

BLACK WOMEN AS MONUMENTS
IN NELLA LARSEN'S *QUICKSAND*

by

NADIA A. BARKSDALE

YOLANDA MANORA, COMMITTEE CHAIR
TRUDIER HARRIS
JENNIFER PURVIS

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ABSTRACT

Given examples such as the Statue of Liberty and various Civil War monuments to the Confederate “Lost Cause,” it is clear that many monuments rooted in the American landscape take the form of the female body. I propose that this public prevalence translates into a rootedness in the American *consciousness* as well. With monuments, we honor the past and attempt to make permanent the ideologies that fit with and bolster our collective memory. This collective memory is, of course, a testament to the greater hegemonic forces that structure societies. Thus, marginalized bodies are often not inscribed within this narrative. Women’s bodies, however, are used to convey these hegemonic, masculine-centered ideologies in the form of monuments.

Because this phenomenon is so present in the American (sub)conscious, I argue that such consciousness bleeds into the literary realm. This thesis attempts to make sense of the process of monumentalization and its deleterious effects on women, who, because they resemble such monuments, are subject to this process. As men construct physical monuments on the landscape in order to bolster their own masculine-centered power structures and ideologies, so do they attempt to construct femininity in such a way that achieves the same effect in every day life. I use Nella Larsen’s 1928 novel *Quicksand* as an example of how men and masculine-centered forces attempt and, ultimately fail, to monumentalize living women, specifically women of color, who face a unique set of constraints on their sexuality and identity within society. With Helga Crane as an example of a woman who undergoes attempted monumentalization in several

different environments and by several different men or male-centered societal forces, I examine the deleterious effects that monumentalization has on the woman's ability to self-fashion her own identity.

DEDICATION

To my parents, Barry and Lilibeth Barksdale, who taught me to read with words written on scraps of cardboard and who have never tried to make me declare a Business or Pre-Med major.

And to Ben, with love, always. Your love, patience, and breakfast burritos carried me through grad school. You mean the world to me.

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Introduction

“Women as Monuments in the American Consciousness”

“A monumental view of the past, a particular kind of consciousness, instantiated in the physical stone of monuments, represents a belief in the coherence and continuity of what is great in all ages, it is a protest against the change of generations and against transitoriness.”

—Sanford Levinson, *Written in Stone*

“Look upon her, ye nations! Measure her by all the standards of human perfection. Weigh her upon the scales that were employed in the weighing of queens, and noble-men’s wives and daughters.”

—John H. Adams Jr., “Rough Sketches:
A Study of the Features of the New Negro Woman”

“You are no maiden but a monument.”
—William Shakespeare, *All’s Well That Ends Well*

“With monuments,” writes Arthur C. Danto, “we honor ourselves,” (*Nation* 152). In his discussion of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the art critic claims that “we erect monuments so that we shall always remember and build memorials so that we shall never forget” (Danto 152). The difference for Danto is that monuments “embody the myths of beginnings” while memorials “mark the realities of ends” (152). Monuments thusly signify change. I begin my discussion of monuments and women in 20th century American literature using these definitions as my points of departure. In doing so, I hope to evoke the mythic overtones of American Modern fiction, which is the backdrop for the myths of femininity and New Negro womanhood with which I am primarily concerned. Additionally, I want to situate my argument within the idea of memory

itself as “a collective construction, a social practice that contributes to producing that which we call *past*” (Piper, et. al 250). If memory itself is a creation, something “*made* from and on the basis of social relations” and thus “precarious and transformable” then the physical manifestations of these memories—the monuments—are themselves socially relevant and inscribed with transformable meanings.

This conception of monuments is crucial to my understanding of women in early 20th century American Literature. I specifically contextualize my argument within the 1920s, an era of immense political and social change—namely involving the steady move toward equal rights for women and blacks—because monuments are indicators of such change. It is at this time that I argue men placed ideological abstractions (such as conceptions of heteronormative masculinity) onto the bodies of women in order to render these ideas concrete and permanent. While forcing women to embody these constructions seemed like a viable way to reify such dominant ideologies, monuments are, in fact, not completely rigid in their inscriptions; rather, these constructed testaments to collective memory are subject to shifts in ideological frameworks. A monument can begin with a certain contextualized meaning and, decades later, come to mean something completely different. Even more immediately, the significance of a monument is somewhat subjective to the viewer and can undermine the creator’s original intention for the monument. Likewise, the monumentalization of women similarly falls short of expectations.

As an example of the intricacies of monumentalization, Marina Warner reads the Statue of Liberty in her book *Monuments and Maidens: The Allegory of the Female Form*. Warner’s conception of Lady Liberty begins with the history of how she came to be, then focuses on the towering mass of the statue. There is the implication that Liberty’s size and presence transformed Lower Manhattan: according to Warner “New York was not what it now is when the

Statue of Liberty was made, [and we know] that the tip of the island of Manhattan was wilderness not long before” (13). The statue, in vast scale, hovers physically over lower Manhattan and theoretically over the rest of America, which Liberty has come to represent to immigrants, other nations, and Americans themselves. Furthermore, Warner contends “she provides a benchmark of an ideal few people still believe has been upheld or will ever be fulfilled” (15). In other words, the Statue of Liberty not only stands for America, but also encompasses those grandiose and abstract ideologies associated with America: liberty, democracy, opportunity, and progress, to name a few. Warner also discusses how “the Statue of Liberty has been used to legitimize political campaigns, to seal them with moral dignity” through mere symbolic force (15). This, I argue, reveals the propensity for diverse, context-driven interpretations within the one statue. As with all monuments, Lady Liberty’s ideological inscriptions and political uses change with time and for the convenience of whoever uses her for representation. Even more telling, the prominence of the Statue of Liberty and the ways in which she signifies constantly-shifting ideas indicates that the effects of monumentalization are known and pervasive, however sub- or unconsciously, among the American people. In discussing the the sculptor of the Statue of Liberty, along with other (male) sculptors of prominent monuments, Warner summarizes their “formal aesthetic” as resting upon “their central assumption...that an abstract concept – liberty, justice or victory – can be appropriately expressed by a female figure” and states that such assumptions still “remain in force today...rarely challenged,” despite women’s lack of claim, in our society, upon these ideological abstractions.¹ The idea that women are figures to be utilized for the representation and solidification of hegemonic centers of power

¹ Warner lists sculptors Thomas Crawford, Frederic-Auguste Bartholdi, Augustus Saint-Gaudens, and Adolph Weinman. She also reads the Freedom Triumphant statue in Washington D.C. as a “classical allegor[y] using the female form,” similar to the Statue of Liberty (16). Both monuments, Warner states, are “gems” with “value and significance ascribed to them from without” (17). In reading these two monuments this way, Warner asserts that we can learn “something about what we have cherished, found valuable, held *dear*” (17).

is cemented in the American consciousness and is constantly at the forefront of our minds because of the prominence of such monuments on the American landscape.

Such prominence is not limited to New York City, or even to the northern United States. “Across the South,” write Cynthia Mills and Pamela H. Simpson, “hundreds of outdoor sculptures and architectural memorials still stand in our midst” (*Monuments to the Lost Cause* xv). They continue: “The monuments of bronze and stone are messengers from the past, relaying to us the nostalgic perspectives of the white women, Confederate veterans, and descendants who commissioned them” (xv). These Southern monuments to the Civil War are “tangible markers of memory” and this memory is, as Piper, Reyes, and Fernandez would claim, collective (xv). Despite the loss of the Civil War, confederate veterans in the “Lost Cause” movement “sought a restoration of respect” (xviii) and “an important confirmation of...shared values and experiences” (xix). These monuments both commemorated what was declared a valiant effort by confederates in the war and anchored ideological abstractions such as states’ rights and antebellum chivalry in the Southern landscape.²

In retrospect, historians such as Gaines Foster say that these monuments

served a useful function at the turn of the century in helping Southerners come to terms with the vast social and economic change their region was experiencing. The sculptures seemed to provide solid reference points about a common heritage in a confusing new world in which the South was reuniting economically with the North, women’s roles were changing, and the class system was dissolving (Foster, qtd. Mills and Simpson xxii).

In other words, monuments are used not only to record change, but to reify normative ways of life in order to safeguard them from that change. Foster’s assessment of what these monuments offered to the South gets at the essence of American Modernism in that it addresses major

² Mills and Simpson situate these abstractions in the post-war sentimental narrative of “states’ rights,” “a chivalrous antebellum way of life,” and “an Old South in which genteel white men protected their beautiful and virtuous women and children” (xvii).

cultural shifts, the “sea changes” of burgeoning feminisms, shifting class systems, and expanding economic practices. Indeed, the 1920s saw women’s suffrage and the 19th amendment as “a pivot” in the role of women in society.³

It becomes clear that these changes are comparable to the changes the South underwent during Reconstruction. Post-Antebellum life, just like Modern life, brought fear to the men who, before these movements, were firmly planted at the dominant center of power. Monuments were one way to concretely root the ideologies of this center of power, of these men, to the ever-changing landscape, presumably forever.

To be clear, monumentalization takes place on levels both physical and tangible, and theoretical and abstract. Aside from her examples of actual monuments, Warner provides theoretical possibilities for the use of the feminine, female body in monuments and memorials. In her consideration of masculine and female grammatical genders, Warner finds that “absolute concepts [are] embodied in the female...[because] they proclaim the result of the systems enacted not by themselves, but by others” (68).⁴ Furthermore, these “abstract principles are engendered by the exponent who displays them” (69). Thus, these principles are effected by and for those in power—in my argument, this center of power is occupied by white men who support and are supported by a white heteronormative society.⁵ The basic construction of maternity and paternity are at play here: “the principle is brought forth by the [masculine] agent but cannot take substance in the visible world unless it be *mothered* in matter, embodied” (69, emphasis mine).

