Race, Gender, and the Limits of Physicality in *Ourika* and *Quicksand*

**Introduction: Reasons for Comparing *Ourika* and *Quicksand***

A comparison of Claire de Duras’s *Ourika* and Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* may at first seem puzzling to those familiar with the differing social and historical contexts of the two works. Ourika, who barely escapes the chains of plantation slavery, occupies the unusual position of a black woman raised amongst the French aristocracy before and during the Reign of Terror. Helga Crane, the protagonist of Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*, exists in the entirely different social climate of the 20th century Harlem Renaissance. The seemingly unwanted product of a Danish mother and a black father, she travels through the United States and Denmark in search of a coherent personal identity. One could easily make the argument that the story of a near-slave living in Revolutionary France would have little to do with the tale of a mixed-race woman passing through various spheres of 1920s America and Copenhagen. However, a detailed analysis of both the historical settings in which the works take place and the protagonists’ similar social circumstances reveals that an examination of the relationship between the two texts is far from unwarranted.

In some senses, the French Revolution and the Harlem Renaissance provide vastly different historical backdrops for Duras’s and Larsen’s protagonists; the former conjures up images of guillotine-fueled bloodshed and terror while the latter evokes a colorful world of nightclubs, jazz, and poetry. However, despite the initial differences between these two historical periods, it is important to note that the French Revolution and the Harlem Renaissance were both
eras of immense social and political change. The French Revolution—during which aristocrats faced the guillotine and revolutionaries vied for liberty, equality, and brotherhood—was a period in which the very idea of citizenship was in flux. In lieu of a more restricted sense of the word, “citizenship” became a universalist concept that was hypothetically accessible to all (Prasad 115). At least in theory, Ourika’s upbringing in pre-Revolutionary and Revolutionary France should place her in a particularly good position to reconcile the discrepancy between her French upbringing and her Senegalese heritage by finding a social position in a rapidly changing society. After all, the spirit of rebellion and reinvention that characterized the French Revolution certainly resulted in a fluidity that allowed for changes in the social structure of France, at least in comparison to historical periods that were less welcoming of change. Similarly, Helga’s search for identity during the Harlem Renaissance also seems advantageously timed. One would imagine that shifting definitions of what it meant to be an African American such as those promoted by the New Negro Movement, the idea of the “talented tenth,” and racial uplift would provide Helga with an excellent environment for finding a coherent identity. In short, as times of optimism for marginalized groups, one would expect the French Revolution and the Harlem Renaissance to provide Ourika and Helga with the necessary opportunities to find their places in society despite their complex racial and social circumstances.

Perhaps even more convincing of the legitimacy of comparing Ourika and Quicksand is the fact that despite the relative fluidity of their respective societies, both characters represent how the intersection of race with gender further complicates the process of forming a satisfactory sense of self. The concepts of race and racial awakenings are certainly imperative to any critical discussion of Ourika and Quicksand. To avoid discussing such topics would mean ignoring one of the most flagrant platforms of social critique found in both texts. However, when focusing
solely on racial complications without addressing the role of gender, one lacks a complete understanding of how the two factors intertwine in Duras’s and Larsen’s works.

In their introduction to *Ourika*, Joan DeJean and Margaret Waller set the stage for understanding Duras’s use of race on a metaphorical level. Considering her status as a white aristocrat, Duras’s decision to portray a racial identity crisis of an African in France is a puzzling one. Positing that Duras’s experience of exile was deeply scarring, DeJean and Waller suggest her use of racial alienation in *Ourika* symbolizes the author’s personal sense of isolation from her country when exiled (DeJean and Waller vii-xx). If it is reasonable to understand Duras’s use of racial alienation as a representation of her sense of isolation from France, it is equally plausible to suggest that Ourika’s racial situation represents Duras’s sense of isolation as a woman, especially considering the nascent literary tradition of using slavery to symbolize the feminine condition. After all, one of Ourika’s central obstacles, her severe lack of marriageability, is certainly influenced by her racial difference but is also a traditionally feminine concern at its core. In Ourika’s case, race and gender function jointly and their influence cannot easily be separated. *Quicksand’s* protagonist also exhibits severe isolation caused by the intersection of racial and gender-based factors. Although Helga ostensibly searches for a society in which she fits racially, the fact that novel ends with the protagonist’s multiple pregnancies speaks to themes of womanhood just as strongly.

While it may be tempting to read *Ourika* and *Quicksand* as governed by either race or gender, such readings do not do justice to the complexity of Duras’s and Larsen’s characters. In order to truly understand the particular brand of alienation that binds Ourika and Helga in a literary sisterhood and inevitably leads to psychological breakdowns that leave them little more than soulless bodies, one must examine race and gender in the novels in conjunction with one
another. By examining the degree to which their identities are simultaneously fractured by both race and gender, it becomes clear that Ourika and Helga’s despair lies not just in their inability to find a place in society, but also in their inability to create a personal identity that transcends the stereotypes that so thoroughly trap them in their raced and sexed bodies.

