

“From Those about Her Came a Thunder-Clap of Joy”: Religion and Manipulation in *Quicksand*

By Max Molchan*

In Quicksand by Nella Larsen, Helga Crane is taken in by a church and removed to the south at the end of the work. The common critical consensus is that this represents either sexual fulfillment or a failure in artistry by Larsen. This article argues that what Helga undergoes is textbook indoctrination by a cult masquerading as a legitimate church. When the finding of New Religious Movement Studies is applied to the novella, it is clear that the ending of Quicksand is a scathing commentary of the storefront churches that became popular after the “Great Migration.” Helga’s struggle throughout the novella to accept her biracial identity makes her the perfect victim of the church which acts as an identity designating environment for Helga before trapping her physically in the south and destroying her body through childbirth.

Keywords: Love bombing, Bi-racial, African American, Identity

Introduction

The ending to *Quicksand* by Nella Larsen is shocking to some critics, but it is not incongruous with the rest of the work. Unfortunately, much scholarship focuses on Helga Crane’s sexual fulfillment, which does a disservice to Larsen while being unfounded within the novella. There is also a presumed failure in artistry which renders the ending unintelligible for critics. The readiness to explain away the end of the work by unnecessarily sexualizing Helga is especially telling. The term love-bombing was not readily available when *Quicksand* was published, but the proliferation of New Religious Movements Studies has provided readers and critics with the tools to understand what happens to Helga Crane. Helga searches for identity from the beginning of the work and finds a new community, only to have a slight time jump show how unsuccessful her integration and happiness are in the rural South. Helga does not find her community; she falls under the influence of a predatory religion that represses her personhood and traps her. The ultimate sadness is that Helga only understands what is happening to her when it is too late. Once she enters the storefront church and gives way to the group’s influence, the congregation ensnares her. After Helga moves to the rural South, she loses any chance of returning to her life in New York, and the quick succession of childbirths ruins her health. In *Quicksand*, Helga shows how easily a group masquerading as a religion can manipulate someone desperate for community and identity.

*Lecturer, Northern Illinois University, USA.

Review of Literature

There are two tracks in the criticism of *Quicksand*: those that see the ending as the result of sexual desire fulfillment and those that feel it is incongruous with the rest of the work. Kimberly Monda argues that the ending represents "Helga's sudden release from the self-sacrifice of sexual repression [which] propels her into a nightmare of domestic self-sacrifice" (23). Jeanne Scheper agrees that the end hinges on sex but sees the relationship as more transactional, which restores some power to Helga, arguing that "At the conclusion of the novel, marriage to this Southern preacher appears to give Crane access to something she cannot quite articulate. She calls it 'happiness' and 'stability' while mostly it seems to have to do with access to insurance, change, and sex" (681). Scheper defines insurance as a guarantee that Helga will not have to deal with the feelings that come from the disastrous meeting with Anderson, and change refers to the ability to leave Helga's current predicament while ending her constant search for an identity. Schleper argues that Helga has sufficient agency to choose what is better for her emotional and physical safety while having access to socially acceptable forms of sexual expression. Scholars also read Helga's fate in relation to the tendency for "the ends of Larsen's novels" to "function specifically as critiques of the repression of black women's sexuality both by racist ideology and by racial uplift ideology" (Scheper 681-82).

