

“Capitalizing on White crazes for Things Black”: The Racial and Gender Politics of the New Negro Movement

Borni Lafi

University of Kairouan, Tunisia

Abstract: African-Americans are often perceived as a homogeneous or cohesive body within the social and racial spectrum in the United States. They are often lampooned together when issues of race, segregation, civil rights, and affirmative action are mentioned as if Negroes or blacks were affected by the above issues in the same manner or degree. This paper argues that African-Americans have always been divided and fragmented. Their cultural history has been marred by disputes caused by intra as well as inter-racial differences. Ideological, class, and attitude factors seem to take African-American divisions beyond the usual din of black-white antagonism. The markers of Negro or black racial identity and its attendant factors are every conceivable hue- and matters of ideology and attitude as much as pigmentation. The Harlem Renaissance and its “New Negro” project divided more than it united the black literati in the 1920s and 1930s. It can be seen as the seedbed for later inter-racial contestations in Negro or black literature and culture in general.

Keywords: Overcivilization, Collective/individual identity, Eternal child/feminine, Feminization, Fragmentation, Harlem Renaissance, Inter/Intra-racial, Gender, Manliness, Masculinity, Neurasthenia, The New Negro.

The Harlem Renaissance and its New Negro project are landmarks in the racial and cultural history of blacks in the United States of America. Both are commendable today for trying to construct a collective and homogenous new Negro identity through doing away with the racial stereotypes in America from slavery to Post-Civil War and Post-Reconstruction times. However, closer looks at this movement and at its racial and cultural claims reveal serious divisions and disputes among its representative leaders and voices. These divisions and disputes survived well beyond the beginning of the 1930s- a beginning that marked the end of white interests in things black and the demise of the Harlem Renaissance itself. The present paper purports to show, as it revisits the Harlem Renaissance and its New Negro project, that blacks in the United States were neither homogeneous nor cohesive. Their attempts to forge a collective new identity fell prey to competing cultural projects which tended to cancel each other and impacted, as a consequence, later black intra-racial relations. Ideology, class, gender, and attitude factors seemed to take Negro inner disputes beyond the usual clamor of white-black antagonism in the United States. To develop these issues, two essential claims will be made: first, the Harlem Renaissance and its New Negro project shifted the parameters of black racial discourse- characteristic of the era that followed emancipation and Reconstruction- from a concern with disfranchisement, citizenship, and economic and physical rights to a repudiation of the past in order to reconceptualize black identity in new terms. What Negro artists and leaders wanted during the heydays of the Harlem Renaissance was a redefinition of collective black identity around an agency of self-assertion. The advent of the New Negro sought to repudiate the old racial stereotypes in favor of the energetic, race conscious, and empowered black. Second, the Harlem Renaissance and the advent of the New Negro ensued from the social and cultural changes that took place in the United States by the beginning of the twentieth century. These changes were marked by shifts from Victorian genteel values to modern new concerns with primitive manliness and masculinity. They led many white American males, especially among the middle and upper-classes, to distance

themselves from white civilization and to link primitive manliness and masculinity to the newly emancipated Negro. The re-articulation of a collective new black identity appeared problematic because it did not really do away with white racial stereotypes. It simply turned blacks against each other and deflected their attention from inter-racial issues. More tellingly, since the agency of black self-assertion was influenced by white new interests in primitive manliness and masculinity the advent of the New Negro minimized black women when it did not exclude them altogether.

