

ALIENATION AND POLITICAL ACTION, REVISITED

Abstract

Alienation is typically invoked as a pathology: a disease that individuals and societies can develop, which the theorist seeks to explain and to cure. In this paper, I challenge this conception of alienation, and its relationship to politics, agency, and action, through a close reading of the fiction of Harlem Renaissance thinker Nella Larsen. Larsen's phenomenological account offers two interventions in the standard account of alienation. First, it offers a framework of non-sovereign political action which makes a radical claim: politics is not the way we get free from alienation but, in fact, the product of alienation's very inevitability. Our efforts to overcome alienation may inevitably fail but they pull us out into the world and drive our worldly political projects. Second, it makes a methodological case for theorizing affect from the ground up, “staying with the trouble” of our feelings of alienation rather than seeking grand theory which pathologizes and diagnoses.

Introduction

Nella Larsen's novel *Quicksand* (1928) does not end happily. One reviewer called the book an elegant study in “futile searching.”¹ Larsen's protagonist, Helga Crane, is deeply alienated and unhappy, tries a range of things to improve her situation, and remains just as alienated at the end of the book. Larsen's novel has been praised for how well it maintains its “indefinable, wistful feeling – that feeling of longing and at the same time a conscious realization of the impossibility of attaining.”² As the reviewer for the *New York Herald Tribune* put it, “the writer has no solution to suggest” to the dilemmas of alienated longing that the book so beautifully depicts.³ In an interview with a journalist given a year after *Quicksand's* publication, Larsen herself would say “I don't have any way of approaching life... it does things to me instead.”⁴

Feelings of alienation, of course, are never a particularly cheerful topic. In his classic work

1 Bradford, Roark. (1928, May 13). “Mixed Blood.” *New York Herald Tribune*.

2 Anonymous. (1929, May 1). “The Books of the Day.” *The New York Sun*.

3 Bradford, Roark. (1928, May 13). “Mixed Blood.” *New York Herald Tribune*.

4 Larsen, the interviewer goes on to note, “admits she is a fatalist if you point it out to her.” Untitled newspaper clipping. (1929, August 13). JWW MSS 1050, Series I. Carl Van Vechten Papers Relating to African American Arts and Letters. James Weldon Johnson Collection in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

Suicide, Emile Durkheim (1897/1997) describes these feelings – he terms them *anomie* – as an innate reaction to life's unavoidable sufferings, and defines a functioning society as one that overcomes this omnipresent desire to kill ourselves (252).⁵ Theorizing alienation in colonized subjects, Frantz Fanon (1952/1967) makes it “a point to convey the misery of the black man [...] physically and affectively” (p. 86). For Karl Marx (1994), the bleakness of our alienation from our labor, what we make, our fellow workers, and our very humanness provides an effective normative bludgeon against capitalism. More recently, Rahel Jaeggi (2016) evocatively begins her opus on alienation by describing how “insignificant and meaningless,” “rigidified,” and “impoverished” alienated works and worlds feel to us (1). The vast and diverse theoretical literature on the concept of alienation differs sharply on what *causes* these wretched feelings and what we should take them to *mean*.⁶ But the often-fractionious literature contains an unnoticed agreement: that human beings do often experience painful feelings of estrangement, loss, self-opacity, and frustrated longing, and that there is a sufficient commonality of experience that we know, intuitively, what we’re talking about when we gesture to the broad phenomenon of alienation.

Few thinkers take our feelings of alienation more seriously than Nella Larsen. She builds a detailed fictional world depicting the awful experience of alienation – what it feels like, how it emerges in thought, and the actions it drives us to – and then, rather than moving to pathologize, theorize, or

5 Durkheim (1897/1997) describes this “cohesive and animated society” as a place defined by “a constant interchange of ideas and feelings from all to each and each to all, something like a mutual moral support, which instead of throwing the individual on his own resources, leads him to share in the collective energy and supports his own when exhausted” (210).

6 Though I am indebted to alienation’s diverse theoretical tradition – in Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Feuerbach, Marx and Lukács, and into Durkheim, Lacan, Žižek, Fanon, Brecht, Du Bois, Césaire, Jaeggi, and many, many others – I use the term alienation throughout this paper in a distinctively non-rigorous sense. I assume the existence of some human experiential and emotional phenomenon, alienation, which has been theorized, variously and often in contradiction, as a manifestation of aesthetic, existential, ethical, socio-structural, environmental, cultural, economic, psychoanalytic, linguistic, theological, and political circumstances and problems. What I am interested in here is not providing a theoretical explanation for the existence of the feeling of alienation; instead, I am interested in explicating Larsen’s account of how people who experience the feeling of alienation, capaciously understood, are likely to act, and what the political consequences of their actions might be.

valorize alienation, she simply asks us to sit in it.⁷ Unlike other thinkers, Larsen's phenomenological account is neither diagnostic about the cause of our alienation nor proscriptive about how to combat it or respond to it. This might not appear to be fertile ground for political theory, but I argue here that Larsen's peculiar engagement with alienation as an emotional experience in *Quicksand* actually provokes a generative new direction for democratic theory, a new way of thinking about the politics of alienation.⁸

