

BLACK LITERATURE IN STRUGGLE:

THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE AND THE CRISIS OF BLACK
CULTURAL NATIONALISM

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To my beloved mother, Maryam Salass

INTRODUCTION

A HISTORICAL AND LITERARY APPROACH TO THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

“The time has come now when the Negro artist can be his true self and pander to the stupidities of no one, either white or black.” – Wallace Thurman¹

In 1903, when W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963) published his most influential work *The Souls of Black Folk*, he stood between the end of the era of Reconstruction and the rise of the era of Jim Crow segregation, the Great Migration, and the New Negro Renaissance. He was at the tail end of the breed of race leadership shaped by the slave narrative genre and the writings of Nat Turner and Frederick Douglass. Despite Du Bois’s continued intellectual and editorial influence over black writers, the Harlem Renaissance had challenged his authority. Du Bois argued that black artistic production would prove integral to somehow paving the way for blacks to achieve a politically democratic future and to contribute their shared “gift” of cultural virtue to America. Key terms like “Africa,” “Negro soul,” “racial genius,” all held deep importance in Du Bois’s nationalistic conception of the Negro and his political and cultural program of uplift. However, with the rise of a generation of “New Negroes” – who I am calling the liberal humanist generation – these essentialist terms began to lose their weight as authoritative explanations of the black experience in America. I juxtapose the new language of liberal expressionism against Du Bois’s nationalistic tropes to emphasize the importance of a literary analysis of Du Bois’s works as well as those of the younger generation; these literary

¹ qtd. in Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was In Vogue*, pp. 229

works capture arguably the first liberal shift in the language of talking about blackness in America. The literary expressions of the liberal generation, under my methodology, become interesting as they are situated within this generational history of departure from black cultural nationalism. Therefore, by turning to the literature of these artists, we enrich our understanding of how the liberal humanists used literature to push the essentialist language of black cultural nationalism into crisis and in so doing, moved beyond the essentialist narratives of understanding blackness. They claimed that in moving beyond the deep and mystical language of race, literature could capture a much wider range of contemporary languages that expressed distinctly racial experiences. In other words, these authors sought to capture the vernaculars and languages of a variety of differently situated blacks attempting to explain distinctly racial issues. They experimented with genre and style in order to capture the jazz-subculture vernaculars of working class Harlem. To be clear, liberal humanists, despite claiming that race was only skin deep, were interested in exposing a variety of languages through which people made sense of race. To boil it down, this generation of authors made two new philosophical claims about race (i) that its true meaning was only skin deep, i.e. not found in mystical and essentialist narratives and (ii) that a variety of languages and expressions existed through which black Americans explained distinctly racial issues to themselves differently. I will examine the lives and literature of these liberal writers in order to expose how they formulated these philosophical claims in response to the discourse of black cultural nationalism.

The liberal humanist literary style through which this generation expressed itself, I will argue, was a direct result of their departure from black cultural nationalism and its emphasis on racial depth – i.e. an essentialist national identity. In order to offer a nuanced and comprehensive treatment of this story of generational debate, my literary analysis will endeavor to capture, what I call the liberal literary style developed by these writers. As the role of the artist and his work was increasingly central to the debate between black nationalism and liberalism, the liberal departure meant that a new form of literary expression about race was innovated in this time period. If we look at the genre of *Souls of Black Folk*, for example, it is constructed as an autobiography in which Du Bois makes claims about how his particular experience speaks for all blacks; As Eric J. Sundquist argues, this style of autobiography was shaped by the genre of slave narrative championed by Nat Turner and Frederick Douglass. However, the rise of the New Negro Renaissance brought about modernist experimentation to express the infinite variety of black experiences in America – not just the experience of the author as it spoke for a political image of all blacks; these authors, for example, experimented with satire, afro-futurism, science fiction, roman á clef, and jazz poetry. The thrust of this thesis will be to illustrate how the literary and racial expressionism of the liberal generation arose out of a struggle against Du Bois’s particular brand of black cultural nationalism.

Considering the historical backdrop to the Harlem Renaissance is crucial to understanding the intellectual shift from black cultural nationalism to liberal humanism. As a young generation of black-Americans moved to the urban North

and participated in cabarets during the 1920s, black nationalist race leaders like Du Bois were interested in declaring the potential for racial uplift expressed by this generation; this interest in attaching a prophetic image to the black youth culminated in the discourse of the “New” Negro. To get a generation of race leaders’ discourse of the “New” Negro, I will offer a brief history of the this young generation’s participation in World War I, the outbreak of Jazz, and the rise of Harlem as a cosmopolitan but distinctly black neighborhood. One of the most impactful sources that gave rise to the optimistic discourse of the “New Negro” can be traced to black participation in World War I. As David Levering Lewis points out in his acclaimed history, *When Harlem Was In Vogue*, the black participation in the war helped shape the popular sentiment that the black-American had achieved a new sense of pride and masculinity; the “New Negro” had arrived, and as Du Bois put it, promised a new spirit of uplift and pride. In 1918, black-Americans were drafted to participate in the First World War. To race spokesmen in the United States, particularly Du Bois, black participation in war was now a bargaining chip to negotiate democracy and equality for blacks in America. In addition to opening the ballot booth and offering black-Americans equal opportunity to jobs, some black army officers called for an active governmental plan to somehow end lynching. However, these demands would have to face the brutal reality of America’s ongoing and proud participation in racism. The War Department, for example, announced that black infantries would train and fight separately from the whites. More devastating to the hope of color integration in the war effort was that two weeks after the declaration of war and the announcement to induct African-American

soldiers into the military, one of the most appalling American race riots erupted in East Saint Louis, Illinois. The riot left several hundred black-Americans dead and was largely a reaction to the thousands of black-Americans who had migrated from the South and taken up industrial jobs in the urban North. Many of these southern blacks were recruited by Northern industrial business owners trying to prevent white laborers from unionizing; in George Schuyler's 1931 satire *Black No More* he jests at the stupidity of unorganized white laborers when his protagonist, Max Fisher, a "passing" black man and leader of the KKK schemes a bunch of southern white workers to devote their attention to race scapegoating instead of organized labor.² Ultimately, Schuyler leverages satire to champion a new way of exposing the hypocrisies in American racial thinking. I will devote my attention to this novel in the second chapter but, for now, I simply want to introduce the ways in which this liberal generation used satire as a new genre to expose the brutal reality of black scapegoating as an economic tool against white labor unionization. At any rate, bloody race riots continued between the U.S. entrance into the war in 1917 and the Allied victory in 1918. These riots swept through the rural South as well as urban northern cities, namely Chicago and Washington D.C. In summary, the riots in the North were a racist response to the influx of black-Americans leaving the rural South after its cotton economy began to suffer tremendously from a torrent of natural disasters and ecological changes – e.g. the rise of the boll weevil, an insect that migrated from Central America to infest the cotton fields of the Black Belt.³ With the fall of the Southern cotton economy, the Northern industrial jobs boomed –

² Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was In Vogue*, pp. 9

³ *Ibid*, pp. 21

offering the higher average daily wage of \$3.60 in the urban North, compared to less than 2.50 per day in the rural South; this economic advantage lured Afro-Americans from the South to the Northern steel mills and stockyards.⁴

Despite the migration inspiring racial violence in the North, it also convinced black spokespeople of a newborn attitude of boldness and optimism for the new generation of African-Americans. After the riot in Chicago, the local *Whip* announced that the rioters in fact feared that the New Negro was “breaking out of his shell and beginning to bask in the sunlight of real manhood.”⁵ The black contributions to the war effort, coupled with the labor opportunities in the North led racial leaders like Du Bois to announce the rise of the New Negro who, with a rejuvenated communal energy would “Make way for Democracy! He saved it in France, and by the Great Jehovah he will save it in the United States of America, or know the reason why.”⁶ As the New Negro writers would emerge, they would be speaking within a current of popular race discourses that advanced the political image of a bold and perhaps prophetic generation of young blacks. I am suggesting that this sense of renewal and hope for the young generation was largely a result of their participation in World War I as well as their mass migration to the urban North in search of better wages and opportunities.

As African-Americans immigrated to the urban North, they found refuge in the affordable neighborhood of Harlem. At the beginning of the 20th century, the housing market in Harlem had declined significantly as a result of the 1904

⁴ Ibid, pp. 21

⁵ Ibid, pp. 24

⁶ qtd. in Ibid, pp. 15

depression. This provided a rare breed of wealthy, light-skinned African-American realtors to purchase property in the neighborhood and rent the apartments exclusively to black tenants in a show of their race pride. Meanwhile, the dense German population in Harlem decided to seek better apartments downtown and escape the black influx; nevertheless, the black population comprised only 30% of the neighborhood by 1923. The proportionately black sections of Harlem, however, could be found between 130th to 145th street, between St. Nicholas Ave. and the Harlem River – a substantial chunk of Harlem. The neighborhood was a cosmopolitan landscape mixed with whites, Southern-emigrant black laborers, blue-blood families with income from preaching and catering, cabaret-owning black businessmen, and Negro intellectuals and artists. With the rise of cabarets, hotels, and theatres, the neighborhood began to enrich itself with a nightlife culture defined by dance and jazz music. Harlem and other Northern black neighborhoods provided a space to combine the genres of ragtime, blues, gospel choir and experiment with unconventional instruments like the saxophone, trombone, baritone horns, banjo, and the mandolin. David Levering Lewis credits the eclectic influence of Jim Europe in arranging the success of jazz in the New York City music scene during the 1910s. His 1914 jazz performance in Carnegie Hall, for example, astonished critics who were drawn not only to the originality of his instrumentation but also his dance accompaniment.⁷ As a jazz-addicted culture flourished out of Black Mecca, so did the literature of a young generation of Negro authors who aimed to capture the ways of thinking and vernacular that arose out of this urban culture.

⁷ Ibid, pp. 31-32

A new generation of liberally-minded black intellectuals by the names of Langston Hughes (1902-67), Claude McKay (1889-1948), George Schuyler (1895-1977), Wallace Thurman (1902-1934), Nella Larsen (1891-1964), Rudolph Fisher (1897-1934), Chandler Owen (1889-1967), Asa Philip Randolph (1889-1979), and Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960) would produce literature and art that black philosopher Alain Locke (1885-1954) would celebrate as the mark of the “attainment of a significant and satisfying new phase of Negro development, and with it a spiritual Coming of Age.”⁸ The work of this generation was immediately rejoiced and preached by established race leaders and institutions like Du Bois’s National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Each organization had its own literary and editorial arm to voice itself and its New Negro writers within their respective banner of propaganda. While Marcus Garvey (1887-1940) shaped his populist Black Nationalism around the goal of emigrating blacks to Africa, Du Bois launched his own form of opposition to the considerable influence of the Back-To-Africa movement. Both leaders were involved in a project of building a black “nation” in the sense that they sought to awaken black-Americans to recognize their hidden cultural capital – a supposedly innate spiritual racial gift of virtue that had been burdened and obscured by the disaster of American slavery and racism. Despite their mutual interest in rousing the imagination of a Negro gift of culture and virtue, Garvey’s nationalism asserted that black-Americans could never achieve their innate spiritual recognition as long as they remained in a white and proudly

⁸ Locke, *The New Negro*, pp. 7

racist country. Du Bois, however, wanted Negroes to stay in America. A decade before Garvey's emergence, Du Bois's *Souls of Black Folk* articulated that the ultimate goal for the Negro was to recognize his spiritual endowment and leverage it to improve both the African-American condition as well as American culture as a whole. While white racist American declared America to be an Anglo-Saxon nation, Du Bois famously asked them to consider:

“How came it yours? Here we have brought out three gifts and mingled them with yours: a gift of story and song – soft, stirring melody in an ill-harmonized and unmelodious land... the third, the gift of Spirit... out of the nation's heart we have called all that was best to throttle and subdue all that was worst... Nor has our gift of Spirit been merely passive. Actively we have woven ourselves with the very warp and woof of this nation – we have fought their battles, shared their sorrow, mingled our blood with theirs, and generation after generation have pleaded with a headstrong, careless people to despise not Justice, Mercy, and Truth, lest the nation be smitten with a curse.”⁹

Du Bois wrote during a period in which white America imagined itself to be rightfully mono-racial – i.e. racially and culturally an Anglo-Saxon nation. As Eric J. Sundquist points out in his famous reconstruction of black-American literature, Du Bois exemplified the push for a recognition of the “multiculturalism of the United States, [the idea that] it was several nations within one, long before such a notion became orthodox – if it is now orthodox.”¹⁰ As Sundquist defends, Du Bois represented a Pan-African nationalism accompanied by the political objective of improving the black condition in America. By contrast, Garvey's movement was underscored by the claim that the American nation should remain white, while the imagined African Liberia would realize its spiritual and moral superiority as a

⁹ Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, pp. 214-215

¹⁰ Sundquist, *To Wake The Nations*, pp. 5

mono-racially and mono-culturally Negro nation. Du Bois, however, would fight for a recognition of a multicultural United States.

Du Bois saw the rise of young black middle-class black intellectuals within the scope of his black cultural nationalism – a project that sought to awaken and contribute black moral and cultural gifts to the multiculturalism of America. In his monthly publication for the NAACP, *The Crisis*, Du Bois called this group the “Talented Tenth,” defining them by their elite status as “the Best of this Negro race. [They would] guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races.”¹¹ The phrase “own and other races” largely implies Du Bois’s vision of black cultural contribution to a multicultural America. Meanwhile, his language of the Best and Worst of the race establishes a stark elitist distinction between the educated, who Du Bois saw under a messianistic lens, and the ignorant, who Du Bois imagined were the object of racial uplift. At any rate, Du Bois was quick to claim leadership and mentorship over this young group who he assumed would participate actively in the cause to awaken black and white America to the moral and cultural gifts of all Negroes. To their eventual chagrin, the young generation of New Negro artists was ideologically and financially tied to the influence of Du Bois as well as the National Urban League. Du Bois’s *Crisis* and the Urban League’s academic journal, *Opportunity*, were two of the most active and influential publications for showcasing Harlem’s literary production. Du Bois’s *Crisis* sold 100,000 monthly copies by 1919 and appeared in the cabins, tenements, and slums

¹¹ Du Bois, “The Talented Tenth” (Web Access)

of the black illiterate.¹² Its influential grasp coupled with its capacity to back the “Talented Tenth” drew many young writers like Jamaican poet Claude McKay to the publication. Langston Hughes’ first and perhaps most well-known poem, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” appeared in *The Crisis* in 1921. In addition to offering financial support, Du Bois’s work also established a pervasive ideological influence over the younger writers, at least in their early stages. Du Bois’s *Souls of Black Folk*, McKay recalled, had “shaken” him “like an earthquake.”¹³ However, as the younger generation continued their collaboration with Du Bois, they began to develop what L.P. Jackson calls a sense of indignant resistance to what they believed was a misleadingly nationalistic, censoring, and severely elitist project of presenting black lives in art. They felt that their artistic expression was confined to the project of advancing civilized and cultured images of black elites instead of accurately describing the condition of differently situated black-Americans.

On the one hand, the freedom to present images of black poverty in *The Crisis* and *Opportunity* was restricted by the NAACP and Urban League’s reliance on the philanthropy of supportive but conservative whites. In his narrative history, *The Indignant Generation*, L.P. Jackson reports that many of the white philanthropists that had funded the publications of the NAACP and the Urban League “were reluctant to showcase images of black working-class life, and, except for the fact that they published black writers, they were reluctant participants in the literary experimentation that was becoming the modernist movement in the arts.”¹⁴

¹² Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was In Vogue*,

¹³ qtd. in Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was In Vogue*, pp. 51

¹⁴ Jackson, *The Indignant Generation*, pp. 22

Therefore, philanthropic and financial ties to whites actually compromised the ability of the NAACP's *Crisis* and the Urban League's *Opportunity* to embrace the liberal expressionism of the "more radical, innovative, and intelligent of the next wave of black artists."¹⁵ Nevertheless, we cannot blame the censorship of black liberal art entirely on the conservatism of white philanthropy. Du Bois was largely responsible for ignoring "writers without academic credentials, lacking upper crust pedigrees, or failing to amass credible records of publication."¹⁶ Increasingly during the Harlem Renaissance, young and liberal black artists struggled against Du Bois's elitism. The making of the Harlem Renaissance, at least for Du Bois, was largely shaped by the goal of producing and projecting the exceptionalism and prophetic promise of a credentialed Negro intelligentsia. Philosopher and acclaimed "Dean" of the New Negro Renaissance, Alain Locke, was also the most outspoken theorist on the prophetic promise and exceptionalism of the New Negro writers. However, Du Bois and Locke's elitism was met with severe resistance as illustrated by the public commentary and literature of the young generation. Langston Hughes, for example, declared Du Bois's "Best people" to be "pompous pouter-pigeons" overly impressed by credentials.¹⁷ In *Home to Harlem* and *Nigger Heaven*, Claude McKay and white author Carl Van Vechten respectively construct tragic characters who struggle with their elitist self-conceptions as writers of the New Negro generation. Throughout the first and third chapters of this thesis, I will illustrate the liberal departure from elitist conceptions of the New Negro artist.

¹⁵ Ibid, pp. 22

¹⁶ Ibid, pp. 22

¹⁷ qtd. in Caughie, "The Best People: The Making of the Black Bourgeoisie in Writings of the Negro Renaissance," *Modernism/Modernity*, pp. 5

Wallace Thurman's above quote in the epigraph suggests the extent to which this generation grew indignant to the restrictive nature of Du Bois's conception of black art. This thesis tells the story of a group of young liberal black artists struggling against the influence of Du Bois's Talented Tenth elitism as well as his particular Pan-African brand of cultural nationalism articulated in the *Souls of Black Folk*. Nevertheless, to this younger generation, Du Bois was not wrong about everything. If the grip of his black cultural nationalism had prevented the artist from becoming what Thurman called "his true self," it had also influenced the early thought of these authors. I argue that the New Negro artist's "true self" was in fact largely shaped by his process of moving beyond black cultural nationalism. Du Bois's famous conception of the Negro soul, the metaphor of the "Veil," the psychological experience of black-American double-consciousness, and his Victorian morals exerted a powerful legacy over this generation. By examining the literature of the liberal humanist generation of New Negro writers, we can see how certain literary characters (particularly in McKay and Van Vechten's novels) incarnate the struggle against Du Bois's legacy. Through the character of Ray in his infamously rejected novel *Home to Harlem*, Claude McKay would challenge the Du Boisian conception of the virtuous Negro soul and the artist's potential for uplifting the Worst of his race as a harmful way to understand the black American experience. Langston Hughes also attacked Du Bois's conception of the Talented Tenth as a privileged and incorruptible being meant to lead the uplift of the uneducated and "Veiled" Negro masses. In his famous satire *Black No More*, George Schuyler challenged the idea that the "Veil" of white prejudice separated blacks from their

Negro soul; for Schuyler, as he articulates in his notorious essay “The Negro Art Hokum,” there was no Negro soul to begin with. The generation of young Harlem liberals inherited an arsenal of Du Bois’s pervasive theories of race and would struggle to unthink them in order to assert (i) the fact that racial meaning is only skin-deep and (ii) that Du Bois’s particular brand of black cultural nationalism and Victorian morality censured the supposedly “ugly” or “depraved” lives of working class black Americans. If Du Bois’s *Souls* argued that the Negro’s innate spirit was hidden from black-American recognition because of prejudice, the young liberals would struggle to prove that racial meaning was simply a fiction. In other words, what gave race its supposed meaning were the various political fictions of race endemic to American thought. The rise of a young and, what L.P. Jackson calls, “indignant” generation of writers marked the struggle to depart from Du Bois’s messianistic and essentialist conception of race precisely because it created a distinction between educated and ignorant blacks; to clarify, Du Bois’s conception is messianistic in the sense that it describes the black artist as a prophetic figure in the political and cultural uplift of uneducated blacks in America. In this struggle, the young liberal humanists moved away from Du Bois’s racially nationalist and messianistic language as articulated in *The Souls of Black Folk* to experiment with new modernist genres that, above all, would remain committed to authentically representing the lives of various classes of black individuals as they existed in real life.

What makes the Harlem Renaissance valuable for studying African-American culture is not only its literary and stylistic novelty of expression but also its

historical role in the debate between black cultural nationalism and black liberalism. One of the most important implications of this historical moment centers on how the young generation departed from the use of tropes like “the Best and Worst of his Race,” “race gift,” “Negro Soul,” and “spiritual genius,” to explain the nationalist duty of black artists. For the first time in African-American history black artists were rebelling against their black nationalist predecessors and claiming the false authority of race-consciousness discourses in explaining the black experience as well as the task of the black artist. In this sense, the Harlem Renaissance enhanced the scope of “resistance” literature to include opposition not only against white supremacists but also against the philosophies of older black leadership. This thesis will illustrate how the liberal humanist generation grew increasingly indignant as they tried to unthink the political conceptions of black life proposed by Du Bois and other black nationalists like Garvey. This generation famously sought to move away from the deliberate and politically manufactured black-nationalist recognition of only certain types of black people in order to innovate a more inclusive and politically disinterested recognition of all classes of blacks in America. Perhaps the most important implication of this project concerns the inability for the black cultural nationalists to recognize and accept the liberal representation of black life. Cabaret transgressions, drunkenness, criminality, and financial destitution were all part of an urban black life that Du Bois deliberately ignored and dismissed as crassly ignorant. The thrust of this project is to understand the authorial and historical context that shaped this intellectual struggle between the black cultural nationalists and the liberal generation. As I continue along this line of questioning, I hope to

illustrate the confusion and frustration accompanied by trying to advocate for black lives that failed to conform to a set of political guidelines – in this context, Du Bois’s black cultural nationalism.

CHAPTER I

ART FOR WHOSE SAKE? THE GENERATIONAL STRUGGLE AGAINST THE DUTY TO BLACK CULTURAL NATIONALISM

With the rise of Harlem as a physical neighborhood for black culture and the increasing success of black literary publications in the late 1910s and early 1920s, the Harlem Renaissance arrived as an urgent debate over what constituted black art. The race leaders and acclaimed authorities of the movement put forth a set of artistic and moral guidelines to define the movement's role in the larger project of constructing a black cultural nationalism. Eager apostles, intellectuals, and artists imagined that art would be the means through which a certain type of black cultural identity would assert itself. The debates over art and its duty to the construction of a black cultural nationalism reflect a sense of urgency in defining and unifying the black American experience into one set of fixed categories. Black cultural nationalists celebrated black art as a path to Negro uplift and progress. Sociologist and race leader W.E.B. Du Bois and philosopher Alain Locke, the "Dean" of the New Negro Renaissance, believed that black literature and arts could produce a sense of communal identity that would vitalize a new and improved sense of confidence, education, and ambition for the black individual. This chapter focuses on the claim that Du Bois and Locke's conceptions of black cultural nationalism share two philosophical beliefs about race in common. They both believed that (i) all black selves internalized a psychological condition of inferiority – i.e. a third-person consciousness that replicated stereotypes and logics of black inferiority and

defeatism. And (ii) that one singular black experience could, in fact, speak for and represent the objective experience of being black. Together, these beliefs supported the idea that the black artist represented a distinguished and exceptional being; the black artist represented the archetype of Negro uplift out of ignorance. For Locke and Du Bois, discovering their relationship to these exceptional race leaders could help inspire black Americans to unthink their third-person consciousness of defeatism and in so doing affirm their identities. This is not to say that Du Bois and Locke shared the same conception of the purpose of black art but rather to emphasize how they both believed that the black artist could undo black psychologies of defeatism.

I will first discuss how Locke and Du Bois developed differing criteria for what would constitute this objective black identity. In Du Bois's case we observe a distinctly essentialist conception of the Negro soul and its role in art. Locke marked a departure from this essentialist conception but nevertheless championed the Negro artist as an uplifter of his people and assigned him the role of advancing cultured and civilized images of black life. Despite their different conception of race consciousness, these theorists of black art shared a philosophical claim against which the younger liberals rebelled. I will trace the shift from Du Bois and Locke's elitism to the liberal humanist philosophy championed by young Renaissance writers. By liberal humanism, in this particular context, I am referring to the belief that the black individual, in fact, was not determined by an objective set of characteristics, morals, and psychologies put forth by the elitist theorists like Locke and Du Bois; in other words, the black masses did not all share a common third-

person consciousness of defeatism nor did they look up to the black artist as a promised prophet. It was precisely this shift in philosophical claims that was at the heart of the generational debate of the Harlem Renaissance. Only by recognizing the elitist commonality between Du Bois and Locke and illustrating the departure of the younger generation from (i) the idea that the Negro masses suffered from a defeatist psychology and (ii) the belief in the potential of the New Negro artist to uplift the Negro masses from their psychological defeatism and ignorance, can we begin to position the literary work of the liberal humanists in an intellectual history.