To deal with the above two claims, the present paper falls into three main parts. The first part contextualizes the Harlem Renaissance and its New Negro project within the social and cultural changes that took place in the United States by the turn of the nineteenth century and up to the end of World War I. Here, focus will be put on how the shifts from Victorian genteel values to modern new concerns with primitive manliness and masculinity led the proponents of the New Negro to distance themselves from the Post-Civil War's discourse of emancipation –which addressed racial uplift, freedom, economic rights, end of violence, and desegregation- to a 'radical' discourse of black cultural self-expression relayed in masculine terms. In this respect, Gail Bederman (1996) and Michael S. Kimmel (2005) will be called upon to understand the shifts from Victorian genteel values to modern new concerns with primitive manliness and masculinity. The second part of this paper looks at the debate that opposed Booker T. Washington to W. E. Du Bois as they wrangled for "token" or "legitimate leadership" status among blacks during the Post-Reconstruction era. Both repudiated each other because of their comparable positions, respectively within the older and the younger black generations in the years leading to the Harlem Renaissance and its New Negro project. Washington and Du Bois stood for two different types of Negroes and their rivalry had lasting effects on the cultural and racial history of blacks in the United States. The third and last part of this paper looks at the place of women in the Harlem Renaissance and argues in accordance with Hazel V. Carby (1998) that the marginalization or exclusion of black women was essentially due to the masculinized nature of the New Negro project. Zora Neale Hurston's contested role in the Harlem Renaissance's will be invoked as a useful illustration.

By the end of World War I, Negro migration from the South of the United States continued to swell black population in Northern cities like Chicago, Detroit, and New York. Good paying jobs lured thousands and thousands of blacks from the rural agricultural South to the urban industrial North. The return of black veterans from Europe, the advent of Negro militant and civic groups, and the surge of northern white rebellion against the stifling Victorian genteel values of mainstream American culture and society led to the emergence of Harlem as the capital of Negro art and culture during the 1920s. Harlem offered blacks in the course of a decade what the South of the United States failed offer since the abolition of slavery: an intellectual and artistic community with huge opportunities for publishing and acquiring and audience.

Additionally, in New York and more precisely in Harlem, whites were not much concerned with the racist and stereotypical views popularized in the South and which reduced blacks to savages not much removed from cannibalism. Instead, some white artists like Ridgeley Torrence and Eugene O'Neill, for instance, found in Harlem blacks and in their folk culture and art a vitality that was fast eroding in white American culture. It seemed to Torrence and to O'Neill that Negro vitality was a natural consequence of slavery because slavery denied the black man the possibility to evolve and to benefit from the progress that humanity achieved in the course of its history. In a sense, slavery shielded the American Negro from the spoiling effects of civilization. Thus, where less or no civilization at all kept the Negro full of vitality and energy, too much of it exhausted the white man's vigor and undermined his privileged position as the apex of humanity and the greatest achievement of its progress.

The exhaustion of the white man's vitality was a lively topic in the years that followed the Civil War and during the Reconstruction era. This topic was caused by what Kimmel called the collapse of Victorian patriarchal values linked to ownership of the land and to a predominately rural way of life. Indeed, the disintegration of the plantation system in the South, the emancipation of millions of black slaves, and the changing of market conditions in the industrial North pushed the white man in most regions of the United States- the southern region being an exception due to its defeat in the Civil War- to forgo his genteel Victorian values and embrace a new ethos which rested on high incomes, rapid urbanization, and on more leisure and less hard work. The more money the white man made the more he succumbed to consumerism, pleasure and giddiness. His self-reliance, resoluteness, courage, and honesty- traits usually linked to Victorian genteel manhood- were displaced by what Kimmel called the concept of "marked place manhood." By marked place manhood Kimmel referred to one's need to prove one's manhood in the sphere of economic competition and production.

Yet, in the context of the above changes, it became difficult for the white man to prove his manhood because of internal as well as external challenges. At the level of internal challenges, the shift from Victorian genteel manhood to market place manhood compelled white males, especially those belonging to the middle and upper-classes, to have office jobs either as businessmen or professionals working side by side with women. The shift from Victorian genteel manhood to market place manhood was accompanied, thus, with fears and anxieties over one's manliness and masculinity. Middle and upper-classes white males felt insecure and threatened by the presence of women in the market place. Their fears and anxieties gained momentum as women demanded more equality and more rights including the right to vote in local and national politics.