³ Elizabeth Ammons writes in *Conflicting Stories*: “the 1920s can also be understood as the continuation and the culmination of decades of change at the turn of the century” (183).

⁴ Dating back to Medieval linguistics “linguistic gender provide[s] one rationale for the depiction of so many disparate and often incongruous concepts in the female form” (Warner 73).

⁵ According to Warner, these abstract principles are female because of the Aristotelian dichotomy of “matter” and “form.” In this conception, “the female provides the stuff of origin (*hyle*) while the male stamps it with form (*eidōs*) and gives it identity and shape” (69). Judith Butler echoes this theory later, in *Bodies that Matter* (1993). Butler says that, “for Aristotle, ‘matter is potentiality (*dynamēos*), [while] form [is] actuality.’ In reproduction, women are said to contribute the matter; men, the form” (31).

If, as Warner contends, the female form is “*passio*” or “acted upon” and the male form is “*actio*” or “the mover,” then the idea that monumental statues reflect and *reproduce* the abstract concepts and principles fulfilled by a masculine power structure is unsurprising and renders the female body subjective and passively malleable (69).

While this theoretical framework can be applied to a plethora of texts, I will focus my application and reading on Nella Larsen’s 1928 novel *Quicksand* because it offers a multiplicity of opportunities for reading the monumentalization of women. As a half-black, half-white young woman, the novel’s protagonist Helga Crane must constantly contend with hegemonic social forces attempting to use her body to displace and reproduce the abstract concepts and principles necessary to sustain a male-dominated center of power. The spaces Helga navigates throughout the novel range from rural Alabama to Copenhagen, Denmark. In rural Alabama, a strong black femininity is key to the foundation of male hegemony. Helga must thusly assume a role as a “Mammy” figure in her unrelenting care and service to her husband and to his family. In Denmark, on the other hand, high-class European society seeks out “erotic exotic” figures for both their sexual intrigue and their propensity to serve as a dark “other” that can underscore through physical difference the superiority and power of the white male onlooker. In this instance, Helga must display her body in such a way that is aesthetically pleasing to men like Axel Olsen, who then use her body as a signifier of their own masculinity. In utilizing this framework to read *Quicksand*, several things emerge: for one, it becomes clear that Helga Crane’s journey is not random but is instead strategically constructed to allow Larsen to critique all angles of the position of the tragic mulatta in Modern society. This also allows Larsen to critique the communities through which Helga moves and the manner in which they act upon the biracial woman. Narratively, monumentalization accounts for Helga’s consistent anxiety of self

and her inability to happily reconcile her mind, body, and environments. Overall, finding traces of monumentalization—physical and theoretical—indicates the pervasive force of these ideas in the American consciousness.

Chapter 1

Black Women as Monuments in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*

“The time came when she grew used to the stares of the population. And the time came when the population of Copenhagen grew used to her outlandish presence and ceased to stare.”

—Nella Larsen, *Quicksand*

Throughout *Quicksand*, Helga Crane migrates from the American South to Harlem, New York, and then to Copenhagen, Denmark, before completely reversing her trajectory and eventually ending up in a small Southern town with her reverend husband and their several children. Because of the ephemeral, dissatisfied, and unsettling nature of her journey, Helga Crane resists monumentalization. In each location, Helga struggles with the pressure to conform to whatever notions of femininity are necessary to the dominant, often patriarchal, forces of her current milieu. The rules of assimilation at Naxos, for instance, drastically differ from the hypersexual, exotic expectations for behavior Helga faces in Copenhagen, where she seeks attention through her “otherness.” Regardless of location, Helga cannot reconcile “appropriate” femininities with her own happiness and self-fulfillment.

Helga's unhappiness throughout the novel is a direct result of the attempts by societal forces to appropriate her body for their own purposes. For instance, the pressures at Naxos to conform to New Negro femininity overshadow Helga's own spirit and style with a drab cloak of muted color and a Booker T. Washington-esque duty to the black race. Axel Olsen's attempts to fashion Helga into an exotic pet to accompany his own social status and celebrity as an artist in Copenhagen force Helga into a grotesque vision of sexuality with which Helga does not self-identify.

All attempts to monumentalize Helga, to reconfigure her into a symbol of another person's status, ultimately fail, however. In describing Helga's features as she does—light-skinned with white-identified features, a slim build, and a quiet beauty about her—Larsen draws strong connections between Helga and artistic and aesthetic value. I argue that in detailing instances wherein characters like Dr. Anderson, Anne Grey, The Dahls, Axel Olsen, and Mr. Pleasant Green attempt to and fail to monumentalize Helga within their own context of propriety and for their own social gains, Larsen underscores the futility of such attempts and the foundational flaws in ideologies and myths like that of the New Negro (and especially New Negro Womanhood) as well as racial uplift itself and racial pride and purity. Larsen also critiques the eroticization of the black body in the sphere of Modernism, as well as fetishization of the mulatta within black culture and the rigid construction of black Southern femininity. This thesis is organized by those goals and movements to which masculine forces attempt to monumentalize Helga. In “‘de mule uh de world’: Helga Crane and Black Southern Femininity,” I focus on how Helga is monumentalized by men like Dr. Anderson at Naxos and Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green. These men attempt to force Helga into embodying black southern femininity, here characterized by subservience to black men. The second section, “New Negro Womanhood and Harlem's Talented Tenth,” focuses on Helga's time in Harlem, New York. What begins as a welcome reprieve from the stifling expectations of Naxos becomes an equally suffocating expectation for black femininity, although this one is rooted in education and black middle class propriety. The final section, “The Erotic Exotic Figure in (White) Modernism,” focuses on the Copenhagen portion of the novel, wherein Helga is finally appreciated for her difference, but this appreciation soon warps into an oppressive process of monumentalizing Helga to force her to uphold white masculinity, especially as it manifests and is performed in a Western European

context. Though separate, these occurrences all prevent Helga from achieving self-realization and individual growth throughout *Quicksand*. Larsen critiques each social arena that Helga enters, ultimately concluding that within white heteropatriarchal society, there is no safe space in which black or biracial women can carve out their own identities. In doing so, Larsen not only deconstructs and examines these sociopolitical ideologies, but she also indicates how such attempts to dictate and solidify such constructed femininities harm the female subject's ability to develop a self-hood divorced from the strictures of hegemonic society.

Literature Review: New Negro Womanhood

In reading Larsen's *Quicksand* in terms of New Negro ideologies, I frame my argument using Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s delineation of the period from his essay titled "The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black." Therein, Gates identifies this period (1895-1925) as "the crux of the period of black *intellectual* reconstruction" (131, emphasis mine). Divorced from the conception of "reconstruction" as a merely physical and legislative movement in the post-slavery South, Gates's frame allows for a focus on the intellectual rebuilding that grew increasingly necessary as Jim Crowism, derogatory representations of blacks, and Social Darwinism brought in a new era for the South. Influenced by the effects of Reconstruction, black intellectual reconstruction continued well beyond the turn of the century. Gates argues that this era is that of "the myth of a New Negro," a construction evoked to counter those constructions of "the new century's image of the black," which included "stereotypes scattered throughout plantation fictions, blackface minstrelsy, vaudeville, racial pseudo-science, and vulgar Social Darwinism" (136). In other words, the doctrines that Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois espoused at the turn of the century, followed by the myths created by Alain Locke's *The New Negro*, are direct responses to the negative constructions of identity for black men and women. It is these myths and newly formed images that Larsen critiques in *Quicksand*.

In addition to the aforementioned harmful stereotypes, Sterling A. Brown contends that "other stereotypes were added to those of the contented slave, the comic minstrel, and the wretched freedman" during Reconstruction: "the brute Negro and the tragic mulatto" were two

(“A Century of Negro Portraiture” 79). Of the latter, Brown writes: “the mulatto, or quadroon, or octoroon heroine has been a favorite for a long time.... In our century...she finds peace only after returning to her own people.... The mulatto man or woman is presented as a lost, unhappy, woebegone abstraction” (80). It is this “abstraction” that Larsen questions in *Quicksand*.

To combat such representations of women, black books and periodicals published essays specifically about the role of black women in the movement toward racial uplift. In conjunction with the women’s club movement, which sought to better the black race through progressive initiatives and reforms, these essays aimed to rewrite the role of black women in American society. Elise Johnson McDougald, in her essay “The Task of Negro Womanhood,” situates “the race’s destiny” on the black woman’s “striving” (382). Throughout the essay, McDougald recognizes that the black woman faced strife and hardship in society due to her subjective position at the outermost edges of a white male dominated environment. McDougald still, however, constructs the black woman as one who is “maintaining her natural beauty and charm and improving her mind and opportunity. She is measuring up to the needs of her family, community and race, and radiating a hope throughout the land” (382). In other words, despite her constant struggling in a world of forces situated against her, the black woman perseveres and does so with grace and beauty, while at the same time ushering in the success of her race. McDougald’s description of this woman is rather monumental, not only in what she represents, but also in that she stands “courageously erect” and with “moral strength,” a beacon of progress for the black race (382). McDougald’s image of “Negro Womanhood” is just one of many, and attests to Brown’s assertion that “the images of Negro...have increased in number, and their

manifold identities have been further recognized” (94). As new characters and images arrive in black fiction and drama, so do they crop up in New Negro political ideologies.