Twenty-two years prior to the publication of Locke's seminal anthology, *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*, W.E.B. Du Bois introduced his Pan-Africanist and Victorian construction of a black cultural identity. In his sui generis autobiography, *The Souls of Black Folk: Voices From Within the Veil* – a canonical text for any artist of the Renaissance – Du Bois insisted on the existence of a common consciousness shared by all Negroes. He discovered art as a political means through which Negroes could discover their familial link to a true African identity. In this vein, Du Bois declared his famous concept of “double consciousness” as the “sense of twoness as an American and a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings” as the national feeling of all black-Americans. He claims that “the history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, – this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self.” Du Bois's doubleness exists between a spiritual connection to a Negro soul and the condition of being black in America. Du Bois espoused the philosophical belief that this double identity was latent in all Negroes living in America and therefore had to be realized

and taught to all American Negroes through cultural work. As Du Bois translated this feeling into a hermeneutic theory to speak for all blacks, he borrowed from the discourse of psychology emerging during the late 19th century.¹⁸ Du Bois's mentor at Harvard, psychologist William James, had also written about the term in a case study investigating the possibility of integrating one's dual selves into a third, new Self.¹⁹ James's writings resonated closely with Du Bois and shaped his theory that the Negro and American selves could integrate into a "better and truer self."²⁰ Informed by James's psychological theory of the merging of selves, Du Bois imagined that if black-Americans could overcome the obstructions or veil between themselves and their black racial feeling, they would become their truest self. Once that step had occurred, Negroes could contribute their virtuous African identity to the American self through cultural production – thereby, resulting in the emergence of a third "better and truer self." Cultural production was therefore twofold for Du Bois; it (i) represented the achievement of the cultural producer himself in overcoming the "Veil" and (ii) would therefore teach other black-Americans how to overcome the "Veil" for themselves. This psychological theory of double-consciousness, therefore, retains a trajectory in which black-Americans moved towards the complete integration of their innate black virtue into American culture.

In the meantime, black cultural production was necessary to complete the first step of this shift towards merging double consciousness – i.e. lifting the veil between the black self and his latent African identity. Du Bois emphasizes that had

¹⁸ Bruce Jr., *American Literature*, pp. 299

¹⁹ Ibid, pp. 211

²⁰ Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, pp. 3

he not come across this “African racial feeling” he would never have understood his own African roots. In other words, this supposed Negro truth “was purely a matter of [his] own learning and reaction.”²¹ Art, therefore, had a responsibility to discovering and teach this quasi-mystic racial feeling to black-Americans – i.e. to unthink the veil of color prejudice that obscured the Negro truth. Black art, as Du Bois had claimed, served a distinctly propagandistic in this project of collapsing double consciousness. Du Bois argued that because “the Negro was painted by white Americans in the novels and essays the have written,” the black writer had a “bounden duty to begin this great work of the creation of beauty... and use the truth.... as the great vehicle of universal understanding.”²² This is a rich passage with vague but important language. The phrases “bounden duty” and “great work” imply Du Bois’s clear task for the Negro writer. His insistence on the relationship between “beauty,” “truth,” and the universal understanding imply the fact that Du Bois favored artistically “beautiful” or palatable representations of black life in order to achieve black as well as white recognition of innate Negro virtue – i.e. universal understanding of the third black self, the black self that had overcome double consciousness. However, because the cultural stereotypes of American racism veiled what Du Bois imagined to be the truth of African racial consciousness, it was the responsibility of the artist to unthink these stereotypes and discover the common black consciousness. In so doing, art could publically reject the racist narrative that blacks were destined to be inferior. At the same time, art would

²¹ qtd. in Sundquist, *To Wake The Nations*, pp. 462

²² Du Bois, “The Criteria for Negro Art,” *Double Take: A Revisionist Anthology of the Harlem Renaissance* pp. 49

outline the shared African virtues, morals, and spiritual feeling of all blacks– thereby championing an optimistic conception of the black future in America.

In his comprehensive narrative history, *To Wake the Nations*, historian Eric J. Sundquist points out how Du Bois made the case for the Negro soul as a contributor to the thought of multi-cultural America. Du Bois mentioned that the original “African virtues (courtesy, moral strength, aesthetic sensibility) were converted into American vices” as a result of slavery and structural oppression.²³ In other words, Du Bois’s history of the enslavement of Africans from their homeland to America puts forth a claim juxtaposing African morality with a vague notion of American vice. In this history, Du Bois claimed that slavery and structural oppression degraded the supposedly shared African virtues into American vices. In other words, the context of oppression only served to distance the black self from his originally determined communal identity and destiny. For Du Bois, this veiling effect of oppression was not only structural but also existed at the level of every black individual’s consciousness. The philosophical claim that bolsters Du Bois’s narrative is based on the notion that the black experience existed doubly with the singular subjective experience of human consciousness but also with the third-person white racist consciousness.²⁴ Sylvia Winter’s reading of Du Bois suggests that he believed that there existed the first person consciousness of Negro virtue but also the third-person consciousness of inferiority skillfully injected into black-Americans as a result of slavery and oppression. Although the black American experience of

²³ Sundquist, *To Wake The Nations*, pp. 513

²⁴ Winter, *Towards the Sociogenic Principle: Fanon, The Puzzle of Conscious Experience, of “Identity” and What it’s Like to be “Black,”* pp. 7

inferiority was primarily economic, Du Bois claimed that the black self internalized the condition of structural inferiority with a third-person consciousness that replicated stereotypes and logics of black inferiority. Du Bois believed that this doubleness in consciousness was the objective experience of all Negroes experiencing discrimination in America. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois symbolized this oppressive third-person consciousness with the metaphor of the “Veil.” Du Bois wrote that the truth of African morals and spiritualism could be awakened from “behind the Veil” of an internalized third-person consciousness of the oppressor – one that reproduced fictions of black inferiority and thereby kept Negroes from their original African destiny.

So, if Du Bois imagined a historical narrative in which past African virtues were degraded by American slavery and the third person consciousness of the “Veil”, he also imagined that they could be recovered through a prophetic moment in which black artists resurrected the distinctly Negro gifts of the past.²⁵ Du Bois wrote that, “After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American word.”²⁶ Du Bois’s guidelines for the Harlem Renaissance reflect his belief that this artistic moment signified the rise of a prophetic “son”. These artists were therefore expected to uplift the black-American through their cultural work. At the very least, Du Bois’s conception of black nationalist art could raise black-Americans to dwell above the veil of a racist third-person consciousness. Therefore, by undoing the internalization of a consciousness

²⁵ Ibid, pp. 514

²⁶ Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, pp. 47

shaped by American racism and vice, black-Americans could discover their original moral selves. This true self, as I have outlined, is a fiction informed by Du Bois's idea of a black national identity as well as a certain set of morals. If America was supposedly sinful and Africa purely virtuous, we should explicate exactly what moral sensibilities Du Bois imagined were latent in all Negroes.

I am proposing that Du Bois's privileged location as a northern born, middle-class, Harvard and Berlin educated Victorian moralist shapes his moral definition of the black-American cultural identity. Du Bois was attracted to Victorian morals espousing sexual restraint, incorruptible honesty, and dignified social conduct. We can locate a Victorian sensibility in Du Bois's critique of young Renaissance art. In his June 1928 review of Claude McKay's acclaimed novel, *Home to Harlem*, he wrote that McKay had "used every art and emphasis to paint drunkenness, fighting, lascivious, sexual promiscuity and utter absence of restraint in as bold and bright colors as he can."²⁷ Here, we can note that sexual and social restraints are two central tenets to Du Bois's moral sensibilities. Similarly, he raged at Carl Van Vechten's controversial novel, *Nigger Heaven*:

"[In *Nigger Heaven*] love is degraded. There is not a single loveable character. There is scarcely a generous impulse or a beautiful ideal... His women's bodies have no souls... Life to him is just one damned orgy after another, with hate, hurt, gin, and sadism... He is an authority on dives and cabarets.... The overwhelming majority of black folk [in Harlem] never go to cabarets. The average colored man in Harlem is an everyday laborer, attending church, lodge, and movie and as conservative and conventional as ordinary working folk everywhere. Something they have which is racial, something distinctively Negroid can be found; but it is expressed by subtle,

²⁷ qtd. in Woodley, Jenny. *Art for Equality: The NAACP's Cultural Campaign for Civil Rights*, pp. 48

almost delicate nuance, and not by the wildly barbaric drunkenness in whose details Van Vechten revels.”²⁸

Du Bois’s criteria for Negro art clearly demanded a Victorian moral sensibility as the medium through which the “delicate nuance” of the blackness could be expressed. Du Bois suggests that to expose the Negro soul takes focused artistic attention precisely because it is supposedly subtle and difficult to see easily. The phrase “delicate nuance” can be positioned in Du Bois’s theory that the Negro soul was hidden by the Veil. Meanwhile, ideals of love and beauty were clearly central in Du Bois’s representation of black life. His critical reviews of *Home to Harlem* and *Nigger Heaven* reflected his commitment to the notion that black art had a necessary duty to project beautiful, sensible, refined, and civilized representations of black life. On the flipside, Du Bois dismissed degrading, violent, and promiscuous representations of black life as manifestations of the veil – i.e. the voice of white-American racism and vice. Ultimately, any artist contributing to the latent “kingdom of black culture” was obligated to participate in the building of a cultural black identity shaped not only around a spiritual race-consciousness but also around the moderation of Victorian morals. Such a committed emphasis on these Victorian morals can be traced to Du Bois’s fiction that America as a nation had internalized the Negro with vice and violence and thereby had dragged him far from his ancient and now latent spirit of African virtue. As the younger generation of Harlem writers began to push against Du Bois, it was clear that they saw his black cultural nationalism as a fiction for its failure to recognize crime, violence, and sexual promiscuity as factual realities

²⁸ Du Bois and Sundquist. *The Oxford W.E.B. Du Bois Reader*. New York: Oxford UP, 1996. Print. pp. 516-517

of impoverished black life. The younger generation claimed that artistic representations of black life could not dismiss these realities as the fault of America's inherent vices or the fault of the veil of third-person consciousness that obscured innate Negro virtue; to these younger writers, Du Bois's nationalist vision was simply a fiction they wouldn't buy. I will now examine the philosophical claims that the younger generation of Harlem artists saw as problematic in Du Bois's fiction of innate black virtue.

Among many of his contributions to the New Negro Renaissance, poet Langston Hughes (1902-67) reckoned with the "ugly side" of urban black life as a factual reality. His literature and poetry challenged the assumption that sexual promiscuity and violence in black communities should be censored from black artistic production. The following example reflects how Hughes critiques Du Bois's treatment of the New Negro artist as a sacred or morally superior being. Hughes defended his friend Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* from Du Bois's critique claiming that:

"[Van Vechten] presents many of the problems of the Negroes of Harlem, and he writes of the people of culture as well as the people of the night clubs.... He was accused of ruining, distorting, polluting, and corrupting every Negro writer from then on, who was ever known to have shaken hands with him, or to have used the word *nigger* in his writings or to have been in a cabaret. To say that Carl Van Vechten has harmed Negro creative activity is sheer poppycock."²⁹

Here, Hughes expressed disapproval of conceiving of the New Negro writer as somebody that needed to be protected from moral depravity. By pointing out the absurdity of attributing the use of the word "nigger" or attending a cabarets as a

²⁹ Hughes, *The Big Sea*, pp. 271

corrupting force for the Negro artist, Hughes gives us a sense of the extent to which he was frustrated with the prophetic fictions surrounding Du Bois's conception of the Negro artist. Hughes felt a duty to represent the black experiences honestly and authentically more than he felt obligated to asserting a black cultural nationalism that privileged the black intellectual as the messiah of Negro progress. Hughes rejected the idea that the Negro writer exemplified an over-determined, morally superior, and universally felt cultural identity. Overall, Hughes represents the substantial liberal shift away from Du Bois's conception of the New Negro artist and therefore the movement as a whole. Ultimately, Hughes' critique of the corruptible force of cabarets and the use of the word *nigger* reflects his philosophical belief that an objectively moral black identity cannot be discovered and replicated in all Negroes. Instead, morality was a personal construction informed by one's distinct social, economic, and intellectual location. As the younger generation shifted away from the fiction of innate African morality, they became interested in exploring the extent to which differently situated Negroes in America made sense of themselves within limited languages like that of Du Bois's black cultural nationalism. In other words, Hughes was concerned with the limited languages with which black-Americans could understand themselves. He was even more concerned about the ways in which expressions of black individuality were integrated into racially nationalistic discourses of blackness.

What is most interesting and perplexing about Hughes, for example, was his tendency to express himself using the language of Du Bois's cultural nationalism while also critiquing this form of cultural nationalism. One glaring pushback against

my claim that Hughes represented an important liberal critique against Du Bois's black cultural nationalism is the fact that Hughes often expressed himself and his poetry in the language of African essentialism. If Hughes did not believe in an innate and discoverable Negro identity, why did he use language like "African soul," and call the tom-tom the "inherent expression of Negro life"? I would propose that these terms do not necessarily prove his unwavering belief in Du Bois's historical myth of shared African virtue. Scholars tend to categorize Hughes as a black cultural nationalist precisely because of his otherworldly emphasis on the African soul.³⁰ However, Hughes' romantic African expressionism must be considered in conjunction with his philosophical position emphasizing the individuality and multiplicity of black experiences in America – e.g. the notion that every black-American has a different relationship to Africa. I am proposing that Hughes consciously conceived of his Africa as his individual choice of personal expression, not as an innate or spiritual truth determining him and all other Negroes. In his autobiography, *The Big Sea*, he tells of his encounter with a wealthy white art critic who needed a Negro composer to "be primitive and know and feel the intuitions of the primitive."³¹ In this specific example, Hughes speaks of the ways in which the stereotype of African racial feeling and the fiction of primitivism were being exploited for their vogue. His critique of this white woman's artistic exploitation of the myth and aesthetic of African racial feeling addresses an issue that Du Bois did not consider in his construction of a black cultural nationalism: the susceptibility of this black racial feeling to be interpreted and exploited as stereotype. Hughes was

³⁰ Sundquist, "Who Was Langston Hughes?" pp. 54

³¹ Hughes, *The Big Sea*, pp. 325

aware of the fact that because the artistic language of Africa was popularly exploited by white and black culturalists, expressing his connection to Africa was always caught up in either white racist or black nationalist narratives of essential Negro qualities. In other words, expressing an individual feeling of African connection could be interpreted to mean that all Negroes felt this connection universally. The particular art critic in this autobiographical reflection claimed that all Negroes shared a distinct connection with notions of primitive rhythm. Therefore, Hughes' freedom to express a *distinctly personal* African racial feeling was trapped in her essentialist interpretation of black cultural nationalism.

Hughes' connection to the language of African spiritual connection derived from what he admitted was a distinctly personal location. During his encounter with this anonymous female white art critic, Hughes reflected that he did not feel the "rhythms of the primitive surging through me and so I could not live and write as though I did. I was only an American Negro – who had loved the surface of Africa and the rhythms of Africa – but I was not Africa."³² Hughes refers to his love of Africa as a surface-level phenomenon, thereby capturing a crucial distinction between Africa as it is used in the project of black cultural nationalism and Africa as a mode of distinctly personal, emotional and artistic expression. I am suggesting that Hughes' romantic African expressionism existed with his knowledge that African racial feeling was, in fact, a fiction. Instead of reflecting a legitimate truth latent in all Negroes, Hughes' connection to Africa derived from his distinctly personal attraction to African aesthetics – e.g. the tom-tom rhythms. In his famous

³² Hughes, *The Big Sea*, pp. 325

response to George Schuyler's scathing critique of black cultural nationalism,

Langston Hughes writes:

"Jazz to me is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America; the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul – the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world, a world of subway trains, and work, work, work... We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame."³³

Despite Hughes' use of the term "Negro soul," a careful and contextualized reading of this passage does not suggest that Hughes participated in the belief that African feeling was latent in all Negroes. For starters, Hughes framed his statement as distinctly personal when he explained that jazz "to me" is an expression of the Negro soul. Secondly, considering this statement in conjunction with his admitted attraction to the "surface of Africa," should allow us to distinguish between African artistic expressionism and Du Bois's belief in a distinctly African racial soul. With that distinction in mind, Hughes' statement can be read for illustrating the ways in which an African artistic aesthetic, more concretely the tom-tom rhythm, can give artistic expression to the revolt, weariness, train noises, and "work, work, work" associated with black urban life. For Hughes, Africa becomes integrated aesthetically into artistic forms of expression instead of being integrated into a project of recognizing racial consciousness. I am spending time to emphasize Hughes' position because it is largely representative of a liberal shift in African-American thought between the cultural nationalism of the old race leaders and the liberal humanism of the New Negro artist. In this transition from old to young, we can observe the

³³ Honey and Patton, *Double Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology*, pp. 43-44

struggle against the popular idea that a restricted set of characteristics, particularly those espousing innate black moral virtue, could capture the entire black-American experience. The dilemma for Hughes was that the black individual was always interpreted under the generalizing lens of black essentialist discourse. Writers like Hughes and later George Schuyler sought to construct a space for the African-American intellectual to express himself outside of these discourses and as Wallace Thurman said, “be his true self” without “pandering to the stupidities” of the black cultural nationalists.³⁴

George Schuyler was a journalist and author who, despite being a self-proclaimed conservative, shared and participated in the liberal humanist philosophies of the New Negro writers. In his early thought, he sought to overturn the myth of Negro essentialism and instead posit the freedom of the African American writer to think outside of black cultural nationalisms and political projects of black-American uplift. In his notorious 1926 essay “The Negro-Art Hokum,” Schuyler dismissed the truth of an innate and shared African racial feeling and instead posited that all Americans, regardless of color, shared the same distinctly American way of thinking. Schuyler reported that the possibility of distinctly Negro art, expressive of the Negro soul was hokum precisely because all Americans shared the same way of thinking. This strategy of overturning the fiction of Negro essentialism, he would later admit, was flawed precisely because the pervasiveness of essentialist race discourse shaped the different ways of thinking endemic to whites and blacks. In this early essay, he proposes that:

³⁴ qtd. in Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was In Vogue*, pp. 229

“New art forms expressing the “peculiar” psychology of the Negro were about to flood the market... Skeptics patiently waited. They still wait. True, from dark skinned sources have come those slave songs based on Protestant hymns and Biblical texts known as spirituals, work songs and secular songs of sorrow and tough luck known as the blues, that outgrowth of ragtime known as jazz, and the Charleston, an eccentric dance invented by the gamins around the public market-place in Charleston, S.C. No one can or does deny this. But these are contributions of a certain caste in a certain section of the country. They are foreign to Northern Negroes, West Indian Negroes, and African Negroes. They are no more expressive or characteristic of the Negro race than the music and dancing of the Appalachian highlanders are expressive of the Caucasian race.”³⁵

Schuyler’s essay speaks against the heavy current of black cultural nationalism as well as white-racist notions of Negro primitivism. For Schuyler, it was social environment and historical context that shaped the development of different black forms of artistic expression. In this passage, he specifically emphasizes that the spirituals were born out of the slave-era and slave exposure to the Bible. Therefore, Schuyler posited that the spirituals – a form of expression that Du Bois emphasized as integral to black cultural nationalism – did not necessarily resonate with blacks in different national and international locations. However, he mistakenly proposed that because environment and historical context shaped black and white identities, all black and whites in the American context possessed a shared identity and way of thinking. He wrote that “blacks and whites from the same localities in this country think, talk, and act about the same” due to shared “schools, politics, advertisements, moral crusades, and restaurants.”³⁶ Schuyler emphasized that what made black skin and white skin seem essentially different were the fictions of racial difference espoused not only by racist America but also by cultural nationalists like Du Bois

³⁵ Schuyler, “The Negro-Art Hokum,” *The Nation*, pp. 36

³⁶ Schuyler, “The Negro-Art Hokum,” *The Nation*, pp. 37

and Back-To-Africa leader Marcus Garvey. In his autobiography, *Black and Conservative* Schuyler wrote that, “the masses of Negroes were indifferent [to Garvey] because they were American-born and reared, and while they had come from Africa originally, they had only the slightest sentiment about it.... White Americans were not going back to Europe except to see distant relatives after they had become well-to-do; so it was nonsense to talk of Negroes going back to Africa.”³⁷ In this rhetorically broadsided critique of Garvey, Schuyler posited his liberal position against all black cultural nationalisms that attempted to perpetuate a fiction of Negro essentialisms – especially that of shared African racial feeling. I will explore Schuyler’s position against Garvey and Du Bois’s cultural nationalist narratives in more detail in the next chapter with regard to Schuyler’s 1931 novel, *Black No More*. For now, it is important to recognize how Schuyler’s 1926 essay positions him as member of the same liberal humanist camp as Hughes which rejected the idea that blacks and whites were essentially or innately different.

However, if Schuyler and Hughes shared the same liberal position against black cultural nationalisms, why would Hughes frame his “Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” as a critique against Schuyler’s “Negro-Art Hokum” essay? One explanation is that Hughes’ critique of Schuyler’s position on Negro art had much to do with Schuyler’s alignment with Alain Locke’s philosophy that the Negro artist need not write about black experiences. In his 1926 essay, Schuyler remarked that the “Aframerican is merely a lampblack Anglo-Saxon.”³⁸ This declaration should

³⁷ Schuyler, *Black and Conservative*, pp. 122

³⁸ Honey and Patton, *Double Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology*, pp. 37

be briefly contextualized. Schuyler was responding to the popular discourses of black essentialism – particularly that of Du Bois – with the claim that race is only skin deep. Because this is the case, black artists need not focus exclusively on black experiences in their art, Schuyler asserted. In his response piece, however, Hughes points out that there are certain cultural fictions that obscured the black self as essentially different than the white self. Hughes suggested that these fictions – including racist thought and black cultural nationalism – created an unfortunate tendency for Americans, black and white, to “pour black individuality into the mold of American standardization”³⁹ By 1931, Schuyler responded to this debate by clarifying his position and exploring how standardizing race fictions were perpetuated by white America, black race leaders, and the black individual himself. If in 1926 Schuyler did not emphasize his commitment to exposing these race fictions, by 1931 his novel *Black No More* solidified his artistic commitment to revealing how standardized race fictions and cultural nationalisms jeopardized the extent to which black-Americans could understand and express their individuality. Ultimately, Hughes’ and Schuyler’s debate can be thought of as a miscommunication. Both thinkers shared a commitment to developing art for the Negro’s sake insofar as their art would expose how a confusing current of racial fictions compromised the capacity for the black self to express his individuality. At the core of this belief lies a philosophical development away from Du Bois’s claim that all black-Americans faced the veil of white prejudice and shared mutual feelings towards an African soul. Both Hughes and Schuyler amended this claim to emphasize that the veil of

³⁹ Honey and Patton, *Double Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology*, pp. 40-41

misunderstanding did not derive just from white American prejudice but also from the pervasive discourses of black cultural nationalism. So, if art would help lift this internalized veil of self-misunderstanding, it would not reveal the innate commonality of the Negro soul but rather expose the deeply flawed political fictions with which Americans, black and white, made sense of race.

Alain Locke's position on the role of Negro art was a contradiction between the conservative project of creating a distinct Negro cultural nationalism and the liberal project of emphasizing the black artistic freedom. Scholars tend to categorize Locke as a liberal humanist for his espousal of the New Negro writers and his insistence that they need not write about distinctly racial topics. I propose, however, that Locke, in his New Negro anthology, put forth a cultural nationalism of his own based on espousing black artistic elites as the archetype of progress and uplift for the Negro masses; this unifying black cultural nationalism limited the extent to which he could champion the liberal humanist philosophy of the younger writers. George Schuyler and Langston Hughes agreed with Locke's commitment to expressing the varied perspectives of black-Americans towards issues of structural and casual prejudice, urban black culture, black history, and African racial feeling. In this vein, Locke argued that, "American Negroes have been a race more in name than in fact, or to be exact, more in sentiment than in experience. The chief bond between them has been that of a common condition rather than a common consciousness."⁴⁰ While Locke emphasized a black common condition under American structural discrimination and prejudice, the younger artists went further

⁴⁰ Locke, *The New Negro*, pp. 7

to expose the varying extent to which differently situated black Americans struggled differently against discrimination – both structural and casual. They also argued that any form of black cultural nationalism restricted the extent to which black-Americans could express their individuality outside of racial standardizations. Finally, the younger generation stood opposed to Locke’s espoused cultural nationalism of Negro elitism. By Negro elitism, I am referring to Locke’s belief that the distinguished talent and achievement of one Negro could serve as an example around which all black-Americans could unify. The younger artists critiqued Locke for the philosophy he shared in common with Du Bois – the notion that a certain type of black-American could represent a determined and objective goal for all black-Americans. Ultimately, they saw past the vogue surrounding the black intellectual and considered that the privileged position of black artists could not do much to “uplift” or “enlighten” the Negro masses – something that Locke never recognized. Hughes critiqued Locke just as he had critiqued Du Bois for privileging the Negro artist as sacred and prophetic.