These demands undermined the structure of the traditional white family- a structure that was based on clearly defined roles and allotted spheres of existence where males ruled and females acquiesced. Also, it represented a frontal assault on the entrenched patriarchal views as to who should or should not assume power and authority in the domestic sphere. As for the external challenges to white manhood, they were linked to the emancipated slaves and more specifically to the flux of immigrants and foreign workers who competed with white men in the job market as well as in the arena of trade unions and other civic organizations. By the time most immigrants and foreign workers became American citizens; their competition heightened the white men's concerns about their position within the American social spectrum and about their aptitude to be in charge of the future of the nation.

The external challenges to white manhood from immigrants and foreign workers acquired cultural and racial significances in the years leading to the Harlem Renaissance and to the advent of its New Negro project. Indeed, in 1916, almost one year before the end of World War I, Madison Grant published *The Passing of the Grand Race*; a book where he argued that the white race was fading away because it was being submerged by what he called 'the adolescent races'. Grant's arguments drew attention to the near collapse of the long held views in Western tradition and thought and which consisted in defining "the white race as civilized and evolved" whereas it considered "the non-white or colored ethnicities at best as adolescent races which were either backward in the progress of civilization or incapable of assimilation to white civilization altogether." (Pochmara 2011. p. 21). According to Grant, the demise of the grand race was caused by nervousness or Neurasthenia. Though it was first diagnosed in 1856 in the United States, Neurasthenia became a hot topic starting with the 1880s thanks to the neuroscientist George M. Beard and to the educationist G. Stanley Hall. Beard identified Neurasthenia as an evolutionary disease that drained both men and women of their energy and vitality. He related it to too much brain work and to less or no physical efforts at all.

Neurasthenics or those diagnosed with Neurasthenia were basically the overcivilized and the most advanced people on earth. It affected men and women equally. According to Bederman, Beard believed that women became neurasthenics because civilization exposed them to more demanding mental activities, which drained their capacity to be healthy mothers. Similarly, civilization was responsible for men's modern nervousness and weakened or enfeebled bodies. The increased pace of technological advancement in modern civilization were:

"The chief and primary cause of [neurasthenia] and very rapid increase of modern nervousness.... Civilization is the one most constant factor without which there can be no nervousness, and under which in its modern form nervousness in its many varieties must arise inevitably." (Quoted in Bederman. 1995. p. 86).

Yet, although Neurasthenia afflicted both sexes, those who suffered most were men since being drained of energy and vitality amounted to their being deprived of manliness and masculinity.

It is interesting to note at this level that in the period that stretched from 1856 to 1890, that is from the moment Neurasthenia was diagnosed to the beginning of the 2nd Reconstruction, manliness and masculinity were interchangeable and they referred basically to the same thing: to what was admirable in man and pertaining to male power as opposed to feminine delicacy and sensibility. Gradually, however, a distinction between "manliness" and "masculinity" started to be made as the former pointed to possessing the proper characteristics of a man- independence in spirit or bearing, strength, courage, open mindedness- and the latter referred to the distinguishing characteristics of the male sex among human beings. The distinction between manliness and masculinity did nothing much to help late nineteenth century white males put an end to the erosion of their power and authority in American society. More tellingly, it induced many observers to blame civilization for the enfeeblement of the white race and to work towards remaking a white manhood that was powerful, energetic, and vigorous.

Following close on Beard's heels, Hall deplored the fact that white American males were well in the process of becoming weak and decadent. But unlike Beard, he saddled himself with the task of solving neurasthenia in order to remake white manhood strong enough to resist the emasculating effects of overcivilization. Hall's solution unfolded as follows:

.... Neurasthenia had posed a paradox: only white men could create a higher civilization; yet higher civilization destroyed white manhood by draining their limited nervous force.... The neurasthenic paradox rested on a linked set of dualistic opposites. Weakness, effeminacy, and civilization had been pitted against strength, male sexuality, and primitiveness. These dualisms were always constructed as opposites, continually at war with one another. Hall solved the paradox by reconciling these dualisms using recapitulation theory. He moved beyond these oppositions by redefining them all as related parts of one development process- evolution of human growth. While a man might be civilized as an adult, Hall insisted, as a *boy* he had been primitive. Boys, he insisted, had access to all the primitive strength lacking to civilized men. By elaborating on this insight, Hall developed an intricate, influential pedagogy based upon the premise that boys could avoid neurasthenic breakdown and become powerful civilized men by taking full advantage of their boyhood access to the primitive. Recapitulation theory, as a means to a primitive virility, became the centerpiece of Hall's pedagogy. (Bederman. 1995. p. 91-92).

