

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/259864682>

African American Satire and Harlem Renaissance Literary Politics: A Review

Data · January 2013

CITATIONS

0

READS

222

1 author:



[Shadi Neimneh](#)

Hashemite University

41 PUBLICATIONS 10 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

All content following this page was uploaded by [Shadi Neimneh](#) on 24 January 2014.

The user has requested enhancement of the downloaded file. All in-text references [underlined in blue](#) are added to the original document and are linked to publications on ResearchGate, letting you access and read them immediately.

African American Satire and Harlem Renaissance Literary Politics: A Review

by Shadi Neimneh,

The Hashemite University, Jordan

Posted 15-Feb-2013

Vol. 20, 2013

ISSN 2044-804X

This article discusses the use of satire in the fictional works of the Harlem Renaissance with reference to critical and intellectual debates about the value and function of African American art. Such satire, I argue, was often employed for its social and political power as a polemical, subversive, and controversial genre fit for debating the representation of blacks in literature and reflecting on the achievement of the Renaissance. It evolved as a reaction to propaganda demands and as a self-conscious assertion of aesthetic freedom. As a weapon against human folly and vice, satire in Harlem Renaissance fiction also had an inherent reformative vision and sociopolitical messages about the racial situation. As a subversive genre, African American satire was in tune with the radical orientation of the Harlem Renaissance movement in its reaction to the genteel school of uplift propaganda.

Introduction: Art vs. Propaganda



The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and early 1930s was a self-conscious flowering of black cultural productions and critical reviews of these productions. The movement was far from unified, and satirization of some aspects of Harlem life was common. Conflicting demands and conceptions about serving the race, together with charges of assimilationism, elitism, and primitivism, characterized intellectual debates and were often the foci of satire. Some critics like W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke promoted positive representations of black life in high-culture Harlem and found in these representations ways of politically helping the race by showing whites that blacks have cultural potential and deserve equal rights. Although these critics advocated a literature that improves their image, fights stereotypes, and has positive political messages, they were, however, attacked for underestimating their identities as blacks and for wasting their literary merits for the sake of propaganda and fake representations. The

opponents of propaganda literature and advocates of artistic freedom like Wallace Thurman, Langston Hughes, and Zora Neal Hurston were themselves attacked for satisfying white desires for primitive themes in a way that served to undermine racial equality. Some writers promoted high-culture Harlem, while others focused on the Harlem underworld and its seedier aspects. Both sides excluded the other Harlem that can exist, and propaganda yielded counter propaganda.

Within this context, satire was often employed for its social and political power as a polemical, controversial genre best suited for debating the representation of blacks in literature and reflecting on the achievement of the Harlem Renaissance. As Dustin Griffin argues, satire works through “inquiry and provocation” (4) and is “open-ended” (5), which partially explains the appeal of this genre to writers and critics when it comes to intellectually problematic topics. As a result of this intellectual breach, a number of witty satires dealing with different attitudes and ideas about the whole race question emerged, often to poke fun at the movement itself and its principles. Hence, the Harlem Renaissance was a self-conscious movement about its art/propaganda and was torn between different ideologies. A specific look at some satirical works and polemical literary theory produced during the Renaissance allows us to understand this rift in politics and ideologies and the polemics of art versus propaganda. Moreover, and in its capacity as a weapon against human folly and vice, satire in Harlem Renaissance fiction had a reformative vision and sociopolitical messages about the racial situation.

In *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (1925), Alain Locke optimistically argues that art and cultural productions can solve the race problem. He argues that “[w]hoever wishes to see the Negro in his essential traits, in the full perspective of his achievement and possibilities, must seek the enlightenment of that self-portraiture which the present developments of Negro culture are offering” (ix). He then speaks of “a new soul” and “a renewed race-spirit that consciously and proudly sets itself apart” (xi). He shows that the “New Negro,” as opposed to the Old, is self-articulate, ambitious, independent, and progressive. Hope for him “rests in the revaluation by white and black alike of the Negro in terms of his artistic endowments and cultural contributions, past and prospective” (15). Like Du Bois, Locke was trying to reconstruct culturally the public image of blacks. His main idea is that through artistic expression, blacks can achieve social equality with white Americans and overcome racism.