Despite Locke’s liberal emphasis on black artistic freedom, he deliberately limited black artistic freedom in favor of his own political conception of a refined, civilized, and aesthetically sensible black cultural identity. Although he took a firm stance against black art that overtly put forth a propagandistic project of race uplift, Locke did admit to an agenda of producing the right kind of art. In his 1928 article entitled “Beauty Instead of Ashes,” Locke admitted that for the Harlem Renaissance “there is an ethics of beauty itself and an urgency of the right creative movement.”⁴¹

⁴¹ Ibid, pp. 24

In other words, there was a correct type of artistic contribution that Locke had in mind; this quote suggests his complicity in advancing representations of black life as ethical and artistically beautiful. Meanwhile, Locke was concerned with art that could not distance itself from what he saw as insecure black “rhetorical assertions” and “didactic sentiments.” He preferred that black artists disinterestedly performed “self-mastery” and “emotional self-assurance” in their art.⁴² Locke saw that this sense of comfort and confidence in being black was central to any black artist that would make “an important contribution to make to the working out of our national culture.”⁴³ So, Locke’s liberal emphasis that black artists need not restrict themselves to distinctly black subject matter and “poeticized propaganda” must be contextualized within his belief that black art must prove the Negro capacity for confidence and aptitude with a certain disinterest in pleading to change black social disadvantages. In many ways, his criteria for a disinterested Negro aesthete who produced “art for art’s sake” reflected his elitism; he was uncomfortable with the image of black artists pandering in order to gain social advantages through art. He saw the slave narratives and genre of racial uplift as a sign of weakness and instead sought to promote images of a disinterested and exceptionally talented artist, whose interests were unsullied by racial responsibility but rather fully dedicated to ‘pure art.’ However, to be disinterested in one’s racial disadvantages either meant that one was (i) deliberately censoring these disadvantages in order to advance the false image of the endurance of black artistic talent through disadvantage or (ii) was privileged enough not to experience them. In this sense, Locke emphasized a certain

⁴² Ibid, pp. 24

⁴³ Ibid, pp. 24

type of racially confident and disinterested black artist as the harbinger of progress for all Negroes without recognizing this particular type of black artist as an elite. In his 1928 review of the Renaissance, he discussed how black writers had brought about a confident “race temperament” as opposed to an insecure one; these artists, he claims, were offering the “genius of the first order” and “giv[ing] it final definiteness.”⁴⁴ In this sense, Locke shared the philosophical position with Du Bois that the singular experience of the elite artist could represent the possibilities or progress for all. It was this shared philosophical outlook on race that supported both Du Bois and Locke in constructing different but similarly nationalistic ideas of a black culture that would privilege certain types of black-Americans as the harbingers of a determined black social evolution.

In Lawrence P. Jackson’s narrative history of 20th century African American intellectuals, *The Indignant Generation*, he summarizes the predicament of New Negro artist with the following statement:

“They had wrestled with and been a bit disfigured by expectations from culture brokers and backers that they drip with “primitive” vitality. Their position as modern artists against the Victorian moralists and the art-for-art’s sake struggle was compounded by their political liability: they were a visibly ethnic minority in a vigorously white nationalist country. The overriding pressures of duty to race often tempered their artistic creativity.”⁴⁵

To say that their struggle against Du Bois’s moralism and Locke’s aestheticism tempered their creative capacity falls short of explaining the effectiveness of their literary work. The young generation used literature, in fact, to expose how not only

⁴⁴ Locke, *The Critical Temper of Alain Locke*, pp. 25

⁴⁵ Jackson, *The Indignant Generation*, pp. 17

the black artist but also the black individual fought against his politically nationalistic liability to race. The art of the young liberals was meant to capture how one's temperament could be compromised by feelings of political duty to race. Hughes, for example, captured the artistic struggle against a duty to Du Bois's conception of the veil, Du Bois's Victorian sensibilities, Locke's notion of black aestheticism, and white racism in his famous short story, "The Blues I'm Playing." In this story, as well as in his autobiography, Hughes exposed how eager white apostles of the Renaissance involved themselves in the practice of uplifting distinguished Negroes by making them perform either refined Victorian art or primitive African stereotypes. In his autobiography, Hughes summarized the mistake of the white art critic who urged him to replicate African primitivism with the comment that she believed she "possessed the power to control people's lives – pick them up and put them down when and where she wished."⁴⁶ It is this same logic of the white power to uplift that shapes the behavior of Mrs. Ellsworth in "The Blues I'm Playing," who undertakes a black Harlem pianist, Oceola, in her project of uplift. Ellsworth expresses her decision to improve Oceola "for art's sake." Hughes writes:

"Then began one of the most interesting periods in Mrs. Ellsworth's whole experience in aiding the arts. The period of Oceola. For the Negro Ellsworth's interests, to take up more and more of her time, and to use up more and more of her money. Not that Oceola ever asked for money, but Mrs. Ellsworth herself seemed to keep thinking of so much more Oceola needed."⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Hughes, *The Big Sea*, pp. 325

⁴⁷ Hughes, *The Ways of White Folks*, pp. 103

As the story continues, it becomes increasingly clear that Mrs. Ellsworth's interest is less in contributing generally to the arts and more in training supposedly exceptional Negroes to perform art in the Victorian classical tradition; Mrs. Ellsworth's behavior towards Oceola is based on her assumption that her white skin and economic privilege gave her the power to uplift a talented but poor black woman. She urges Oceola to move out of Harlem to Washington Square, give up blues, and break up with her black boyfriend all "in order to help" her supposedly disadvantaged life.⁴⁸ In short, Oceola is expected to sacrifice her freedom to express her personal relationship to black artistic culture, black people, and her particular black self as a result of Ms. Ellsworth's belief in her capacity for racial uplift. Mrs. Ellsworth, Oceola noted, often referred to artists from other ethnic and religious backgrounds, Judaism for example, with the claim that they were a "genius not a Jew. Hating to admit his ancestry."⁴⁹ This example illustrates Mrs. Ellsworth's tendency to believe that one's artistic refinement can excuse them of their racial or religious background. In this sense, Mrs. Ellsworth epitomizes Locke's logic that one's artistic talent can make the world forget about one's race – a philosophy that collapses precisely because it relies on distinguishing an exemplary Negro from the masses or an exemplary Jew from the masses, etc. In other words, despite Locke's concern for the Negro masses, his cultural nationalism is based on distinguishing the exceptional elite from the uneducated and ignorant masses.

The verb "I'm" in the title of Hughes' story, "The Blues I'm Playing," emphasized Oceola's express through blues as an individual choice. Instead of titling

⁴⁸ Hughes, *The Ways of White Folks*, pp. 103

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 113

it “The Blue’s We’re Playing,” the use of “I’m” reflects the individuality of Oceola’s connection to the blues. This is important because even in the title of this short story, Hughes emphasizes how the freedom for the black artist to choose certain forms of artistic expression – in this case, blues and spirituals – is inevitably interpreted through the popular racial standards of the time period. If the Harlem Renaissance was famous for the vogue it imposed on things Negro, it was the young generation of Harlem writers who critiqued exactly how this vogue misinterpreted or obscured the individuality of the black artist. In this particular story, it is the standard of black exceptionalism or elitism and the Lockean discourse of “art-for-art’s sake” that limited Oceola’s freedom to express her individual relationship to certain forms of black art without being misunderstood by Mrs. Ellsworth. In Hughes’ autobiographical reflection of the white critic in “Not Primitive,” he reflected that “in the end it all came back very near to the old impasse of white and Negro again, white and Negro – as most relationships do in America.”⁵⁰ Here, Hughes laments the extent to which the black self’s freedom to express his or her individuality is restricted by racial standardizations. White and black are, to Hughes, standardized fictions that absorb the individual into a generalization. Hughes’ tone in this statement comes across as simultaneously plaintive but patient; this reflects his awareness towards the inevitability of the black individual, like Ocea who feels a personal connection to expressing herself artistically through the blues, being interpreted through racial fictions like Mrs. Ellsworth’s politicized language of racial uplift. Through the characters of Mrs. Ellsworth and Oceola, Hughes incarnates the

⁵⁰ Hughes, *The Big Sea*, pp. 325

problem of the theories of Du Bois and Locke in conceiving of the black artist as a representative of racial uplift.

Hughes' attitude towards the ways in which racial standards and black cultural nationalisms restrict the black individual's self-expression should also be contextualized in his bibliography. Hughes wrote both *The Ways of White Folks* as well as his autobiography, *The Big Sea*, after 1930 – i.e. during the fall of the Harlem Renaissance and the brutal onset of the Great Depression in black urban communities. As L.P. Jackson writes, “By 1930, the best known of the black scribblers had become expatriates of sorts, and their exile would send them not just out from the physical neighborhood of Harlem, but away from the very idea of the Harlem Renaissance itself.”⁵¹ In “The Blues I’m Playing,” Hughes reckons with the reality that with the fall of Harlem and the exile of Harlem writers came the dismantlement of the liberal humanism espoused by its writers. His protagonist, Oceola returns to a black-America destroyed by a stock market crash in which “nobody had any money – except folks like Mrs. Ellsworth who had so much” that she could focus exclusively on Victorian art.⁵² However, at least for Hughes and other members of the liberal camp, the Harlem Renaissance was not meant to showcase exceptional black Americans who would promise uplift; this was a fiction. In fact, as the brutal realities of the Great Depression disadvantaged black-Americans and sent them from cabarets to the Works Progress Administration, more black artists would abandon the fiction that “the race problem had at last been solved through Art.” Hughes reflects, “I don’t know what made any Negroes think

⁵¹ Jackson, *The Indignant Generation*, pp. 17

⁵² Hughes, *The Ways of White Folks*, pp. 116

that – except that they were intellectuals doing the thinking. The ordinary Negroes hadn't heard of the Negro Renaissance. And if they had, it hadn't raised their wages any."⁵³ Here, Hughes points out how as economic despair and racial discrimination began to re-surge during the Depression and brutally disadvantage black-Americans in Harlem and across the nation, the notion of a black cultural nationality and uplift through art meant especially nothing to black-Americans. However, it would be an exaggeration to conclude, as L.P. Jackson does, that the fall of Harlem necessitated the abandonment of its ideas. As Hughes' reflections demonstrate, there was much more to the Harlem Renaissance than the idea that nationalistic art could uplift the Negro masses. Instead, the fall of the Renaissance did nothing to detract from the liberal philosophy of these young writers – i.e. the idea that black cultural nationalism did nothing but disillusion the black-Americans who heard about or participated in its celebration. Therefore, when the vogue in things Negro evaporated and the Depression sent Negro writers into financial destitution and out of Harlem, the liberal writers of the New Negro generation were still equally indignant to Du Bois and Locke's elitist conception of the artist. If the Harlem Renaissance had done anything for the New Negro black artist, it had at least given him a platform on which to voice his abandonment of black cultural nationalism and artistic elitism. As Hughes and Schuyler demonstrated through their literary works, the departure from artistic elitism and black cultural nationalism was both integral to the literature of the liberal generation and would only prove its legitimacy and structural disadvantage and discrimination resurfaced during the Depression.

⁵³ Hughes, *The Big Sea*, pp. 228

Therefore, only by looking at the literature of the young liberals for their roman á clef literary treatment of black-Americans struggling against notions of artistic elitism or black cultural nationalism can we get a sense of the achievement of these young writers in departing from the ideas of the past. Perhaps no novel does a more clear job of positing the achievement of young liberal writers as does George Schuyler's *Black No More*. I will devote my second chapter to exploring how Schuyler experimented with a new combination of satire and afro-futurism to expose the futility of Du Bois and Garvey's black cultural nationalism in explaining the black American experience. In so doing, we can get a clear sense of Schuyler's achievement in exposing the political, social, and economic machinery that bolstered the production and pervasiveness of black cultural nationalisms. Schuyler's novel leverages the absurdity of satire to posit very clearly his theory of how the Du Boisian and Garveyist nationalisms, as well as the opposing white supremacist discourses, are mass-manufactured for uncritical American consumption. His novel explores the stakes of these pervasive race fictions on the psychology of black-Americans in a way that marks a key departure beyond the Du Boisian concept of double-consciousness and the Veil.

CHAPTER II

THE MAGIC OF WHITE SKIN: COGNITIVE ERROR IN GEORGE SCHUYLER'S *BLACK NO MORE*

"I am talking of millions of men who have been skillfully injected with fear, inferiority complexes, trepidation, servility, despair, and abasement." – Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*⁵⁴

"With America's constant reiteration of the superiority of whiteness, the avid search on the part of the black masses for some key to chromatic perfection is easily understood." – George Schuyler, *Black No More*⁵⁵

"Negroes in America have less reason than any others to harbor any feelings of inferiority, although naturally they suffer from frustration. I learned very early in this life that I was colored but from the beginning this fact of life did not distress, restrain, or overburden me. One takes things as they are, lives with them, and tries to turn them to one's advantage or seeks another locale where the opportunities are more favorable." – George Schuyler, *Black and Conservative*.⁵⁶

I. Introduction: Cognitive Error as an Approach to Reading Schuyler

George Schuyler's 1931 novel, *Black No More: Being an Account of the Strange and Wonderful Working of Science in the Land of the Free, A.D. 1933-1940* explores how black and white Americans perpetuate the fiction of inherent black powerlessness. By powerlessness, I am referring generally to the structural and social disadvantages associated with being black during early 20th century America and even today. In this novel, Schuyler made two key claims with regard to the condition of black structural and casual prejudice in America. Firstly, Schuyler addressed the reality that the structural aspects about being a black-American are

⁵⁴ Fanon, pp. 7

⁵⁵ Ibid. pp. V

⁵⁶ Schuyler, *Black and Conservative*, pp. 2

objectively disempowering – examples include segregation, discriminatory housing and property laws, income inequality, lack of political representation, and the threat of racially-motivated violence. Despite these brutal structural realities, Schuyler emphasized an attitude of determination in overcoming the structural circumstances of blackness through economically rational behavior; he believed that black men and women could strive to overcome the structural disempowerment of being black through economically-motivated and pragmatic willpower. In other words, one could overcome structural dispossession despite one’s blackness in America. His second claim, however, was that casual prejudice was in fact impossible to overcome in America; in other words, racism would always exist on both sides of the color line. To be clear, I am including white racism and black cultural nationalisms under the umbrella of casual prejudice precisely because I define casual prejudice as the exercising of an essentialist narrative to describe the black individual. Schuyler blamed black cultural nationalist race leaders for perpetuating essentialist fiction and for erring that the inevitability of casual prejudice also meant the inevitability of structural disadvantage for black Americans. As Schuyler wrote in his autobiography, *Black and Conservative*, “puzzled” black race leaders “too often underestimated the human ability to adjust and adapt to environment and frequently to alter it to their advantage.”⁵⁷ Schuyler was frustrated by black individuals – both civilians and race leaders – who emphasized and raged over petty incidences of casual prejudice as an explanation for one’s inevitable structural disadvantages. An attitude of rage and continual

⁵⁷ Schuyler, *Black and Conservative*, pp. 1-2

surprise towards petty casual prejudice, he believed, impeded and diminished the mental attitude of willpower necessary for structural overcoming and optimistic behavior; this attitude, he believed, was an unnecessary and avoidable overburdening of one's mind.

By fixating on the psychological harm caused by casual prejudice, black-Americans jumped to the wrong conclusion that structural harm was also inevitable; thus, they erred cognitively. For Schuyler, this unnecessarily disadvantaging attitude was actually a cognitive or mental error that took place in the minds of black-Americans. By cognitive error, I am referring to both (i) the mental error of automatically associating black skin with inevitable structural powerlessness and (ii) the assumption that changing one's skin from black to white skin could offer the black individual authentic expression. By authenticity in this context, I am referring to the capacity for a black person to express his or her individuality without being interpreted through racial standardizations, generalizations, politicizations, and other discourses of casual prejudice. Schuyler claimed that the pursuit of authenticity was an impossible and overburdening task for the black individual. Throughout the novel, Schuyler expressed his belief that the pervasiveness of various forms of casual prejudice was simply inescapable. Therefore, because he assumed that one's black skin always provoked stereotypes from both sides of the color line, the mere act of expressing one's individuality while possessing black skin would always confront and be restricted by the interpretations of others. Schuyler wanted the black self to accept that casual prejudice in America was inevitable; in other words, there would be always racists reproducing petty racist discourses and

there would always be race leaders producing politicized and generalized conceptions of the black self – both of which obscured the individuality of the black self. Schuyler’s logic posits that the pursuit to express oneself without being misunderstood by an America that would continually reproduce race fictions was an impossible task for black-Americans.

Accepting the inevitability of causal prejudice was not enough to overcome one’s cognitive error – i.e. one’s conflation of casual and structural prejudice as inevitable. Schuyler observed that many black Americans dealt with the inevitability of casual prejudice by changing their skin color; an act only possible by mistaking white skin with structural advantage and authentic expression. By hiding from color prejudice with white skin, these black Americans believed that they could overcome their structural disadvantages as well as avoid the threats of casual prejudice to their self-expression; from Schuyler’s perspective, this was a cognitive error because it conflated the inevitability of casual prejudice with the inevitability of structural prejudice and interpreted whiteness as the solution to these two supposed inevitabilities. Schuyler’s critique of this cognitive error begins with his claim that racism, at least structurally, has a limited impact. Therefore, while the black self could not overcome casual prejudice, he could overcome structural disadvantage if he exercised enough mental willpower. Schuyler’s solution to cognitive error required the black self to exercise two forms of willpower; he must (i) accept the inevitability of color prejudice and fictions of race and, from there, learn to mentally reduce its harmful impact and (ii) accept his mobility out of structural disadvantage as a possibility that was realizable through economic

pragmatism and personal willpower. As he reflected in his autobiography, “I learned very early in this life that I was colored but from the beginning this fact of life did not distress, restrain, or overburden me. One takes things as they are, lives with them, and tries to turn them to one’s advantage or seeks another locale where the opportunities are more favorable.”⁵⁸ For Schuyler, the very act of repetitiously whitening one’s features or permanently undergoing Dr. Junius Crookman’s fictional color treatment indicated that one was in fact “distressed, restrained, and overburdened” by the factuality of his or her blackness.

Reading Schuyler’s text for its emphasis on cognitive error and cognitive willpower is not an arbitrary decision. I use the term, cognitive, to emphasize Schuyler’s conception of the mental processes through which one’s skin color mistakenly provoked a pre-determined narrative of inevitable structural and casual victimhood. I also use the term cognitive willpower, to emphasize the mental processes through which the black self could overcome structural disadvantages and reduce the psychological impact of color prejudice. Schuyler was concerned with the cognitive processes through which black individuals reproduced self-defeating attitudes towards their lives; cognitive willpower was his liberal conception of the solution to the tragic defeatism of cognitive error. Reading Schuyler for his emphasis on the cognitive and mental processes that shaped one’s relationship between skin color and mental willpower helps capture a larger philosophical shift during the Renaissance: the shift from a nationalistic promise that awakening a commonly shared black consciousness could liberate all black-

⁵⁸ Schuyler, *Black and Conservative*, pp. 2

Americans from color prejudice to the liberal humanist philosophy that asserted the inevitability of race fictions and, therefore, espoused the black individual's willpower in reducing the psychological impact of these fictions.

II. Contextualizing Schuyler in The Struggle Between Black Cultural Nationalism and Black Liberal Humanism.

Before diving into a literary analysis of *Black No More*, I will lay out the key threads of comparison between Schuyler's cognitive theory and those of the black cultural nationalists that he opposed, namely W.E.B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey. I will also clarify his intellectual location with regard to other liberal humanists, namely Langston Hughes. Schuyler positions himself in response to two of Du Bois's psychological claims – the first being the veil of American color-prejudice and the second being Du Bois's promise of the reconciliation of double-consciousness.⁵⁹ In the previous chapter, I explained Du Bois's conception of the veil as an obstructionary consciousness present in all black-Americans; Du Bois believed that the prejudiced consciousness of the veil in the black subject prevented black-Americans from recognizing their inherent African virtue. In Sylvia Winter's reading, the veil psychologically reproduced white racist narratives of black inferiority in all blacks-Americans and thereby prevented them from discovering their African identity and contributing it to American culture. This is the psychological and historical narrative through which Du Bois imagined the eventual reconciliation of double-consciousness in all black-Americans. Schuyler's argument attacked Du

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Bois's assumptions that (i) this veil of white racist consciousness was present in all black-Americans and (ii) that its destruction would reveal a common and virtuous African consciousness. Schuyler dismissed the veil as a shared experience and instead conceived of it as a cognitive error in which certain – not all – black men and women participated. Schuyler also expanded Du Bois's explanation that only white racism obstructed black self-understanding. Because he blamed the pervasiveness of white racist narratives for restricting the black masses from discovering their virtuous African self, Du Bois never considered how black-Americans were also responsible for obscuring their own self-understanding. Schuyler wanted his contemporary readers to despise black leadership for either overlooking or concealing how the black individual was cognitively responsible for reproducing his own fictions of black victimhood. In other words, it was not only white America that was responsible for fictions of inevitable black casual and structural powerlessness but also black America and its race leaders. Schuyler believed that black leadership too often perpetuated the error that the inevitability of casual prejudice also meant the inevitability of structural powerlessness. If Schuyler was expanding Du Bois's definition of the veil of white prejudice, he did so by showing how black individuals and race leaders were responsible for spreading the pervasiveness of a third-person consciousness of cognitive error that mentally reproduced fictions of inevitable black defeat in the face of casual and structural prejudice. Thus, in Schuyler's reformulation of Du Bois's theory, the psychological veil of white prejudice becomes the cognitive error of black victimhood and therefore white America could no longer be held exclusively accountable for the production of race fictions. Schuyler's

modification of the veil of white prejudice as a cognitive error maintained and produced by black Americans allows him to take on a critical approach against the older generation of race leaders and black cultural nationalists.

Schuyler also took issue with what he believed Du Bois and Garvey had in common – their African essentialist teleology. In his aforementioned 1926 essay, “The Negro-Art Hokum,” Schuyler responded directly against the claim that an African cultural nationalism would somehow collapse the contradiction of being black and being American; he was responding to Du Bois’s teleological narrative that when black-Americans and black artists lifted the “veil of white color prejudice,” they could begin to rediscover and therefore contribute their African virtues to the kingdom of American culture. To this teleological claim, Schuyler retorted that:

“The work of these black artists is no more expressive of the Negro soul – as the gushers put it – than are the scribbling of Octavus [Roy] Cohen or Hugh Wiley. This, of course, is easily understood if one stops to realize that the Aframerican is merely a lampblack Anglo-Saxon. If the European immigrant after two or three generations of exposure to our schools, politics, advertising, moral crusades, and restaurants becomes indistinguishable from the mass of Americans of the older stock, how much truer must it be for the sons of Ham who have been subjected to what the uplifters call Americanism for the last three hundred years. Aside from color, which ranges from very dark brown to pink, your American Negro is just plain American.”⁶⁰

Schuyler redefined Du Bois’s definitions of both blackness and America in this statement. For starters, he announced that there no longer existed a Negro soul; Schuyler’s tone was extremely declarative of the death of this Negro soul as a

⁶⁰ Honey and Patton, *Double Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology*, pp. 37

possible explanation for the commonality between blacks in America and across the globe. His declarative tone also suggests the contentiousness of an anti-Du Boisian position during this time period. Schuyler was part of a generational struggle in which men like Garvey and Du Bois set the terms and conditions of the debate over what constituted the black-American political identity. Ultimately, Schuyler's essay refuted the nationalist belief in a distinctly African commonality. However, Schuyler's short essay rejected the African identity hastily by collapsing black and American identities into one homogenous definition – American. He defined “America” as a mixture of shared schools, politics, arts, moral tenets, and cuisines shared by blacks and whites in the same social and economic location. In other words, he assumed that all Americans shared a common identity and therefore the fiction of racial difference could dissolve once this American identity was recognized for its existence across color lines. By 1931, however, Schuyler adjusted his claim that blackness and America were, in fact, the same thing – or, as he put it in the “Negro-Art Hokum,” that “the Afro-American is subject to the same economic and social forces that mold the actions and thoughts of the white Americans.”⁶¹ His 1931 novel, *Black No More*, explores the social and economic realities that make certain black cognitive processes, attitudes, and race languages exclusive to black individuals – i.e. social and economic realities of being black that make black and white thought distinct. Schuyler took a new position that black and white Americans subscribed to different and inevitable race fictions that were responsible for perpetuating the false notion that blacks and whites were essentially different; this

⁶¹ Ibid, pp. 37

fiction, Schuyler believed, would exist in America *ad infinitum*. In other words, casual prejudice was inevitable. He, therefore, dedicated *Black No More* to addressing the impact of this inevitability on black-Americans. He used the genre of satire and afro-futurism to expose the mechanics and the consequences of a mental process through which black-Americans misinterpreted the inevitability of causal prejudice as the simultaneous and necessary inevitability of structural powerlessness. He also pointed fingers at the black cultural nationalist leaders, because he saw them as responsible for publically perpetuating this mental error of black victimhood and defeat.

