

The Party as Rejected Heterotopia: The Protagonist Gaze in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and
Passing

Nella Larsen's works are laced with parties. From the Negro Welfare League dance and Felise's Christmas party in *Passing* to long nights in Amsterdam and New York parties in *Quicksand*, Larsen does not hesitate to put her characters in this most social of situations. In the introduction to *The Modernist Party*, Kate McLoughlin argues the party functions as a way to convey "conflict, awkwardness and embarrassment" and "a sense of alienation" all of which could "be induced by the sheer banality of party interaction" (6). These scenes, ripe with conflict and a plethora of characters, become spaces in which race, gender, wealth, and class function differently than in the rest of the novel. For Larsen, these spaces are prime for wrestling with ideas of race and class and, specifically, the place of the multi-racial female in modern literature as defined not by man, but by other multi-racial females. Through the use of party scenes and the relationships between the protagonist of each work and characters such as Clare Kendry in *Passing* and Audrey Denney in *Quicksand*, Larsen pushes against Margo Crawford's¹ idea of the interracial party as simply "modernist primitivism," and instead suggests that these spaces have the *potential* to act as insurgent² spaces. These spaces are at once held captive by and freed from racial, social, and economic bonds and provide a space for black/multi-racial female agency. Larsen, concerned with the hypocrisy of performing identity but also the desire for self-invention, attempts to remedy the dichotomy between social obligation and personal freedom. Echoing Bakhtin's *carnavalesque*, Larsen attempts to create a space where "opposites come together, look at one another, are reflected in one another, know and understand one another" (Bakhtin 176). Yet, in a shift away from Crawford's "white gaze", she instead employs what I

¹ From *The Modernist Party*, "The Interracial Party of Modernist Primitivism and the Black 'After-Party'"

² Here looking at McKittrick's definition of "insurgent spaces" in *Demonic Grounds* (2006)

will be calling the “protagonist gaze” or the “internal gaze.” The space of the party in Larsen’s work acts as Foucault’s *heterotopia*, a space where black/multi-racial female agency is challenged and recognized, but remains a temporary space nonetheless due to the ever-present protagonist gaze. Applying Katherine McKittrick’s understanding of demonic grounds to a social space where one refuses to succumb to social obligation, Larsen’s parties serve as a place of unknowability and uncertainty, where characters can express themselves in ways not otherwise possible. Yet, Larsen’s protagonists, like those outside of McKittrick’s “uninhabitable” lands, cannot make sense of the openness and freedom allowed to these women and thus must *domesticate* them — Irene “kills” Clare and Helga resists “the jungle,” — in order to survive outside the party. In this way, the party provides a glimpse at black/multi-racial female agency that remains unattainable to Larsen’s protagonists as they struggle to accept or escape their physical bodies.

I. The Party as Uninhabitable *Heterotopia*

By nature, parties are temporary spaces. They last for a single evening or a brief afternoon. They function as a literary device reflective of real-life desires to escape the monotony of day-to-day life. In the introduction to her book *A Curious Invitation: The Forty Greatest Parties in Fiction*, Suzette Field explains “parties, being occasions where people are at their most ostentatious, provide writers with the perfect vehicle for a spot of social satire: the ostentatiousness and vulgarity of nouveau riche hosts...; the boorishness of guests...; the false sophistication of food” (xiv). Larsen’s parties are no exception to occasions of social, cultural, and political critique. In his book, *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret*, Shane Vogel explores both the literary and the social role of the Harlem cabaret in the era of the “New Negro.” He claims writers such as Larsen

employed the scene of the cabaret to push against essentialist notions of racial uplift that encouraged “a way to regulate such sexualities and reinforce the color line... a way to compose taxonomies and classifications of deviance that could be deployed elsewhere in the management of racially and sexually non-normative spaces and practices” (10). This mode of exploration naturally focused on the female body in an attempt to assert what Foucault defines as a “normalizing judgement” through which to view the respectability of the black/multi-racial female body. Vogel asserts that, “in early-twentieth-century America, a normalizing judgement of racial respectability established norms of familial organization, urban recreation, sexual and gender comportment, and capitalist productivity” (11).

