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In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line by George Hutchinson (Book Review)

Daryl Cumber Dance

University of Richmond, ddance2@richmond.edu

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IN SEARCH OF NELLA LARSEN: A BIOGRAPHY OF THE COLOR LINE. By George Hutchinson. Cambridge: Belknap P of Harvard UP, 2006. x + 611 pp. \$39.95.

With *In Search of Nella Larsen*, George Hutchinson makes the third major attempt to provide a biography of the elusive Harlem Renaissance author Nella Larsen (1891–1964), the mulatto daughter of immigrants from Denmark and the Danish West Indies whose life and fiction were shaped largely by her mixed emotions about her racial heritage and her feelings of abandonment by her white mother, stepfather, and sister. In his introduction, Hutchinson makes much of the errors of prior Larsen biographers Charles R. Larson (*Invisible Darkness: Jean Toomer and Nella Larsen* [1993]) and Thadious M. Davis (*Nella Larsen, Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance: A Woman's Life Unveiled* [1994]), charging that they overlooked important information that he will provide and that they “pathologized” Larsen in “a pattern not atypical of the way children from interracial families had often been misunderstood” (3). At times he seems to actually gloat over his own discoveries, as he points to a “document previously unknown to scholars” (65). Conversely, he sometimes makes use of previous scholars’ work without even mentioning their names in the text, though he does meticulously document all borrowings in footnotes. A gracious recognition of the contributions of Larson and Davis is, however, found at the end of the book, where Hutchinson generously acknowledges, “Had it not been for the two previous biographies of Nella Larsen, by Charles R. Larson and Thadious M. Davis, I would never have undertaken this project. I owe them a lot” (592).

While Hutchinson clearly provides some important new information, makes some corrections to a few errors in prior biographies, and offers some new interpretations, it becomes clear as the book progresses that we are not going to learn a great deal more about certain critical periods in Larsen’s life. Hutchinson’s extensive research has uncovered some new details about Larsen’s family and childhood in Chicago, although he is never able to provide definitive details about Peter Walker, her mixed-race natural father, and his fate: Did he marry Nella’s mother, Mary? Did he die when Larsen was two as she sometimes claimed? Could he pass? Did he pass, etc., etc.? It is certainly important

to note that Hutchinson probably disproves Davis's theory that Larsen's natural father, Peter Walker, and her stepfather, Peter Larsen, were one and the same.

His attempts to portray Larsen's mother, Mary/Marie Larsen, in a more favorable light are not, however, entirely convincing. He attacks former scholars who "negated or minimized" (3) Larsen's relationship with her mother and claimed that her mother had denied her existence (5). Given the limited documentation of their relationship, there is room for varied interpretations of the scant available evidence. One example: We know that her mother visited Nella once while she was a student at Fisk University. Are we thereby to conclude that she was a solicitous mother concerned about her lonely daughter, as is suggested by Hutchinson? Or are we to consider that she may have come to inform Nella that the family could no longer support her education or to ask her not to return to Chicago with the rest of the family, as Davis speculates? It is clear to all biographers that her younger half sister, Anna Larson Gardner, denied her racially mixed half sister all of her life, presumably leading to Larsen's last deep depression after she traveled to California sometime in 1963 in an unsuccessful attempt to see her half sister. The irony is that, after a lifetime of rejection, as Hutchinson points out, once her sister died leaving an estate of \$35,000, Anna Larson Gardner still denied knowing about Larsen but sought a lawyer to establish her relationship.

Hutchinson is the first scholar to verify the possible cause for Larsen's expulsion from Fisk University. He does not provide absolute proof, but he points to faculty complaints leading to new rules occasioned by a few students who "have dressed in a manner contrary to the wishes of several of the faculty" (62-63), and asserts that the complaint "has the marks of Nella Larsen all over it" (63). Then he explains that the faculty reaffirmed the dress code on June 10 and voted on June 13 to expel eleven students, one of whom was Miss Larsen (63).

Another of Hutchinson's many contributions to the biography of Nella Larsen is his correction of the doubts about Larsen's visits to her relatives in Denmark. He uncovers details of her travel to and from Copenhagen, Denmark, during two trips between 1908 and 1912. However, his discussion of the events of these years is based largely on the very brief comments (usually one sentence) that Larsen made about her time in Denmark and suppositions he draws from her novel *Quicksand* (1928).

More intensive information emerges about Larsen's life after she came to New York in 1912 to study nursing. Applications and correspondences provide explicit documentation of the one-year interlude when she worked at Tuskegee (1915-16). However, Hutchinson provides not much more than the vital statistics of her courtship and marriage to research physicist Dr. Elmer S. Imes shortly after her return to New York. This 1919 marriage provided her entree into Harlem society, and over the ensuing years Larsen, who had given up nursing to work in the New York Public Library and attend library school, was meeting and interacting with prominent Harlemites, many of whom were leading players in the Harlem Renaissance, including James Weldon Johnson, W. E. B. Du Bois, Jean Toomer, Walter White, Dorothy Peterson, Eric Walrond, Langston Hughes, and Carl Van Vechten. It was not long before she had determined, with the encouragement of some of her friends, especially White and Van Vechten, to write a novel. With the support of her established literary friends, her two novels, *Quicksand* and *Passing* (1929), found easy placement with Alfred A. Knopf.