Critics also see the ending as a conscious decision by Helga or as a flaw in the logic and artistry of *Quicksand*. Ann Hostetler argues that the ending is a coping mechanism that causes Helga to move toward religion because "At the novel's end, Helga, who has never been religious, tries to drown the searing pain of rejection and self-defeat by succumbing to the monochromatic paradigm of a religion constructed by whites for blacks" (43). Other critics have argued that the ending confuses readers because the character's motivations do not match the situation. Caresse John argues from a feminist standpoint that Larsen's novel "also leaves readers questioning, wondering why Helga makes the choices she does" (101). Gregory Alan Phipps contends, "Most critics consider this conclusion not just a break in the autobiographical trajectory of the novel but also a break in the continuity of the narrative" (136). Scheper reads the ending as so disparate from the rest of the novel that it crosses a boundary between author, narrator, and reader arguing that "Helga's religious conversion onward, is not just unsettling to audiences, but disturbing as well. Larsen forcibly transports Helga" (146). Mary Esteve notes the use of crowds to influence Helga, saying, "conventional conceptions of individuality were thus threatened by what we call today the social construction of the self, that is, the belief that the self is socially permeable and manipulable rather than individually unified and monadic" (269-70). Even though Esteve lays this conceptual groundwork that aids in understanding how a group of people could affect Helga, she still finds the religious conversion to break too heavily from the rest of the novel: "If up to now Larsen has ventured primarily-though by no means exclusively-in a realist project, a project that demands credible relations of cause and effect, in the final episodes all bets are off. Reader and writer will be abandoned to the cause of narratological causelessness" (279).

Contemporary studies of New Religious Movements (NRMs) illuminate the nature of Helga's religious conversion and provide a way to resolve the prevailing critical negativity about the ending of Larsen's novel. Scholars of NRMs interrogate the conventional yet reductive conceptual opposition between established, legitimate religions and manufactured modern cults. David J. Ward observes that "while the 'true religious cults' (in the pejorative sense) are arguably spiritually abusive . . . not all spiritual abuse is found in a 'cult'" (900). Helga becomes subject to control and manipulation in ways entirely consistent with forms of abuse that scholars have unearthed in both cults and religions. Lee Joyce Richmond discusses categories of cults that fit Helga's experience: "There are two kinds of cults. One type recruits members and exposes them to psychological and social processes that cause major shifts in perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs. The intention of this kind of cult, commonly called destructive, is long-term control of the cult member" (367).¹ It is understandable that a person who comes under the influence of such an organization would think and act in ways that are discordant with expectations established before interacting with the cult. That Helga would make drastic changes like moving to the South and having children with a man she just met is not only an understandable outcome of this type of influence it is also the goal of these groups. Causing a person to alter their typical thought process to produce a different reaction is necessary for these groups to maintain power.

Helga's experiences in the church involve such processes standard to New Religious Movements as brainwashing, socializing, and love-bombing. Theodore Long and Jeffrey Hadden define brainwashing as when members of a cult or religion put recruits through a process, thereby "'stripping' their previous identities, neutralizing their powers of will, creating dependence on the cult, and programming them with cult beliefs, etc." (1). Long and Hadden emphasize how a cult remakes identity which is especially important when considering how Helga is ideally suited for cult programming. Helga spends the entirety of the novella before joining the cult trying to establish an identity not fractured by her biracial heritage or lack of a nuclear family. She fails repeatedly before meeting the worshippers. Helga is searching for an identity and meets a group looking to assign identity to new members. Long and Hadden also identify a second central process called "socializing," "*the social process of creating and incorporating new members of a group from a pool of nonmembers, carried out by members and their allies*" (5). The main form of brainwashing in *Quicksand* happens at the religious meeting when Helga experiences love bombing, a process whereby "cultists create a greater sense of belonging and equality, the latter often falsely" (6). There is a public conception of these terms that makes it more challenging to have a nuanced conversation about what happens in cults and religions. The public might think of brainwashing as science fiction, but NRMs lay out a process that allows leaders and followers to bring in recruits and make it difficult for them to leave. There are many different ways for this process to work, but it is more successful with the right target.

Helga's desire for identity fits the demographic most likely to join an abusive religious affiliation. Johanna M. Wagner rebukes the way "Critics frame this longing through a heteronormative lens that presumes a craving to belong within a kinship system, such as the conventional community of the nuclear family" (129).