Naturally, Michael Foucault’s idea of *heterotopia*, a space that exists only temporarily as an upset or a mirror of the dominant ideology of the world, seems to describe these parties well. As Foucault’s “normalizing judgement” is formed, its mirror has the potential to form opposite it. The proliferation of racial uplift in the Harlem Renaissance resulted in a “normalizing judgement” that privileged performances of respectability seemingly in direct contrast to the perceived notions of the cabaret as an amalgamation of “underworld practices and deviant subjectivities” (Vogel 11). In novels concerned with race, gender, and class in the Harlem Renaissance, the heterotopic space presumably provided by the party is one of white/black equality and co-existence. Yet, Larsen’s use of the party as a heterotopia rejects the standard ideas of race as white/black and instead focuses on the social expectations and personal freedoms of black/multi-racial females. For Larsen, the party/cabaret is not a spectacle, but a *space* ripe for explorations and explanations of black/multi-racial female sexuality and identity.

By focusing on multi-racial female characters such as Helga and Irene, and contrasting them with characters such as Audrey and Clare, Larsen suggests the blurred line between black

and multi-racial females and the desire to escape categorization is perhaps more dangerous than the racialization of black/multi-racial females by white persons in traditional “tragic mulatta” narratives. Though Larsen’s *Quicksand* and *Passing* are often identified as a part of the tragic mulatta genre, Vogel distinctly points to the ways in which this categorization morphs the multi-racial characters of Larsen’s novels “into a singular sexual and racial threat” (77). For Irene, in *Passing*, Clare threatens both her understanding of her own identity and her sexual relationship with Brian. Similarly, in *Quicksand*, Anne’s disapproval of Audrey and the ways in which she navigates the boundaries of race is interlaced with sexual jealousy as she remarks, “if there is any desirable man about, trust her to attach to him” (55). In both instances, the women of the cabaret, the “tragic mulatta”s, the black/multi-racial women are relegated to the place of threat by the protagonists (and adjacent characters, i.e. Anne) for fear of racial and sexual displacement. The party, thus primed as a heterotopic space for the racial divide of black and white, is complicated by the protagonists’ relationships with sexual interracial mingling situated in the body of the black/multi-racial female.

Similar to Foucault’s idea of heterotopia, Kathering McKittrick introduces her concept of “insurgent spaces”, in her chapter “Demonic Grounds: Sylvia Wynter.” McKittrick expands on Wynter’s concept of demonic grounds in a conversation with the “uninhabitable” lands of black geography. I want to use McKittrick’s understanding of uninhabitable lands to suggest that whole the parties in Larsen’s fictions are heterotopic spaces, they present themselves as uninhabitable heterotopias. Focusing primarily on the creation of Man’s geography (dominant geography) and the way in which this geography erases the place of the black, female population, McKittrick’s examination is largely feminist and geographic in its approach. She explores space and place and its relationship to the black female body concluding that geography is not fixed nor is it fully

developed and thus we must make room for the black female body in geographic history. Through the protagonist gaze, the characters of Irene and Helga constantly reject the place of the party and its inherent heterotopic qualities. If Irene and Helga are Man, Clare and Audrey represent the black female geographies. These geographies threaten Man's way of thinking in and of the world and thus result in the attempt to *domesticate* them. Just as Helga rejects the jungle and settles in rural Alabama, Irene kills Clare in an attempt to retain the dominant geography, in this case, to prevent the further unraveling of each of their respective identities. In this way, Larsen's parties, though endowed with potentiality, remain outside of the heterotopic space for her protagonists.

II. The Interracial Parties of Larsen's Fictions and the Protagonist Gaze

I want to start by further identifying the notion of the protagonist gaze. Like the "white gaze" described by Toni Morrison as "the little white man that sits on your shoulder and checks out everything you do or say,"³ Larsen's protagonist gaze is the "little mutli-racial female" that attempts to come to terms with race not as diametrically opposed notions of white/black but as "a spectrum rather than an opposition, a palette that will unify her life rather than leave it divided" (Hostetler 34). This gaze is present in each of Larsen's multi-racial protagonists and thus renders every party in Larsen's fictions *Passing* and *Quicksand* interracial.