The remaking of white manhood meant, when one bears Hall's primitive virility in mind, being powerful and strong since both power and strength shielded the white race from neurasthenia or overcivilization. And to prevent the decline or "the passing of the grand race", what white America needed was teaching its children to be savages and primitives for as long as possible:

Children's primitivism was "the light and hope" of the overcivilized world, not only because they were the next generation but because children's reliving on their evolutionary past provided an unfailing guide towards true evolutionary destiny.... "Childhood and youth in their best impulses of development are not perverse but point more infallibly than anything else to the constant pole of human destiny. *Das ewige Kindliche* [eternal child] is now taking its place beside, if not in some respect above, *Das ewige Weibliche* [the eternal feminine] as man's pillar for smoke by day and fire by night to lead him on." Victorian society had revered the eternal feminine as the source of religion and morality. As Hall saw it, however, Victorian feminized religion had grown effeminate and empty... The eternal child- eternal both in the divine truths and in the evolutionary trajectory he embodied__ could become "man's pillar of cloud by day and fire by night" to lead him out of his overcivilized wilderness and into the promised land of racial advancement and powerful manhood. (Bederman. 1995. p. 96).

Hall's investigation of Neurasthenia and his subsequent calls for powerful manhood led many to engage seriously in physical and athletic activities. Muscular sports like bodybuilding, weightlifting, prizefighting, baseball, and college football gained unprecedented popularity and American society. It was nature, however, which provided the white man with his best antidote against overcivilization and its emasculating effects as camping in the woods, fishing, and hunting became favorite pastimes.

The white man's interest in nature- a bio-centric and not homo-centric interest- as an effective way to remake manhood is very interesting to our understanding of how the Negro occupied front stage during the Harlem Renaissance in 1920s America. Indeed, white's infatuation with things black and celebration of the Negro was grounded in the attempt by many whites to reconceptualize manliness and masculinity in terms of the natural and the Negro epitomized nature by excellence. Slavery reduced him to a state of perpetual childhood and his art, music, dancing, folk culture, and traditions were unfettered by white men's civilization. In a sense, whites in New York and in other northern cities like Chicago and Detroit found in southern Negroes relocated in Harlem and elsewhere what was missing in their civilized society: a natural and a spontaneous reality. They found what they were looking for to recreate or reinvent white manliness and masculinity: strength, vigor, and primitive virility.

It was for the above reasons that Harlem became the place to be for many whites. It became a *Nigger Heaven*- to borrow the title of Carl Van Vechten's 1925 novel- brimming with the unspoiled primitive and with the sensuous and exotic. But regardless of its merits or of its flaws, Van Vechten's novel along with other works by white artists touching on black life, like O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* (1920) and *All God's Children Got Wings* (1924), and Paul Green's *In Abrahams Bosom* (1926), provided substantial evidence that the Harlem Renaissance and its New Negro project were, up to a certain extent, a white phenomena which claimed the "naturalness" and "primitivism" of the "adolescent dark skinned races" in order to save the white race from its degeneracy and decline.

Such was the context that ultimately gave America and the rest of the world the Harlem Renaissance and its New Negro project or Movement. This context ushered in the age of rebellion against the Victorian values which restrained man's natural impulses and encouraged Negroes to capitalize on white crazes for things black in order to refigure themselves in new terms: those developed by the concept of the New Negro. The New Negro concept fostered racial pride and an assertive black identity within American society. Nonetheless, the New Negro concept with its assertive black racial identity within American society meant different things to different blacks. Thus, the Harlem Renaissance or New Negro Movement leaders and artists needed to agree first on what they meant by the New Negro: was he the displaced rural southern folk black? Or was he the urbanized and somewhat educated colored man or woman who evolved for generations in northern cities and was shielded, up to a certain degree, from racism and segregation? Also, the Harlem Renaissance or New Negro Movement leaders and artists had to agree on a workable aesthetic to disseminate their idea of Negro newness. The result was a lively debate which opposed an older generation of blacks presided by W. E. Du Bois to a younger one which included Alain Locke, Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Sterling Brown, Zora Neale Hurston, Countee Cullen, and many more. Age was certainly a determinant in the debate that opposed Du Bois to the young Negroes of the Harlem Renaissance. Other factors like background, regional belonging, ideology, gender and class differences caused huge intra-racial rifts among the key players of the New Negro movement.