If Schuyler took issue with Du Bois's African nationalism, he adopted an even harsher stance against Marcus Garvey for his conviction that Negroes needed to emigrate to Liberia in order to overcome the structural and causal disadvantages of being black in America. From Schuyler's perspective, Back-To-Africa leader, Marcus Garvey, epitomized the problem with black leadership precisely because he interpreted the structural and casual prejudices against black-Americans as a justification to give up on the entire experience of being black and being in America. From Schuyler's perspective, Garvey's nationalism was a hilariously flawed assertion of cognitive error; Garvey's nationalist position was so absurd that Schuyler satirized Garvey with the character of Santop Licorice in *Black No More* – a character that ends up “selling out the race” to the KKK and undergoing Crookman's color treatment.⁶² Schuyler leveraged this satire to argue that Garvey's mass emigration propaganda was the result of his cognitive error that (i) automatically

⁶² Schuyler, *Black No More*, pp. 72

interpreted the inevitability of casual prejudice as a signifier of inevitable black structural powerlessness in America and (ii) suffered from a conviction that the black self could never construct and express an authentic identity in America because of the inevitability of color prejudice. What distinguished Du Bois from Garvey was Garvey's notion that, by moving to Africa, black-Americans would all finally escape the imposition of stereotypes on their African identity and therefore be free to construct the authentic black self around a supposedly shared African nationalism. Schuyler favored Du Bois because he at least had a vision of structural overcoming for black-Americans – albeit one that was based on the mistake that black-Americans shared in African virtue and could leverage it to overcome structural and casual prejudice. Schuyler and Garvey, unlike Du Bois, believed that casual prejudice would never be overcome in America. However, Schuyler fumed at Garvey's nationalism for erring that because casual prejudice was inevitable, so was structural disadvantage, and therefore Negroes should "quit" America. In *Black No More*, Santop Licorice's (Garvey's) black nation fails to materialize due to the black demand for Dr. Crookman's color sanitariums. Licorice ironically chooses to undergo color treatment and become white. This satire reflects Schuyler's summary of Garvey as an extremist with an impractically radical solution to the structural and casual disadvantages of being black in America.

Schuyler leverages satire to posit his liberal position against nationalistic fictions of race. His novel, for example, forced Garvey to consider the options if the promise of his black nation were to fail – which it actually did with the 1922

bankruptcy of Garvey's ship-company, the Black Star Line.⁶³ Schuyler's novel asks the following: what would happen to Garvey's Pan-African vision if blacks were stuck in America and had the option to stay white? In *Black No More*, Schuyler wrote:

“Mr. Licorice, for some fifteen years, had been profitably advocating for the emigration of all the American Negroes to Africa. ... But [because of competition with Crookman's business] there was little reaching for check books in his office nowadays. He had been as hard hit as the other Negroes. Why should anybody in the Negro race want to go back to Africa at a cost of five hundred dollars for passage when they could stay in America and get white for fifty dollars?”⁶⁴

Because Licorice/Garvey's black nation failed to materialize due to the success of Crookman's sanitariums, then the black self could only achieve authentic expression and structural advantage by becoming white; this is the problem that Schuyler sought to expose in Garvey's propaganda. According to Schuyler's argument, Garvey mistook white skin as a signifier of inevitable structural and casual power and black skin as a signifier of inevitable structural and casual disempowerment in America. So, if blacks had no African nation to which they could escape, Garvey's followers would either suffer forever as black or take the option to appear white. Schuyler's satire serves a distinctly argumentative purpose against Garvey's Pan-African nationalism. He constructs a world in which he can test the feasibility of Garvey's black cultural nationalism against the inevitability of color prejudice and the impossibility of the African nation. In Schuyler's autobiography, *Black and Conservative*, he dismissed the claim that Africa would even be structurally more advantageous for the black-American than America already was. Schuyler claims:

⁶³ Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, pp. 38-39

⁶⁴ Schuyler, *Black No More*, pp. 62-63

“It is not easy being a black man in the United States but it is easier than anywhere else I know for him to get the best schooling, the best living conditions, the best economic advantages, the best security, the greatest mobility and the best health... the people have to live and strive, and to do that they must have feelings of hope.”⁶⁵

If a return to Africa were no longer possible or realistically advantageous, black Americans in *Black No More* felt they had to continue to suffer as black (because they erred that being black meant inevitable structural disadvantage) or prosper by becoming white. However, the above statement captures Schuyler’s alternative philosophy against this cognitive error: to remain black, limit the psychological damage of casual prejudice, and overcome the structural disadvantages of black skin. In this context, Schuyler’s satire should be read for the ways in which it undermined the Back-To-Africa logic of Marcus Garvey.

Overall, this novel marks Schuyler’s shift into the same liberal camp as Langston Hughes. As I argued in the previous chapter, Hughes was concerned with how the pervasiveness of race fictions tragically misinterpreted and politicized the infinite expressions of black individualism into a standardized fiction; in short, America would always politicize black bodies into some essentializing fiction or another – i.e. casual prejudice was inevitable across color lines. While Schuyler agreed with Hughes’ concern with the ways in which white racism as well as black cultural nationalism politicized and essentialized the black self (albeit drastically differently), Schuyler’s literature emphasized how an attitude of willpower could assist black Americans in overcoming the psychological impact of these casual prejudices. To be clear, I am including white racism and black cultural nationalisms

⁶⁵ Schuyler, *Black and Conservative: The Autobiography of George S. Schuyler*. pp. 121

under the umbrella of casual prejudice precisely because I define casual prejudice as the exercising of an essentialist narrative to describe the black individual. In other words, while Hughes' work lamented how authenticity was tragically impossible for the black subject, Schuyler argued that the black self should exercise willpower and ignore the intended harm of color prejudice or the intended "uplift" of black cultural nationalisms; nevertheless, both agreed that the black self's authenticity was compromised by the inevitability of race fictions dispersing across both sides of the color line. Schuyler, more so than Hughes, emphasized a solution to this issue: the black self must exercise his willpower in order to ignore race fictions and focus exclusively on overcoming structural disadvantage. To do so, the black individual must simply ignore the psychological impact of discourses that aim to generalize, politicize, uplift, or degrade him into a standardized narrative. In other words, the more one can ignore narratives of color prejudice and black cultural nationalism, the more one is disposed to accumulate money and arrive at a more favorable economic and structural location. As Dr. Johnson, one of Dr. Crookman's close associates remarks in the novel, "when yuh got money yuh kin git anything in this man's country."⁶⁶ Johnson's comment reflects Schuyler's belief in the determination to overcome one's structural disadvantage. Meanwhile, Schuyler claimed that authenticity could never exist between the black self and society's generalized and politicized conceptions of him. To care about aligning oneself with an America full of mistaken or prejudiced fictions of race could only distract the black self from overcoming the avoidable challenge of racism – structural disadvantage. It is

⁶⁶ Ibid, pp. 49

through the narrative of Max Fisher in *Black No More* that Schuyler not only distinguished himself from black cultural nationalists like Du Bois and Garvey but also made the radically liberal claim that the black individual should minimize the psychological damage of color prejudice and focus exclusively on getting ahead structurally. While Schuyler would agree that money cannot guarantee authenticity as a black individual, he espouses this type of economic willpower for its confidence and determination to overcome structural prejudice.

III. *Black No More*: Fictioning Cognitive Error.

In Schuyler's satire, Dr. Junius Crookman, a light-skinned self-proclaimed "race man", invents a glandular and electrical process permanently transforming black skin and features into Caucasian ones – albeit with no genetic permanence. By the end of the novel, all black-Americans emptied their bank accounts, paid Crookman's supposedly "reasonable" \$50 fee, and crossed the color line. As Dr. Foster, a colleague of Crookman remarks, "Everything that looks white ain't white in this man's country."⁶⁷ Despite the erosion of color as a reliable signifier of one's racial background, white America continued to try to exercise color prejudice against blackness. One newspaper article declares, "THE OFFSPRING OF THESE WHITENED NEGROES WILL BE NEGROES!"⁶⁸ So, as white Americans dread over the implications of color treatment and its potential to erode white structural privilege, they express an unwavering determination to reassert racial distinctions once the new generation of black Negroes was born. For racist America, the future Negro

⁶⁷ Schuyler, *Black No More*, pp. 29

⁶⁸ Schuyler, *Black No More*, pp. 25

generation becomes a promise of the return to normal modes of color prejudice; for black-America, they become the site of Crookman's color science. Accordingly, Crookman develops hospitals that can either dispose of the Negro babies or perform color treatment upon them. Meanwhile, because so many white women were birthing black babies and "there was no way of telling a real Caucasian from an imitation one, every stranger was viewed with suspicion, which had a very salutary effect on the standard of sex morality in the United States...chastity became a virtue."⁶⁹ By showing how "cases" of black children born to ostensibly white parents resulted in the rise of chastity as a virtue, Schuyler's satire gives us a sense of the extent to which white America was committed to maintaining the fiction of color prejudice and politicizing blackness. Schuyler's posits that Americans would actually give up sex in order to maintain the project of color prejudice. Hereditary science also becomes an important scientific tool with which racist America can use statistical data to distinguish American families descending from Anglo-Saxon lineage. To their mortification, white statisticians discovered that most "social leaders, especially of Anglo-Saxon lineage, were actually descendants of the colonial stock that came here in bondage. They also associated with slaves, in many cases worked and slept with them. They intermixed with the blacks and the women were sexually exploited by their masters."⁷⁰ If Crookman's color treatment made it so that color was no longer a visual signifier to identify blackness, sexual chastity, hereditary science, and hospitals become new tools through which the narrative of color prejudice can maintain itself. This is all to say that, through satire and afro-

⁶⁹ Ibid, pp. 73-74

⁷⁰ Ibid, pp. 119

futurism, Schuyler posits that color prejudice was unbendable and inevitable; this inevitability becomes most clear, ironically, when color signifiers begin to dissolve. What we gain in Schuyler's satirical and afro-futurist treatment of color prejudice is a clarity about the pervasiveness and inescapability of color prejudice. If liberal thinker and author of the roman á clef critique of blue vein society, *Blacker The Berry*, Wallace Thurman declared that, "The time has come now when the Negro artist can be his true self and pander to the stupidities of no one, either white or black," Schuyler's satire exposed the pervasiveness of the American "stupidity" of color prejudice.⁷¹ By exposing this "stupidity," he implicitly warned against being adopted into these fictions of essential racial meaning and thereby posited the power of an attitude of cognitive willpower – a theory that I will address later.

Color, ironically, returns as a reliable visual indicator of one's blackness once Dr. Crookman imprudently publishes a monograph of the skin pigmentation results of Black No More Inc., concluding that, "the new Caucasians were from two to three shades lighter than the old Caucasians."⁷² In other words, being *too* white meant that one was once a Negro. With this scientific evidence, white Americans hastily concludes that "if it were true that extreme whiteness was evidence of the possession of Negro blood ... then surely it were well not to be so white."⁷³ Ironically, this scientific discovery made white racists exercise color prejudice against whiteness – leaving open the potential to mistakenly exert color prejudice against non-Negroes who just happened fit the color profile of appearing *too* white. Beyond

⁷¹ qtd. in Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was In Vogue*, pp. 229

⁷² Ibid, pp. 148

⁷³ Ibid, pp. 148

Schuyler's humor, however, is his insightful claim that racist America's obsession with maintaining a narrative of color prejudice was simply inevitable. We can contrast this with Du Bois's teleological narrative of cultural nationalism in which he imagined color prejudice vanishing once black-Americans discovered and contributed their African virtue to American culture. If in Schuyler's 1926 essay, "The Negro-Art Hokum," he critiqued Du Bois's belief in the Negro soul as naïve, he maintained the belief that color-prejudice could be overcome, at least in his early thought. However, this novel marks Schuyler's departure from the belief that America could somehow overcome color prejudice. This shift is key to understanding Schuyler's intellectual shift as a liberal humanist; it provided the basis on which Schuyler could legitimize his philosophy that black-Americans must exercise personal willpower in order to ignore or diminish the impact of color-prejudice on their determination to overcome structural disadvantage – i.e. overcome cognitive error. In other words, by shifting towards a belief in the inevitability of color prejudice and the surmountability of structural disadvantage, Schuyler could begin to assert the liberal claim that the black individual must dedicate his being, his mental faculties, his immediate and long-term attention exclusively to overcoming structural disadvantage. He believed that because color prejudice was inevitable, the black individual needed to adopt a way of being in which he dedicated his entire existence to overcoming structural prejudice and diminishing the psychological harm of color prejudice; I am not espousing Schuyler's attitude of determined willpower but rather attempting to situate it as a

response to Du Bois's cultural nationalism which posited that recognition of the Negro soul could somehow solve the pervasiveness of color prejudice.

A primary mainspring of cognitive error, Schuyler believed, was the mistaken belief that the black self could somehow achieve an authentic relationship in which American society did not politicize his blackness and instead recognized him for his individuality. If color prejudice was inevitable, some black Americans mistakenly thought that manipulating their features to appear white would protect them against color prejudice and therefore allow them to express their individuality freely and authentically. For Schuyler, this belief was flawed because it saw whiteness as the only solution to one's blackness. Instead, Schuyler favored a solution in which the black individual could live within their skin color and, from there, focus exclusively on overcoming structural disadvantage with a determined willpower. However, this meant that the black self had to reject the pursuit of authentic expression as an achievable ideal. Because color prejudice and politicizing race fictions about the black self were so pervasive across color lines, to express one's identity while black would always result in its politicization. Here, Schuyler established his radically liberal position against Du Bois's teleological conception of double-consciousness: the black individual should never expect his identity to be readily understood by an America that was inevitably prejudiced across color lines. If Du Bois believed that the narrative of double consciousness would end in black-Americans discovering their inherent African virtue and contributing it to a supposedly attentive and open American audience, Schuyler saw that not only as a falsity but also as a race politicization of its own. In *Black No More*, Schuyler

satirized Du Bois as Dr. Shakespeare Agamemnon Beard, a character that espouses the potential for black-Americans to discover and teach America the “love of the suffering of the black race... sorrow songs... the Goddess of the Nile... and the Great Sphinx.”⁷⁴ Dr. Beard’s hope in the potential for these vague representations of Africa and African feeling, Schuyler established, could not undo the inevitability of America’s continuous reproduction of prejudicial ideas towards blackness. Schuyler also wanted to point out that Du Bois’s theory was actually a political generalization of the black experience. Therefore, if white America as well as black race leaders were complicit in reproducing fictions about the black race, the black self should not reliably expect to achieve authentic expression without being politicized or generalized in some capacity; in other words, the pursuit of authentic expression as a black individual was simply a naïve expectation, a fool’s errand – at least according to Schuyler. At the core of Schuyler’s critique against Du Bois was the claim that casual prejudice was inevitable in America. Because Du Bois believed that African virtue could eventually solve American color prejudice, he hardly explored the cognitive processes with which black Americans interpreted the inevitability of color prejudice in their daily lives. Instead, Du Bois was simply too caught up in his black nationalist narrative of African virtue and its redemptive potential for America as a whole.

In a world in which color prejudice was inescapable, Schuyler constructs characters that either leverage the factual reality of color prejudice to their advantage or fall victim to its omnipresence. Schuyler espoused characters that

⁷⁴ Schuyler, *Black No More*, pp. 55

could disregard the inevitability of color prejudice because their ability to do so reflected that they were in fact not overburdened with the factuality of their blackness as a casual and structural inhibition. These characters, therefore, could exert their immediate and long-term attention towards structural overcoming. Throughout the satire, Schuyler favorably treated characters that manipulated color prejudice and race fictions to their economic advantage, even as it disadvantaged those who bought into the race fiction they were selling. In *Black No More*, Schuyler continually turned race fictions (e.g. white supremacy, black victimhood, the necessity to appear white) into commodities that savvy and pragmatic black characters sold to other black Americans caught up in cognitive error; because of this, Schuyler appears completely unsympathetic to the ways in which black-Americans suffered from cognitive error. Based on Schuyler's positive treatment of characters like Max Fisher and Madame Sisseretta Blandish – characters who sell race fictions to get ahead – it would seem that he took an offensive approach towards black Americans suffering from cognitive error. Based on this reading, Garvey and Du Bois would perhaps call Schuyler a “race-traitor.” If we think back to Langston Hughes' story, “The Blues I'm Playing,” Hughes laments the ways in which black artists were coerced into selling the race fiction that by performing “refined” and “Victorian” classical music, certain distinguished or talented Negroes would redeem the Negro masses; this is Hughes' aforementioned critique of Du Bois's Victorian moralism and Alain Locke's eager celebration of the Negro writer as a pure artist. Hughes' protagonist, Oceola, finally triumphs over Mrs. Ellsworth's determination to project the fiction that a black artist was a symbol and

spokesperson of progress for the uneducated Negro masses.⁷⁵ In this story, as well as in the “Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” Hughes asserts that black-Americans needed to overcome the ways in which race fictions distorted their ability to find and express their authentic identity. Schuyler was similarly frustrated by what he believed was the pervasiveness of race fictions. It is important to remember that his novel takes on a satirical treatment towards the issue of pervasive color prejudice; in other words, his treatment of Max and Madame Blandish is intended to be ironic and hyperbolic. Because of this fact, his novel cannot be read as an espousal of the commodification of race fictions but rather as a satirical approach to exposing the ways in which black-Americans fell victim to race fictions. Therefore, we must read Schuyler’s protagonists with his novel’s satirical intent in mind. The satirical genre allowed him to leverage hyperbole and irony as strategic tools in evoking (i) the cognitive processes through which black-Americans tragically and unnecessarily disadvantaged themselves and (ii) how race fictions were reproduced in popular discourses of white supremacy as well as those of black cultural nationalism.

With Schuyler’s satirical use of the satirical genre in mind, Madame Blandish – a “community business leader” and the owner of a Harlem-based hair-straightening shop – can be read as a representative of Schuyler’s espoused attitude of willpower. In other words, her questionable ethical location as a salesperson of the demand for a white appearance is actually an irony meant to evoke her attitude of economic pragmatism. As she considers whether to undergo Crookman’s

⁷⁵ Hughes, *The Ways of White Folks*, pp. 122

treatment, Madame Blandish reflects on her position as a black Harlemitte who had overcome black structural disadvantages by opening a very profitable hair-straightening business. Schuyler most certainly constructed Madame Blandish as a fictional representation of Madame C.J. Walker, the hair-straightening queen of Harlem, and the first American woman of color to make her own millions.⁷⁶ Similarly to Madame Walker, Blandish leverages the Harlem community's demand for white features to her economic advantage. Her insight was to observe how other black-Americans demanded skin whiteners and hair straighteners as visual masks against black-targeted prejudice. Schuyler was most likely aware that his reader questioned Blandish's ethics. Many of his contemporaries in fact voiced ethical critiques against the real Madame C.J. Walker for making her millions by selling skin-whitening cosmetic products.⁷⁷ However, we must recall that Blandish serves an expository purpose in Schuyler's satire: to expose the cognitive errors that allowed black individuals to unnecessarily spend their resources on expensive and time-consuming skin whitening products. In this sense, Blandish represents Schuyler's philosophy that to fall victim to certain race fictions – e.g. the necessity to spend money to appear white in order to avoid casual prejudice – only diminishes one's capacity to leverage economic opportunity. Instead of being the one buying into this race fiction, Blandish is the one selling the fiction to other black-Americans; this irony is meant to distinguish between those who suffer from cognitive error and spend their money wastefully and those who do not suffer from cognitive error and earn money accordingly.

⁷⁶ Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was In Vogue*, pp. 107

⁷⁷ Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was In Vogue*, pp. 107

In order to overcome structural disadvantages associated with being a black woman, Blandish is capable of separating the impact of inevitable casual prejudice from her economic determinations. With the rise of Crookman's sanitariums, Madame Blandish reflects that, "she had lived long enough to have no illusions about the magic of a white skin. She liked her business and she liked her social position in Harlem. As a white woman she would have to start all over again... Here, at least she was somebody. In the great Caucasian world she would be just another white woman."⁷⁸ Because of the success of Crookman's sanitariums, the mass of black-Americans and therefore Blandish's customers no longer require hair-straightening services. Therefore, her decision to become white is exclusively based on pragmatics and economic necessity. Blandish also admits that, "it would be nice to get over being the butt for jokes and petty prejudice."⁷⁹ However, the inevitability of being black and experiencing petty casual prejudice is not what drives her to cross the color line and become white. Madame Blandish's hesitation to become white is purely economic. This attitude of pragmatism in her decision reminds us of Schuyler's central critique of cognitive error – that structural advantage is not magically guaranteed with white skin. While many black-Americans conflated whiteness with inevitable structural power and authenticity, Madame Blandish sees access to structural power as determined by one's willpower and not necessarily by one's color. In other words, Blandish recognizes that she will still have to work and exercise willpower in order to secure a position of structural advantage, even in the white world. Blandish is not concerned with achieving authentic expression in an

⁷⁸ Schuyler, *Black No More*, pp. 33

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 33

America bursting with color prejudice and other fictions of race; she is simply money-driven and within this economic determination, her ability to express her black self against petty racism only weighs in as an afterthought.

Schuyler directs our attention to how black-Americans suffering from cognitive error remained committed to whitening their features while ignoring this practice as a physically painful and financially unnecessary process. In other words, Schuyler was disturbed by the extent to which black Americans suffering from cognitive error were committed to maintaining the illusion that lighter skin meant structural advantage as well as avoidance of casual prejudice. Throughout the Harlem Renaissance, cosmetic products such as electric skin refiners, face bleachers, and “kink no more” hair straighteners were heavily advertised and consumed by urban elites, the middle class, as well as poor and working class black-Americans.⁸⁰ Schuyler argued that this demand for white features was a direct result of the cognitive error of interpreting whiteness as a signifier of access to structural power and authenticity. This error impels black Americans to waste money on these chemical cosmetic products and repeatedly deface their skin in the image of whiteness. Schuyler emphasizes the repetitious aspect of these temporary skin whiteners and hair straighteners. In the Preface to the novel, he writes that “the immediate and unfailing straightening of the most stubborn Negro hair, a preparation called Kink-No-More, [advertised] a name not wholly accurate since users of it were forced to renew the treatment every fortnight.”⁸¹ Schuyler draws

⁸⁰ Lindsay, “Black No More: Skin Bleaching and the Emergence of New Negro Womanhood Beauty Culture,” pp. 103

⁸¹ Schuyler, *Black No More*, pp. v

our attention to the sheer waste of money and time expended on this project to control “savage” or “ugly” black features in favor of whiteness; to characters like Miss Simpson – a solicitor of Blandish’s Kink No More products – this temporary and painful feature-lightening seems like an obvious and necessary precaution to avoiding color prejudice and to positioning oneself as more likely to overcome structural disadvantage. Schuyler, however, sought to expose how this economically wasteful and physically painful daily treatment was, in fact, the result of an unnecessary cognitive error. Schuyler described the hair straighteners and skin bleachers as a “wrenching” and “torturous” “tyranny” on the body.⁸² Schuyler’s insight was to reveal why black-Americans, cognitively, perceived this cosmetic manipulation as a necessity, irregardless of the pain and discomfort it inflicted upon their bodies every day. If black Americans were treating their bodies as sites of painful cosmetic manipulation, Schuyler wanted them to consider how their physical relationship with their bodies becomes compromised under the detrimental logic of a cognitive error. Choosing to inflict and endure this pain speaks to the extent to which Schuyler thought that black-Americans suffering from cognitive error were incapable of imagining themselves outside of a location of structural and causal victimhood as long as they possessed black skin; in this sense, Schuyler felt that he and other black spokespeople during his time period had a responsibility to exposing the ways in which black individuals suffered from fictions of race. We will later explore how Schuyler’s satire bashes race leaders for their lack of commitment to this task.