Though all parties are interracial in nature, the host of the party determines the way in which the space operates. Crawford's exploration of modernist primitivism hinges on the 'interracial' party as a party hosted by white peoples. In a "playful attempt to escape white privilege," the party hosted by white individuals "gained a performative space that had the shape

³ Toni Morrison, *Toni Morrison :The Pieces I Am* (Documentary, 2019)

of an interracial party” (Crawford 166). Thinking specifically of the term “interracial” as a defining characteristic of these parties, the term implies *inclusion*. While white hosts often invited black guests, these guests were not *included* in the party. Rather, they were a source of spectacle, something to be gawked at. Crawford’s idea of the interracial party situates itself notably in both *Quicksand* and *Passing*. In *Quicksand*, the party in Copenhagen serves as an example of Crawford’s modernist primitivism as demonstrated through the interracial party. Helga is largely a prop or piece of art meant to be examined. As she prepares herself for the party, she remarks she “felt nothing so much as some new and strange species of pet dog being proudly exhibited” (64). As Danes parade through the party, she notes their politeness while also addressing their “massed curiosity and interest” so delicately shrouded by genial interaction (64). Dressed in the emerald gown her aunt had made especially for the occasion, Helga notes “no other woman in the stately pale blue room was so greatly exposed” (65). As a spectacle based on the color of her skin, she must not only have the most skin exposed, but her lack of covering must also render her exotic and different from the other females in attendance. Like the portrait Axel Olsen paints of Helga later in the novel, Helga operates within the space of the ‘interracial’ party as a piece of art. Her function within the party is limited. Though she moves through the space physically, she has no lasting effect on the space itself. The Danish females feel “no need for jealousy” asserting that she is *not* “one of them” and thus does not count as a participant in the party. Though the party is thrown, presumably, to welcome her to Denmark, the agenda is not strictly that of interracial mingling, but rather in “advancing the social fortunes of the Dahls of Copenhagen” through her “exoticness” (63). Though Helga exists in the space of the interracial party, she is relegated to “a curiosity, a stunt, at which people came and gazed” (66). She is

denied any active participation in the party, but instead used as the “escape” from white privilege the Danes continue to participate in under the guise of an interracial party.

In *Passing*, the interracial party looks a bit different. The Negro Welfare League dance, a dance like that of the NAACP dances of the period, is the most obviously interracial party scene in Larsen’s fiction. Held as a fundraising event by Irene, the party is a place where white people can come “merely to enjoy themselves and come to collect material with which they hope to capitalize on the Negro vogue” (Wall 128). Cheryl Wall’s assessment of the party as a space for white spectators to observe the black body accurately upholds Crawford’s idea of the interracial party as practicing modernist primitivism. Yet, though it is seemingly a place for white people to gaze upon the black body, Wall argues that the act of intermingling at the party allows for the opposite as well. Black bodies have the capability to gaze on the white body. Not only this, but the party is hosted by black bodies. Despite this, as I will later discuss in my exploration of this scene at length, the space of the Negro Welfare League dance is still mediated by the white gaze. As Wentworth attempts to “race” Clare, both Irene and Wentworth engaged in a sort of racism that Crawford defines as “darkness that seduced the modernist primitivists... a darkness that was most appealing when it was collected, rearranged, and interpreted through the white modernist lens” (166). As Irene watches Clare dancing back and forth across the color-line, she begins to embody the white “modernist primitivism” that defined white interpretations of black night-life.

It should be noted that Crawford’s idea of “modernist primitivism” and the party are not limited to interracial parties alone. In fact, in the final scene of *Passing*, Clare and Irene are headed to a private, race-singular party at Felise’s for Christmas. Here, though the party is not interracial in the most basic form, Irene’s “gaze” or the protagonist’s gaze, functions in the party scene as the white gaze. Her disapproval of Clare for performing her identity, and her belief that

Clare's identity is biological, pushes Irene to attack Clare and shut down her ability to acquire personal freedom from racialized society. In other words, Irene's actions *mimic* what Crawford identifies as the modern primitivist sentiment. This imitation of the protagonist gaze as the white gaze is also accurately depicted by Helga Crane's experience in New York at Anne's after-party. Despite, once again, being a party by and for black peoples, the white gaze is still present in the scene, as Crawford demonstrates, "In the 'jungle creature' party scene in *Quicksand*, the release that dance produces is the release produced when a group of black people dance without the presence of a white gaze. Nonetheless, when the music ends, Helga feels the power of the gaze that conflates black people dancing with 'jungle creatures'" (166). Helga, I argue, not only feels the gaze, but produces the gaze. It is through her own observations she rejects the idea of the 'jungle' by "cloaking herself in faint disgust" (54).