**Alienation: Exclusion from Intellectual, Social, and Political Spheres**

In order to fully understand the type of alienation the protagonists of *Ourika* and *Quicksand* experience, one must first identify the similarities between their relationships to social communities. Thematic parallels between Ourika’s and Helga Crane’s situations are directly related to racial identity and sexism at once. For example, Ourika is awkwardly wedged between the worlds of African slavery and white aristocracy because she identifies with the culture in which she was raised despite her physical appearance and the continuous exploitation of her perceived exoticism. However, when she becomes conscious of her status as a black woman she simultaneously realizes the degree to which she is distanced from her white adoptive family and male-dominated culture. The marquise is an especially powerful force in revealing Ourika’s place as an outsider when she insists, “Ourika has flouted her natural destiny. She has entered society without its permission. It will have its revenge,” (Duras 14). After overhearing the marquise’s words, Ourika’s childhood belief that she is a legitimate member of her white and aristocratic social class is suddenly shattered. Furthermore, Ourika reveals that she has fallen into a state of irreversible disillusionment about human ties when she recalls, “I no longer belonged anywhere. I was cut off from the entire human race” (Duras 16). Such a statement extends beyond the scope of ordinary loneliness and into the realm of total isolation. Ourika is not mixed-race, but the duality of her African heritage and white upbringing certainly gives her a
sense of double-consciousness, a confusion that is only compounded by expectations of her as a woman, or more specifically, as the stereotypical “Orientalist mulatta” (Sherrard-Johnson 27).

Helga Crane’s repeated cycle of hope followed by disillusionment as she tries on various ill-fitting identities prompts a sense of isolation that is almost identical to Ourika’s understanding of herself as separate from all humanity. Following failed attempts to find a sense of community in the American South, in Harlem, and even in Copenhagen, Helga reveals the extent of complications stemming from sexism and her racial background when she describes feeling “alone, isolated from all other human beings” (Larsen 1593). The striking similarity of the two protagonists’ perceived relationship—or lack thereof—to the human community suggests that both characters function as examples of how strict conceptions of race and gender undermine the existence of those who attempt to construct identities that challenge society’s established norms.

OURIKA’S ALIENATION

As a black woman raised in Enlightenment-era France, Ourika’s sense of alienation is often linked to her exclusion from the intellectual sphere, or more specifically, from the world of logic and rational discussion that supposedly characterized the period. To examine Ourika’s intellectual marginalization one need look no further than descriptions of the conversations occurring in Mme de B.’s living room. The great irony of Ourika’s passivity is that she grows up surrounded by models of scholarly engagement. Whereas Mme de B.’s guests are constantly engaged in lively discourse, Ourika sits docilely at her benefactress’s feet, isolated from the intellectual society enveloping her. For example, when remembering the social atmosphere of her youth Ourika states, “I used to listen—long before I could understand it—to the conversation of the most distinguished men of the day [emphasis added] (Duras 8). Ourika’s isolation from intellectual pursuits is not merely a factor of racism and intentional exclusion, but is also fueled
by the fact that she understands little of the talk she hears. In addition, it is noteworthy that Ourika describes the conversations she heard during childhood as the conversation of men, a strange distinction to make considering the fact that Mme de B., a female figure, hosts the discussions under her own roof. One can interpret the masculine characterization of these conversations as a sign of the link between racial marginalization and the plight of women presented in the text. As is noted in the introduction to Ourika, the protagonist, who does not participate in Mme de B.’s discussions, is isolated from her peers and from the spirit of the Enlightenment as a whole (DeJean and Waller xvi). On one level, Ourika is excluded because of her race, but on another level, she is excluded because she is a woman who is viewed as unsuitable for the discourse reserved for only the most distinguished male intellectuals. The barriers placed between Ourika and intellectual discourse mirror the limits of the woman writer, a phenomenon Duras would have experienced in a culture where writing was still largely gendered as a masculine pursuit. Thus, in a broader sense, Ourika’s struggles illustrate the difficulties of female intellectualism and question how far-reaching the Age of Reason really was. While white male aristocrats may have benefitted from a culture of philosophy and intellectualism, Ourika, who epitomizes both racial and sexual difference, reaps none of the benefits in her role as a passive listener.

Ourika’s exclusion from Mme de B.’s salon, however, is indicative of much more than her alienation from the intellectual sphere. Considering the historical backdrop of the French and Haitian Revolutions, it is not surprising that many of the intellectual discussions Ourika listens to from afar are not just scholarly, but are also political in content. According to one scholar, “the decades leading up to the Revolution saw a growing importance of public opinion as a legitimizing force in French political life” (Prasad 114). Therefore, Ourika’s exclusion from the
political discourse she witnesses not only deprives her of intellectual development, but also silences her voice in the public opinion that was becoming an integral part of French politics. Although the specific content of the discussions in Mme de B.’s salon is never explicitly described, one major topic of discussion during the Revolutionary period in France revolved around redefining the concept of citizenship, and it is not unreasonable to imagine Ourika witnessing such conversations (Prasad 115). The possibility that Ourika is denied the opportunity to participate in the very debates that could satisfy her intense longing to be perceived as an official member of French society is a strong indicator of her political isolation.

Aside from Ourika’s exclusion from political discussion, Duras’s critique of supposedly universal citizenship is implicitly evident in Ourika’s inability to marry. As the marquise reveals during her fateful conversation with Mme de B., Ourika is barred from marriage for multiple reasons. In particular, the marquise highlights the discrepancy between Ourika’s heritage and her white, aristocratic upbringing when she asserts, ““Even supposing you could bribe some fellow to father mulatto children, he could only be of low birth. She could never be happy with such a man. She can only want the kind of husband who would never look at her”” (Duras 13). Such a statement, while certainly a strike against Ourika’s potential to experience the emotional fulfillment of marriage and motherhood, represents far more than her exclusion from traditional women’s roles. The impossibility of marriage for Ourika ultimately makes her what Michelle Chilcoat calls “the impossible citizen” (Chilcoat 1). Within the context in which Duras was writing, the marquise’s comments are indicative of ideas about nationalism and citizenship. Duras certainly would have been acquainted with the paradoxical expectation that non-whites, and particularly Africans, should both imitate the manners or “civility” of their white counterparts and refrain from attaining complete assimilation (Chilcoat 138). In order to preserve
the notion of white superiority, Africans in France were commonly assumed to lack the emotional capacity to form meaningful social bonds. Therefore, marriage was considered an essential component of civility, and part of the unofficial criteria for citizenship (Chilcoat 125).

