

Filling in Blanks: Nella Larsen's Application to Library School

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IN 1922 NELLA LARSEN IMES WAS THE FIRST “NEGRO” APPLICANT ACCEPTED to the library school of the New York Public Library. Soon she would become a children’s librarian in the Harlem branch of the system and, somewhat later, one of the most promising novelists of the Harlem Renaissance, but her literary career ended prematurely in the wake of a much-discussed plagiarism charge.¹ What we know about her life remains patchy; she left no personal papers. Her biographers have relied heavily on her fiction, on letters saved by others, and on standardized files preserved by institutions: census reports, student transcripts, Larsen’s application to library school. Yet bureaucratic records present their own challenges to interpretation.

Recent work in media studies has brought interpretive pressure to bear on “mundane” documents, theorizing and historicizing the production and use of bureaucratic forms (Brenneis 42). This essay examines Larsen’s library school application to address the role of the reader in generating what Ben Kafka calls the “contradictions” and “surprises” of paperwork (*Demon* 9).² Paperwork does not have readers, as novelists or literature scholars generally use that word: invoices, certificates, and licenses contain neither absorbing plots nor characters with whom to identify. Distinguishing between readers of fiction and users of documents, Lisa Gitelman asks, “[W]ho ever really reads receipts, bills, tickets, bonds, or certificates?” (30–31; see also 11). Yet filling out forms requires cultural competence, and some forms demand more hermeneutic activity than others. An application—for a job, a grant, admission to a school—is more “interactive” than an invoice or a receipt and offers more freedom both to the person who fills it out and to a reader of the finished product (Brenneis 42).

Larsen’s application has had many readers. It was examined by an entrance committee and, almost a century later, by her biogra-

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pher George Hutchinson, then by me, and perhaps other scholars; it may have been read by friends or colleagues of Larsen's while in preparation. Each new reader examines it for different purposes and with different results. When Hutchinson discovered Larsen's long-neglected application in the Columbia University archives, it helped him reconstruct missing pieces of her elusive life history.³ I have reexamined Larsen's file along with those of other candidates who applied to the school between 1912 and 1925,⁴ but I do not approach this archive as a source of biographical information. Instead, I argue that while standardized documents offer only limited opportunities for nuance or personal expression, they are also "unpredictable" and replete with "surplus meanings" (Kafka, *Demon* 110; Gitelman 25). Larsen's application is a rich text that invites speculation. It discloses the encounter of a decidedly conflicted subject with the norms and values of an institution. It reflects her ambivalence about racial uplift and her resistance to stereotyping, along with her pragmatic, aesthetic, and emotional investment in books. I suggest that the combination of caution and daring, self-revelation and concealment, inscribed in Larsen's application anticipates themes and even rhetorical strategies that made Larsen an extraordinary writer for a very short time.⁵

Composed of questions followed by empty spaces, an application form is designed to gather facts, but it encourages some responses more than others, relying on convention to reinforce guidelines and constraints. Adapting Robin Bernstein's concept of "scriptive things," I approach applications as material artifacts that, like theatrical scripts, provide both "explicit instructions" and "cultural prompts" to elicit a repertoire of socially intelligible answers (11). Yet the presence of multiple blanks enables an applicant to improvise, elaborate, even fabricate. In the evaluation of such a document, everything depends on the underlying assumptions with

which a reader fills in the gaps surrounding bites of information entered on the form. For both candidate and reader, a strategy for filling in gaps is essential.⁶

Differentiating among "genres of paperwork," Kafka places "identity documents" such as passports in a category of their own ("Paperwork" 349). Even more than a passport, an application for a passport translates "identity into a document" (Robertson 9). But the library school application, by including questions about career goals and reading preferences, departs from a concern with certifiable details of personal history and offers additional room for self-fashioning. A candidate's responses imply a narrative, the meaning of which is provisionally determined by a sequence of readers.

Most readers of this essay have had so much experience filling out forms that the activity seems banal. As Gitelman argues, "[W]hatever reading is entailed" in the use of standardized documents does not have "very much to do with . . . readerly subjectivity" (30, 30–31).⁷ Yet a routine request to state "Name in full," "Nationality of mother," or "Place of birth" has significance for one candidate that it does not have for the next (Imes, Application; fig. 1). What one reader takes for granted gives another reader pause. Larsen completed her application for a specific professional goal; filling in blanks, she presented herself as an exemplary future librarian, but her entries reflect personal concerns that do not serve that purpose. Obscuring and foregrounding her racialized stigmatization, Larsen generated a blend of forthright claims and oblique ironies that destabilize her racial and national identity, reveal the literary taste of an autodidact, and disclose the formidable obstacles that she faced. Such tensions were not visible to the entrance committee.

Analyzing Larsen's application as a document riddled with contradictions, I focus on the way that cultural, institutional, and personal meanings escape the constraints of the

APPLICATION FOR ADMISSION TO THE
LIBRARY SCHOOL OF THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

Fill out in your own handwriting and in detail, and mail to the Principal, Library School of The New York Public Library, 476 Fifth Avenue, New York. Send also physician's certificate showing your fitness to do continuous mental and physical work.

Name in full *Nella Larsen Jones*

Date of this application *April 27, 1922* Place of this application *New York City*

Address at which you can always be reached *34 W. 129TH St., New York City*

Date of birth *April 13, 1892* Place of birth *Chicago, Illinois U.S.A.*

Nationality of father *Danish West Indian Negro* Nationality of mother *Danish*

If born abroad, when did you come to this country? _____ Are you married or single? *Married*

Name and relationship of person to be notified in case of emergency *Mr. E. S. Jones*

Address of person to be notified in case of emergency *34 W. 129TH St. New York City*

Health
Underscore the phrase which represents the general condition of your health: perfect; very good; good; fair; delicate, but able to work; very delicate.

Have you defective sight, hearing or speech? *no*

Have you any marked physical defect, such as lameness? *no*

Have you ever suffered a nervous breakdown? If so, when, and to what extent did it interrupt your work or study?
no

application rubrics. Briefly historicizing the rubrics themselves, I show that despite the library's progressive agenda, unmarked criteria such as whiteness were indispensable for evaluating a candidate. Race, class, religion, and family background often trumped other criteria, turning these forms into sites of negotiation over identity and belonging. I then analyze Larsen's responses in more detail, paying particular attention to a book list Larsen compiled in response to the question: "Name ten books you have read in the last two years" (Imes, Application; fig. 2). Considering both the individual titles on Larsen's list and their relation to one another, I tease out the implications of her claims about reading. I argue that the titles she selected create a cacophony that intensifies her conflicted self-representation elsewhere on the form.