Despite a definite interest in race, Larsen's parties are also spaces in which to explore race alongside gender. In her article "Transgressive Tendencies or the Case for 'The Wrong Man,'" Yolanda M. Manora explores the party scenes of *Passing*, *Quicksand*, and Larsen's short story "The Wrong Man." Written under her pseudonym Allen Semi (Nella Imes) and published in January 1926 in *Young's Magazine*, "The Wrong Man" includes little to no conversation about race, though most likely due to the audience of the magazine. Focusing on a single evening, Julia Romley attends the party of a friend named Myra. While at the party, she sees a man she used to work for as a mistress. Ashamed of her work prior to her marriage, Julia attempts to erase that part of her life by confronting the man she believes is Ralph Tyler. One of Larsen's earliest published works, Larsen found other ways to address race within the text without referencing it specifically. Instead, she uses the double-life of her character Julia Romley (before Julia Hammond) to demonstrate the way in which the white view, here the bourgeois view, of the

protagonist complicates their relationship to their own identity as a lower-class woman. As Manora posits, “The Wrong Man,” though discredited by Larsen herself as “gimmick” fiction, serves as the beginning of “the trope of the party, dance, or festive ball as a space to explore the transgressive” (61). Time and time again, Larsen’s party works by creating a space ripe with potential for insurgency, but is instead thwarted by the protagonist gaze which renders these spaces uninhabitable for black/multiracial women. As I have now established, the scene of the party in literature has the potential to be a heterotopic space, yet, Larsen’s attachment to the protagonist gaze renders these spaces unattainable for her female protagonists. I have also asserted that all of Larsen’s parties are interracial parties for two reasons: first, her protagonists are, themselves, multi-racial, and second, and most important to my argument, she employs the protagonist gaze to complicate the relationship between black/multi-racial peoples rather than explore the obvious racial divide between black/white.

III. The Rejection of Heterotopic Spaces: Parties in *Passing* and *Quicksand*

Larsen’s work provides a plethora of examples of the party as an *attempted* heterotopic space. In this paper, I want to look specifically at the Negro Welfare League dance, Irene’s tea-party, and Felise’s Christmas party in *Passing* and Anne’s after-party and the subsequent party in New York after Helga’s return from Denmark in *Quicksand*. All of these parties exemplify the potentiality of the party as a space for Bakhtin’s *carnavalesque*, while at the same time rejecting the notion of the party as heterotopia through the protagonist gaze.

Before entering the scene of the party, it is important to discuss the role of two of its most prominent guests in their respective narratives: Audrey Denney and Clare Kendry. In both narratives, these characters act as “different model[s] of race and sexuality than that imagined by

the representational schemas of either the Negro vogue or uplift ideology” (Vogel 94). They are black/multi-racial females who challenge the prominent ideologies of the protagonists Helga and Irene. At first glance, it seems the relationships between Helga and Audrey and Irene and Clare are more different than they are similar. Helga never speaks to Audrey, but only watches her from afar. She admires her and her ability to push against the racial and sexual boundaries Helga herself struggles to escape from. Yet, according to Vogel, Helga also *rejects* Audrey out of fear.

Unable to reassure herself so easily that she is *not* Audrey Denney – that she is not, in other words, made up of the complex, messy, and socially unsanctioned racial and sexual subjectivity that is earlier deemed “trecherous” by an uplifting Anne – Helga feels her own sense of self begin to unravel. (95)

Though Vogel is specifically examining the relationship between Helga and Audrey, I want to assert that this relationship continues and is reanimated through Irene and Clare. Unlike Helga, Irene *was* “content” with her life before reuniting with Clare. Like Audrey, Clare represents a transgression of sorts as she moves comfortably between black and white societies. Though, unlike Helga, Irene does not seem to be searching for solace in her multi-racial identity, it is important to note that Irene and Clare reunite *while* both women are ‘passing.’ Like Anne, Irene feels as if Clare is treacherous to the race. After realizing Clare has married a white man who hates black people and is unaware that his wife is black, Irene remarks, “no, Clare Kendry cared nothing for the race. She only belonged to it” (36). Like Anne, Irene shares the sentiment that there is an inherent community in the black race that, despite Clare’s attempts to distance herself from, she will always be a part of. Yet, while Helga makes her admiration of Audrey clear, Irene attempts to *dislike* Clare characterizing her as over-dramatic and emotional. She rejects Clare, I assert, for the very reason Helga rejects Audrey: she is afraid she *is* Clare. Both Clare and