While the marquise is likely correct in her assessment that Ourika will never marry a white man, she also refuses to acknowledge the possibility of Ourika finding a suitable partner of her own race. However, significant evidence exists to suggest that Ourika’s status as an African in France was hardly singular. The historical figure that inspired Ourika’s fictional benefactor, M. de Boufflers, was known for bringing parrots, ostriches, and African children as novelties to French aristocratic families during his voyages to and from Africa (Raedt 20). Like Ourika, such children, both female and male, were often treated as “exotic and prized possessions” (Prasad 102). The refusal to acknowledge the existence of Ourika’s black male counterparts in France evokes the concept of marriage as reserved for the true citizens, for the truly civilized, and for the truly French (Chilcoat 126). By denying Ourika the possibility of marriage, Duras distances her character from French citizenship as a whole, a denial that is especially harsh considering the fact that Ourika is raised during the French Revolution, a period in which the definition of French citizenship was in a state of reinvention. In a sense, the impossibility of Ourika’s marriage indicates an exclusion from the realm of political rights as a whole.

Further evidence of the link between Ourika’s lack of marriageability and her impossible citizenship lies in her preoccupation with her adoptive brother Charles. While one could interpret Ourika’s love for Charles as an incestuous desire, another explanation is that he represents the white male citizen of which she is the opposite (Chilcoat 126). There are certainly moments at which Ourika’s attitude toward Charles fits the mold of unrequited love. For instance, her last words after retiring to a convent are “Let me go, Charles, to the one place where I may think of
you day and night…” (Duras 46). Ourika’s futile desire for a meaningful relationship with Charles and her growing obsession with him alludes to the notion that she lives vicariously through her clearest example of a white male with all the rights of a citizen (De Raedt 30). Charles, after all, not only marries Anaïs and has children, but he is also sent to school and given entry into the intellectual and political realms Ourika only experiences as a silent spectator.

Additionally, Ourika’s exclusion from the theoretically universalist definition of citizenship also serves as a critique of the effectiveness of the French Revolution for those falling outside the dominant classes. Mirroring the optimism of marginalized groups, such as women in general, Ourika initially believed in the liberating power of the Revolution:

…the Revolution brought a change in my views of life. It gave me a whisp of hope and for a brief while I forgot my own problems…I sensed that at the end of this great chaos I might find my true place. When personal destiny was turned upside down, all social caste overthrown, all prejudices had disappeared, a state of affairs might one day come to pass where I would feel myself less exiled. (Duras 19)

Ourika’s brief moment of hope, however, is dashed by what she calls a “false notion of fraternity” driving the Revolution (Duras 20). Similarly, Ourika also experiences false hope in respect to the Haitian Revolution. Although she personally identifies with “emancipating the Negros” and hopes the newfound liberty will reach her as well, she is eventually disappointed by the level of brute violence in Haiti (Duras 21). Ourika, the ultimate “other” in terms of both race and gender, illustrates how political revolutions such as those in France and Saint-Domingue did little to ameliorate the condition of the most marginalized groups. In fact, they reinforced their alienation.
Apart from intellectual and political exclusion, a third and more personal type of isolation Ourika experiences is the social alienation that prevents her from satisfying what appears to be an intense longing for family ties. On the most basic level, Ourika’s social isolation stems from the fact that she “lacks a prehistory” in terms of her “birth, lineage, or her African family” (Prasad 113). In addition, Ourika’s inability to marry speaks to themes of citizenship, but more explicitly, it symbolizes the degree to which race complicates her ability to adopt a traditionally feminine identity as a wife and a mother. Throughout the text, Ourika yearns for familial connections and is greatly disturbed by the possibility that her affections for her adoptive family are not returned:

What haunted me most was the notion that I was alone on earth, that I might die without being regretted by a single person. This was unkind to Mme de B., who loved me and had abundantly proved it. But there were others she was more concerned for than me. I didn’t envy the affection she lavished on her grandsons, especially on Charles. But I longed in vain for their privilege of being able to call her mother. (Duras 17)

Ourika’s wish to feel needed by her family along with her desire to call her benefactress “mother” allude to her deprivation of the reciprocal relationships one finds in family. For instance, her sisterly attachment to Charles is often overlooked as her brother travels with his tutor with little concern for the well-being of the sister he leaves behind (Duras 18).

One of Ourika’s most telling statements about family revolves around her desire to experience motherhood. Surprisingly, Ourika even goes so far as to wish she had not been rescued from slavery. When imagining an alternate life as a plantation slave she states, “I would have a poor hut of my own to go to at day’s end; a partner in my life, children of my own race to
call me their mother, who would kiss my face without disgust” (Duras 39). Certain critics have taken Ourika’s longing for slave life to be an anti-abolitionist statement on Duras’s part. For example, Christopher Miller questions Ourika’s musings by reasoning, “The segment goes on to suggest an emotional-economic calculus: for the small price of cultivating someone else’s land during the day, one is offered a perfectly ordered and fulfilling life—replete with family values… Would a female slave’s existence have resembled this sentimental fantasy in any way?” (55). While his rejection of plantation slavery as a “productive and reproductive way of life” (Miller 56) and his refusal to dub Duras “the French Harriet Beecher Stowe” (Miller 53) certainly make sense, his outrage over the rosy misrepresentation of New World slavery overlooks the literary function of Ourika’s statement. The absurdity of her desire for slave life serves to illuminate the degree to which she is starved for familial ties. As a woman who is limited by her race, Ourika is so isolated from the roles of daughter, sister, wife, and mother that the brutality of slavery seems a small price to pay for loving companionship.

