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**Suffering We Know:
The Hermeneutic of *Han* and
the Dilemma of African American (Religious) Experience**

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African American theologians typically consider engagement with other communities as a means by which to affirm—in light of the web-like nature of oppression—their particular theological read of experience. That is to say, there is an assumption of existential similarity (shared modalities of oppression and a need for liberation) leading to a set of common

theological proclamations. Yet, what I propose here is a different type of engagement—the use of Asian American theological categories as a hermeneutic brought to bear on African American theological source materials. In this way engagement between African American and Asian American theological discourses is more fundamental, less pre-set, and more fluid in nature than is often the case.

For the purposes of this essay, I make use of an Asian American theological formulation of marginality and *han*, and I bring these together as a way to read one of the more troubling assessments of the absurdity and inevitability of embodied suffering—Nella Larsen’s novel *Quicksand*.¹ While a variety of texts could have been picked for inclusion here, I discuss *Quicksand* in that it graphically represents a genre of cultural production ignored because of its stinging challenge to black and womanist theologies regarding the nature of oppression and the meaning of liberation. Furthermore, *han* as a central Asian American theological category allows for creative engagement of this text in ways that maintain its complexities.

Fiction Qua Theology

Cultural expression is tied to the “religious” in significant and repeating ways. Nathan Scott’s early work in the area of “Literature and Religion” speaks to the manner in which the religious as “ultimate concern” is played out in significant ways through literary expression. There is something religious in the work of poets and novelists in that their prose speaks “testimony about the human condition...” and seeks to arrange and interrogate experience in

¹Nella Larsen, *Quicksand and Passing* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 1-135.

complexity and significance.² In fact, as Anthony Yu notes, in many historical cases a community's literary tradition grows "in intimate—indeed, often intertwining—relation to religious thought, practice, institutions, and symbolism."³ Hence, it is reasonable for scholars to work from the posture that one informs the other, and both relate to similar motivations. In short, the arts—in this case literature—tell something of the nature and meaning of the religious—its 'language', shape, content and concerns—and should not be missed by students of religion. This, of course, is not without problems: language is a tricky matter, and prose can paint vivid depictions of life that challenge the order theology seeks to speak into being.

Following this line of reasoning, some in the study of African American religion have mined African American literary tradition(s) for insights into the nature of black life and the mechanics of the struggle for liberation they assume defines this life. Materials are privileged and highlighted to the extent they promote a fundamental (and assumed successful) wrestling against injustice—particularly in ways that affirm faith in a God committed to the advancement of those who suffer. White supremacy is read as a problematic handled through the tenacity of African American mechanisms of creativity and determination in spite of the absurdity of life arrangements. Hence, African American literature is presented within both black and womanist theologies as a running example of struggle against injustice in ways that affirm a traditional ethics of divinely sanctioned social change. Literature does this in several ways: (1) it outlines

²Nathan Scott, "Religious Symbolism in Contemporary Literature," in *Religious Symbolism*, ed. F. Ernest Johnson (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1969), 160.

³Anthony C. Yu, "Literature and Religion," *Comparative Journeys: Essays on Literature and Religion East and West*, ed. Anthony C. Yu (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 1.

the nature of suffering and promotes strategies for change; (2) it offers critique of oppressions *as* a strategy for change; (3) it provides a posture toward the world in some way—either implicit or explicit—consistent with the basic parameters of activist Christianity; and, (4) it promotes the integrity of individual and collective black life as the core of liberation and as consistent with the best of the black (Christian) tradition. In other words, African American literary materials, drawn from the shared experience of struggle for life meaning, contain what Riggins Earl might call “foundational religio-ethical meanings constructs” through which ontological value is established and epistemologically spread.⁴

This scheme has both determined how literature is read and also what literature is read. Often missing from this list of utilized materials is Larsen’s *Quicksand*, and I suspect this oversight has something to do with the troubling nature of enduring suffering found in Larsen’s novel.

