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Spaces of Identity: Gender, Ethnicity, and Race in
Salome of the Tenements (1923) and *Quicksand* (1928)

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Abstract

The 1920s marked a fervent time for artistic and literary expression in the United States. Besides the famous authors of the decade, including F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and William Faulkner, Anzia Yeziarska and Nella Larsen, among other female writers, also managed to carve “a literary space” for their stories. Yeziarska and Larsen depicted the struggles and tribulations of minority women during the fermenting 1920s, with a view to illustrating the impact of ethnicity and race on the individual female identity. Yeziarska, a Jewish-American immigrant, and Larsen, a biracial American woman, share an interest in capturing the nuances of belonging to a particular community as an in-between subject. Therefore, this essay sets out to examine the intersections of gender, race, ethnicity, and choice in shaping individual identities in public and private in-between spaces in Yeziarska’s *Salome of the Tenements* (1923) and Larsen’s *Quicksand* (1928).

Keywords: gender, racial and ethnic identity, individual female identity, belonging, in-between spaces of “otherness.”

The literary scene of American modernism brought about experimentation in content and form as a result of the changing social, economic, ideological, and cultural environment after WWI. Particularly in the 1920s, the literary environment was marked by the fiction of such trailblazing authors as F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and William Faulkner. Nevertheless, as modern critics point out, minority literatures, African-American and Jewish-American, among others, also occupied a literary “niche” during the time, in spite of the fact that

“minority American writers were largely unread since they were not writing in the Anglocentric or northern European ‘voice’” (Cronin and Berger xviii). Gloria Cronin and Alan Berger maintain that, in general, Jewish-American literature focused on themes of “resistance, protest, Jewish socialism, Jewish family disruptions, Jewish labor unrest, Jewish religious orthodoxy, and Jewish assimilation” (xix). At the same time, the Harlem Renaissance flourished during the 1920s as an artistic movement that contributed to “a ‘Negro aesthetic,’” and, as Ann Hostetler points out, “Harlem Renaissance writing is most often characterized by its central concern with the subject matter of race and embodiment” (629). Similar to the Jewish-American literature during that period, this writing “*emphasiz[es] experience over experiment* in its obsession with African American culture and struggle” (Hostetler 629, emphasis added). In the Jewish-American and African-American literary landscape of the early 1900s, besides well-known Jewish-American authors such as Abraham Cahan, Michael Gold, or Meyer Levin, and African-American writers like W.E.B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, and Jean Toomer, Jewish-American Anzia Yezierska (1880-1970) and African-American Nella Larsen (1891-1964) carved “a literary space of their own” as women writers.

In the 1920s, Yezierska started writing about the female immigrant experience with a view to capturing the connections between gender and ethnicity, while Larsen became interested in depicting the complexity of the intersections between gender and race. Both writers enjoyed some fame during their life time: Yezierska’s first collection of short stories, “Hungry Hearts and Other Stories” (1920) was acclaimed by the literary critics of the time, and Larsen became the first African-American woman to be awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1930, as a result of her two successful novels, *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929). Much of their fiction is semiautobiographical as both writers used their own lives as sources of inspiration. During the latter part of their lives, Yezierska’s and Larsen’s fame faded, but they left a significant literary legacy acknowledged by their literary descendants who rediscovered the complexity of their fiction in the late 1970s. As Cronin and Berger state, the “renewed interest in Yezierska’s writings” stems both from “the work of feminist scholars and women’s activism” and from “a new appreciation

of her passionate portrayals of Jewish immigrants” (327), and Mark Axelrod remarks that Yeziarska “is most often recognized as initiating an understanding of the Jewish-American experience which was, as yet, an undefined and uncharted cultural territory” (685). Furthermore, modern critics point out that Yeziarska was mostly interested in depicting “the impossibility of transcending cultural barriers and the inevitable failure of such utopian enterprises. This theme reappears frequently in her work and is entwined with the story of the immigrant woman’s struggle to become a true American” (Naveh 327). Yeziarska herself was, in Elizabeth Avery’s words, “desperate to escape the plight of other immigrants, the confinement of the ghetto, and the limitations of Orthodoxy”; nevertheless, “despite her talents, intellectual connections, and Hollywood success, ... [she] never found the happiness or peace she was seeking as an American woman” (29).¹ On the other hand, Carol Kort claims that, similar to Yeziarska, Larsen became a center of renewed interest during the 1970s as “the psychologically complex semiautobiographical novel [*Quicksand*] sensitively tackled subjects such as illegitimacy and interracial relationships, taboo topics at that time” (171), while Betty L. Hart and Anna A. Moore remark that she was among the first women writers to depict “the dilemma of identity for biracial women” in a realistic way (670).² Moreover, Susan Currell points out that “to Harlem Renaissance writers, exiles and migrants occupied the interstices of race and gender as well as of time and space, a liminal position of ‘inbetweenness’ examined in the many novels of racial passing such as Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929),” explaining that “novels of passing explored the migrancy of existing within and outside of two mutually exclusive worlds, at home and an outcast in both” (40). Contemporary African-American women writers such as Maya Angelou and Alice Walker “have expressed their admiration for the enigmatic but talented writer who had the temerity, in the early 20th century, to portray candidly characters, especially women, confronting racial, sexual, and class issues” (Kort 171). Lori Harrison-Kahan places Yeziarska and her novel in the larger context of the 1920s, arguing that “it is no accident that Yeziarska’s vogue – her literary fame and her subsequent transportation to Hollywood – occurred in the 1920s and coincided with the ‘vogue’ of the