She argues that when "We assume that everything about Helga, all her desires and longings, are implicitly connected to her heterosexuality: her desires in kinship, marriage, reproduction—all become interrelated" (131). Helga's yearning is more diffuse than exclusively needing a relationship. This amorphous longing is why Helga becomes such a promising recruit by the church. Dominiek Coates acknowledges multiple motivations for religious affiliation while emphasizing that over half of the people in his study conformed to a single "common reason for membership" what he calls "uncertainty reduction" in which "conformity to an 'all-encompassing' NRM identity can help to resolve or alleviate struggles pertaining to identity uncertainty or confusion" (1301). These groups target and enforce identity onto people because "The majority of the sociological literature describes NRMs as 'identity designating' environments" (1301). Helga is going through the very kind of crisis that conventionally fuels religious conversion. She spends the first part of the work searching for an identity, so it is reasonable that a group that works by designating identity would be particularly attractive to Helga. The added promise of affiliation through a religious organization and the legitimacy religion adds to the group explains Helga's actions. The framework provided by New Religious Movements and the strategies they employ to add and retain members complicate notions of Helga's actions as being sexually motivated, and the seeming inconsistencies of Helga's decisions are understandable as the logical conclusions of someone targeted and manipulated.

Discussion

Helga's failure to establish a connection with her estranged family or start a romantic relationship puts her in an incredibly vulnerable position, which coincides with meeting the cult. Early in *Quicksand*, Helga places the blame for much of her life on her lack of family. She believes the reason she is unhappy is because she has "No family. That was the crux of the whole matter. For Helga, it accounted for everything, her failure here in Naxos, her former loneliness in Nashville" (8). Helga has no relationship with her parents or the people who raised her, so in an attempt to find some connection with her relatives, she travels to Copenhagen to stay with her maternal aunt. Helga has a complicated relationship with being multiracial, and being with her aunt only makes it clear that she cannot escape into white society. Her aunt displays Helga and how different she is by dressing in ways that make her feel "like nothing so much as some new and strange species of pet dog being proudly exhibited. Everyone was very polite and very friendly, but she felt the massed curiosity and interest, so discreetly hidden under the polite greetings" (64). Like the community Helga finds in the church, these people pretend to accept Helga without reservations, but it is only a façade. Even though living with her aunt gives Helga access to money, she knows it is futile to believe she can have a future in Copenhagen. Having some family connection is not enough to override the feeling that "Helga Crane, this mysterious niece of the Dahls, was not to be reckoned seriously in their scheme of things. . . she wasn't one of them. She didn't at all count" (65). Helga left her job early in the work, and now she has lost another possible

connection to a community in her aunt. Helga returns to America and soon finds she cannot begin a romantic relationship with Dr. Anderson.

After the failed attempt at reconnecting with her family, Helga falls for Dr. Anderson who rebuffs her. Helga is not pursuing Dr. Anderson; she runs into him exiting a room, and suddenly “He stooped and kissed her, a long kiss, holding her close. She fought against him with all her might. Then, strangely, all power seemed to ebb away, and a long-hidden, half-understood desire welled up in her with the suddenness of a dream” (97). This moment is sexual assault even if Helga does not view it that way. The narration explains that she “fought against him with all her might” and he ignores her protest and continues to kiss her. Helga tries to keep her distance from Dr. Anderson because he is married to her close friend, but eventually, they talk and make an appointment to meet, and she “carried away from yesterday’s meeting a feeling of increasing elation. It had seemed to her that she hadn’t been so happy, so exalted, in years, if ever” (99). The way Helga idealizes a new possible avenue for happiness mirrors the early days with her aunt, where she ignored early signs of problems only to be disappointed later. This same scenario plays itself out when she joins the church. At the meeting with Dr. Anderson, he quickly tries to explain away his actions and tells her “that you might have misunderstood” (100). Helga tries to pretend this turnabout does not hurt her, but then she slaps Dr. Anderson and feels “an instantaneous shocking perception of what forever meant. And then, like a flash, it was gone, leaving an endless stretch of dreary years before her appalled vision” (100-01). Helga has suffered two episodes of being lifted into ecstatic happiness by her aunt and Dr. Anderson, and then both situations leave her distraught. It is at this remarkable low that she finds the church. She has no strong connection to her family and no romantic prospects, and as Heart Nelson argued, being churched was especially important to the African American population at the time. It is reasonable that Helga would turn to this last vestige of easy identification for solace.