Initially, Du Bois and his younger opponents seemed to agree on the fact that the New Negro was the post Civil War Negro. He was the Negro born after slavery and who deserved immediate full-citizenship, immediate access to freedom of speech, to voting rights, and who demanded the end of segregation as well as the respect of his basic human dignity. Here, one sense the influence of Du Bois- an influence made during his participation in the 1910 Niagara Falls meeting when the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (N.A.A.C.P) adopted its platform calling among other things for the full implementations of the 14th and 15th amendments of the American Constitution. Besides being born after slavery, the New Negro was also any dark skinned individual self who was either a child or a grandchild of a former slave. For the younger Negroes of the Harlem Renaissance, like Hughes and other black poets and artists, the New Negro needed to be immersed in his southern black folk culture and traditions. After all Harlem became the hub or "Mecca of Negro America"- so went the argument of Locke, Toomer, Hughes, and their acolytes- thanks mainly to the rural folk masses who migrated from the South of the United States carrying with them a cultural and racial luggage heavily shaped by slavery. Thus, the New Negro was expected to bear in mind his past and his heritage in order to produce a literature capable, first, of combating racism and of expressing, second, Negro identity within American society.

While Locke and his younger colleagues claimed the masses of black migrants and their folk culture and traditions, Du Bois seemed to distance himself from those very masses and from what he often called their "lower dark associations and culture." His call for New Negro artists to stress beauty and propaganda was probably dictated by the conviction that the masses of black migrants did not correspond to what he considered beautiful and commendable in Negro life. As chief editor of *The Crisis*, Du Bois outlined what he meant by beauty and the functions that it fulfilled:

We shall stress beauty- all beauty, but especially the beauty of Negro life and character; its drawing and painting and the new birth of its literature. This growth which [*The Crisis*] long since predicted is sprouting and coming to flower. We shall encourage it in every way... keeping the while a high standard of merit and never stooping to cheap flattery and misspent kindness. (*The Crisis*. May 1925).

Du Bois' rejection of "cheap flattery" and "misspent kindness" alluded to those among his opponents who continued to cater for white tastes and perpetuate racial stereotypes and prejudices. He wanted New Negro artists to deal with decent black people grappling with real problems in real life situations. Beauty did not necessarily mean, Du Bois maintained, the portrayal of idealist or unreal Negro characters. Rather, it meant portraying praise-worthy hardworking black men and women. Due to his background as a social scientist and a political leader, Du Bois defended true honest art because it functioned as a weapon to wipe America clean from its racial stereotypes and prejudices. And since he was the first black man with a Harvard and University of Berlin education, he exhibited an intellectual aloofness that set him apart from Negroes whose age, social standing, and prestige among blacks and whites alike approximated or equaled his own.

A huge rift drove, as a consequence, Du Bois and Booker T. Washington apart and cast them as irreconcilable intra-racial foes. Both of them were Negro elite members and both played significant roles in the years leading to the Harlem Renaissance or the New Negro Movement. On the one hand, Washington belonged to the moneyed Negro class thanks to friendly white philanthropists who provided hard needed cash to set up vocational schools for blacks. Du Bois belonged,

on the other hand, to the black cultural elite and was shielded during his life from the racism to which most members of his race were exposed during and after the abolition of slavery. He was born and raised in Massachusetts and his father was a Civil War soldier in a black unit led by white officers. Du Bois was a northern Negro whose experiment of racism was vicarious and never upfront whereas Washington was a former slave and a southern Negro from Alabama whose knowledge of racism was personal and intimate.