If written depictions were not enough, magazines such as *Crisis* and *Opportunity* featured paintings, drawings, and photographs of the New Negro woman. According to Cherene Sherrard-Johnson, images featuring mulatto women were popular in these early 20th century publications. Archibald J. Motley’s work is among the most prominently featured, as his painting *The Octoroon Girl*, among others, was heavily published at this time and even today. Of Motley’s painting, Sherrard-Johnson writes:

this portrait gestures at a collective, visually inflected understanding of the aestheticized markers that created the mulatta, or passing, subject in African American literary and visual culture: physiognomy, exoticism, and the mysterious gaze.... Along with Motley’s haunting octoroon series, a preponderance of photography, visual art, and narrative texts produced during the Harlem Renaissance featured the mulatta as either heroine or primary subject, reinforcing her role as the representative New Negro woman (“A Plea For Color” 835).

Thus, Motley’s painting is not an outlier but instead indicates a trend of its time. Coupled with essays such as McDougald’s, these images created, socialized, and perpetuated the image of a light-skinned, graceful, stylish, middle-class New Negro woman. Yet, while this woman “is a constrained throwback to Victorian womanhood,” the exotic, mysteriously charming look of the mulatto woman in the portraits and photographs of the time underscores the other side of the coin, so to speak, for this modern woman: the Jezebel.⁶ This construction is but one that the Victorian depictions of the New Negro woman had to work against. The iconography of the mulatto woman perpetuated an exotic, erotic view of the subject. Thus, by the same markers of

⁶ An overtly-sexualized stereotype from the Antebellum period, the Jezebel figure represents a wanton woman who displays her sexuality openly and who, perhaps, seduces white and black men alike. This stereotype is often cited as an ideological precursor to contemporary misrepresentations of black women as primal, sexual objects.

light skin and a beauty typically associated with white women, the mulatto woman could “also be a seductive temptress, or a deceptive, independent modern woman” (Sherrard-Johnson 840).

In addition to the images of light-skinned beauties with which the black woman was inundated in the early 20th century were the actual vocational roles these women were expected to hold. McDougald’s essay mentions black female teachers, secretaries, nurses, librarians, and mothers, while, according to Sherrard-Johnson, men were “called upon to be an inventor, innovator, and artist” (835). “Service and self-sacrifice” were imposed on black women in order to relegate them to these subservient roles. These roles, as we learn from McDougald, offered black men the support they needed to lead the black race. This idea evokes a monumental effect because, as Marina Warner argues in *Monuments and Maidens: The Allegory of the Female Form*, “the principle is brought forth by the agent but cannot take substance in the visible world unless it be mothered in matter, embodied” (69). Warner details this abstraction in order to account for the fact that, throughout history, monuments in the female form have been constructed to uphold philosophies that maintain predominantly male power structures. To apply Warner in this context, I argue that the New Negro principle is brought forth by the black man, for the benefit of the black man, by the work of the black woman. This accounts for the influx of what Sherrard-Johnson calls “mulatta iconography,” as well as the specific service roles assigned to New Negro women.

Helga, of course, fits into this iconography. Because of her appearance, both her personal and romantic relationships with men always result in a failed attempt to fashion her into a monument to their goals. However, while Helga fits physically into this template, she resists the required modes of femininity that accompany the look. Anne Grey perhaps provides the best example, with her prim, black middle-class, cultured, and politically-concerned personality.

Helga, however, prefers the demeanor of the adventurous and demure Audrey Denney. In short, the iconography of the mulatta is limiting to Helga because it does not reflect her actual personality and thus results in a feeling of inferiority and a lack of belonging within the dominant culture. Ultimately, the physical iconography and the template for black feminine identity are damaging to Helga's ability to create her own version of self. This stifling limitation follows Helga and takes different forms throughout her journey.

“de mule uh de world”⁷: Helga Crane and Black Southern Femininity

As confederate veterans and members of the old antebellum high society sought to cement their importance within the male-dominated sphere of the plantation South with female-bodied monuments to their “lost cause,” so do black men like Dr. Anderson and Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green attempt to solidify and reinforce their own masculine ideals and agendas upon the bodies of black women, especially upon that of Helga Crane. And, while the environments of Naxos and rural Alabama are superficially different for Helga, they both have in common the same stifling mandates for black femininity with the same ideas of servile, passive roles created for the benefit of black male social and economic advancement.

Within this section, which takes its titular quote from Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, I focus on the beginning and ending of Helga’s somewhat circular journey in *Quicksand*. Considering Helga’s experiences in the South amongst both Naxos faculty and Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green’s rural congregation, Hurston’s assertion that “de nigger woman is de mule uh de world” while “de white man is de ruler of everything” (20) resonates in *Quicksand* as it does in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Helga’s roles and duties at Naxos and in the Reverend’s household are more servile and thankless than her other roles and duties throughout the novel.

Helga’s attitude and experiences in the American South can perhaps be best described as a perpetual “hot anger and seething resentment” at the attitudes and restrictions of the milieu (3). The rigid assimilationist environment at Naxos, a Southern town and black institution modeled

⁷ Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937).

after Larsen's own experiences at Tuskegee Institute in Tuskegee, Alabama both sparks and exacerbates Helga's bitter sentiment. And, while packaged differently, these feelings return when Helga journeys back to Alabama at the end of the novel with her new husband and faith—however facile—in his God. Despite the temporal distance between Helga's two Southern episodes, both exhibit attempts to monumentalize Helga in terms of black Southern womanhood, a subservient role in which Helga has no interest. Between her thankless roles as uplifter, then bearer, of the race that she labels "despised," Helga finds no space for herself. Instead, her body becomes supplanted into unnatural roles which ultimately benefit the male systems of power surrounding her. By placing Helga in these roles, men like Dr. Anderson and the Reverend attempt to reify their own power. To their minds, then, Helga would become a monument or a representative figure of their masculine power.

The Naxos section of *Quicksand* opens with Helga Crane mulling over a sermon from a white preacher who visits Naxos to implore its attendees and faculty to essentially stay in their place below the white man in Southern society. This speech, condescending and paternalistic, is perhaps the incident that incites Helga's sudden departure from Naxos:

[The preacher] had said that if all Negroes would only take a leaf out of the book of Naxos and conduct themselves in the manner of the Naxos products, there would be no race problem, because Naxos Negroes knew what was expected of them. They had good sense and they had good taste. They knew enough to stay in their places and that, said the preacher, showed good taste. He spoke of his great admiration for the Negro race, no other race in so short a time had made so much progress, but he had urgently besought them to know when and where to stop. He hoped, he sincerely hoped, that they wouldn't become avaricious and grasping, thinking only of adding to their earthly goods, for that would be a sin in the sight of Almighty God. And then he had spoken of contentment, embellishing his words with scriptural quotations and pointing out to them that it was their duty to be satisfied in the estate to which they had been called, hewers of wood and drawers of water. And then he had prayed. (3)

This is the ideology that dictates all that Helga despises of Naxos. Much to Helga's disgust, this sermon and what it represents is met with "considerable applause" (3) from the blacks surrounding her. This provides the greatest example of what Helga determines is "the method, the general idea behind the system" (4) that oppresses her by snuffing out "its most delightful manifestations, love of color, joy of rhythmic motion, naïve, spontaneous laughter" (18). Larsen is not merely moving Helga through a series of geographic locations but is also moving Helga through a series of *systems* in which she cannot negotiate her own idea of herself with the idea of what she should be.

Helga views Naxos as an embodiment of Negro education as a whole. While she grows to hate this system, she realizes that this is "strange, too, for this was the thing which she had ardently desired to share in, to be a part of this monument to one man's genius and vision" (3). Interestingly, in referring to Naxos as a monument, Helga invokes an entire framework through which these systems can be considered. If a monument is, in part, built by those who have enough money and power to put such a structure into existence, then it will reflect the values and ideologies of those who envision and plan for its presence. The goal is to bring those values and ideologies into perpetuity. In the case of Naxos, then, the school not only represents education, but specifically represents Negro education in the South. The undertones here are that Negro education in the South is designed to keep blacks in servile roles that ultimately benefit white society in ways similar to antebellum life. From the preacher's speech, it is clear that one goal of Naxos is to keep blacks "in their place" and in order to do so, Naxos must wield, as Helga says, "a big knife with cruel sharp edges ruthlessly cutting all [Negros] to a pattern, the white man's pattern" (4). Furthermore, as Helga sees Naxos, the institution is "a machine...a show place in the black belt, exemplification of the white man's magnanimity, refutation of the black man's

inefficiency” (4). Thus, the school stands for more than education. As a monument, Naxos, though built for black education, is actually representative of white power and ideologies that remain pervasive in the South even after Reconstruction.

Helga’s role at Naxos is strictly passive. As an educated black woman in the South, Helga is expected to assist in the uplifting of the black race in purely acquiescent roles: teacher, secretary, and librarian were, historically, the roles to which women like Helga were assigned (footnote to that secondary source that talks about this). While black men were, as the preacher proclaimed, expected to accept their lot as slightly more educated “hewers of wood and drawers of water,” black women were reduced to an even more subsequent role to assist those “hewers and drawers” (3). This role, Helga feels, is completely thankless. She notes that, in her difficult classes, “she gave willingly and unsparingly of herself with no apparent return” of thanks from either students or faculty (1). Helga, in lamenting “the strenuous rigidity of conduct” required at Naxos, feels as though she is “an insignificant part” of this massive community (1). While her role is one of service and duty to the greater structures of power hovering above her, Helga’s role at Naxos is perhaps more significant than she or the faculty acknowledge. As a cog, so to speak, in the Naxos machine, Helga is thus implicated in this narrative of black (primarily male) uplift. In order for such a system to function, the foundational support—in this case, educated but service-oriented black women—must remain in tact.