George Schuyler in his 1926 article “The Negro-Art Hokum” also tried to refute negative stereotypes, although his statement that the “African American is merely a lampblack Anglo-Saxon” (Napier 25) led many to label him an assimilationist. Schuyler did not believe in racial art since for him it presupposes an essential African American literary or artistic tradition. He argues that the African American is different only in color yet “subject to the same economic and social forces” as whites (Napier 25). Belief in fundamental differences, he thought, was used to promote supremacist ideology. He, like Du Bois and against writers like Langston Hughes and Claude McKay, believed that what is taken to be characteristic “Negro art” is based on stereotypical representation of “imbecilities of the Negro rustics and clowns” not true of the average African American (Napier 25). The literature of blacks, he argues, can be American but not racial as the belief in racially black

literature is a product of an “old myth” of “fundamental, eternal, and inescapable differences” (Napier 26). Responding to Schuyler, Langston Hughes in “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (1926) provided the Harlem Renaissance with a cornerstone text when he argued the need for both race pride and artistic independence. This article was a manifesto for younger writers who wanted to assert themselves in the face of black or white criticism. It dominated debates about the function of Harlem’s art for a long time. For Hughes, young black writers should express themselves “without fear or shame” and regardless of the desires of whites since black people are humans and their lives, accordingly, are marked by degrees of beauty.

Du Bois in his 1926 “Criteria of Negro Art” attacks many of the younger writers for failing to adhere to their political responsibilities by writing positive racial propaganda. He famously claimed that art is “propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I don’t care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda” (Napier 22). He asserts that art and beauty are universal themes available to black writers, without ignoring political responsibilities. The duty of defending the race should take precedence over the value of art for art’s sake. For Du Bois, African American art can be “part of the fight” for radicals and a “forward and an upward look” (Napier 17). Blacks are capable of producing beautiful art “but the point today is that until the art of the black folk compels recognition they will not be rated as human. And when through art they compel recognition then let the world discover if it will that their art is as new as it is old and as old as new” (Napier 23). In his novel *Dark Princess* (1928), representatives of black nations resent racism and white domination. A talented tenth protagonist is expelled from medical school due to racism and feels the need to unite with other people of color in exile. The characters use Standard English, and there are no Harlem low-life cabarets or prostitutes in the novel. Herman Beavers notes that Du Bois’s creative writing is part of the work of “a social scientist” and is driven by the need to “exert critical force as part of his contribution to the effort of studying ‘Negro problems’” (250). Du Bois believed in the power of black art to generate real changes. Although a social scientist should depict real life with its seedier aspects, there were some aspects that Du Bois shied away from. Du Bois used his training as a sociologist creatively to give a model about a socially and politically committed literature, but his approach and attitude were not always liked, and many writers directly differed from him in their take on the race issue. Hughes is a case in point.

Hughes critiques racial prejudice, condemns the complicity of the black bourgeoisie in perpetuating racism, objects to Schuyler that environment and economics have made blacks just darker Anglo-Saxons, and asserts the beauty of blackness. He accepts, however, Schuyler’s belief in the lack of fundamental differences because racism requires maintaining some attributes and differences. He criticizes the white standards of middle-class black intelligentsia and argues for embracing a distinctive race aesthetic fearing no shame about representing black culture. The racial mountain as an obstacle is “this urge toward whiteness” and to be “as little Negro and as much American as possible” (Napier 27). Middle-class blacks, Hughes argues, do not see the beauty of their own people (Napier 27). Nordic manners and imitation among middle-class blacks are a “very high mountain for the would-be racial artist to climb in order to discover himself and his people” (Napier 28). Hughes’s heroes, unlike Du Bois’s respectable middle-class ones and like Claude McKay’s natural men, are “the low-down folks,

the so-called common element and they are the majority” who live freely, “do not particularly care whether they are like white folks or anybody else,” love spirituals and jazz, and “furnish a wealth of colorful, distinctive material for any artist because they still hold their own individuality in the face of American standardizations” (Napier 28). Hughes asserts the need for an artist who loves his blackness and is free from the negativity of his own people and the flattery of whites who expect him to be respectable.