Audrey disrupt Irene and Helga's notions of being in the world as black/multi-racial females. Both provide the potential for "another possibility of racial and sexual subjectivity" (Vogel 95). It is this potential subjectivity that creates in these protagonists a mirror of the "white gaze" here reflected as the protagonist gaze.

Beginning with the Negro Welfare League dance, Irene describes the company as "young men, old men, white men, black men; youthful women, older women, pink women, golden women" (54). All are intermingling, Clare especially, "dancing sometimes with a white man, more often with a Negro, frequently with Brian" (54). Despite the diverse crowd, the prominent white guest of the evening, Hugh Wentworth, is concerned only with Clare as he remarks, "Everybody seems to be here and a few more. But what I am trying to figure out is the name, status, and race of the blonde beauty out of the fairy-tale" (54). As Irene has previously noted, the event is lavish, colorful, and jubilant, primed for people-watching and intermingling, yet Clare, it seems, is the only object of interest. Beauty, of course, is part of her allure, but as Wentworth suggests, it is the inability to *identify* her that draws the greatest attention. In this instance, Clare is given a personal freedom not allowed to black women. She can be whatever she desires. She can be white or black, but, consequently, she can also be neither. It is this sentiment that alarms Irene and interests Wentworth. As the two engage further into conversations about race and the ability to identify race, it is clear that Irene is not bothered by the *act* of passing. We could argue this was already made clear through the beginning of the novel in which she passes in order to secure a glass of water, but here her sentiments concerning passing are evoked. As she watches Clare and gazes upon Hazelton, Clare's current dance partner, she comments on the attractiveness of Hazelton, though it seems, the sentiment may extend to Clare as well: "I think ... [it] is... a kind of emotional excitement. You know, the sort

of thing you feel in the presence of something strange, even, perhaps, a bit repugnant to you” (55). Though Irene is aware of Clare’s racial background, she is unsettled by Clare’s performance of neither black nor white identity. She refrains from blatantly revealing Clare’s race, though she heavily alludes to the inability for a “white person to ‘pass’ for coloured” (56). What is of interest here to the exploration of the party scene and the rejection of heterotopic spaces is the fact that in Irene and Wentworth’s conversation Clare can only be one of two things: white or black. Both characters subscribe to the notion of blackness that requires only the smallest amount of biologically black heritage to render one singularly black. Despite the obvious conflict between notions of black and white in this scene, Irene’s fascination with Clare, paired with her hesitance to allow Clare to attend the dance, puts Clare in the position of *being gazed at*. Irene sees Clare’s ability to move through both white and black spaces — specifically through black spaces as ambiguously neither white nor black — as a threat to notions of identity. Clare’s flexible identity is “a bit repugnant” to her. In her article, Cheryl Wall remarks on Clare’s identity as neither white nor black and Irene’s internalized racism claiming scenes such as this one “... concern the psychological damage done when women internalize the racist and sexist stereotypes omnipresent in the society. What happens when one performs neither for the public nor for one’s own pleasure, as a singer or dancer might? What happens when one performs a masquerade for oneself?” (130). Clare’s desire to be unidentifiable is, in Irene’s eyes, a selfish act only solidified by Clare’s remark that she’d “do anything, hurt anybody, throw anything away” to get the things she wants (58). In this case, she wants to be perceived the way she desires. The potential for black/multi-racial female agency suggested in the ambiguity of Clare’s presence at the dance, is thwarted by Irene’s gaze and desire to situate her firmly in her race. Despite a multi-racial background, Clare is not white in Irene’s eyes, nor can she ever be. It is

merely a performance that destroys any agency and renders the heterotopia uninhabitable for both Irene and Clare.

