Examining frustration and anger in Nella Larsen's Quicksand and Passing and Ntozake Shange's for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuff

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ABSTRACT

ENGLISH

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EXAMINING FRUSTRATION AND ANGER IN NELLA LARSEN’S QUICKSAND AND
PASSING AND NTOZAKE SHANGE’S for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuff

Advisor: Dr. Laura Fine

Thesis Dated July 2003

This study examines Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* and *Passing* and Ntozake Shange’s *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuff* and discusses the way these authors’ works show African-American female characters’ overcoming their frustration and anger as a result of racism and sexism. In *Quicksand*, Helga Crane attempts to overcome her frustrations by escapism. In *Passing*, Larsen depicts two female characters who use “passing” to overcome their frustration and anger. For one of the characters this works relatively well, but creates problems for the other, which results in her death. Further, Shange’s female characters are forced to deal with frustration as a result of misogyny in the form of rape and emotional and physical abuse. However, Shange illustrates how these women vent their anger through words and give hope for other frustrated African-American women.
EXAMINING FRUSTRATION AND ANGER IN NELLA LARSEN'S QUICKSAND AND PASSING AND NTOZAKE SHANGE'S for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuff

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTERS OF ARTS

BY
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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The tension between the individual and society, the yoke-like manner in which society encroaches, and the courage Larsen's women find to resist predict writers as diverse as Ellison, Wright, Shange, and Walker. (Larsen ix)

The tension spoken of in the epigraph helps explain the connection between the displaced frustration and anger of Nella Larsen's female characters and the vented frustration and anger of Ntozake Shange's female characters, and has been a theme that many authors have examined throughout literary history. Anger in African-American female characters has traditionally been based upon racism as a result of slavery. However, both Larsen, in *Quicksand* and *Passing*, and Ntozake Shange, in *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuff*, particularly demonstrate how African-American females deal with their frustration and anger due to the racism and sexism that threaten them. The frustration of
which the researcher speaks is the idea that African-American women are, indeed, troubled by inequalities that plague them. African-American women may become upset when they are denied the same equal rights as their white counterparts, and at times, their frustration may resort to anger, instigated by the racism and sexism that constantly burdens them and destroys the African-American female community.

Perhaps one should delve briefly into the relationship between African-American women and anger prior to discussing Larsen’s and Shange’s characters’ frustration and anger. Audre Lorde possibly explains African-American women’s anger best:

Every Black woman in America lives her life somewhere along a wide curve of ancient and unexpressed angers. My black woman’s anger is a molten pond at the core of me, my most fiercely guarded secret. I know how much of my life, as a powerful feeling woman, is laced through with this net of rage[. . .] . It is an emotional [. . .] tapestry upon which I set the essentials of my life - a boiling hot spring likely to erupt at any point, [. . .] . How to train my anger
with accuracy rather than deny it has been one of the major tasks of my life. (145)

Lorde argues here that anger is certainly an aspect of African-American women's lives, and that it is important for African-American women to focus their anger appropriately, an issue that both, Larsen and Shange's female protagonist either do or do not achieve to various degrees.

In Quicksand, Passing and for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuff, both Larsen and Shange exhibit how the "double bind" of both racism and sexism leads African-American women to react with anger. Through Helga Crane in Quicksand and Irene Redfield in Passing, Larsen depicts how, because of this "double bind," African-American women are sometimes forced into a state of anger but have limited choices of how to express it. They are often regarded as inferior beings who are degraded and seen as unequal to their white counterparts because of the constraints placed on them by a racist society. In addition to racism serving as a catalyst that enrages African-American women, sexism is an equal opponent both to real women and these authors' characters. Sexism also forces African-American women to become angry and traps
them inside a world where they really have no voice against the very catalysts that enrage them, as both Larsen’s and Shange’s female characters prove.

In this study, chapter two explores Helga Crane’s frustrations and angers in *Quicksand* as a result of racism and sexism, especially as a biracial female. Moreover, through Helga Crane’s character the researcher will demonstrate how her biracial nature forces her to live her life within two worlds, while attempting to find the one where she belongs, which results in stress and tension. The researcher demonstrates how Helga Crane does not accurately train her anger so that it can be used as a tool against the oppressors and oppressions that bind her, and how she becomes enraged because of the racist and sexist restraints placed upon women in the 1920s. In *Quicksand*, Larsen demonstrates how Helga is unable to address her frustration because she does not know how due to the limitations placed on women at that time. Larsen demonstrates how Helga continuously denies her frustrations, and is encompassed with a feeling of inequality. Therefore, she simply moves around seeking fulfillment and attempting to deny the very things that frustrate her. In *Quicksand*, Larsen creates a work that
shows that women in the settings of 1920s novels had limited choices. Larsen illustrates that Helga is finally forced to comply with society and enter into a conventional lifestyle, including marriage and children; however, that life proves to be overwhelming.

Chapter three focuses on how “passing” causes much distress within the African-American female, regardless of whether she is the one “passing” or simply observing others who are “passing.” Furthermore, the researcher will explore how Passing’s protagonist Clare Kendry’s decision to “pass” completely into the white world enrages her counterpart, Irene Redfield, because of Clare’s desire to reconnect with the black world she previously abandoned. Moreover, “passing” is also used to counter some of the frustrations that cause African-American women to become angry when it is used as a means to obtain many of the privileges that minority women are denied. Because these women are constantly denied rights that whites enjoy daily, they become enraged. Larsen depicts characters who attempt to reap the benefits of a more privileged (white) society. The novel depicts the lives of these women who “pass” into the white world and white life. Passing, like Quicksand, deals with the double consciousness that is constantly
present within the African-American character and shows how this double consciousness forces the protagonist to feel as if she were an outsider in both worlds.

Irene Redfield, the other protagonist in Passing, like Helga of Quicksand, never actually confronts the catalysts that enrage her because of the similar limitations placed upon her. One may argue that Irene realizes that "passing" does circumvent some of the anger that is naturally a part of these women's lives, but surprisingly, it also adds to the anger that already surrounds them, leading to the novel's conclusion but to no real resolution. Larsen demonstrates that Irene is angry because of the restraints placed on her by a racist and sexist society, leaving her two choices, madness or death, and she displays both as unsatisfying resolutions.

Finally, chapter four addresses the ways in which Ntozake Shange's for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuff portrays the reasons for African-American women's frustrations. Shange's characters express the causes for their frustrations. Shange focuses on the reasons for African-American women's anger, and her work employs a feminist perspective to explain why African-American women should confront the rage that boils inside
of them. Moreover, it is informed by a feminist approach as it addresses the needs and concerns of women. In both regards, Becky Field’s findings apply to Shange’s work:

Anger is an extremely powerful but frequently misunderstood emotion. It is important for defense of one’s boundaries and assertion of one’s right as a human being, but it is often viewed with opprobrium by society because of its association with out-of-control aggression, rage, or violence. (354)

Shange’s work shows how anger is an intricate part of African-American women’s lives, and how society places negative connotations on it, therefore, forcing African-American women to feel ashamed when they express their anger. However, Shange’s female characters deny any shame and accept their anger so that they can overcome it. Her work perpetuates the idea that there are societal ills that force African-American women into a state of anger, and once they confront these ills they can and will overcome their anger through the process of recognition, acceptance, and resolution.

However, Shange does not suggest that anger is necessarily a negative aspect of our lives, as many non-
African Americans may suggest, but that it is simply a part of our lives that is unavoidable and must be confronted. In *for colored girls . . .*, Shange shows female characters evolving during the course of her work just as real women do in their lives, and she shows women how to confront and counter their anger. She suggests that anger should be recognized, addressed, and controlled, which will help African-American women regain control over their lives. By showing that becoming angry due to the frustrations of the world is a natural part of their lives that does not have to consume them or be destructive, Shange offers hope for frustrated African-American women, illustrating that since Larsen's characters portray women in the 1920s who have limited choices, characters portraying African-American women today have evolved.
CHAPTER 2
NELLA LARSEN’S QUICKSAND: EXAMINING
FRUSTRATION AND ANGER IN THE MULATTO WOMAN

Nella Larsen’s Quicksand depicts the struggle of Helga Crane, whose expectations about society force her to endure a life of patterned anger. Larsen portrays Helga Crane as a biracial woman who reacts to her marginalized position within a racist and sexist society. Through Helga, we see a woman whose frustration erupts as a result of the racism and the sexism of the 1920s, which bleed into society from Reconstruction onward. In the work, Helga’s life takes on many unexpected turns. She like many women of her time feels the constraints of society and reacts to her environment. Helga Crane epitomizes the African-American female who becomes frustrated, and denies her anger by trying to escape her hostile environment. Larsen depicts her life of denial through a cycle of frustration and escape.