While the home was the traditional place for women of Ourika’s era, her race fractures her identity to the point that familial love in France is out of her reach, implying a critique of the notion of feminine domesticity. Even Ourika’s final act of retiring to the convent, while a retreat from social structures in one sense, represents a desperate attempt to create a family by serving as a mother figure to the poor and orphaned (Donaldson-Evans 128). Overall, despite Ourika’s efforts to cultivate reciprocal relationships in which she both loves and is beloved, she remains, as she fears, alone in the deepest sense of the word.

**HELGA CRANE’S ALIENATION**

In comparison with Duras’s protagonist, Helga Crane enjoys considerable mobility and can be understood as a sort of traveling Ourika. However, this surface-level freedom does not
translate into overcoming the alienation Ourika faces. In actuality, like Ourika, Helga is consistently isolated from her peers on intellectual, political, and social levels. Her supposed freedom allows her nothing more than the ability to flee uncomfortable situations and to alienate herself even more in the process.

Helga’s intellectual alienation surfaces most clearly at Naxos when she is exposed to the limits of education for African Americans, particularly women. The culture of Naxos, a southern school for African American girls, appears to be more about discipline and etiquette than academics. Instead of forming the minds of their students, teachers like Helga are charged with cultivating their manners. One faculty member, for example, admonishes her lively students by chiding, “Even if every last one of you did come from homes where you weren’t taught any manners, you might at least try to pretend that you’re capable of learning some here…act like ladies and not like savages from the backwoods,” (Larsen 1535). The teacher’s criticism, especially the phrase “savages from the backwoods” alludes to the culture of Naxos in which individuality and the ability to think for oneself are exchanged for imitating a set of acceptable and expected social behaviors. As Helga states, Naxos is “no longer a school” and has turned into “a big knife with cruelly sharp edges ruthlessly cutting all to a pattern, the white man’s pattern… Ideas it rejected, and looked with open hostility on one and all who had the temerity to offer a suggestion” (Larsen 1531). Put simply, Naxos exposes Helga to the limits of education for her race, class, and sex. Even in a supposedly academic environment, Helga is distanced from anything resembling an education.

Another facet of Helga’s intellectual alienation involves artistic expression. As one critic points out, “While the exact nature of her potential is never made plain, Helga Crane does possess a visual artists’ perception and appreciation for décor, color, and style” (Sherrard-

There are moments at which Helga even seems to have an appetite for, rather than just an appreciation of color. Seemingly starved by the conformist culture of Naxos and the overwhelming tendency to dress in the drabbest browns, tans, and greys, Helga dresses herself in “dark purples, royal blues, rich green, deep reds” (Larsen 1539) in order to satisfy “this craving, this urge for beauty” (Larsen 1532). Despite Helga’s keen aesthetic eye and hunger for artistic beauty, she is constantly forced to suppress her creative impulses, which ironically contributes to her inability to participate in the artistic-intellectual world of the Harlem Renaissance. One strong example of Helga’s tendency to suppress her creative impulses occurs in a Harlem nightclub when she and her friends dance gleefully “ambling lazily to a crooning melody, or violently twisting their bodies, like whirling leaves, to a sudden streaming rhythm, or shaking themselves ecstatically to a thumping of unseen tomtoms” (Larsen 1563). Helga, however, is unable to retain her joy when she realizes that “not only had she been in the jungle, but that she had enjoyed it…She wasn’t, she told herself, a jungle creature” (Larsen 1563). Helga’s shame at having danced like a “jungle creature” could be construed as Larsen’s need to distance herself from Marcus Garvey, whose trial and deportation discredited his back-to-Africa movement during the years in which she wrote and published Quicksand (Martin 7). The idea of an anti-Garveyist agenda is further supported by the fact that Helga never even thinks of traveling to Africa to find her true identity. However, when placed in the context of the Harlem art scene, Helga’s refusal to continue dancing is revelatory of her alienation from creative expression. Instead of engaging in the music, poetry, and visual art of Harlem, Helga restricts her role to that of a mere spectator.

Like Ourika, Helga’s intellectual alienation is paired with her exclusion from politics and political speech. When a respected reverend gives a speech to the teachers and student body
about the philosophy of racial uplift that inspired schools like Naxos, Helga is dumbfounded as to how she should respond (Larsen 1530). Despite that she “had ardently desired to share in, to be a part of this monument to man’s genius and vision,” Helga “had no talent for quarreling… she preferred to flee” (Larsen 1530-32). Helga reacts similarly when she is introduced to the political ideals of the Harlem Renaissance, such as the idea of the “New Negro.” Because Helga has been silenced at Naxos, her reaction is to physically flee her discomfort instead of confronting the philosophical questions at hand. Despite her desire to participate in discussions about race, she has never been given the opportunity to learn how to engage with her comrades on a political level. Due to this inability to enter into racial discourse, Helga excludes herself from vital cultural movements. Similar to Ourika’s alienation from the French Revolution and Enlightenment thought, Helga is isolated from movements aimed at redefining what it means to be an African American.