Because Larsen's method is so unlike other theorists of alienation, let me clarify two major differences at the outset. One classic theoretical perspective on alienation, taken by those within Marxist and dialectical traditions, describes alienation as a symptom of a broader socio-structural pathology.⁹ The lived experience of alienation is an effect of a broader dysfunction in the polity, and theoretical interest is focused on that broader problem. Such theorists are interested in questions like: what is wrong with a given society such that its members are alienated? How can political and social arrangements be changed to allow dis-alienation to occur? In these accounts, the emotional experience of individuals is real and instrumentally useful as a social diagnostic, but is *in itself* theoretically uninteresting and unimportant. For Larsen, as we will see, the inverse is true. She refuses to abstract away from individual alienation by treating it as a mere social diagnostic; instead of focusing on structures, she asks us to see what we can learn when we "stay with the trouble" of individual felt and lived experience, to borrow Donna Haraway's words. Larsen is uninterested in trying to resolve or

⁷ Larsen is not, of course, the only twentieth-century novelist to take up the lived experience of alienation in their writing. For myself, I have found thinking alongside her work to be intensely and uniquely generative, particularly as it relates to the ideas of alienated action, freedom, and the implications of thinking about the political consequences of alienated affect.

⁸ In his recent work, Nick Bromell finds similar utility for political theory in Larsen's work, though he focuses on her second novel, *Passing*, and on how recognizing the alterity of other citizens can be democratically important. See Bromell (2013). Other recent political-theoretical work which has fruitfully drawn on Larsen's thought includes a chapter in Reddy (2011).

⁹ The unity of this view has recently been lucidly articulated by Frederick Neuhouser (2022), who provides an account of social pathology as a framework for social critique. I draw in this paper on Neuhouser's articulation of the previously unnoticed commonality which underlies accounts from Marx, Durkheim, and others, highlighting the shared framework of "social pathology" with which they approach social critique.

theorize our way to a future without alienation; she wants us to theorize from within the existence of alienation, from within the felt reality of people's lives right now.¹⁰

The second distinctive element of Larsen's account relates to the relationship between alienation and political action. The classical perspective on alienation assumes an account of political action where our political projects emerge through our intention and agency: we perceive political wrongs or inefficiencies and we work together to correct them.¹¹ Alienation may be objectionable, then, precisely because it makes it harder for us to exercise our agency, to intentionally come together and enact political projects; on the flip side, with our consciousness sufficiently raised, the experience of alienation may motivate us to act intentionally in political life to unmake the structures we perceive as responsible for it.¹² It may even be the case, as it is for Fanon, that free and agential political action is tantamount to dis-alienation.¹³ Larsen does not wholly jettison this agential, intentional account of political action, but she wants us to notice how much it misses. It misses how we might end up doing politics incidentally, unintentionally, as we pursue some other end. It misses how we might end up doing politics because, for instance, we are lonely or anxious or because we don't know what we want and politics just happens to be there.¹⁴ Larsen offers an illuminating account of how alienation drives us into political action in a non-sovereign and non-agential sense, an important and novel account of

¹⁰ I don't take an empirical stand in this paper on whether alienation is, in point of fact, a pathology with an eventual solution, or whether it is an intransigent aspect of the modern or human condition. This is a live theoretical debate, with substantial intellectual advocacy on both sides (on the intransigent side, *see* fn 26, below and also Biro 2005). Rather, the question which interests me is this: what are the political consequences of feeling alienation, right now? While most salient if we assume intransigent alienation, I do take it that the argument I advance here is equally relevant and useful in circumstances in which the horizon of dis-alienation is sufficiently distant from us as to render alienation, in the short and medium term, *practically* intransigent. Moreover, I also take my argument to be useful and revealing even in tandem with a theoretical commitment one might hold to attacking social problems taken as generating alienation.

¹¹ Examples of where this account of political action can be found, implicitly or explicitly, include Arwa (2023), Marx (2002), and Fanon (1952/1967).

¹² For a discussion of this dynamic in the context of another reader's interpretation of *Quicksand*, *see* fn. 17, below.

¹³ For a discussion of Fanon on alienation and action, *see* fn. 19, below.

¹⁴ This point echoes recent work calling for more attention to negative affect as a political force, though diverges sharply from prescriptive accounts which demand we rationally reject certain feelings (Nussbaum 2016), redirect antagonist feelings into support for left populism and liberal democracy (Mouffe 2018), or apply psychoanalytic insights to explain, socially contain, or even transform antipathic affects (McAfee 2019; Yeung 2024).

political action that strongly diverges from other theorists. In her view, alienation is politically generative but not in the normative, motivational sense offered in other accounts.

Building on these two major novelties of Larsen's thought – the focus on non-sovereign political action and the phenomenological account which eschews grand theorizing or efforts to “solve” alienation – the basic contention of this paper is that the experience of alienation is a “productive opacity,” to use Eve Sedgwick's evocative phrase (1995, p. 510). I use Larsen's work offer a descriptive account of our individual day-to-day actions, plans, and projects are driven by the desire to escape or resolve the emotional experience of alienation. Politics is a frequent by-product of these efforts, but the politics that emerges is largely epiphenomenal and tangential to our agency. The project of the self is what motivates us to act; we respond to the experience of alienation by acting to resolve or elide that emotion. In these efforts, we may end up acting politically along the way. This non-sovereign account of the relationship between politics and alienation also opens a new perspective on the relationship between affect and democracy: rather than a direct motivation to political action, or a means of passionate attachment to the polity, the emotional experience of alienation drives democratic politics in a tangential, but still important, sense.¹⁵