When the work opens, Helga is dispirited and heavy-hearted. The narrator states that
"The South. Naxos. Negro Education. Suddenly, [Helga] hated them all" (30). Upon reflecting on a sermon given by a white preacher, Helga becomes irritated when she recalls his comment that he was pleased that "Naxos Negroes knew what was expected of them[. . .]. They knew enough to stay in their places" (37). The preacher had gone on to say that "[he] hoped, he sincerely hoped, that they [the Negro race] wouldn’t become avaricious and grasping, thinking only of adding to their earthly goods, for that would be a sin in the sight of Almighty God" (37). Upon this memory, Helga again, "felt a surge of hot anger and seething resentment" (37), which incites her desire to flee the South. She disagrees with the Southerner's way of life, Southerner's ideals, and Southerner's constraints. Helga becomes quite frustrated with the situation she is in and allows her frustration to transform to anger:

At last she stirred, uncertainly, but with overpowering desire for action of some sort. A second she hesitated, then rose abruptly and pressed the electric switch with determined firmness, flooding suddenly the shadowy room with a white glare of light. Next she made a quick nervous tour to the end of the long room, paused
a moment before the old bowlegged secretary that held with almost articulate protest her schoolteacher paraphernalia of drab books and papers. Frantically, Helga Crane clutched at the lot and then flung them violently, scornfully toward the wastebasket. (38)

Helga, like many African-American women, allows her frustrations to consume her, but she is unable to react against these frustrations because of the limitations placed on women in the 1920s. For example, Helga reflects over the attire of many of Naxos' women and disagrees with their acceptance of the constraints placed upon them by the white patriarchy. The women wore "[d]rab colors, mostly navy blue, black, brown, unrelieved save of a scrap of white or tan about the hands and necks" (51). As she reflects she remembers some "[f]ragments of a speech given by the dean of women [. . .] 'Bright colors are vulgar'—'Black, gray, brown, and navy blue are the most becoming colors for colored people'—'Dark-completed people shouldn't wear yellows or green or red'[. . . ]" (51). The memory frustrates Helga and now "[she], a despised mulatto [. . .] [whose] unanalyzed driving spirit of loyalty to the inherent racial need for gorgeousness told her that bright
colors were fitting and that dark-complexioned people should wear yellow, green, and red" (51). However, Helga dismisses this frustration and reflects on how she will escape the dress code and other constraints placed upon her and other African-American women in Naxos because she feels that escape is her only means to refute the constraints placed on her by whites.

In addition, Helga is disgusted with Naxos' adoption of the negative stereotypical images of African Americans. She opposes the ideals that non-African Americans relegate as law in Naxos, and she can no longer comply with their ridiculous constraints which cause her to suppress her love for beautiful and colorful things. She refuses to readily accept life as it is because of her "craving, this urge for beauty, which had helped to bring her into disfavor in Naxos - 'pride' and 'vanity,' her detractors called it" (41). Once Helga actualizes her situation, she becomes angry. It appears that the suppression of desires for anything decorative, in clothing or home décor, is one way Naxos disallows blacks entry into the privileges of the white world. Blacks, finally, are restrained in this way in all areas of life from the clothes that they wear even
to the desires of their hearts, and this incites Helga’s frustration.

Cheryl Wall asserts:

Helga recognizes that, superficially, her more sophisticated taste in clothing and furnishings sets her apart at Naxos and conditions the way in which others respond to her. For example, when she mentions resigning, her colleague Margaret urges her to stay. (98)

Margaret tells Helga, “I do wish you’d stay. It’s nice having you here, Helga. We all think so. Even the dead ones. We need a few decorations to brighten our sad lives” (Larsen 49). Margaret sees Helga as a decoration that would brighten the appearance of Naxos and so wants her to stay. Margaret makes a prejudicial assumption about Helga which also upsets the latter as had others attempted to do. Helga refuses to allow others to determine her station in life or impose stereotypical roles upon her. G. Winbush affirms that “the roles of African-American women in African-American communities are derived from perceptions of what their own community expects from them” (13). However, as seen with her interaction with Margaret, Helga does not appreciate or accept the role that her colleague
attempts to prescribe for her because Margaret promulgates the racist ideals that are upheld within their society, and Helga resents this. Wall argues that Margaret’s statement to Helga shows that

[t]he dark-skinned young woman making this statement reveals not only a negative self-image, but also the expectations that light-skinned ‘pretty’ women like Helga should assume an ornamental role. Helga’s interracial parentage [. . .] troubles her too, but against imposed definitions of blackness and womanhood. Her ‘difference’ is ultimately her refusal to accept society’s terms in the face of her inability to define alternatives. (99)

In relation to Margaret, her suggestion is not only racist, but serves as an example of the sexism that has also bled into black society via white patriarchal ideals. Even though the charge of sexism is usually reserved for men, Margaret represents sexist ideas and attempts to assign Helga to a compromised role.

Lillian Comas-Diaz and Beverly Greene suggests that Anger and rage directed at racial inequalities are central issues for people of color. The
continued challenge of being caught in a system that undervalues their contributions is a constant burden for women of color and generates anger. Many women of color experience frequent anger at their exposure to the double bind of racism and sexism, and if they confront the problem its reality may be denied, thus intensifying the rage. (365)

Furthermore, one can extend Comas-Diaz and Greene's idea and argue that Helga is faced with a triple bind. She is an African American, a woman, and an African-American woman, which increases the constraints placed upon her. Therefore, she not only suffers from inter-racism, but also intra-racism and sexism and the latter is what her colleague, Margaret employs. Margaret suggests that Helga stay in Naxos because she is fair skinned, which obviously (based on the times) means that she is pretty, so that she can "brighten [their] sad lives" (Larsen 49). This is a stereotypical image begun during slavery and continuing into the 1920s and results in Helga dismissing Margaret. The narrator says, "Helga was unmoved. She was no longer concerned with what anyone in Naxos might think of her, for
she was now in love with the piquancy of leaving” (Larsen 49).

Helga’s inability to accept the “unintentional” but historically embedded racism and sexism sucked the very drive from her spirit, therefore forcing her to feel frustration and anger for the society in which she lived. Helga never really considers that Margaret is perpetuating intra-racism and sexism, but she does know that she can no longer accept Naxos’ thinking and decides that her stay in Naxos must come to an end quickly. The situation of inequality and unjust standards in Naxos, as with the entire South’s many constraints, wears at Helga’s spirit.

Helga prepares to leave Naxos and as she relays her intentions to her administrator, Dr. Anderson, he attempts to dissuade her. Helga states, “I hate hypocrisy. I hate cruelty to students and to teachers who can’t fight back. I hate backbiting, and sneaking and petty jealousy” (Larsen 55). Dr. Anderson compliments her saying, “What we need is more people like you, people with a sense of values and proportion, an appreciation of the rarer things of life. You have something to give which we badly need here in Naxos” (55). Upon these words Helga decides to stay; however, Dr. Anderson goes on to say, “You’re a lady, you
have dignity and breeding" (54), and at this point Helga takes immediate defense to his assuming that he knows anything about her "breeding." Dr. Anderson’s words do more harm than good, and as Helga becomes angrier, she loses focus: "At these words turmoil rose again in Helga Crane. The intricate pattern of the rug which she had been studying escaped her" (54). Once again one’s assumption of her and the placing of labels angers Helga. She attempts to maintain control, but she struggles with trying not to reveal her “own angry thoughts” (55) which eventually forces her to react harshly, and Larsen’s narrator’s words are illustrative:

Concerned with her own angry thoughts, which scurried here and there like trapped rats, Helga missed the import of [Anderson’s] words, [and] her answer, fell like drops of hail. ‘The joke is on you, Dr. Anderson. My father was a gambler who deserted my mother, a white immigrant. It is even uncertain if they were ever married[. . .]. I don’t belong here[. . .]. Good morning.’ (55) Helga’s restraint evaporates and she, who had considered remaining in Naxos, immediately loses control. She yells at Dr. Anderson and storms from his office. Helga’s
inability to remain calm, as would a lady in her era, shows that she loses control. Kimberly Monda maintains that Helga is unable to control her anger, and she allows all the events that have transpired thus far to force her to explode (33). Helga considers all the inequality and negative implications that she has endured, and she angrily reacts to Dr. Anderson’s “compliment” thus leading to her decision to flee the South. Helga is angry with the South, Naxos, and the institution where she teaches; however, there are root causes for all: racism and sexism. Because of the racist and sexist constructs that are within society, many African Americans, such as Dr. Anderson, adopt “white” attitudes without ever actually realizing it. Their prejudices become so embedded within white society that people assume that there is no cure for that which plagues them. Helga’s response to Dr. Anderson’s remark is only an excuse to flee her hostile environment. Her anger is misdirected at the gentleman who attempts to compliment her lineage instead of at the individuals within society who have placed the negative restraints upon her, and her anger is therefore displaced.