‘Negro’, since the decade saw an unprecedented interest in the primitivism of ethnic minorities” (417); consequently, her statement that “this fascination with racial others led to the objectification of ethnic women, both black and immigrant, who were often stereotyped as exotic and sexually free” (417) applies both to Yeziarska’s and to Larsen’s fiction.³

As the nuanced depictions of the struggles and tribulations of minority women illustrate, Yeziarska, as an immigrant woman writer, and Larsen, as a biracial woman writer, share an interest in capturing the intricate nuances of belonging to a particular community as a gendered in-between subject. Rita Keresztesi points out that “Larsen’s characters suffer physically and mentally under the stress of ambiguous identities: Helga Crane feels suffocated by her lack of a stable racial and ethnic belonging, and, thus, she listlessly moves between blacks and whites, between countries and continents in *Quicksand*” (34), while “Anzia Yeziarska’s novels portray her heroines fighting on two fronts: against the patriarchy of Jewish orthodoxy and against the similarly patriarchal and oppressive culture of the New World they are so set on becoming part of” (71). As a result, “their recurring experiences are those of exile, relocation, and displacement; that is, being permanent strangers at home and in the world” (Keresztesi 35). Keresztesi further argues that “Yeziarska’s commentary on America, and on modernity itself, offers an ambivalent first-person and psychologically rich critique of the modern condition from a Jewish immigrant woman’s perspective. Her female characters’ restlessness is reminiscent of Nella Larsen’s frenzied plots of always seeking and never finding” (71). *Salome of the Tenements* depicts Sonya Vrunsky’s struggles to forge an individual identity and pursue her immigrant version of the American Dream.⁴ A poor Jewish immigrant in New York, Sonya navigates both the spaces of the Jewish ethnic community and the American ones in an attempt to fulfill her desire for beauty and her dreams of love, material comfort, and possibly assimilation into the mainstream culture, by marrying a wealthy American. Helga Crane, the protagonist of *Quicksand*, is a biracial woman (white mother, black father) who is on a quest for an individual identity in a world that is divided into either black-only or white-only communities. Sonya’s and

Helga's quests for identity are shaped by physical movement and emotional tension, as they struggle to find a space of their own where they can reconcile the markers of their in-between identity: [n]either Jewish [n]or American (Sonya), [n]either black [n]or white (Helga).⁵ Therefore, this essay sets out to examine the intersections of gender, race, ethnicity, and choice in shaping individual identities in public and private in-between spaces in Yeziarska's novel *Salome of the Tenements* (1923) and Larsen's novel *Quicksand* (1928).

In *Transcultural Imaginings*, Alexandra Glavanakova points out that "identity arises as a complex interplay between self-definition and the definition provided by others of oneself. Whether the Self internalizes the stigma of otherness or resists it and strives towards dissimilarity from Otherness, the impact of an Other – internal or external – who is simultaneously familiar and strange, will always be present" (47). She further maintains that "identity is dynamic, complex, socially constructed: not just 'being,' but also 'becoming'" (47). In the two novels, Sonya's and Helga's identities are shaped both by the physical spaces they navigate and by the people they encounter in those spaces. From the beginning of the novel, Helga is uncertain which community she belongs to because of the color of her skin (light brown). She navigates American spaces – in the North and in the South – and European spaces – in Denmark –, trying to achieve a sense of belonging either to the black community, or to the white, respectively. During her quest, she encounters four men – three black men and a white one – who define her in various ways: James Vayle, Robert Anderson, Axel Olsen (Copenhagen), and the Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green. On the other hand, intent on assimilating into the American mainstream, Sonya straddles the two worlds of the Jewish ghetto and of the American upper class, in search of an ideal "democracy of beauty" (Yeziarska 27), as she calls it. While navigating these two opposite spaces, she is surrounded by three men who crave her company as a woman: Lipkin, the poor Jewish immigrant poet and editor whom she has met in the ghetto, John Manning, the wealthy American philanthropist, and Jacques Hollins (formerly Jaky Solomon), the successful Jewish-American designer on Fifth Avenue.

Sonya's in-between spaces are marked by social class issues, reflected in the difference between the dreary atmosphere of the Jewish ghetto on the Lower East Side and the elegant and aristocratic Manning mansion on Madison Avenue. Therefore, in her pursuit of upward mobility, Sonya disregards Lipkin's passionate interest in her because he is poor and cannot offer her the stylish life she dreams of outside the constraints of the ghetto. On the other hand, John Manning is the only one who can offer her the beautiful and elegant things she craves for in life: custom-made clothes to reflect her personality, simple but expensive decorative objects, etc. Priscilla Wald suggests that Yezierska does not portray Sonya as "a golddigger," but "carefully depicts her interest in beautiful things as a kind of artistic self-expression, a vision that grows out of the hunger that distinguishes Yezierska's worthy protagonists" (64). For Sonya, Manning's "settlement work emblemizes the ideals that she wants to be able to embrace," allowing her "to bring beauty to the settlements" (Wald 64). From the beginning of the novel, Sonya finds herself in a gendered emotional in-between space: she is in a position of inferiority – as a woman and as an immigrant – in her relationship with Manning, but she is also different from other immigrant women in the Jewish community on the Lower East Side, such as Gittel Stein. As Harrison-Kahan aptly points out, Yezierska's female protagonists did not only "experience the in-betweenness, the not-quite whiteness, of being Jews in America, but they were also doubly marginalized, perceived as outsiders because of their ethnic or racial status *and* their gender" (419). Against all odds, Sonya is determined to transcend her condition as a poor immigrant and "make of herself a person" (Yezierska 167). Consequently, she initiates the interview with Manning, stepping out of the comfort of the ghetto space into a neutral space which he inhabits at the moment (in front of the settlement house where he lives now) and considers his subsequent invitation to lunch as the first step towards a new life. In her excitement, Sonya disregards Gittel's remark, "you're crazy for power" (Yezierska 6), dreaming only of the things that Manning can offer her, "the luxuries of love, beauty, plenty," and his "companionship" (Yezierska 9), the elements that bring together her love of beauty, her sense of a refined style, and her wish to be perceived as a true American,