Although my focus is African American writers, Caribbean writers also contributed to this debate. For example, Eric Walrond in “Writers Desert Great Field of Folk-Life for Propaganda” (1922) writes that the reason “why the Negro has not made any sort of headway in fiction is due to the effects of color prejudice. It is difficult for a Negro to write without bringing in the race question. As soon as a writer demonstrates skill along imaginative lines he is bound to succumb to the temptations of reform or propaganda” (Parascandola 63). He calls for more focus on the aesthetic value of literature although he understands why writers care about political messages. In “The Negro Literati” (1925), he similarly writes that blacks should give expression to their emotions and creativity but are held back spiritually despite increased social and political freedoms (Parascandola 130). Since he is “conscious of the color problem,” the black writer writes for whites and is careful not to disfavor his people by presenting them “in a disparaging light” (Parascandola 130). Hence, Walrond praises writers like Toomer, Hughes, Cullen, and Fisher who do not hesitate to depict negative aspects of black life, beyond uplift propaganda (Parascandola 130-1). They “don’t think of the negro as a distinct racial type at all,” Walrond claims (Parascandola 131). This means they take him as a human being and write about average African American people, not only rich and virgin types.

In “Blueprint for Negro Writing” (1937), Richard Wright made a late contribution to this critical debate about the direction African American literature should take. He distinguishes between two main aspects of black writing in the past: one seeking “ornamentation, the hallmark of ‘achievement’” and one becoming “the voice of the educated Negro pleading with white America for justice” (Napier 45). He questions the whole endeavor of racial uplifters writing about respectable, educated blacks as well as primitivists writing about low classes in the name of artistic freedom and achievement: “Rarely was the best of this writing addressed to the Negro himself, his needs, his sufferings, his aspirations” (Napier 45). “Through misdirection,” he adds, “Negro writers have been far better to others than they have been to themselves” (Napier 45-46). Wright shows the influence of Marxist ideology and emphasizes the need for more assertive, serious political literature that would address the negative effects of racism on blacks. The black writers in the past were “prim and decorous ambassadors” pleading racial equality while contemporary writers should use their words as weapons in a struggle for racial equality (Napier 45). Wright advocates literature that is socially and politically committed in bringing about a revolutionary consciousness in the black masses.

A further dimension to the art versus propaganda debate was explored by younger and more radical writers in their literary works, particularly in satires. Since satire can be corrective, subversive, iconoclastic, and playful, it was used to oppose the ideas of the conventional school of black uplift writers. Harlem Renaissance writers used satire as a self-conscious artistic tool to engage debates about political commitment in literature and simultaneously to question the foundations of racial

discrimination. Their use of satire also allowed them to reflect on the aesthetic merits of the movement as a whole. Next, I review some Harlem Renaissance novels and categorize them in terms of their satirical treatment of different aspects of African American life and the degree of their engagement with intellectual debates about black art and racial polemics.

II. Satire in Selected Harlem Renaissance Novels

A. Social Satire

***The Blacker the Berry* by Wallace Thurman**

Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry* (1929) explores the nuances of racism within the African American community, rather than interracial racism as in a typical propaganda novel. The harsh experiences of Emma as a dark-skinned woman are used to offer a scathing critique of the preference for lighter skin and other features associated with being white within the African American community. The novel treats this theme with bitter irony as Emma's blackness makes her the object of rejection and intraracial discrimination. Emma has terrible experiences of intra-racial prejudice, ironically during the "Negro" vogue, because light skin is desired for its associations with social status, opportunity, and social acceptance. She internalizes prejudice and repeats it against others as her lighter-skinned relatives, who are also satirized, mimic the racist attitudes and materialistic values of mainstream society. The reaction to color prejudice in the form of replication and imitation is thus also satirized. Thurman satirizes the preference for light-skin and other features associated with whiteness, for it is illogical to praise whiteness and white middle-class values, especially during the "New Negro" movement. The attack on prejudice and assimilation within the middle-class black community makes it a satirical novel with a topic racial uplifters did not like.