Larsen published *Quicksand* in 1928. This, as some readers may know, was a pivotal time in the history of the United States. The “Great Migration” of African Americans was in full swing, and African Americans undertaking this journey found in northern cities a continuation of the economic despair and marginalization that marked the geography they had fled. The ramifications of embodied ‘blackness’ combined with issues of gender-bias and class, plagued and deformed life options for African Americans across the landscape of southern Jim and Jane Crow and their socio-political equals in the North. Yet, within this context of struggle, African Americans were creating religious markers of identity that spoke against the traumas of their

⁴ Riggins R. Earl, Jr., *Dark Symbols, Obscure Signs: God, Self, and Community in the Slave Mind*, Second Edition (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2003), xxvi.

existential condition. They were creating cultural modalities that expressed a different and more robust aesthetic of black life. Hence, despite hardships and uncertainties, this was also a period of transformation—a shift in ontological and epistemological markers of me(an)ing; or, what Alain Locke named in 1925 the birth of the “New Negro.” For Locke the cultural articulations of African Americans during the turn of the century suggested the emergence of a difference—people of African descent with complexity, capable of articulated new worlds of thought, action, and meaning. “With this renewed self-respect and self-dependence,” writes Locke, “the life of the Negro community is bound to enter a new dynamic phase, the buoyancy from within compensating for whatever pressure there may be of conditions from without. The migrant masses, shifting from countryside to city, hurdle several generations of experience at a leap, but more important, the same thing happens spiritually in the life-attitudes and self-expression of the Young Negro, in his poetry, his art, his education and his new outlook, with the additional advantage, of course, of the poise and greater certainty of knowing what it is all about.”⁵

Authors recorded the nature and meaning of African American life with all its points of promise and discomfort. Along these lines, “The Negro today,” Locke reflects, “wishes to be known for what he is, even in his faults and shortcomings, and scorns a craven and precarious survival at the price of seeming to be what he is not. He resents being spoken of as a social ward or minor, even by his own, and to being regarded a chronic patient for the sociological clinic, the sick man of American Democracy.”⁶ Consistent with this assessment, Larsen promoted the

⁵Alain Locke, “The New Negro,” in *The New Negro*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Atheneum, 1986), 4-5.

⁶*Ibid.*, 11.

reconstitution of the self as already always marginalized and configured. Movement, not the stability of a fixed identity and clear geography of life meaning, is the guiding epistemological trope.

Quicksand is marked by a presentation of the protagonist as a complex and embodied being, whose life is complex and tragic.⁷ This intentionally moves beyond the apologetics of early writings whereby an effort was made to present African Americans as one dimensional and acceptable within the social structures of a “whitened” world. This process of articulating African American life amounts, from my perspective, to the smashing of idols noted by Locke as part of the emergence of the “New Negro.” Creating comfort with African Americans (either within the community of African Americans or outside that community) was not the point of this new work. Instead, it sought to present the tragic without nihilism, forcing recognition of the troubled nature of life and in this way expressing the full humanity of African Americans, whose lives are rich, thick, and nuanced. And more to the point of this essay, this “New Negro” does not necessarily operate based on theological assumptions and precepts that might dull the senses and challenge reason for dominance. Religion and its theological framing are no longer assumed to provide the resolution to existential trauma.⁸

I believe it is this last point that has troubled students of African American religion, particularly those with a somewhat narrow perception of the content and workings of history as teleological in nature. Helga Crane, the protagonist of *Quicksand*, personifies a type of realism

⁷This recasting involved an effort to move beyond the apologetics of early writings in which African Americans were discussed as one dimensional and acceptable within the social structures of a “whitened” world.

⁸ Locke, “The New Negro,” 11.

comfortably situated within the workings of modernity.⁹ Breaking the “idol” of supernaturalism tied to expression of socio-racial and erotic embodiment, Larsen promoted the reconstitution of the self.