not a mere immigrant. Critic Lisa Botshon argues that Yeziarska's novels "bring a different sense of the New Woman to popular fiction as they portray the struggles of the Jewish immigrant woman to achieve not only a sense of American citizenship, but also self-determination, independence, and creative and sexual fulfillment, ideals found throughout many strains of the varied New Womanhood," maintaining that "it is her characters' immigrant and ethnic status (their very distance from American cultural norms) that helps them to liberate themselves from traditional women's roles" (234). In Sonya's case, "self-fulfillment is clearly found in creative expression" (234), as she strives to become "'an American' on her own terms" (Botshon 235). In a larger context, "when her protagonists set out to capture men who will make them American, Yeziarska indicates that the interest in the opposite sex has little to do with heterosexual romance and more to do with the desire to wed one's self to America" (Harrison-Kahan 422); as a result, Sonya strongly believes that a union with Manning will bring her both material comfort and assimilation into the American mainstream.

Similar to Sonya, who distinguishes herself from other Jewish-American immigrant women due to her relentless pursuit of beauty and determination to succeed, Helga pines for beauty and color in her life, which marks her as different from the other African-American women in the school community of Naxos, in the American South. Amid the bleak atmosphere in the teachers' quarters, Helga has created an individual oasis of beauty and color in the private space of her room: a reading lamp with "a red and black shade," "a blue Chinese carpet," "a shining brass bowl" with multicolored flowers (Larsen 1), capturing the play of light and shadow in her room, an early indication of the white-black [light-dark] in-between spaces she will navigate throughout the novel. Like Sonya in the ghetto, Helga feels suffocated by the complete conformity required in Naxos: a place where "life had died out," a place that "tolerated no innovations, no individualisms" (4) and discouraged "enthusiasm, [and] spontaneity" (5). In the public spaces in Naxos, she is painfully aware of her difference and would like to leave but does not have enough money. Like Sonya, money only matters to her in terms of what she can buy with it: "most of her earnings had gone into clothes, into books, into the

furnishings of the room which held her” (7). Moreover, because “all her life Helga Crane had loved and longed for nice things” (7), the other members of the community have labeled “this craving, this urge for beauty” as “‘pride’ and ‘vanity’” (6). Still, perhaps in order to maintain the appearance of conforming to expected gender roles, Helga is engaged to one of her colleagues, James Vayle; however, unlike James, “she could neither conform, nor be happy in her nonconformity” (7). Karsten Piep maintains that her reluctance to conform “compels her to become a woman-in-motion who defies societal expectations” (114). Unlike Sonya, who is not tied to a family, only to her Jewish heritage, Helga feels that the lack of her family – who has abandoned her because the color of her skin did not fit in with her step family after her mother’s death – is a defining element in her life: “No family. That was the crux of the whole matter. For Helga, it accounted for everything, her failure here in Naxos, her former loneliness in Nashville. It even accounted for her engagement to James” (Larsen 8).

As a biracial woman, Helga is on a constant quest for a place of her own, surrounded by “her people,” even if she is not sure who “her people” are, but she longs for a substitute home, a space inhabited by a family who accepts her for who she is as a person. In Naxos, she inhabits an in-between space both because she craves something different from life, particularly individuality not conformity, and secondly, because in this black community she becomes aware that “Negro society ... was as complicated and as rigid in its ramifications as the highest strata of white society. If you couldn’t prove your ancestry and connections, you were tolerated, but you didn’t ‘belong’” (9). The lack of family should, therefore, render her “inconspicuous and conformable” (9), something that Helga refuses to be. Like Sonya, Helga craves “a social background” and hopes that her engagement to James can provide that, although “she had not imagined that it could be so stuffy” (Larsen 9). Her colleague, Margaret, perceives Helga as decorative, but most of her female colleagues look down upon her as vulgar because of her love of bright colors: “these people yapped loudly of race, of race consciousness, of race pride, and yet suppressed its most delightful manifestations, love of color, joy of rhythmic motion, naïve, spontaneous laughter. Harmony, radiance,

and simplicity, all the essentials of spiritual beauty in the race they had marked for destruction” (Larsen 17). As a result, Helga is determined to leave this place of “shame, lies, hypocrisy, cruelty, servility, and snobbishness” (Larsen 13) “that suppresses individuality and beauty” (Larsen 19), even if the principal, Robert Anderson, asks her to reconsider her decision because she has “dignity and breeding” (Larsen 20), two qualities appreciated in Naxos. As suggested in the play of light and shadow in her room, in the in-between space in Naxos, Helga experiences much pressure to conform, and she feels torn between resisting conformity and trying to somehow meet those societal expectations, as suggested in her engagement to Vayle and her attitude towards Anderson. Nevertheless, like Sonya who is looking forward to moving away from the ghetto and stepping into Manning’s world, Helga feels the thrill of anticipation upon departing from Naxos, hoping to find a place which she can call “home,” where her qualities matter more than the color of her skin.