Emma leaves the University of Southern California for Harlem, hoping to free herself from the intraracial prejudice that is exacerbated by her gender. She continues to be obsessed with color and class consciousness and becomes prejudiced against dark-skinned people. Within this logic, dark-skinned blacks are prejudiced against working-class dark-skinned blacks, mulattoes are prejudiced against dark-skinned blacks, and whites are prejudiced against both. The color problem has a hierarchy based on economic position and material power. In addition to exposing this negative side of race relations, Thurman portrays mundane Harlem tenement buildings, rent parties, dance halls, cabarets, dirty slums, and crowded employment agencies. He emphasizes a seamy side of Harlem life: gay mulatto men drinking and making love to young boys. In a sense, gay sex made this novel seem even seamier because of its deviation from straight sexuality. In describing Harlem as it is, not as it should be, Thurman defiantly promoted it as a cultural capital for blacks, a major tenet in Harlem Renaissance literary politics. The Harlem he depicted was not, though, a place for respectable blacks only.

Emma is complicit in this intraracial prejudice as she tries to seek the acceptance of lighter-skinned blacks and snubs darker ones. She sees her blackness as the "tragedy of her life" and "her future identification tag in society" (23). The motto of her family is "Whiter and whiter every generation"

(29). That she was not a boy made things worse for her family and ruined their hopes for assimilation. The family associates whiteness with social and economic superiority and respect from whites. They discriminate her and she replicates their prejudice: She “resented being approached by any one so flagrantly inferior, any one so noticeably a typical southern ducky, who had no business obtruding into the more refined scheme of things” (42). She seeks “agreeable acquaintances” (42) and “the right sort of people” (43). Hence, she snubs Hazel Mason, a college acquaintance, as a “vulgar person” (45). Hazel’s “darky-like clownishness” Emma thinks, can cause “discomfort and embarrassment to others of her race, more civilized and circumspect than she” (46). She learned to be a snub from her family, and the satire becomes more formal/direct here: “All of her life she had heard talk of the ‘right sort of people’ and of ‘the people who really mattered,’ and from these phrases she had formed a mental image of those to whom they applied” (50). Her father was discriminated against as “no-gooder” just because he was very black. Her people wanted to impress whites by being genteel, educated, sober, and serious rather than funny or stereotypical. She, in her ignorance, imitates them: “Had any one asked Emma Lou what she meant by the ‘right sort of people’ she would have found herself at a loss for a comprehensive answer. She really didn’t know” (59). She is used by men who exploit her sexually and economically and then leave her, and she allows this because she is so desperate for social interaction and acceptance by light-skinned men. Her vulnerable situation makes her more liable to exploitation. In the case of one lover: “Emma Lou did not understand that Weldon was just a selfish normal man and not a color-prejudiced one, at least not while he was resident in a community where the girls were few, and there were none of his college friends about to tease him for liking ‘dark meat’” (69). Even after she arrives in Harlem she still thinks about meeting “the right sort of people” (87), people who are college-trained from cultured homes. In Harlem, however, she faces prejudice and lack of opportunity, yet she naively believes that her isolation is due to not having “worthwhile contacts” (117). She decides to bleach her skin and even eats “arsenic wafers” to “increase the pallor of [her] skin” (123). The ointments and powders give her skin “an ugly purple tinge” rather than the desired color (128). In such cases, satire—by stating the adverse effects of what Emma does—serves the opposite function of exposing the folly of racial aping and suppression of one’s identity.