The other women at Naxos, especially Miss MacGooden and Margaret Creighton, exemplify the standards of femininity to which Helga is held. The condescending and controlling Miss MacGooden represents the level of propriety expected of Helga. Part of this is due to her familial pride: she is “a ‘lady’ from one of the best families—an uncle had been a congressman in the period of the Reconstruction” (12). Rather than exhibit any semblance of a vibrant

personality, Miss MacGooden is “humorless, prim, [and] ugly,” in addition to being rather Victorian in her demeanor. Helga notes that Miss MacGooden is so proper that she would not even consider marriage because “there were...things in the matrimonial state that were of necessity entirely too repulsive for a lady of delicate and sensitive nature to submit to” (12). In the short passage dedicated to Miss MacGooden, we learn much about what is expected of Helga. For one, she is expected not only to care for, but to corral the students at Naxos; additionally, Helga must forgo any outward signs of sexuality or of individualism in favor of presenting a rigidly professional front. This, coupled with the marching in-line Helga witnesses from her dormitory window, gives Naxos an air of military discipline and control. Margaret Creighton, perhaps Helga’s only friend at Naxos, also serves as an example of what Helga must be in order to be accepted at Naxos. Though subtle, we learn much from Helga’s description of Margaret. The fact that she dresses in drab colors and presses the kinks and curls from her hair underscores the assimilationist nature of Naxos, one to which Helga cannot succumb. In recalling the assimilationist imperative of Naxos, Helga reflects “bitterly” on the fact that her fiancé, James Vayle, is now “completely ‘naturalized’” and has thus left Helga, who “had never quite achieved the unmistakable Naxos mold” (7) behind. Frustratingly, Helga feels that *she* lacks something and that she may actually be the root cause of her own unhappiness. However, the fault for Helga’s inability to fit within this established society instead lies with the systems of power and institutions that dictate such contrived gender roles.

The controlling, gendered imperatives that underpin Helga’s life at Naxos are in place in order to bolster the status of black men. Thus, Dr. Anderson’s plea for Helga to remain at Naxos should come as no surprise. Dr. Anderson excuses the faults that Helga finds with Naxos, saying that “lies, injustice, and hypocrisy are a part of every ordinary community” but that “there’s less

of these evils [at Naxos] than in most places” (20). To Dr. Anderson, the only reason they are so amplified to Helga and, perhaps, to his own apologetic mind, is because their community “[is] trying to do such a big thing, to aim so high,” which causes “the ugly things to show more” (20). This line of reasoning from Dr. Anderson is initially enough to convince Helga, who “feel[s] a mystifying yearning...for service, not now for her people, but for this man who was talking so earnestly of his work, his plans, his hopes” (20). Dr. Anderson succeeds, however momentarily, in drawing Helga into his cause for racial uplift. In this instance, Helga almost resigns herself to monumentalization. As Dr. Anderson attempts to inspire Helga into staying, he actually attempts to fashion her into a monument to his cause. To do so, he writes his own conception of who she is onto her body, telling her that “what [Naxos needs] is more people like [Helga,] people with a sense of values and proportion, an appreciation of the rarer things in life” (20). Her ego being stroked, Helga succumbs to this narrative until Dr. Anderson’s speech continues one statement too far: “Perhaps I can best explain it by the use of that trite phrase, ‘You’re a lady.’ You have dignity and breeding” (21). Helga is immediately offended by this assumption that she fits into some standard category of appropriate femininity as Naxos defines it, and noting Helga’s reaction, Dr. Anderson tries to recover by telling her that she comes from “good stock.” At this point, however, it is of no use. Dr. Anderson’s attempt to monumentalize Helga thusly fails due to his own insistence upon trying to write Helga’s identity for her in a way which, as she feels, is completely adverse to her true identity. His insistence upon labeling Helga a “lady” actually benefits his own status position. In subjecting Helga to the role of a Lady, he makes himself the masculine center of power in the situation. In other words, he solidifies his own positionality by defining her. In this situation, Helga goes from being a monument to all that Naxos upholds to being a monument to and a reflection of Dr. Anderson’s own masculinity and position of power.

This is the first instance in the novel of the attempted monumentalization of Helga Crane, and its resulting failure and blow to Helga's self-recognition foreshadows the trajectory of the rest of the novel. Ultimately, Dr. Anderson does not attempt to monumentalize Helga for his own personal goals, necessarily, but instead attempts to keep her entrenched in the act of supporting this masculine system of "racial uplift" that in turn forces women like Helga into these roles. It is through the rhetoric of change, prosperity, and progression, much like that which Dr. Anderson espouses, that draws and keeps women in these positions of thankless service without receiving any benefit to themselves.

When Helga returns to the South in the last section of *Quicksand*, she faces different expectations of black Southern femininity and thus undergoes a different kind of monumentalization by her husband and his congregation. As she rejects "the sins and temptations of New York" in order to assume the role of "the wife of the preacher [as] a person of relative importance" (118) Helga realizes that she must surrender the things with which she identifies the most: flashy clothes; fine housewares; and oriental, worldly decor. In joining the reverend's "scattered and primitive flock," Helga forces herself into religious devotion and domestic service. These are the proper roles for a pastor's wife, but in order to assume them, Helga must resign herself to giving up much of her own individuality. At first, this seems like a small price to pay for the "compensation" she feels "for all previous humiliations and disappointments" (118). To Helga, religion numbs these negativities and allows her to make sense of her past situations, to feel that these wrongs have been, to some extent, righted. Because Helga feels as though she has finally found permanent happiness, she willingly accepts the rules of femininity in this town with little to no criticism. For instance, while she initially attempts to "subdue the cleanly scrubbed ugliness of her own surroundings to soft inoffensive beauty, and to

help the other women to do likewise,” she soon gives in to the rugged rural life around her that is so different from the exquisite belongings she used to surround herself with and “eagerly...accept[s] everything, even that bleak air of poverty” (119).

Specifically, in terms of black Southern femininity, Helga’s new role models are the women of her husband’s congregation, especially Clementine Richards and Sary Jones. Clementine Richards is perhaps the closest representation of acceptable sexuality in this rural atmosphere. “A strapping black beauty of magnificent Amazon proportions and bold shining eyes of jet-like hardness,” Clementine looks down on Helga with a barely “concealed contemptuousness, considering her a poor thing without style, and without proper understanding of the worth and greatness of [Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green]” (120). Although he is married and both Clementine and the reverend are religiously devout, Clementine admires the pastor openly and fully in a way so overt that it “astonishes” Helga. Though she is initially struck by this behavior, Helga soon learns that “open adoration was the prerogative, the almost religious duty, of the female portion of the flock” (120). Thus, the only acceptable form of adoration in this community is that of the religious brand. This too accounts for the lack of sexual desire Helga feels in her marriage, where sex seems to be a means to a procreative end rather than any indication of intimacy between parties. After three children, Helga succumbs to the fact that there is “no time for the pursuit of beauty, or for the uplifting of other harassed and teeming women, or for the instruction of their neglected children” (124) nor is there any space in her marriage for true admiration or love beyond religious duty.

In relenting herself to her role as a mother and a wife—roles of service to her husband’s importance in the community—Helga begins to buckle under the weight of her duties. When her questions about how the other women manage their loads are met with “a resigned shrug, or an

amused snort, or an upward rolling of eyeballs with a mention of ‘de Lawd’ looking after us all,” she realizes that silent strength and passive acceptance are critical components to this black Southern womanhood in this community. Sary Jones is Helga’s role model for this mode of black Southern femininity because she dismisses her own feelings about her lot in life in favor of two beliefs: the first, in God; the second, that “et’s natur’al fo’ a ‘oman to hab chilluns” and that women must “make de bes’ of et” (125). Sary is, perhaps, the epitome of the Strong Black Woman in her community because she has worked hard since

early childhood except on those days, totaling perhaps sixty, following the birth of her six children. And who by dint of superhuman saving had somehow succeeded in feeding and clothing them and sending them all to school. Before her Helga felt humbled and oppressed by the sense of her own unworthiness and lack of sufficient faith. (126)

In addition to her hard work, Sary’s ability to finesse motherhood in terms of community expectations (by “feeding and clothing” her children) and to maintain religious faith through her trials, while never stopping to consider her own needs, indicates her status as a passive and supportive caregiver. What is perhaps most important about Sary’s black Southern womanhood is the effect it has on Helga, who says she feels “humbled *and oppressed*” because she knows she does not measure up to Sary. Furthermore, between Sary as an example and her husband telling her what is required of a pastor’s wife, it is now clear to Helga what, exactly, is expected of her.

Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green attempts to monumentalize Helga from the moment he makes her his wife and Helga gleans that the pastor’s wife is only of “relative importance.” It becomes clear to Helga that her role in their marriage is supportive and to his benefit only. Within the first two years of their marriage, Helga gives birth to three children—twin boys and a girl, whom Helga is less excited about, perhaps because she is aware, from personal experience, of the fate that awaits her. The Reverend sees Helga’s pregnancies as a blessing, and perhaps a

testament to his own virility and ability to provide for a large family. When Helga is “inclined to wonder a little just how they were to manage with another child on the way, he would point out that her doubt and uncertainty were a stupendous ingratitude” (124). It seems as though the Reverend takes Helga’s questioning as an insult both to his religious faith and to himself. Her husband is, as she has already noted, accustomed to the “unhidden and exaggerated approval” from the female constituency of his congregation, which “contribute[s] to his already oversized pomposity” (120). The Reverend is, then, taken aback by Helga’s questioning of his actions. As a monument to the Reverend’s own status in the community, Helga is not expected to do anything beyond support and remain passive before her husband.