After the incident with Dr. Anderson, Helga is at a point where she realizes that there is something that
plagues her, yet she is unsure exactly what it is, and she dismisses the feeling. She does not understand why she reacts so harshly toward Anderson and fails to see what the real cause of her anger is. She, instead, resolves to leave without confronting the issues of racism and sexism that obviously overcome her because she is unaware of how to address them. Larsen creates a woman who epitomizes the era in order to display the many constraints placed upon women. Helga portrays a typical African-American woman of the times. During the 1920s, African-American women had limited choices. They were expected to "be seen and not heard" and live the life of a "lady." Helga, unlike men of the time, is not allowed to become angry; therefore, she does the only thing that she can, and that is to change venues with the hope that new scenery would bring about a new attitude, and she moves North.

While on the train to Chicago, Helga begins to evaluate what occurred in Naxos and a feeling of despondency falls upon her. Comas-Diaz and Greene suggest that "a woman's image of herself as a non-aggressive person is often so salient that she will become depressed or anxious when she discovers that she has had angry feelings" (365). Once Helga realizes that she reacts with anger, she
becomes despondent. Her action coincides with what Comas-Diaz and Greene assert, which is that African-American women, like many women of color, attempt to covertly manage their anger and therefore adapt behaviors that are ruinous: "opposition, passive aggression, manipulation, and dependency" (366). Helga adopts passive aggression and displaces her anger. She negatively responds to Dr. Anderson because to her he represents the ideals of white society, which are the basis of her problem.

When she arrives in Chicago, she secures a job with Mrs. Hayes-Rore, a lecturing female on her way to a convention, and accompanies her to New York. There Helga is introduced to Mrs. Hayes-Rore's friend, Anne, and decides to stay in Harlem with Anne. Helga finds Harlem very exciting, and she immerses herself in black life. She begins working and is ecstatic to be in a place where her sophistication and decorous taste are recognized and received warmly. She is intrigued with their [the African Americans' of Harlem] sophisticated cynical talk, their elaborate parties, the unobtrusive correctness of their clothes and homes. [It] all appealed to her craving for smartness, for enjoyment. Soon she
was able to reflect with a flicker of amusement on that constant feeling of humiliation and inferiority which had encompassed her in Naxos [. . .]. For she considered that she had, as she put it, 'found herself.' (Larsen 75)

But upon escaping the South and entering the Black Mecca of the North, it is impossible for Helga to evade the race problem, for it plagues the North as well. And it is impossible for Helga to escape it with Anne constantly obsessing over the idea. Helga asserts that "Anne, [. . .] hated white people with a deep and burning hatred, with the kind of hatred which, finding itself held in sufficiently numerous groups, was capable someday, on some great provocation, of bursting into dangerously malignant flames" (Larsen 80). Anne, who was Helga's housemate and friend, was now becoming an agitation that Helga constantly attempted to escape.

After enduring Anne's complaints over the course of several months, Helga becomes belligerent with Anne and her views about society's race problem. The narrator states that

Helga had been entertained by this racial ardor in one so little affected by racial prejudice as
Anne, and by her inconsistencies. But suddenly these things irked her with a great irksomeness and she wanted to be free of this constant prattling of the incongruities, the injustices the stupidities, the viciousness of white people. (Larsen 80)

Because Helga deals with her anger by escape instead of confronting her problems directly, one can conclude that she vacillates between anger and escape and sees escape as her only option. Once again, Helga is angered by her situation and looks for an escape much like when she tires of Naxos. Helga Crane can be viewed "as a restless, complex personality who redecorates her narrow unfulfilling life" ("A Mulatto Girl," 16), and she leaves when she is frustrated. Helga, like many African-American women, avoids the catalysts that enrage her, and attempts to flee or rather ignore the situation because it is the only option that she has. Finally, she tires of the black life of Harlem and decides to escape to Copenhagen to visit her mother's sister.

Helga prepares for her trip to Copenhagen, and she dreams of a place where there are "no Negroes, no problems, no prejudice" (Larsen 87). For Helga, life in Copenhagen
appears to be exactly what she wants. She believes it will cure the frustration and anger that boils deep inside:

She began to feel a little excited, incited. Incited. That was it, the guiding principle of her life in Copenhagen. She was incited to inflame attention and admiration. She was dressed for it, subtly schooled for it. And after a while she gave herself up wholly to the fascinating business of being seen, gaped at, and desired. (Larsen 104)

Finally, she is ready for what she feels she is due. She is ready to live the life that so many whites have the privilege of living in the United States. She is now able to indulge in the finer things, and this makes her extremely happy. In Copenhagen, she assumes that because there are no blacks there will be no problems because there would evidently be no racism. All the beautiful materialistic things that her aunt and uncle provide for her enrapture her, and she believes once again that this is what she has been searching for all her life. The narrator states, "Always she had wanted, not money, but the things that money could give, leisure, attention, beautiful surroundings. Things. Things. Things" (Larsen 97). But
soon Helga becomes a toy for her family, something that they can dress up and show off to the world. At first, she believes that they simply want her to enjoy the finer things in life and capitalize on her unique beauty. But it is clear that she is admired because of her “primitive” beauty, her biracialism, and her exoticism. Monda proposes that

Helga seems to gain access to her repressed desire as she conflates being admired with being understood and believes that she experiences the recognition she never received as a child. Larsen warns us, however, that this escape is illusory, for Helga’s life of conspicuous consumption transforms her into an European fantasy about African primitivism, a version of the racist construction of black identity that had tormented her in the United States. Larsen thus exposes the ways in which the pleasures of consumerism lead her heroine to participate in her own objectification. (30)

Helga ignores her situation, and she does not attempt to relegate certain restrictions nor standards for herself. Instead, she accepts the role that her aunt and uncle
delineate for her and accepts the racist constraints that are present within Copenhagen, which results in the same incitement to flee as occurred both in Naxos and Harlem.

So, once again, Helga is dealing with a brand of racism that further torments her and is what one considers hidden racism. Because Helga believes that she is admired for her beauty as a woman in general, she is unable to detect the obvious exoticism that the people in Copenhagen attribute to her. They believe her to be the beautiful, black primitive "pet." In Copenhagen, at first Helga's life appears to be the perfect solution to the bitter resentment she feels for America. She is able to wear the most beautiful garments and be in the midst of Copenhagen's elite. However, once she realizes that she is being exploited, she again longs to be amongst her own people and returns to America.

Once she returns, she is again engulfed in "black life," and she has a chance encounter with Dr. Anderson. Even though she is aware that he has married her friend Anne, Helga still imagines the two having an affair and kisses him. However, she mistakes his friendliness for sexual desire. He tells her, "I was afraid, that you might have misunderstood; might have been unhappy about it"
(Larsen 136) and he rejects her. Helga is enraged by his rejection of her: "Helga Crane too had risen. Quickly. A sort of madness had swept over her. She felt that he had belittled and ridiculed her. And thinking that, she had suddenly savagely slapped Robert Anderson with all her might, in his face" (Larsen 136). After her altercation with Anderson, Helga begins to once again feel depressed: "She felt alone, isolated from all other human beings, separated even from her own anterior existence by the disaster of yesterday" (Larsen 137). Once again Helga shows how despondency is an intricate aspect of her anger. Once Helga realizes that she reacts angrily, she becomes even more frustrated and ashamed of what she has done, but she dismisses it as before:

[. . .] she couldn’t escape from sure knowledge that she had made a fool of herself. This angered her further and she struck the wall with her hand. She couldn’t go on with the analysis. Why bother, when she could add nothing to the obvious fact that she had been a fool. (Larsen 138)

She realizes that her actions were foolish and she hurries to dress herself to escape the small enclosed space. She
rushes out to take her mind off the incident and, as fate would have it, Helga is introduced to a new life. She wanders into a Baptist church, and there she receives the affections of a young minister. Shortly after, they are married and Helga believes that this time she has found happiness. She believes that this traditional life is what she had been searching for. All of Helga's other attempts to avoid a conventional and traditional life have failed, and she is led to the very thing that she has been attempting to escape. However, she is excited just as she is when she first moves to Harlem and when she visits Copenhagen: "As always, at first the novelty of the thing, the change fascinated her" (Larsen 146). But this change was not what she had expected, and she does not realize that she has married a man of a much lower station in life. She is thrust into the bleak air of poverty and condemnation. Helga, who is much too pretentious for the other churchwomen in her husband's congregation, soon begins to feel angry once again. Larsen's narrator states that "at first she had felt only [...] anger at the quagmire in which she had engulfed herself. She had ruined her life" (159). Helga now regretted her spontaneous decision to marry, and wanted to
once again be free. She was not accustomed to an impoverished life, and living in one, almost takes a complete toll on her mentally. After the birth of her fourth child, Helga deliberately closed her eyes, mutely shutting out the sickly infant[. . .]. A week she lay so. Silent and listless[. . .]. On the floor, in and out among the furniture [. . .] [her] twins played [. . .] Helga was unconcerned, undisturbed by the commotion about her. (154)