The storefront church that Helga enters is a byproduct of the Great Migration. The need for community was significant for the millions of African Americans moving from the South because “In virtually all destinations, the southern migrants were greeted with suspicion and hostility by black and white northerners alike” (Tolnay 218). Heart Nelson argues that being churched was particularly important to the African American community, and the increase in unchurched citizens moving into cities caused an uptick in demand because “First, the church could not meet all the functions required in the complex urban environment and it had no monopoly to do so, and, second, the storefront churches and the cults came into being in the urban area to replicate rural patterns of status-conferring” (407). This issue became so problematic that some community members began to push back against the proliferation of storefront churches: “In 1926, the well-known black scholar Ira De Augustine Reid complained that storefront churches were ‘a general nuisance. Neither their appearance nor their character warrants the respect of the community’” (qtd in. Nance 123). Having a church community was important for African Americans at the time, and Helga had neither a church nor a secular community. *Quicksand* was published in 1928, two years after Ira De Augustine Reid publicly decried the proliferation of storefront churches. Larsen was at the

forefront of expressing fear and apprehension that these churches could target African Americans for abuse. From the perspective of NRM studies, these churches are well-positioned to find new converts by opening up in cities that are disorienting and strange for African Americans moving from the South. Establishing locations in a strange place and offering protection in the form of religion to people desperate for both is a highly effective recruiting tool.

The African American religious community had its own New Religious Movement leaders who took advantage of members. In his book *Down in the Valley*, Julius Bailey describes many different leaders and denominations that existed during the great migration. A significant storefront leader named Father Divine provides an example of this phenomenon as "he began to assert that he was the incarnation of the divine" (140). Divine was the leader of a significant denomination. His power was sizable, and "At the height of the movement the community had about 50,000 members" (140). Divine enforced strict rules on his followers, including "celibacy, which was required of each member" (141). He went to jail several times, and "Throughout his ministry, Divine had a number of accusations leveled against him, including racketeering charges" (141). Divine started in storefront churches but eventually moved to more remote areas; Reverend Green ensnares Helga by following the same pattern of establishing a storefront church and leaving the city for a more rural area where he can exert more control. People like Divine, reflected in Green, took the opportunity to gain recruits because they offered access to religion, which Nelson shows was sorely needed. The African Americans desiring to be churched are dealing with issues similar to Helga's. They suffer because they do not have their previous support systems, including family and the church, so they look for identity-designating spaces to find kinship. Going from small towns in the South to large cities in the North where segregation, while still present, was lessened, also presented difficulties in establishing a new identity for the nearly six million African Americans believed to have moved during the Great Migration.

Helga's alienation—from society and herself—makes her particularly susceptible to religious conversion. After she fails to begin a romantic relationship with Dr. Anderson, Helga feels "alone, isolated from all other human beings, separated even now from her own anterior existence" (101). Her sense of separation is now so extreme that she even feels a disassociation from her own body. At this point, she stumbles, in a haze of confusion, out of the rainy streets and into a religious meeting. Upon entering the service, Helga hears a song with lyrics that advocate losing individual personhood for the replacement of religion, and these lyrics highlight the very nature of coercive religion. The members of the service sing: "all of self and none of Thee . . . Some of self and some of Thee . . . Less of self and more of Thee" (103-4). From the view of those already initiated into the group, this transaction is positive. Helga is disturbed but fascinated, and eventually, the congregation's singing starts to take on a hypnotic quality. The singing does not stop just because a new person has arrived, "It went on and on without pause with the persistence of some unconquerable faith exalted beyond time and reality" (105). The group manipulates Helga, and her control over the concept of time loosens. It is not long before Helga starts to notice something sinister happening and she

becomes “Fascinated, Helga Crane watched until there crept upon her an indistinct horror of an unknown world. She felt herself in the presence of a nameless people . . . But the horror held her . . . all in wild appeals for a single soul. Her soul” (105). There are several terms here that show a significant shift in Helga’s thinking. She starts to feel “horror” at the “nameless people” who all seem to be vying to bring her soul into the fold, but she is “held.” None of these terms describe a voluntary decision to join the group.