As Anna Brickhouse first demonstrated, Larsen was a voracious reader; her reading helped her address the rage and despair triggered by the prejudice she encountered. Larsen's library school application, especially her book list, shows how an ephemeral, mundane text can reflect a dense, "lived experience of reading" (to adapt Paul Armstrong's phrase, 88–89). Larsen's reading practices, refracted through her social and personal history, are indelibly, if ambiguously, inscribed on an ordinary, standardized form, a neglected document that has preserved some of her earliest writing.

Encoding/Decoding

In 1922 the library school had recently revised the application form to maximize facts. Where the form of 1912 requests a brief narrative about "the character and extent of your reading" (Gearhart), the 1922 application requests a list of ten specific titles, as noted above (Imes, Application). According to the library school's *Circular of Information* for 1921–22, the sample entrance exam also replaced questions about the candidate's personal relation to reading with requests for

verifiable information about literature.⁸ These shifts—from an emphasis on narratives of personal experience to titles or plot summaries—reflect broader cultural trends that gave increasing credit to professional expertise. In 1917, when Ernest J. Reece became principal of the library school, he set out to develop its curriculum, raise its academic standing, and improve the qualifications of its candidates (Sullivan 101–03). The same year, the Carnegie Corporation commissioned a study to assess the way library schools selected and trained their students. *Training for Library Service*, written by Charles C. Williamson and published in 1923, had a significant impact on library history and library training schools in the United States. Critiquing the absence of clear criteria for evaluating candidates, the report recommends the use of "modern vocational and psychological tests" to determine "scientifically what personal qualities are essential" in a librarian (26, 31).⁹

The absence of clear entrance criteria persisted, partly because some qualities deemed "essential" for candidates could not be named. The "ideal" applicant (31) had to meet expectations about race, religion, and family of origin that remained unspoken because they were at odds with the liberal belief—consistently emphasized by the public library movement—that books and reading would promote democracy, bridge gaps between "alien" groups, and unify the nation (Rose, "Serving" 256; see also Rose, "Books" 75).¹⁰ As Thomas Augst has argued, "faith in reading" became a kind of civil religion in the Progressive Age. When Larsen applied to library school she embraced this faith, hoping that her relation to literature would propel her into a more just and open social world than the ones she already knew. Six years later, writing her first novel, she created a protagonist who "knew books and loved them" but cannot get a library job (*Quicksand* 30).

By the time Larsen applied to library school, she was intimately familiar with

Fig. 1

First page of Larsen's library school application (Library School of the New York Public Library, housed at Columbia U, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, box 30).

Have you travelled, or pursued special courses of study or reading? If so, state particulars.

Travelled - Denmark - 1900 - 1903
Denmark, Norway + Sweden - 1909 - 1912

Name ten books you have read in the last two years.

- 1 Growth of the Soil - K. H. Hauken
- 2 And Even Us - Max Beerblom
- 3 New World of Islam - Stoddard
- 4 Aboard at Home - Julian Street
- 5 Fight for the Republic in Asia - P. Weale
- 6 Queen Victoria - Lillian Stodden
- 7 Prejudices (1-2) - Menden
- 8 Story of Mankind - H. Van Poot
- 9 A Daughter of the Middle Border - H. Garland
- 10 Dark water - W. E. B. Dubois

What periodicals and newspapers do you read regularly?

The Bookman
The Literary Digest
Asia
The Nation

New York Tribune
New York Evening Post

Does your reading include regularly any periodicals which are concerned with library work? If so, name them.

Library Journal

Do you use shorthand or the typewriter? If so, tell extent and speed.

Typewriter - Speed - Slow

Experience

What is your present employment or school connection? Tell particulars, including date at which begun.

First grade assistant in Children's Room - 135th St Branch
of the New York Public Library - since September 15th 1923

Have you had experience in teaching? If so, tell positions, subjects taught, names of schools and their heads, and inclusive dates of service.

Yes - History of Nursing - Lincoln Hospital - N.Y.C.
Adah B. Stone - 1916 - 1918.
Materna Medica - Same -

Position - Assistant Superintendent of Nurses

racialized norms and rigid institutional structures (as a student at Fisk University she was expelled for violating a dress code [Hutchinson 63, 101]). Growing up in a white working-class neighborhood of Chicago, the child of a white mother and a black father, Larsen was a visible example of “amalgamation.” When her mother married a white man and had another child, Larsen became still more anomalous (Hutchinson; T. Davis). But working as a junior assistant in the Harlem branch of the New York Public Library in 1921, she discovered a vibrant community invested in the democratic potential of literature and art. Energized by the values of this community, she made a bid for professional librarianship despite her visibly mixed-race origin, lack of family backing, and limited formal education. Ernestine Rose, head of the Harlem branch, encouraged Larsen to apply to library school, recommending her enthusiastically and discounting the “drawback” of “color” (Recommendation form). Rose saw Larsen’s acceptance to the school as a milestone on the road to integration. Yet Larsen did not apply primarily to serve a cause; her application both affirms and disrupts Rose’s vision of books and reading as a gateway to knowledge, culture, and entitlement. Although Larsen was a successful library school candidate, and indeed a successful librarian, what Simon Gikandi calls the “fantasy of the library” impelled her to look beyond the goals that Rose encouraged her to fulfill. Larsen’s ambitions were larger, more amorphous, and—as it turned out—unattainable.

The library school’s four-page application form begins with a section on personal history: “Name in full,” “Date of birth,” “Place of birth,” nationality of both parents, and extent of formal education. Several questions, not found on application forms today, address mental and physical health: “Have you defective sight, hearing or speech?” “Have you any marked physical defect, such as lameness?” “Have you ever suffered a nervous

breakdown?” Some rubrics pose yes-or-no questions; others are multiple choice: “Under-score the phrase which represents the general condition of your health: perfect; very good; good; fair; delicate, but able to work; very delicate” (Imes, Application).¹¹ Additional questions attempt to gauge the applicant’s literary taste and general experience, focusing on her reading practices and professional aims.¹² These questions and the amount of space provided for answers enable greater variability in the tone and format of response. On page 3 the applicant is asked to provide the book list mentioned above and the names of newspapers and other periodicals that the candidate reads “regularly.” Page 4 includes the question, “What is there in your abilities, tastes, or experience that leads you to think you would be successful in library work?” The form ends with a space for the names and addresses of “three people who can speak from personal knowledge concerning your character, experience, ability and fitness for library work.”