Larsen's novel portrays these dynamics in action. First, I use Larsen's protagonist to describe the emotional experience of alienation, focusing on how alienation is experienced as an inarticulable opacity in the self. Second, I describe how action is one attempt to solve this problem of self-opacity: in conversation with both Larsen and with Plato's account of democratic man, I show how we act in order to try to reveal our selves to ourselves, and also how our free actions come to be experienced as an independent source of pleasure. Next, I explore how this freedom appears myopic, anti-political, and anti-social. In fact, however, alienated subjects end up engaging in collective political projects

15 On emotional attachment to the polity – and concerns that democratic theorists have about the safety of bringing affect into liberal democracy in such a sense – *see* Markell (2000). For a recent treatment of Fanon and the politics of exhaustion which bears a family resemblance to this orientation, *see* Siegel (2023).

incidental to their solipsistic quests for self-understanding. While democratic life may seem threatened by individualistic emotional interiority, Larsen shows the surprising way alienation pulls us out of ourselves and back into the world.¹⁶ I close by suggesting a descriptive rather than normative framework for understanding the relationship between politics and alienation. Perhaps our political goal should not be to get free from alienation; alienation may be an inevitable, albeit terrible, facet of human life. Instead, alienation can be usefully understood descriptively, as a positive factor in democratic political action: the actions demanded by feelings of alienation may in fact create political life rather than hamper it. This, in turn, suggests that we ought to consider how to make democratic life more responsive to those who come at it, to some degree, by accident.

Alienation as Self-Opacity

Alienation is a ubiquitous theme in *Quicksand*, and the presence of so much alienation gives us the constant sense that something is profoundly wrong – with the protagonist, Helga Crane, with her society, or both. Helga’s suffering is so palpable that the sympathetic reader is constantly thrown back on the question of who or what is to blame: does Helga’s world objectively fail her, in that she has been deprived of the material and affective support necessary for her flourishing? Or is her problem one of appreciation: that is, she subjectively experiences her world as alienating when, empirically, it need not necessarily be experienced in that way? At the same time, we are constantly running up against the ambiguity of Helga’s suffering: what, precisely, is she so upset about? What does she want? What,

16 This is a more indirect account of the relationship between politics and emotions than, for instance, Sara Ahmed’s important book *The Cultural Politics of Emotions* (2014), which highlights the cultural and institutional production, and political effects, of emotions about others. Ahmed suggests that our emotional reactions to others, which might appear personal or ahistorical, are products of historical and material circumstances which are concealed and naturalized: “social and cultural practices” rather than “psychological states” (9). In Ahmed’s account, these feelings – like pain, disgust, fear, shame, hatred, and love – *do* things politically: create community or exclusion, function as forms of oppressive social power or attachment to conditions of oppression (*see also* Berlant 1997), or build solidarity in social movements. In Ahmed’s account, generating and analyzing such emotional reactions, relations, and attachments *is* politics.

exactly, is she feeling?

Larsen's text does not offer clear answers to any of these questions. The reader, just like Helga Crane herself, is never quite sure. Indeed, it is the very indefiniteness of Helga's suffering which often seems to make it so wretched for her. She lives first in Naxos (at a southern school for Black students), then Chicago, Harlem, Copenhagen, and the rural South; across this diversity of cultures and experiences she is haunted by "formless and undesignated" feelings of "incompleteness," "dissatisfaction," and "suffocation" (122, 160). Her material and social conditions also change throughout the novel: sometimes she is poor, sometimes she has access to wealth, sometimes she is utterly alone, and sometimes she is surrounded by family or friends or involved in communal projects. Yet her suffering does not durably end in any of these circumstances; she never feels meaningfully satisfied for any length of time. Always she is dogged by "her need of something, something vaguely familiar, but which she could not put a name to and hold for definite examination." At points in the narrative, her need for this nameless thing becomes "almost intolerable," as she "went through moments of overwhelming anguish. She felt shut in, trapped" (78). Helga is tormented by a need for something ineffable, some unmet but existentially essential thing that she cannot articulate.

Though she cannot clearly articulate this formless need, Helga Crane does seem to feel that the problem is at least partially internal to her or in her self. She recognizes this in Naxos: "it wasn't, she was suddenly aware, merely the school and its ways and its decorous stupid people that oppressed her. There was something else, some other more ruthless force, a quality within herself, which was frustrating her, had always frustrated her, kept her from getting the things she had wanted" (44). Later in the novel, in Copenhagen, she will wonder "what was the matter with her? Was there, without her knowing it, some peculiar lack in her?" "Why couldn't she," she wonders with despair, "be happy, content, somewhere? [...] Was she incapable of it?" (111). Her suffering is magnified by feeling that her misery is caused by something within herself, something inescapably part of her, which she will

carry wherever she goes. When her feelings of incompleteness and dissatisfaction rise up in Harlem, Larsen writes that Crane becomes “a little frightened, and then shocked to discover that, for some unknown reason, it was of herself she was frightened” (79). Her experience of her own suffering internal; it feels like she is at odds with herself, alien, even frightened of these unknown parts. Again and again, Larsen shows that the horror of Helga's suffering lies in this dual character: the inarticulable nature of the suffering is compounded by the horrible sense that this opacity is close to her, interior to her, part of her very being. What, precisely, is the problem? She doesn't know, but she knows the problem is in her. How, precisely, would she describe what she needs? She cannot find the language to define it and think it through: “her conception of it had no tangibility. She couldn't define it, isolate it, and contemplate it” (45).¹⁷ What, precisely, has caused the problem? We can't tell, but she carries it with her wherever she goes.