In a pivotal satirical scene, some Harlem Renaissance intellectuals debate the hierarchy of racism during a drunken rent party in a crowded Harlem apartment, an idea enhanced by their names like Tony Crews (probably suggesting Langston Hughes) and Cora Thurston (probably suggesting Zora Neale Hurston). Truman (probably Thurman himself) explains racial and intraracial discrimination in terms of a human need for superiority in a hierarchy governed by power relations of wealth and privilege: “You see, people have to feel superior to something, and there is scant satisfaction in feeling superior to domestic animals or steel machines that one can train or utilize. It is much more pleasing to pick out some individual or some group of individuals on the same plane to feel superior to” (145). Ironically, racism is made to seem a natural human need. Emma Lou, however, ignores this criticism and the intellectuals ignore the most basic argument against color prejudice as the suffering Emma who is sitting next to them listens silently. While rent parties and heavy drinking are one seedy side of Harlem life, Thurman records to the chagrin of the genteel school of intellectuals, primitive

dancing: “Leering faces” and “lewd bodies” “panting” and “shaking buttocks” dance in close proximity and are propelled by “animal ecstasy” (148). Emma meanwhile is engaged in the “debauchery” of Harlem’s nightlife and is still seeking respectable relations. Her new acquaintances, Elva and his friends, drink liquor heavily, lead licentious lives, and hold rent parties. Alva, a sexual pervert, exploits her money and body. She is too eager for affection to notice his base character. “So color-conscious” she becomes “that any time someone mentioned or joked about skin color, she immediately imagined that they were referring to her” (175). This social satire gets moralistic and corrective at the end: “It was clear to her now what a complete fool she had been. It was clear to her at last that she had exercised the same discrimination against her men and the people she wished for friends that they had exercised against her—and with less reason” (218). She accepted the values of blacks and whites who discriminate her rather than tried to revise them. Too naïve to consider alternatives, she degraded herself for the sake of the homosexual, sickly Alva, only because he is light-skinned. She has to learn that salvation rests with the assertive and defiant individual. However, she has to accept herself and live happily: “What she needed to do was to accept her black skin as being real and unchangeable, to realize that certain things were, had been, and would be, and with this in mind begin life anew, always fighting, not so much for acceptance by other people, but for acceptance of herself by herself” (217). Such a moral message actually reverses the attempts of race propagandists by showing that what matters first is self-acceptance rather than the acceptance of blacks trying to be “good” by prejudiced whites.

***The Walls of Jericho* by Rudolph Fisher**

The Walls of Jericho (1928) by Rudolph Fisher is another satire on social class, the elitism of black bourgeoisie, and the supremacist attitudes of white liberals and socialites; it satirizes black and white cultures, the black urban experience, and fake attempts at racial harmony. The novel explores the relations between different social strata in Harlem society, particularly the working-class “rats” and the middle-class “dickties.” Fisher satirizes the gap between social classes and does not shy away from the depiction of poor, uneducated blacks with intraracial prejudice, thus undermining the idealism of the genteel school of intellectuals. The dickties are lighter skinned and better educated than their poorer neighbors. Fred Merrit, a mulatto lawyer, buys a house next door to Agatha Cramps, a white liberal woman who likes to partake in Harlem nightlife and charity work yet is appalled when she knows that her new neighbor is black. The message is comic and socially satirical because of the way Fisher blends Harlem’s low and high social life and cultures. He presents black people, especially working-class people, as primitive, natural, instinctive, and essentially noble. One plot revolves around Joshua “Shine” Jones, a piano mover, and his romance with a black maid, Linda Young. The second plot involves the lawyer Fred Merrit, an avowed hater of whites who, by virtue of his wealth and light skin purchases a house in an all-white neighborhood strictly for the purpose of creating trouble. Trouble follows and it turns out the house is burned by a black owner of a pool hall who holds a grudge against Merrit and not the white neighbors. Fisher’s success is a consistent employment of satire and comedy. At the end, Shine and Linda are much closer and the mulatto light-skinned lawyer is helping him develop his trucking business, thus healing the rift between castes and classes with the African American community. Jinx and Bubber, co-workers representing the crowds of the street on a

wide variety of subject, provide a comic counterpart to the satire employed against the white philanthropist.