While less prominent in the text, a close reading reveals that Helga’s political alienation extends to the concept of the “talented tenth.” In response to the notion that the elite strain of American blacks, or the black bourgeoisie, should reproduce to uplift the race overall, Helga remarks, “Why do Negroes have children? Surely it must be sinful. Think of the awfulness of being responsible for the giving of life to creatures doomed to endure such wounds to the flesh, such wounds to the spirit, as Negroes endure” (Larsen 1590). Having internalized the mechanisms of oppression she has lived under all her life, Helga’s anxiety about having children reflects her tendency to alienate herself from human ties. Furthermore, Helga is uncomfortable with elitist views such as the “talented tenth” due to the discrepancy between her studied manners and her illegitimate birth in a Chicago slum. Her impoverished background prevents her from self-identifying with the black bourgeoisie. In fact, it is Dr. Anderson’s assumption that she
is a lady of “dignity and breeding” that causes her to storm out of Naxos and book a train ticket to Chicago (Larsen 1541).

Although Helga expresses anxiety about raising children, she does exhibit a longing for family ties similar to Ourika’s pining for the reciprocal relationships she lacks. Like Duras’s protagonist, Helga has a limited family history. She was raised by her mother and has a few white relatives in the United States and Denmark, but has no concept whatsoever of her father’s family and the African American side of her heritage. As critic Cheryl Wall states, this lack of family history is a problem because “In the class-conscious community of Naxos, her heritage is a practical liability, and Helga is concerned lest it jeopardize her engagement to James Vayle, the son of prominent black Atlantans” (Wall 99). Similarly, Helga is encouraged to fabricate a family history upon reaching Harlem instead of admitting to her illegitimacy (Larsen 1553).

Aside from the fact that Helga’s mixed-race birth and her mysterious paternity prevent her from identifying with those descended from prominent black families, Helga’s loneliness as a child also proves to have been deeply scarring and alienating. When discussing her childhood, Helga describes herself as one of society’s “unloved little Negro girls” (Larsen 1542). Her mourning of loveless childhood and her inability to construct an identity based on a family history alienates her from the affectionate family life she both craves and observes in her peers. Even when Helga eventually marries and has children the arrangement does little to detract from her isolation from other human beings. Once again, Helga’s internalized oppression causes her to reject the human ties she craves.

When it comes to marriage, Helga certainly has more options than Ourika. After all, she is once engaged to James Vayle, receives a proposal from her Danish portraitist Axel Olsen, and eventually marries the Reverend Pleasant Green. However, Helga is always faced with the
prospect of marrying someone with whom she does not identify. For example, James Vayle differs from Helga in his elaborate family history, Olsen differs from Helga in terms of race, and the Reverend Pleasant Green represents the southern “Negro” lifestyle Helga had rejected through the majority of the novel. Just as Duras never entertains the possibility of a suitable black male partner for Ourika, Larsen never presents her protagonist with a suitable marriage prospect. It is actually quite striking that during her travels Helga never meets a man with a similar mixed race heritage, or at least never one who admits mixed parentage. When discussing Helga’s inability to find her male counterpart, it is important to note that Helga’s heritage is a reversal of “the historical realities of sexual abuse of slave women by white slaveholders” (Johnson 39). While there were certainly men with similar parentage to Helga’s, Larsen’s choice to reverse the traditional pattern of a white father and a black mother serves to further alienate Helga by limiting her identification with other products of mixed-race parents. As the product of a white mother and a black father, Helga is barred from any marriage in which she might feel comfortable, and as a woman, she is nevertheless expected to participate in “husband-hunting game” (Wall 102). Due to the intersections of race and gender in Helga’s personal identity, domesticity is both an impossible path and the only acceptable one.

**Psychological Declines: Surrendering the Mind and Yielding to the Body**

Ourika and Helga Crane’s isolation can reasonably be read as commentary about how complications involving race and gender can inhibit one from fully engaging in intellectual, political or social movements, but it is equally important to recognize how such factors contribute to psychological shifts in Ourika and Helga’s development. In other words, the protagonists’ inward transformations are just as revealing as the outward declines in their
circumstances, especially when examining the extent to which race and gender complicate the process by which the characters attempt to form personally meaningful identities.

On a psychological level, both Ourika and Helga eventually suffer from a dissociation from their status as philosophical or social beings, resulting in an obsession with themselves as mere bodies. Such a dramatic shift in focus from the mind to the body can once again be explained by the distinctive intersection of racial and gender-based barriers. Societal marginalization, after all, can technically be based on numerous factors other than race or sex. Religious identity and social class, for example, also contribute to the sense of “otherness” experienced when one seeks a role outside those prescribed by the dominant class. However, whereas factors like religious orientation and social class can change at least in theory, race and sex are less fluid. Skin color, for example, is a fixed trait that is linked to the physical body rather than to one’s beliefs or socio-political circumstances. Similarly, one’s sex is equally rigid. For women in particular, the body is linked to the physical realities of biology, such as pregnancy and birth. Due to the physicality of race and sex, Duras’s and Larsen’s emphasis on their protagonists’ carnal selves is a particularly appropriate illustration of the realities of alienation for Ourika and Helga. Like the other forms of isolation Ourika and Helga experience, their descent into a solely carnal existence speaks to themes of both race and gender at once.

When one examines the various moments at which Ourika and Helga become conscious of how race and gender limit their participation in social spheres and philosophical movements such as the Enlightenment, political revolutions, and the Harlem Renaissance, it is clear that they also become aware of their status as physical bodies as opposed to intellectual or spiritual beings. It is through an examination of the process by which Ourika and Helga come to identify with
their physicality over their spiritual selves that one truly begins to understand the limits of the identities they are permitted to pursue.