In her endeavor to impress and conquer Manning, Sonya starts refashioning herself into an immigrant woman who appreciates simple but tasteful objects. First of all, she understands the importance of appearance and the visual power of expensive but understated clothes. To this end, she visits Jacques Hollins’ designer store and appeals to his Jewish self to create an elegant suit, appropriate for her meeting with the American philanthropist. As Hollins had also refashioned himself from Jaky Solomon in order to become a successful designer and gain access to the wealthy American clientele, Sonya believes that they are kindred spirits who share a great understanding and love of beauty. In this part, Sonya finds herself in Hollins’ in-between space – that she would perhaps, subconsciously, like to inhabit, a space where she is surrounded by creativity and the beautiful clothes afforded by wealthy American women, one of whom Sonya dreams to become one day. At the same time, the meeting with Hollins places Sonya in another in-between space, this time between Hollins and Manning, as Hollins seems to like her too and is jealous because Sonya only has eyes for Manning. In this space, she becomes an object of desire because of her passionate and fiery feminine being, coveted by both men. However, her position towards each man is

different in each space: in Manning's world, she feels inferior, a "nobody," a mere immigrant who is determined to assimilate into the American mainstream through marriage. On the other hand, during her first meeting with Hollins, their common ethnic background sets them on more equal footing, although he is an accomplished and wealthy designer and she an immigrant woman with lofty ideals. Nevertheless, there seems to be a unity between them "coming from the racial oneness of the two of them," as Hollins "saw in this countrywoman of his a living expression of his ideas and ideals" (Yezierska 25), a unity that does not exist yet in her relationship with Manning. Still, during this encounter, Hollins has the upper hand because he is the one who recreates her so as to bring out the beauty and passion in her; like Pygmalion, Hollins is the creator, the giver, and Sonya is the subject, the receiver, albeit in the same ethnic community.

During the first meeting, the opposition between Sonya and Manning is highlighted not only in terms of their different nature, but also of their clothes, a leitmotif that permeates the novel. Sonya is wearing a dress "of blue serge, shiny from wear," an attire that reflects "the nun-like austerity of the intellectual East Side," a uniform that cannot hide Sonya's flaming "personality and femininity" (Yezierska 3). She is deeply impressed by his "cultured elegance": "a master tailor had cut his loose Scotch tweeds. A pongee shirt was lighter and finer than a woman's waist. The rich hidden quietness of his silk tie; even his shoes had a hand-made quality to them!" (Yezierska 2). Katherine Stubbs claims that "clothing is used as a vehicle to engage in a fascinating attempt to transgress and transcend forms of economic and social hierarchy" (157), and for Sonya, at least during her second meeting with Manning, the clothes allow her to create the image of a simple but stylish immigrant woman. In this respect, Christopher Okonkwo suggests that "as constructed in the novel, clothes assume figurative and complementary roles, serving, on the one hand, to conceal immigrant Otherness and, on the other, as an effective material and psychological agency which, in Sonya's case, reveals and fulfills the artistic and immigrant self" (133). Sonya's difference and "otherness" is underscored by the expensive simplicity of the suit designed by Hollins. Thus, the meeting of the opposite worlds represented by Sonya, the

“Russian Jewess, a flame – a longing ... the ache of unvoiced dreams, the clamor of suppressed desires ... the urge of ages for the free,” and Manning, “a puritan whose fathers were afraid to trust experience ... bound by our possessions of property, knowledge and tradition” (Yeziarska 37), ends with Sonya’s offer to work for him, to help him create a better settlement house for immigrants. Natalie Friedman argues that, in order to lure Manning to marry her, Sonya “presents herself as exotically different and yet uncannily familiar ... appeal[ing] to Manning’s sexual instincts through her exoticism and to his class instincts through her linguistic fluency” (179-180).

After their encounter in public spaces, Sonya agrees to meet with Manning in the privacy of her room to talk about working together. In keeping with her new image in the expensive suit, Sonya’s next task is to redecorate her room, making it presentable for his visit, changing it from a poor abode into a simple but tastefully decorated place. By trying to create an image of herself that does not correspond to the real circumstances of her life, “if he sees the dump where I live, he’ll think I’m only one of the Ghetto millions – an object for charity and education, fit only to be uplifted” (Yeziarska 41), she tries to project an image of what she believes to be Manning’s perception of immigrant women, thereby creating a private in-between space which she inhabits only with Manning. Ljiljana Coklin maintains that “Yeziarska’s heroine feels comfortable exploring the foreign potential in herself and invoking Oriental images” (148). That is why, in this space, “Sonya Vrunsky turns her difference into a virtue; she Orientalizes and mystifies her sexuality as a powerful tool to gain her ‘trophy’ husband” (148). Moreover, in order to subtly coax Manning to propose to her, Sonya uses her feminine charm to persuade the men in her Jewish community to help her: Hollins to create her designer suit, Mr. Rosenblat, her landlord, to repaint her room, and Honest Abe, the pawnbroker, to lend her money to buy furniture. Sonya is determined to be “a somebody of my own making” (Yeziarska 48), even when Gittel calls her a Salome who only takes advantage of men in order to reach her goals.⁶ After she goes to great lengths to create an atmosphere “of simple” beauty in her room, Sonya is still not proposed to by Manning, and although disappointed, she feels like a winner when he suggests that they

should work and “save *our* East Side” together (Yezierska 77), “our East Side” becoming a public in-between work space, where the ethnic meets the American.