Helga experiences her suffering – her alienation – as both an acute lack of the self, and also as the pain of isolation and incommunicability with the self. She cannot say precisely what she feels or needs, even to herself. Her suffering is that of being at a distance from herself and her own needs. Larsen repeatedly highlights that Helga's suffering is not merely that she needs something external she cannot get – love, say, or sufficient material well-being – but that it is something internal to the self which she intuits but cannot name, and that this is what it means to say that she is alienated from herself. Alienation, then, is the suffering experienced as a separation in the self: between the self that suffers without understanding why, and the part of the self which is hidden and which, presumably, has knowledge of or contains the unmet needs and problems.¹⁸

17 Helga goes on to observe that the self-satisfaction and happiness she is trying to abstractly understand is different in kind from the abstract ideas of hatred and kindness (which, I note, are abstract ideas that relate us to other people rather than to ourselves).

18 I do not mean to take a stand here on whether or not this is an empirically correct model of the structure of the alienated self; this is, however, the way that Helga Crane experiences and understands her emotional life and self.

Action as Revelation and Freedom

Helga sees the futility of trying to reason – to articulate, isolate, or contemplate – her way out of the dilemma of her self alienation. Instead, she acts by trying a wide range of professions, lifestyles, intimate relationships, and even countries; she hopes to find circumstances corresponding to her indefinite felt need.¹⁹ She hopes her actions will reveal herself to herself. Acting is the only possible path Helga sees to make sense of her self to herself and thus to find existential satisfaction.²⁰ The emotional imperative of her alienated suffering propels her dynamically out into the world in a quest for this self-revelation.

Notably, Helga's experiences of positive emotion all correspond to moments when she is engaged in free action: when she is trying something new, something which she believes might simultaneously reveal and satisfy the inarticulable parts of herself from which she is alienated. Upon arrival in Harlem, for instance, she feels the “charm of this new and delightful pattern of her life” (75, 77). Each time she tries something new, she has a “returned feeling of happiness and freedom,” a feeling of optimism that she is on a promising path toward finding the solution to her alienation (94). Larsen's account of action by alienated subjects is clearly distinct from someone like Fanon, who

¹⁹ I do not distinguish between various types of action – suggesting, for instance, that group life might be more effective as a means of responding to Helga's felt needs (e.g. Jacques 1953) – because the text itself does not support this reading. This diverges strongly, of course, for a social structural or even psycho-pathological reading wherein Helga's experience can be categorized and understood in terms which prescribe a general (or even possibly quite specific) type of solution.

²⁰ In her analysis of *Quicksand*, Hazel Carby (1987) has argued that we can explain the *cause* of Helga's suffering, which then gives us a possible way of responding: that Helga's “alienation was not just in her head but was produced by existing form of social relations and therefore subject to elimination only by a change in those social relations” (183). To undo Helga's alienation requires a collective social effort at transforming the relations which produce it. On Carby's reading, Larsen is trying to teach us that “individual struggle and isolated effort are doomed to failure” (187). For Carby, Helga's individualistic feelings and actions represent a misunderstanding of her circumstances, a false consciousness about their causes and their solution. Though she does not explicitly specify what form this social transformation will need to take, Carby implies that it will be widespread and dramatic. Yet whether Carby's structural analysis of Helga's suffering is empirically valid or not, it misses what I take to be the main contributions and theoretical provocations of Larsen's novel: not the causes of her suffering but their effects. (We cannot, of course, adjudicate whether Helga's statements about how she understands her own suffering are empirically correct or not; once raised, the specter of false consciousness imperils any claim I might make on Helga's behalf. In that sense, I do presume in this account a normative position that we *ought* to take Helga's claims seriously on their face and, moreover, that it is theoretically productive to do so.)

theorizes dis-alienation as a necessary condition of free action.²¹ For Helga, freedom is constituted by alienation; she is propelled by alienation to act freely in the world, in a wide variety of ways, as a method of hopefully revealing to herself who she is and what she needs.

We know, of course, that Helga's actions do not lead her to a final happiness, to dis-alienation and self-understanding. This is not a *bildungsroman*. So in one sense, her actions fail to accomplish her desired ends. But Larsen is careful to show us that, in several other senses, Helga's actions *do* things; that is, they are not pointless or meaningless. For one thing, acting changes how Helga feels; her suffering recedes temporarily. Each time she embarks on a new project, Helga feels a happiness which “vaguely, without putting it into words or even so tangible a thing as a thought, she knew [...] sprang from a sense of freedom, a release from the feeling of smallness which had hedged her in” (78). Each time, she is released from circumstances she knows do not satisfy her, and she feels again “that blessed sense of belonging to herself alone” (94). Helga's experiences of happiness and joy – her only experiences of belonging to herself – are experienced in moments of free action, of newness. Her repeated failure to become dis-alienated provokes her to repeatedly create conditions under which she experiences transient happiness in freedom.