The effect of being around these worshipers is working on Helga. Kimberly Monda places the blame for what happens in the church on Helga, saying that after leaving her meeting with Dr. Anderson, Helga “rechannels [*sic*] her frustrated sexual energy into” the meeting at the church (34). Monda believes that what happens at the church is “self-annihilation triggered by Anderson’s rejection,” but when Helga tries to leave, she feels too weak and nauseous from her hangover to go anywhere (34). After this failed momentary attempt to leave, the narrator acknowledges that something has changed, explaining, “And as Helga watched and listened, gradually a curious influence penetrated her . . . she felt herself possessed by the same madness . . . she gathered herself for one last effort to escape, but vainly. . . . in that moment she was lost – or saved” (105). This scene follows the model for manipulative religious conversion. First, the recruit feels negative emotions; this is not a required part of every conversion, but it can heighten the experience of love bombing, which creates “a greater sense of belonging and equality” (Long and Hadden 6). Then she feels an exalted rush of emotions which the recruit chases by joining the cult. Penetrated is an essential word choice for a scene that follows Dr. Anderson denying any feelings for Helga and making it clear he does not want a relationship with her after sexually assaulting her while married to her friend. Helga has left one abusive relationship to enter into another one because Green and his parish position themselves as the solution to all of Helga’s problems.

Up to this point, Helga has felt something off or strange happening, but after first calling her “A scarlet’ oman” and a “pore los’ Jezebel,” (104) she is about to be love bombed, and this will end any chance for escape:

From those about her came a thunder-clap of joy, Arms were stretched toward her with savage frenzy. The women dragged themselves upon their knees or crawled over the floor like reptiles, sobbing and pulling their hair and tearing off their clothing. Those who succeeded in getting near to her leaned forward to encourage the unfortunate sister, dropping hot tears and beads of sweat upon her bare arms and neck. (106)

The rushing mixture of emotions overwhelms Helga and the members participating in this recruitment activity. The members are overwhelmed as they achieve the peak of intensity needed for the conversion of their new target. The explicit purpose of the members’ actions is to convert Helga; they make no attempt to hide this intention. They want to save her soul, and they plead with her to “Come to Jesus, you pore los’ sinner!” (104). Members inside a religion take on teaching and encouraging roles, and socialization hinges on the effectiveness of current members to bring in new members and train them for future use. These churchgoers believe they are helping Helga, but the result of their work is to destroy her life and any possibility of happiness.

Helga immediately begins to crave the already diminishing effects of the love bombing. She has not left the meeting yet, but she is already coming down from her emotional high as "The thing became real. A miraculous calm came upon her. Life seemed to expand, and to become very easy. Helga Crane felt within her a supreme aspiration toward the regaining of simple happiness . . . time seemed to sink back into the mysterious grandeur and holiness of far-off simpler centuries" (106). Helga retains her curious relationship with time, and this feeling of "simple happiness" will not last without further socialization. If allowed, outside forces will soon weaken the initial brainwashing. If Helga stays in New York, she will begin to realize that her feelings are the result of manipulation. It is imperative for her conversion to stick that the congregation isolate Helga and give her a job within the community that makes her feel important and valuable. Her desire to continue to feel this easy calmness rather than painful isolation drives her to enter the group along with a desired position within the community. It was easy for Helga to leave her aunt because when she began to feel it was time to leave, "Secretly they felt as she did" (87). Dr. Anderson assaulted her and then needed to minimize his actions by blaming alcohol and pushing Helga away from him. The church needed to bring her into close contact as soon as possible while making Her feel valuable, which made Helga, who is already prone to quick attachment, feel devoted.