As Sonya strives to become a significant part of Manning’s business and private life, Helga moves from Naxos in the South, to Chicago in the North, the place where she was born. “Helga Crane, who had no home” (Larsen 28), at first felt that she had found her home there, but after her encounter with her uncle’s wife (on her mother’s side), she becomes more aware of the racism of the white community, which brings about deeper feelings of disappointment and despair. In the end, she finds temporary employment which results in a trip to New York, and once she settles in and befriends Anne Grey, New York seems a great place, where “she has that strange transforming experience, this time not so fleetingly, that magic sense of having come home” (Larsen 40). After feeling that she had been betrayed by her white mother’s family, Helga seems to have “found herself” in the black community of New York: “Harlem, teeming black Harlem, had welcomed her and lulled her into something that was, she was certain, peace and contentment” (Larsen 40). As Catherine Rottenberg points out, “the picture Larsen has Helga paint of Harlem can be termed ambivalent in the sense that it is inclusive of both that which attracts and that which repels; the neighborhood concomitantly contains the very desirable and the very undesirable” (“Affective Narratives” 784). Harlem becomes a new in-between space for Helga, in a different black community, seemingly more cosmopolitan, where she feels comfortable at first. However, while in Naxos Helga had been aware of her difference in the black community because of her love for beautiful and colorful things, in Harlem she is painfully reminded of her white ancestry which she has to hide from her African-American acquaintances. On the other hand, the receipt of her uncle’s letter and check prompts a new desire to explore other, more welcoming or accepting spaces. Consequently, in spite of initially enjoying Anne Grey’s beautifully decorated house and her company, Helga becomes restless again, experiencing “a feeling of anguish,” as if she were “shut in, trapped” (Larsen 43), isolated and estranged, the same way she had felt in Naxos. In Harlem, she feels an outsider in her life and in her social circle, as she does not understand or

agree with Anne's contradictory and inconsistent position towards the white and the black races and the constant mentioning of the race problem, racial discrimination, and the uplift of the Negro race. On the other hand, this in-between space is connected to the one in Naxos through Robert Anderson, in whose presence, "she was aware, ... of a strange ill-defined emotion, a vague yearning rising within her" (47), perhaps a slow awakening of her sexuality. Living in this in-between physical and emotional space in Harlem, Helga questions again the idea of belonging to the black race, although she keeps repeating to herself "they're my own people, my own people" (Larsen 50). Her growing awareness that people belonging to the same race should have more important things in common than the color of their skin prompts her to make a major change and take a bold decision: she will give her white heritage another chance by moving to Copenhagen, Denmark, to live with the family of her mother's sister.

While Helga takes a radical decision to remove herself physically from the United States and look for a home in a completely different geographical space, Sonya finds a space, the settlement house, where she and Manning can connect professionally. Although Sonya was never a supporter of the methods practiced in settlement houses, this time, she idealizes this space because she identifies it with Manning and wants to believe that it is different from other such places for immigrant uplift. Sonya navigates this new in-between space of the settlement house in a double capacity: on the one hand, she has inhabited this space as an immigrant, who was supposed to learn how to become an American. On the other hand, working for, and later, with Manning, grants her a different status in the settlement environment as she intends to suggest ways of making the settlement work better, for the real benefit of the immigrants. Determined to emulate the American way, particularly in order to impress Manning, she wants to make herself over, to ignore her past and refashion herself as an American: "two weeks at the settlement and Sonya, the unadaptable, believed that she had adapted herself to a new race, a new culture, a new religion!" (Yeziarska 84). She even tells Gittel: "I'm an American – not a crazy Russian" (94), hoping to change from a "Salome of the Tenements" into a "Mona Lisa" (the painting she sees in

Manning's office) (85). Her relationship with Manning progresses; he feels more and more drawn to Sonya, as he tries in vain to decipher her mystery, and after they spend some time at his country estate, he asks her to marry him. So far, Sonya has moved in this in-between space, where she has shared ideals with Manning, almost as his equal. This space has also offered her the opportunity to try out a new identity as an American, more restrained in her behavior, and to adhere to American, rather than Jewish, values.

Finally, Sonya has accomplished her goal; she has become an American by becoming Manning's wife. Manning is equally enthusiastic, hoping that the union of "the oriental mystery and the Anglo-Saxon clarity" "will pioneer a new race of men" (Yeziarska 108). After the honeymoon, she feels the thrill of anticipation of moving into Manning's town house on Madison Avenue, where she finds herself in yet another in-between space: the private space of Manning's American world. Although now she has plenty of money to buy all the beautiful things she has yearned for all her life, it is in this space that she becomes even more aware of her in-between status, questioning her belonging to this place: "I am one of them now. Am I one of them? Has our love made us alike? Just because I am his wife, have I become his kind? Will his people accept me – and will I accept them?" (111). Her dream of decorating the house where they are going to live together, choosing the colors and textures that would create a cozy home, is shattered because everything is already in the right place; the house is more austere than she had expected, and she does not feel at home. "Between trying to act I'm a lady for the servants and holding myself up to the ancestors, God from the world! Where am I?" (116), Sonya wonders, fearing that her passionate love for him would not be enough to bridge the huge difference in social class between them. All of a sudden, she becomes keenly aware of her difference and "otherness" in Manning's polished world, a fact revealed poignantly during the reception he offers for his and her friends. She feels a complete outsider in what should be her house; "she was lost among Manning's people like a stranger in a strange land" (122). Sonya experiences strong feelings of loneliness and futility and does not know where she belongs anymore, particularly when she overhears the harsh remarks Manning's