When specifying her age Larsen often made adjustments, depending on the occasion; she also claimed more education than she actually had. She was surely not the only candidate to improve on facts when filling out forms, but one of her lifelong liabilities gave her a paradoxical advantage here: the lack of a stable, conventionally respectable family, rooted in a community and visible in public institutions, made it relatively easy for Larsen to edit her biography. Her recommenders did not emphasize long-standing familiarity with Larsen and her family.

Recommendations often testify to an applicant’s roots in church and community. Traceable ancestry, or at least family stability, was understood to be a value. One recommendation of 1919 describes a candidate as the “daughter of acquaintances” and “for a time member of my young women’s Bible class”; she is a “reader,” raised “in a ‘bookish’ family” (Recommendation form for Mary Patton Welles). A 1921 recommendation

Fig. 2

Third page of Larsen’s library school application (Library School of the New York Public Library, housed at Columbia U, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, box 30).

asserts, "I know the family well and they are all very intellectual cultured and gifted and refined" (Recommendation form for Violet Gordon Gray). In 1923 a recommender states, "Have known her for ten years or more—my husband knew her father and family for over fifty years as they were well known and of very high standing . . ." (Recommendation form for Grace Hamilton). Such comments were typical—and exactly the sort that did not appear in Larsen's file. Lacking gilt-edged cultural credentials that include religious affiliation, community, Americanness, and of course whiteness, Larsen needed to display other virtues.

When asked to state their parents' nationality, most candidates wrote "American."¹³ Larsen notes the Danish nationality of her mother and her "Danish West Indian" father (Imes, Application). The word "Negro" (beneath "Danish West Indian") was not written by Larsen: the script is quite different from that on the rest of the form. Inserting "Negro," someone seems to have tried stabilizing unwelcome ambiguities in Larsen's self-representation. On official documents and, later, in interviews, Larsen often highlighted her Danish background, displacing a narrative of origins that included miscegenation, poverty, anonymity, and other modes of social instability, if not disgrace. Her application succeeded largely because Rose's recommendation carried special weight, as did that of E. C. Williams, former teacher and friend of Reece, the library school's director. That Rose and Williams were well-known to the committee offset their relatively limited acquaintance with Larsen herself.¹⁴

Rose was an influential champion of integration in the public library movement; she handpicked Larsen to break the barrier that kept African Americans out of library school (Hutchinson 139). But Larsen does not frame herself as a race woman on the application. In fact, she does not label herself as African American at all. On the form, as in her later

writing, she rejects race loyalty and essentializing categories.¹⁵ Yet her cultural marginalization is inscribed in her application in multiple ways, including in her book list.

Reporting on Reading / Inscribing Oneself

A list includes no interpretive comments. Unlike discursive accounts, a book list does not say how books were chosen or read: gaps and silences take the place of explanation.¹⁶ But, paradoxically, compiling a list may enable more freedom than producing a narrative where titles are framed by commentary. Larsen's selections were partly governed by her short-term professional goals and assumptions about her readers. Thadious Davis notes that when Larsen made lists of her "favorite authors" she often included those "cited in the Library School's sample [exam] questions" (146). Brickhouse elaborates: "She would present her list of prized writers—all of them white men—almost as if she had internalized the exclusionary values of the dominant literary culture" (535). Many African American writers have used autobiographical accounts of reading to showcase their sophistication and familiarity with the prevailing canon, as Karla F. C. Holloway argues. However, Larsen's book list also addresses deep private concerns. If we read it as a verbal composition, like a poem or a piece of prose, with lacunae and cross-references, her titles create a dialogue between radical and conservative views of genre, gender, nation, and race. Most of all, like other aspects of her application, Larsen's list discloses her racialized stigmatization—without directly addressing that issue.

The book list is a particularly good example of an application entry that could be variously compiled, organized, and interpreted. Candidates, who were expected to be well-read, often stress their investment in reading. "I love books" and "have an insatiable desire for knowledge," one candidate writes, explaining why she would make

a good librarian (Hubbell).¹⁷ Enthusiasm for reading is also implicit in book lists that exceed the number of titles requested—as if the applicant cannot confine herself to a mere ten (the book-loving candidate above includes fourteen). Many book lists crowd more than ten titles into the designated space and inconsistently provide authors' names; the handwriting can be hard to decipher.¹⁸ By contrast, Larsen's script is neat and clear; she consistently follows instructions. Her list contains just ten items, carefully numbered, each author specified (Imes, Application). As a material artifact, her application declares she would make an exemplary librarian. But if the look of Larsen's application signals order and compliance, the content does not.

Larsen's list begins with *Growth of the Soil*, a novel by the Norwegian Nobel Prize laureate Knut Hamsun, followed by Max Beerbohm's *And Even Now*, a collection of essays on art and literature; *The New World of Islam*, by Lothrop Stoddard, the popular white-supremacist author of *The Rising Tide of Color*; Julian Street's *Abroad at Home*, a travelogue of the western United States; and B. L. Putnam Weale's *Fight for the Republic in China*. The list also includes Hendrik van Loon's *Story of Mankind* (the first Newbery Medal winner, a book that continues to be updated and reprinted) and the essay collection *Prejudices*, by the cantankerous literary and social critic H. L. Mencken. Although Larsen's list includes no women writers, several titles address gender issues: Lytton Strachey's ironical biography of Queen Victoria, Hamlin Garland's autobiographical *Daughter of the Middle Border*, and the last text on the list, W. E. B. Du Bois's *Darkwater*.

Larsen's titles reflect her aesthetic taste, her political concerns, and the nature of her investment in books for several years before her attempt at authorship. But there is always a gap between a lived experience of reading and claims about reading. That gap is all the greater when a book list is prepared by a black

reader for white authority figures. Black authors who write about their reading often avoid African American writers, as Holloway notes. Up to a point Larsen's book list fits that pattern—her list includes only one African American text—and she claims to read only white periodicals (although in 1920 she contributed Danish games and songs to the *Brownies' Book*, the short-lived offshoot of *The Crisis*, edited by Du Bois). Of course if Larsen omitted many texts she read, she may have included some she did not read. Applicants to an institution often produce self-portraits shaped more by desire and ambition than reality. Larsen knew how to respond to white prompts so as to meet white expectations; as a student she consistently received top grades in "Book selection" (Imes, "Student Record"). But her book list is not fully explained by her desire to please the institution to which she was applying; it reflects issues that deeply disturbed her: race, gender, national belonging, power, and violence. If the list is read as the sort of "allusive 'patchwork'" Brickhouse discerns in *Quicksand*, it becomes a "collage of references" that challenges common ideas and well-worn tropes (550, 545). It invites an ironic reading that reveals the gap between public declarations and private uses of books.