Critics argue the scene following the meeting at the church is emblematic of sexual fulfillment, but the calls to join the community have already interpellated Helga; she has already become a subject. Eda Lou Walton thinks Larsen's goal was "To tell the story of a cultivated and sensitive woman's defeat through her own sex-desire" (qtd. in Monda 24). It is hard to understand Helga's desire to be anything other than identity designation. Viewed from the standpoint of NRMs, Helga pursues the person most likely to assign her a role and force her to accept the position. Walking home with the help of Reverend Green, Helga thinks, "That man! Was it possible? As easy as that?" (107). Critics point to this as the moment Helga decides to exercise her sexual desire with the reverend, but the narrator describes Green as a "rattish yellow man" (109) who "failed to wash his fat body, or to shift his clothing" (113). Deborah E. McDowell views Helga's relationship with Green as a way to get acceptable access to sex because "The only condition under which sexuality is not shameless is if it finds sanction in marriage. Further, because she is born out of wedlock, Helga is preoccupied with the issue of 'legitimacy.' Marriage to a preacher is, then, legitimacy redoubled" (Deborah E. McDowell xxi). However, Helga is not desperate to have a sexual relationship that is appropriate by societal standards since she has sex with Reverend Green out of wedlock. She desires access to the community that will appoint her identity which she can easily gain through sex with Green. David Ward interviewed former members of religious groups that practiced what he terms "spiritual abuse" and found "Six core themes as generated from participant transcripts" (903). He found that "all the participants explained the idea that the leadership of the group represents the highest spiritual authority. . . . to obey them is to obey God" (903). Abused followers believe that God imbues leaders with special significance, and to go against them is to sin. Helga has had her reality so warped that she sees sex with the disgusting Reverend Green as an easy way to

gain significance in her new group. The processes that target and acquire recruits have worked perfectly.

Mixed language fills the moments when Helga thinks about sex with Reverend Green from the beginning of their relationship. Walking home from the meeting, Helga feels, “Instantly across her still half-hypnotized consciousness little burning darts of fancy had shot themselves. No. She couldn’t. It would be too awful. Just the same, what or who was there to hold her back?” (107). She has not yet recovered from her love bombing, and her mind is “half-hypnotized.” She is not in a position to make decisions, but she is feeling something. If she feels attraction, it is not for the physical man beside her. Even with her clouded mind and desire to establish herself in the group, she thinks that sex with Reverend Green “would be too awful.” Waking up the following day, Helga is still confused, but now she is in denial, reasoning that it is “Curious. She couldn’t be sure that it wasn’t religion that had made her feel so utterly different from dreadful yesterday. And gradually she became a little sad, because she realized that with every hour she would get a little farther away from this soothing haziness” (108). She yearns for the “soothing haziness” that made her feel so good before. If it was the fulfillment of her sexual desire that finally made her feel good, there is no reason for it to fade in this manner. She decides to marry Reverend Green one way or another, so the fulfillment of her sexual desire will continue if this is what she wants and if her actions result from genuine biological and emotional needs. If she only later has her happiness thwarted, she should not now feel “with every hour she would get a little farther away.” Helga realizes, waking up the day after her conversion, that she will never return to that reality where time slipped away from her, and she was finally content. The potent feeling evoked by the love bombing is something Helga will have to chase, and this realization causes her to begin to fall into a depression that will worsen after childbirth. Helga was desperately searching for a community that could provide her with an identity, but even now, she is beginning to feel that something is wrong and that “slowly bitterness crept into her soul. Because, she thought, all I’ve ever had in life has been things – except just this one time” (108). Sex is material, and faith is not material. When Helga refers to the non-thing that she has finally found, she is referring to her faith and community.