Helga becomes delusional, and the narrator states that "it was all part of the general unreality. Nothing reached her. Nothing penetrated the kind darkness into which her bruised spirit had retreated" (155). Because Helga embraces this unfamiliar impoverished life much too quickly, she begins to feel depressed and alone. Everyone is bewildered by Helga's state, and unable to determine the root cause. However, a contemporary reading of the novel would suggest that she is suffering from postpartum depression¹. Helga becomes so depressed right after her fourth child is born that she is unable to respond - physically or mentally - to her environment, including her husband and children. She is unconcerned with the health
of her new baby or the condition of her older children. Once again Helga realizes that she is frustrated and angry with the life that she has chosen, and she realizes that her life is not what she expected. The narrator relates, "In her was born angry bitterness and an enormous disgust" (157). Helga realizes that she is in a loveless marriage and has become a mother much too quickly, and the reality of that frightens and frustrates her. Her life as a mother is exhausting, and she describes the bleakness of it. She describes the appearance of her home:

[S]he look[ed] about in helpless dismay and sick disgust at the disorder around her, the permanent assembly of partly emptied medicine bottles on the clock shelf, the perpetual array of drying baby clothes on the chair backs, the constant debris of broken toys on the floor, the unceasing litter of half-dead flowers on the table, dragged in by the toddling twins from the forlorn garden, failed to blame him for the thoughtless selfishness of these absences[. . .]. How, she wondered, did other women, other mothers, manage? (Larsen 151-152)
Helga is disgusted at the life she has chosen for herself, and she regrets this final escape. However, this time, she is not able to pick up and move as she had done in the past because she is now a wife and a mother. Larsen shows how Helga’s previous denial of anger and use of escape have forced her into a new position. Had Helga attempted to live through the frustration and resentment that she felt in Naxos or even Harlem instead of escaping, her life would be different. Through Helga’s plight, Larsen teaches readers a lesson about the denial of anger and frustration. Helga shows that, in actuality, one chooses his or her path, and because of her station as an African-American woman, her only way to cope with frustration is escape, therefore leading to a destructive path. Helga had embraced her conventional life with the hope that she would be happy; however, as the narrator explains her life is far from this state of happiness:

The thought of her husband roused in her a deep and contemptuous hatred. At his every approach she had forcibly to subdue a furious inclination to scream in protest. Shame, too, swept over her at every thought of her marriage. Marriage. This scared thing of which parsons and other
Christian folk ranted so sanctimoniously, how immoral - according to their own standards - it could be. (Larsen 161)

Helga considers abandoning her children and leaving her bleak life behind, but she remembers her own life without a mother and decides to remain, at least physically. Helga for the first time must accept her life as it is without escaping to a new place and this frustrates her even more. She thinks, “How, then, was she to escape from the oppression, the degradation, that her life had become? It was so difficult. It was terribly difficult. It was almost hopeless. So for a while she put aside the making of any plan for her going” (161). Helga convinces herself that once she is strong she will leave her husband and abandon her children, but by the end of the novel, Helga is the mother of four with her fifth child on the way before she even realizes it.

Helga Crane portrays the typical mulatto figure. She is constantly torn between her biracialism, and, as a result, she is often unsure of which world to embrace. Consequently, she moves in between the two worlds seeking fulfillment. However, due to the constraints placed on her as an African-American woman, her anger surfaces, and it
creates an unhappy environment in which Helga no longer intends to live inhibited. Larsen tells Helga’s story from her unhappy life in Naxos to her prominent rise in Harlem to her voyage to Copenhagen and, finally, to her ultimate deep depression at the close of the novel. Helga subsequently sinks into her fated life and exemplifies the work’s title, Quicksand. Larsen depicts the life of Helga Crane, the despised mulatto, who wanders from place to place trying to escape the inescapable because she is unable to cope with the frustrations facing her.
NELLA LARSEN'S PASSING: "PASSING" TO BE FREE

It's funny about 'passing.' We disapprove of it and at the same time condone it. It excites our contempt and yet we rather admire it. We shy away from it with an odd kind of revulsion, but we protect it. (Larsen 21)

Nella Larsen's Passing explores the radical idea of "passing," where an African American pretends to be white in order to live and work in a white-dominated society, which many African Americans embraced in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Larsen's work centers around two characters, Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry who view "passing" for white from two different perspectives. Claudia Tate contends that Passing's most overt purpose is to depict the characters as "purely psychological beings," [and that] "race is peripheral to Passing. It is more a device to sustain the suspense than a compelling social issue" (181). Deborah McDowell also suggests that the work is more concerned with the
characters as "sexual creatures" (Tate 181) rather than with the obvious fact that race and class are both contributing factors that compel light-skinned African Americans to pass for white, and that they adopt this fraudulent behavior because of their limited choices in a racist world. As Jennifer Devere Brody asserts, "Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry [are] [. . .] representatives of different ideologies locked in a struggle for dominance" (1053). In Irene Redfield, Larsen creates one who "remains at least superficially a part of the black world, whereas Clare [Kendry] supposedly leaves this world when she marries a white man" (Brody 1054). Both characters portray women who practice "passing" but for different reasons; and though the work encompasses the above critics' ideas, it is more closely related to the frustration and anger within African-American women because of "passing," and their precarious situations within a racist and sexist society.

In her affirmation of "passing" Elaine Ginsberg states that the act of "'passing' is a 'discourse of radical difference' inscribed in American history as the 'assumption of fraudulent 'white' identity by an individual culturally and legally defined as [black] by virtue of a percentage of African ancestry'" (371). The practice of
"passing," which the above quote references, actualizes what both Clare and Irene feel. Historically, it was necessary for some African Americans to "pass" for white in order to obtain some legal and/or social rights and to obtain economic parity in the working world. Romona Liera-Schwichtenberg asserts that "'passing' suggests the desire to assimilate through the winning of acceptance and the securing of privileges from the white power elite. Whiteness, the locus of power and privilege, is simultaneously despised and desired [. . .]" (371). Liera-Schwichtenberg affirms the obvious reasons for "passing," but this does not fully explain what Larsen expects her readers to deduce from her work; for she allows one protagonist, Clare Kendry, to totally immerse herself in "white life," yet be seductively drawn back into the "black world," and then plunges her toward death. Contrastingly, Larsen portrays Irene Redfield, who only occasionally practices "passing," unlike Clare. Irene embraces "passing" when she is attempting to procure some of the benefits that she is denied as an African-American woman, such as going to "restaurants, theater tickets, and things like that" (Larsen 260).
Clare Kendry is torn between two worlds and is much like Larsen’s protagonist Helga Crane in *Quicksand*. Clare, like Helga, is torn between her ancestry and her white identity. She embraces white culture because, as Cheryl Wall suggests, “she wants the material comforts the white world offers; however, she also seeks the freedom to define herself [. . .]” (106). Clare, unlike Irene, has completely disregarded her African ancestry and Clare enters into the white world. She was reared by her father’s white sisters and made to feel less than worthy because of her blackness. As a child, she felt ashamed of her heritage and as an adult she denies it. Nell Sullivan asserts that “[t]he aunt’s definition of blackness attempts to rob Clare of her humanity, so she must shed that black identity to be human. To do so, she must literally turn white by “passing,” accepting the demands of assimilation to avoid the ramifications [of being black] [. . .]” (79).

Clare was not as fortunate as a child as Irene was. She was the daughter of a janitor, who at one time attended college with many of their childhood friends’ fathers, but upon his alcoholic related death, she was sent to live with her white aunts. There she was made their servant and was expected to “earn [her] keep by doing all the housework and
most of the washing” (Larsen 188). Brody states, “[Clare] was poor until her marriage; she worked as a domestic for weekly wages at the home of her white aunts” (1056). Before seeing Irene, Clare disregards the idea of blackness, which her aunts defined for her, believing that African Americans were not people, and she believes that if she recognizes her blackness she will be inhuman also; therefore, she adopts a white identity and is able to obtain at all times all the things that she wants. She consistently obtains all the privileges of being white - she obtains wealth by marrying a white man, and she asserts that she is not willing to live her life as someone’s problem. Clare does what she deems necessary in order to obtain the luxuries that she was denied as a child. Brody asserts that she [Clare] rose rapidly, readily “passed” and in so doing surpassed Irene in terms of class and material wealth” (1056). Clare realizes “passing” offers her the quick mobility into the upper-echelons of white society.