Spanning multiple genres and subjects, national as well as international affairs, Larsen's list implies an interest in current events, travel, history, geography, and literary culture—useful qualities for a librarian. Many of her titles endorse socially normative ideas, yet her book list is atypical. Whereas many lists include classics as well as best sellers, almost all of Larsen's titles were published within five years of her application.¹⁹ Moreover, whereas most candidates include many novels, Larsen (who would begin publishing her own fiction four years later) names only *Growth of the Soil*, a controversial naturalist text.²⁰ Her inclusion of Du Bois makes the list unusual in another way: no other application I have seen includes a black writer, and *Darkwater*

is a particularly explicit critique of racism and political exploitation. From my perspective as a twenty-first-century reader, Larsen's titles announce her concern with geographic and racial otherness as well as conflicts over political dominance. That said, it is impossible to read the list as ideologically coherent. Whereas *Darkwater* attacks racist assumptions and exploitative practices worldwide,²¹ other titles powerfully offset Du Bois's challenge to the status quo. In fact, several of the books on Larsen's list are openly racist.

Delineating power struggles on the geopolitical stage, Stoddard and Weale in particular assume a historical narrative where race is decisive—an idea that was anathema to Larsen. She could not have regarded such books with equanimity. For Stoddard, “[t]he great racial divisions of mankind are the most fundamental, the most permanent, the most ineradicable things in human experience” (*New World* 104). Gender essentialism is equally visible on Larsen's book list—though strongly challenged in her fiction. Garland's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Daughter of the Middle Border* gestures toward the value of women's independence, aesthetic expression, and professional work but celebrates Garland's mother and wife for their “serenely optimistic spirit” under their burdens, as if women are self-abnegating by nature (223). The narrator's aunt is the epitome of contented, stoical womanhood: a “happy, hard-working farmer's wife” whose “life had been . . . a cheerful pilgrimage” despite “thirty years of unremitting toil” (186; see also 215, 219).²² The affirmation of gender binaries, pervasive in Garland's text, is an unmarked assumption in Van Loon's *Story of Mankind* and even, paradoxically, in Strachey's biography of Queen Victoria, two popular, contemporary titles that, unlike most other books on Larsen's list, appear on several applications.

Rose's recommendation emphasizes Larsen's “unusual” tact. Asked to comment on Larsen's “initiative,” Rose writes, “Has plenty,

but does not always use it readily. So diffident or rather intensely restrained [is she] in self-expression” (Recommendation form). In many respects Larsen's book list—like the rest of her application—is indeed “intensely restrained.” Perhaps the preponderance of books endorsing racism and gender norms reassured the committee that Larsen would know her place. But Larsen's book list also expresses conflict, even defiance; it implies ideas and emotions that are held in check at some cost.

Uses of Fiction: Public and Private

I want to return now to the fact that Larsen's book list keeps imaginative literature to a bare minimum—one title. In the early twentieth century, with the rise of middle-brow culture, novel reading was increasingly respectable as well as popular throughout the United States. But resistance lingered among many white men of letters, educators, and librarians, as well as black commentators. In the 1910s and early 1920s, *The Crisis* often recommends useful reading to African Americans, publishing lists of “selected” books and other suggestions for black intellectual advancement (“Selected List”). Although these lists sometimes include fiction, especially by or about African Americans, the books are frequently chosen for their social function, especially racial uplift.

Black reviewers of the period endorse some novels, but they more often celebrate histories or biographies that testify to African American achievement. Writing about fall books in 1924, Du Bois briefly praises Walter White's *Fire in the Flint* as “a good, stirring story and a strong bit of propaganda” (“Fall Books” 25) but comments primarily on William H. Skaggs's *Southern Oligarch* (a book “every intelligent Negro should buy . . . even if it does cost five dollars” [25]) because it argues that “[t]he Negro in America is not degenerating. He is advancing . . .” (26). In “The Younger

Literary Movement,” Du Bois and Alain Locke praise Jessie Fauset’s *There Is Confusion* because it confronts the “ugly facts and . . . consequences” of slavery while representing “the race situation in this country” (163).

White reviewers, recommending books to white readers, had different criteria: fiction was not required to turn a harsh light on reality. Reading was increasingly seen as a valuable leisure activity. An advertisement in the *Literary Digest* of 1920 promotes the “liberal education” promised by Dr. Eliot’s multivolume collection of classics, the Five Foot Shelf, with the subheading: “Adventure, Entertainment, Thrill.” The ad proclaims that while “text-books are often tiresome,” the contents of the “five-foot shelf” are the “most fascinating books in the world.”²³ Although a variety of pleasures were deemed legitimate for white readers, neither black nor white commentators encourage African Americans to read for “Adventure, Entertainment,” or “Thrill.”

Black writers from Booker T. Washington to Malcolm X have compiled book lists dominated by nonfiction (Holloway 92). Perhaps Larsen was foregrounding her sophistication and firm sense of reality by minimizing fiction on her book list. But the solitary novel she includes was a tendentious book in a contested genre. *Growth of the Soil* reflects Larsen’s conflicted cultural positioning on two levels: it reasserts her “Nordic” affinities, while emphasizing (and disguising) her sense of irremediable outsidership.²⁴ Analyzing one climactic scene of the book, I speculate that Larsen was powerfully drawn to Hamsun’s novel and that she read it through her characteristic emotional and aesthetic preoccupations. Although she never mentions this book in writing again, some of its themes and narrative strategies reappear, transmuted, in *Quicksand* and *Passing*. Hamsun’s presence on Larsen’s book list discloses Larsen’s racialized abjection and isolation while hinting at a practice that has dominated scholarly discussions of her fiction: her habit of inscribing her reading into

her writing. Indeed, Larsen’s intertextuality—the unmarked use in her fiction of many texts she had read—eventually drew the charges of plagiarism that ended her career.

Perhaps *Growth of the Soil* reinforced Larsen’s self-representation as a citizen of the world, with “the advantage of foreign travel,” in the words of a recommendation for another candidate (Recommendation form for Grace Hamilton). However, Hamsun’s book includes an unsettling image of foreignness, one that reflects Larsen’s personal experience of exclusion. A central character of the novel is Inger, a woman with a cleft lip. This inherited trait makes her an outsider, haunted by a bodily handicap. Depicting Inger’s struggle to overcome what she experiences as a shameful defect, the book underscores the significance of inherited characteristics. Inger’s physical anomaly fosters insecurity, inarticulateness, self-hatred, and an overwhelming fear of passing on a crippling trait to her children. In Hamsun’s novel, throughout Larsen’s application, and subsequently in her fiction, the body as a site of disfiguration and disempowerment is the elephant in the room—at once obtrusive and unacknowledged.