In attempting to serve her duty to her husband, Helga gives birth to her fourth child. This treacherous labor almost kills Helga, and she emerges from the experience feeling that she has “contributed to a despised race” (127). Her depression after childbirth is almost immediate: when her child is “held before her for maternal approval. She fail[s] entirely to respond properly to this sop of consolation for the suffering and horror through which she had passed” (127). Rather than celebrate her new child, as is expected of her, Helga “deliberately close[s] her eyes, mutely shutting out the sickly infant, its smiling father, the soiled midwife, the curious neighbors, and the tousled room” (127). This marks the passage of Helga’s initial feelings of worthy recompense that she has when she succumbs to religious fervor at the beginning of her marriage. This also signifies the beginning of Helga’s resignation to depression at the choice she has made to marry her husband and, perhaps more regrettably, return to the South, a place that brought her unhappiness at the beginning of her journey. Admittedly, the Naxos South and the Reverend’s rural South are different in many ways. Naxos Negroes, Helga finds, are far more educated and concerned with the politics of promoting the black race than are the citizens of the rural Alabama

town where the novel ends. Still, despite the characterized differences in these environments, the idea of subjective and submissive black women is still an underlying expectation that colors Helga's interactions and relationships in those spaces. With the end of the novel, Larsen indicates how deleterious the process of monumentalization is on the subject. If the Reverend fashions Helga into a monument to his own masculinity through marriage and childrearing, then his methods are at the root of her near-death experience. Helga, by this point, is emotionally, physically, and mentally "used up" by her children, thus affording her no opportunity for self-expression, self-fashioning, or self-recognition.

Helga may die not too far beyond Larsen's ending of *Quicksand*, since the novel ends with her becoming pregnant with her fifth child in a relatively short period of time after recovering from the near-death illness and depression of her last childbirth. In ending the novel in such a frustratingly non-conclusive manner, Larsen implies that the cycle of monumentalization and its deleterious effects on the female subject are never-ending, that they never wrap up neatly. The fact that Helga's journey ends with death, at least the metaphorical death of her own visions and expectations for her life, underscores Larsen's unrelenting critique of the South and the rigid standards of femininity imposed by its two major sectors of black life. Though the two Souths are different, both rely on subservient women in order to function to the benefit of the male leaders. Naxos, for instance, employs Miss MacGooden and women like Margaret to indoctrinate the children into the Naxos mindset of obedience and limited ambition. At Naxos, sentiments like Helga's, which question the structure of the system, are discouraged. Likewise, in rural Alabama, women like Sary and Clementine are expected to function for the benefit of male leaders by bearing children, bringing them up in the church, and maintaining a household to the liking of their husbands. In both cases, women do the bulk of the work

necessary to sustain the hegemonic system in their environment. Given the strict roles of Naxos and the abject black southern womanhood touted by Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green, Hurston's conclusion that "de nigger woman is de mule uh de world" is descriptive of Helga's experiences with black Southern womanhood.

New Negro Womanhood and Harlem's Talented Tenth

Helga migrates from Naxos to Harlem thinking that the expectations and rules for black femininity will be different; she is, however, mistaken, and she realizes this as her stay in Harlem unfolds. As Helga is drawn deeper into Anne Grey's social circle, it becomes clear that the ideology of racial uplift and progress has not disappeared, but has instead been replaced with a competing ideology which seeks the same result. Helga finds that a more politicized, black-pride mentality of black progress has replaced the Booker T. Washington-inspired methodologies set rigidly in place at Naxos as the dominant political stance in Harlem. While this new form of racial pride and social awareness is initially appealing to Helga, the hypocrisy that she rallies against to Dr. Anderson soon appears before her once more in the form of Anne Grey, who serves as a female representative and supporter for this brand of racial uplift.

Notably, the literature and rhetoric of this time speaks directly to the advancement of the black *man* when referring to the state of the black race. Washington, for instance, stresses "the value and *manhood* of the American Negro" in his "Atlanta Exposition Speech" and thanks the white southern men to whom he speaks for creating a South where "the Negro is given a *man's* chance in the commercial world" (573, emphasis mine). Du Bois, in critiquing Washington, uses similar language, saying that "Mr. Washington's counsels of submission overlooked certain elements of true *manhood*" (695, emphasis mine) and that "there is among educated and thoughtful colored *men* in all parts of the land a feeling of deep regret, sorrow, and apprehension at the wide currency and ascendancy which some of Mr. Washington's theories have gained" (696, emphasis mine). Du Bois ends his critique of Washington by saying that "we must strive

for the rights which the world accords to *men*” (702, emphasis mine). The lack of opportunities present for black women, however, is not discussed. In these linguistic choices, both Washington and Du Bois highlight the fact that black women are dismissed from the conversation of racial uplift, especially when the conversation surrounds what the black race has to gain in the process. In these instances, the masculine-centered language used suggests that white patriarchy is an affront to black *men* and that black *men* have much to gain from racial progress. However, the subject switches to *we* when the conversation turns to what can and should be done for black manhood. Notably, neither Washington nor Du Bois contend that black *men* should work to uplift the race; rather, both writers use a group rhetoric which implies that all blacks, male and female, should work toward the goal of black (male) progress. From these texts by men, we can infer that the same structure of male-centric power and male-focused goals and advancements are as prominent in this text as they are in Larsen’s own world. Larsen’s critique of this discourse indicates a contemporary awareness of this discrepancy and places Helga’s journey in conversation with the lived experiences of black women at this time.

Because of the politicized push for black racial advancement in white society, ideologically-driven directives and roles for women emerge. For the success of this goal, black women must work actively to undo racialized stereotypes such as the “jezebel” which are prevalent in white society. These men and women must also show themselves to be active in the community, proud of their race, and educated. In addition to the ideological mandates, the physical mold of the protest-oriented New Negro woman is best embodied in Anne Grey, who Helga feels is “almost too good to be true” (45). Anne, I argue, attempts to monumentalize Helga, not for herself, but for the cause of black racial uplift, which is the dominant political force during Helga’s time in Harlem. The stakes for monumentalization are high, since in order

for racial uplift to occur, blacks must undo the negative stereotypes and expectations of themselves that are so entrenched in the memories of white society. Because she already meets the physical and intellectual requirements, Anne attempts to bring Helga into her social circle and espouses her views on the race problem repeatedly, as if to imply that Helga should hold the same views as well. This attempt to monumentalize Helga fails, however, as Helga becomes more interested in following in line with the sexually and racially intriguing Audrey Denney instead of the prim, politically-appropriate example of Anne Grey, an example that embodies the expectations for the New Negro woman.

Anne's appearance is crucial to understanding the expectations Helga faces in Harlem:

Thirty, maybe, brownly beautiful, [Anne Grey] had the face of a golden Madonna, grave and calm and sweet, with shining black hair and eyes. She carried herself as queens are reputed to bear themselves, and probably do not. Her manners were as agreeably gentle as her own soft name. She possessed an impeccably fastidious taste in clothes, knowing what suited her and wearing it with an air of unconscious assurance. The unusual thing, a native New Yorker, she was also a person of distinction, financially independent, well connected and much sought after (45).

Anne's beauty is supplemented by her softness and composure. As the ideal New Negro woman, Anne presents herself as educated, distinctive, and "well connected," traits both greatly appreciated at Naxos and completely beyond Helga's possibility. The tastes Anne displays in her apartment, which are to Helga's liking, also indicate that worldliness and culture are particularly important for the New Negro woman. Her comparison to "a golden Madonna" also matches Anne's holier-than-thou attitude and her absolute, unquestioning belief in her conception of social equality. These descriptions coincide with the iconographies of mulatta women during the Harlem Renaissance. As stated in the introduction, publications like *Crisis* displayed such photography and portraiture of black women while at the same time touting a message of racial equality. These are not antithetical, but putting the imagery and rhetoric in close juxtaposition

suggests a conflation of meaning. Likewise, Helga conflates Anne's spewing of protest rhetoric to be as intrinsic a part of her personality as her soft features and her fastidious manner of dress. Embodied in Anne is the idea that racial uplift should occur at the intersection of educated protest, well-mannered dress and social interaction, and proper appearance.

So, as an ideal New Negro woman herself, Anne attempts to make Helga into a similarly constructed example. Firstly, Anne only takes Helga under her wing because Mrs. Hayes-Rore—one of Anne's prominent connections and her aunt by marriage—asks her to do so, after first asking Helga to mask her lack of “appropriate” family ties and presence of racially “inappropriate” ones. Anne brings Helga into her world generously, but in doing so, instructs Helga through her own example on the necessary propriety for this upper-class, “Talented Tenth” social arena. It is clear that Anne sees herself as an important representative of how black women should function in this social sphere, and she judges those who fall short of her standards. Thus, she holds the same expectations for Helga. In this manner, Anne attempts to monumentalize Helga, to bring her into the cause of racial uplift. Anne is drawn to Helga because she is both educated and beautiful in a way that matches up with the prominent imagery of femininity at this time. With fair skin, black hair, and an air of worldliness and culture, Helga fits neatly within the narrative and iconography of the New Negro woman. Anne's approval of Helga is not merely personal, but it is also indicative of Anne's approval of the *idea* of Helga Crane and how that idea fits into her political interests and agenda.