By the end of the novel, the happiness she experiences in freedom comes to seem valuable to her in and of itself. Ill and impoverished after the birth of her fourth child, Helga desperately longs for the freedom to make different choices, to try something new again. While she is ill, her vision is not necessarily clearer than it had been: she is still unable to form a positive conception of what dis-

²¹ For Fanon (1952/1967), alienation precludes the exercise of free human powers and action. “Before it can adopt a positive voice,” Fanon writes, “freedom requires an effort at dis-alienation” (231). He describes alienation as a state of being “overdetermined from without” (116) to the point that one “stops behaving as an *actional* person” (154, emphasis in original) and becomes “enslaved” (60). Societies that produce alienation are likewise “rigidified in predetermined forms, forbidding all evolution, all gains, all progress, all discovery” (224). Thus, an individual must overcome their alienation before free action is possible. Dis-alienation comes first, and then afterwards individuals can “scrutinize the self” (8), engage in “authentic upheaval” (231), and dig “into [their] own flesh to find a meaning” (9). Freedom is a space in which existential and political action become possible. Alienation, on the other hand, results in “the butchery of what is most human in man: freedom” and the corresponding capacity for action (222).

alienated happiness might be. What she imagines and longs for is not such happiness but rather conditions of freedom and non-attachment within which she can again pursue self-awareness and satisfaction. Now she wants merely to be free and unbound again so she can engage with “identity as process and dialogue” (Hostetler, 1990, 43-44). Her daydreams include longing images of “freedom and cities,” “clothes and books,” and “inconsequential chatter and laughter and sophisticated tuneless music” (Larsen, 1928/2001, 161-162). From her experiences in Harlem and Copenhagen, we know that these things will not themselves dis-alienate Helga Crane, but they do represent a world within which she can make choices and engage in free action. It is this lost ability to act and try new projects which Helga laments when she recognizes that marriage, motherhood, and poverty have “made it impossible ever again to do the things that she wanted” (159). Action itself has come to have a value for her, not merely as a means toward self-discovery, but as a happiness in and of itself.

The account that Larsen offers us of Helga Crane's action, and the value she places on the experience of free action as an end in itself, mirrors accounts of living offered by theorists as varied as Marx, Machiavelli, and Plato.²² The most generative comparison is probably with Plato's account of “democratic man” and how he lives. Democratic man, Plato famously tells us,

Lives from day to day indulging the appetite of the hour; and sometimes he is lapped in drink and strains of the flute; then he becomes a water-drinker, and tries to get thin; then he takes a turn at gymnastics; sometimes idling and neglecting everything, then once more living the life of a philosopher; often he is busy with politics, and starts to his feet and says and does whatever comes into his head; and, if he is emulous of any one who is a warrior, off he is in that direction, or of men of business, once more in that. His life has neither law nor order; and this distracted existence he terms joy and bliss and freedom; and so he goes on (561c-561e).

22 In *The German Ideology*, Marx famously describes how “in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic.” For Marx, this mode of life frees us from conceiving what a person *is* purely as a fixed (economic) identity; there is something about being human beings that demands such free action. Machiavelli, on the other hand, writes about a similar mode of living less as a utopian expression of human nature than as the best possible life he can realistically lead given constraints (in his case, constraints on his ideal life advising princes and being close to the seat of power). *See* Machiavelli (1513).

Plato's democratic man seems at first a figure of pity: he tries every mode of living without landing on anything solid, and we are meant to see his “distracted existence” as chaotic and unsettled. But the account itself has a mesmeric, narrative quality that undercuts this judgment: this “fair and many-colored” figure is also living a rich and varied life. His life is an adventure. He tries different ways of living and is testing himself and the world through his own experiences of it. Living in this way, democratic man becomes a person with a new understanding of value: democratic man has constructed new terms of living. He “terms” his free mode of being in the world “joy and bliss.” The very process of experimentation and flux itself comes to have value to him.²³ It is, of course, initially a search for meaning – for a mode of life which will, finally, satisfy – that drives the action forward: that causes him to try hedonism, aestheticism, physical training, ennui, philosophy, politics, war, and commerce in turn. But in time, the freedom of the search itself comes to possess an intrinsic meaning and joy. He seems to be doing x in order to achieve y – and this might be the formal reason he gives – but in fact, he does x in order to enjoy x itself, for the pleasure intrinsic to the process.

Plato himself seems unsettled in how to judge this way of living (and, by extension, democracy itself). Democracy and the democratic mode of living are described as “a garment of many colors, embroidered with all kinds of hues,” “decked and diversified with every type of character”: a “garment which “appear[s] the most beautiful” (557c). Although Plato pivots to say quickly that only women and children see such colorful garments as beautiful, the clear longing in the prose signals an aporia. While Plato tells us that democracy is a degraded form of government as well as the final step before tyranny, his account also lovingly depicts the diversity and beauty

23 This reading might seem to cut against scholarship (e.g. Scott 2000) arguing that there is no overarching global reasoning dictating democratic man's actions, but my sense is that Plato's splintered framework of understanding the soul prevents him from seeing the unifying purpose behind democratic man's seemingly chaotic pursuit of desires.

of democratic life in a wistful and desirous way. Democratic man fails in the ultimate aim of achieving a stable and rational good, but the means – the life of free action – weave their own kind of spell.

Simultaneous to acknowledging these beautiful transient pleasures of free action, however, Larsen's novel never lets us lose sight of Helga's pain nor equate her pleasures with stable dis-alienation or self-understanding. The moments of happiness Helga experiences in freedom are always eventually swamped by her suffering. This is not merely because of the scale and intractability of her alienation as such but because something in the pleasures of free action itself that appears to feed back into her alienation. To be clear, I am not offering an origin story here; that is, I do not agree with theorists like Will Kymlicka that alienation is originally *caused by* a surfeit of freedom.²⁴ What I am suggesting is that we are driven to free action by our alienation, but such action does not resolve our alienation: instead, it provokes an interstitial awareness of our continuing alienation, and so becomes a flight from it as well as an effort to resolve it.