**OURIKA’S PSYCHOLOGICAL DECLINE**

*Objectification*

Ourika’s gradual descent from spirited being to soulless body begins with the simple process of objectification. Even before becoming conscious of the degree to which she is barred from participation in her community, Ourika unwittingly plays the role of a passive object within a culture that values intellectualism and the individual’s participation in the realm of abstract thought. While living with Mme de B.—the woman whose generosity, or perhaps curiosity, spared her a life of slavery—Ourika functions as a novelty for her benefactress, an exotic doll “dressed in oriental costume” (Duras 8). Despite her initial belief that she is legitimately loved and valued, Ourika’s primary role in Mme de B.’s household is to entertain her benefactress’s circle of white, aristocratic friends. When she performs the Comba, for example, she is considered the most fascinating “spectacle” of the ball, largely because her African heritage renders the dance authentic in the eyes of her spectators (Duras 11). She is admired for her grace, but she is on stage, separated from her peers by the idea that she is something to observe from a distance rather than someone with which to engage intellectually or spiritually. Her body and her physical appearance are of the utmost importance, which contributes the undervaluing of her thoughts.

Ourika spends her childhood sitting passively at Mme de B.’s feet, “loved by her, fondled, spoiled by all her friends, loaded with presents” and praised as the “most endearing of children” (Duras 7). In other words, Ourika is seldom an active figure during her childhood years. Instead, she is the recipient of all action. She is admired and praised, but never articulates her own thoughts. The fact that Ourika is merely a target of action supports the idea that she
exists only as an object or a possession to be admired. Therefore, when the adolescent Ourika reaches a marriageable age, she can no longer belong to a parental guardian but is also prevented from marrying into the entirely white society in which she has been raised. Having lost her position as an exotic, charming little girl, she can no longer serve as an object of pleasure or entertainment. Ourika mourns the loss of this one acceptable role in society as she cries out, “I was to be cast out of a world that could never admit me” (Duras 13).

Hyperawareness of the Body

Along with a realization of her racial background, the next step in Ourika’s psychological development is an understanding of herself as a raced and sexed body, not simply an ornamental object. Eileen Warburton supports the idea of a link between racial self-awareness and becoming conscious of oneself as a body when she summarizes Ourika as “the story of a sensitive girl’s response to carnal knowledge of herself, the recognition that she is a being in the flesh” (Warburton 168). At the exact moment that Ourika overhears the fateful conversation between Mme de B. and the marquise, she instantly becomes conscious of two particular facets of her identity: her race and her physical body.

Ourika’s immediate reaction to the marquise’s assertions that she has no place in white aristocratic society is highly emotional, but also physical. Whereas the beginning of Ourika’s life story rarely contains references to the body, Ourika suddenly begins describing corporal sensations when recounting her reaction to the marquise’s words. She states, for instance, “I was seized by a frightful trembling, everything grew dark, and for a moment the pounding of my heart prevented me from hearing more” (Duras 13). Ourika’s abrupt explosion of physical sensations suggests that her response is just as physical as it is emotional, implying an awakening of the carnal self that had been dormant during her more innocent childhood years.
In addition to the physical nature of her initial reaction to the marquise’s declarations, the discrepancies between Ourika’s behavior before and after the incident also point toward the idea of a carnal awakening. In the years before Ourika became aware of the social complexities her racial situation would spark she was not ashamed of her physical appearance and was comfortable with her dark complexion. For example, when Ourika remembers performing an African dance for Mme de B.’s visitors, she remarks, “My partner covered his face in a mask of black crepe, a disguise I did not need. I say that sadly now. But at the time, it meant nothing to me” (Duras 10). Although Ourika reveals shame about her skin color as an adult, she initially thought little of the difference between her dark complexion and the light skin of her white aristocratic peers. Her physical differences appear to have been of little importance before her adolescence.

However, after Ourika attains racial awareness, her attitude toward her skin color and her carnal self shifts toward shame and resentment. Ourika is so disgusted by her body that she cannot stand to catch a glimpse of her own skin. When Ourika discusses her emotional state after the marquise’s revelations she states, “My face revolted me, I no longer dared to look in a mirror. My black hands seemed like monkey’s paws. I exaggerated my ugliness to myself and this skin color of mine seemed to me like the brand of shame” (Duras 15-16). Finally, because she is unable to think of herself as something more complex than a body in the flesh, she falls into a state of depression and physical illness manifested as fainting spells and fevers. The fact that Ourika experiences overt physical maladies as opposed to pure mental illness suggests a growing inability to ignore the role her body plays in alienating her from the society with which she longs to identify.

*Surrender to the Body*
Ourika spends a great deal of time attempting to deny the realities of her physicality, but near the end of Duras’s novel she becomes so preoccupied with her carnal self that her bodily sensations begin to disrupt the way she interprets her thoughts and emotions. Repulsed by the body she sees as fundamentally different from those of her peers due to her race, she is quick to accept bodily disgust for her body’s sex as well. For example, Ourika is easily convinced that her familial love for Charles is actually “an insane and doomed passion” (Duras 42). Even though there is little evidence to suggest that Ourika actually experiences a sexual desire for Charles, her anxieties about physicality cause her to believe that even her innocent yearnings for human ties have a basis in physical and sexual drives in lieu of emotional needs. Because Ourika is no longer able to experience emotional ties and sexuality as distinct from one another, her only choice—if one can really consider it a choice—is to reject society and her hopes for meaningful relationships. When Ourika becomes a nun and resigns herself to a life of celibacy, she makes a desperate attempt to negate her existence as a physical body. By exchanging her relationship with Charles for a relationship with God, Ourika submerges herself in a life devoted to the metaphysical world as opposed to the physical one.