She does what she has to in order to gain her status within society. Clare tells Irene, when Irene asks why Clare decided to “pass” completely into the white world:

I was determined to get away, to be a person and not a charity or a problem, or even a daughter of
the indiscreet Ham. Then, too, I wanted things. I knew that I wasn't bad looking and that I could pass. You can't know, 'Rene, how, when I used to go over to the South Side, I used to almost hate all of you. You had all the things I wanted and never had. It made me all the more determined to get them, and others. (188-189)

This idea suggests that because Clare was frustrated with her situation as a child, once she becomes an adult she feels that the only way to progress within society is to become completely white. However, Larsen does not simply allow Clare to "pass" and forget her African-American life, but rather obsessively propels her back into the lost world of her early childhood. For example, the narrator describes how Clare obsessively attempts to contact Irene after their chance meeting at the Drayton Hotel: "The telephone. For four hours it had rung like something possessed. Since nine o'clock she had been hearing its insistent jangle" (193). Clare Kendry repeatedly attempts to contact Irene, her childhood friend for tea. Even though Clare is now considered a white woman, she still longs for the company of blacks, and she sees Irene as her inlet into the black world.
Liera-Schwichtenberg states that, "[p]assing as a 'trespass' between domains such as borders, boundaries, or the color line exposes race as a construct based on the contradiction between the visible (appearance) and the invisible (blood)" (372). Clare, who obviously looks like a white woman still longs to be in the midst of blacks. She "passes" as a trespass, but it is considered a constructive trespass that she uses to obtain all her superficial desires quickly. Clare undoubtedly has a visible whiteness, but also an undeniable invisible blackness, which propels her back into "black life."

Clare's decision was to "pass" completely into the white world, yet her attempt to reconnect with her African-American world enrages Irene because Irene does not feel that one has to "pass" as white to be successful. Irene realizes that she can obtain success and status, even if it is not as quickly as whites, as a black woman. She is also able to hold on to her black identity. When Clare asks Irene why she had not "passed" Irene tells her, "Clare, I've everything I want. Except, perhaps, a little more money" (190). Irene is happy with the life she has chosen and flaunts this in front of Clare. However, Irene is secretly upset that Clare has left her black life and
married a white man, pretends to be a white woman, has everything that she could possibly want or need, yet still wants to "pass" into the African-American world.

When Clare requests that Irene write her, yet refers Irene's response to Clare's post office box, Irene is appalled and angry. Larsen's narrator explains that, that had angered Irene and increased her disdain and contempt for the other. Tearing the letter across, she had flung it into the scrap basket. It wasn't so much Clare's carefulness and her desire for secrecy in their relations - Irene understood the need for that - as that Clare should have doubted her discretion[...]. Having always had complete confidence in her own good judgment and tact, Irene couldn't bear to have anyone seem to question her. Certainly not Clare Kendry. (222)

On the surface, it appears that Irene is upset that her childhood friend believes that she is unable to secure her true identity. However, it is much more than that. After all, Irene secures her own identity living within the two worlds by "passing" occasionally; yet, she has not completely left the black world. Irene resents Clare
because she is able to "pass" in and out of the "black world," yet still enjoy the privileges of being white. Irene is angry that Clare has taken the idea of "passing" to the most extreme level, (she is a white woman) but still wants and longs to be a part of the "black world." Irene is indignant with Clare and her ability to live carefree. However, Irene admits that

[s]he wished to find out more about this hazardous business of 'passing,' this breeding away from all that was familiar and friendly to take one's chance in another environment, not entirely strange, perhaps, but certainly not entirely friendly. (Larsen 187)

Irene is curious about what her friend has become and has questions that only one who is a part of that "secret society" can answer. Irene receives a letter from Clare after two years of no communication, and all the frustration that she attempted to elude by disconnecting herself from Clare came rushing back. The narrator describes:

[laying it [the letter] aside, she [Irene] regarded with an astonishment that had in it a mild degree of amusement the violence of the
feelings which it stirred in her. It wasn't the great anger [...] that surprised [...] her. That, she was certain, was justified and reasonable, as was the fact that it could hold, still and unabated, across the stretch of two years' time[...]. (211)

In Irene, Larsen creates a woman whose anger resurfaces as a result of Clare's infringement. However, her anger has a double cause, for she is enraged that she must "pass" in order to receive the equal treatment which she feels that she deserves, which counters some of her anger, and she is enraged that Clare has obtained these "equal rights," but that she had to "pass," to do such. At the Drayton Hotel we observe Irene's ability to easily "pass." She sees no other way to circumvent the racism and sexism that encompass women at this time, and she attempts to escape briefly. She is trapped in a life of inequality. Audre Lorde affirms this in her response to anger as a black woman in relation to her environment: "My anger is a response to racists' attitudes and to the actions and presumptions that arise out of those attitudes" (124). Irene is responding in the same way because she does not have the power to overcome her frustrations in any other
way; she like Helga Crane is powerless against her environment.

It is obvious that Irene only "passes" when it is necessary to secure the things that she is denied because of her race and gender. Irene never desires to be white, just to have the power and privileges that whites have. If Irene wanted to be white, she would have obviously "passed" into the white world years previously. Furthermore, Irene realizes just as many African Americans do today, that there are often times when one must "mask" and assume a nontraditional role in order to progress in a white dominated society. This nontraditional role of "passing" gives Irene an advantage that she would otherwise not have. Irene realizes that the racist and sexist constraints placed upon her limit her accessibility within society; therefore, she masks.

The practice of "passing" or "masking" is echoed in Paul Laurence Dunbar's famous poem "We Wear the Masks," which speaks of the American Dream. The first stanza of the poem reads:

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties. (362)
Clare also wears this mask while she is "passing."
She smiles and grins in the face of non-African Americans (as does Irene) in order to indulge in the luxuries that she would otherwise be denied. Brody proposes:

Irene is threatened by Clare's ability to simultaneously imitate and denounce white society [...]. Throughout the text Clare plays the part of the trickster who wears her 'ivory mask' that 'grins and smiles' in the face of hateful whites (and Irene). Her laugh is the very essence of mockery [...]. (1056)

Brody reasserts my position that Clare is the masquerader, for she wears the face that "grins and lies," and she is able to move in and out of the two worlds easily.

Contrastingly, Irene's ability to "pass" in and out of white society yet continue to embrace her African ancestry, is simply a tool used to negotiate a white male-dominated society in which she attempts to counter the anger induced by her frustrations. Irene is afforded some privileges and counters some aspects of her anger through "passing"
because she is able to "mask," but it never completely changes her circumscribed position within society. For example, Irene is not allowed to dine at the Drayton Hotel's restaurant because she is African American, but when she is "passing" as a white woman, her options are seemingly endless, and she may dine anywhere she pleases. But, because Irene is forced to "pass," she is further angered, and this may be the reason that she resents Clare's attempts to reconnect with her African-American ancestry. No matter how many times Irene attempts to "pass" in and out of the white world, the fact remains that she, unlike Clare, is a proud, but frustrated, African American.

Through Irene Redfield, Larsen creates a mouthpiece of one who denies the actions of totally embracing white culture. She solidifies this denial by allowing Clare Kendry to refer to her black life and become obsessive with trying to reconnect with the "black world." Moreover, through Irene she portrays an African-American woman whose anger is often displayed due to the restraints in place at that time, and Larsen shows how African-American women are forced to become like Clare, which means to "become completely" white. Irene realizes that her childhood
friend has attempted to disown her African-American heritage, but now she returns and wants to "dabble" in black life. Irene resents the fact that Clare has obtained all the luxuries that Clare dreamt of as a child, yet it is still not enough. Irene's anger is further inflamed when she meets Clare's husband who is obviously a racist, and she vows never to see either Clare or her husband, John Bellew, again. When she is introduced to Bellew, Irene almost loses her restraint. The narrator states:

[T]here was a brief silence, during which she feared that her self-control was about to prove too frail abridge to support her mounting anger and indignation. She had a leaping desire to shout at the man beside her: 'And you're sitting here surrounded by three black devils, drinking tea.' (202)

Because Irene is "passing" at the time that she meets Bellew, she is unable to defend her race. She must endure all his demeaning comments. The narrator explains her frustrations: "She had wanted to be free of the other women, to be alone; for she was still sore and angry" (207). Irene is furious with Clare for bringing her into the presence of such a racist, and decides that she never
wants to experience such belittling again. This is an example of how the act of "passing" increases the frustrations that Irene already has to endure. Because she is assuming the role of a white woman, she is forced to be silent and this further angers her.

However, this is not the last Irene sees of Clare Kendry; Clare resurfaces two years later, and Irene recalls the events that cause her to become indignant at Clare because against her husband’s, Brian, better judgment, she has brought Clare into their world. When she tells Brian that she is bringing Clare to the party of Felise Freeland, their friend, "she remembered the not quite derisive smile with which Brian had cloaked his vexation when she informed him - oh, so apologetically - that she had promised to take Clare, and related the conversation to her visit" (233).