As free action comes to be a joy and an end in itself, it mediates against the belief in ends – that is, that any final satisfaction is possible. This is a strangely liminal position to occupy: meaning becomes something Helga experiences at every moment she is engaged in free action, but which recedes whenever she attempts to hold it in a moment of stillness, whenever she is at rest. In the stillness, therefore, the question of meaning continues to haunt her. Free action, which is a source of joy, also takes on the character of a flight from stillness. She flees into the world of action and possibility to avoid being at rest with herself. Helga comes to feel that joy consists in freedom, and this underlines and emphasizes her alienation. She finds that in any given quiet moment, she still exists as something horribly, concretely alien to herself. The dynamic nature of

24 For Kymlicka (1989), it is the “vaunting of ‘free individuality’” that produces “existential uncertainty and anomie” to begin with; it is radical and atomized self-determination – individualism and freedom run amok – which has “generated more doubt about the value of our projects than before” (61-62).

alienation perpetually pulls Helga out of herself and into the world, over and over again.

Other People

Plato's account of democratic man suggests a congruence between a life of free action in quest of self-understanding and democratic political institutions and norms. Plato, of course, intends a pejorative here; democracy is prone to collapse into tyranny precisely because the character of its citizens tends toward myopic and passion-driven instability. But Larsen's account provokes us to consider a more constitutive relationship between democracy and the free action that our alienated feelings generate. While alienation can turn our attention away from structural problems like racism and intentional solutions like collective political action, lacking such attention – that is, lacking an agential focus on political goals – does not mean that alienated subjects fail to act politically. In fact, the dynamism of free action propels alienated subjects into worldly action and politics in a way that democratic theorists should take more seriously.

In a general sense, it is easy to see how the suffering of alienation and the quest to overcome self-opacity could have a myopic effect, analogous to how physical pain or nausea causes the body to draw into itself. In *Quicksand*, Helga's focus on her alienation often comes at the expense of other elements of her life, like interpersonal relationships, the material necessities of life, and complex political and social problems. Sometimes, Helga's existential sufferings leave her in a state where she is simply too exhausted to engage with these other problems. Late in the novel, worn out by the cumulative existential stress of her life and the physical damage done to her by pregnancy and labor, Helga subsides into the necessary relief of disengagement. "Purposely she had lain silent and still," Larsen writes, "wanting to linger forever in that serene haven, that effortless calm where nothing was expected of her" (155).

But more often, Helga's disengagement with the interpersonal, material, and political elements

of her life appears as a willful refusal. In these moments of refusal, Helga's vision of happiness consists precisely in being able to live in a state where everything “had become simplified” down to her efforts toward dis-alienation (104). As free action comes to be a joy and pleasure in itself, it mediates against the elements of life which necessarily constrain that freedom: elements like the bonds and commitments we might make to one another or to long-term collective projects. To the extent that we value free action as such, we simultaneously refuse and de-value constraints, commitments, and stasis. This is not, to be clear, an intellectual or logical position that one consciously takes; rather, Helga experiences this refusal as emotions of irritation, exasperation, annoyance, and disgust.

Helga's reaction to the politics of Black racial uplift during her time in Harlem offers an illuminating example. During this period, Helga lives and works in the Black community and identifies as Black through her Afro-Caribbean father. Many social events revolve around questions of racial politics, and Helga is uniformly irritated by these discussions. One afternoon tea she attends is “boring beyond endurance – insipid drinks, dull conversation, stupid men” because of its emphasis on collective racial concerns. “Why, Helga wondered, with unreasoning exasperation, didn't they find something else to talk of? Why must the race problem always creep in?” (83) She is irritated by talk of “uplift” and tired of “harangue[s] on the needs and ills of the race” (84). Helga's irritation can be read as a refusal to see racial problems as central to her own alienation: collective racial projects are neither the solution to her suffering nor compatible with the free action she values. The repetitive, unchanging “harangues” on the “race problem” mirror the ossification of a racial identity that neither accounts for Helga's suffering nor leaves her free to fully determine the meaning of her own actions.²⁵

In part, Helga is responding to a broader phenomenon: political action demands our time and energy, and it also constrains our freedom to enable us to work together. The demands and discourse of

25 In a related sense, Larsen and her publisher, Alfred A. Knopf, would repeatedly publicly declare that *Quicksand* was not a book about race nor a piece of racial propaganda. I take her seriously when Larsen says that the book is not, at core, “about race” and taking her seriously on this point profoundly shapes my own reading of the novel in this paper.

communal and political life are always disjointed, to some degree, from our individual emotional experiences and projects. But Helga is attuned not only to the tension between collectivity and interiority but also to the inadequacies of collectivity on its own terms. In the most basic sense, Helga sees that Harlem's shared oppression and political activism are accompanied – as Larsen writes that such things inevitably are – by the “lies, injustice, and hypocrisy [that] are a part of every ordinary community” (53-54). These negative facets of politics increasingly dismay and disgust Helga during her time in Harlem.