The personal trajectories of Du Bois and Washington dictated that they pictured the future of blacks in America differently. Du Bois contemplated a dominant role for the educated black elite or what he called “the talented tenth.” He recommended formal education and the pursuit of foreign languages and fine arts as viable means for young Negroes aspiring to be future race leaders. As for Washington, he argued in favor of occupational training to help the masses of unschooled blacks acquire handy skills in order to succeed in life. His calls for Negroes “to cast [their] buckets where [they] are” underlined his belief in hard work, resilience, and ultimate success. In his autobiographical work *Up from Slavery*, Washington not only preached an ideology of racial uplift in conciliatory terms with white America but also depicted himself as the standard bearer of the huge masses of Negroes or common-run former slaves. His racial uplift project and style of leadership were contested, however, by Du Bois in the essay “On Booker T. Washington and Others,”- an essay included in *The Souls of Black Folk*. Years later, the poet Dudley Randal revisited with gusto the feud between Washington and Du Bois over Negro leadership as follows:

“It seems to me,” said Booker T.,

“It shows a mighty lot of cheek

To study chemistry and Greek

When Mister Charlie needs a hand

To hoe the cotton on his land,

And when Miss Ann looks for a cook,

Why stick your nose inside a book?”

“I don’t agree,” said W. E. B.

“If I should have the drive to seek

Knowledge of chemistry or Greek,

Some men rejoice in skill of hand,

And some in cultivating land,

But there are others who maintain

The right to cultivate the brain.”

“It seems to me,” said Booker T.

“That all you folks have missed the boat

Who shout about the right to vote,

And spend vain days and sleepless nights

In uproar over civil rights.

Just keep your mouth shut, do not grouse,

But work, and save, and buy a house.”

“I don’t agree.” Said W. E. B.

“For what can property avail

If dignity and Justice fail?

Unless you help to make the laws
 They'll steal your house with trumpeted-up clause.
 A rope's as tight, a fire as hot,
 No matter how much cash you've got.
 Speak soft, and try your little plan,
 But for me, I'll be a man."
 "It seems to me," said Booker T._
 "I don't agree."

Said W. E. B. (Chapman Abraham. 1986. pp. 470-71)

Randal's poem accurately sketched the huge gulf that separated Washington and Du Bois regarding the becoming of the Negro in the United States in the years leading to the Harlem Renaissance. Washington valued property and ownership of material things as basic outward signs in the shift from being owned as a slave to being a free man capable of owning property. He linked the manliness and masculinity of the post- Civil War Negro to owning a house, money, and manual skills. Conversely, Du Bois stressed the possession of non material things like brain power, liberal education and knowledge as necessary means for the achievement of Negro manliness and masculinity in American society. The Negro was not doomed, Du Bois maintained, to hoeing cotton and tilling the land or to waiting on "Mister Charlie" and "Miss Ann". Du Bois New Negro was not the rural southern Negro defended and claimed by Washington. He was the exceptional, educated, college bred Negro whose mission was to civilize, elevate, and guide the unfortunate black masses. Moreover, Du Bois was aware, perhaps more aware than his opponent Washington, that the post-Civil War social reality in the South of the United States prevented Negroes from acquiring property and from leading a fulfilling rural life. Slavery was certainly over but it was replaced by a system of production and exchange- the sharecropping system- that was archaic, pre-modern, and which hardly generated cash for employer and employee alike. Washington's redefinition of Negro masculinity and manliness seemed, if one followed Du Bois' argument, nothing more than mimicry of Victorian genteel white respectability.