Despite Irene's growing friendship with Clare, proximity to her sustains and enhances Irene's gaze upon the multi-racial body. Irene, a seasoned host, decides to host a tea-party, the likes of which she has done before. Intentionally removing Clare from the equation, Irene attempts to mitigate the space of the tea party. Without Clare in attendance, Irene is free to push the questions of her identity Clare so aptly brings to the surface underground. When Brian reveals he has invited Clare, Irene cannot break from her "host" mindset, remarking she is glad Brian invited Clare as "Clare does add to any party. She's so easy on the eyes" (62). Despite coming to the realization that her husband is cheating on her with her friend and the very person who makes her question her own place in society, Irene's fear of displacement outweighs her desire to confront Brian. She must, then, assume the white gaze under the guise of the protagonist gaze and view Clare only as a prop to the success of her party. The shift in her gaze is clear through the remainder of the scene as she struggles to recognize not only the persons around her, but also herself. Before going down to entertain her guests, she looks at her reflection in the mirror.

The face in the mirror vanished from her sight, blotted out by this thing which had so suddenly flashed across her groping mind. Impossible for her to put it immediately into words or give it an outline, for, prompted by some impulse of self-protection, she recoiled from that exact expression. (63).

In shifting her gaze *against* Clare, she simultaneously fails to recognize herself, and when she does, she averts her eyes for "self-protection" (63). As she goes down to the party, she attempts to keep herself distracted to keep her mind from "return[ing] to that horror which she had not yet

gathered sufficient courage to face” (63). Irene *assumes* Clare and Brian are having an affair, that she has been “very much – of a damned fool,” yet she has little proof of the matter (62). She associates displacement, risk, and the “uninhabitable” with Clare. The very presence of Clare threatens to displace her identity. The horror, then, that Irene is describing, is both the assumed affair and the threat of displacement. Her fear of losing her identity as a black woman, of assuming a fluid ideology such as Clare’s, creates for her a world in which Clare usurps her not only racially but sexually. As she moves through the party, she notes Clare and Brian’s expressions through her tainted gaze, unable to determine if they look different. Brian is, at one moment, “pitifully bare” and in the next “the look on his face was the most melancholy and yet most scoffing that she had ever seen” (65). At the same time, her identification with the white man at the interracial party further implies the deepening of the protagonist gaze. As she watches her white guest, Hugh Wentworth, she determines he is looking at Brian, his eyes “a little scornful” (65). She decides he must know about Clare and Brian as well as she notes, “something had to be done about him. Now. She couldn’t, it seemed, help his knowing... but she could and would keep him from knowing that she knew” (66). Irene attempts to mask her gaze through the inversion of it: she becomes the spectacle. Dropping the ceramic cup in her hand, Irene becomes the center of Hugh’s interest, distracting him from Clare and Brian, and allowing her further denial of her displacement. Irene further rejects her multi-racial heritage through the destroying of the cup, a symbol of white oppression of black peoples as a heirloom of “the charming Confederates” (66). She attempts to reject her space as a multi-racial female by asserting that she has always been looking for a way to get rid of the “ugly” cup, but could not find one. It was only in the last few minutes she realized she “only had to break it, and I [she] was rid of it forever!” (67). Here, the “breaking” of the cup refers to her firm denial of her

circumstances, both as a woman scorned and a multi-racial female, that is epitomized through the protagonist gaze.

In the final party of the text, Irene's inability to cope with the "horror" that is her own unraveling concepts of identity manifests through her action against Clare. Unable to reconcile her relationship to Clare as well as Clare's *supposed* relationship to her husband, Irene determines she must "break it [Clare], and I [she] was rid of it forever" (67). Clare is not held captive by the race, but instead manipulates it to her desires. She has a white husband and a black lover. She has a child, a big house, money, and privilege, but she lives in fear that her husband will find out she is multi-racial. At the Christmas party, when John Bellew arrives, Irene is not concerned about Clare's safety. As Bellew rushes into the room, yelling obscenities and racial slurs, Irene is only concerned with Clare's reaction.