⁸² Ibid, pp. 14

Schuyler explicated the persistence of cognitive error in his treatment of Miss Simpson – a working class Harlemitte woman soliciting Madame Blandish’s cosmetic products. Miss Simpson passes Madame Blandish’s hair-straightening salon reflecting that, “Two weeks before she would have been a rare sight in the Black Belt because her kinky hair was not straightened. Miss Simpson had vowed that she wasn’t going to spend any dollar a week having her hair “done” when she only lacked fifteen dollars of having money enough to quit the Negro race forever.”⁸³ She tells Miss Blandish that she could “hold out with the bad hair” until her color treatment operation.⁸⁴ The idea that she needed to somehow “hold out” or endure appearing *too* black reflects her anxiety towards her skin color as a risk to her freedom of expression; Miss Simpson, this passage suggests, understands her blackness as a threat to her projection of her identity. In other words, she experiences her blackness as annoying or obstructionary precisely because she believes it makes her a target of prejudicial ideas about blackness. If she appears *too* black – i.e. with “unstraightened” and “bad” hair – she is at risk of not attracting Harlem men (many of whom, this novel describes, preferred white features) and also at risk of petty prejudice. Miss Simpson, therefore, accepts what Schuyler would consider true – the inevitability of color prejudice towards black skin; in other words, Schuyler believed that she rightly understands that her skin color will always put her at risk of provoking stereotypes from both sides of the color line. Her mistake is to turn to white skin as a solution for her casual and structural disadvantages. In other words, possessing white skin did not mean that she could

⁸³ Schuyler, *Black No More*, pp. 32

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 33

project whatever type of identity she so desired – i.e. achieve authenticity.

Moreover, she fails to recognize that as she whitens her skin, she must also hide the knowledge that she was once black – i.e. hide an inescapable truth of her inner identity. She, therefore, does not achieve authentic expression as a white woman because she must continue to hide her former blackness.

Schuyler was intent on criticizing characters that mistakenly conflated the freedom of authentic expression with possessing white skin. He explored how black Americans like Miss Simpson (and later, Max Fisher), who felt a necessity to appear white, also forced themselves to be complicit and subservient to discourses of white prejudice. Miss Simpson must reproduce racist fictions as a white woman and ignore the glaring fact that she was once black; this creates a psychological discord that she cannot ignore. It is precisely because the appearance of white skin will not provoke stereotypes about blackness that Miss Simpson feels she has achieved authenticity. Despite her white appearance protecting her from color prejudice, however, the society with which she believes she is achieving an authentic relationship holds a variety of inescapable fictions about blackness; this produces, in her mind, an inauthentic tension between her private/inner identity as a formerly black woman and her new white society. Therefore, even if she escapes being a target of prejudice, she is still disturbed and overburdened by the continual fictions of prejudice against blacks. If purchasing white skin does anything, it only forces her to exist more proximately to the source of racist discourses about black people.

The novel's protagonist Max Fisher – who undergoes color treatment and becomes the leader of the KKK-equivalent, the Knight of Nordica – is Schuyler's

most ironic expression of the impossibility of authenticity as a black or formerly black individual. We laugh with Max as he perpetuates the fiction of white superiority and we are concerned when his wife, Helen, almost discovers his blackness as she delivers his black child; in short, we support him as the satirical protagonist despite his lack of ethics. At first, Max is equally as complicit as Miss Simpson in participating in a cognitive error in which whiteness is assumed to bring about authentic expression and structural power. Max believes that a feeling of harmony or “peace with the world” is only possible as a white man. This, of course, is a result of his mistaken belief in the automatic structural advantage of being white as well as a belief in the illusion that white skin grants an authentic relationship between self and society. Schuyler writes:

“He [Max] would just play around, enjoy life, and laugh at the white folks up his sleeve. God! What an adventure! What a treat it would be to mingle with white people in places where as a youth he had never dared to enter. At last he felt like an American citizen. He... sank back in his seat feeling at peace with the world.”⁸⁵

As a former Negro with white skin, Max imagines that he can privately “laugh at white folks” instead of “being the butt for jokes and petty prejudice.”⁸⁶ Schuyler’s distinction between “being laughed at” and “laughing at” white America establishes a subtle distinction between accepting one’s private blackness or feeling disturbed at its inauthenticity. By private blackness, I am referring to the phenomenon of being a whitened Negro associating with racist white American society – e.g. the experience of any black-American who “passed” over the color line and moved out

⁸⁵ Ibid. pp. 23

⁸⁶ Ibid, pp. 33

of Harlem to live as a white individual. At first, as Max begins his new white life he feels that he is *too* proximate to white racist discourses. He begins to consider how his appearance as a white man does not necessarily grant him “peace” or authenticity between himself and his white society but rather produces a psychological discord. To use Max’s distinction, his awareness to his private blackness and the racism of his compatriots prevents him from simply laughing at the white folks around him. His white skin, he discovers, will require him to ingenuously “laugh at” black people, not just white people. This is an inauthentic act required for him to “pass” as a white man. When the color prejudice of his white companions enrages him, Max feels nostalgic towards black people and longs to interact with them. Schuyler writes:

“Often when the desire for the happy-go-lucky, jovial, good-fellowship of the Negroes came upon him, he would go down to Auburn Avenue, looking at the dark-folk and listening to their conversation and banter... The unreasoning and illogical color prejudice of most of the [white] people with whom he was forced to associate, infuriated him. He often laughed cynically when some coarse, ignorant white man voiced his opinion concerning the inferior mentality of the Negroes. He was moving in white society now and he could compare it with the society he had known as a Negro in Atlanta and Harlem. What a let-down it was from the good breeding, sophistication, refinement, and gentle cynicism to which he had been accustomed as a popular young man about town in New York’s Black Belt. He was not able to articulate this feeling but he was conscious of the reaction nevertheless.”⁸⁷

Here, Max feels and admits his connection to a distinctly black urban culture. So, when he pretends to share color prejudiced beliefs of white supremacy he is exercising racism against other Negroes as well as his private self – a reality from which he feels he cannot escape precisely because he cannot return back to his black

⁸⁷ Ibid, pp. 34-35

community. As Max observes this black community, Schuyler clarifies that they “did not want him around. He was a white man and thus suspect.”⁸⁸ He, therefore, becomes distinctly aware of the extent to which his private black identity and his public white identity are, in fact, inassimilable in white and black America respectively. This is a critical turning point for Max as his illusion that his whiteness would bring about authenticity shatters. He begins to outgrow, at least inarticulately, the cognitive error that his whiteness necessarily granted him authentic expression of his inner identity. Max, Miss Simpson, and all other whitened Negroes must live with the knowledge that their identity as privately black individuals with white masks was, in fact, inassimilable in an America that continued to suffer from what Schuyler believed was inevitable color prejudice. Schuyler described how his black characters, particularly Max, confront this particular relationship of inauthenticity as a private mental experience. In other words, because Max cannot erase his memory that he was once black, he will continue to feel inauthentic in an America that continued to believe in fictions of race. Perhaps Schuyler did not introduce the fictional and equally improbable science of memory-deletion into Crookman’s color treatment procedure precisely because it would have solved this issue of cognitive inauthenticity. At any rate, Max must live with his private blackness and therefore his whiteness cannot change his feelings of disgust and frustration with America’s color prejudice. In order to cope with his proximity to white racism as well as his inauthentic life, Max develops an ironic and shrill attitude towards all race fictions.

⁸⁸ Ibid, pp. 34

From this moment onward, Max develops and embraces the inauthentic relationship between his private blackness and his public role as the leader of the Knights of Nordica – a contradiction that marks Max’s complete abandonment of the pursuit of authenticity as a possibility for the whitened Negro or even for the black Americans who remained black. By accepting the inevitability of inauthenticity between blackness and America, Max begins to focus his attention on making money. Max leverages the fiction of white superiority to trick a horde of racist southerners and their leader, Reverend Givens, into giving him money to fight against the “evil” threat of Black No More, incorporated. Schuyler writes:

“Matthew told them at the top of his voice what they believed: i.e., that a white skin was a sure indication of the possession of superior intellectual and moral qualities; that all Negroes were inferior to them; that God had intended for the United States to be a white man’s country and that with His help they could keep it so; that their sons and brothers might inadvertently marry Negresses or, worse, their sisters and daughters might marry Negroes, if Black No More, Incorporated, was permitted to continue its dangerous activities.... For an hour he spoke, interrupted at intervals by enthusiastic gales of applause, and as he spoke his eye wandered to the females in the audience, noting the comeliest ones. He wound up with a spirited appeal for eager soldiers to join the Knights of Nordica at five dollars per head.”⁸⁹

By developing an ironic attitude towards himself and his exposure to white racist fictions, Max can “laugh at” white people while he profits from their ignorant beliefs. What makes Max’s enthusiastic speech so amusing is Schuyler’s underlying assertion that black individuals would make great KKK spokesmen, precisely because they have the no illusions about the fiction of white supremacy and instead understand it from the perspective of victimhood. In other words, the Max can see

⁸⁹ Schuyler, *Black No More*, pp. 45

white racism for what it is and therefore naturally know how to reproduce its fiction even more enthusiastically and evocatively than could a white KKK leader. Max's newfound irony towards white racism and his location as a privately black man provide the conditions for him to brilliantly exploit white Americans for their belief in the fictions of white supremacy. Schuyler was aware of the disturbing ethics of Max's complicity in fueling a revival of KKK prejudice and violence as a means of personal financial profit. Nevertheless, despite Schuyler's extremely satirical approach, he espoused Max for breaking out of the illusion that authenticity between was possible as a whitened Negro. This abandonment allows Max to develop a critical attitude in which he can finally "see through" the fiction of racial discourses. He becomes less concerned with expressing his inner identity publicly and instead develops a private language of irony against the fictions of race in America. With this private language of satire, he can also leverage white supremacy (and later black cultural nationalism) to his economic advantage. Therefore, it is not Max's whiteness that necessarily gives him structural power but rather his newfound cognition. It is his ability to privately embrace the irony of his inauthenticity that allows him to profit off of the "white mob's" mistaken belief in their inherent supremacy. Therefore, Schuyler's satire cannot be read without recognizing Schuyler's espousal of Max's cognitive and financial triumph over the pervasiveness and inevitability of race fiction.

Earlier in the novel, when Max possessed black skin and fell victim to his belief in the necessity to appear white and possess white women, he never spent his money gainfully. Instead of discovering how to be on the "other end of the joke," he

allows himself to fall victim to petty prejudice. During this time, Max meets Helen – his future white wife – at a Harlem cabaret and spends his own money to get her alcohol. She crushes his flirtatious overture to dance declaring, “I never dance with Niggers.”⁹⁰ Max “returned crushed and angry to his place [in the cabaret] without a word.”⁹¹ Schuyler described Max as simultaneously furious yet voiceless, full of protest yet subservient to her petty burst of color prejudice. Despite Max’s justified frustration with this instance of color prejudice, Schuyler insisted that Max was naïve and reckless to pursue Helen in the first place. Max’s hope in Helen responding to his flirtation was simultaneously his hope that color prejudice was not inevitable. In Schuyler’s world, however, color prejudice is inevitable and because we know this as readers, we anticipate Max’s disappointment and anger with Helen. By not expecting the inevitability of color prejudice, Max, out of surprise, jumps to the conclusion that he is inevitably defeated as a black man. This instance of color prejudice dictates Max’s perception of himself as an inevitable victim to casual and structural prejudice. Max exists in a cycle of cognitive error in which he, at first, believes he can overcome casual prejudice by possessing a white woman but then feels completely defeated by the re-assertion of casual prejudice against him.

It is Max’s hope that he will win over a white or light-skinned woman that compels Max to spend most of his money chasing light-skinned women and repeatedly using skin-whitening products before he goes out to the cabarets. Max frequently fixates on possessing a light-skinned black (“yallah”) or white woman – a pursuit that Schuyler emphasized as financially unnecessary. Max reflects that, “it

⁹⁰ Ibid, pp. 5

⁹¹ Ibid, pp. 5

was so hard to hold them [yallah women]. They were so sought after that one almost required a million dollars to keep them out of the clutches of one's rivals."⁹² Because Max suffers from the fiction that light-skinned or white women are "essential to the happiness of any colored gentleman," he wastes his money on pursuing and maintaining them. He, therefore, jeopardizes his capacity to use that money more resourcefully in overcoming the structural disadvantage of being black and being broke.⁹³ What Schuyler seeks to show is how the perceived cognitive necessity to possess yallah women, results in him wasting his money on them as well as on skin-whitening products. What cognitive process allows Max to feel the urgency to possess white women at such a financial cost? One potential explanation is that these women act as signifiers of to project the illusion of Max's exceptionalism against color prejudice. By using a white woman to project the illusion that he is not like other black-Americans, he feels protected from the inevitability of color prejudiced attempts to subordinate or stereotype him. This psychological dependence on protecting oneself against assertions of color prejudice, Schuyler argued, results in characters like Max and Miss Simpson wasting their time and money on unnecessary expenditures. Ultimately, Schuyler argued that the capacity to protect oneself from color prejudice was not achieved by projecting whiteness externally but rather existed as a cognitive ability; in other words, the damage of color prejudice only existed psychologically and could therefore be mitigated with the right attitude. Because the harm of color prejudice existed only cognitively, one's pursuit or projection of whiteness could not necessarily protect them from

⁹² Ibid. pp. 2

⁹³ Ibid. pp. 2

assertions of color prejudice. As we explored earlier, Max and Miss Simpson cannot escape the private knowledge that they were once black, even as their skin color protects them from being the direct target of color prejudice.

Max eventually and inarticulately develops an attitude in which he can mentally dampen or hedge against the inevitable assertions of color prejudice against his formerly public and later private black identity. His attitude allows him to avoid placing faith in the belief that color prejudice could be avoided by possessing white skin or white women. With this attitude of intellectual willpower against the inevitability of prejudice, Max takes on a critical approach against both white supremacy as well as the fictions of black cultural nationalism. For example, instead of buying into Santop Licorice's Back To Africa propaganda, Max exploits Licorice for his debates against W.E.B. Du Bois (fictionalized as Dr. Shakespeare Agamemnon Beard) in an attempt to divide and conquer black nationalist leadership. Schuyler is interested in the cognitive conditions that make possible Max's ability to recognize Garvey and Beard's nationalisms as political projects instead of uncritically accepting them as truths. When Bunny, Max's formerly black pal in Harlem, crosses the color line and joins Max's white supremacist organization, the Knights of Nordica, Schuyler establishes the cognitive distinction that makes possible Bunny's belief in the truth of black cultural nationalisms:

"Now listen, Bunny. You know Santop Licorice, don't you?"

"Who doesn't know that hippo?"

"Well, we've had him on the payroll since December. He's fighting Beard and that crowd. He was on the bricks and we helped him out. Got his paper to appearing regularly and all that sort of thing."

"So the old crook sold out the race, did he?" cried the amazed Bunny.

“Hold that race stuff, you’re not a shine [black] anymore. Are you surprised that he sold out? You’re actually becoming innocent,” said Matthew [Max’s white alias]...

“Listen here, Boy, this thing is running me nuts. Here you are fighting Black No More and so is Beard and the rest of the Negro leaders, yet you have Licorice on the payroll to fight the same people that are fighting your enemy. This thing is more complicated than a flapper’s past.”⁹⁴

Max implies that because Bunny is no longer black, he should be able to “see through” race fictions. Respectively, Bunny and Max represent the shift from believing in black nationalisms as “racially-devoted” and truthful projects to seeing them as politically motivated and dishonest forms of propaganda. In this exchange, we see Bunny as innocent and Max as staunchly cynical. However, it is not simply Max’s whiteness that allows him to take on this critical approach towards black nationalisms; Bunny is also a whitened Negro. Their ironic juxtaposition is only possible because of Max’s lack of illusions about the fictions of black cultural nationalism. Bunny, therefore, appears naïve in comparison to Max, precisely because Max possesses a critical and ironic outlook that deconstructs any race fiction for what it is – a greedy form of propaganda. Thereby, Max possesses a cognitive capacity to see through the fictions of black nationalisms. Without this cognitive capacity, Bunny appears innocent to Max as well as Schuyler’s reader. By believing in a dedication to race, Bunny reveals his Bunny, belief in race leaders’ genuine commitment to their nationalisms. However, Schuyler exposes race leadership for their greedy politics.

Schuyler also critiques race leaders as “dumb” for falling victim to the cognitive error. In Schuyler’s novel, race leaders like Garvey, Du Bois, and others are

⁹⁴ Schuyler, *Black No More*, pp. 72

portrayed either as dumb or greedy – a stance that Schuyler believed was accurate. Dr. Bonds, a statistician for the Urban League (fictionalized as the Negro League), is just one example of a race leader who Schuyler believed was overly fixated on the structural immobility of black people in America. Schuyler evoked the uselessness of the Urban League’s statistical research through the character of Dr. Bonds:

“He was engaged in a most vital and necessary work: i.e., collecting bales of data to prove satisfactorily that more money was needed to collect more data. Most of the data were highly informative, revealing the amazing fact that black poor went to jail oftener than rich whites... that strangely there was some connection between poverty, disease, and crime.”⁹⁵

Dr. Bonds overburdens the black public with what Schuyler sees as an obvious fact: black Americans are structurally at a disadvantage in America. In his autobiography, Schuyler reflected that he learned this at a young age and, from there, never overburdened himself with the structural factuality of blackness. It is unclear whether or not Dr. Bonds reproduces this narrative of black structural immobility to make money or is also a victim of the cognitive error that overstates the inevitability of black structural disadvantage. In Schuyler’s satire, characters are either equipped with a cognitive power against race fictions or they fall victim to its deceptions. Schuyler’s novel, due to its satirical genre, creates sharp ironies and thereby divides its characters across a critical line; I have summarized this line as the cognitive error of black victimhood. Those who participate in this error – i.e. mistake the inevitability of casual prejudice as the inevitability of structural disadvantage – are susceptible to believing in race fictions emanating either from white or black sides of the color line. Schuyler leaves the Dr. Bonds’ cognitive position ambiguous so we

⁹⁵ Schuyler, *Black No More*, pp. 58-59

wonder; he is either motivated by reproducing a race fiction to gain money and is therefore not suffering from cognitive error or, he is suffering from cognitive error and is convinced that the black individual is completely powerless to structural disadvantage. The ambiguity of Dr. Bonds' psychology evokes Schuyler's critique of race leaders as either greedy or dumb. Based on this critique, however, we should ask if Schuyler treats Max and Madame Blandish – characters that do not suffer from race fiction but perpetuate these fictions for money – with the same attitude that he treats black nationalists like Garvey and Du Bois. Max, for example, is a fictional character in Schuyler's satire whose literary purpose is meant to expose how the black self can overcome cognitive error. Santop Licorice and Dr. Shakespeare Beard, however, were fictionalized versions of real black-American race leaders. Their words and propaganda influenced black-Americans inevitably and therefore, Schuyler believed, they had a responsibility to exposing the ways in which black Americans could develop a cognitive willpower to (i) reduce the psychological harm of casual prejudice and (ii) still overcome structural disadvantage. Schuyler, for example, describes black Americans consuming or "devouring" propagandistic race narratives through local and national periodicals, "believing every word."⁹⁶ If black-Americans would inevitably buy into the words of these race leaders, these leaders had a duty to publically espouse the ways in which the black individual had his own willpower to overcome structural disadvantage as well as the intended cognitive harm of color prejudice. Schuyler wanted his contemporary readers to despise race leaders for continually failing to reveal the ways in which the black individual could

⁹⁶ Schuyler, *Black No More*, pp. 65

develop this individual willpower. Therefore, Schuyler naturally felt frustrated by black race leaders for their perpetuation of the fiction of black victimhood; whether they suffered from cognitive error or sold race fictions for greed, Schuyler held black nationalist leaders responsible for their complicity in injecting black-Americans with the error that because casual prejudice was inevitable, they were inevitably at a structural disadvantage. It is important to note that because Du Bois did not accept the inevitability of casual prejudice and therefore the inevitability of structural prejudice that Schuyler critiqued him less severely than he did Garvey. Overall, however, Schuyler's treatment of the fictionalized race leaders in *Black No More* establishes his intellectual location in the liberal humanist struggle to assert the willpower of the black individual – i.e. the psychological capacity to achieve structural determination and to unthink the fictions of race spewing from the mouths of white and black nationalist America.

III. Conclusion: Looking Beyond The Generational Struggle

I read *Black No More* as Schuyler's most articulate expression of a liberal humanist position against the authoritative shadow of black cultural nationalists like Du Bois and Garvey. In his autobiography, he reflects on *Black No More* with the following:

“Contrary to the pundits on the Negro (or Caucasian!) problem who bewail the American racial facts of life, most of the colored brethren do not go about perpetually enveloped in gloom and despair despite the ululation and incitements of their professional agitators... Puzzled head-waggers [including these Southrons as well as Negro race leaders] too

often underestimate the human ability to adjust and adapt to environment and frequently to alter it to advantage.”⁹⁷

This statement captures Schuyler’s central issue with black nationalist race leaders who overemphasized the immobility of the black American in responding to the “racial facts of a black life.” Overall, Schuyler’s novel captures the cognitive attitudes that make possible one’s ability to alter structural disadvantage and mentally hedge against the inevitability of color prejudice. His use of satire should be read for the purpose it serves in exposing this attitude of overcoming cognitive error. Moreover, we must also consider how his satirical treatment of black nationalists captures the generational struggle of the Harlem Renaissance. For Schuyler, even as he writes his autobiography in 1966, he reflected on how the older generation of race leaders during the Renaissance was responsible for “agitating” and “overburdening” the Negro with the error that the inevitability of casual prejudice also meant the inevitability of structural disadvantage. As we begin to explore the works of liberal authors like Carl Van Vechten and Claude McKay, we will discover how the black artist struggled not only against the ideas of the older generation of race leaders but also against his disillusionment with his own generation. By analyzing the artistic characters of their novels, I will illustrate the achievement of liberal humanists in overcoming and exposing the pervasive narratives of race through literature. I posit that Van Vechten and McKay’s novels should be read as a literary critique of Du Bois’s and Alain Locke’s elitist conception of the black artist – i.e. the narrative that the black artist was an exemplary being who had a duty to uplifting the uneducated

⁹⁷ Schuyler, *Black and Conservative*, pp. 1-2

and ignorant Negro masses. Schuyler's novel criticizes the narrative of Negro uplift precisely because it overemphasizes the extent to which the black masses were inhibited by their dispossessions; I have shown how Schuyler points the blame on race leaders like Du Bois and Garvey for reproducing this narrative of disadvantage. Only by reading the black artist characters of Van Vecthen and McKay within an intellectual history of their critique of Du Bois and Locke's narratives of uplift, can we approach a comprehensive understanding of the achievements of the liberal humanists in challenging the very pervasive narrative that the black artist had a duty to uplifting the uneducated Negro masses.

CHAPTER III

STUCK IN BLACK MECCA: TRANSGRESSING ARTISTIC ELITISM

I. Introduction.

The publication of *Nigger Heaven* in 1926 and *Home to Harlem* in 1928 mortified the cultural nationalist guardians of the Harlem Renaissance – many of whom were quick to label Claude McKay and Carl Van Vechten as threats to the sanctity of black art. As Langston Hughes reflected in his 1940 autobiography, *The Big Sea*, his friend Carl Van Vechten had been unfairly “accused of ruining, distorting, polluting, and corrupting every Negro writer, who was ever known to have shaken hands with him.”⁹⁸ The fact that McKay and Van Vechten’s novels were considered corruptions to Harlem Renaissance art for their portrayal of a supposedly depraved black urban working class suggests the extent to which the liberal author was restricted in producing accurate portrayals of Harlem’s working class life. In addition to provoking a similarly controversial critical reaction, both novels participate in a similar critique of a particular class of Harlemites – the New Negro elitists. Both novels present characters that are meant to incarnate the elitist theories defining the New Negro artist during this time period. Through the characters of Byron Kassel (Nigger Heaven) and Ray (Home to Harlem), Van Vechten and McKay articulated their positions against the conservative and elitist conception of the black artist as a privileged and distinguished member of the black community. W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke, two of the most influential

⁹⁸ Hughes, *The Big Sea*, pp. 271

theoreticians of Harlem Renaissance art, posited what Van Vechten and McKay considered an elitist conception of the black artist. Du Bois clarified his position on the New Negro artist in his essay entitled “The Talented Tenth.” For Du Bois, only “the Best of this Negro race may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races.”⁹⁹ To a large extent, Locke shared Du Bois’s sentiment that the New Negro writer should possess a bourgeois acceptability and represent the potential for racial uplift. For Locke, the New Negro writer would express his stake in the project of racial uplift not by writing exclusively about racial issues but rather by performing his capacity to contribute to civilization and culture. In his essay “The Negro Youth Speaks,” Locke writes that “the newer motive in being racial is to be so purely for the sake of art. Nowhere is this more apparent or more justified than in the increasing tendency to evolve from the racial substance something technically distinctive, something that as an idiom of style may become a contribution to the general resources of art.”¹⁰⁰ Much suggests that Alain Locke felt negatively towards *Nigger Heaven* for its betrayal of the project of expressing the black capacity to contribute to the “general resources of art.” After all, the novel’s tragic protagonist is a failed artist himself. In his 1928 “Retrospective Review of Negro Art,” Locke wrote that *Nigger Heaven* lacked a “clean folki-ness of the soil” and celebrated a “decadent muck of the city-gutter.”¹⁰¹ This quote captures Locke’s feeling that Van Vechten had misrepresented black life as depraved and decadent as opposed to “clean” and “friendly.” Therefore, despite their

⁹⁹ Du Bois, “Talented Tenth,” Web.