Helga Crane’s Story in Brief

Mindful of this framing, the novel begins with Helga Crane restless, discontent with life within the structures of Naxos—a school formed for African Americans along the Booker T. Washington philosophy and model—because it seeks to limit the range of black life and forge African Americans who fit within the strictures of raced-based society. Struggles with the limits of identity formation for African Americans, and the added eroticization she encounters as a mulatto, are expressed through her movement across geography. Helga leaves. Yet, struggles with the limits of identity formation and the added eroticization she encounters as a mulatto are present in each place she goes: Harlem, Copenhagen, back to Harlem, and finally Alabama. The movement is graphic, but the actual time—the moment in time and space—constituted during and by this movement is rather vague.

Helga journeys in light of, and in reaction to, various cultural mappings, while sustaining little alteration to her self-awareness. Yet, it is during her second sojourn in Harlem that she succumbs to the promises of energetic Christianity, and it is in Alabama she hopes to live out these promises within the context of church practice and family stability. What she encounters consistently, however, is suffering and pain, isolation, and the compromise of her body and

⁹Thadious M. Davis, *Nella Larsen Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance: A Woman’s Life Unveiled* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 3.

psyche. In response to her physical misery and existential trauma Helga makes a proclamation. “The cruel, unrelieved suffering had beaten down her protective wall of artificial faith in the infinite wisdom, in the mercy, of God,” writes Larsen, “for had she not called in her agony on Him? And He had not heard. Why? Because, she knew now, He wasn’t there. Didn’t exist. Into that yawning gap of unspeakable brutality had gone, too, her belief in the miracle and wonder of life.”¹⁰

Helga’s life up to the point of her conversion in a small storefront church in Harlem, involved existential arrangements based on what she preserved as reason and logic applied to the historical circumstances of lived life. However, as Larsen seems to argue, the ‘religious’ dulls identity formation, and refocuses wellbeing and purpose away from the physicality of our existence. Even when Helga, as the above quotation marks, recognizes that the lynchpin of religiosity—God—is mythical, a trope without realness, the power of religion to shape and confine life-meaning remains intact. The novel ends with Helga tied to her troubled existential arrangements, pregnant again, ethically frustrated, and confined to the geography of her conservative Christian community. There is no teleology here; no push toward liberation so important in African American liberation theologies.

How Black and Womanist Theologies Might Explain Helga Crane

It is likely that black and womanist theologians would first read *Quicksand* as a signifying of (and shift with respect to) the nature and meaning of race. They, I imagine, would call into question the racial paradigm and the white supremacist sensibilities undergirding Helga

¹⁰ Larsen, *Quicksand and Passing*, 130.

Crane's struggle for identity outside the exotic and reified notions of racial dominance in place within her world. The story is replete with instances of racialization as negation, and it chronicles these instances against a struggle for difference as beneficial—here in terms of the liminal space of light skin and European 'blood.' After receiving a note from her (white) uncle, Peter Nilssen, in which he explains the poor reaction of his wife in meeting Helga and offers her a bit of money and advice to visit family in Copenhagen, she thinks to herself: "She didn't, in spite of her racial markings, belong to these dark segregated people. She was different. She felt it. It wasn't merely a matter of color. It was something broader, deeper, that made folk kin."¹¹ Yes, there are racial tensions and a mocking of racial distinction within the story. But it isn't necessarily the case that Larsen did this in a manner consistent with what now defines the ideological leanings of black theological discourse. Whereas black theology understands race (blackness, ontological blackness) as a marker for pride and sign of divine favor, Larsen's perspective is a bit more paradoxical. "In taking a bemused stance toward matters of race," writes Thadious Davis, "Larsen reflected an ironic vision of life, a willingness to dissent from acceptable racial discourse, and a complicated understanding of the arbitrariness of racial definitions."¹²

Womanist scholars, no doubt, would pick-up on the implications of gender and sexism for women of 'color.' The mode by which Helga Crane is 'other-ed,' they might argue, is not simply a function of race. More appropriately understood, it is the consequence of a complex arrangement of race, gender, and class. To the extent there is something autobiographical about

¹¹ Ibid., 55.