friends and relatives make about her and their relationship. The in-between space of his house is a space inhabited by native-born Americans who perceive Sonya as a person out of place there, an exotic, savage, and primitive “other,” wondering why Manning has chosen to marry her: “giving a dinner for a pet monkey is one thing and marrying one is quite another thing” (127). Hurt and feeling misunderstood both by the American guests and by Manning himself, Sonya, like Helga in various places, feels the need to defend her individuality, her “otherness” and her reluctance to conform. When Manning asks her “to adjust to the form of the society in which you have to live,” she answers vehemently: “I’m different. I got to be what’s inside of me. I got to think the thoughts from my own head. I got to act from the feelings in my own heart. If I tried to make myself for a monkey, I’d go crazy in a day” (131). Still, Sonya wants to help Manning with the settlement house work, and this time, she steps into this in-between space as the wealthy wife of an American philanthropist. Upon looking at this environment with more objective eyes than before, she remembers the patronizing attitude of the settlement workers and her initial abhorrence of their idea of social uplift, and she realizes that she cannot change this space the way she would really like to. Disappointed with the life she had hoped to share with Manning and forced by Honest Abe’s blackmail, she confesses all the things she had done in order to make Manning to marry her, and then, convinced that she does not want to belong to his world anymore, she decides to leave him.

Sonya’s awakening to reality is harsh; her American Dream of assimilation has turned into a nightmare; all of a sudden her world has become bleak again; she feels helpless and a strong sense of nothingness, afraid that her desire to escape poverty at all costs has brought her back to a miserable life of financial struggle in the ghetto. Throughout the novel, she has been plagued by the question: “who are my people? where do I belong?,” even more so when she returns to the ghetto newspaper where she had worked before meeting Manning. Her first solution is to go back to her ethnic community, but this time her difference from them is enhanced by her marriage choice, which puts her in an in-between position: “I’ve come back to my own people, to my real work,” she explains to Gittel and is stunned by her reply: “Who are your own people,

after you married yourself to a Christian? ... And what's your 'work' but to vamp men?" (Yeziarska 158). This prompts a crisis of self-confidence in Sonya, who does not perceive herself as a manipulator of men through her feminine charm and sexuality, but she does not want to be defeated; this time, she is determined to create her own space by herself: she works as a waitress and then in a dress shop, intent on "making of herself a person" (Yeziarska 167). She manages to create a dress, the Sonya dress, which becomes a success. Okonkwo states that "Yeziarska seems to have adopted the Sonya model as both space and voice to tell the creative Jewish woman's story through her own dress. Even if the Model seems to resemble New York's Fifth Avenue style, it differs from it in the distinctiveness of its immigrant artistic origins" (141). Sonya decides to go back to Hollins only after she has created the dress, hoping that their common ethnic heritage will bring them together as partners in business and life, as she believes that he understands her fiery passion better than Manning. In this context, Wald argues that "Yeziarska is more interested in how the heroine finds fulfillment by discovering the proper medium for self-expression. Sonya becomes a fashion designer. And with the happiness she finds, Yeziarska offers her own narrative of assimilation" (64). Still, Sonya feels torn after her experience with Manning: "she could not rid herself of the past nor get hold of the present" (Yeziarska 179). As a result, "as the day set for her marriage to Hollins drew near, a vague, unutterable sadness possessed Sonya. Hollins' love gave her every reason to be happy, but something deeper than herself sobbed and sorrowed within her" (179). Manning's final visit makes Sonya think more about her relationships with both men, even if she decides to stay with Hollins: "whom do I really love? Both or neither? Is this the price I must pay because I want beauty? Always to be torn on the winds of doubt and uncertainty – never have rest – never find peace?" (Yeziarska 182). Sonya's uncertainty at the end of the novel might be considered an implicit acknowledgement of her inner feeling of in-betweenness.

In a way, Sonya has come full circle, back into the Jewish community, but with a different social status: while at the beginning she was poor and craved beautiful things which she thought could be acquired only by marrying a rich American man, at the end, she is with a rich

Jewish man, working with him in another in-between space on Fifth Avenue, a Jewish space for American clients in the heart of Manhattan, a space she has constructed through her own strength and determination. This may also signify an emotional in-between space, where she tries to make sense and reconcile, perhaps, her past experience with Manning and her future with Hollins. At the end of the novel, Sonya has become stronger and has perhaps achieved a clearer understanding of her own identity; she seems to have found a space of her own, by working with Hollins to create beautiful and affordable things for other immigrants. In her capacity as a creative artist, she has also found a way to help “her people”: “in the midst of the ready-mades of Grand Street, a shop of the beautiful – that’s to be *my* settlement!” (Yezierska 178, emphasis added), and this time, it is not “*our*” settlement (like the one she had wanted to create with Manning), but *hers*, a place that will probably bear the traits of her passionate personality.

On the other hand, after her experiences in Naxos, Chicago, and New York, Helga feels that she has failed to connect with the black community in the United States and hopes that she will finally find a home in Europe, with her white Danish relatives.⁷ Full of anticipation, she feels elated, dreaming of “a happy future in Copenhagen, where there were no Negroes, no problems, no prejudice ...” (Larsen 51). Her greatest desire is to be “among approving and admiring people, where she would be appreciated, and understood” (53), and given the loss of a family life early in her life, she hopes never to feel “cold, unhappy, misunderstood and forlorn” again (57). Copenhagen represents a different kind of in-between space, which Helga, like in other places before, approaches with anticipation, perhaps a little fear of the unfamiliar, a place where she feels she belongs, for a while. She feels elated and happy at being received with such warmth by her white relatives. “You’re young,” her aunt tells her, “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” (62), a good impression on the right suitors, since her relatives intend to use her as a means to advance their social position. Initially, Helga is shy about her appearance in Copenhagen and would like, because of her difference, to keep her appearance as