Clare stood at the window, as composed as if everyone were not staring at her in curiosity and wonder, as if the whole structure of her life were not lying in fragments before her. She seemed unaware of any danger or uncaring. There was even a faint smile on her full, red lips, and in her skinning eyes. It was that smile that maddened Irene. She ran across the room, her terror tinged with ferocity, and laid a hand on Clare's bare arm. One thought possessed her. She couldn't have Clare Kendry cast aside by Bellew. She couldn't have her free. (79)

Clare is the spectacle, but she is unconcerned. She does not care that she is being looked at. Instead, she finds freedom in this altercation. She no longer has to pretend to be white for her husband. She no longer has to live two entirely different lives. This idea of freedom, to Irene, is complicated by her protagonist gaze. While Clare sees a glimpse of

heterotopia, Irene sees only danger. She rejects Clare and subsequently the heterotopia by pushing her out the window.

Helga, too, engages in her fair share of parties, but unlike Irene, Helga is surrounded by the “spectrum” Clare attempts to create: “For the hundredth time she marveled at the gradations within this oppressed race of hers. A dozen shades slid by. There was sooty black, shiny black, taupe, mahogany, bronze, copper, gold, orange, yellow, peach, ivory, pinky white, pasty white” (54). Though marveling at the mosaic of colors at Anne’s after-party, she is “blind to its charm” (55). Unlike Irene, she does not find solace in identifying as black or on the spectrum of blackness. As she observes the crowd on the street, she notes white, black, tall, skinny, men and women, yet she “felt singularly apart from it all” (53). Like Clare, Helga wants to move in the inbetween — the not-white/not-black. Raised by a white family, Helga does not identify with black identity, as she states “she wasn’t, she told herself, a jungle creature”, yet she is unable to find solace in her white identity either (54). For a moment, Audrey Denney, perhaps an early iteration of Clare Kendry, provides an answer to Helga’s desire to exist both apart from and within the space of the party. Helga watches as Audrey, “pale... with a brilliantly red, softly curving mouth... a skin of unusual color, a delicate, creamy hue, with golden tones,” dances gracefully with Dr. Anderson (55). Anne rejects Audrey as a part of the black community claiming “her behavior is outrageous, treacherous, in fact” equating Audrey’s desire and willingness to exist as both white and black as “disrespecting” oneself. Helga, on the other hand, feels only admiration for her, a desire to be her. In this moment, Hutchinson claims, “Audrey Denney serves Helga Crane as the ideal of an alternative way of being in the world, ‘raced’ and yet not restricted by race, desired and desiring yet self-possessed, a model of feminine agency

irrespective of racial boundaries” (16)⁴. Yet, Helga cannot escape her own internal, protagonist gaze. As she watches Audrey on the dancefloor “swung by that wild music from the heart of the jungle” she is reminded of her desire to escape the inherent notions of blackness associated with ‘the jungle’ (56). Just as at the beginning of the party, Helga is taunted and almost seduced by the music, but quickly catches herself, repositioning her gaze and rejecting the heterotopic space. Instead, she does as she does multiple times throughout the novel and flees from the space of dichotomies, interested only in finding a space where she can live without hypocrisy.

Years after her first run-in with Audrey Denney, Helga attempts to create the space she envisioned for herself in New York after her return from Denmark through the space of the party.

Helga Crane was leisurely dressing in pleasant anticipation of the party to which she had been asked for that night... And Helga, since her return, was more than ever popular at parties. Her courageous clothes attracted attention, and her deliberate lure – as Olsen had called it – held it. Her life in Copenhagen had taught her to expect and accept admiration as her due. This attitude, she found, was as effective in New York as across the sea. It was, in fact, even more so. And it was more amusing too. Perhaps because it was somehow a bit more dangerous. (91).

The idea that Helga *is* Audrey that Vogel so aptly addresses is embodied in her return from Denmark. As she floats through the new party spaces, she becomes the object of attention. Like Irene at her tea-party in *Passing*, Helga attempts to escape the protagonist gaze by becoming the spectacle, “accept[ing] admiration as her due” (91). Yet in doing so, she demonstrates the way in which she cannot escape the gaze. As she reassures