¹⁰⁰ Locke, *The New Negro*, pp. 51

¹⁰¹ Locke, *The Critical Temper of Alain Locke*, pp. 201

aforementioned debate over propagandistic art and the validity of racial consciousness, Du Bois and Locke shared a conception of Negro art as a way to advance presentations of the Negro as civilized and cultured. The thrust of this chapter is to illustrate how Van Vechten and McKay challenge this elitist conception of the black artist through the characters of Byron and Ray – two educated aspiring artists, who live “in” the black working class community but are not “of” the black working class culture.

Van Vechten’s Byron Kasson – who moves to Harlem in attempt to become a “writer, not a Negro writer” – represents Alain Locke’s conception of the New Negro aesthete – i.e. the black artist who contributes to American culture by seeking and achieving what Locke called “pure artistic values.”¹⁰² Van Vechten illustrated how Byron’s language of “being for the sake of art” prevents him from understanding and therefore writing about Harlem working class culture accurately. McKay’s Ray – a Haitian-born and Howard-educated writer – derives his feelings of cultural superiority from Du Bois’s brand of Talented Tenth elitism. These novels’ treatment of this special class of elitist artists suggests that there existed people like Byron and Ray in Harlem. In other words, we should read Byron and Ray as representatives of a particular social group of elitist and educated blacks who, despite living amongst Harlem’s working class, were not “of” Harlem’s working class. I should briefly evaluate the importance of having these failed and frustrated black elites at the center of this final chapter. Byron and Ray serve as explanatory tools for Van Vechten and McKay in revealing the ways in which Negro artistic elite struggled

¹⁰² Locke, *The New Negro*, pp. 52

with his language of cultural and moral superiority as he sought to understand his location in amongst Harlem's working class. McKay and Van Vechten illustrated how these characters possessed an elitist language that restricted their capacity to integrate with and understand their working class black counterparts. More central to my argument, however, is the observation that the failures of Byron and Ray to unthink their elitism highlight the achievement of their novel's authors in constructing a new artistic method that distinguished them from Harlem Renaissance theoreticians like Du Bois and Locke. Byron and Ray serve an explanatory purpose in this thesis to highlight the achievements of McKay, Van Vechten, and the other liberal humanists of the Harlem Renaissance. Only by looking at these characters, can we understand the breakthrough of the liberal humanist writers in moving beyond art that only sought to advance presentations of the Negro as civilized and cultured.

II. Elitist Reactions: The Threat of Black Primitivism to Advancing the Black Political Image

As Du Bois famously remarked in *The Crisis*, he felt "distinctly like taking a bath" after reading *Home to Harlem*.¹⁰³ In the same vein, Howard University's librarian raged that McKay's characters were "filthy mongrels."¹⁰⁴ This is not to say that Du Bois and other conservative critics condemned McKay and Van Vechten on account of their inclusion of poor urban black life. Instead, Du Bois's accusations against these authors had to do with their failure to espouse a bourgeois

¹⁰³ Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was In Vogue*, pp. 225

¹⁰⁴ Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was In Vogue*, pp. 227

acceptability. Du Bois's critique should be contextualized in his theory of the Veil and his espousal of Victorian morals. Du Bois adopted a harsh position against these novels because he felt that the way of thinking and vernacular of the jazz-addicts, pimps, and working class was a product of the "crass ignorance" nurtured by their living under the Veil of racist America.¹⁰⁵ Du Bois's conception of the Talented Tenth meant that he supported writers who shared his Victorian morality and possessed academic credentials, upper class pedigrees, and a substantial record of publication. Therefore, he considered Van Vechten and McKay's working class and elite artist characters as ignorant and skewed representations of Harlem. Because they did not advance representations of the Negro as civilized, educated, and cultured, Du Bois considered denounced these novels as betrayals to the project of Negro uplift. For McKay and Van Vechten, however, Du Bois's moralistic, nationalistic, and Victorian language prevented him from comprehending, let alone engaging, with the lives and language of the black working class. Meanwhile, McKay and Van Vechten's novels struggled to advocate for the acceptance of the black working and jazz-addicted class as an equal member of the black-American artistic and political identity. By simply dismissing the black working class on the basis that they did not advance representations of a cultured and educated Negro, Du Bois overlooked the structural and social realities that shaped the moral attitudes, languages, and nightlife transgressions of Harlem's working poor.

Because black art, for Du Bois, was meant to advance clean representations of cultured blacks, then we can understand why Du Bois condemned these novels

¹⁰⁵ qtd. in Borst, "Signifying Afro-Orientalism: The Jazz-Addict Subculture in *Nigger Heaven* and *Home to Harlem*." pp. 689

for what he considered to be their espousal of black primitivism – i.e. the essentialist fiction of the natural black zest for life, rhythm, sex, comedy, and drinking. Du Bois violently dismissed *Nigger Heaven* and *Home to Harlem* for apparently feeding fictions of inherent black primitivism to the insatiably racist white audience of the Jazz Age. Du Bois took issue with black primitivist representations of Negro life for (i) their clear falsity and (ii) their threat to his project of representing the black potential for cultural contribution and Victorian sensibility. Above all else, Du Bois felt threatened and offended by these novels because he thought they confirmed white attitudes towards Negroes as an inherently primitive people. The more pervasive the primitive narrative became, the more his message of African virtue and moral superiority was threatened. Recognizing the priority of Du Bois's politics elucidates why he failed to understand McKay and Van Vechten's unique treatment of the limits of primitivist language as an accurate descriptor of Negroes in cabaret culture. Many liberal writers, most famously McKay and Van Vechten, were critiqued by the guardians of the Renaissance for pandering to white demands for primitivist fiction. Du Bois wrote that McKay's representations of "drunkenness, fighting, lascivious sexual promiscuity and utter absence of restraint" threatened the African American's political reputation. He also accused both authors of intentionally catering to "that prurient demand on the part of white folk for a portrayal in Negroes of that utter licentiousness which conventional civilization holds white folk back from enjoying – if enjoyment it can be called."¹⁰⁶ Van Vechten

¹⁰⁶ Monda, Kimberley, "Self-Delusion and Self-Sacrifice in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*," *African American Review* Vol. 31, No. 1 (Spring, 1997), p. 23-39 (pp. 26)

was apparently guilty of the same betrayal against the American Negro's civilized, refined, and virtuous political image. Because Du Bois focused intently on the war between his particular brand of black cultural elitism and representations of black primitivism, he mistakenly and hastily dismissed Van Vechten and McKay as black primitivists themselves.

McKay and Van Vechten perhaps knew that Du Bois and other conservative critics would label them as primitivists and as traitors to the race. According to conservative critics, any display of black drunkenness, promiscuity, and participation in cabaret and speakeasy culture was considered to be a celebration of black inherent primitivism. Du Bois's cultural project, therefore, sought to censure cabaret culture as it contradicted his bourgeois privileges of the cultured black-American. By contrast, McKay and Van Vechten critiqued the conservative conception of the black artist as an uplifter of blacks suffering from ignorance and moral depravity. As a result, Du Bois was outraged with how the novels treated Byron and Ray who clearly served as critiques against his Talented Tenth group of "exceptional men." From its inception, the Talented Tenth was conceived as a pedagogical project in which the distinguished few would uplift the masses away from the squalor and vice resultant of living under discrimination in America. By teaching the masses to recognize and affirm their inherent African virtue, the "Worst" Negroes could become the "Best."¹⁰⁷ This project imagined that once all black-Americans were morally "uplifted" by their discovery of African virtue, they could contribute to culture. Van Vechten and McKay felt that this imagination, in

¹⁰⁷ Du Bois, "Talented Tenth," Web.

addition to relying on a false belief in inherent race consciousness and virtue, forcefully censored working class cabaret culture. Du Bois's critical response to *Nigger Heaven* captures the extent to which he censored the transgressive cabaret culture found in working class Harlem. Du Bois wrote:

The average colored man in Harlem is an everyday laborer, attending church, lodge, and movie and as conservative and conventional as ordinary working folk everywhere. Something they have which is racial, something distinctively Negroid can be found; but it is expressed by subtle, almost delicate nuance, and not by the wildly barbaric drunkenness in whose details Van Vechten revels... Again and again with singular lack of invention he reverts to the same climax of two creatures tearing and scratching over 'mah man.'"¹⁰⁸

Du Bois's derisive use of 'mah man' depreciates the urban vernacular of working class Harlemites – exposing his outright refusal to accept their dialect as an acceptable mode of black expression. Instead, Du Bois sought to represent the black Harlemite as conservative and conventional as opposed to emotional, angry, and drunk, as many of the characters are in *Nigger Heaven*. In this context, Du Bois's use of "mah man" to describe two arguing women in Van Vechten's novel suggests the extent to which he wanted to portray Negroes as rational and cultured. In making this point, Du Bois implicitly claims that Van Vechten had misrepresented the vernacular of working class Harlem. The logic of Du Bois's argument relies on accusing Van Vechten for misleadingly imposing a "filthy" and apparently misrepresented vernacular into the mouths of the novel's black characters. To bolster his claim that Van Vechten had unjustly misrepresented black Harlem, Du

¹⁰⁸ Du Bois and Sundquist. *The Oxford W.E.B. Du Bois Reader*. New York: Oxford UP, 1996. Print. pp. 516-517

Bois writes, Van Vechten's "characters are singularly wooden and inhuman."¹⁰⁹ By blaming Van Vechten for creating supposedly fake black characters, he asserted that the black America about which Van Vechten is writing did not exist; to be blunt. Du Bois's claim implies that there existed no two women in Harlem "tearing and scratching over mah man." Unfortunately for Du Bois, the cabaret culture about which Van Vechten wrote did in fact exist. This suggests that Du Bois's critique of *Nigger Heaven* largely censored the real lives of working class Harlem and their participation in the drunken jazz-addicted transgressions of the cabarets, speakeasies, and rent-parties. More broadly, Du Bois's critique of Van Vechten should be read within the context of a debate over artistic representations of black life between black cultural nationalists and liberal humanist writers. This debate, I am suggesting, was largely shaped by the pervasiveness of the white demand for black primitivist fictions and the black cultural nationalists fear of these fictions detracting from their political project to advance cultured and civilized bourgeois representations of black life. According to the logic of black cultural nationalists and elitists like Du Bois, if liberal writers were dealing with Harlem's cabaret culture without advancing the image of a black capacity for education and cultural refinement, they risked portraying blacks as inherently primitive.

Even today, scholars fail to recognize McKay and Van Vechten's achievements in defending the artistic representations of Harlem's jazz-addicted poor. Throughout this thesis, I have posited that the liberal writers' foremost concern was to expose the ways in which the conservative and elitist guardians of the Renaissance ignored

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

certain types of working class blacks precisely because their lives contradicted the representation of black potential for cultural contribution and bourgeois acceptability. Without positioning the Harlem liberals against the generation of conservative cultural nationalists, scholars often misunderstand the achievements of authors like Hughes, Schuyler, McKay and Van Vechten. Like Du Bois, contemporary literary critic Howard Bloom seems to think that Van Vechten and McKay intentionally reproduced the primitivist fiction in an effort to cater to the insatiable demand of a white Jazz Age audience. He mistakenly concludes:

“It is reasonable to say that [*Nigger Heaven*] seems to have had a crippling effect on the self-expression of many black writers by either making it easier to gain success riding the bandwagon of primitivism, or by making it difficult to publish novels that did not fit the profile of the commercial success formula adopted by most publishers for black writers.”¹¹⁰

Considering McKay’s extensive use of primitive language, it is perhaps easy to mistake him as a devoted believer in primitivism.¹¹¹ Bloom’s decontextualized reading of McKay and Van Vechten, however, overlooks the intent of these authors in critiquing the fictional language of black primitivism as an unreliable way to understand Harlem nightlife. Without positioning McKay and Van Vechten within the intellectual debate between old conservatives and young liberal humanists, Bloom injudiciously blames these authors for intentionally enhancing the vogue of black primitive art. Instead, I am proposing that the context of a pervasive demand for black primitive fiction contributed to Du Bois’s anxiety that *Home to Harlem* and *Nigger Heaven* celebrated cabaret culture as primitive and thereby detracted from

¹¹⁰ Bloom, Howard, *The Harlem Renaissance*, pp. 28

¹¹¹ Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was In Vogue*, pp. 224

the project of racial uplift through literature. By constructing characters who understood cabaret culture as primitive, McKay and Van Vechten uncovered how primitive explanations mistakenly essentialized jazz-subculture. To miss this reading of these novels, I propose, is a result of not positioning these authors within their rightful historical and intellectual context against the elitism of Du Bois and Locke.

Van Vechten's contemporary critics, namely Du Bois, unfairly accused him of enjoying black art and cabaret culture for what he believed was its inherent primitivism. This reading of Van Vechten is surprising considering the ways in which his novel challenges the accuracy of primitivism as a language to understand cabaret culture. In *Nigger Heaven*, he describes racist white men who come from downtown up to Harlem to enjoy cabaret culture for its supposed primitivism. Dick Sill, the "passing" character of the novel, frequently accompanied his white companions to Harlem cabarets and speakeasies. In order to remain undetected, Dick reproduces primitive fictions in the company of his white friends. Baldwin, one of Dick's drunken white friends, tells Byron:

"I think you are a wonderful people... a perfectly wonderful people! Such verve and vivacity! Such dancing! Such singing! And I've always thought coloured people were lazy! I suppose that it's because you're all so happy. Do you know of a young coloured fellow named Langston Hughes? He's just a bus-boy or something like that, and he doesn't understand his race. Listen to this:

My hands!
My dark hands!
Break through the wall!
Find my dream!
Help me to shatter this darkness,
To smash this night,
To break this shadow

Into a thousand lights of sun,
Into a thousand whirling dreams
Of Sun!

Well I thought that was good, Baldwin repeated laughing, but now I see it's only bus-boy bunk. He don't understand his race."¹¹²

As their letters reflect, Langston Hughes offered the above poem, entitled "As I Grew Older," to Van Vechten in the second printing of *Nigger Heaven*.¹¹³ The public friendship between Hughes and Van Vechten alone should have proved Van Vechten's innocence as an espouser of false black primitivism. Hughes' poem even expresses one of the central claims of *Nigger Heaven* as well as the general liberal humanist attitude to racial fictions; the feeling of terror, confusion, and anger in being politicized on account of one's black skin – i.e. one's "shadow." Baldwin, however, is incapable of appreciating Hughes' poem for its expression of frustration with being black and being continually politicized. Baldwin's dismissal of Hughes as a "bus-boy spewing bus-boy bunk" reflects the danger of conceiving of the black artist only as a distinguished and elite Negro – i.e. the black artist could not be a member of the working class. In Baldwin's formulation, Hughes' location as a working class black American completely delegitimizes the value of his artistic production; Hughes class status serves as Baldwin's justification in censoring his work. Baldwin's dismissal of Hughes is simultaneously the result of a belief in Negro elitism as well as primitivism. In his rejection of Hughes' working class status, Baldwin also embraces the fiction that the Negro is lazy on account of his primitive "happiness." For Baldwin the only legitimate Negro artistic expressions were ones

¹¹² Van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven*, pp. 210

¹¹³ Bernard, *Remember Me to Harlem: The Letters of Langston Hughes and Carl Van Vechten*, pp. 42

that reflected a primitive and simple happiness. Baldwin, like many white participants of cabaret culture, conceived of themselves as spectators to the show of black primitivism. Van Vechten's achievement was to represent the possibility of unthinking this primitive conception of cabaret culture. His novel wanted to unthink for its readership the black primitive fiction that defined the interracial character of cabaret and speakeasy culture. Therefore, the accusation that Van Vechten's novel espoused the fiction of black primitivism misses his novel's achievement in exposing the failure of many white cabaret attendees to understand black nightlife outside of the fiction of primitivism.

Similarly, McKay deconstructed the notion that black primitivism provided a reliable explanation for the drunken transgressions of cabaret culture. McKay provided an alternative explanation to the idea that drinking and dancing to jazz music was a psychological phenomenon peculiar to black Americans. McKay did this by asserting that all men, regardless of color, enjoy drinking at a bar in the same way. He wrote, for example, that all men act differently at bars than they do at home with their wives. In *Home to Harlem*, McKay reflected that:

“Negroes like all good Americans, love a bar. I should have said Negroes under Anglo-Saxon civilization. A bar has a charm of its own that makes drinking there pleasanter. We will leave our women companions and choice wines at the table to snatch a moment of exclusive sex solidarity over a thimble of gin at the bar.”¹¹⁴

McKay suggested that all black and white men enjoy bars for its atmosphere of sex solidarity. Men, he wrote, enjoy “sitting in a saloon differently as they do at home.

¹¹⁴ McKay, *Home to Harlem*, pp. 324

There's a bar for them to lean on and drink and joke as long as they feel like."¹¹⁵ The cabarets and speakeasies were not a space of black primitivism but simply a space in which men could assert and enjoy their masculinity differently than they do at home. Despite its distinctly misogynistic implication that the bar was a space for men to dominate, McKay's claim deconstructed the pervasive primitive myth as an explanation for the transgression and drunkenness of cabaret culture.

III. Being "In" But Not "Of" Harlem Working Class Culture.

The difference between the novel's authors and the characters of Byron and Ray can be captured by comparing their stances on the fiction of black primitivism. While Van Vechten and McKay deconstructed the notion of black primitivism as a reliable language to understand cabaret culture, Byron and Ray rely on the fiction of primitivism in order to explain the transgressive culture of Harlem's cabarets. The problem with mistaking Van Vechten and McKay as black primitivists is that it obscures the intellectual difference between the authors of these novels and their elitist characters. As I have suggested, Du Bois and other conservative critics who prescribed the goal of race uplift to Renaissance art obsessed over the threat of the insatiable demand of a white Jazz Age readership for primitive representations of blackness. As a result, these elitist uplifters read *Home to Harlem* and *Nigger Heaven* as intentional espousals of Byron and Ray's flawed language of primitivism. Therefore, the context of primitive vogue actually prevented Van Vechten and McKay's readership, particularly Du Bois, from comprehending their critique of

¹¹⁵ McKay, *Home to Harlem*, pp. 249

Byron and Ray's failed understanding of working class cabaret culture. A distinction that may be helpful is to say that Byron and Ray are living in black working class cabaret culture but are not "of" this culture. They are educated bourgeois writers who subscribe to the elitist conception of art espoused by Du Bois and Locke. Their location as educated blacks means that they will inevitably encounter exclusion from the working class who lacks this education and speaks an urban vernacular different from their business-professional lingua franca. For Du Bois and McKay, the problem of being an educated black American amongst the black working class was of particular importance, especially considering that they were both educated and gainfully employed. Van Vechten was a white author writing for the *New York Times*. Jamaican born McKay was one of the most popular black poets during this period and was educated at Tuskegee and Kansas State.¹¹⁶ In short, these authors were personally aware of how one's location as an educated intellectual in Harlem gave them a disadvantage in being excluded by the black working class. However, by focusing on the social class of failed and frustrated black elites, these authors expressed their own achievement in overcoming the distance between their privileged background and working class black culture.

Part of what made this distance so difficult to bridge was the split between their lingua franca and the vernacular of working class Harlemites. Van Vechten pokes fun at his educated and non-vernacular readership by attaching what he called a *Glossary of Negro Words and Phrases* to the appendix of *Nigger Heaven*. When we look up "boodie," Harlemites for the vagina, Van Vechten tells us to see

¹¹⁶ Jackson, *The Indignant Generation*, pp. 23

“hoochie pap.” Of course, when we refer to “hoochie pap,” he tells us to refer back to “boody.” Despite presenting a tragic story of Byron’s incapacity to bridge the gap between his elitist self-conception and his isolation from the working class black culture, Van Vechten also has fun in making the point that in order to understand Harlem life accurately one must experience it authentically. Van Vechten’s brief register of urban black terminology serves to further reinforce his own achievement in overcoming the rift between being “in” working class black Harlem but not “of” that culture. Therefore, if Van Vechten’s privileged location as a white educated man excluded him from working class black culture, his capacity to learn the vernacular and write an accurate novel about the Harlem working class speaks to his achievement as a “New Negro” or liberal humanist artist of the Harlem Renaissance. By contrast, Byron represents the social group of educated Negro elites who were incapable of embracing and overcoming their cultural and vernacular exclusion from the black working class.

In *Nigger Heaven*, Byron Kasson’s literary ambitions are tragically defeated by his self-conception as a bourgeois Negro artist. Byron – a college educated light skin Negro – moves to Harlem with the ambition to write a novel, not about race, but rather for “art’s sake.”¹¹⁷ We should read Byron as a representative of Alain Locke’s conception of the New Negro as a distinguished entity from the black masses. He believed himself to be an “exceptional” example for the Negro masses as a result of his education and pursuit of pure art. Van Vechten illustrated, however, that Byron’s fiction of artistic elitism acts as a language with which he misunderstands and even

¹¹⁷ Van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven*, pp. 223

develops hatred towards his fellow Harlem neighbors. Byron's elitist self-conception tragically perpetuates an already-established social and linguistic rift between the educated Negro and the uneducated working class Harlemiter. Put differently, Byron's education would inevitably isolate him from the culture and vernacular of the black working class. However, his elitist self-conception only perpetuated that division between himself and the black world around him – thereby making it impossible for him to achieve what Van Vechten does in writing *Nigger Heaven*.

Byron embodies Van Vechten's critique of the social class that subscribed to the Lockean politics of the Negro artistic elitism. As a result of his self-conception, Byron continually finds himself feeling superior to and frustrated by black Harlemites who he dismissed as "distasteful" and "repugnant."¹¹⁸ What Van Vechten hoped to illustrate was how Byron's politically determined conception of himself as a "distinguished" Negro writer in fact contributed to his conclusion that "he would never write about [urban Harlem] low-life, that he could never feel anything but repugnance for, because they were black. He couldn't bear to think of himself as a part of this."¹¹⁹ Here, Van Vechten illustrated how the Lockean tenet for the New Negro to be "a writer, not a Negro writer," could be driven by psychological feelings of elitism (i.e. cultural, political, and moral superiority) to the supposed ignorance and depravity of working class Harlem – an attitude that only prevented mutual understanding and cultural exchange within the supposed Black Mecca. When Byron is forced to take up work as an elevator boy in an office lobby, his fellow Harlemites exclude and judge him as a snob on the basis of his language; this exclusion is

¹¹⁸ Van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven*, pp. 192

¹¹⁹ Van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven*, pp. 192

something that Van Vechten understood to be inevitable for any educated individual living amongst the black working class. Van Vechten, as a white intellectual in Harlem, certainly felt a similar and perhaps even more drastic sense of exclusion from the black working class. As he wrote in a letter to Langston Hughes, "it would have been comparatively easy for me to write *Nigger Heaven* before I knew as much as I know now... Enough to know that I am thoroughly ignorant."¹²⁰ Van Vechten and Byron share this surge of anxiety in interacting and attempting to understand the complex and coded language of Harlem's working class. However, Byron's mistake is to let his anxiety of exclusion provoke thoughts of his superiority to the working class. After Byron expresses his desire to quit his job because of his feelings of exclusion from his coworkers, his friend Howard advises that he "ought to speak in dialect... You have to be a mixer."¹²¹ However, for Byron to feel capable of mixing, he must put aside his self-conception as an exceptional or elite Negro who superior to working class culture and vernacular. At work, Byron reflects how his coworkers:

"spoke freely about their amorous adventures, about games of craps, about dives on Lenox Avenue... To Byron the atmosphere was vaguely distasteful. You want to be a writer, he adjured himself, and this is probably first-class material. Nevertheless, his immediate pendent thought was that he would never write about this life, that he could never feel anything but repugnance for these people, because they were black. I can't bear to think of myself as a part of this, he sighed... Well, presently he knew what they thought. As a couple whispered, they gave sly nods in his direction; they laughed and winked. Soon, they carelessly raised their voices. He caught phrases: posin' an' signifyin' high-toned mustard-seed arnchy yaller boy."¹²²

¹²⁰ Van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven*, pp. xxxiii

¹²¹ Van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven*, pp. 194

¹²² *Ibid*, pp. 192

This passage illustrates two sources of Byron's exclusion from communicating with his coworkers: their exclusion of him and his repugnance of them. Van Vechten posited that their exclusion of him due to his education and light-skin was simply inevitable. However, he also suggested that Byron's feelings of repugnance towards them was counterproductive to his interests as a writer and as a participant in Harlem working class life. When Byron quits this job, he adopts a self-pity that suggests his incapacity to "mix" with, or at the very least, write about the working class lives surrounding him. Byron reflects that nobody could "understand how hard it had been for [Byron]. They couldn't understand that he had tried [to be a writer]. What was it all worth, anyway? Why couldn't he fall in line and just be a Nigger, like the rest of the "good" Niggers?"¹²³ Byron explains his exclusion from with a self-pity that perversely asserts a racist conception of his coworkers as "good" or "conciliatory Niggers." Byron is incapable of understanding his exclusion from the working class without feeling that his education gives him a sense of tragic superiority over the supposedly passive and ignorant working class.