¹²Thadious M. Davis, *Nella Larsen Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance: A Woman's Life Unveiled* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 12.

Quicksand, Davis's point serves to support this triadic read: "Larsen's movement from nurse to librarian to writer demonstrates her personal search for class position, meaningful work, social prestige, and full self-expression as an African-American female."¹³ "Her movement," Davis continues, "reconstituted through the lens of time, reflects the dual efforts of a woman constructing herself during the moment of the larger social construction of an African-American middle class and of a woman engendering herself during a period of confluence of race, gender, and art."¹⁴ Axel Olsen's commentary in Copenhagen accompanying his proposal of marriage speaks to this dilemma—a configuration of race, gender, and class meant to stultify and reduce: "You know, Helga, you are a contradiction... You have the warm impulsive nature of the women of Africa, but, my lovely, you have, I fear, the soul of a prostitute. You sell yourself to the highest buyer. I should of course be happy that it is I. And I am."¹⁵ Helga's response speaks, at least momentarily, to an assertion of self over against objectification that both black and womanist theological discourses might embrace. "But you see, Herr Olsen," Helga counters, "I'm not for sale. Not to you. Not to any white man. I don't at all care to be owned. Even by you."¹⁶ Albeit an important statement on Helga's part, it does not entail "speaking truth to power" consistent with the grand design of black and womanist theological discourses. This is not the worst of it, not the most rigorous or 'damning' challenge to the basic structure of these discourses.

¹³ Davis, *Nella Larsen Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance*, 456.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 456-457.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 87.

¹⁶ Larsen, *Quicksand and Passing*, 87.

Helga Crane offers a theodical challenge, noted earlier, that black and womanist theologians might find a useful critique of white supremacist manipulations of the “religious” for the purposes of a discriminatory theology. When confronting her personal pain—seen in Helga’s ongoing torment and angst associated with continued pregnancies, the dislike of her neighbors and church family, and in spite of prayer—Larsen concludes:

With the obscuring curtain of religion rent, she was able to look about her and see with shocked eyes this thing that she had done to herself. She couldn’t, she thought ironically, even blame God for it, now that she knew that He didn’t exist. No. No more than she could pray to Him for the death of her husband, the Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green. The white man’s God. And His great love for all people regardless of race! What idiotic nonsense she had allowed herself to believe.¹⁷

The “white man’s God”...this idol has long been a target of theological critique within African American communities. And it appears that Larsen provides a literary equivalent. But is this really the nature of Larsen’s commentary? African American theological critique of this fictive force is meant to promote struggle towards liberation and make possible proper connection to the true God, who fights alongside the oppressed for their liberation. The unmasking of this idol is, then, a theological breakthrough promoting a greater sense of self and greater potential for transformation. Yet, Helga’s situation does not improve. Hers remains an existential quagmire—a struggle over freedom. In this regard, Larsen’s theological insight fails to accomplish the aims of black and womanist theological critique.

Helga Crane’s perspective does not line up with the liberation/transformation schematics of such deep importance to black and womanist liberation theologies. And this is a key reason

¹⁷ Ibid., 130.

why Larsen's work has received such limited attention within black and womanist theological circles. Yet this begs a question. Is there benefit in looking beyond black and womanist theologies for assistance with a re-thinking of materials such as Larsen's *Quicksand* that trouble staid theological depictions of suffering and redemption? I answer in the affirmative, but qualify my positive response: the benefit is available to use only when such troubling texts are approached using an alternate hermeneutic, one better equipped to appreciate the paradoxes marking much of African American life. I propose *han* as this alternate hermeneutic.