Questions about “health” and physical “defects” (Imes, Application) on the application form reflect popular beliefs about biological determinism and survival of the fittest that gave growing impetus to the eugenics movement of the 1920s in the United States. Racial mixture—what Stoddard calls “mongrelization” (*New World* 104)—was seen to threaten the superiority of whiteness.²⁵ Like Larsen’s application, *Growth of the Soil* can be read as a text that addresses stigmatized otherness without mentioning race. Inger’s inherited physical disability is not only a defining aspect of her self-understanding but also a crucial plot device: her congenital handicap first makes her feel like a “monster” (Hamsun 57), then impels her to behave like one. After giving birth to her third child—a baby with a cleft lip—Inger kills it.

Early in the novel *Os-Anders*, a passerby from Lapland, stops at Inger's home in the deep woods:

Inger wondered why he did not beg for anything; *Os-Anders* always begged, as do all the Lapps. . . .

"No need to ask if the little ones there are yours," [he says]. . . .

"They're as like you as could be. . . ."

Now Inger was a monster and a deformity to look at; 'twas all wrong, of course, but she swelled with pride. . . . Even a Lapp can glad-den a mother's heart. (57)

Throughout *Growth of the Soil* "Lapps" are the whipping boys, outsiders in Norway, derided and despised.²⁶ Inger is Norwegian, but while she looks down on *Os-Anders*, she sees herself as "a monster and a deformity." Nevertheless, she makes a bid for normalcy, domesticity, and happiness. Despite her pain, and her crime, she partly succeeds.

Although Hamsun was translated and much discussed in American periodicals, especially after winning the Nobel Prize, commentators in the United States were often critical. As one reviewer notes in 1921, Hamsun's novel *Hunger* "possesses the . . . characteristics of 'unashamedness' and 'impolite realism' . . . that many American readers do not care for" (Moritzen 134–35) and that require "expurgation" (135).²⁷ What requires "expurgation" remains unspecified. Reviewers regularly divert attention from unacceptable aspects of Hamsun's work, avoiding the term *naturalism* and praising his representation of nature or his epic reach. Discussing *Growth of the Soil*, commentators generally focus on Inger's husband, Isak—"the symbol of man, strengthened physically, if not morally, by a hard struggle with nature" (G. J.). The women in the novel are barely mentioned, yet they are significant figures.²⁸ Inger is not the only woman in the book who kills her child and goes on with her life.

Inger gives birth to four infants in the course of the novel. When the first two are

born, her husband is away. Initially her determination to be alone when giving birth is not obvious; a reader may wonder whether Isak's absence is a result of planning or mere chance. But Inger's initiative (if not her motive) is clearly indicated the third time around. When she urges Isak to take a bull to market, the narrator comments, "Inger had no doubt her own reasons for getting Isak out of the place on that particular day. 'If you are going at all, you'd better go today,' she said. 'the bull . . . will fetch a good price at this time of year'" (Hamsun 72). A brief exchange about logistics is followed by a description of the bull. Finally, Isak departs and the narrative turns to Inger:

Inger sat down on the door-slab. She was in pain; her face was aflame. She had kept her feet till Isak was gone; now he and the bull were out of sight, and she could give way to a groan without fear. Little Eleseus can talk a little already; he asks: "Mama hurt?"—"Yes, hurt." He mimics her, pressing his hands to his sides and groaning. Little Sivert is asleep.

Inger takes Eleseus inside the house, gives him some things to play with on the floor, and gets in to bed herself. Her time was come. She is perfectly conscious all the while, keeps an eye on Eleseus, glances at the clock on the wall to see the time. Never a cry, hardly a movement; the struggle is in her vitals—a burden is loosened and glides from her. Almost at the same moment she hears a strange cry in the bed, a blessed little voice; poor thing, poor little thing . . . and now she cannot rest, but lifts herself up and looks down. What is it? Her face is grey and blank in a moment, without expression or intelligence; a groan is heard; unnatural, impossible—a choking gasp.

She slips back on the bed. A minute passes; she cannot rest, the little cry down there in the bed grows louder she raises herself once more, and sees—O God, the direst of all! No mercy, no hope—and this a girl!

Isak could not have gone more than a couple of miles or so. It was hardly an hour since he had left. In less than ten minutes Inger had borne her child and killed it. . . . Isak came

back on the third day, leading a half-starved yearling bull. (73–74; ellipses in the original)

For “some time” after Isak’s return, Inger hides the fact that that she has given birth (75). In due course she acknowledges the event, implying the baby died naturally. When the truth emerges, the narrator notes: “Isak took the matter sensibly from the first. He made no great words about it but asked his wife simply: ‘How did you come to do it?’” Initially, Inger gives “no answer to that” (91). Isak remains troubled:

“You shouldn’t have done that.”

“No,” she agreed.

“And I can’t make out how you ever could bring yourself to do it.”

“She was all the same as myself,” said Inger.

“How d’you mean?”

“Her mouth.”

Isak thought over that for some time. “Ay, well,” said he.

And nothing more was said about it at the time. (92)

Throughout the novel, Inger’s emotional suffering derives from one source—the burden of her biological inheritance. In the masterfully compressed murder scene, a lifetime of discrimination culminates in swift and deadly violence, premeditated on Inger’s part but unanticipated for the reader. Clare Kendry’s death at the end of *Passing* may owe something to this scene. Just as Inger kills her infant with lightning speed, Irene suddenly pushes Clare out a window, and what has happened becomes apparent later. In both cases, the murder is as unexpected as it is swift, presaged in *Passing* only, perhaps, by a shattered teacup that Irene drops in silent “rage,” convinced that Clare and her husband are lovers (Larsen, *Passing* 66). Yet if Larsen read *Growth of the Soil* with an aesthetic appreciation of its pacing, compression, and management of narrative gaps, her life and her writing suggest she was also drawn to Ham-

sun’s representation of Inger’s self-hatred, anxiety, and social death, all generated by inherited bodily stigma in a society repelled by disability and otherness. Clare, passing as white and married to a white man, shares Inger’s problem: what to do should her worst fear about the body of her unborn child be fulfilled. After bearing one light-skinned infant, Clare determines never to have another; the fear of producing a “dark” baby has made her pregnancy too “hellish [a] strain” (168).