From this point on, Irene begins to feel more and more threatened by the idea of Clare being around, and she suspects that she and Brian are having an affair. These feelings begin on the night of the party and escalate until the end of the novel. After Irene finishes dressing upstairs, for the party at Felises', downstairs she finds Brian and Clare waiting:
Clare, exquisite, golden, fragrant, flaunting, in a stately gown of shinning black taffeta, whose long, full skirt lay in graceful folds about the slim golden feet [. . .]. Irene, with her new rose-colored chiffon frock ending at the knees, and her cropped curls, felt dowdy and commonplace. She regretted that she hadn’t counseled Clare to wear something ordinary and inconspicuous. What on earth would Brian think of deliberate courting of attention? But if Clare Kendry’s appearance had in it anything that was too, Brian Redfield, annoying or displeasing, the fact was not discernable to his wife [. . .].

(234-235)

Irene constantly battles with this idea, and even considers killing Clare; she comes to recognize Clare as a threat to her social and economic stability - her marriage. Irene realizes that she and Brian are in a loveless marriage, but it is a place of security which Irene intends to protect: “Yet all the while, in spite of her searchings and feeling of frustration, she was aware that, to her, security was the most important and desired thing in life” (267).

Monique Rooney affirms that “as [a] passer, [. . .] Clare
Kendry is positioned as a threat to stability [...] and she begins to fear Clare as a figure of uncontainability (98). Irene contemplates the many ways she can eliminate this new threat from her world. But before she can devise a plan, she meets Bellew on the street as she is walking arm and arm with her dark complexioned friend, and it becomes obvious to him at this point that she is an African-American woman:

He had, Irene knew, become conscious of Felise, golden, with curly black Negro hair, whose arm was still linked in her own. She was sure of [his] understanding[...]. [H]er face had become a mask. Now she turned on him a totally uncomprehending look, a bit questioning. (259)

This is the climax of the novel and the denouement ensues. Because Bellew sees that Irene is able to "pass" for white, he questions his wife's true identity. Irene battles with revealing the incident to Clare, but resolves to conceal it because she is acutely aware that this will probably eliminate Clare Kendry from her life: "Irene was conscious of a feeling of relieved thankfulness at the thought that she was probably rid of Clare, and without having lifted a finger or uttered a word" [my emphasis](261).
Irene at this point feels safer than she has since Clare Kendry resurfaced in her life, for she believes that Bellew's hatred for blacks and his certain anger over Clare's deception will lead to his killing of her. This does not immediately occur, however. The next day Irene fails to tell Clare or Brian of her chance meeting with Bellew and his recognition of her as a black woman. In addition, she and Brian fight over various differences illustrating how far apart they are in their marriage. At this point, Irene thinks, "surely she was going mad with fear and suspicion" (264). Shortly after, Clare appears at Irene's door "radiant in a shiny red dress" (265), ready for Felise Freeland's party. At this point, Irene's hope for her friend's demise is lost and her fear is restored. While at the party, Irene decides to "open one of the long casement windows" (270) to enjoy a cigarette. Moments later at the party, Irene angrily observes Clare and Brian's interactions:

She felt something in the air, something that had been between those two and would be again. She [Clare] was looking at him with that provocative upward glance of hers, and his eyes were fastened
on her face with what seemed to Irene an expression of wistful eagerness. (269)

Irene's anger began to mount, and, at the same time Bellew rushes into the party, and sees Clare and all her African-American friends; he accuses his wife of being a "damned dirty nigger!" (271). However, Clare is never flustered but appears to be relieved that her husband has found the truth:

Clare stood at the window, as composed as if everyone were not staring at her in curiosity and wonder, as if the whole structure of her life were not lying in fragments before her. She seemed unaware of any danger or uncaring. There was even a faint smile on her full red lips and in her shining eyes. It was this smile that maddened Irene. She ran across the room, her terror tinged with ferocity, and laid a hand on [my emphasis] Clare's bare arm. (271)

Clare Kendry falls to her death and there is little doubt that Irene has pushed Clare out of the opened window. Jonathan Little affirms that "[i]t is finally Irene's inability to control Clare [. . . ] that "maddens" Irene to murder" (180). Irene's increasing jealousy and anger along
with various clues offered by the narrator tell us this is so. Remembering that she and Brian had a fight earlier that day and the way Clare and Brian walked arm and arm, in addition to the narrator’s emphasis on Irene putting a hand on Clare’s arm, along with the fact that Irene opens the window moments before Bellew rushes in, proves this point. This is an extreme example of an African-American woman’s frustrations forcing her to take matters into her own hands. She is angry with Clare for all the reasons mentioned above, and she can no longer endure her presence and allow her to threaten her world. This scene gives Irene the perfect opportunity to eliminate her childhood friend from her life, seemingly ending her troubles, and she takes full advantage of the opportunity.

In *Passing*, Larsen creates a work that exposes the realities of the phenomena that swept across the African-American community. Through these two protagonists, she creates two women from the same background whose lives take them on two completely different paths. Larsen exhibits the frustrations and angers that plague these women because of the restraints and constraints placed on them by a racist and sexist society.
DISCOVERING THE REASONS FOR AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN'S FRUSTRATION IN NTOZAKE SHANGE'S *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuff*

i cant hear anything/ but maddening screams/ & soft strains of death/ & you promised me/ you promised me [. . .]/ somebody/ anybody/ sing a black girls song/ bring her out [. . .]/ she doesn't know the sound/ of her own voice/ her infinite beauty. (Shange 4)

The aforementioned quote from Shange's "choreopoem" expresses the inner anguish and oppression of women of color in their appeal to have a voice heard. In her award winning *for colored girls who have considered when the rainbow is enuff*, Ntozake Shange reveals the truths behind the angers and frustrations that African-American women face, and explores their causes. Shange's "choreopoem" is a new genre in American theater, a form rooted in an African-American tradition of movement, song, music, and emotional catharsis" (Lester, "At the Heart" 714), which
conveys a possible reason for African-American women's frustrations. The "choreopoem" uses different women who are all represented by a specific color: brown, yellow, purple, red, green, blue, and orange. These women, with their designated colors, speak the experiences of all African-American women. In her preface, Shange declares "[t]hey were numbered pieces: the women were to be nameless & assume hegemony as dictated by the fullness of their lives" (xii). They all voice an array of viewpoints with their own interpretive flare.

The "choreopoem" suggests that when African-American women address their frustrations and angers rather than covertly dismiss them or become passively aggressive, it can be therapeutic. Shange's work depicts African-American women's deep-seated frustrations, which are engendered by the problems that men cause in their relationships with other women, their dealing with misogynistic behavior, especially rape, and the lack of positive male-female relationships.

In her "choreopoem" Shange addresses the disloyalty of women toward other women in respect to men as another frustration that is tearing down the African-American female community, causing them to often times react with
anger toward each other. The lady in purple postulates that "three of us like a pyramid / three friends / one laugh / one music / one flowered shawl / knotted on each neck" (39). The lady in purple discusses how sisterhood connects African-American women as a whole. In this poem, the women all see the same man, whom each is attracted to and he to them. The lady in purple contends, "we all saw him at the same time / & he saw us / I felt a quick thing in each one of us / didn't know what to do / we all wanted what waz comin our way / so we split / but he fond one / & she loved him" (40). The lady in purple relates that one of the friends loved him, but that does not stop the friends from continuing to respond to his flirtatious advances: "the other two were tickled / & spurned his advances / when the one who loved him waz somewhere else /" (40). Shange reveals how women are willing to betray their friendship for a man, and she shows how the man contributes to this problem. The women discuss their discontentment about the fact that there are no men around. She states, "the season waz dry / no men / no quickies / not one dance or eyes unrelentin" (40). Because there are no men for them to have for themselves, they feel that it is perfectly acceptable for them to flirt with their friend’s lover
simply because she is not around. However, Shange shows how this type of betrayal only results in hurt and disappointment at the end. The lady in purple continues to say, “she cdnt figure out what was happenin / then the rose / she left by his pillow / she found on her friends desk / & there waz nothing to say” (41). The lady is hurt by her friends betrayal, and she is unable to respond. Her friend attempts to explain and make excuses for her betrayal. She declares, “i wanna tell you / he’s been after me / all the time / says he’s free & can explain / what’s happenin wit you / is nothing to me / & i dont wanna hurt you / but you know i need someone now / & you know / how wonderful he is” (41). Shange shows how the man causes the friends to betray the pyramid that they built with one another for a chance to be with the man and the disappointment that this behavior engenders: “Her friend cdnt speak or cry / they hugged & went to where he wuz / wit another woman / he said good-bye to one / tol the other he wd [sic] call / he smiled a lot” (42). At this point, it is obvious to the friends that it was not just their pyramid that he attempted to tear apart, but that he was a threat to women in general. The women are both disappointed and hurt because of the man’s lies. He is a relentless man who
cares nothing for the women but simply uses them because they allow themselves to be used.