⁴ “Introduction,” *American Cocktail: A Colored Girl in the World* intro by George Hutchinson

herself she is fond of the attention, she contemplates Anne's reaction to her change in behavior. Recently, Helga notes, there "was something about Anne that was to Helga distinctly disagreeable, a particular half-patronizing attitude, mixed faintly with distrust" (91). While Anne's attitude has only recently *become* disagreeable to Helga, it is the same attitude Anne expresses toward Audrey Denney at her after-party. Now that Helga has *become* the spectacle, the receiver of Anne's distaste, she is able to identify Anne's gaze. Yet, Helga's new interpretation of Anne's feelings, and her own "ruffled feelings" about Anne's disapproval, signal Helga's inability to completely detach herself from the protagonist gaze (91). Though she attempts to *become* Audrey, her own gaze prevents her from the fluidity and freedom associated with Audrey's character that Helga so desperately desires. Helga's growing association with Audrey is further exemplified in her conversation with Helen Tavenor, the hostess of the evening. Watching Audrey from across the room, Helga remarks she has never had the pleasure of meeting Audrey herself. Unsurprised given Helga's previous companionship, Helen remarks, "*you'll* like her, Helga," implying Helga and Audrey have similar sentiments (92). Before Helga is able to make contact with Audrey, she is distracted by a familiar face at the party – her former colleague and partner James Vayle. Helen remarks she had intended to send Audrey to "vamp on him," but that Helga will "do just as well" (93). Just as Anne's judgement of Audrey and, subsequently Helga, suggest Helga's inability to escape her protagonist gaze, the appearance of James Vayle reminds Helga of her previous life in Naxos. In her conversation with James, it is clear he believes Helga's sentiments to be entirely different from those of the race. Helga's desire to travel, and perhaps live abroad, is strange to James. He insists many people return from European countries never to

return again perhaps, he asserts, because “we just like to be together. I simply can’t imagine living forever away from colored people” (94). Helga is offended by the implication that she is not black, to which he responds, “Well, Helga, you were always a little different, a little dissatisfied, though I don’t pretend to understand you at all” (95). While to Helen and perhaps the other party guests Helga seems just as confident as Audrey, she is seen as “treacherous” to Anne and dissatisfied to James. She is at once both a part of the race and situated outside of it. Despite her desire to act in both spaces, using the party as the space of “in-between” or as a *heterotopia*, she is so distracted by the desire to fit into one race or the other that she fails to exist fluidly. Her desire to be accepted as both white and black, Danish and American, is thwarted by her own desire to exist fully in both spaces, to be perceived as belonging in both races.

Aside from demonstrating the way in which Helga is unable to escape the protagonist gaze, the interracial party scene in New York after Helga’s return from Denmark also demonstrates the way in which the party scenes in Larsen’s fictions are deprived of heterotopic space. In her conversation with James Vayle, James reveals that he “detests” the party scene. Surprised by his rejection of the space, Helga questions his distaste: “You know as well as I do, Helga, that it’s the colored girls these men come up here to see. They wouldn’t think of bringing their wives” (96). Despite the space as an interracial party thrown by black people, James demonstrates the way in which the party is still operating under a sort of spectator versus spectacle mentality. While perhaps the black guests come for the socialization, the white guests come to gaze upon the black body. This, of course, complicates Helga’s relationship to the party as she wishes to be gazed at, but not because she is darker-skinned. She wishes to be Audrey – enticing,

enchanting, inviting – not because of her skin color, but because of the way she is able to exist in both spaces.

In conclusion, Irene rejects the space of the party as a heterotopic space for fear of displacement. Clare's ability to move through space freely challenges Irene's notions of race as white or black. Though Irene accepts that 'passing' is a possibility and at times uses it for her own advantage, she rejects the idea of the multi-racial female. Helga, on the other hand, accepts her multi-racial heritage, but rejects the notions of belonging to one or the other. While Clare is content to perform both races, Helga rejects performance altogether. In this way, Helga rejects the party as a heterotopic space. Her desire to exist without hypocrisy and judgement demonstrates the way in which Larsen attempts to characterize "the race problem" in her novels. For Larsen, the most dangerous division of race exists within the black/multi-racial female community. Her character's inability to attain happiness through existing as black/multi-racial females also suggests the danger of racial uplift ideologies. Irene, entrenched in ideas of "bettering" the race through parties and partnerships with white people, rejects Clare's multi-racial living as being *against* the race. Similarly, Helga cannot exist as happily as the multi-racial female because her judgements and interpretations of the world are too entrenched in racial uplift ideology. In the end, Irene kills Clare and Helga rejects her individuality as neither can escape from their own concepts of race and fully enter into the heterotopic space of the party.

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