understated as possible. This fact, however, is ignored by her white relatives who are intent on enhancing her difference and “otherness,” particularly in terms of the material things they buy for her: colorful, often extravagant clothes and flashy jewelry that make her stand out, thus underscoring her exoticism. Kimberley Roberts points out that “in virtually every place Helga appears, her clothes mark her in some way and, in so doing, set her apart from the company she keeps. If in Naxos her clothes place her in conflict with those policing black female sexuality, in Copenhagen she finds herself at the other extreme of the interpretive spectrum” (113-114). Helga feels like a savage dressed in the ostentatious outfits bought by her relatives, “like a new and strange species of pet dog being proudly exhibited,” uncertain how to respond to the guests who “show curiosity and interest” at the first tea party, leaving her “nervous and a little terrified” (Larsen 64). Aware that the first impression of “her dark, alien appearance was to most people an astonishment” (67), after a while, like Sonya, Helga decides to use her difference to her advantage and starts behaving according to their expectations.

Unlike her room in Naxos, where she was free to display her difference (the books, the colorful atmosphere), but tried to contain it in her private space, in Copenhagen, Helga allows others to change her into their image of an exotic “other” in public spaces. “She gave herself up wholly to the fascinating business of being seen, gaped at, desired” (Larsen 68), feeling self-important and catering to the image of extravagant “otherness” that her relatives and Axel Olsen expect from her: “batik dresses in which mingled indigo, orange, green, vermilion, and black; dresses of velvet and chiffon in screaming colors, blood-red, sulphur-yellow, sea-green; and one black and white thing in striking combination. There was a black Manila shawl strewn with great scarlet and lemon flowers, a leopard-skin coat, a glittering opera-cape” (Larsen 67-68). According to Pamela Barnett, “Helga herself is inscribed with certain colors and objects just as her body on the canvas is inscribed with pigments, shading, and shape” in Olsen’s painting (586). Gradually, Helga becomes aware that “her exact status in her new environment” is that of “a decoration,” “a curio,” “a peacock” (Larsen 67), an object or a colorful

bird, and she is willing to accept this situation as long as she feels that the expensive clothes she had craved for but could not afford in the United States highlight her difference and the exotic shade of her skin in a positive way. Still, it is during a vaudeville show where she sees two black men performing on the stage that she truly becomes aware of her difference and “otherness” as something less positive: while she had considered herself as an exotic “other,” the people in her Danish social circle might have considered her merely a primitive savage. Feeling again unsettled and incomplete, she longs to be again with people who look more like her, and becomes “homesick, not for America, but for Negroes” (Larsen 86). Her determination to leave is enhanced by Olsen’s proposal first that she become his mistress, then that she marry him, and his statement that “you have the warm impulsive nature of the women of Africa, but ... you have, I fear, the soul of a prostitute. You sell yourself to the highest buyer ...,” hurts her deeply. Nevertheless, she is confident enough to reply: “But you see, Herr Olsen, I am not for sale. Not to you. Not to any white man. I don’t care at all to be owned. Even by you” (Larsen 81). Helga resents the idea of “being bought” by Olsen as an expensive and colorful possession, even if a marriage to him would elevate her (and her relatives’) social status, implicitly refusing to be defined by the men in her life who want her for her feminine charm rather than her qualities. Roberts proposes that “the language governing moral sexual behavior is displaced onto criticism of Helga’s clothes, as if to say that her clothing is a text where her morality can be read, an external manifestation of her inner being” (113), something Olsen might have captured in Helga’s portrait. As a result, Denmark becomes another in-between space of difference where she does not want to live merely as a decorative exotic and sexually objectified “other.”

Every time Helga leaves a place, her feeling of anticipation is laced with fear: fear of the unknown, fear of not being in the right place, of not belonging, and of not being accepted for her qualities. Her return to New York, although initially giving her back a sense of belonging to the black community, underscores her feeling of in-betweenness: “This knowledge, this certainty of the division of her life into two parts in two lands, into physical freedom in Europe and spiritual freedom in America, was

unfortunate, inconvenient, and expensive” (Larsen 89-90). She has been moving from one in-between space to another, constantly oscillating between her mother’s white community and her father’s black one, permanently wondering who “her people” are: “she caricatured herself ... moving from continent to continent. From the prejudiced restrictions of the New World to the easy formality of the Old, from the pale calm of Copenhagen to the colorful lure of Harlem” (Larsen 90). After a chance meeting with James Vayle, which again highlights her difference and lack of conformity, and a passionate kiss with Robert Anderson, to whom she feels sexually attracted but who refuses to have a relationship with her because he is married to her friend Anne Grey, Helga grows more disillusioned, insecure and lonely.⁸

At this moment, a chance encounter with a church community makes her think that religion could save her, as “a miraculous calm came upon her ... she felt within her a supreme aspiration toward the regaining of simple happiness, a happiness unburdened by the complexities of the lives she had known” (Larsen 106). She ends up marrying Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green, hoping that she has finally found a stable relationship and a home she can call her own. Roberts argues that throughout the novel, Helga tries to defy “her positioning as feminine object” in all the in-between spaces she has inhabited, pointing out that, “in her boldest act to defy” this positioning “in the enslaving market system – in her marriage to the Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green – she is ultimately and utterly reinscribed once more” (116). “Textually, Larsen alerts the reader to the dangers inherent in Helga’s relationship to Green by using much of the same iconography that she uses to describe Helga’s relationship to Olsen: images of clothing and prostitution” (Roberts 116), in this case, the torn red dress she is wearing when she enters the church and is mistaken for a prostitute by the churchgoers: “a scarlet ‘oman. Come to Jesus, you pore los’ Jezebel!” (Larsen 104). Roberts further points out that “while the Helga/Olsen relationship symbolizes the fetishization that African American women experience at the hands of white men, Green serves a similar function in indicating both the coercive power of the church and the sexist instincts of middle-class black men toward black women” (116-117). At first, Helga is looking forward to her new life as a wife in the

