In Nella Larsen's 1928 novel *Quicksand*, the main character Helga Crane is characterized by her liminality and mobility, two things which allow her to move through various racialized spaces, though she is often marked by the space she occupies as a mixed race woman. In several circumstances, Helga participates in what Alys-Eve Weinbaum has termed "racial masquerade", a theory that concerns modern women exercising their ability to put on and take off other racial identities as it benefits them. She also embodies the concept of a new, modern *flâneur*, a figure popularized by Charles Baudelaire in the mid nineteenth century. I'm going to start with an image of Helga and then discuss the themes of racial masquerade, Orientalism, and mobility throughout the novel.

Larsen presents the first scene of *Quicksand* as though it were a beautiful painting, unveiling its splendor piece by piece, extravagant object by extravagant object. As the tableau unfolds, the readers are treated to exquisite descriptions of the room's decoration: a reading lamp with a great red and black shade; a white and blue Chinese rug; a shining brass bowl filled with nasturtiums. These objects provide a context for the main object: a woman, with well-turned legs and skin like yellow satin, dressed in a negligee and satin mules. She may as well be a table or a lampshade; just another beautiful object in a still life of beautiful things. This is how Larsen introduces Helga Crane, a mixed-race woman teaching at a black boarding school in the South. Her position as a teacher at a black school places her in a position she will continue to inhabit throughout the novel: one of liminality, of middleness. Larsen emphasizes that Helga surrounds herself with exotic objects and beautiful decorative pieces, but fails to clarify that Helga is not herself one of these objects, which mirror her in their exoticism; she, too, is "imported from afar". Weinbaum points out that commodities are central to Larsen's portrayal of Helga as a modern woman, able to effectively perform femininity, blackness, and sensuality. Here we can also see one of many instances of Helga's inclination towards Orientalist decoration and dress — her command over this commodified, racialized product marks her as a product of her own modernity, as Weinbaum suggests in her theory of racial masquerade.

Though often used to describe the style habits of the middle to upper class white woman of the 1920s, Weinbaum's theory here extends to Helga, as a figure who is constantly performing one racial identity or another, whether she is performing blackness in Harlem or exoticized Africanness in Copenhagen. The ever-tenuous dichotomy in the early twentieth century between modernity and primitivism is evident particularly in a scene that takes place in a Harlem jazz club, where Helga finds herself performing savagery rather than sophistication. Though Helga is horrified by her own manifestation of self as primitive, she seems also unable to disconnect herself from her own enjoyment of the music, of the primitivism which, when worn by white artists and writers, is avant-garde, but for her is simply incriminating.

Weinbaum's theory posits that for white consumers, the racial masquerade is an ability to adopt or remove as many racial masks as one wishes; women may "try on" the more attractive aspects of a racial identity, and remove them when desirable. For non-white people, however, this theory becomes an opposite; the inability to move past one's racial identity, to remove that mask. This is the scenario in which Helga finds herself when she visits family in Copenhagen: she has left Harlem to escape her black roots, to visit the white side of her family — but when she arrives, the white Europeans are unable to see past the exotic Africanness of her, and rather transform her into an exotic object, to be admired and gazed at, recalling practices in the nineteenth century of exhibiting African women like Sara Baartman as social curiosities.

Larsen's decision to surround Helga with Orientalist decoration is a carefully orchestrated choice that serves to solidify Helga's modernity both in accord with modern trends and in opposition to the constructed timelessness of the Orient. Linda Nochlin discusses this idea of timelessness as a function of colonialism — it became a method of propaganda established in the nineteenth century to justify colonialist actions throughout Asia and Africa, playing to the ideology that the West was more advanced and therefore would be benefiting the East by invading. Nochlin's "Imaginary Orient" primarily discusses Orientalism in terms of artists like Gérôme and Delacroix, but the concept applies here as well. Helga's preference for decorative pieces from the East places her in a position of control over its commodities; as a Western consumer, she is able to select which aspects of the East she likes, and leave the rest. Here we can see echoes of Weinbaum's theory of racial masquerade — Helga's ability to pick and choose pieces of the Orient locates her as a modern woman and as a *Western* woman, but also as a sexualized, exotic figure. She is at once in opposition with the Orientalist motifs surrounding her and also reduced to an Orientalist object herself. Larsen's imagery relies heavily on stereotypes of Asian women as sexually submissive, and situates Helga as an eroticized exotic object on multiple occasions. Helga's repeated affiliation with Orientalist decoration and aesthetics marks her as an entity to be colonized; whether by Axel Olsen and his artistic truth in Denmark, or by Reverend Green's reproductive intent in the South. She is, for these, men, a timeless slate to be projected upon, to be claimed — a body for which everyone around her has a definition. For Olsen, Helga is a contradiction; he sees her as warm and impulsive, an untamed primitive of African origin, and yet to him she has the soul of a prostitute, which seems to mark her as modern — so modern, in fact, that Olsen believes her soul has been tainted by the Western ideals of trade and therefore her body and sexuality are themselves commodities to be consumed. For Reverend Green, Helga's sexuality is something to be suppressed; for him she represents a body to be impregnated, to reproduce, but never to allow her the sexuality that Olsen so clearly wishes to control. In both cases, Helga seems to be a literal representation of the elusive Orient which Western men so deeply wish to colonize; she is a vessel for reproduction and progress but never for desire.