Though Du Bois often claimed that the American identity of the black masses was organically tied to the South of the United States, he repudiated, as pointed out earlier, their lower dark associations and culture. Many New York blacks in 1920s Harlem- especially among those whose presence in the city was decades old and who belonged to the "old Knickerbockers stamp" or "old black aristocracy"- shared Du Bois' irritation with lower-class Negro associations and culture. They looked down on the masses of migrant southern Negroes, repudiated their ways as they considered themselves "the best people" and "the aristocratic dark circles" that belonged to "the Negro society of the son of New York":

[They] railed against the lower-class southern Negro with the virulence of good white racists ... To many New York Negroes, the migrants were 'riff-raff,' 'illiterate,' 'thoughtless,' [and] 'common.' It was the southern, they said, who created the 'epidemic of negrophobia,' the recent spread of antipathy in the North.' They listened too readily to 'tramp preachers,' and were dirty__ they were "the lower element to our race... the class who own a lot of dirty rags and dogs and crowds of children." (Osofsky. 1963. p. 43)

Other intra-racial stereotypes circulated among New York Negroes who looked for every possible way to denigrate migrant southern blacks. They complained, moreover, that whites lampooned all Negroes together and failed to realize that there were different shades of black as well as different types of Negroes. Black intra-racial stereotypes and prejudices coupled with Du Bois' elitism and with whites' pursuit of the primitive in Negro life and culture undermined the Harlem Renaissance and its new Negro Project. Racial pride, the pillar of the New Negro concept, hardly materialized as a majority of blacks internalized the stereotypes that whites affixed to their race and longed to define themselves using white standards and values. As a reaction, younger members of the Harlem Renaissance felt alienated and insisted following the manner of Hughes, for instance, upon their right to express their individual dark-skinned selves regardless of whether they pleased or offended their black and white audiences.

Artists like Wallace Thurman, Claude McKay, and Samuel Schuyler did address black intra-racial stereotypes and prejudices in their respective novels *The Blacker the Berry* (1929), *Home to Harlem* (1928), and *Black No More* (1931). Thurman's novel, the title of which was taken from the black folk maxim "the blacker the berry the sweeter the juice", depicted the vain efforts of Emma Lou Morgan, a high school dark-skinned black student, to be accepted in the circle of her light-skinned Negro friends. In high school as in the University of South Carolina, Thurman's female protagonist wears her blackness not as a sign of pride but as sign of ugliness, depravity, and dishonor. She secretly wishes to pawn her education and diploma for a magic cream or product that would turn her white. Unable to fit into the light-skinned student population, Emma Lou Morgan leaves for Harlem where she fails to be employed and to be housed. Negro businessmen refuse to hire her because they prefer lighter skinned black female clerks and landlords turn her down because they cannot rent rooms to very dark-skinned women like her. Color prejudice, self-hate, and alienation finally wear down Thurman's Emma Lou Morgan.

The issues raised by Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry*, were basically dealt with in MacKay's *Home to Harlem* where Jake Brown goes to the segregated and cast-built black environment in Harlem after a stint in Europe. Because of its emphasis on certain lurid aspect of black life, MacKay's novel was negatively received by Negro readers and was often compared to Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven*. Du Bois, for one, contested the accuracy of *Home to Harlem* and lashed at saying:

Home to Harlem for the most part nauseates me, and after reading the dirtier parts of its filth I feel distinctly like taking a bath.... It looks as though McKay has set out to cater to that prurient demand of the part of the white folk for a portrayal in Negroes of that licentiousness which conventional civilization holds back from enjoying. (Quoted in Frank N. McGill. 1992. p. 200)

McKay's novel disturbed and amused at the same time. It stressed what Hughes called the ugly and beautiful in Negro life. It stressed, in fact, everything or anything akin to black life's ordinary quirks. Schuyler's novel *Black No More* was a huge success among both white and black readers when it hit the bookstore stands in the early 1930s. It owed its success not to the nauseating "filth" and "dirt" decried by Du Bois but to the fact that it detailed in an ironic way the hidden desires of many blacks for lighter skin colors. *Black No More* described the effects of a scientific discovery that turned blacks into white people and pointed, as a consequence, to the fact that New Negro's racial pride was basically a hollow motto among a large majority of blacks in 1920s America.¹