Interpretive Ambiguity

Growth of the Soil was a more radical book than public discourse of the period indicates. Representing sex, marriage, birth, motherhood, and infanticide, the book addresses volatile questions about physical defects, women’s agency, birth control, and eugenics. But Hamsun’s novel was not publicly discussed in terms of bodily stigma, defenseless children, or desperate mothers, issues of particular resonance for Larsen.²⁹ In *Quicksand*, Helga Crane begins her life as a rejected, unprotected, and racialized child. She ends up “nearly dead of compulsive maternity,” in Jennifer Fleissner’s evocative phrase (251).

Motherhood was much celebrated in newspapers, magazines, and speeches of the period. Theodore Roosevelt’s emphasis on multiple children as a blessing prepared fertile ground for the work of Stoddard and Madison Grant, both of whom fanned the flames of anxiety about white “race-suicide” by emphasizing black sexual energy and procreation (Stoddard, *Rising Tide* 249). Eugenics was also a recurrent topic for Harlem Renaissance writers. Many black commentators urged the African American middle class to reproduce, celebrating so-called race women. By contrast, in a chapter of *Darkwater* (“The Damnation of Women”), Du Bois stresses the disastrous economic and social condition of many African Americans but refrains from promoting reproduction for what

he famously called “the talented tenth” of the race and asks instead, “[O]ught children to be born to us? Have we any right to make human souls face what we face today?” (202).³⁰ In *Quicksand* Helga restates Du Bois's argument. Countering James Vayle, who insists that “people like us”—“Negroes of the better class”—are duty-bound to have children, she asks, “Why add any more unwanted, tortured Negroes to America? Why *do* Negroes have children? Surely it must be sinful” (103). Ironically, Helga ends up exemplifying the degraded black mother whom proponents of eugenics decried. The vexed issue of black childbearing informs the work of the Harlem Renaissance writer Angelina Weld Grimké as well. Fear of lynching causes one of Grimké's heroines to renounce maternity and another to kill her child.³¹ In Larsen's *Passing*, Irene and her husband argue bitterly about whether to discuss “the race problem” with their children (232).

Insofar as *Growth of the Soil* engages some of Larsen's pressing concerns, it was an outrageous text to include on her application book list. But since library school applicants were not asked to comment on these lists, the (all-white) entrance committee was free to assume that Larsen's view of her titles would match their own. If they were familiar with Hamsun's novel, they likely took their prompts from reviewers who celebrated the representation of man's heroic struggle with nature. Moreover, at least one of Larsen's titles can be read as a strong antidote to *Growth of the Soil*. Garland's autobiographical *Daughter of the Middle Border* extols women who are heroic in childbirth (286–87) and “glorified” by motherhood (287). If *Growth of the Soil* was particularly meaningful to Larsen, the grounds of her attachment to it (like the grounds of her attachment to *Darkwater*) were not immediately obvious. For the entrance committee, the crucial questions were whether an African American would be capable of library work and whether other students would be offended by her presence.³²

I have been arguing that Larsen's application to library school represents Larsen not only as a well-organized, cooperative, urbane, and suitable candidate but also as a rebel and even an ironist. Beerbohm, Mencken, and Strachey are all ironic stylists, and their work may well have appealed to Larsen for that reason. Irony is a hallmark of her fiction and a mode she often used in letters. She habitually used it to scramble familiar categories. I “work like a nigger,” she wrote in letters of the 1920s to both black and white recipients (qtd. in Hutchinson 259–60; see also Hutchinson 354, 366; Hochman, “Love”). If there is irony in Larsen's inclusion of Stoddard or Garland, it stems in part from irreconcilable impulses—to conform and resist, to conceal and reveal—which the committee could not have perceived. An application form is no place for irony, but Larsen understood the interpretive conventions of her target audience and just might have allowed herself some ironic touches, assuming they would pass. If so, they did.

Informed by a tension between acceptance and defiance of widely shared norms, Larsen's application anticipates structural and thematic elements of *Quicksand* and *Passing*, books that begin almost decorously enough to qualify as novels of manners before taking a catastrophic turn toward naturalist degradation or violence. Larsen's fiction (like her book list) is festooned with intertextual references in dialogue with one another—black and white, elitist and popular, local and foreign. Like the titles on her book list, the allusions in her fiction display her credentials as a sophisticated participant in literary culture. However, the implications of these references are never self-evident, which is why the academic debate about them continues.

In November 1929, after publishing two well-received novels, Larsen filled out an application form for a Guggenheim Fellowship. In January 1930, before learning that her application was successful, she published “Sanctuary,” the story that drew criticism for

its similarities to Sheila Kaye Smith's "Mrs. Adis." Asked to specify her "[p]resent occupation" on the Guggenheim form, Larsen wrote, "Hack writing. Housework. Sewing" (Imes, "Guggenheim Application" 153). Why would Larsen refer to her work as "[h]ack writing"? Whether we read this entry as witty or self-critical, hackwork seems a disruptive concept for an aspiring author to include on a grant application. Still, like her application to library school, Larsen's bid for a Guggenheim persuaded its initial readers to accept her.

Literature, Paperwork, and the Contexts of Reading

As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues, there are "many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture," even if that culture does not offer its support (150–51). In the early 1920s, Larsen extracted emotional, aesthetic, intellectual, and material sustenance from literature, moving from nursing to librarianship to authorship in less than a decade. Through librarianship, she might have combined professional stability with racial activism, community involvement, and even artistic experimentation, as at least one black librarian of the period managed to do. Regina Andrews, who also began work at the Harlem branch of the New York Public Library in the early 1920s, later attended library school (Whitmire 7–8), promoted community theater (e.g., 61), and became the first African American branch supervisor in the United States (93). Like Rose, Andrews was committed to the idea of literature as an important resource in the struggle for "racial understanding" (Andrews). But Larsen was ambivalent about pressing art into the service of a cause; both *Quicksand* and *Passing* sardonically critique institutionalized commitments to racial uplift. Her relation to race was conflicted; her relation to reading and writing not consistently goal-directed.³³

In the early twentieth century, an investment in books and reading was generally perceived as the key to personal enrichment, upward mobility, and social equality. As Kinohi Nishikawa suggests, "[T]he weight of extraordinary expectation" still clings to black literacy in particular (698). The promises attached to literacy impelled Larsen to stake herself on authorship (Hochman, "Love" 530). Leaving professional librarianship behind, she abandoned the future that Rose had imagined for her. *Quicksand* and *Passing* won considerable acclaim. But after the embarrassment of "Sanctuary," Larsen did not publish again; the novel she wrote during the fellowship year was rejected. Cutting off her ties with friends, writers, and artists she had known, she subsequently returned to the service profession of nursing. She died alone and forgotten. Although no one could have predicted Larsen's future by reading her library school application, her talent, fears, and cross-purposes are inscribed there.