The social tone of Harlem is, in many ways, antithetical to that of Naxos. Helga is immediately drawn to the reflections of luxury scattered about her new home: for instance, Anne Grey has tailored clothes and a maid, as well as beautiful furniture and décor that suit Helga aesthetically. The fact that it is now “possible for her to meet and know people with tastes and

ideas similar to her own” makes Helga feel “welcomed [and] lulled...into something that was, she was certain, peace and contentment” (43). Finally, she feels compensated and right for her vehement rejection of Naxos and its stifling doctrine, since “her New York friends looked with contempt and scorn on Naxos and all its works” (43), preferring instead to heighten themselves through “books, the theater, [and] parties” (45). Helga is also delighted that there is some aesthetic attention paid to life in Harlem, relishing in the proper, “unobtrusive correctness” of the styles of those around her. This signals to Helga that pride in oneself, and, therefore, pride in the black race, is of utmost importance in Harlem. After Naxos’ muting of colors and of the things that make blacks vibrant to Helga, Harlem is a welcome reprieve.

Helga initially feels that she fits in and that she has opportunities for self-fulfillment that were denied her in Naxos. For instance, Helga is more moderate in her views on the “race problem,” while Anne seems to devote her every emotion and action to the cause. However, it becomes clear by the end of her stay in Harlem that her moderate nature is not entirely welcome and that Harlem society may be just as rigid and unforgiving as that of Naxos. Helga’s realization plays out at a jazz club where Helga first witnesses Audrey Denney, whose interracial friendships and relationships deeply offend Anne. Anne, believing that Audrey “out to be ostracized...because she goes about with white people and they know she’s colored,” indignantly apprises Helga of Audrey’s alleged sins in an attempt to shut down any threat of acceptance or toleration of such behavior, of such an individual. However, Helga objects to none of Audrey’s alleged transgressions—giving parties for white and colored people together,” (61) for instance—and instead longs to be her. Helga notes Audrey’s ability to enchant men and to “ignore racial barriers and give her attention to people” and feels “not contempt, but envious admiration” (62) as she watches her on the dance floor. To Helga, Anne’s sanctimonious

shunning of Audrey Denney is not merely unnecessary, but it is completely antithetical to Anne's beliefs in equality. Because Anne represents the "Talented Tenth" doctrine in Helga's life, this forces Helga's disillusionment with this brand of racial uplift.

In this way, as Helga ultimately realizes, Naxos and Harlem are not so different. The hypocrisy that she rallied against to Dr. Anderson now appear before her in the form of Anne Grey, who, while female, is a representative and supporter for the cause of racial uplift, which would primarily benefit black men. Helga equates Anne's interest with "the race problem" as an "obsession" fed by "all the meetings of protest...the complaining magazines...the lurid newspapers spewed out by the Negro yellow press" (48). In lamenting the problems of the black race, Anne "preache[s] social inequality and equal opportunity for all and honestly thought that she believed them, but she considered it an affront to the race...for any Negro to receive on terms of equality any white person" because "she hated white people with a deep and burning hatred" (48). Thus, Anne's solution is not to seek equality with whites, but to insist upon her own race's superiority to theirs. Helga finds this ironic, because Anne

aped their clothes, their manners, and their gracious ways of living. While proclaiming loudly the undiluted good of all things Negro, she yet disliked the songs, the dances, and the softly blurred speech of the race. Toward these things she showed only a disdainful contempt, tinged sometimes with a faint amusement. Like the despised people of the white race, she preferred Pavlova to Florence Mills, John McCormack to Taylor Gordon, Walter Hampden to Paul Robeson. Theoretically, however, she stood for the immediate advancement of all things Negroid, and was in revolt against social inequality. (48)

To Helga, the fact that the "race problem always creep[s] in" is irritating, but the hypocrisy of Anne's stance is particularly vexing. Helga's attitude after this revelation is rhetorically and emotionally similar to her disillusionment with Naxos. Just as she notices that all Naxos faculty appears to be cut from the same "white man's pattern" by the institution, she realizes that in

Harlem there are “dozens or more brown faces, all cast from the same indefinite mold, and so like her own” (54). Hypocrisy and molding, Helga finds, are inescapable.

“Monumentalize” is an apt description for what Anne does with Helga because the strictures imposed upon these Talented Tenth women—in terms of appearance and social status—are constructed and enforced out of a fear of obscurity. Lest anyone forget what the vision for the race is, or what the black man has achieved, there is a convenient monument—the body of a fair-skinned, well-educated, ladylike, cultured black woman—to attest to the progress of the race and, by proxy, of the black man. To be clear, Anne has been monumentalized within this movement as well—as a representative of that movement in Helga’s life, she in turn attempts the same process on Helga.

The significance of this particular construction of femininity is that it lies in direct contrast to the stereotypical images of the black race borne from the era of Reconstruction. The New Negro era is a way in which blacks may showcase their advancements and the bodies of these women, who will hopefully undo the negative expectations of an exotic figure or a jezebel, testify to that change. To Anne Grey, and to the Talented Tenth at large, women like Audrey Denney must be shunned because, to their mind, these women visually reify the hypersexual and racially transgressive tropes of antebellum and Reconstruction America.

Though Helga is not explicitly monumentalized by a man, as she is in the South by both Dr. Anderson and Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green, she is still monumentalized in Harlem for the cause of male-centered power structures. While men and women are both expected to work toward the advancement of the black race, there are, much like at Naxos, separate spheres for men and women. These spheres are so separate that the benefits of any work done are most

directly experienced by black men, while black women commit to part of, if not the bulk of, the work of racial uplift.

The Erotic Exotic Figure in (White) Modernism

Foreshadowing the Danes' reception of Helga, Margaret Creighton imparts unto her friend what she considers a compliment: "It's nice having you here, Helga. We all think so. Even the dead ones. We need a few decorations to brighten our sad lives" (Larsen 14). Despite this plea, Helga leaves Naxos and eventually finds herself in Copenhagen, Denmark, where her role as an erotic, exotic (footnote Audre Lorde) "decoration" takes form. As an aesthetically pleasing figure, Helga is roped into bodily representing the exotic and erotic expectations for black female sexuality that are commonplace with the white European Modernists with which she surrounds herself. The exotic appearance fabricated for her by her aunt and by Olsen is used as a monument to Olsen's masculinity and celebrity as an artist.

As a biracial and transnational⁸ writer, then, Larsen does not limit her focus to American society but instead broadens her critique of these power structures to include a critique of how these structures function abroad. Elizabeth Ammons contends that Helga's stint in Denmark offers Larsen the chance to "take on white modernism" by critiquing the primitivism forced upon Helga for the sake of "high art" (188). Despite the fact that Helga "[takes] to luxury as the proverbial duck to water and "[takes] to admiration and attention even more eagerly" (67) she comes to realize that this luxury and attention comes at the cost of respect. Helga is given admiration, not as a woman, but as a "pet dog" or an object of art.

In the old city of Copenhagen, Helga is made constantly aware of the history and antiquity of the environment. Helga notes the nostalgic feel of the city and its old architecture

⁸ I use "transnational" here to signify the fact that Larsen troubles boundaries, both between American and European racial discourses and between Helga's racial identities.

amidst the burgeoning modernity of its streets, social outlets, and businesses. As a major western European city, Copenhagen represents for Larsen a site of white Modernism, wherein high art and aesthetics are deemed culturally dominant. Larsen's representation of Copenhagen recalls dominant Modernist ideologies of progression and, at the same time, a respect or nostalgia for classical, cultured aesthetics. The dominant center of power here, just as it is in America, is occupied by white men of high social status. But, as with the rest of the Western world, his space also undoubtedly witnesses an onset of change wherein women and other queer-identified bodies attempt to move closer toward the center of power and away from their abject spaces in the margins. It is this sense of change, this shift, that spurs the move toward monumentalization in America, and for Larsen, Copenhagen is no different. An ideology of white male dominance reigns supreme, as is evidenced by Axel Olsen's possessive, domineering treatment of Helga and his own self-serving vision of her identity and appearance. For a white male of socially-superior status, movements like feminism that attempt to move marginalized bodies toward the center are often seen as threatening to the hegemonic center of power that those white men already occupy.

I argue that this ideology is so prevalent, as evidenced by the former examples of monuments such as the Statue of Liberty, that it undergirds the ways in which men contend with women. In *Quicksand*, Olsen attempts to monumentalize Helga in order to rigidify his own masculinity out of this tradition, and he does so not only by chipping away at her humanity by addressing her as an aesthetic object, but also by rendering a portrait of Helga that displays her in an offensively sexualized way. In doing so, Olsen attempts to write the traits of the erotic exotic figure onto Helga in order to Other her. As an Other, Helga then serves the purpose of reifying the dominant center of power through her very being, thusly characterized by opposition to and difference from those who occupy that dominant center. For Olsen, this act ideally results in a

visual, tangible object that represents and upholds his own masculinity. Yet, regardless of Olsen's attempts to monumentalize her through his language, his painting, and his "marriage proposal," Helga manages to resist the processes.