Helga’s feelings for Reverend Green never move beyond transactional. She struggles to admit that she does not have feelings for Reverend Green. However, she sees her relationship as a way to continue to seek the feeling she had at her conversion. Helga is “Still confused and not so sure that it wasn’t the fact that she was ‘saved’ that had contributed to this after feeling of well-being, she clutched the hope, the desire to believe that now at last she had found some One, some Power, who was interested in her. Would help her” (108). The reality of why Helga feels different is on the surface, but her warped way of thinking makes it difficult for her to access this logically. Instead, she plans for an immediate marriage to the “One” with the “Power” to get her back into a situation where she can feel the way she did the night before. The return to the feeling of her conversion will never happen; she will always chase that high, and her trajectory toward a desire to leave the religious group is typical of new members. The reverend moves Helga away from her support system so that outside forces of socialization cannot interfere with her religious

conversion. In the rural South, she has nothing and no one outside of her religious community, and for a time, this is an effective means to keep her as a productive member: "Everything contributed to her gladness in living. And so for a time she loved everything and everyone" (111). Helga is still experiencing the euphoria of her conversion, but this feeling can only last for so long. Part of socialization is placing a member into a job; Helga attempts to teach the women how to dress and act, but she fails because they are not interested in what she thinks. Helga's unsuccessful socialization occurs because the current members fail to perform their expected job of being receptive to the recruit to make her feel validated.

The solution to Helga's disappointment is first to become more devoted. Ward discusses this tactic as a common trait, explaining, "Each of the participants in the study experienced what one participant termed 'love based on performance'" (906). Helga wants to feel accepted and loved by the community that has designated her identity, but she finds it challenging to connect with her peers, and she intuits they do not like her. She becomes more subservient resulting in "This utter yielding in faith to what had been sent her found her favor, too, in the eyes of her neighbors. Her husband's flock began to approve and commend this submission and humility to a superior wisdom. The womenfolk spoke more kindly and more affectionately" (117). Helga begins to perform the actions of a devoted member of the religion so commendation and affection are her rewards. The current members use negative reinforcement in order to entrench Helga. The members do not need to do this consciously. Some religions have specific ways to target new members, but Ward shows in his interviews with former members that similar ways to manipulate and reward recruits are universal. In the past, Helga was quick to think she had found a community to make her happy, and she would leave when she became disillusioned. Now, she cannot leave, so she is forced to try to integrate as much as possible.

Helga, like many recruits to abusive faiths, becomes dissatisfied and wants to leave. Long and Hadden examine the Christian group known as the Unification Church, known for the proficient use of love bombing; they added members quickly, "But those very practices also sowed the seeds of later defection, which usually matured within two years" (10). James Lewis interviewed The Order of Christ Sophia and found a fluctuating but still short membership duration: "In 2005, the average length of membership was two and a half years; by 2008, this had risen to four years" (600). Rousselet et al. found that members wanted to leave but had extenuating circumstances; they found "the first desire to leave" began on average at "16 months" (29). Helga has three children, "all born within the short space of twenty months" in her new community before she becomes disillusioned (114). After her next child is born, she plans to escape her life. She can see the damage this religion has done to her, but she blames herself: "With the obscuring curtain of religion rent, she was able to look about her and see with shocked eyes this thing she had done to herself" (121). Helga is unable to see they have done this to her. She sees her life as the result of her decisions rather than the outcome of a congregation targeting a recruit and using the tools at their disposal to isolate and socialize her into submission.