Helga's changing feelings toward Anne Grey, her friend and benefactor, provide one example of her general disdain for political action. In one telling instance, Helga notices that Anne claims to believe in social equality but refuses such social equality to white people, considering it “an affront to the race [...] for any Negro to receive on terms of equality any white person” (79). And yet, while loudly proclaiming her “deep and burning hatred” of white people, Anne “aped their clothes, their manners, and their gracious ways of living” in her personal life (80). As Helga becomes more aware of Anne's seeming inconsistency and hypocrisy, she goes from being merely “entertained” by Anne's activism to feeling her “obsess[ion] by the race problem” as “a great irksomeness” (79-80).

One way to make sense of both Anne's actions and Helga's reactions to them is to recognize that people's motivations for political action are complex. Anne may get feelings of belonging, intimacy, superiority, or excitement from her activism, and these positive feelings may be her primary or even sole motivation for political action.²⁶ At the same time, these affective experiences are largely contingent on dissimulation: that is, on presenting her activism in terms of a commitment to abstract shared ends and on concealing from others (or even from herself) her true motivations. We do not know Anne's degree of self-opacity on this front, but Helga sees the disconnect between Anne's actual and

26 This assertion draws in part on recent work in political psychology which argues that positive emotions – not just negative emotions like anger or fear -- motivate people to participate in political action. *See* van Zomeren 2021.

professed motivations clearly. In Anne's fury about racial injustice, Helga sees no consistent moral or political project aside from Anne's desire to revel in the emotional pleasures of an “orgy of protest” (79). Helga cannot overlook or accept Anne’s emotionally motivated activism because she cannot truly empathize with it; in doing politics, Helga is not rewarded emotionally in the same way. But more broadly, Helga is troubled by what she sees as the *constitutive* connection between collective political life and dissimulation. Anne’s activism forces her to playact – to parrot motivations which hide at least some of her true desires – to build and maintain political community.

Helga’s critical rejection of politics, then, is multi-faceted: political action constrains free action, takes time away from other pursuits, and enmeshes people in layers of what appear to be hypocrisy and self-opacity. These elements of political action are intolerable to someone grappling with alienation, since the freedom to act is valued as a means and dis-alienated self-understanding is valued as an end. In these terms, Helga's alienation appears to position her squarely in opposition to political life. Politics makes Helga “unhappy, dissatisfied” (53). Recruited into political projects or faced with collective problems, whenever possible Helga instead “preferred to flee” (43).

Politics

Helga feels that political community is “inexplicable, alien,” an irritating experience of living and working with others on projects that seem far removed from her own inchoate needs and priorities (86). Though Helga does not seem aware that other people might also experience politics as annoying, alien, and limited, the reader of Larsen's story may, in fact, see their feelings mirrored in Helga's. Doing politics does often bring one face to face with the reality that lies, injustice, and hypocrisy are a part of every ordinary community. For Helga, as for many of us, community often feels like “a hateful place where one lived in intimacy with people one would not have chosen had one been given choice” (84). Yet political projects continue to exist, and political activism continues to happen everywhere and all

the time. *Quicksand* provokes us to notice a mystery in plain sight: given how tangential or even oppositional politics is to some of the central emotional preoccupations of our lives, there is actually an awful lot of politics happening all the time. How do these political projects come into being?

As Helga demonstrates, politics often feels opposed to the more pressing concerns of our individual and alienated lives. But if alienation mediates against the direct appeal of political and communal life, it also may work in important indirect and tangential ways to pull us out into the world, constructing community and bringing politics into being. Helga Crane, like Nella Larsen herself, arrives in New York during the Harlem Renaissance, a period of gathering together and of intensely creative output between the first and second world wars. How does Helga find herself in Harlem? Her actions in pursuit of self-understanding and dis-alienation bring her there. Her restless search for meaning draws her to this place, toward other people who are also drawn together, the cumulative effect of which is to produce a period of ephemeral and fugitive – but important and creative – political work.²⁷ The Harlem Renaissance is episodic and ephemeral, but it existed, and it mattered, even if it did not ultimately solve the problems of alienation (or the other insoluble dilemmas) of the people that brought it into being. It was what happened along the way, as an orthogonal consequence of the actions of individuals like Helga, who contributed something to the community even as she was seeking something else in Harlem, which she ultimately did not find.

To be clear: this is a descriptive account of the indirect effects of alienation, not a way of recuperating value in alienated suffering or suggesting normative terms on which one might accept alienation. Larsen's phenomenological account precludes a reading that valorizes Helga's suffering. By keeping the reader close to Helga's emotional experience, we are prevented from finding comfort in such chilly intellectual abstractions. In this sense, *Quicksand* is an important corrective to existential

²⁷ Larsen's own biography is notable for the ephemerality of her engagement with the world; she completely disappeared from the world of action and public life – indeed, even largely the public record – after her second novel, *Passing* (Hutchinson 2006).

accounts of political action often demanding we deny what we feel in the same breath that they acknowledge our suffering. Iris Marion Young, for instance, has written that “everyone is born in loss” because we have been ejected from “the dark comfort of the mother's body” and “thrown into a world without walls.” Our project is to pivot from this pain and to use it to “find and form meaning and identity for ourselves, without foundation or certainty” (2005, 128). We embrace our groundlessness and remake it into a source of meaning. Our birth and ejection into a world without foundation is not a loss in this willful reformulation: it is instead a space of possibility, of what Hannah Arendt famously calls natality. We possess “the capacity of beginning something anew,” the capacity to do actions, and to have experiences, defined by “startling unexpectedness” (2019, 177-178). Our affective experiences are re-cast: suffering is somehow positive, groundlessness is the possibility for making our own grounded meaning, our loss is really our gain.