Black intra-racial prejudices and black internalization of white stereotypes and standards undermined the Harlem Renaissance and its New Negro project. Yet, the movement suffered most from its marginalization of black women despite the fact that Nella Larson, Arna Bontemps, Jessie Fauset and... Zora Neale Hurston were popular figures in 1920s Harlem. Indeed, being bent on redefining the Negro in masculine terms, the Harlem Renaissance and its New Negro project put black women in inferior positions compared to their male counterparts. According to Carby's *Race Men*, Du Bois never thought of black women "as intellectuals and race leaders" and "the community he imaginatively brought into being as the symbolic *talented tenth* was gender specific and constructed in masculine terms only." (Quoted in Pochmara. 2011. p. 35). Hurston's mistreatment by her fellow Harlem male writers validates Carby's eloquent remarks. She was caricatured in Thurman's *Infants of the Spring* as a disgrace to her race. Cast in the ludicrous figure of Sweetie Mae Carr, Hurston appeared incapable of writing books and posed as one who could:

Sweetie Mae was a short story writer, more noted for ribald wit and personal effervescence than for actual literary work. She was a great favorite among those whites who went in for Negro prodigies. Mainly because she lived up to their conception of what a typical Negro should be. It seldom occurred to any of her white patrons that she did this with tongue in cheek. Given a paleface audience, Sweetie Mae would launch forth into a saga of the little-all Mississippi town where she claimed to have been born. Her repertoire of tales was earthy, vulgar and fanny. Her darkies always smiled through tears. [...] Sweetie Mae was a master of Southern dialect, and an able raconteur, but

¹ While Harlem or the New Negro Movement was in Vogue, there existed in the 1920s a business of beauty products that catered for the needs of dark skinned blacks who wanted to straighten their kinky hair or whiten their skin color through bleaching processes. Madame C.J. Walker made a fortune as she marketed her 'Walker System' - a system applied in the hair straightening business. In New York A'lelia Walker, the heiress of J. C. Walker was a regular hostess to prominent Harlem Renaissance and New Negro figures. See Hughes, Langston. *The Big Sea*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1993. pp. 244-47.

she was indifferent to literary creation to transfer to paper that which she told so well. The intricacies of writing bored her, and her written work was for the turgid and unpolished. But Sweetie Mae knew her white folks... "It's like this," she told Raymond. "I have to eat. I also wish to finish my education. Being a Negro writer these days is a racket and I'm going to make the most of it while it lasted. Sure I cut the fool. But I enjoy it, too. [...] Thank God for this Negro literary Renaissance! Long may it flourish!" (Thurman. 1932. pp. 229-30).

Thurman's negative assessment of Hurston established a pattern of black male criticism that reduced her to a mere cipher in the annals of the Harlem Renaissance. Black negative criticism of Hurston was later taken up by Richard Wright when the Great Depression put an end to white infatuation with things black. Wright steadfastly dismissed Hurston as irrelevant because her work, namely her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* cultivated the exotic or stereotypical in black life and lacked vital dramatization and genuine folk portraiture. His dismissal of Hurston spilled over in order to become a dismissal of the Harlem Renaissance and of its New Negro project in general. Thus, in "Blueprint for Negro Writing" he pointed to the servility of black leaders and artists during the 1920s and accused them of behaving like 'French poodles' in the presence of their "white masters:"

Negro writing in the past has been confined to humble novels, poems, and plays, prim and decorous ambassadors who went a-begging to white America. They entered the Court of Public Opinion dressed in the Knee-pants of servility, curtsying to show that the Negro was not inferior, that he was human, and that he had a life comparable to that of other people. For the most part these artistic ambassadors were received as though they were French poodles who do clever tricks. (Addison Gayle, Jr. ed. 1972. p. 315).

"Blue Print for Negro Writing" inaugurated a new phase in black artistic life: the phase of protest literature under the aegis of Wright. Protest literature was marked by a shift from what Wright called pseudo-characters epitomizing white stereotypes of illiterate and primitive blacks to genuine protagonists standing for the struggle of the oppressed among both blacks and whites by those with power and money. Accordingly, Zora Neale Hurston epitomized, the "liaison between inferiority-complexed Negro 'geniuses' and burnt-out white Bohemians with money." Her work belonged, Wright still maintained, to that "foul" and "stillborn tradition" called the Harlem or New Negro movement.

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