

autant que les hommes, peu de femmes prennent les décisions politiques. Bien que peu d'hommes sont en charge des décisions politiques, ces derniers, en général, s'arrangent pour s'accaparer le progrès: on consacre plus d'argent dans les autoroutes électroniques que dans les garderies, l'énorme budget de la Défense Nationale ne concerne pas non plus les femmes.

D'après André Gorz, la libération socio-économique des femmes pourrait être envisagée de deux façons. Premièrement, par la rétribution du travail ménager qui perpétuerait le modèle capitaliste, ou deuxièmement, étant donné que l'informatisation amènera une réduction du temps de travail salarié de 30 pour cent d'ici l'an 2000, un nouveau modèle plus communautaire, basé sur les échanges de services pourrait être envisagé. Cette option est critiquée par le mouvement féministe car il maintient et accentue la division sexuée du travail. En effet, il est possible que les femmes ne se contentent que d'un minimum salarial garanti et prennent en charge les autres services non marchands, « gratuits » (services aux personnes âgées, enfants...), alors que les hommes s'occuperaient de la sphère marchande seule génératrice de pouvoir. Cette idée novatrice ne pourrait, dans mon opinion, se réaliser que si l'on réduit à part égale le travail salarié des hommes et femmes et si l'on encourage les hommes à contribuer aux tâches communautaires.

**NELLA LARSEN
NOVELIST OF THE
HARLEM RENAISSANCE:
A WOMAN'S LIFE
UNVEILED**

Thadious M. Davis. Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana UP, 1994.

by Leslie Sanders

The flowering of African American artistic creativity between the end of

World War I and the beginning of the Great Depression of the 1930s, the Harlem Renaissance, marked the entry of African American writers into the discourse of modernity and brought them into the literary and artistic consciousness of white America. The Renaissance is still more generally known by its panoply of male writers, among whom Langston Hughes and Claude McKay are the best known to an international audience; the African American women writers, until recently, received little attention from male literary historians and critics. Yet women both contributed to and fostered the Harlem Renaissance; Nella Larsen was one of only two women—the other, Jessie Fauset—who produced novels during that period. In fact, Larsen's two novels, *Quicksand* (1928), and *Passing* (1929), are startlingly contemporaneous in their rich dissection of race, gender and class intersections in the female invention of the self. Moreover, in any reading of the history of African American women's fiction, they mark that tradition's entry into modernism.

Until Thadious Davis completed her work, however, few would have thought a biography of Larsen possible. Despite the warm contemporary reception of her two novels, Larsen fell out of the public view by the mid-1930s, and little was known of her life. Her novels were reprinted in 1971, but scholars found the particulars of her life elusive. Her origins were unknown, and she was widely believed to have chosen to pass into the white world some time in the 1930s. Davis's scrupulous research has uncovered most, but by no means all, of her life's details; her biography of Larsen is a masterpiece of reconstruction.

For only about twenty-five years of Larsen's life was Davis able to rely on a variety of informants and a voluminous correspondence; of Larsen's first two decades, and of the thirty years following her "disappearance," she left little trace. Davis's method of reconstruction is one of her stunning achievements. *Nella Larsen* is a rich

and detailed social history of the world Larsen inhabited; Larsen literally emerges from the setting which Davis so carefully constructs for her. For example, in 1912, Larsen entered New York's Lincoln Hospital and Home Training School for Nurses, and Davis's account situates her within the early years of the profession; she documents its importance for women and the limitation it set for African American women who joined its newly professionalised ranks. Larsen's dissatisfaction with her first profession, then, arose not only from her own particular ambitions but also from the profession's refusal to give scope to a woman of her administrative abilities.

Details of Larsen's birth and childhood still remain elusive, but their outlines emerge from Davis's careful scrutiny of Chicago census information, her identification of Larsen's birth certificate (born Nellie Walker, April 13, 1891), and from school records. Larsen's mother was white, and Davis argues convincingly that Larsen's working-class father was a light-skinned Virgin Islander, who began passing as white at some point in Nella's (as she later named herself) childhood. Their first dark-skinned offspring became an embarrassment, and so, at the age of 16, Nella was sent to Fisk University, a private black institution, to complete high school. Severed from her family, much like Helga Crane, the heroine of her first novel, *Quicksand*, Larsen was left to find her way in the world of black America.

