
Fashioning the New Negro in Nella Larsen's Quicksand

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Abstract

Although scholars of the Harlem Renaissance have emphasized the ways in which African Americans achieved selfhood through traditional forms of art such as literature and music, the redefinition of the racial self through fashion has not been addressed in depth. Many African Americans, especially those moving north in the Great Migrations, were being interpolated as consumers but denied full participation in mainstream society. In this paper, I argue that Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928) maps the familiar conflict between the Old and New Negro onto the new terrain of fashion. Prior scholarship of Larsen's text often connects the protagonist's search for identity with her inability to find the "something else" she seeks. I suggest that Larsen attends to the potential for subjecthood through the "something else" of dress, which has the potential to cross geographic, affective, and racial borders. I trace Helga's movement through Naxos, Harlem, Chicago, Alabama, and Denmark, contending that her micro-endeavor of self-fashioning parallels the macro-movement of racial self-definition. Larsen's novel demonstrates that the mode of reading others through fashion provides a means to counteract oppression and introduce dimensionality into stereotypical models of black identity. Here I turn to the idea of "spectacular opacity" borrowed from Daphne Brooks who describes it as a practice that contests forced transparency. Through the figure of Helga, Larsen imagines a mode of surface reading that accepts the clothed black body as the site of meaning while allowing for the tactical deployment of fashion. Although Brooks analyzes traditional performances of gestures and speech, I find that Helga's series of sartorial performances reject transparency while enabling consensual translation during her travels.

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