Another facet of modernity that is circumscribed onto Helga is that of movement, of mobility. Until the late nineteenth century, middle and upper-class women's mobility was limited to domestic spaces. The city as we understand it developed during the mid-nineteenth century and was seen as a place of sin and immorality; for a woman to be seen in that space would have been ruinous for her reputation, as well as her husband's. In Charles Baudelaire's "The Painter of Modern Life", he introduces the figure of the *flâneur*, for whom it is "an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite". In essence, the *flâneur* is someone who is able to be a part of the crowd, to observe without himself being observed. White male artists were afforded an anonymity in crowds which was inaccessible to women, let alone black or mixed-race women, who themselves become the commodity when existing in the public sphere. It is a form of this masculine anonymity that Helga experiences when she moves from Naxos to Harlem, where she can walk amongst the crowds and observe, but then conversely must also herself be observed. In this way, Helga can be characterized as a new version of the *flâneur*, one whose movements are marked by her own awareness of her existence within a whole — her emotional reaction to crowds, to this anonymity, mirrors that of the *flâneur*, who draws comfort in anonymous movement throughout the city.

On the other hand, the idea that mobility automatically represents liberation from patriarchal bonds is one that applies primarily to white women, whereas historically for black women mobility was a means of survival. Helga's movements across the Atlantic to Copenhagen parallel that of the Middle Passage. The history of unwilling movement for black Americans is not one to be disregarded, especially in a book that is essentially *about* Helga's numerous relocations. There are, however, instances that allow space for mobility as a site of resistance, of political action. This reading of mobility as a political act is one that Helga embodies: as a mixed-race woman moving between racialized spaces, her identity is a shifting possibility in itself, a constantly evolving masquerade that allows her not only to exist within these spaces but to emulate the cultural codes that enable her to thrive within them. This continuous movement becomes itself an identity for Helga — she is always prepared to take flight, to relocate and re-masquerade herself, to effectively commit to a new performance.

Helga feels a sense of home twice in the book: once at her arrival in Chicago, and again when she is in Harlem. This sense of home for Helga is caused by a feeling of connectedness to an urban crowd, specifically a black or multi-raced one; her displeasure at Naxos seems to have been a result of her individuality among the dull grayness of her peers; in Copenhagen, it stems from her conspicuous racial performance. The places that Helga seems to feel the most comfort are the places that she can most easily become an anonymous face in a crowd which resembles her, which effectively cloaks her and allows her to become an observer as opposed to the observed.

Throughout the novel Helga finds herself able to move through racialized spaces with varying degrees of success, but her status as a mixed-race woman limits that mobility in a way that a contemporaneous white woman would not have been limited. But Helga is also constantly in flux between two extremes: not black nor white, not observed nor observer, not modern nor primitive. Her mobility and masquerade mark her as a modern consumer, an anonymous watcher moving through the crowd in Harlem, but Larsen's constant aligning of Helga's body with Orientalist decoration marks her as an entity to be colonized and subdued, if we are to subscribe to Nochlin's theory of the imaginary Orient. Helga's liminality pervades the novel and circumscribes her movements through the world, effectively othering her even as she reaches her final resting place, so to speak, with Reverend Pleasant Green — even then, surrendered to the sedentary role of motherhood, in the entirely un-crowded South, this Orientalist imagery follows Helga in her experience of the Southern evenings: "in the evening silver buds sprouted in a Chinese blue sky, and the warm day was softly soothed by a slight, cool breeze".