As Van Vechten continually illustrated, Byron's refusal to learn, speak, and write the working class dialect undercuts his attempts to write a novel about black life.¹²⁴ As a result, Byron is more concerned with writing a novel for art's sake – an obsession that Van Vechten seeks to reveal as shallow and elitist. For Van Vechten the "art-for-art's sake" group relied on their artistic elitism to understand their continued exclusion from Harlem's working class. In a letter to Gertrude Stein, Van

¹²³ Ibid. pp. 181

¹²⁴ Borst, "Signifying Afro-Orientalism: The Jazz-Addict Subculture in *Nigger Heaven* and *Home to Harlem*." pp.696

Vechten elaborated on the importance of writing directly about “Negroes as they live now in the new city of Harlem (which is part of New York). About 400,000 of them live here now, rich and poor, fast and slow, intellectual and ignorant.”¹²⁵ By contrast, Byron incarnates the disengagement and unnecessary self-exclusion resultant of “being purely for the sake of art.”¹²⁶ Byron’s white editor, Russell Durwood, echoes Van Vechten’s philosophy that the black writer needed to engage with the cosmopolitanism of urban black life directly and with calm and collected reasoning. Byron, however, fails to understand why his publisher rejected his story and hastily blames color prejudice as the motive. This scene offers insight into Byron’s tragedy as a writer and his inability to unthink the fiction that he must perform ‘pure art’ instead of portray the complicated lives of his neighboring Harlemites. In this sense, the discourse of pure art only perpetuates Byron’s social and artistic disengagement with the working class. As Byron’s white publisher remarks:

“Why, there are West Indians and Abyssinian Jews, religious Negroes, pagan Negroes, and Negro intellectuals, all living more or less amicably in the same community, each group with its own opinions and atmosphere and manner of living; each individual with his own opinions and atmosphere and manner of living. But I find that Negroes don’t write about these matters; they continue to employ all the old clichés and formulas that have been worried to death by Nordic blonds who, after all, never did know anything about the subject from the inside.”¹²⁷

Durwood tells him to abandon his moral judgments of cabaret culture and instead attempt to understand it: “Your scene [of the cabaret] reads like a description of a

¹²⁵ qtd. in Van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven*, pp. xxiii

¹²⁶ Locke, *The New Negro*, pp. 51

¹²⁷ Van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven*, pp. 223

Baptist sociable for a new minister.”¹²⁸ Tragically, Byron’s capacity to produce expository literature – and more vitally, understand the lives of labouring class black Americans – is completely paralyzed by the way he understands his educated status in comparative perspective with the uneducated working class and the educated white elites like Durwood. At once, he feels that Durwood is excluding him from publication on the basis of his skin color. Therefore, Byron fails to integrate Durwood’s constructive rejection of his story and instead falls into delusional self-pity:

“Byron began to feel sorry for himself. Self-pity surged into his heart. Why should he, who had talent and energy, he who had tried to do something worth while, be made to suffer, to eat mud? He treated me that way because I am a Negro! was his subsequent passionate conclusion. He wouldn’t talk that way to a white man. His fury was a flame that scorched him.”¹²⁹

Byron’s immediate return to a feeling of victimhood is what Schuyler would have called Byron’s lack of cognitive willpower. Byron is incapable of overcoming the rejection he encounters in white and black Harlem. He feels too white when around his black coworkers but mistakes his blackness as the reason that white elites reject his artwork. In this sense, Byron’s evaluation of his elitism fluctuates as he is in the white-collar world and in the world of the black working class. With the black working class he perversely feels that his education prevented him from being just a “good Nigger.” However, after meeting with Durwood he felt the “Negro problem hovering over him and occasionally, like the great, black bird it was, claw[ing] at his

¹²⁸ Van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven*, pp. 194

¹²⁹ Van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven*, pp. 228

heart.”¹³⁰ The extent to which Byron evaluates himself as elite varies whether he is with his white publisher or with the working class. In both circumstances, however, he blames blackness, be it his own skin color or his location amongst the black working class, as a restriction to his capacity to be the elite and exemplary artist who wrote, as Locke put it, “purely for the sake of art.”¹³¹

Van Vechten further illustrates the uselessness of Byron’s anxious struggle to be a cultural and professional elite with his descriptions of Byron’s anger and frustration. In so doing, Van Vechten suggests that there is an unproductive anger endemic to striving to be Locke’s conception of the cultural elite. Despite Durwood’s advice to write about black life with a “calm, cold eye,” Byron rejects the importance of writing about black life and instead bursts into a fury “that scorched him.”¹³² The imagery suggests that Byron’s frustration only served to further restrict his capacity to become a successful author. Interestingly enough, in a letter to Langston Hughes, Van Vechten reflected:

“I get too emotional when writing it and what one needs in writing is a calm, cold eye.”¹³³

With this letter in mind, we see how Van Vechten suggested his own advice from writing *Nigger Heaven* to Byron: write calmly and with an intent to understand Negro working class life. By contrast, Byron is tragically erratic and desires to escape the grip of the “Negro problem” on his art. A brief consideration of Van Vechten’s letter further highlights the devastating effect of Byron’s pursuit of

¹³⁰ Ibid, pp. 175

¹³¹ Locke, *The New Negro*, pp. 51

¹³² Van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven*, pp. 222

¹³³ qtd. in Bernard, *Remember Me to Harlem: The Letters of Langston Hughes and Carl Van Vechten*, pp. 34

elitism. If he receives rejection from his publisher, he blames color prejudice. If he is excluded by his coworkers, he perversely blames his educational and cultural superiority. In both circumstances, Byron's desire to confirm his elitism results in an anger and frustration that prevents him from being a writer and even a passionate lover. His girlfriend Mary is often forced to endure the brunt of his artistic frustration. While Mary attempts to get Byron to consider the perspectives of his white and black characters more closely, Byron is more concerned with the glory of getting published in a magazine. Mary tells Byron, "of course you'll understand the psychology of the intelligent coloured man, but as you have related the story he would be one of the least important characters... I don't think you comprehend the motives of the white characters at all... explain the white girl's attitude... that she's willing to brave race-prejudice and conventions that have risen from it."¹³⁴ Ignoring her critical feedback to explicate the psychologies of his characters, Byron yells at her: "I'll be damned if I'm going to stand you're nagging any longer. I guess I know what I can do better than you do! You'll see! Wait till you read my story in a magazine! Then you'll be sorry."¹³⁵ His fit of embarrassing rage, at the very least, exposes his shallow concern with being "in a magazine" instead of developing believable characters. A broader implication is that Byron's anxious concern with confirming his elitism compromises his relationship.

For Van Vechten, anger and frustration were endemic to the psychology of confirming one's superiority to working class blacks. Dick Sill – Byron's light-skinned friend who eventually passes the color line – is notorious for introducing

¹³⁴ Van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven*, pp. 206

¹³⁵ Van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven*, pp. 206

racial topics of conversation and immediately bursting into anger over them. Van Vechten wrote:

“Don’t they [black-Americans] want a member of the race to get on?”
Byron asked.

“Say,” Dick inquired. “Where have you been living? They *do* not. You’ll have to fight your own race harder than you do the other... every step of the way. They’re full of envy for every Negro that makes a success. They hate it. It makes ‘em wild. Why, more of us get on through the ofays than through the shines.”¹³⁶

“Bottle it,” said Olive. “You’d think this was a Marcy Garvey meeting. Let’s not spoil the evening for Byron and Mary.”¹³⁷

Here, Dick’s fiction that Negroes are inherently jealous towards successful or distinguished Negroes is a mutation of the same logic to which Byron subscribes – the idea that distinguished Negroes were somehow above the “repugnancy” of the working class Harlem Negroes. Instead of considering how, for example, vernacular differences may inform the rift between working class Negroes and themselves, Dick and Byron simply rely on their fiction of superiority as a sufficient explanation. However, their obsession with confirming their superiority over other black-Americans was accompanied with an anger and frustration that compromised their capacity to enjoy their lives and relationships. Dick and Byron’s fixation on confirming their cultural and educational superiority overburdens or “spoils” their lives with unnecessary anger. Throughout the novel, Van Vechten emphasizes the importance of looking forward to one’s leisure time as a black-American. From Van Vechten’s perspective, the time to enjoy oneself was especially important for the black-American as a result of daily victimization by color prejudice. In this sense, Van Vechten espoused the same philosophy articulated by George Schuyler in *Black*

¹³⁶ Van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven*, pp. 119-120

¹³⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 120

No More: the importance of not overburdening oneself with fictions about one's blackness. In Van Vechten's formulation, Byron and Dick's psychological overburdening result in their incapacity to enjoy their daily lives and relationships.

Van Vechten and Schuyler would agree that Dick and Byron overburden their "in-between" location as educated Negroes in working class Harlem. As Van Vechten formulates it, Dick, feeling excluded by the white world as well as the black working class, feels that his only solution is to pass the color line. When Dick declares his decision to "pass" the color line, his narrative of "the distinguished vs. the envious Negro" works him into another burst of unproductive anger:

"Well I've thought it all out and I'm going to pass!" he went on defiantly. "Not today or tomorrow, but sooner or later I'm going to pass, go over the color line, and marry a white woman. I'd like to start a movement for all us near whites to pass. In a short time there wouldn't be any Negro problem. There wouldn't even be any Negroes."

"I couldn't do it," Ollie asserted. "Somehow I feel my race."

"What race?" cried Dick. "What race do you feel? What's the coloured race ever done for you?" Dick, now thoroughly worked up, demanded.

"What!"¹³⁸

Dick participates in the same cognitive error that compelled the black characters of *Black No More* to undergo color treatment; he feels the necessity to become white because it promises him structural advantage as well as psychological freedom from the supposed intolerability of the Negro working class. Despite sharing this elitist conviction that the "uneducated Negroes" supposedly "delighted in keeping the upper level as low as possible, pulling them down, maliciously, even with glee," Byron chooses not to pass the color line.¹³⁹ He explains his decision to Dick, saying

¹³⁸ Van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven*, pp. 48

¹³⁹ Van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven*, pp. 179

that he “hasn’t got the guts.”¹⁴⁰ Byron does not pass because he feels he must remain black and showcase himself as the “exceptional” Negro artist – what Du Bois called, the “Best of the Negro race.”¹⁴¹ Through Byron, Van Vechten explicated the potential for Locke’s logic of the Talented Tenth to mutate into a hatred of working class African-Americans – i.e. a perverse desire to continually confirm one’s superiority to the Negro working class. Therefore Byron does not exploit his light skin to become white precisely because he feels an anxious urgency to be a black elite, distinguished from the Negro masses.

If Byron’s character incarnates the Lockean conception of elite Negro aestheticism, Ray – McKay’s Haitian born, dark-skinned black artist character – embodies the black cultural nationalism and bourgeois acceptability espoused by Du Bois. While Byron sought to exploit his education as a means to project his superiority to the black working class, Ray understood his education to provide him with the capacity to uplift his race through pedagogy. Ray feels a distinctly Du Boisian connection to his race. Ray serves as an underdeveloped or even failed progenitor to a young McKay who had read *Souls of Black Folk* and felt that Du Bois’s conception of the Negro soul “shook” him “like an earthquake.”¹⁴² L.P. Jackson reports McKay’s departure from the politics of the Negro soul and the elitism endemic to Du Bois’s Talented Tenth aristocracy. When McKay returned to Harlem after a long absence, he grew “ambivalent towards many of his black peers, fashioning for themselves a Harlem aristocracy... McKay was wary of and prone to

¹⁴⁰ Van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven*, pp. 175

¹⁴¹ Du Bois, “Talented Tenth,” Web.

¹⁴² qtd. in Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was In Vogue*, pp. 51

resent the pink-skinned black-petit aristocracy.”¹⁴³ For McKay, this belief in the potential for uplift through a recognition of the Negro soul had the potential to give educated black nationalists a fatefully pedagogical and snobbish attitude towards their supposedly “underdeveloped” working class brethren. In this sense, McKay’s novel illustrates Ray as a case study in understanding the ways in which the elitist and, in this case Du Boisian nationalist, social group failed to understand the lives of the working class Harlemites with whom they lived. Ray juxtaposes or highlights McKay’s achievement in disposing of the Talented Tenth elitism and ushering in a modernist and liberal engagement with black Harlem life. Upon moving to Harlem, both McKay and Ray, felt disillusioned by their encounters with the sexual promiscuity, criminality, and drinking culture of urban black America. During several points in the novel, Ray’s discomfort and hatred towards Harlem’s “savage” cabaret transgressions comes through. Ray was disillusioned in the sense that he felt that the supposedly crass black-Americans, were inassimilable in his Pan-African political vision of Negro virtue:

“Harlem! How terribly Ray could hate it sometimes. Its brutality, gang rowdyism, promiscuous thickness. Its hot desires.”¹⁴⁴

McKay sought to show how Ray’s commitment to Du Bois’s notions of the virtuous African soul compromised his ability to appreciate, let alone understand, the lives of working class Harlemites. Ray attributes his language of “culture,” “literature,” and “virtue” to his superiority over American Negroes – a fiction that inspires his initial repugnance towards working class black-Americans. Ray reflects:

¹⁴³ Jackson, *The Indignant Generation*, pp. 68

¹⁴⁴ McKay, *Home to Harlem*, pp. 267

“He used to feel condescendingly sorry and superior to ten millions of suppressed Yankee “coons.” Now he was just one of them.... But, he was not entirely of them, he reflected. He possessed another language and literature that they knew not of.”¹⁴⁵

Ray describes himself as “of” a different substance than American Negroes because of his education. McKay’s use of the preposition “of” captures Ray’s simultaneous feeling of exclusion from and superiority towards working class black-Americans. As a result of his sense of moral superiority, Ray felt he was stuck in working class Harlem amongst depraved blacks needing uplift. Through Ray, McKay critiqued Du Bois’s exclusion of the jazz-addicted black working class from the publically acceptable black political identity. As Ray confronts cabaret culture, he feels himself to be what Du Bois called, the “Best” of his race. If Du Bois’s theory of double-consciousness asserted a nationalistic narrative of the American Negro discovering his African virtue and, with it, redeeming himself and the American nation, Ray’s exposure to Harlem’s “vice” made him abandon the possibility of there being any virtue latent in the Afro-American.; instead, he develops a perverse disgust and sense of irreparability towards the working class black-American. By contrast to McKay’s achievements in shedding his own elitism, Ray’s particular brand of black cultural nationalism and Talented Tenth elitism completely jeopardized his understanding of the urban black-American lives around him.

Ray struggles with cabaret culture precisely because it threatens and complicates his Du Boisian conception of the virtuous Negro soul. As Ray encounters

¹⁴⁵ McKay, *Home to Harlem*, pp. 155

this culture, he adopts the mistaken fiction of African primitivism to explain the Harlem nightlife. Ray reflects that he:

“felt alone and sorry for himself. Now that he was there, he would like to be touched by the spirit of that atmosphere and, like Jake, fall naturally into its rhythm. He also envied Jake. Just for this night only he would like to be like him... But some strange thing seemed to hold him back from taking the girl in his arms... The piano player had wandered off into some dim, far-away ancestral source of music.... The notes were naked acute alert. Like black youth burning in the jungle. Love in the deep heart of the jungle... Like a primitive dance of war or love...the marshaling of spears of the sacred frenzy of a phallic celebration.”¹⁴⁶

For Ray to embrace his discomfort in the cabaret, he relies on a discourse of African primitivism. By romanticizing his imagination of the African primitive, Ray is able to justify participating in the environment that he would otherwise find depraved, uncomfortable and, as he puts it, “violently disgusting.”¹⁴⁷ If his encounter with the drunkenness and sexual promiscuity of American cabaret culture threatens his conception of the virtuous Negro soul, the false language of African primitivism allows Ray to naively and, at least temporarily, embrace cabaret culture. To boil it down, McKay feels that Ray is actually very unintelligent. His reliance on the fiction of Negro primitivism captures the extent to which he is incapable of evaluating cabaret culture outside of his reliance on theories of Negro essentialisms. If Negroes in the cabarets were not innately virtuous to Ray, they were innately primitive. This essentialist paradigm, McKay revealed, contributes to Ray’s failure as an artist and “uplifter” of his people. Ray is too troubled by his essentialist way of thinking to achieve what McKay does – write a modernist and liberal novel of black Harlem life.

¹⁴⁶ McKay, *Home to Harlem*, pp. 195-197

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 192

To reiterate, the thrust of this analysis of *Home to Harlem* is to explore how McKay's achievement in writing a novel about black working class is juxtaposed against Ray's incapacity to do so. In this vein, I will briefly recognize the ways in which McKay was able to shed his elitism and instead write a novel exposing the subtle and problematic social distinctions drawn by working class Harlemites against each other; again, this is something that Ray fails to do precisely because he cannot understand Harlem outside of his own elitist perspective. Firstly, it is important to note that *Home to Harlem* contains no white characters, nor any Negroes of high social and economic position. Instead, McKay's novel deals exclusively with the ways in which various urban blacks communicated, miscommunicated, and in the case of Ray, were troubled by their commitment to a particular brand of elitism. Therefore, the closest we come to a class distinction in this novel is between the uneducated working class and the educated but still poor Ray. Aside from illustrating the cultural and vernacular rift between the educated and uneducated Negroes of Harlem, McKay sought to reveal the ways in which working class black characters created unnecessary distinctions between each other based on national background, skin tones, and even occupational position. In other words, Black Mecca was not only occupied with struggles between the educated Negro elitists and the working class but also troubled by fictional distinctions within the working class. In McKay's description of the train on which Ray works, he captures the subtle ways in which these distinctions were established:

“The two grades, cooks and waiters, never chummed together, except for gambling. Some of the waiters were very haughty. There were certain

light-skinned ones who went walking with pals of their complexion only in stopover cities.”¹⁴⁸

McKay offers a snapshot of “haughty” and arrogant light-skinned waiters travelling in packs – most likely to illustrate how these waiters felt their light skin color as an advantage in attracting light-skinned or white women. Meanwhile, we should note that the illusory social distinctions between skin color and occupational position break down when the men gather to gamble. Instead of joining in on the gambling, an opportunity for Ray to negotiate his friendship and recognize his shared socio-economic position with his working class coworkers, he spends his time reading. In this sense, Ray’s pursuit of education compromises his capacity to engage with the working class. From the perspective of the working class Harlemites, who McKay critiques for their predisposition to creating unnecessary social distinctions between themselves, Ray’s decision to read during gambling time only further contributes to their exclusion and dismissal of him as a pompous elitist.

Ray’s coworkers bully him, calling him the “dopey professah” – a categorization that is meant to reject what the working class blacks considered to be Ray’s elitist self-projection. The head chef barked at the other waiters for associating with “professah” Ray. Contemptuously, the chef tells Jake that he “Better leave that theah nigger professor alone and come on ‘long to the dining-car with us. That theah nigger is dopey from them books o’ hisn. I done told befoh them books would git him yet.”¹⁴⁹ It would be a mistake to interpret the chef’s punches at Ray as evidence of the chef’s “uncultured” attitude towards education; in fact, this

¹⁴⁸ McKay, *Home To Harlem*, pp. 126-127

¹⁴⁹ McKay, *Home To Harlem*, pp. 159

interpretation only perpetuates what McKay understood to be wrong with Ray's way of engaging with working class Harlem. In other words, the chef cannot be read as crass and ignorant. The chef's dismissal of Ray has nothing to do with his envy of Ray's intellectual privilege and everything to do with Ray's projected facade of cultural superiority over the uneducated Negroes with whom he works. As Ray encounters this exclusion against his privileged location as a highly educated young Negro, he evaluates his modern education as an inhibition to his capacity to be "simple" like the black working class. In this sense, Ray's encounters with working class black America provoked a self-reflective consideration of his supposedly "unfit" relationship to the larger African-American community. Instead of recognizing how his decision to read instead of interact leisurely with the working class perpetuates his exclusion, he perversely laments that his education has irreconcilably made him "of" a culturally superior existence. Instead of perversely attributing his "misfit" education as the cause for exclusion from working class Harlem, Ray, McKay feels, should attempt to socialize and understand the working class with whom he lives.

In addition to revealing Ray's perverse self-pity towards his education, McKay wants to show how Ray's reliance on romantic and extremely vague imaginations of the black soul prevents him from understanding himself and his literature. As I mentioned earlier, McKay presents Ray as fatefully essentialist and romantically vague in his thinking. During the peak of Ray's overdose on cocaine, he naively escapes to an impossible "world of blue paradise. Everything was in

gorgeous blue of heaven. He was a blue bird in flight and blue lizard in love.”¹⁵⁰ Jay’s nonchalant reaction to the cocaine really juxtaposes the pathetic silliness of Ray’s drug-induced fantasy of escape from the “magnificent monster of civilization.”¹⁵¹ As Ray questions the utility of his modern civilized education, he naively concludes that a return to primitivism would solve his feelings of disillusionment with civilization’s promise of progress and uplift for the Negro. He tells Jake:

“I don’t know what I’ll do with my little education. I wonder sometimes if I could get rid of it and go and lose myself in some savage culture in the jungles of Africa.”¹⁵²

Ray mistakenly equates abandoning modernity with returning to African primitivism; for McKay, this paradigm of Negro essentialisms completely shape Ray’s thinking. As a result, his moments of drug-induced transgression only heighten his paranoia of his education failing to make him the Negro artistic uplifter. Instead, he imagines that by abandoning his education, he could achieve what the Negroes in the cabarets participate in – innate primitive joy. McKay wants us to understand that Ray’s social distance from the working class of black Harlem is not only derived from his self-conception as an elite Negro artist but also a result of this intellectual naivety. As it is juxtaposed against Jake’s casual drug use, Ray’s anxious rant is actually funny. McKay enjoys poking fun at Ray for his deluded and vague way of thinking precisely because Ray is McKay’s progenitor in his own development as a writer. In this sense, we can see exactly how McKay asserts his accomplishment in writing a novel about black working class life.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, pp. 158

¹⁵¹ Ibid, pp. 155

¹⁵² McKay, *Home to Harlem*, pp. 274

Despite Ray's literary ambitions, his intellectual naivety coupled with his elitist self-conception prevents him from writing a successful novel about the black-American experience. For McKay, Ray devotes too much of his being and attention to a vague romance of writing and uplifting black life through art. He is too caught up in the romance of writing instead of focusing his attention on simply learning and documenting the vernacular of his laboring Harlem companions. To illustrate this point, we should consider Ray's vague conception of literature itself:

“Ray had always dreamed of writing words some day. Weaving words to make romance, ah! There were the great books that dominated the bright dreaming and dark brooding days when he was a boy... Dreams of patterns of words achieving form. What would he ever do with the words he had acquired? Were they adequate to tell the thoughts he felt, describe the impressions that reached him vividly?... Dreams of making something with words. What could he make.... And fashion? Could he ever create Art? Art, around which vague, incomprehensible words and phrases stormed? What was art, anyway? Was it more than a clear-cut presentation of a vivid impression of life?... Could he create out of the fertile reality around him?”¹⁵³

Ultimately, Ray's vague romance of literature as a “pattern of words achieving form” illustrate his lack of attention on learning the complex stories and vernacular of the black working class with whom he lives. Instead, Ray is preoccupied by “weaving words into romance.” Ray's reflections strongly resemble Du Bois's claim that literature needed to subtly expose the “beautiful ideals” of Negro life.¹⁵⁴ McKay's insight was to point out the uselessness of such a vague conception of literature. This concern with beautiful ideals, at least for McKay, only detracted from the

¹⁵³ McKay, *Home to Harlem*, pp. 229

¹⁵⁴ Du Bois and Sundquist. *The Oxford W.E.B. Du Bois Reader*. New York: Oxford UP, 1996. Print. pp. 516-517

capacity for the black writer to devote his attention to learning about the lives and vernacular of the black working class life around him.