Reproducible paperwork aided the process of consolidating what Benedict Anderson has influentially called an "imagined community" (25).³⁴ For Anderson, the "remarkable confidence of community in anonymity . . . is the hallmark of modern nations" (36). Anonymity—"depersonalization"—is also an indispensable component of bureaucracy, as Kafka emphasizes ("Paperwork" 346). Perhaps the anonymity of far-flung citizens not only reading the same newspaper but also using the same standardized documents made it easier for some to imagine a unified, even homogeneous United States. However, anonymity was a source of anxiety for many, especially in the early 1920s, when segregation was a legal practice and new restrictions on immigration would soon become law. In this context it is not surprising that recommendations for library school candidates regularly specified a candidate's origins in a respectable, white, churchgoing family.

Applications are designed to establish facts, but questions and answers on an application

form reflect historically specific institutional, cultural, and personal values. While Larsen attempted to downplay her “Negro” blood, her racial origins were unambiguous biological and social realities for the committee. She was admitted to library school as a “colored applicant,” a “most significant” event that Rose described as progress toward understanding and “racial readjustment” (“Librarian” 206). When Hutchinson examined Larsen’s application, he was able to add important facts to what was previously known about Larsen’s life. But the application is still richer when read as a paraliterary text and in tandem with other applications of the period. Stylistically and thematically, this ephemeral document anticipates Larsen’s best work; it intimates conflicting perspectives on race, gender, and national belonging while exposing the limits of “imagined community” in one culturally typical American institution. A great many people have filed applications for jobs, schools, and passports in the last century. By analyzing not only the institutional and social nexus in which application forms are produced but also changes in the way “ordinary” documents have been filled out, read, and used over time (Kafka, *Demon* 143), we open new avenues of inquiry into the norms, goals, and contradictions of individuals and communities.

NOTES

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1. When Larsen’s story “Sanctuary” was first published in the *Forum* (1930), readers noted its resemblance to Sheila Kaye Smith’s “Mrs. Adis” (Larsen, “Author’s Explanation”; M. Boyd; “Editor’s Note”; all reprinted in Larsen, *Passing*). Scholars of the last twenty years have argued that Larsen creatively engaged Smith’s story but

that she denied doing so for reasons of personal psychology (Haviland) or racial politics (Douglas; Hoeller). The plagiarism episode continues to spark interest in Larsen’s intertextual practices (e.g., Brickhouse; Hochman, “Love”; K. Larson; Moynahan; Orlando; Erika Williams).

2. Arguing that paperwork has its own “psychic life,” Kafka relishes the unexpected, even bizarre, turns of the paper trails he follows, leading many reviewers to note the odd appropriateness of his family name (*Demon* 9). The “surprises” of paperwork are more central to his project than an account of depersonalized procedures or a critique of political structures. This focus makes for a compelling narrative in the tradition of Carlo Ginzburg’s *The Cheese and the Worms* or Robert Darnton’s *Kiss of Lamourette*.

3. Though uncertainties remain, Hutchinson’s 2006 biography clarifies numerous ambiguities and corrects errors about Larsen’s life, some of which have shaped readings of her fiction. Born on 13 April 1891, Larsen often claimed to have been born in 1893, as T. Davis and C. Larson note (3–4; xix); on the library school application, she gave the year 1892. Addressing the confusion surrounding “the public record” of Larsen’s life, Tate suggested in 1995 that before the work of T. Davis and of C. Larson appeared, scholars erroneously believed that the Copenhagen episode of *Quicksand* implied Larsen had been there (236, 257n2). In fact, she had: Hutchinson (4–5) later found her name on a ship’s passenger list; she had no passport, but passports were not required for travel to Denmark at the time.

4. In 1926 the library school merged with the Columbia University School of Library Science.

5. Guillory traces the emergence of brevity as a norm in memoranda and the resulting stylistic impoverishment of the genre (“Memo” 123–29). Applications also mandate brevity and, like other standard forms, employ what Kafka calls “anti-rhetorical devices” (“Paperwork” 350). Yet styles of expression among applicants differ and can reveal more than the claims made to secure a position. Bridling at the constraints of recommendation forms, at least two library school recommenders of the 1920s wrote letters instead. One explains, “I suppose you have to have such blanks in an Institution like yours. . . . I never answer any of them” (Locke; see also Ridington).

6. In Iser’s influential theory, literary works are full of gaps that readers fill in, following textual guidelines reinforced by generic conventions. As Bernstein suggests, however, a specific “repertoire” of culturally normative responses is available to readers at any given historical moment (13). Thus, cultural context and personal experience join textual and generic guidelines in shaping interpretation and use.

7. The examples Gitelman provides here are “bills of lading and stock transfers” (30), not applications. But she emphasizes that documents in general have users, not readers (30–31).

8. Between 1911 and 1916, the “Literature” section of the sample exam begins: “Give an account of your read-

ing up to your fifteenth year, naming individual books and authors that were favorites, as well as the *class* of books you liked best. Sketch in not less than 200 words” (*Circular* [1915–16] 12). From 1916–17 until at least 1921–22, the literature section of the sample exam begins: “Give the principal writings of one of the following authors: Aeschylus, Aristophanes, Euripides, Horace, Plato, Virgil” (*Circular* [1921–22] 29).

9. The need to standardize and coordinate library training was much debated between 1915 and 1924, amid tensions between the American Library Association and the Association of American Library Schools (D. Davis 230–37). Williamson’s report criticizes the use of “impressionistic” personal interviews and notes that entrance exams were not rigorously graded, “the theory being that the examiners can learn what they need to know about the candidate whether he answers the questions correctly or not” (31, 27). Larsen’s acceptance did not create a “widespread trend,” as S. Anderson notes: “by 1929 only four library schools were admitting black students” (392n9).

10. In “Books,” Rose’s name is misspelled as Ross on the title page and in the essay.

11. The emphasis on fitness was routine for the period. According to the library’s *Circular of Information*, “Good health and freedom from serious physical defects or weakness are of the highest importance” ([1921–22] 14). A Guggenheim fellowship application that Larsen filled out in 1929 includes the question, “Have you any constitutional disorder or physical disability?” (Imes, “Guggenheim Application” 153).

12. Most applicants were women. Evaluation forms use the feminine pronoun (e.g., “Has she learned easily?”). Some recommenders cross out the *s* in *she* or change *her* to *his* when appropriate.

13. A minority of other library school applicants note foreign parents, e.g., Irish, Russian, German, Chilean.

14. E. C. Williams, university librarian at Howard and the first African American professional librarian in the United States, had known Larsen for two years. Robertson’s history of the passport highlights a tension between the emerging authority of standardized documents in the early-twentieth-century United States and the weight previously given to “personal knowledge and reputation” in establishing personal identity (6–7).