Larsen's life among the Harlem literati, unlike other periods in this biography, is presented in great detail, thanks largely to the papers of Charles S. Johnson, Langston

Hughes, Walter White, Dorothy Peterson, James Weldon Johnson, and particularly Carl Van Vechten, who became one of her closest friends and confidants. In this study as elsewhere, it is clear that Van Vechten's excitement about numerous black writers in Harlem during the period, his encouragement and support of their careers, his frequent partying with them, his enthusiastic reading of their works, his support in sponsoring and publishing them, and his memorable and aesthetic photographs of them contributed mightily to the period that we know as the Harlem Renaissance. But even more important to Hutchinson's account, as well as to the studies of numerous other Renaissance writers, were Van Vechten's meticulous recording of events in his daybooks, his extensive communications with the writers, his meticulous saving of all of that communication, and his placing those detailed records in archival collections now available to scholars. He was also instrumental in encouraging many of those writers (but not Larsen, alas!) to preserve and place in archives their own manuscripts and papers.

That these materials are crucial in reconstructing the life of Larsen is clear, but there are times when Hutchinson's incessant use of them becomes tedious, as he seems to provide in detail every party, luncheon, tea, book event, lecture, and nightclub excursion that Larsen attended with Van Vechten, with a complete listing of every other person who was a part of the event. He details (it appears), every meal they ever shared, every letter they exchanged. But even here the mysteries still remain—what is really going on in her marriage? How are we to deal with the obvious flirtations and provocative statements in her letters to the bisexual Van Vechten (whose extramarital affairs were reportedly only with men), her fear that her husband had read their communication with each other, their expressions of affection for each other, his frequent gifts and flowers to her, the fact that they both frequently went out together without their spouses, this note she wrote in his autograph book?

Here's hoping you live as long as you want to
And want to as long as you live;
If I'm asleep and you want to, wake me.
If I'm awake and don't want to, make me.

—Nella Larsen Imes (337)

Finally, the details and most of the sources that Hutchinson presents in this section of the biography are precisely those used by previous biographers, and in numerous instances one feels he/she is reading a twice-told tale.

Larsen's success as a writer and a socialite was threatened by disastrous events in her professional and private life in 1930: the accusation that in her short story "Sanctuary" (1930) she had plagiarized a short story by Sheila Kaye-Smith, and her husband's move to take a position at Fisk University, where he began an affair with a white colleague. These tragic events were somewhat ameliorated when Larsen learned that same year that she had won a Guggenheim Fellowship. Hutchinson exhaustively details her travels, socializing, reading, and writing in Europe, mainly in Spain and France, which offered her a brief respite from her problems at home. She sailed to the United States in 1932, briefly moved to Nashville with her husband, divorced him in 1933, and returned to Harlem.

Larsen's return to Harlem in 1933 was not a return to the life that she had formerly known. Apparently beset with drug and/or alcohol problems, she returned to nursing and

withdrew from writing and her association with the Harlem literati, not even corresponding with Van Vechten, her close friend and confidant. Hutchinson notes that her last written words to him were a six-word birthday telegram on June 17, 1937 (449). And thus ends one of the major sources for reconstructing the life of Nella Larsen, although her friends occasionally discuss her in their correspondence with each other. Hutchinson can only speculate about what motivated this withdrawal and relies largely in his account of this period on Davis's interviews with Carolyn Lane and Alice Carper, Larsen's fellow nurses and close friends during these years.

Like earlier biographers, he is able to provide details of Dr. Imes's illness and death, thanks again to the correspondences of Imes, Peterson, and Van Vechten. Using the same resources, he provides pretty much the same details that Davis provides about Imes's hospitalization in New York, the gifts and visits of the Van Vechtens, and Imes's expressed desire not to see Larsen. Hutchinson does not, however, include Imes's desperate correspondence with Fisk University regarding his salary, which Davis cites from the Thomas Elsa Jones papers.

Reading Hutchinson's attack on prior biographers in his introduction, the reader might have been led to expect finally to enjoy in *In Search of Nella Larsen* a full and satisfying biography. However, one recognizes that for several large sections of Larsen's life, Hutchinson, like prior biographers, is left to speculate about his subject's life through her fiction, a device that he himself recognizes is "an inherently hazardous enterprise" (68). Nonetheless, there is no doubt that there is much that is autobiographical in *Quick-sand* and *Passing*, and he offers provocative readings of these and her short stories. Much of his discussion of her life, except for the Harlem years, is full of speculation, which in some cases is no more compelling than the theories of earlier biographers. Ultimately, he faces the same problems as his predecessors in dealing with this enigmatic figure. He warns at the beginning that this book "is different from most biographies. It is the kind of biography one writes about a person who has been 'invisible'" (1). While certain periods of Larsen's life continue to be invisible even after reading this lengthy 611-page biography, it is certainly fascinating and rewarding to read Hutchinson's intensive study and to follow his exhaustive search for the details of his subject's life. Where there is little information, Hutchinson is imaginative and creative in his assessment and provides interesting details, even when those details are as much conjecture as fact. At times when there is no real information about his subject, he provides excessive details of people and places among whom she moved, arguing that "the individual ego is not always as central as the forces acting upon it. One can only, at times, reconstruct the settings in which the subject lived and summon her from their midst" (13).

Nella Larsen died alone, presumably reading in her bed, in March 1964. Her body was discovered on March 30. The details of her death, like much of her life, remain unknown. She was buried in an unmarked grave. Hutchinson couldn't find that either, though he tried. Even after this exhaustive study, we, like Hutchinson, remain in search of Nella Larsen.

This biography would have been even more helpful to scholars had Hutchinson included a chronology of Larsen's life and works for quick reference and a bibliography of primary and secondary materials.

Daryl Cumber Dance
University of Richmond