In 1919, Larsen married Elmer Imes, a physicist from one of African America's leading families. This marriage into the black middle class, gave her the first real home she had known, and *entré* into the vibrant intellectual and artistic world that constituted the Harlem Renaissance. She numbered among her close friends such notables as Dorothy Peterson and her brother, Sidney, Walter and Gladys White, James Weldon and Grace Nail Johnson, and the white novelist Carl Van Vechten, whose manifold contacts with the black community, as

well as white intellectual and artistic New Yorkers, provided a locus of interchange and opportunity for many, Larsen among them.

Within this world, Larsen created a new persona for herself. Claiming white Danish ancestry, and, on occasion, childhood years and university study in Denmark (none of which Davis could confirm), Larsen's various accounts of her ancestry provided her unique status within the community into which her husband was born. Her voracious reading, as well as her desire for a genteel profession, led her to turn from nursing to library work (in 1922 she gained certification from the New York Public Library School). By the mid 1920s, like others in her circle, she responded to the demand for African American creative production, and set out to fashion herself as a writer.

The Larsen who emerges from Davis's pages engages in constant self-creation. Her emotional marginality and spiritual malaise remain private; her public persona, even in letters to friends, comprises a sharp intelligence, studied sophistication and driving ambition. Yet clearly she never acquired emotional security or peace of soul that her art demanded of her. Her vision, in many respects, far exceeded that of her contemporaries, but her letters reveal little articulation of the immense complexity of issues that her fiction addresses.

The world Larsen had constructed for herself began to dissolve toward the end of the 1920s. In 1928, she discovered her husband was having an affair, which continued during the year she spent in Europe on a Guggenheim Fellowship. Upon her return she joined Imes at Fisk University, where he was then teaching, but the marriage was beyond redemption, and Larsen deteriorated under the strain. Aside from a short story for which she was charged with plagiarism (and later exonerated), none of her writing subsequent to *Passing* was ever completed, and by all accounts it was far inferior to her earlier work. Although she returned to New York after her divorce, the circle she

depended on had scattered, and she had few friends. In 1937, she dramatically severed ties with most of them by creating the fiction of a journey. However, she remained in New York, working at Gouverneur Hospital until her death in 1964.

The most remarkable aspect of Davis's stunning achievement is her profound, though never explicitly stated, reading of Larsen's project of self-creation as signifying the difficult emergence of African American women into modernity. Davis's deeply feminist reading of social history, her sympathetic understanding of one woman's determination to make herself, and her complex interpretation of the meaning of that endeavour, constitute a exemplary—and beautifully written—exercise in feminist biography. *Nella Larsen: Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance: A Woman's Life Unveiled* illuminates not only the life and work of an African American novelist of great importance, but also the world through which she made her way in such anguish.

THE VIENNA TRIBUNAL: WOMEN'S RIGHTS ARE HUMAN RIGHTS

Gerry Rogers. Augusta Productions and the National Film Board of Canada (video, 1994, 48 minutes, 13 seconds).

by *Barbara Evans*

Driven by the success of confessional television and by the new small-format video technologies which allow personal narratives to be told with an immediacy—and bargain-basement cheapness—never before possible, mainstream broadcasters are suddenly hungry for “disclosure” material: pieces in which subjects disclose, on camera, experiences of rape, incest, or homosexual encounters, for exam-

ple, experiences offered up for consumption/entertainment to an audience hungry for material still deemed to be “shocking”. It is doubtful whether what these broadcasters have in mind, however, are the very public disclosures of torture and violence contained in *The Vienna Tribunal*. For these disclosures are not presented for vicarious entertainment or diversion. Rather they are intended to provide analysis of the global social and political context in which they exist and to provoke political awareness and action.

The Vienna Tribunal covers events at the United Nations World Conference on Human Rights, held in June 1993, when representatives of governments from around the world gathered in Vienna to reassess the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations in 1948. At the same time, thousands of human rights activists converged on the conference to put pressure on governments to bring issues of women's rights onto the international agenda. As one of the spokeswomen in the video, a tribunal judge from Costa Rica, says, their objective was to “continue fighting until violence against women is considered a violation of fundamental human rights.” Her words are echoed by women representatives from around the world as they relate deeply personal experiences of persecution and violence in this often harrowing yet ultimately inspiring video production. Relegated to the lower floor of the conference hall, while the “official” UN conference convened upstairs, women prepared their stark, disturbing testimonies of violation and abuse.

The Vienna Tribunal shows women from country after country relating stories drawn both from their own and other women's experience. Their narratives dissolve into one another, creating a global portrait of abuse suffered under their various religions, military regimes and governments. In a striking image, a line of national flags fades into a line of women's T-shirts, blowing in the breeze, im-