Conclusion

Helga is a victim; she is not finally finding a way to act out her sexual desire, and she is not the stand-in for the punishment of black women whose sexuality society does not condone. Helga feels at the meeting “half-hypnotized” and filled with a “miraculous calm” from “a thunder-clap of joy” that is produced by those “possessed by the same madness,” which in turn pushes her “beyond time and reality.” She is someone who is trying to develop a better understanding of her identity as a biracial woman who grew up without a nuclear family. She begins the work by leaving her job, which weakens her professional identity. Her relationships in Harlem discombobulate her racial identity, and her trip to see her aunt in Copenhagen puts into question her familial identity. Back in America, Dr. Anderson dashes her sexual identity. Finally, she meets with an identity-designating group in the form of a cult under the auspices of a storefront church. It is reasonable that someone who is searching for a community and an identity would gravitate toward and be entangled by a cult. NRMs explain a process of adding a recruit that is remarkably similar to what happens in the novella, and the result is the same as the stories told by survivors of cults. Further, an understanding to take from NRM studies is that Helga does not make a conscious and level-headed choice to join the cult. An immense amount of thought and work goes into bringing a recruit into a cult, and the goal is to make the process nonoptional. The critical consensus that the work is about sexuality distracts from the reality that groups that hold power can be destructive to vulnerable communities, which includes but is not limited to minorities and women. A focus on sexuality also ignores the damage a group can do by presenting itself as a legitimate religion. Nella Larsen was ahead of her time in understanding this complex topic that would not have a suitable depth of scholarship for decades after she wrote *Quicksand*. That critics question her artistry is not a surprise; she was a biracial black woman writing in the 1920s, but it is unacceptable that current scholarship does not work to reevaluate the unfair criticism of a remarkable work.

References

- Bailey J (2016) *Down in the Valley: An Introduction to African American Religious History*. Media Fortress P.
- Coates D (2014) New Religious Movement Membership and the Importance of Stable ‘Others’ for the Making of Selves. *Journal of Religion and Health* 53(5): 1300–16.
- Esteve M (1997) Nella Larsen’s ‘Moving Mosaic’: Harlem, Crowds, and Anonymity. *American Literary History* 9(2): 268–86.
- Gallagher E (2007) ‘Cults’ and ‘New Religious Movements.’ *History of Religions* 47(2): 205–20.
- Hostetler A (1990) The Aesthetics of Race and Gender in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*. *PMLA* 105(1): 35–46.
- John, C (2011) Strategic Ambivalence: A Feminist Standpoint Theory Reading of Nella Larsen’s Novels. *Feminist Formations* 23(1): 94–117.
- Larsen N (1928) *Quicksand*. Dover 2006.

- Lewis J (2014) The Youth-Crisis Model of Conversion: An Idea Whose Time Has Passed? *Numen* 61(5): 594–618.
- Long T (1983) Religious Conversion and the Concept of Socialization: Integrating the Brainwashing and Drift Models. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 22(1): 1–14.
- McDowell D (1986) Introduction. In McDowell (ed.), *Quicksand and Passing*, ix–xxxvii. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP.
- Monda K (1997) Self-Delusion and Self-Sacrifice in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*. *African American Review* 31(1): 23–39.
- Nelsen H (1988) Unchurched Black Americans: Patterns of Religiosity and Affiliation. *Review of Religious Research* 29(4): 398–412.
- Phipps G (2016) Breaking Down Creative Democracy: A Pragmatist Reading of Race and Gender in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*. *English Studies in Canada* 42(3): 135–57.
- Richardson J (2001) 'Brainwashing' Theories in European Parliamentary and Administrative Reports on 'Cults' and 'Sects.' *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 40(2): 143–68.
- Richmond L (2004) When Spirituality Goes Awry: Students in Cults. *Professional School Counseling* 7(5): 367–75.
- Rousselet M (2017) Cult Membership: What Factors Contribute to Joining or Leaving? *Psychiatry Research* 257: 27–33.
- Scheper J (2008) The New Negro Flâneuse in Nella Larsen's 'Quicksand.' *African American Review* 42(3): 679–95.
- Tolnay S (2003) The African American 'Great Migration' and Beyond. *Annual Review of Sociology* 29: 209–32.
- Wagner J (2012) (Be)Longing in 'Quicksand': Framing Kinship and Desire More Queerly. *College Literature* 39(3): 129–59.
- Ward D (2011) The Lived Experience of Spiritual Abuse. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 14(9): 899–915.