and within her own
bodily pain. Compare the first description of Helga's body with this one:
Reluctantly he went from the room with a last look at Helga, who was lying on her back with one frail, pale hand under her small head, her curly black hair scattered loose on the pillow. She regarded him from behind dropped lids. The day was hot, her breasts were covered only by a nightgown of filmy crepe, a relic of prematrimonial days, which had slipped from one carved shoulder. He flinched. Helga's petulant lip curled, for she well knew that this fresh reminder of her desirability was like the flick of a whip. (129)

There are many parallels between the two scenes; again, the image is one of carefully arranged beauty and seduction. Perhaps the only discernible difference is the presence of the male gaze, but it is a potent difference. Although Helga seems to hold all the power ("flick of the whip") because of her loveliness, her desirability, the impression is an ironic one. The "whip" calls to mind a sadomasochistic relationship, but who is the tormentor and who the tormented? In reality, this despised husband whose fingernails are always dirty and whose fat body smells of stale sweat -- an outrage to the aesthetic beauty and
refinement associated with Helga -- does have, and has had, free access to her body.

Yet what strikes me about this scene is how little Helga's relationship to her body has changed. Despite having undergone a series of pregnancies, she still seems to view her body primarily as a beautiful object -- consider, for example, the word "carved." Perhaps her clothing has become less of a barrier -- the crepe of her nightgown is "filmy" -- but it nonetheless simultaneously accentuates her "desirability" while withholding any actual pleasure. . . most importantly, from herself.

In "The Quicksands of the Self: Nella Larsen and Heinz Kohut," Barbara Johnson presents Kohut's theory of "self-psychology" as a way of understanding Helga Crane's self-defeating movement through the text -- her "periods of heightened vitality and contentment. . . followed by a renewed sense of depletion" (189). For Kohut, the self is an "image" or "representation" formed by "empathic mirroring;" "the self is the internalization of the gaze of the other" (189). Johnson explains:

If the child is not appropriately mirrored, is not given the message, What you are is valuable. . . then the
grandiose self (I am perfect) and the desire to merge
with the idealized selfobject do not fade away but become split off and retain their archaic demands.

Rather than being progressively reality-tested and integrated, they keep the **unfulfilled hunger for validation intact**, like an open wound. (emphasis added, 189)

If the concept of "mirroring" is literalized then the reflected image Helga sees is a jarring one. She cannot "see" herself in her white mother. Seeing her mother first, the sight of her own self is strange and she is estranged from herself. Indeed, Helga is taught to identify against herself, to see herself with others' eyes: "under the stinging hurt she understood and sympathized. . . . she saw herself for an obscene sore in all their lives, at all costs to be hidden" (emphasis added, 29).

As Kohut's theory would suggest, Helga is continually associated with fragmentation, incompleteness, and emptiness. The idea that she suffers from "a lack somewhere" (7) is reiterated throughout Larsen's text. She looks for approval everywhere, but it is never substantial enough to fill up her emptiness. Throughout the text, Helga asks of herself:
But just what did she want? Barring a desire for material security, gracious ways of living, a profusion of lovely clothes, and a goodly share of envious admiration, Helga Crane didn't know, couldn't tell. But there was, she knew, something else. (11)

Significantly, "love" is missing from Helga's list. Helga achieves all of the "things" she desires in Denmark, yet it does not satisfy her. Again, there is a textual repetition: "Always she had wanted...the things which money could give, leisure, attention, beautiful surroundings. Things. Things. Things" (67). By the end of the novel, Helga is satiated by "things" -- "All I've ever had in my life has been things" (116) -- and still searching for something. No matter how many "things" she accumulates, she cannot fill up the empty space of her emotional deprivation.

Helga's first emotional relationships, specifically the one with her mother, who is described as "sad, cold, and -- yes, remote" (23), only confirm that Helga is dispensable, the antithesis of valuable. No amount of valuable "things," whether draped over her body or otherwise propping her up, can heal the damage of this initial assessment. Helga's relationship to her own body -- expressed almost parodically by her relationship to her clothing -- becomes one
of distortion and extreme alienation. She oscillates between viewing herself as a "luxury item" and "garbage"; as Barbara Johnson notes, "what luxury and garbage have in common is that each is a form of excess with respect to an economy of use or need" (196).

Helga's inclination to regard herself as a "status object" is echoed in the text itself. Larsen's textual details consistently align themselves with the sensual/material opposed to, and at the sacrifice of, the emotional/psychological.

Eda Lou Walton, who reviewed Quicksand for the July 1928 issue of Opportunity magazine, criticized Larsen for writing "too carefully of the objective evidences of culture and too carelessly of the refinement within the woman herself." In Walton's judgment, "the elaborateness of uninteresting detail" functioned merely "to assure us that her Helga is cultured and modern" (quoted from Davis, 280).

For me, Larsen's relationship with the sensuous surface of things -- materialism, consumerism, and by extension, commodification -- is animated by comments made by Veronica Webb, a contemporary model/writer/"not just a clotheshorse but a guru of all that is hip." Webb says of herself: "I'm a consumer. Why spend money on therapy like everyone else in New York? I'd rather spend a hundred bucks at Barneys" (quoted in British Elle magazine, December 1994, 74). Larsen's work is filled with examples of this
"(post)modern" notion that emotional problems can be solved or eased by a hefty dose of consumerism.

Near the end of *Passing*, one of Irene's friends notices her emotional distress and advises her: "Buy yourself an expensive new frock, child. It always helps. Any time this child gets the blues, it means money out of Dave's pocket" (219). Indeed, in an earlier scene of the novel Irene does just that. After she and her husband Brian quarrel about their son, (specifically, about the son's learning about sex from other kids at school), Irene suddenly decides that she needs a new dress and abruptly departs in order to go shopping. In *Quicksand*, when Helga feels distressed by loneliness and the rejection of an employment application she goes shopping. Despite her dwindling funds, she buys "a book and a tapestry purse, things she wanted, but did not need and certainly could not afford" (32).