However, Shange's poem suggests that the women's friendship is more important than their relationship with the man by having two of the three women console each other: "She held her head on her lap / the lap of her sisters soakin up tears / each understandin how much love stood between them / how much love between them / love like sisters" (42). Shange shows how the betrayal of each woman, one by one disassembles their pyramid, built with each of their strengths. The lady in purple covertly condemns the woman's disloyalty to her friend by allowing the man to hurt her as well. She iterates that African-American women must be cohesive in their struggle to persevere.

Through women's voices, Shange celebrates womanhood and explains how African-American women should relinquish their anger, especially in respect to their relationships with men. Sandra Flowers asserts that, "[t]he primary focus of Colored Girls is on the quality of relationships between black women and their men" (52). Shange portrays that African-American women should reclaim their lives by overcoming their frustrations and redefining their spaces
within society by confronting the issues that frustrate and even anger them. Through examples of women who fail to appropriately redirect their frustration, Shange attempts to persuade women that this is not the most effective way of dealing with the injustices confronting them. For example, the lady in red is left weeping, angry, and frustrated because of mistreatment by men in her past; therefore, she has forged a cage around her heart and will not allow anyone to get close to her. She simply tells her lover that he must go quickly, for she can not have a man in her bed, and that he has gotten what he wants (sex) therefore he should leave. When her lover wakes the next morning, she tells him:

you'll have to go now / i've a lot of work to do/
& I can't with a man around / here are yr pants /
there's coffee on the stove / its been very nice
/ but i can't see you again / you got what you
came for / didn't you [. . .]. (35)

This young woman has been scarred by unrequited love, and she now assumes the role that has historically been reserved for men. In a patriarchal world, the role of "player" has been filled by men who have sexual rendezvous with women without the attempts or hopes of maintaining a
relationship. The lady in red appears to be uncaring and unmoved, telling her lover to leave, and gathering her things. The “choreopoem” reads:

[s]he wd gather her tinsel & jewels from the tub/
& laugh gaily or vengeful she stored her silk roses by her bed /& when she finished writtin the account of her exploit in a diary /embroidered with lilies & moonstones she placed the rose behind her ear /& cried herself to sleep. (35)

From this small excerpt, one can see a woman who attempts to play the game, but one who is obviously not as content with her position as she appears, for, when she is left alone, she cries herself to sleep. The lady in red appears to be heartless, and out for only one particular thing - control, but one can conclude that she is in need of much more. African-American women who have experienced heartache can understand the lady in red's position. It seems probable that she is reacting out of anger. She feels that there is no hope for true love, so she settles for the next best thing, which is sexual control. She has the ability to control this situation, and pacify her bitter resentment for her past heartache. Becky Fields declares that “the thematic structure of African-American
women's anger comprises three main elements that stand out as figural: respect, power, and control" (359). And as one can see, she maintains control, demands respect, and exudes power over males. However, the lady in red does not direct her anger appropriately, but only finds a temporary solution to her problem. In her dynamic essay, Audre Lorde relates that

[е]very woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressors, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being. Focused with precision it can become a very powerful source of energy serving progress and change. And when I speak of change I do not mean a simple switch of positions on a temporary lessening of tensions, nor am I speaking of a basic and radical alteration in those assumptions underlying our lives.

(127)

The lady in red takes out her "well-stocked arsenal" and allows it to explode. She never actually focuses her frustrations and anger on its true past heartache; rather, she uses a "temporary lessening of tensions," (Lorde 127) and she believes that she has resolved her problem, but she
is actually powerless because she has made no change in her life. Shange's choreopoem goes on to discuss one of the most problematic issues for women in their relationships with men.

Shange feels that misogyny is an issue that enrages African-American women, and it negatively affects male-female relationships. Shange assures us that rape is an example of this. In a very emotional monologue, Shange reveals the realities of rape by allowing each woman represented by the colors blue, red, and purple to voice society's disbelief of women's claims about being raped. She displays how society faults women for rape and makes excuses for men for these violent acts against women. All the women reiterate society's voices on rape. The lady in blue says, "[A] friend is hard to press charges against" (17). The lady in red comments, "[If] you know him / you must have wanted it", while the lady in purple agrees and says it must have just been "a misunderstanding" (17). These women show how society attempts to make excuses for this violent act, which is not an act of love, but an act of power and a criminal assault. The lady in red goes on to agree with the lady in purple affirming, "[Y]ou know these things happen" (17). However, the lady in blue takes
society’s accusations a step further asking, “[A]re you sure you didn’t suggest”, while the lady in purple asks “had you been drinking” (17). The ladies show how society often attempts to blame rape on the victim because she must have done something to elicit such a crime. She must have suggested in some way that she wanted to engage in intercourse. Finally, the lady in red sums up society’s absurd misogynistic thinking with a sarcastic statement: “[A] rapist is always to be a stranger / to be legitimate / someone you never saw / a man wit problems” (17), which would infer that women cannot be raped by people with whom they are associated. The lady in red’s final words actually suggests that a rapist can be anyone one knows; however, society perpetuates the idea apparently to save the guilty. The lady in red’s words suggest that society blames women for criminal sexual acts against them, and hint that a woman deserves a man’s ill treatment because “she wanted it”, or in some way “asked” for it. Women as well as men make these excuses. Shange suggests in an interview with Neal A. Lester that society has to recognize rape as a crime:

[I]t [rape] is an act of violence; it’s not a sexual act. Rape and child molestation have to
become as heinous to us as lynching was; we have to understand them as political crimes. That is where I think men have been cowardly because they have allowed the victims, the women who have been raped, and the mothers of children who have been attacked to be the voices of change in this matter when, in fact, we're not the perpetrators of the crimes. (726)

In her work, Shange addresses these issues directly. She overtly proclaims that these issues are pertinent to the lives of women and are influenced by men, and therefore, men and women must form an alliance, or frustration and anger will continuously be the tools that dismantle their relationships. And further, women must reclaim their independence and freedom.

In her poem, Shange continues to illustrate how difficult it is to prove rape and argues against society's opinions of women, by having the lady in blue assert that the rapist could very well be "someone else we know," while the lady in red confirms that "we cd even have em over for dinner / & get raped in our own houses / by invitation / a friend" (21). Here the lady in blue affirms how hard it is for women to protect themselves against the crime of rape.
However, often times women attempt to deny their frustrations with misogyny in its various forms, and Shange shows this is not the best choice because at the end of the poem she notes that "the lights change, and the ladies are all hit by an imaginary slap [. . .]" (21). The imaginary slap signifies the women being "slapped in the face" by society's disbelief, and it is seen as a signifier that society must be aware of the awful crime of rape because women often attempt to ignore their frustration and try to "pacify" it because it is useless to fight back. This is most obvious in the powerful Beau Willie and Crystal poem.

In this poem, one sees the most dangerous form of anger, for it is anger that explodes and results in complete chaos. In this story, Beau Willie is a Vietnam vet who comes home "crazy as hell / he tried to get veterans benefits to go to school and they kept on putting him in remedial classes / he cdn't read wortha damn / so beau cused the teachers of holdin him back [. . .]" (55-56). Through his anger, he perpetuates and inflames the anger that Crystal has felt because she has been involved with him since she was fourteen years old, and he has always treated her badly. In a drunken rage, he beats her with the high chair that holds their son, and in return she
places a restraining order on him: "the next day beau willie came in blasted & got ta swingin / chairs at crystal / who cdnt figure out what the hell he waz doin / [. . .]. & he cdnt do no more with the table n chairs / [. . .] and beau waz beatin crystal with the high chair & her son / " (57).

Crystal's anger is fed by Beau Willie's inconsistencies, the oppressions that he deals with daily, and the frustration that he attempts to take out on Crystal. Crystal is a frustrated African-American woman who eventually tires of the drama that surrounds her relationship with Beau Willie, but her actions are not swift enough. Even though she knows that he is a "lunatic," she still allows him to be a constant figure in her life. She, just as Nelson suggests, "denies her rage, attempts to pacify it, tamp it down and achieve temporary relief, but it stays with [her]" (93). Crystal continues to deny her rage and stays with Beau because she feels that he is all that she has and because he is the father of her two children. Brown asserts that "Crystal's desperate circumstances as a poor, unmarried mother" (45) force her to feel compelled and drawn to Beau Willie.
Crystal maintains control, until she can no longer allow her love for Beau to cloud her judgment, and her rage erupts. She tells him out of frustration and tiredness:

whatcha wanna marry me for now / so I can support yr ass / or come sit wit ya when they lock yr behind up / cause they gonna come for ya / ya goddamn lunatic / they gonna come for / & I'm not gonna have a thing to do wit it. O no I wdnt marry yr pitiful black ass for nothing [. . .]/.