Miss Cramp, the white philanthropist, bears much of the comic criticism. She “had devoted the more recent years of her life to Service” but now as she has a black maid, “she had no outlet for her urge” (59), although she helped Russians, French, Polish each time she had a corresponding maid. Her philanthropic work stops when she associates with blacks as if to suggest that she does not see them as equal or deserving of help. Only on her sickbed does she see her black maid, Linda, as a human being and realize her beauty when the latter brings in her breakfast: “For fifteen years Miss Cramp had been devoting her life to the service of mankind. Not until now had the startling possibility occurred to her that Negroes might be mankind, too” (61). Blacks to her have always been “rather ugly but serviceable fixtures, devices that happened to be alive, dull instruments of drudgery, so observed, so accepted, so used, and so forgotten” (61). This racist woman always associated blacks with animals and objects and “though they had brushed her shoulder, they had never actually entered her head” (62). She is presented as narrow-minded, ignorant, and stereotypical in her thinking. For example, she thinks that if she is Episcopalian no black is (64) and that all black people sing spirituals (65). She sees Linda as pretty and light-skinned and wants all blacks to be like her (68). Just as black characters get satirized, white ones are legitimate satirical objects as well.

Nor are African American organizations spared. The General Improvement Association (GIA), a satirical rendering of Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), Linda tells Miss Cramp, collects a dollar every year from people joining and “whenever there’s a lynching down south they take the dollar and send somebody to go look at it” (66). The African American bourgeoisie class is criticized along with the white professional and liberal class in the pivotal scene of the costume ball held by the GIA, a satire on the deluded attempts at easy racial harmony through social gatherings and debates. The annual costume ball of the GIA in the Manhattan Casino has a variety of guests who are “all the decoration that is necessary” (70). Different people from different classes meet: “There is a variety of personal station that extends from the rattiest rat to the dicktiest dickty, for this is not an exclusive, invitational ‘function’ but a widely advertised public affair; and it is supported by everyone, because the proceeds are to be given over to Negro advancement” (70). Professionals, gamblers, bootleggers, artists, and politicians all get together: “This is the one occasion in Harlem when everybody is present and nobody minds” (71). Middle-class women are “all extravagantly dressed” and men are “uniformly clad in dinner-coats” and performing “their sole esthetic function of background” (73). In this scene meant to enhance racial harmony, “rats” sit below, “dickties” and “fays” above, and between them are stairways. These social gatherings fail and become a reinforcement of separatism and fake social appearances; they are meant for entertainment, not seriously improving race relations: “One might have read in that distribution a complete philosophy of skin-color, and from it deduced the past, present, and future of this people. . . . Out on the dance floor, everyone, dickty and rat, rubbed joyous elbows, laughing, mingling, forgetting differences. But whenever the music stopped, everyone immediately sought his own level” (74). The working-class people are not accommodated and ironically remain so: “Downstairs at one point in the terrace were Jinx and Bubber, oblivious to everybody, arguing heatedly over the relative speed of corn and gin as intoxicants” (75). Linda, the quiet maid, becomes here “a vivacious light-hearted child” (75). The gathering shows Harlem as “superlatively rich

in diversity” and with “the most outrageous ugliness to the most extraordinary beauty” (79). Ironically, seduction, flirtation, and miscegenation—rather than solving the race problem—take place during such social gatherings in Harlem. Such racial intermingling calls the very notion of separation/racism into question as an imposed myth or construct.