A Hermeneutic of *Han*

I am not the first African American theologian to engage Asian American conceptual frameworks. For example, Karen Baker-Fletcher, in *Dancing with God*, tackles the nature and meaning of sin in conversation with the paradigm of *han*.¹⁸ Drawing on Andrew Park's writings, Baker-Fletcher uses *han* to capture both the 'content' and scope of disconnection and trauma particularly as related to a womanist sensitivity to "the relationship the presence of God in creation and the violation of creation" as connoting "sin."¹⁹ Accordingly, through *han* one gathers a sense of how the oppressed—the "sinned against"—encounter the world, as well as the content of their predicament.²⁰ The oppressed experience misery, a troubling of deep ontological and material meaning, that produces a gross response. "The victims of various types of wrongdoing," writes Andrew Park, "express the ineffable experience of deep bitterness and

¹⁸Karen Baker-Fletcher, *Dancing with God: The Trinity from a Womanist Perspective* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2006).

¹⁹Ibid., 92.

²⁰Ibid., 95.

helplessness. Such an experience of pain is called *han* in the Far East. *Han* can be defined as the critical wound of the heart generated by unjust psychosomatic repression, as well as by social, political, economic, and cultural oppression.”²¹ By means of *han*, the perspective of the oppressed is prioritized, and the world is viewed from their position. Pain experienced, hence, is the point of departure for understanding and action. The challenge of *han*, from my perspective, is this: It marks out the anger of the oppressed, the internalized tension and external trauma of their painful predicaments. It is the graphics of misery. *Han* cannot be easily distilled or isolated and removed, in that it influences all dimensions of one’s existence: “It shows through the interpersonal social, cultural, and religious aspects of life. Like repression, *han* is submerged in the unconscious, forcing us to bury our oppressed feelings. *Han*, however, controls our ways of thought, emotion, and behavior.”²² It is both a significant marker of creativity and the shape and content of misery. Difficult to target in simple ways, *han* can connote and signal contraction and paradox. Mindful of the above, one can argue *Quicksand* ends with Helga acknowledging and responding to her *han*.²³

Helga Crane’s *Han*

The inclination of black and womanist theologies might be to pull apart the various dimensions of Helga’s misery—racism, sexism, and so on—but according to Jae Hoon Lee, “certain meanings of *han* can be found only by making it whole, instead of fragmenting it.”

²¹Andrew Sung Park, *The Wounded Heart of God: The Asian Concept of Han and the Christian Doctrine of Sin* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 10.

²²Ibid., 17, 80-81.

²³Jae Hoon Lee, *The Exploration of the Inner Wounds—Han* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 2, 5.

Required, then, is a process of “synthesis,” a holding together.²⁴ In this way *han* as hermeneutic interprets Helga Crane’s story as a matter of internal and external struggle, a complex decoding of paradoxical feelings and desires, all couched in material and psychic developments. Rejection of God might be viewed as Helga surrendering a dimension of her *han*, “conscious *han*.” It is a recognition that her misery is multi-dimensional, a result of oppression but also a result of *han* (e.g., anger and resentment) more elaborately configured.²⁵ This is “a removal of *han*-causing elements,” but such a move is incomplete in that *han* is also unconscious.²⁶ Furthermore, it is the double nature of *han*—external and internal—that accounts for recognition of Crane’s predicament as an insufficient means by which to confront the predicament: she remains within a context of oppression. Put differently, addressing the external markers of oppression is insufficient to address fully the nature and meaning of *han*. Or, as Jae Hoon Lee remarks, drawing on psychological paradigms, “The idea that the complex is the product of only external oppression and is removable by devoting oneself to the cause of social justice, does not account for the inner nature of the complex.”²⁷

Helga Crane is not simply rejecting Christianity as a tool of oppression; rather, she is speaking out of and to *han* in a way that acknowledges external and internal causes and

²⁴Ibid., 7.

²⁵For a discussion of *han* with the life experiences of women, see Grace Ji-Sun Kim, *The Grace of Sophia: A Korean North American Women’s Christology* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2002), chapters 3, 7.

²⁶Park, *The Wounded Heart of God*, 174.