Larsen consistently jettisons emotional anxiety with material things. Helga's ritualistic retreat into her room at Naxos -- filled with rare books, silky clothes, and exotic "objet d'art" -- is her way of forgetting the problems of the day and isolating herself from the emotional discomfort of social interaction. In a later scene -- her reunion with her aunt in Denmark -- Helga is described as assessing her aunt's clothing, even as she fears her reception with her mother's family. "And, even in the fervent gladness of her relief, Helga took in the
carelessly trailing purple scarf and correct black hat that completed the
perfection of her aunt's costume, and had time to feel herself a little shabbily
dressed" (65).

Helga feels closest to people when they can share the same "things." The
substance of her emotional connections is materialistic. For instance, Helga's
affection for Anne Grey can largely be attributed to their mutual aesthetic tastes
and appreciation for clothes and furnishings. Helga's loneliness in Chicago is
assuaged by joining the "moving multi-colored crowd" (30); when shopping, she
is at least sharing a consumer experience with other people. And the alienation
Helga suffers from in the rural Southern communities is largely due to a
different standard of aesthetics. Rather than being admired for her sophisticated
clothes and manners -- to some extent Helga's standard for a positive human
relationship -- she is considered to be "a poor thing without style" (119).

During the tea-party at which Irene suspects that her husband is having an
affair with Clare, (the very occasion she is counseled to buy a new dress in order
to lift her depression), she seems unusually obsessed with clothing. She greets
her friend Felise with a "mock" complaint: "Really your clothes are the despair
of half the women in Harlem" (219). She queries the label of Felise's dress --
"Worth or Lanvin?" (219). Her question calls attention to her own knowledge
of French couture; by extension she shares an "artistic" appreciation of this rare
commodity with Felise. Irene martial the only forces she knows: against the
power of Clare's beauty she asserts her own sophisticated consumerism.

Irene and Clare do not exchange words or even meaningful looks at this
tea-party show-down. Their encounter is limited to Irene's detailed appreciation
of Clare's appearance and acknowledgment that Clare had never looked better.
Throughout the novel, Irene's disapproval of Clare is characterized by her belief
that the latter is too "having" -- an unusual choice of words with its connotation
of "owning" too much. Davis describes Clare as a "screen upon which Irene's
psyche is made visible" (323); appropriately, then, Irene attributes her own
marked acquisitiveness to Clare. Irene notes that "around her [Clare's] neck
hung a string of amber beads that would easily have made six or eight like one
Irene owned" (220). Irene's anger at Clare's perceived appropriation of Brian
seems rooted in the idea that Clare already has too much -- or, more than Irene.

As the example of Irene's characterization would suggest, it is difficult to
deconstruct Larsen's use of aesthetic detail because she fervently participates in,
and thus upholds, the aesthetics she critiques. According to Davis, "Larsen
believed -- paradoxically, given her own background -- that surfaces told the
whole story of a person's life" (231). Like her characters, Larsen "had an
attraction to aesthetics in personal appearance, particularly wearing beautiful
fabrics and fashionable clothing" (Davis, 104). Although she had a sensual
response to beautiful clothing, it also served as a kind of self-defense. Drawing from the example of her characterizations, it seems that Larsen believed that clothing could almost literally increase one's personal value.

Considering the emotional experience of her childhood, it is perhaps understandable that Larsen turned from people to things for verification of her identity. To return to the example of Veronica Webb -- a light-black woman who describes her skin color as "cafe au lait" -- "self-fashioning" is an American tradition. Like Larsen, Webb uses clothing to present a certain image of herself. Yet it is a measure of the values of our contemporary society, with its devotion to consumerism, that Webb speaks so glibly of the plastic and disposable qualities of her own identity. "'I haven't decided on my look for this (season) yet,' says Webb, entirely seriously, decorating herself being as important as decorating her apartment" (74). Elsewhere, Webb describes her apartment as a sort of self-contained identity -- "a black urban hip-hop playhouse" (72). Webb announces that a future move will also be an exchange of personal identity: "When I move, I'll be ready to have a black bourgeois apartment" (74).

While Larsen played up her "whiteness" in order to increase her social and economic opportunities, Webb constantly refers to her "blackness." At least within the world of fashion, Webb is famous for being the first black model to get a lucrative contract representing a cosmetics company. However, I question
how much the aesthetics of beauty, allied to consumerism in the selling of 
cosmetics, have actually changed in our society. Veronica Webb has light skin, 
Anglo features, and long straight hair. The real difference between Nella Larsen 
and Veronica Webb -- and the measure of how American society has actually 
changed -- is the attitude towards styling a new identity. For both, it is a 
"business" -- Davis writes that Larsen considered her writing to be a "product" 
(381). Yet Larsen was covert about her own "self-fashioning," while for Webb, 
self-fashioning is the point.

Larsen's writing reminds me of a line from T. S. Eliot's "The Waste 
Land": "These fragments I have shored against my ruins" (line 431). The 
emotional and physical rejection experienced by Larsen in her most primary and 
formative relationships suggests that, for her, building an identity was akin to 
building on sand. Although Larsen may not have regarded her writing as a way 
to work out the problems of her psyche, it nonetheless shows an awareness and 
perceptiveness that was apparently missing in her life. Certainly her writing 
reflects her preference for things opposed to people; she was clearly more 
comfortable with surfaces than interiors. Yet the aesthetic details which enabled 
her to distance herself from the emotional aspects of her work also act as a code 
from which we can decipher her highly conflicted views on race, gender, and 
sexuality.
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