Helga's monumentalization as an erotic, exotic figure begins almost immediately upon her arrival in Copenhagen. With an affinity for luxury items, Helga is thrilled by the encouragement to shop for bright colors, shining jewels, and flattering outfits. Although her niece needs little convincing, Aunt Katrina pushes Helga toward flashier dress: "you're young. And you're a foreigner, and different. You must have bright things to set off the color of your lovely brown skin. Striking things, exotic things. You must make an impression" (68). What Aunt Katrina does not tell Helga, however, is that the impression Helga must make is for the benefit of the social profile of herself and her husband. In an aside to the reader, Larsen reveals that "In [Aunt Katrina's] own mind she had determined the role that Helga was to play in advancing the social fortunes of the Dahls of Copenhagen, and she meant to begin at once" (68). In other words, Helga arrives in Copenhagen already subjected to the pressure of societal expectations.

Because she is initially unaware of the role she is expected to play in Copenhagen, Helga succumbs to the realization of her dream of "the things which money could give, leisure, attention, beautiful surroundings" (67). She says that Copenhagen is "her proper setting" and there she feels "consoled at last for the spiritual wounds of the past" (67). But just as quickly as Helga is roped into preparations for the Copenhagen social scene, she realizes that she is quite different from those around her. Her difference becomes her currency in Copenhagen, the thing that makes her special. It also, however, positions Helga on the receiving end of voyeuristic gazes. After her first round through the stores, Helga dons her new buckles and earrings and feels

“like a veritable savage as they [make] their leisurely way across the pavement” (69). Still, early on, Helga chooses not to critique this feeling; nor does she give much thought to the implications of the stares she receives from “the many pedestrians who stopped to stare at the queer dark creature” (69). Instead of dealing with “the mental strain” of assessing these looks, Helga chooses instead to enjoy her place at the center of this society (70). For some reason, the “sly, curious glances” Helga gets from Danish people do not cause her resentment; instead, Helga is comfortable being a representative Negro in Copenhagen. Because there are no other blacks to compare her to, Helga is finally considered black without having to hide her interracial identity. In fact, it is her interracial identity that makes her such a curiosity in Copenhagen. Helga enjoys her status of difference in Copenhagen and, at first, assumes happily the role of a “token” black woman among her new friends and admirers.

Gradually, the consequences of this social treatment become increasingly pronounced to Helga. At one point, Helga refers to “her exact status in her new environment” as “A decoration. A curio. A peacock” (73). Here, she echoes Margaret Creighton’s exact language from the very beginning of the novel. Helga also likens herself to “some new and strange species of pet dog being proudly exhibited,” noted that she garners “curiosity and interest” more than, perhaps, genuine interest between two humans (70). She later concludes that she “incites” interest:

She was incited to make an impression, a voluptuous impression. She was incited to inflame attention and admiration. She was dressed for it, subtly schooled for it. And after a little while she gave herself up wholly to the fascinating business of being seen, gaped at, desired. (74)

This is Helga’s first major realization of her role in the lives of others. Just as monuments to the South’s “Lost Cause” garnered attention from all on-lookers, black and white, and admiration from confederate veterans and sympathizers, Helga stirs the collective consciousness of those who gaze upon her. Helga, “as a woman, is at the center of a complex process of exchange”

(Carby 172). Carby's words are especially true here because of the immense luxury thrust upon Helga in Copenhagen. The exchange is Helga's selfhood and virtue for upward social mobility and material wealth. This exchange is processed, not by Helga, but instead by her aunt and Uncle. Thus, all Helga can do is "give herself up wholly" to the process of monumentalization (74). Because she is at this center of exchange in which her body is her most valuable asset, she is constructed as a monument to the masculine system of power at play in Copenhagen and, if we expand our view to Larsen's whole critique, in (white) Modernism as a whole. Helga's grooming and placement at the center of her Aunt and Uncle's representatively upper-class privileged social life bears a striking resemblance to "the nineteenth-century European practice of exhibiting black women as a form of social entertainment" and to the "Human Zoos" of the turn-of-the-century World's Fairs. These marginalized bodies represented for the white spectator a false and arbitrary difference between their own ethnicities and that of the white European man. The presence of these bodies reflected the supposed superiority of white hegemony. The stares Helga faces in Copenhagen are thus in conversation with the collective white, western European gaze upon the exotic Other at the turn of the century and into the 20th century. Just as the Hottentot Venus and other women were displayed during this time, so is Helga's body an "othered" monument to the superiority upper-class of Copenhagen.

Like a monument, Helga must constantly contend with the stares of strangers. The difference is, of course, that Helga is not a stone monument but instead a monumentalized woman; therefore, the gaze has more pronounced consequences. As her "peacock's life" (81) becomes unsatisfying, Helga grows more aware of the meanings behind the glances she gets from men and women, and the differences in the two:

She liked the compliments in the men's eyes.... The women too were kind, feeling no need for jealousy. To them this girl, this Helga Crane, this mysterious

niece of the Dahls, was not to be reckoned seriously in their scheme of things. True, she was attractive, unusual, in an exotic, almost savage way, but she wasn't one of them. She didn't count at all (70).

Regardless of the viewer, Helga is merely an object in Copenhagen. The gazes with which she is faced reduce her to a subjective position. In a sense, she is dehumanized in this setting. To men, she is an object to be complimented, like a work of art or a sex object. Women, knowing that men do not take Helga seriously, do not bother feeling jealous of Helga's attention. For them, the attention Helga receives is more along the lines of the attention given to a novelty item and is thus not threatening to their own lives. Helga thus takes on the role of aesthetic artifact instead of human companion.

However, while Helga is not taken seriously in Copenhagen, the ideas and hegemonic constructs with which she comes to embody are significant to those around her. Helga is thusly monumentalized in Copenhagen because while she is not significant as a *human* to her Danish cohort, the exotic difference through which their own hegemonic superiority is underscored is of great importance. As her aunt and uncle gaze upon her body, they see, first and foremost, their ticket to upward social mobility in their capitalist Modern society. Thus, they position Helga at the forefront of society, where she occupies the space at "the center of an admiring group" (70) of well-to-do whites who are immediately taken by "her dark, alien appearance" (73) and who, as they "fully profit by their stares" (73) regard her as a work of art.

Stares of this nature, when fixated on a human subject instead of a work of art, produce a drastically different effect. Perhaps the most obvious difference is that there is a thinking presence at the end of this gaze. As that presence, Helga is all too aware that Olsen "look[s] intently at her for what seem[s] to her an incredibly rude length of time" (71) before approving her physical appearance. Olsen calls her "amazing. Marvelous," (71) as though describing a new

painting he of which he is particularly fond. Olsen continues: “superb eyes...color...neck column...yellow...hair...alive...wonderful...” (71) and he only says so to Helga’s aunt, as though she is the curator to the masterpiece before him. Helga understands the lack of humanity in this treatment, noting that in Copenhagen, she is “a curiosity, a stunt, at which people came and gazed” (71) and yet she only responds inwardly that this treatment is “odd” and “different from America” (72). Ironically, this treatment is not at all different from America. In Harlem, for instance, Anne gazes contemptuously upon Audrey Denney. While this is not directly about Helga, Helga does wish that she could be Audrey Denney, who represents, socially and aesthetically, what Helga wants in life. Furthermore, in Naxos, it is implied that Helga is gazed upon in this manner quite often, although in a negative way, because of Margaret Creighton’s comment that Helga functions as a “decoration” for the faculty. While Olsen’s comments may initially appear to be complimentary—or at least innocent—in Helga’s mind, the effect is the same as Anne and Margaret’s comments. Helga is, in each of these circumstances, reduced to her appearance, which then overrides any personal identity she has. Comments about Helga’s appearance serve to rigidify the status quo surrounding her. Not only does she become even more aware of the difference between herself and others, but she also becomes increasingly aware of what that difference means to those who gaze upon her figure. Still, in the beginning, Helga pushes such ruminations to the side for the sake of basking in “a goodly measure of flattering attention and admiration” (74) because this “gratifie[s] her augmented sense of self-importance” (76) which was not fully recognized in either Naxos or Harlem.

Despite her reveling in the center of attention in Copenhagen, Helga cannot ignore the reactions and attitudes she witnesses at a minstrel show she attends with her white European cohort. Helga witnesses this spectacle, wherein

upon the stage pranced two black men, American Negroes undoubtedly, for as they danced and cavorted, they sang in the English of America an old ragtime song that Helga remembered hearing as a child, "Everybody gives me good advice." At its conclusion the audience applauded with delight. Only Helga Crane was silent, motionless. (82)

Helga, unable to redirect her attention or to escape, is finally confronted with the reality of what, by proxy, she represents to those who gaze upon her in Copenhagen. Her initial response is shame—"she was filled with a fierce hatred for the cavorting Negroes on the stage"—and betrayal, along with surprise as her fellow audience members fanatically partake in what she considers an offensive spectacle (83). Furthermore, Helga feels vulnerable because the "cavorting" and singing on stage provide a mirror in which she can finally see how the people of Copenhagen have viewed her. Helga, "silent [and] motionless," is, at this moment in the text, a monument to this minstrelsy that the people of Copenhagen, perhaps her own family included, expect of black Americans.

The racial shame Helga experiences at the show subsides somewhat when she is alone again. It becomes

quite clear to her that all along they had divined its presence, had known that in her was something, some characteristic, different from any that they themselves possessed. Else why had they decked her out as they had? Why subtly indicated that she was different? And they hadn't despised it. No, they had admired it, rated it as a precious thing, a thing to be enhanced, *preserved*. (83, emphasis mine)

I emphasize "preserved" to indicate the extent to which Helga serves as a monument in Copenhagen. Helga realizes here that her purpose in Copenhagen is to exemplify difference, to create a counterpoint from which those who come in contact with her may become aware of the difference between themselves and herself, and may, theoretically, experience a heightened sense of superiority. In making these differences clear and underscoring the racial and, perhaps,

national, superiority this society assumes, Helga in effect becomes a living monument to this society.