(56-57)

One must remember that once upon a time, all young Crystal wanted was to marry Beau, but now she is forced, because of Beau’s situation “to be tired of being tired.” The lady in red continues with the story: “crystal most died/ that’s why the police wdnt low beau near where she lived” (57). However, Beau manages to come back into Crystal’s life and he tells her:

[I] just wanna hold em [the children] & get on my way / i dont wanna craz you no more trouble/ I wanted to marry you & give ya things /[.. . .]. he coaxed her [crystal] & he coaxed her / he tol her she waz still hot lil ol thing & pretty & strong.

(57-58)
Beau tells Crystal what he thinks she wants to hear, and convinces her to give him the children. Once she hands the children to him, "he kicked the screen outta the window / & held the kids offa the sill /[ . . ]. & he dropped em" (60).

This horrendous scene is presented as a most absurd scene with the worst-case scenario. Beau coaxes Crystal into giving him the children then dropping them out of the window. But the reader wants to know why. Shange attempts to shock readers to show them how catastrophic male-female relationships can become without proper communication and understanding. Many critics have responded to the controversial scene in which Shange states:

There's such craziness in their relationship. I purposely chose things that didn't make any sense. Of course someone should want to get married to someone that wanted to marry her. That's why I had Beau Willie keep asking Her[. . .]. The other thing I wanted to do in that episode was explain that both Crystal and Beau Willie are very confused people. She is not any less confused than Beau Willie is, but people
seem never to notice that. (Lester "At the Heart," 723)

The "craziness" is the constant fighting and abuse of Beau and the using of the children to get what both Crystal and Beau want from one another. This is a common problem tearing down the African-American community, and Shange condemns this behavior.

When Crystal wanted to love Beau Willie, his mistreatment of her ran wild. But once he felt the world had completely turned its back on him, he runs back to her, but she is exasperated and no longer has the strength to deal with his craziness. Beau Willie is so desperate for Crystal's love that he resorts to murder, murder of the two beings who connect them - their children. Brown affirms that "[i]t is the failure of the men, as of the rest of society, to love these women for themselves that dooms their relationships. The men have borrowed the attitudes and behavior of white patriarchal society" (45). Brown feels that African-American men are mistreating African-American women when they display misogynistic behavior, which causes their anger to erupt; Beau's mistreatment of Crystal signifies this. He is suppose to be the man who loves and protects Crystal and their
children, but he is the one who abuses them all and eventually kills their children. Shange's work explains this idea showing how the mistreatment of women by men causes women to be frustrated and even angry. Shange shows how women's frustrations are transferred and how African-American women often attempt to maintain control and pretend that there is nothing festering deep inside. This is how they ignore their anger, but Shange shows that this all results in more frustration.

Shange displays how to cope with the anger that has oppressed women. She provides the cases that enrage them, and shows how to ease the pain. For example, Owen Dodson states: "The lady in blue castigates her man for all his miserable sorries." (161) The lady in blue states:

[B]eatin my heart to death/ talkin bout you sorry/ well / I will not call/ I'm not goin to be nice/ I will raise my voice/ and scream and holler/ and break things and race the engine/ I tell all yr secrets bout yrself to yr face/ [. . . ] you wanna carry all the guilt and grime ya wanna/ just don't give it to me/ I can't use another sorry. (53-54)
He illustrates how Shange challenges women to reclaim their place in the world. She commands women to disallow men and society to trot on their spirits and to embrace themselves. She is calling for women to redefine themselves in order to be the women that they are supposed to be, the mothers of their children, true friends to their sisters, better lovers to their significant others, and most importantly true to themselves.

Shange insists on portraying the events that cause African-American women to feel beaten down and abused, but shows, just as her title implies, that there is hope for the colored girl in a patriarchal society. Even though she displays what inflames the anger of African-American women, she also exemplifies that there is beauty within, and hope for a better tomorrow, a rainbow on the other side. Sally Burkes asserts that by

- enacting myth and stereotype, and knowing the pains of betrayal, rape, and abortion to
- achieving a true sense of identity, an almost sacramental community with her peers, and
- discovering the sacredness of her own being.

(185)
Shange reveals the strength of the African-American woman and reveals ways to relinquish our anger.

Shange's work challenges the idea of what is acceptable within society. Tejumola Olaniyan states: "Shange's artistic practice shares with that of many African-American women the daring identification of what Cheryl A. Wall calls an 'unwritten space' in African-American literary discourse, and the bold inscription in that space of an 'afro American female self'" (120). This "unwritten space" that Shange creates is a daring concept in which she elicits the voices of women to show the familiarity with the struggle that African-American women endure.

Shange's work relays the frustration and anger that African-American women feel. She shows, through realistic situations, the reasons for their frustration and anger; however, unlike Larsen, Shange shows that there is hope for a better tomorrow. She displays her women of color overcoming the oppressions and situations that enrage them, and she displays that her women seek true happiness within themselves. They find the joy and love that society and men attempt to suck from them within themselves. She
shows, just as her title suggests, that there is hope over the rainbow.
CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

When one examines the psychological inner workings of African-American women’s frustration, one must first understand that anger is not always displayed and carried out through violent altercations and/or tantrums; rather, it becomes a burden that weighs African-American women down like a heavy load. This concept is an underlying attribute in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* and *Passing* and Ntozake Shange’s *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuff*. Both Larsen and Shange’s characters exhibit the frustrations that constantly enrage them because of the racist and sexist environment surrounding them, which reminds them of the double inequalities to which they are subjected as African Americans and females.

In *Quicksand*, Larsen portrays Helga Crane as one who ignores her frustrations and attempts temporarily to mend the problems by fleeing the environments that frustrate her. Larsen does illustrate that Helga’s decision to escape is her only means of resisting the negativity that
surrounds her. However, Helga’s continuous decision to escape leads her into the conventional life that she had always attempted to avoid. Similarly, in Passing Larsen portrays women who are angry and frustrated with their unequal positions within society, and she shows how the act of “passing” forces Irene and Clare into precarious situations of jealously and anger, which eventually result in the murder of Clare by Irene.

Finally, Shange’s for colored girls . . . writes out women who are frustrated and women who are unafraid to address the catalysts that enrage them. Shange demonstrates that when African-American women address their frustrations and anger, instead of attempting to ignore or pacify them, they can overcome both. Shange’s characters, the various ladies signified by different colors, express the reasons for their anger through real life situations. Shange, unlike Larsen, supplies women with the belief that they can overcome their anger once they learn to face it by confronting the catalyst that enrage them. Shange illustrates that women are able to overcome the oppression and misogynistic behavior of men by first learning how to love themselves.
Both authors examine African-American women's frustration and anger and portray their characters reacting to their environments the only way that they can. Larsen presents an accurate portrayal of early-twentieth-century African-American women. She portrays women who have limited choices because of a racist and sexist society, and she shows that they attempt to negotiate their marginalized positions within this society. Larsen's characters are only allotted so much freedom because they are African-American women. Because of the limited choices in a male-dominated society, these women attempt to pacify their frustrations through escape, "passing," and denial of anger.

Furthermore, Larsen's work serves as a precursor for Shange's work which shows later twentieth-century women who are able, finally, to confront and overcome the obstacles that anger them. Both Larsen and Shange expose the anger that African-American women endure and their sometimes ambiguous responses to their situations. The researcher examines how Larsen's characters' responses to their anger result in less than satisfying resolutions, while Shange's characters have evolved and are able to address their frustrations in a more positive way. Both works
incorporate aspects of the real world and relate real-life issues to their characters' lives. From this work one should be able to understand the intricate pattern of African-American women's frustration and anger and how these things are in part a result of the world in which these women live.

In studying and understanding these authors' works, readers, especially African American women, should feel that they now have a better understanding of themselves as well as of other African-American women. Moreover, this study is significant for it compares works of the past to contemporary fiction. Through this comparison, one is able to empathize both with the African-American female characters and African-American females. The reader is able to understand how the ideas of biracialism, sexism, racism, and passing frustrate and anger the African-American woman. Both Larsen and Shange demonstrate how their characters' lives are intensively affected by the above concepts. However, their works are not simply fictional accounts of unrealistic events or situations, but, in essence, they are aspects of the past that have affected the women of today both in print and real life.
Endnotes

1 Helga’s deep depression after becoming the mother of four in such a short span of time is what I consider postpartum depression. Helga exemplifies the symptoms: loss of interest, loss of appetite, and a feeling of overall hopelessness.

2 The word player was chosen because it is a modern term that defines a man who believes that it is attractive and “manly” to be promiscuous and unable to commit to a monogamous relationship. Because women especially deem this word as negative, by referring to the lady in red as a player it shows just how unrelenting and negative her behavior is.
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