Aside from Ourika’s specific anxieties about an incestuous sexual desire for Charles, the very notion of the body’s inescapability echoes the feminine condition in general. The critic Chantal Bertrand-Jennings notes that almost all of Duras’s protagonists are, because of some fundamental difference from their peers, locked into an inescapable fate despite any personal ambition to better their futures (47). As Bertrand-Jennings suggests, such an entrapment in one’s destiny—or in Ourika’s case, one’s body—is a universal paradigm of women’s lives in patriarchal society (41). Ourika’s struggle to find an appealing role in society, therefore, is reflective of the obstacles women face when pitted against the social norms of the patriarchy.
(Bertrand-Jennings 40). Bertrand-Jennings’s arguments are persuasive, but they do little to illuminate how race also contributes to Ourika’s psychological entrapment in her body. Although Ourika’s gender does translate into exclusion from intellectual life and politics, they are not what ultimately bar her from the domestic spheres of daughterhood, wifehood, and motherhood. Ourika’s psychological decline begins as a result of gender discrimination when she is objectified in Mme de B’s household and later intersects with race as she becomes conscious of her complexion. Eventually, Ourika’s psychological decline boils down to the tale of a woman denied even a traditional domestic life due to her racial difference.

**HELGA CRANE’S PSYCHOLOGICAL DECLINE**

*Objectification*

Although Helga Crane belongs to a culture that affords women more lifestyle choices than Ourika’s society does, she suffers from the same level of objectification. Like Ourika, Helga exists as a passive object whose function is to entertain her more mainstream peers. At the beginning of the novel, Helga’s life is boiled down to “a desire for material security, gracious ways of living, a profusion of lovely clothes, and a goodly share of envious admiration” (Larsen 1534). Later, when Helga decides to leave her teaching post at Naxos her colleague pleads, “I do wish you’d stay. It’s nice having you here, Helga. We all think so…We need a few decorations to brighten our sad lives” (Larsen 1537). Such remarks may appear flattering in the sense that Helga inspires joy at the school, but they are also derisive in the sense that they reduce Helga to the role of mere ornamentation. After all, Helga’s colleague does not value Helga’s intellect or aptitude for teaching, but instead admires her charm and exotic appearance. Whereas Ourika is considered exotic because she is an ex-slave living among white aristocrats, Helga’s exoticism stems from her refusal to conform to the somber dress code most of the teachers at Naxos adopt.
Instead, Helga chooses to wear bright, outlandish colors that appear more “African” than the dark-colored clothing of the other black teachers at the school (Larsen 1529).

Aside from her flashy appearance and her resulting status as an exotic novelty, another level of Helga’s objectification can be observed in the language Larsen uses to describe her. Adopting the techniques of visual art, Larsen constantly places Helga in what critic Cherene Sherrard-Johnson calls “textual tableaux,” or detailed written representations evocative of visual art. As Sherrard-Johnson explains, the opening pages of *Quicksand* evoke the art of portraiture by describing Helga’s room at Naxos in minute detail, including its contents and the specific positioning of objects within the space. Notably, Helga is seamlessly incorporated into a long enumeration of material objects in the room (Sherrard-Johnson 33). By placing Helga in the context of material objects such as books, vases, and other decorative items, Larsen introduces readers to Helga as an object rather than a spirited human being.

Yet another textual tableau in the novel occurs in Denmark when a scantily-dressed Helga lies back on a satin couch surrounded by party guests. As Sherrard-Johnson suggests, Helga’s dress and posture in this particular scene alludes to the artistic tradition of the reclining nude (Sherrard-Johnson 33). By placing Helga in the milieu of reclining nudes such as Titian’s *Venus of Urbino* or Manet’s *Olympia*, Larsen establishes Helga as a sexual object to be enjoyed by the male viewer, an idea that is compounded by Axel Olsen’s choice to paint Helga as a highly sexualized being she later describes as a “disgusting sensual creature” that happens to share her features (Larsen 1582). The overall effect of Larsen’s textual tableaux is very similar to the effect of Duras’s choice to portray Ourika dancing the Comba. Like Ourika’s association with performance, Helga’s association with visual art creates a barrier between herself and her
viewer. Instead of being understood as an interesting human spirit with whom to engage, Helga becomes little more than a decorative object to be viewed and admired from a safe distance.

Hyperawareness of the Body

As with Ourika, Helga’s awakening to the complexities of her racial identity is paired with a growing consciousness of the physical body. Each time Helga leaves one destination for another, each time that she becomes aware that she is blocked from the philosophical domain she wishes to enter, she becomes more and more preoccupied with her carnal self. Ann Hostetler draws attention to the fact that when Helga leaves Naxos she is immediately seized by a physical sensation for the first time in the novel: thirst. Additionally, when she travels to Chicago with little means to support herself she discovers hunger pangs, in Harlem she learns how to engage her body in dance, in Copenhagen she becomes acquainted with sensuality, and at the end of the novel when she returns to the American South, she immerses herself in sexuality and the pain of childbirth (Hostetler 39). In other words, each of Helga’s racial awakenings is accompanied by a growing awareness of her existence as a body. Even the title of Larsen’s work conjures up tight, claustrophobic images of physical discomfort.

Surrender to the Body

Interestingly, Helga’s concerns about physicality and sexuality ultimately drive her to a lifestyle that is different from, yet equally destructive as Ourika’s life at the convent. Instead of attempting to reject her body as Ourika does, Helga becomes unhealthily obsessed with her physicality. After marrying the Reverend Pleasant Green, Helga falls into what critic Claudia Tate describes as an “orgasmic frenzy” (Tate 251). She marries without even thinking of love; her only objective is to succumb to the sexual desires and the physical existence she had previously attempted to deny when confronting her attraction to Dr. Anderson. At first, Helga’s
sexual experiences with her husband are described as intense and satisfying: “Emotional, palpitating, amorous, all that was living in her sprang like rank weeds at the tingling thought of night, with a vitality so strong that it devoured all shoots of reason” (Larsen 1601). Although such experiences appear fulfilling in one sense, they also represent a decline in the complexity of Helga’s character. The phrase “devoured all shoots of reason” is particularly significant considering Helga’s past efforts to engage in intellectual movements. When Helga loses her rationality and becomes absorbed in her physical or sexual self, she buries an entire side of her identity. The side of Helga who wanted to find a place in the philosophical world represented by Naxos and Harlem dies when she accepts her role as a sexual object. In the end, Helga is reduced to what she has always dreaded becoming: a purely carnal being.