South, where they move, but soon she finds herself in another in-between space where she is different. Initially, the black women in the congregation worship her husband, the pastor, and look upon Helga as a temptress, who trapped the reverend into marriage through her sexuality, although they end up pitying her after her fourth childbirth. In fact, marriage turns out to be very different from what she had expected it to be, and she feels how she slowly succumbs to the dreary and joyless daily routine of married life. As Roberts points out, at the end of the novel, “as a result of this figuring of women’s proper role, Helga Crane finds herself in a double bind: if she remains autonomous, if she continues to walk the streets alone, she is mistaken for the commodified body of the prostitute; but when she consents to marriage and motherhood, she is literally consumed by her own reproductive capacities” (118). Helga’s final drama lies in the fact that she seems to have no escape: “Either way she is the sexual being par excellence, and either way she is defeated at the intersection of capitalism and sexism” (Roberts 118).

Similar to *Salome of the Tenements*, *Quicksand* ends full circle; it begins and ends in the South, in the same stifling atmosphere; however, while in Naxos Helga had the will and energy to leave everything behind and start anew, she seems to have lost all her hope in Alabama, so a final departure from here seems less likely, mainly because of her children, whom she is reluctant to leave behind. Depressed and miserable, she realizes that “she had engulfed herself into a quagmire” (Larsen 123), and, in spite of her wish to get out of this situation, she remembers how she had felt unwanted and insecure in all the places where she had lived: “For she had to admit that it wasn’t new, this feeling of dissatisfaction, of asphyxiation. Something like it she had experienced before. In Naxos. In New York. In Copenhagen. This differed only in degree” (Larsen 124). While Sonya seems to have found an in-between space where she might develop a stronger ethnic-American identity, by being successful on Fifth Avenue and creating beautiful things “for her people,” Helga, who had wished all her life to be a part of and have her own family, bitterly regrets her final choice and feels trapped in her married life. As Cheryl Wall suggests, “clinging to a few of the books and beautiful things which surrounded her in the opening scene, the protagonist ends up mired in the

quicksand of racism, sexism, and poverty in the US South" (43). Helga's experience as a wife and as a mother in the in-between space of her marriage and family is marked by hopelessness and desolation, representing the death of her dreams, desires, and emotions. She has lost all her love of beautiful and colorful objects and decorations that she had cultivated in Naxos and also in Copenhagen; her search for an individual identity has become futile, and she ends up in this final black in-between space still feeling that she does not belong anywhere: not to the black community, not to her family, and, more importantly, not even to herself.

Each space inhabited by Sonya and Helga has added an emotional layer to the development of their individual identities, for the most part underscoring their physical and/or emotional in-between status. After having navigated Manning's American in-between space, the American-Jewish in-between space of the settlement house both as an immigrant and as "an American wife," Sonya seems content to have found a Jewish-American in-between space, where she, a creative immigrant woman working with Hollins, has managed to succeed on her own, "making from herself a person." As Wald points out, "Yeziarska imagines a cultural assimilation – Americanization – that transpires not through intermarriage (Sonya and Manning), but through the marriage of like-minded immigrants (Sonya and Hollins)" (66). "*Salome* is not a passing story," she further states, and, as "Solomon/Hollins does not try to hide his past ... does not experience his self-creation as a severing from the past," neither does Sonya "need [to] sever her past from the present" (66). By returning to "her people," her Jewish roots, albeit not to the ghetto, but from a higher social position, she seems to have reconciled the American and Jewish sides of her identity. Helga, on the other hand, has lived a life in constant motion, torn between the desire to be a part of a black or a white community and the reluctance to conform to the expectations of either community, both in the United States and in Europe. In her search for acceptance and a sense of belonging beyond the physical markers of race, Helga, marked by her gender and sexuality, ends up defeated emotionally. Piep argues that "her compulsive mobility, though often painful on a personal level, undermines restrictive conceptualizations of belonging and allows her to enact a mixed-race subjectivity that expands

and confounds established identity categories” (114). Thus, Helga seems to have understood that she could not belong to her mother’s white world in Denmark not only because of her skin color but also because of the implied but unuttered prejudices associated with the black race and particularly those regarding black women and sexuality. That is probably why she had the strength to refuse Olsen’s marriage proposal and resist being labeled as having “the soul of a prostitute” (Larsen 81). On the other hand, her decision to marry the reverend on an impulse does not bring her the much coveted marital bliss in the black community either, so she feels betrayed by her father’s black ancestry as well, ending up trapped in the ambiguity of a desolate and hopeless in-between existence.

Notes:

¹ For more on Yeziarska as an avant-garde ethnic writer during modernism, see Konzett.

² For more on Larsen as a modernist writer, see Rabin.

³ For more issues of race and class in both novels, see Rottenberg (*Performing Americanness*).

⁴ For more on class and the American Dream in *Salome of the Tenements*, see Rottenberg (“Salome of the Tenements, the American Dream”).

⁵ For a detailed and nuanced contextualization of Larsen’s life and work, including the connections between *Quicksand* and Greek mythology, see Hutchinson.

⁶ For more on the Salome myth in the novel, see Coklin.

⁷ For more on the connections between the mulatto myth and Europe in *Quicksand*, see Gray.

⁸ For more on desire, self-delusion, and self-sacrifice in *Quicksand*, see Tate and Monda.

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