15. “Sanctuary,” Larsen’s last published story, has often been read as an affirmation of group allegiance, but—as Hutchinson argues—Larsen’s “essential ambivalence about racial loyalty” was deep and sustained (294). On the theme of racial solidarity in “Sanctuary,” see especially Hoeller; cf. Hochman, “Love.”

16. For theoretical discussions of lists, see Guillory, *Cultural Capital*; Holloway; Tankard. On the limits of pragmatic approaches to “enumerative lists,” see Jackson (291). Lists of recommended reading or of popular books pervaded contemporary periodicals. During the 1920s, the *Library Journal* (which Larsen and many other ap-

plicants claimed to read “regularly”) includes book lists in almost every number.

17. Other candidates also stress their “love of books and reading” (e.g., Hofflund; Lockhart) or “ardor” for library work (Knickerbocker 3). Such answers exemplify the “stick[y] subjectivity-saturated language of involvement and affection” analyzed by Lynch (10). Some candidates emphasize work experience and skills. Larsen’s answer is especially concise and matter-of-fact: “Interest in books, interest in children, interest in hospital libraries” (Imes, Application).

18. Candidates were asked to complete the form by hand. Digital forms maximize legibility but create new constraints: the number of characters per rubric is strictly limited.

19. The only exception is Street’s *Abroad at Home*, published in 1914.

20. Translated into English in 1917 by W. W. Worster, Hamsun’s novel circulated widely. *Library Journal* includes it on lists of books that were “[p]opular” in August, September, and October (15 Oct., 1 Nov.). Between March and August 1921, *The Bookman* mentions Hamsun in ten separate articles. Three other candidates include Hamsun on their book lists. One is a Norwegian applicant who lists Scandinavian writers only, with the exception of May Antin’s *Promised Land*—a book that celebrates the welcome that America extends to immigrants and that includes a paean to the Boston Public Library (Hofflund).

21. The inclusion of *Darkwater*, of all the African American texts Larsen might have chosen, seems to signal her outrage at the oppression and humiliation of what Du Bois calls the “darker races” (*Darkwater* 49). But by 1920 Du Bois represented “the older and more genteel” generation of African American writers, as Douglas notes (313), so perhaps Larsen assumed that the library committee would not be aware of *Darkwater*’s radical messages. In “Serving New York’s Black City,” Rose mentions the popularity of the book in the Harlem branch, taking this as evidence of African American interest in contemporary history. Surprisingly, she adds that Stoddard’s *Rising Tide of Color* is “almost equally popular” (258; see also Hochman, “Investing” 96).

22. On Garland’s transition from “radical realist” to “conservative arbiter of literary standards and . . . controlling patriarch,” see Mulligan; Newlin.

23. The ad—“A Few Great Books Started Lincoln”—is reprinted in Hochman, “Love” 515.

24. The “Nordic race” (85) was “the great race,” in Grant’s widely circulated *Passing of the Great Race* (1916). Stoddard asserts that “the Nordic” is the most valuable “sub-species” of the white race, “ranking in genetic worth well above the various colored races” (*Rising Tide* 162).

25. Like Stoddard, Mencken assumes the essentialism of “blood” and is intrigued by “interbreeding” (76). In his view, “mulatto mistresses” contain “the best blood of the south and perhaps of the whole country” (78).

26. The celebration of Nordics in popular discourse marginalized Lapps (Selden 46). In Cather's *My Ántonia* (1917), a character explains what's "the matter" with her by noting her grandfather "married a Lapp. . . . They say Lapp blood will out" (154).

27. Moritzen notes that many Americans want to read "foreign literature and yet believe that a line should be drawn somewhere" (134). Literary nationalism of the 1920s also militated against foreign fiction: "see American fiction first" (E. Boyd).

28. A review that includes a rare mention of Inger is otherwise typical in summing up the novel's focus: "a man in the wilds; his struggle with nature; his creation of a home" ("Knut Hamsun's Greatest Novel"). The book is regularly praised for its sublime simplicity and celebration of "the soil" ("Knut Hamsun's Greatest Novel"). Worster, the book's English translator, calls it "an epic of earth" which shows the "loving alliance between Nature and . . . Man" (258). Townsend praises the narrative's "heroic tone."

29. As I argue elsewhere, Larsen's ill-fated story "Sanctuary" engages Edith Wharton's novella *Sanctuary*, which opens with the death of a socially excluded mother who appears to have drowned herself and her daughter (Hochman, "Love" 519). On Larsen's much-discussed relationship with her own mother, see T. Davis; Hutchinson; Haviland.

30. Du Bois strongly advocated birth control for the "health and strength" of women; "and of all who need it we Negroes are first" ("Opinion" 250, 248). On Du Bois and eugenics, see English, ch. 1; Fleissner 269–70. On *Quicksand* as a challenge to eugenics, see English 121–23, 133; Macharia 267.

31. When Grimké's play *Rachel* was published in 1920, it was attacked for advocating race suicide (Fleissner 266). Oddly enough, her story "The Closing Door" appeared in Margaret Sanger's *Birth Control Review* (Fleissner 267). Fleissner explores the fraught relation between birth control, eugenics, and racial politics in these texts (266–74). See also English, ch. 4.

32. Some were. In 1922 an alumnus complained, "I cannot feel that I could have felt happy at the School had there been a Negro in the class" (Goodell). Responding by return mail, the principal explains the school had no "grounds for refusing" because of "the possible effect on the work at 135th Street in the event that a negro member of the staff made application and was rejected . . ." and "considering the fact that the person in question not only had prospects of a library position but was actually doing satisfactory work in one." He adds, however, that this was not an "indication of policy. In other circumstances we should doubtless act otherwise; and take into account the opinions of the Alumni and of the Southern librarians" (Reece). Reece attempted to tread a fine line. Rose often alienated white, southern librarians; during a library dedication at Fisk in 1930, she was removed from the program because of her "outspoken positions on race relations" (S. Anderson 391).

33. In 1945 Andrews completed a thesis: "A Public Library Assists in Improving Race Relations" (Whitmire 97). In 1946 she compiled a book list of sixteen titles recommended for home libraries (Andrews). With the exception of John Hersey's *Hiroshima*, all the titles are by or about African Americans. Andrews's list thus constitutes a codified, ideologically consistent statement—exactly the sort Larsen could not or would not produce.

34. On the production of paper itself as a factor in "building and constructing the nation," see Senchyne 77.

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