While it is possible to make the argument that Larsen stresses “color anxieties and class ambitions over sexual oppression,” (Bell 112) a close examination of Helga’s state of mind at the end of Quicksand reveals the folly of downplaying the importance of gender in her psychological development. The consequence of Helga’s choice to accept her physicality is that she is unable to escape the realities of female biology when subjected to frequent and painful pregnancies. The birth of her fourth child is particularly damaging, plunging Helga into a lethargic depression that lasts indefinitely. The one moment at which Helga seems to rise from her stupor is when she dreams of leaving her children for the wandering life of her youth in order to continue her search for happiness, but her optimism is short-lived. Like her own mother, who declined leave her daughter behind in Denmark, Helga soon understands the degree to which she is bound to her responsibilities as a mother. The novel ends with the sentence, “And hardly had she left her bed and become able to walk again without pain, hardly had the children returned from the homes of the neighbors, when she began to have her fifth child” (Larsen 1609). Helga is eternally trapped
in a cycle of sexual desire and the trauma of unwanted pregnancies. Not only is Helga rooted in her body through the experiences of childbearing, but her responsibilities as a mother are equally limiting. Helga’s one defense mechanism, her tendency to flee one place in hopes of finding happiness in another, is an impractical path for a mother of five children. For the first time in the novel, Helga is trapped in a single location, and her hopelessness marks a figurative death of the hopeful character presented at the beginning of *Quicksand*. While Ourika’s understanding of the limits of her physicality begins with gender and ends with a primary focus on race, Helga’s psychological descent takes the opposite, yet equally damaging trajectory as she plummets down into the harsh realities of the female body. However, what draws the development of both characters together is their inevitable descent into the physicality they each try desperately to disown.

**Synthesis and Conclusion**

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir famously states, “One is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (283). The gradual process of “othering” Beauvoir describes is not only relevant to *Ourika* and *Quicksand* in terms of gender, but is also illustrated by the racial complexities each protagonist faces. Ourika’s Senegalese birth has little to do with her situation as a young adult in Enlightenment-age France. Instead, it is her aristocratic upbringing that produces a destructively passive young woman. Furthermore a mixture of societal and internalized racial oppression work to develop Ourika into the empty, soulless shell she becomes once retreating to the convent. Similarly, Helga’s alienation and descent into the reproductive realities of the female body result from a lifelong process in which her hopes for community are repeatedly dashed. Neither Ourika nor Helga are born into the hopeless states in which they end
their lives; it is a combination of psychological and societal processes that ultimately reduce their personal identities to that of mere bodies.

Despite Ourika and Helga’s inability to extricate themselves from stereotypes and to overcome various levels of alienation, it is important to note that both *Ourika* and *Quicksand* include characters that are exempt from the same obstacles to self-definition. These characters, namely Charles and Audrey Denney, manage to overcome limits set by factors such as race and gender in order to form personally meaningful identities, or as Beauvoir might say, to achieve transcendence. As an aristocratic white male, Charles faces far fewer challenges than Ourika does when it comes to reaching one’s potential as a human being. Unlike Ourika, who is barred from intellectual, political, and even familial life, Charles is able to build his own identity through travel, education, and a fulfilling domestic life with Anaïs. Equally illustrative of transcendence is Audrey Denney, a mixed-race woman in Harlem who somehow flies above the racial barriers Helga never penetrates. Helga’s dark complexion is painfully anomalous when in white company, but Audrey manages to cross color lines. Although Audrey’s white and black companions are aware of her racial difference on some level, she finds an acceptable place in both communities, even throwing “parties for white and colored people together” (Larsen 1564). In short, Audrey forms a personal identity that transcends the rigid conceptions of race that will not budge for Helga.

The presence of transcendent characters like Charles and Audrey may seem to suggest *Ourika* and *Quicksand* should be interpreted as posing specific solutions for the racial and gender-based alienation the protagonist of each text experiences. Such an interpretation would certainly be consistent with Beauvoir’s assertion that women have the potential for transcendence but are “often caught up in social and economic factors beyond their control and
forced into immanence” (Simons 230). However, to state that Charles and Audrey represent solutions to marginalization overlooks an overriding sense of inevitability at the end of each text. Ourika’s death is not presented as an outcome that could have been avoided. Instead, her passing appears to be part of a natural and inevitable pattern that occurs “at the end of October, with the last of the autumn leaves” (Duras 47). Similarly, Helga’s mental and bodily decline during an incessant cycle of pregnancy and childbirth also places her spiritual death within the realm of natural and unavoidable outcomes. Duras’s and Larsen’s unflinching portrayal of the inevitability of their protagonists’ declines negates the notion that either author works to outline a means by which the marginalized can achieve transcendence. In fact, what Ourika and Quicksand actually portray is how thoroughly the complications stemming from the intersection of race and gender inhibit transcendence and detract from one’s sense of humanity. Ourika and Helga certainly represent the alienation provoked by racial and gender stereotypes, but on a more intimate level, they also represent the dangers of denying an individual the opportunity to transcend the confines of otherhood and identify, first and foremost, as a human being.
Works Cited