The differences between expectations from Helga's Copenhagen society for black men and women become clear to her in what is arguably the climax of this section, and perhaps even of the novel: the proposal from Axel Olsen. In this scene, Helga becomes more metaphorically monumental: detached, indifferent, as Olsen makes assumptions about her and implicates her into his own narrative as an artist, a creator: "It may be that with you, Helga, for wife, I will become great. Immortal. Who knows?" (87). He relieves himself of choice—"I didn't want to love you, but I had to"—to further imply that Helga's exotic beauty is that a tantalizing "deliberate lure" (87). Olsen others Helga until her sexuality is borderline monstrous and controlling. Ironically, her sexuality falls, at this point, out of her control because of the ways in which Olsen chooses to usurp her identity and remold it into something that functions with respect to himself.

Disproportionately configuring Helga into his own narrative is Olsen's first step toward monumentalizing her, aside from his initial appraisal of her body. In these acts, he gazes upon Helga in such a way that renders her an aesthetic, soulless object. Once she is void of her humanity in his eyes, Olsen can proceed with his monumentalization of Helga Crane. He attempts to propose to her, however offensively⁹, in order to legally and hegemonically usurp her into a role of support for himself, his art, and his celebrity as an artist.

Olsen not only metaphorically attempts this, as he inscribes Helga with meaning and importance regarding his own artistry, but he also indicates his expectations of Helga in the crude ways in which he addresses her during his "proposal". Olsen says "you have the warm impulsive nature of the women of Africa, but, my lovely, you have, I fear, the soul of a

⁹ Here, I'm referring to Olsen's accusation that Helga has "the soul of a prostitute" (87).

prostitute” (87). This comment reveals the extent to which Olsen internalizes and expects the stereotypical renderings of exotic and eroticized women present in white hegemonic culture. In making this statement, it is clear that Olsen does not expect to be rejected because he views Helga as a purely sexual commodity. Furthermore, the system of masculine hegemony in which Olsen functions assumes that the woman will not reject the supposedly dominant man. This accounts for Olsen’s shock when Helga declares: “I don’t at all care to be owned. Even by you” (87). With monumental structures, there is, of course, no chance of rejection. Thus Helga’s reaction puzzles Olsen, who has already written his meaning and purpose onto Helga. While Helga views Olsen as “the most distant, the most unreal figure in the world,” Olsen ironically feels the same way about Helga. This conception of Helga underscores Olsen’s attempt to monumentalize Helga, to use her body, to reify and promote his own masculinity, ego, and social standing.

Olsen's grotesque portrait of Helga is a physical manifestation of his impressions of her, which effectively and spacially solidifies Olsen’s view of Helga. Before this, Helga becomes a monument to the city of Copenhagen after “she had become a little familiar with the city, and its inhabitants a little used to her” (76). The language Larsen uses here suggests that Helga is somewhat of a fixture in Copenhagen. It is as though she is describing a new statue or monument being built in the town—at first, striking, and then, gradually, becoming more embedded in the landscape. Notably, it is around this time that Helga’s “old unhappy questioning mood” (83) begins to nag at her consciousness.

In leading up to the reveal of this portrait, Olsen attempts to box Helga into the role of his erotic exotic figure. While Helga has succumbed to this treatment throughout her entire stint in Copenhagen, this climactic instance becomes the breaking point, at which time she realizes the

truly deleterious effects of such treatment on her personal identity. This exacerbates what Sherrard-Johnson refers to as “the African American women’s struggles to reconcile the template of the race woman with their own self-definitions” (840). While her example specifically refers to Helga and New Negro womanhood in Harlem, it is equally pertinent to a discussion of Helga as an erotic, exotic figure because she is unable to configure her own identity within the confines of this trope which has been ascribed to her body. This inability to develop oneself while being forced to represent the hegemonic society, I argue, is the predominant negative impact of monumentalization on the female subject.

Helga's body is used as a canvas onto which Olsen can project his own male-centered ego. In rendering Helga's body this way, and in proposing marriage to his subject, Olsen admittedly hopes to achieve a new level of artistic greatness. This goal, which feeds his own egotistical purposes, must be achieved at the cost of Helga's own self-recognized sense of identity. Confronted with the twisted image of what Olsen asserts is her true self, Helga is rightfully offended and realizes that she cannot achieve any sense of self-creation in Copenhagen, or anywhere else.

The implications of Helga’s monumentalization in Copenhagen are twofold: first, it indicates the extent to which Larsen critiques white Modernism; secondly, it voids any claim that either Anne Grey (referring to that old conversation) or Helga herself held as to the superiority and lack of racial inequality abroad. In writing this portion of *Quicksand*, Larsen expansively claims that there is not, at this time, any space in which the black (and, especially, biracial) woman can find solace from the forces of power at work which construct for her a submissive role in society.

Conclusion

“Monumental Femininity in 20th Century American Literature”

In my reading of *Quicksand* I hope to have shown the extent to which Helga Crane must contend with monumentalization throughout the narrative. While Helga sets out on her journey in order to find comfort, happiness, and belonging, she ultimately fails. Rather than blame the forces of power in society that cause this unhappiness, she blames herself. Perhaps, she concludes, she is not willing enough to assimilate or to appease others. As a reader, however, I am reluctant to blame Helga entirely because the things she rejects—Naxos education, Anne Grey’s racial shame, and Axel Olsen’s insulting proposal—will result in further discontentment simply because they do not contribute or consider Helga’s best interests. Instead, these things are pushed upon Helga for the sake of solidifying some ideological agenda. I chose to focus my reading on Larsen’s *Quicksand* in order to read not only how men monumentalize women, but to examine how such acts play out with a biracial woman who is monumentalized not only by black men but by white men and by black women who seek to uphold the rigid power structures that support black men.

I chose *Quicksand* specifically because Larsen situates Helga within a time of immense change for the black community and for America at large, and it is at these times in American history when monuments become more prevalent on the landscape in order to reify certain ideologies against the perceived threat of burgeoning change. Furthermore, *Quicksand* offers a dynamic field upon which to test the theory of monumentalization. Helga’s journey takes place in two vastly different southern landscapes, as well as in Europe and in the northern cities of

Chicago and New York, which saw exponential growth due to the Great Migration of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Helga herself is an interesting case to apply this theory to because she is not only a woman, but she is a *black* woman, a *biracial* woman, and a woman whose whiteness ties her directly to a Western European immigrant identity. Class issues are present throughout *Quicksand*, especially given the fact that Helga is, for all intents and purposes, poor, and must rely on others for basic necessities such as clothing, food, and living arrangements. Additionally, Helga's black and biracial identities take on different meanings as she moves between spaces and as the dominant centers of power shift as a result of these movements. On a larger scale, the racial differences in the novel invite readings of not only masculinity and femininity but of *black* masculinity in the Jim Crow South, as well as different shades of appropriate black femininity. *Quicksand* is thus a particularly rich text upon which to test this theory.

I think, however, that the idea of monumentalization has implications that reach far beyond *Quicksand*, the early 20th century, and texts written by black women. In the original iteration of this idea, I utilized Willa Cather's *A Lost Lady* (1923) and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) as texts through which to read the monumentalization of women in this period. Cather's Marian Forrester seems a particularly apt example of the effects of monumentalization, as her body comes to represent the old Frontier mentality and the Cult of True Womanhood as industrialization and social modernity begin to take force in the lives of her husband and the novel's narrator, Neil Herbert. Neil and the Captain, fearful of the ways in which modernity shifts the axis of power in the small frontier town of Sweet Water, grasp onto and attempt to rigidify the already tenuous symbolism of old frontier ideals represented by Marian Forrester's femininity. In doing so, Neil becomes increasingly disillusioned by Mrs.

Forrester, who ultimately does not succumb to Neil's attempts to monumentalize, or write such ideologies, onto her body.

Similarly, Fitzgerald's Daisy Fay Buchanan can be read as a monument to Gatsby's nostalgic sense of his own masculinity. Gatsby's insistence upon—and subsequent failure to—restore Daisy as a pure Southern belle worthy of the spoils of his corrupt estate indicates the extent to which monumentalization rests in the American consciousness alongside the myth of the American Dream. The trajectories of both Marian and Daisy, which both end in their disappearance from the narrator's lives, suggest that the abstractions written onto monuments are as ephemeral as time itself and that the masculine impulse to reify normative constructions of power and sexuality ultimately fail at the same time as they adversely affect the ability for these living subjects to construct their own identities.

Further into the 20th century, I think this idea still holds true. There is, of course, a consistent move toward shifting centers of power throughout the 20th century, including but not limited to Civil Rights, the feminist movement, the movement toward LGBTQ+ rights, anti-war protests of the 1970s, and the Black Power movement of the same period. As these various marginalized groups attempt to chip away at the hegemonic systems that oppress them, there is an attempt by people benefitting from those hegemonic systems to reify those structures.

Ntozake Shange's 1975 choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf* provides a striking example of the effects of monumentalization on the female subject. The external forces that attempt to box these women into rigid categories of black female sexuality results directly in the "metaphysical dilemma" of "bein alive & bein a woman & bein colored" (59) the women of the choreopoem attempt to overcome.

Overall, there is space to consider the ways in which monumental thinking is enforced and is thusly reflected in American literature. Just as the Statue of Liberty is emblematic of a variety of abstractions to the American public, so is the female body a site upon which men similarly attempt to display to future generations their conceptions of their own normalizing, hegemonic power.

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