²⁷Jae Hoon Lee, *The Exploration of the Inner Wounds—Han* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 150.

consequences of her misery. She is expanding her understanding.²⁸ (What we have here is more than recognition of ‘internalized racism’ for instance.)

Helga begins the process of “working through the reality of such painful events” but the story ends before this is accomplished.²⁹ Helga mines the self, and the end of the novel points to the beginning of the process. In other words, “recognizing the reality of the painful *han* and determining the diversion of *han*-energy are the avenues by which one transcends the unconscious level of *han*.”³⁰ The expression of Helga’s frustration, the acknowledgement of her role in the fostering of her predicament, is not a moment of defeat but rather the marking out of recovery as possibility to the extent the negative energy of *han* is released and can be used.³¹ Perhaps Helga’s situation, the ongoing connection to people and world, is an act of “*dan*” whereby the push for revenge is subsumed. In this regard, it is possible that Helga undergoes a transformation whereby “masochistic uses of aggression and sentimental love” are challenged by the practice of “aggression creatively.”³² (*Han*, nonetheless, remains —although transformed.) Such is not a call for a denial of socio-cultural change; rather, it is to put this change within perspective. Think of this in light of the following, first a definition of *dan* and then a stating of Helga’s status: “On the personal level, ‘*dan*’ is the practice of ‘self denial’ through which one can

²⁸ Lee, *The Exploration of the Inner Wounds*, 149-150

²⁹Park, *The Wounded Heart of God*, 174-175.

³⁰ Ibid., 175.

³¹ Lee, *The Exploration of the Inner Wounds*, 127.

³²Ibid., 160.

remove the temptation of the ‘easy life, circles of petite bourgeois dreams, and secular swamps without depth.’”³³

And now, the last words of the novel:

She must rest. Get strong. Sleep. Then, afterwards, she could work out some arrangement. So she dozed and dreamed in snatches of sleeping and waking, letting time run on. Away.

AND HARDLY had she left her bed and become able to walk again without pain, hardly had the children returned from the homes of the neighbors, when she began to have her fifth child.

Helga Crane remains within her context of suffering, but with a much milder desire for revenge. There is no reconstitution of the self as victorious over injustice; and no reconstitution of right religion as the marker of ongoing change, and so on. The faith of black (Christian) religion is held in check by the absurdity of experience, and logic/reason only intensify this situation.

Without doubt, the issue of theodicy would surface for black and womanist theologians, particularly in light of Helga’s dismissal of the God concept in light of human misery. And the response for black and womanist theologians might involve some version of redemptive suffering.³⁴ But not so for Helga Crane. Helga’s re-envisioning God as robust trope, turns from theodicy to a mode of anthropodicy in that the idea of God’s involvement in human suffering is secondary to human production of misery: “And this, Helga decided, was what ailed the whole

³³Dong-hwan Moon, “Korean Minjung theology,” quoted in Jae Hoon Lee, *The Exploration of the Inner Wounds – Han*, 153.

³⁴Anthony B. Pinn, *Why, Lord? Suffering and Evil in Black Theology* (New York: Continuum Press, 1995); Anthony B. Pinn, *Moral Evil and Redemptive Suffering* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002).

Negro race in America, this fatuous belief in the white man's God, this childlike trust in full compensation for all woes and privations in 'kingdom come.'"³⁵ There is a suggestion here, lifted out through the hermeneutic of *han*, that resolution for Helga is not found in a traditional overcoming of existential conditions. Such an outcome is "good," but alone it is insufficient in that the material (socio-political and economic situation) is connected to the inner realities that make us who we are.

Questions still abound, and circumstances remain challenging. "How, then," Helga asks, "was she to escape from the oppression, the degradation, that her life had become? It was so difficult. It was terribly difficult."³⁶ Such a proclamation is a challenge to the typical sensibilities of black and womanist theologies, but the manner in which the challenge echoes *han* might shed light on its importance.

³⁵Larsen, *Quicksand and Passing*, 133.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 134.