Helga does not see her life in these terms. Her suffering is ongoing, palpable, and unresolved. At the same time, we cannot deny that she is vibrating with her own alienation: she is propelled by it, moving and acting and jostling against other people. As part of her various efforts toward dis-alienation, she attends political lectures and talks in Harlem, engages in heated discussion and debate, writes political speeches for one of her employers, and generally participates in recognizable forms of democratic political life. So while on the one hand, alienation clearly mediates against intentional political and communal projects, it is also clear that alienation is not, on Larsen's account, a quietistic state. Alienation produces dynamic if ultimately futile striving to unmake and undo it, striving toward self-understanding.²⁸ The pain of alienation thrusts subjects out into the world and propels them into action, though the pain remains.

Thus, while alienated individuals are often repulsed by the actions characterized as classically

28 This type of non-sovereign action, as Brian Massumi has put it, “is a state of suspense” but it “is not exactly passivity, because it is filled with motion, vibratory motion, resonance” – though “the motion is not of the kind that can be directed (if only symbolically) toward practical ends in a world of constituted objects and aims” (1995, 9).

political, in the end, they are part of the world which humans inhabit in common, and their ordinary actions to evade suffering shape that shared world. In this sense, Larsen gives us a more holistic and honest framework for thinking about how democratic political action comes about, focusing us beyond agency. This account is useful not because it captures everything about how politics comes into being but because it captures things we are least likely to be aware of and also things we are least likely to be comfortable talking about. It mediates against the tendency in democratic theory to conceptualize *truly* political action as only that which is – to paraphrase Iris Murdoch – agential, self-aware, detached, and free. Larsen's account emphasizes the ways in which our political actions are often, in fact, non-sovereign, taken up under conditions of self-opacity, and occur without directly political or collective goals.

Conclusion

Helga Crane acts, and she attempts with each action to say something about herself to herself. Her actions do not bring her a final resolution – that is, they do not unmake her alienation – but they are meaningful and tangible actions all the same: they are the product of her will, and they have consequences in the world. It is one of the recurring wonders of the novel that Helga continues to act; she is never truly resigned. Her very suffering and restlessness manifests a hope that her life could feel other than how it does.

Yet her restlessness is also a refusal of stillness, an evasion of pain. Just as the experience of skepticism provokes the search for certainties, the feeling of alienation provokes the desire for self-understanding. It is this same feeling, we might assume, which drives theorists like Marx and Fanon to envision a world without alienation, a world freed from the loneliness, exile, and longing that shape our lives. How reasonable it is, too, to want to posit causes for these feelings in our human-built (and thus human re-buildable) institutions and social structures. How difficult it is to consider, instead, that

alienation might be a mere fact of humanness, albeit a terrible one.²⁹ Helga's restless actions in her own life ultimately align with the theorists whose projects are grander: they are all seeking to evade alienation, to refuse its inevitability.

On this front, *Quicksand* ultimately gestures toward humility. But Larsen is not asking us either to be resigned to alienation or, conversely, to valorize alienation as such. Both individual and political projects are, of course, fatally limited; they cannot resolve our alienation any more than they can somehow prevent our deaths or allow us to overcome the alterity of other minds. But the terrible and inchoate facts of our mortality, alterity, and alienation do provoke us to act, a provocation which causes us to live *right here* even as we think we are looking for a different life *elsewhere*. We read Helga Crane's story as a tragedy because, in relation to her incommunicable longings for self-understanding and happiness, it is. But we can also read her story as a rich and complex life with many acts, a life lived intensely precisely because she was driven to action by her feelings of alienation and longing. Though we can hold her suffering in mind, we can also see that her actions shaped the world we share.

Democratic politics grows, in part, out of the strange reality that our projects are both futile and, in an oblique and non-sovereign way, potentially not meaningless. Alienation's myopia drives us to act in the world, bumping us against one another, which in a sense is arguably all that politics is, anyway. Larsen's novel helps us see that it is *because* of the actions demanded by our feelings of alienation, not in spite of them, that political and communal projects come into being. Yet these projects are fragile, ephemeral, and in an important sense, tangential to our agency.

Larsen's phenomenological account of alienation opens new avenues for thinking about the

29 I am sympathetic to the account Slavoj Žižek gives of Lacan and others who make a similar claim about the inevitability – the humanness – of the alienated state, what is termed a constitutive alienation. Žižek (2017) describes this as “a fundamental alienation of the human subject, an alienation which is constitutive of being-human, the alienation in the symbolic order: a human subject is not only a speaking being but, more radically, a being spoken, traversed by language, its truth lies outside itself, in the decentered symbolic order which forever eludes human control; every dream - of 'appropriating' this alienated symbolic substance, of subordinating it to human subjectivity - is a humanist illusion” (447).

links and tensions between political life, action, freedom, and affective states. Paradoxes abound: we act as free dynamic agents in the world, but we are driven to do so by feelings of alienation to which we may always be yoked. Political life may not give us dis-alienation, but acting in concert might allow us to make something in the world or experience more moments of freedom along the way. And while the potential inevitability of alienation is not an argument for doing nothing, Larsen was correct when she said that “life does things” to us, a statement that implies there are limits to what we can understand, change, and control. Yet this account also opens appealing possibilities: might there be ways of structuring democratic institutions to recognize and acknowledge the non-agential actions many of us take when we are doing politics? And what might greater honesty about the conditions and motivations of our actions do for democracy?

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