Unlike Byron in *Nigger Heaven*, Ray actually expresses a potential to overcome his elitist conception of himself and write. As Ray, however, confronts cabaret culture and black working class life, he begins to abandon his elitism, his vague romantic notions of the Negro soul, and his language of Negro primitivism to understand the cabarets. Ray's story about Jerco, the pimp, is the only moment in the novel when Ray thinks outside of the language of Negro virtue or Negro primitivism in explaining and understanding the brutal structural realities of Harlem's poor. In this story, entitled "He [Jerco] Also Loves," Ray confronts how the financial realities of being black and broke in urban America can shape one's relationship to love, sex, and marriage – making the Du Boisian ideas of 'pure love' obsolete. The title of the chapter captures the thrust of McKay's critique against Du Bois's conviction that the black artist need illustrate a Victorian espousal of love; the implication is that McKay's characters that Du Bois thought were "filthy mongrels" who could not achieve the values of pure love could, in fact, and did participate in loving relationships.

To summarize, Ray's story is about the relationship between Rosalind and her pimp/lover, Jerco – who pawns his clothing and possessions in order to pay her doctor's bill when she falls terminally ill; McKay wanted his contemporary readers, particularly the Du Boisian moralists, to unthink their straightforward ethical judgment against Jerco as a "filthy mongrel" for simultaneously pimping and loving of Rosalind; from the perspective of these moralists, humans could either be

virtuous or depraved, but not both. Therefore, Jerco's pimping immediately categorizes him as the latter in Du Bois's Victorian way of thinking. This story, however, captures how Du Bois's ideal of pure virtuous love fails to accurately capture Jerco's relationship to Rosalind. Ultimately, Ray is capable of expressing a realistic picture of being black, destitute, and in love in urban America outside of the language of Negro essentialisms and his own elitism. Ray reflects:

"I wouldn't touch not one of her things until she's better," Jerco said.
"I'd sooner take the shirt off mah back."
Which he was preparing to do...
"I don't know what I'd do if anything happens to Rosalind," he said. "I
kan't live without her."¹⁵⁵

As Rosalind approaches death, we become more aware of Jerco's contradiction; he loves Rosalind but also relies on her body for income. Therefore, his affectionate expressions and sacrifices to provide her with medical care are always accompanied by the moral irony of his exploitation of her body. While his contemporaries viewed these characters as "filth mongrels," McKay and, by extension, Ray saw that these characters represented an accurate picture of the economic destitution of life in black urban America and its effects on the politics of love.¹⁵⁶ McKay and Ray both lived amongst Harlemites who could not experience love without confronting a brutal reckoning of their financial realities. Therefore, Du Boisian ideals of beauty and love failed to capture or sympathize with the ways in which love had to be compromised as financial troubles asserted themselves. These characters are committed to each other not just out of love but also out of financial dependence. Therefore, Rosalind's death is simultaneously the end of Jerco's loving relationship

¹⁵⁵ McKay, *Home to Harlem*, pp. 258-259

¹⁵⁶ Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was In Vogue*, pp. 225-227

as well as his only source of income; Ray reflects feeling uncomfortable with Jerco's misogynistic advantage in their relationship – i.e. the unfairness of the fact that it is not Jerco who whores his body for their mutual income. At first, Ray is acutely aware of a discomfoting ambiguity in discussing Rosaline's death to Jerco; it becomes difficult for both Ray and Jerco to distinguish when they are talking about Rosaline as Jerco's whore or Rosaline as Jerco's paramour. When Jerco cries, "I'll never find another one like Rosalind," Ray responds by telling him to "Buck up. You'll find somebody else." Offended, Jerco addresses Ray's comment for the implication that Rosalind was only a whore. Jerco charges, "Perhaps you didn't like the way me and Rosalind was living. But she was one naturally good woman, all good inside her." Ray immediately felt "foolish and uncomfortable."¹⁵⁷ Ray's feelings of foolishness and discomfort derive from his acute awareness to the difficulty in communicating his sympathy to Jerco. Ray remarks how moral ideals could only make the goal of mutual understanding and sympathy more difficult. As Ray reflects:

"I never thought [Jerco] could feel anything. Never thought he could do what he did. Something so strange and awful, it just lifted me up out of my little straight thoughts into a big whirl where all of life seems hopelessly tangled and colored without point or purpose."¹⁵⁸

By "straight" thoughts, Ray is reflecting on his abandonment of the Du Boisian romantic ideals of beauty and love; they are just unable to explain the "tangled-ness" of Jerco's simultaneous love and exploitation of Rosalind. At the very least, Ray's experience revealed to him the ways in which the vague and outdated Victorian ideas of beautiful and pure love failed to capture the ways in which love could be

¹⁵⁷ McKay, *Home to Harlem*, pp. 260-261

¹⁵⁸ McKay, *Home to Harlem*, pp. 244

subject to tragic financial realities. In order to express his genuine sympathy towards Jerco's location as a pimp in love, Ray says and abandons his elitism and declares, "I have nothing against [Rosalind]. I am nothing myself."¹⁵⁹ In order for Ray to clearly express his lack of moral judgment towards Jerco, he admits the "nothing-ness" of his life as a poor black man who must also do his best to overcome the brutal reality of structural disadvantage. The word, "nothing," in this context, becomes the language of structural difficulty in which Jerco and Ray can comprehend and express sympathy towards each other. Therefore, even if Ray was educated and failed to speak the Harlem vernacular, his ability to express his connection with Jerco at the level of structural disadvantage is extremely significant. This is what McKay wanted to highlight as Ray's achievement in the novel. This final chapter of my thesis focuses on the educated elites in Harlem precisely because their flawed self-conceptions highlight the achievement of McKay and Van Vechten in championing an artistic style different from the elitism of Du Bois and Locke. Unlike in *Nigger Heaven*, however, *Home to Harlem's* Ray achieves, at least temporarily, the promise of overcoming his own elitism.

IV. Conclusion: The Lives of New Negro Artists.

This thesis has intended to explore the ways in which Talented Tenth elitists and black cultural nationalists mistook the artistic method of the New Negro writer. This chapter, in particular, chooses to study the elitist characters of *Nigger Heaven* and *Home to Harlem* in order to offer insight into the achievement of the liberal

¹⁵⁹ McKay, *Home to Harlem*, pp. 261

humanist New Negro writers in abandoning the conservative preconceptions about the Harlem Renaissance. Only by looking at Ray and Byron as they represent the theories of Du Bois and Locke can we understand the New Negro artist's struggle against the popular current of petit-black elitism and flawed black cultural nationalism. However, it is not enough to illustrate the departure of these New Negro writers from their old conservative mentors. In order to understand the lives of the New Negro artists, we must briefly consider how their philosophies, despite their shared liberalism, differ from each other. As I move to conclude this thesis, I will attempt to provide a crisp map of the ways in which our liberal humanist writers – Langston Hughes, George Schuyler, Claude McKay, and Carl Van Vechten – differed from each other in their attitudes towards the jazz-addicted black working class.

CONCLUSION

VIEWS FROM THE CABARET: LIBERAL HUMANIST PERSPECTIVES ON HARLEM NIGHTLIFE

Despite their liberal mode of artistic expression and commitment to documenting the lives of the jazz-addicted working class of black Harlem, these liberal authors also expressed a critique of cabaret culture. In these concluding comments I will briefly examine how the treatment of Langston Hughes, George Schuyler, Claude McKay, and Carl Van Vechten towards cabaret culture, highlight a spectrum of their attitudes towards the black working class. This project has intended to express the ways in which the liberal humanist generation wrote to expose the individualism of differently situated blacks encountering and responding to the urban culture of Harlem. By briefly discussing these authors' treatment of cabaret culture, the main perspectives and behaviors of, for example, black laborers, elitist intellectuals, Du Boisian nationalists, and the New Negro writers themselves becomes clear in comparative perspective; all of these characters interacted with each other in urban spaces like Harlem. Therefore, the liberal writer sought to show how these interactions were shaped and limited by a complex variety in racial thinking. To conclude, I will juxtapose these authors' treatment of black perspectives to cabaret culture in order to perform my claim that these liberal authors collectively provided a macro-level view of various black perspectives and behaviors in urban black America, including their own. I am not necessarily trying to posit a new argument but rather attempting to reiterate, using the example of cabaret culture, how these liberal authors illustrated Harlem as a cosmopolitan

space of interactions shaped by differing modes of racial thinking. Moreover, by considering the biographical context of our liberal writers, I hope to capture how they shaped their philosophies in response to their social locations within Harlem.

Carl Van Vechten's reputation for hosting exclusive and decadent parties for the New Negro artist perhaps suggests his own privileged location – a location that may have restricted his understanding of black working class life. In many ways, he leveraged his financial and social capital to provide the spaces for black and white elites in Harlem to party and socialize together – a social role that seems to contradict his critique of Harlem elitist culture. In *The Big Sea*, Langston Hughes reflected that “Not only were there interesting Negroes at Carl Van Vechten's parties, ranging from famous writers to famous tap dancers, but there were also many other celebrities of various colors and kinds, old ones and new ones.”¹⁶⁰ Carl Van Vechten's financial privilege in being able to throw parties as extravagant as those of A'Leila Walker – the daughter of hair-straightening millionaire Madame Walker – provides context in understanding how he shaped his attitude towards cabarets and Harlem's elite class. Van Vechten's treatment of cabaret culture and Harlem nightlife actually showcases his critique of the shallow attitude with which elites like the wealthy black A'Leila Walker enjoyed black nightlife. *Nigger Heaven's* Lasca Sartoris, fictionalizes the extravagance and moral precariousness of A'Leila Walker who was notorious for throwing parties using the capital from her millionaire mother's Kink-No-More business.¹⁶¹ The fact that A'Leila Walker appears

¹⁶⁰ Hughes, *The Big Sea*, pp. 251

¹⁶¹ Borst, “Signifying Afro-Orientalism: The Jazz-Addict Subculture in *Nigger Heaven* and *Home to Harlem*.” pp.699

fictionalized in *Nigger Heaven* as well as Schuyler's *Black No More* suggests the extent to which these New Negro writers interacted closely with the wealthy black elites. In *Nigger Heaven*, Lasca incarnates the particular attitude of elitism that exercises a language of hatred and violence against the black working class. In *Black No More*, on the other hand, Madame C.J. Walker's ironic success as a black woman selling cosmetic skin and hair whiteners is meant to represent, through satire, Schuyler's espousal of a cognitive willpower to overcome structural disadvantage. Lasca, in *Nigger Heaven* however, stands in as representation of an elitist attitude that refers to one's structural advantage and privilege as an explanation for one's educational and moral superiority over the disadvantaged black working class – an attitude to which Van Vechten was exposed during his time hosting parties for the Harlem elite. Van Vechten illustrated this point most clearly through the relationship of Byron and Lasca. Byron storms out on his girlfriend, Mary, after she provides critical feedback on his story. "In a renewed fit of fury," he joins Lasca at the "Black Venus. He wanted to be cheered up and at this cabaret there was always excitement of some kind."¹⁶² Ultimately, Byron is inspired to go on a bender precisely because he felt that Mary questioned his status and capabilities as an educated Negro writer; her criticism of his capacity to write provokes an unnecessary anger and an anxious discourse of his cultural superiority to the black working class. For several days, Byron and Lasca indulge in heavy drinking, cocaine abuse, and rages of "angry race-talk" at various cabarets. During the bender, Lasca mistakenly perceives that working class cabaret goers naturally envied her as a

¹⁶² Van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven*, pp. 206

result of her financial privilege and light skin. In this vein, she declares, “Well, they detest me because I get what they want... They all make me sick. The black motto is: Drag down the topmost.”¹⁶³ She uses this discourse to make the claim that the black working class is innately envious. Lasca and Byron’s nightlife transgressions are driven by what Van Vechten considered a detrimentally elitist attitude towards working class black Harlem.

Van Vechten juxtaposed Lasca and Byron’s nightlife transgressions with those of the black working class to demonstrate that, despite sharing the same cultural space, these social groups of people thought about their experiences within these spaces very differently. Van Vechten wrote that laborers, “refused to live in. The white world might do its best to rob their days of pleasure, but they could always look forward to the evening.”¹⁶⁴ Cabaret culture, far from being a necessarily sinful, depraved, and primitive space, could provide what Van Vechten thought was a necessary leisure to black-Americans who could use the evening to forget about structural difficulty of their lives, if only for a moment. In Allan G. Borst’s essay, “Signifying Afro-Orientalism: The Jazz-Addict Subculture in *Nigger Heaven* and *Home to Harlem*,” he points out that these laborers do not rest up for the next day nor do they “worry about replenishing their labor-power [and] instead pursue entertainment and cultural activity that disobeys approved standards of behavior.”¹⁶⁵ To take this observation further, we should note Van Vechten’s

¹⁶³ Ibid, pp. 257-258

¹⁶⁴ Van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven*, pp. 188

¹⁶⁵ Borst, “Signifying Afro-Orientalism: The Jazz-Addict Subculture in *Nigger Heaven* and *Home to Harlem*.” pp.689

espousal of the working class's supposedly justified attitude towards cabaret transgression. He believed that the Harlem nightlife's promise of leisure was reasonably necessary for black laborers who faced structural difficulties every day. By contrast, Byron and Lasca's transgression only further inspires their delusional feelings of superiority to the Negro working class – an attitude of elitism that Van Vechten must have observed at his own parties and those of A'Leila Walker. Van Vechten's treatment of the black elite differs from Schuyler's insofar as he is interested in exposing how the black elite use their financial and structural privilege to exercise a mistaken fiction of their cultural and moral superiority to the black working class. In his formulation, however, Van Vechten overlooks the ways in which the black working class abused cabaret culture.

While Van Vechten observed the cabaret as a necessary space of transgression for working class blacks, George Schuyler viewed drunken cabaret transgression as an unnecessary and avoidable distraction for black-American laborers who he believed, needed to devote their full attention to overcoming structural disadvantage. As I illustrated in the second chapter of this thesis, Schuyler critiqued his protagonist Max for spending all of his capital pursuing white women and drinking at cabarets when he could have been investing his financial resources and time to overcoming his location as a working class black American. In comparative perspective, Schuyler's philosophy retains an economic conservatism absent from Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven*. Schuyler prescribed a cognitive attitude of structural overcoming, of devoting one's psychological attention, time and resources to beating the disadvantage of being black in America. Schuyler was not

accusing blacks of being responsible for their own dispossession but rather sought to encourage them to reduce the psychological impact of casual prejudice and instead devote their entire energies to overcoming this location of structural dispossession; drinking heavily at cabarets, Schuyler believed, only detracted from this project. In short, Schuyler's attitude of willpower for the black individual comes through clearly when we compare Max in *Black No More* to Van Vechten's espousal of the black working class's cabaret transgressions. At the very least, the overlap as well as the nuances of each of these authors' perspectives captures the variety of ways in which differently situated blacks interacted with Harlem's cabaret culture.

While Langston Hughes did not necessarily share Schuyler's adamant commitment to black economic rationalism, he did have a clear grasp on the structural realities that supported the possibility of participating in cabaret culture. More so than Van Vechten, Hughes was exposed to the poverty that prevented blacks from enjoying cabaret culture – particularly after the onset of the Great Depression. In his autobiography, he reflected:

“That was really the end of the gay times of the New Negro era in Harlem, the period that had begun to reach its end when the crash came in 1929 and the white people had much less money to spend on themselves, and practically none to spend on Negroes, for the depression brought everybody down a peg or two. And the Negroes had but few pegs to fall.”¹⁶⁶

Hughes recognized the ways in which Harlem's nightlife culture was supported by downtown whites (e.g. party hosts like his friend Van Vechten) and the capacity for working class Negroes to spend some of their meager income on themselves. Van Vechten's status as a gainfully employed white author actually prevented him from

¹⁶⁶ Hughes, *The Big Sea*, pp. 247

developing this critique of cabaret culture. This is not to say that he did not accurately critique the attitudes of black elites indulging in cabaret culture but rather to point out the extent to which he took for granted the working class freedom to enjoy cabaret culture. In short, Van Vechten, despite championing a liberal artistic expression of working class cabaret culture, retained a social privilege that perhaps limited his recognition of how the black working class's capacity to participate in cabaret culture came at a financial cost. As a result, he failed to critique the consequences of the black working class enjoying cabaret culture.

Through the character of Jake in *Home to Harlem*, Claude McKay went beyond Van Vechten's espousal of the black working class and Schuyler's economic critique of working class participation in cabaret culture. The character of Jake in *Home to Harlem* defined himself by his stylistic appearance and his capacity to attract attention in the Harlem cabarets; McKay's representation of Jake captures the ways in which a working class indulgence in cabaret culture actually provided an unreliable source of identity. After an overdose, Jake thinks "honestly about it, after all, he was never satisfied, flopping here and sleeping there... it would be a thousand times nicer to have a little brown woman of his own to whom he could go home and be his simple self with.... [Harlem girls] expected him always to be the prancing he-man."¹⁶⁷ This passage captures how Jake explains the ways in which cabaret culture began to offer him a diminishing gratification. The more he participated in Harlem's nightlife after returning home from the war, the more he felt his leisure grow empty.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, pp. 212

As he reflects, Jake feels stuck within himself and his reliance on cabaret culture. In this sense, Jake begins to feel confined within his participation in cabaret culture and approaches an inarticulate recognition that he has no access to a different possibility of selfhood. To take this point further, I should contrast Jake, a returning WWI veteran and member of the Harlem Hell Fighters infantry, with Du Bois's claim that black participation in the war reflected the Negro youth's capacity to define himself as an uplifter of his race. Jake's return from World War I was not defined by what Du Bois celebrated as the spirit of pride and confidence that would allow the New Negro to "Make way for Democracy! He saved it in France, and by the Great Jehovah he will save it in the United States of America, or know the reason why."¹⁶⁸ I mentioned in the introduction how black participation in the war gave rise to an optimistic discourse in the New Negro generation's potential for uplift. By juxtaposing Jake's return with Du Bois's rhetoric of return, we can see how McKay deconstructs the myth of the New Negro generation as the harbingers of racial uplift and progress. The novel opens with Jake's re-immersion into Harlem's nightlife transgressions after the war. Jake reflects that, "The noises of Harlem. The sugared laughter. The honey-talk on the streets. And all night long, ragtime and blues playing somewhere... singing somewhere, dancing somewhere [all] burnt in Jake's sweet blood."¹⁶⁹ This initial passion to rejoice in Harlem's cabarets only diminishes as Jake continues to immerse himself in this cabaret culture of transgression and pleasure seeking. When Jake ends up in the hospital after a cocaine-induced bender, he confronts the fact that cabaret culture was in fact an unreliable source of self-

¹⁶⁸ qtd. in *Ibid*, pp. 15

¹⁶⁹ McKay, *Home to Harlem*, pp. 15

definition. His landlady condemns him and “the younger generation in Harlem [for not knowing] no god... All you know is cabarets and movies and the young gals them exposing them legs a theirs in them jumper frocks.”¹⁷⁰ Here, McKay wanted to expose how binging in cabaret culture and nightlife functioned as a diminishingly reliable source of self-definition. Earlier we mentioned how Van Vechten espoused cabaret a necessary space of transgression for the laboring class, while Schuyler viewed drunken cabaret transgression as an unnecessary and avoidable distraction for black-Americans who he believed, needed to devote their full attention to overcoming structural disadvantage. Jake’s reflections suggest McKay’s espousal of a balance between cabaret transgression and Schuyler’s attitude of structural overcoming. In other words, McKay wanted the working class Harlemite to recognize that if he could no longer afford cabaret culture, an identity defined by the cabaret subculture would no longer be possible.

The subtle differences between each of these authors’ critiques of cabaret culture illustrates a variety of attitudes towards and behaviors within cabaret culture during this time period. The Jakes and the Byrons and the Rays and the Lascas all interacted with each other as well as with the authors of these novels in some capacity – all viewing their experiences differently but nevertheless sharing the same cosmopolitan space. What this suggests is the success of the New Negro writers in capturing the various perspectives of people interacting in cosmopolitan Harlem. More generally, the differences between the ways in which these New Negro liberal artists viewed cabaret culture illustrates their departure from the Du

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, pp. 220

Boisian discourse on Harlem life. Du Bois's narrative of the Negro soul, as illustrated through Ray, simply cannot explain the nightlife transgressions of working class blacks like Jake or elites like Lasca and Byron.

What this thesis has aimed to do is illustrate the lives and achievements of New Negro writers as they struggled to depart from the trajectory of Du Bois's black cultural nationalism. I have treated their literary works as explanatory vehicles to illustrate the lives and philosophies of New Negro writers during this time period as they responded to black cultural nationalism. In this vein, I have attempted to combine a historical and literary approach to expose the novelty of what this generation of writers accomplished. At its core, this project has been an attempt to illustrate the shift in artistic styles and philosophical perspectives between the black cultural nationalist guard and the indignant generation of liberals. As an intellectual history, this thesis uses literature to speak for the time period of the Harlem Renaissance. Therefore, combining the fields of literary and historical analysis has been a necessary part of my methodology – a methodology that, until recently, has been missing from scholarly attention to the Harlem Renaissance. Only by allowing the characters of these works to represent certain social groups of people during the Renaissance can we understand the lives, achievements, and observations of the New Negro writers. Through fiction, we can see how the younger generation of New Negro writers posited their philosophical claims against the black cultural nationalists. These fictional works, under this methodology, serve the purpose of capturing a difficult, frustrated, and confusing struggle to abandon the politicized

racial fictions of the past and approach a more inclusive and authentic artistic representation of black urban life.

Throughout this project, I have been fascinated by the juxtaposition between Du Bois's argument that blackness retains a deeper meaning beyond skin color and the liberal humanist generation's claim that race is only skin deep. The intellectual transition between these two ways of thinking took place through a complex debate over literature and its role in black life. I find it helpful to refer to black cultural nationalist ways of thinking about race as "deep." During the crisis of black cultural nationalism, liberals found that race was no longer as "deep" as it was for Du Bois – deep in the sense that one's blackness signified a spiritual and ancient connection to a mystical African past. Du Bois's prose reflects this mystical or deep philosophy of race. Race, as a result of the rise of the liberal humanist philosophies, perhaps became "shallow" in that it abandoned deep essentialisms; throughout this thesis, I have endeavored to show how the prose of the liberal humanists reflects this loss of mystical or essential depth. However, in this shallowing or flattening of racial philosophy, these authors revealed a wide-ranged and complex variety of ways in which their contemporaries thought about distinctly racial issues. Although race lost its essentialist depth, these writers opened up and exposed new languages that recorded what was happening in urban black life. In other words, these young writers were not interested in asserting that race was only skin deep in order to claim the possibility of a post-racial society. Although they claimed that race was skin deep, they did not seek to buy into the fiction that humans could somehow overcome racial differences, prejudices, and preferences. At the core of my

argument is the claim that these liberal writers wrote about the infinite and pervasive languages of their contemporaries in understanding distinctly racial aspects of life. This transition away from racial depth opened up the possibility to discuss race and write about race through a variety of languages and genres. I find my research impactful in the sense that it uses a literature to speak for a time period in which racial thinking was in transition. Despite the fact that I have used Du Bois aggressively to represent a particular nationalism juxtaposed against the rise of liberal modes of literary and racial expression, I want to acknowledge that Du Bois was not a static thinker. He wrote for several decades after the fall of the Harlem Renaissance and his thought cannot be exclusively categorized as the static black cultural nationalism that I have laid out. Nevertheless, during this time period, many liberals developed their literature in response to Du Bois's notions of racial depth and Talented Tenth elitism. Without exploring the black liberal literary development as a response to Du Bois, we risk overlooking a historical moment in which black literature, for the first time, struggled to move beyond racial essentialism.

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