One of the vice-presidents of the GIA naively believes that “only admixture produced harmony between races” and that social mixing is “the solution to all the problems of race” (98). White guests and supporters are also satirized as profiteers and shallow people repeating clichés or coming for “amusement, profit, uplift” (101). Fred Merrit and Miss Agatha meet and oversee the scene below. The “primitive” dancers are very close and seem like “some turbulent congress of bright colored, inanimate things, propelled by a force over which they had no control” (102). Apparently, an observer would lose sense that “these were actually people” (102). The executive board of the GIA accepts the racist, condescending Agatha and “nobody minded her excessively corrective attitude” (103). She prides herself “on her own liberality in joining this company tonight” (104). She is surprised that many white visitors are enjoying themselves rather than “maintaining the aloof, kindly dignity proper to those who must sacrifice to serve” (104). She finds “no little relief in sitting beside Fred Merrit, whose perfect manner, cherubic smile and fair skin were highly comforting. She had not yet noticed the significant texture of his hair” (105). She looks at the dancing mob downstairs and says to Merrit: “How primitive these people are,” and he exploits her ignorance, passes as white, and says: “So primeval. So unspoiled by civilization” (108). She is overwhelmed by their “abandonment” and “unrestraint” (108). She turns to another guest and exclaims: “So primitive” and “the throb of the jungle” (109). She says: “These people—we can do so much for them—we must educate them out of such unrestraint” (109). Merrit himself talks to her exploiting her ignorance about the “tropic nonchalance” and defines it: “This acceptance of circumstances not with a shrug, like the Oriental, but with characteristic grin. Nobody laughs at the miseries of life like the Negro” (121). So, Fisher mocks the whole race problem including black leaders and white patrons. In his character selection, he is not limited to the genteel middle-class blacks. Du Bois angrily said that Fisher “has not depicted Negroes like his mother, his sisters, his wife, his real Harlem friends. He has not even depicted his own soul” (quoted in Helbling 35). Fisher employs satire to poke direct fun at racial polemics and fake social divisions, but he does this with a humorous spirit that lightens up the satirical thrust.

***Not Without Laughter* by Langston Hughes**



In *Not Without Laughter* (1930) Hughes enacts some of the critical viewpoints he presented earlier in his critical essays, and which I discussed briefly in my introduction. As a novelist here, he celebrates the vitality of ordinary African Americans and discusses dominant cultural concerns about Harlem life. He does not shy away from the working class people struggling to find basic life needs for the sake of educated, talented tenth characters. While Hughes dramatizes a split in the ideologies of representation, Sandy, the young son of the family, decides to take the best of both worlds and be a credit to his race. Hughes presents typical, working-class blacks struggling to survive against poverty and racism and working for white families in a small Kansas town. The

multi-generation family members stand for different racial ideologies like primitivism and assimilationism. Religion, slavery, and accommodation are strongly present in the life of the old matriarch Aunt Hager. Harriett, her young daughter, stands for the assertiveness of the "New Negro" woman who is yet related to her simple folks and their ways. She fights racism and loves to sing blues. She hates and mocks her respectable, assimilationist middle-class sister, Tempy, to her mother: "So respectable you can't touch her with a ten-foot pole, that's Tempy!" Harriett also says: "When niggers get up in the world, they act just like white folks—don't pay you in mind. And Tempy's that kind of a nigger—she's up in the world now!" (44-45). Tempy supports racial advancement and cultural refinement but looks with disdain at her family and folk expressions like spirituals. Her bourgeois outlook is satirized and her model is dismissed.

Tempy married a mail-clerk with some property and she herself inherited property from the white people she worked for and began to be a social climber, not visiting her family often and imitating whites in their tastes and attitudes. When Aunt Hager dies and Sandy's mother leaves to join her husband in a different state, his aunt Tempy takes him to live with her. She wants Sandy "to learn to do things right" and to show whites that "Negroes have a little taste" (252). She encourages his talent "so that the white race would realize Negroes weren't all mere guitar-players and housemaids" (252). Tempy is a social-climber who represents the racial uplift agenda. She began as a housekeeper for a white lady and listened to directions, obeyed them, imitated her mistress's manner of speech, and read her books (254). What the genteel Harlem school wanted to show about black life is just what she wants to show to her neighbors: "She wanted to show her white neighbors a perfect colored boy—and such a boy certainly wouldn't be a user of slang, a lover of pool halls and non-Episcopalian ways" (297). She wants her nephew Sandy to go to school, attend church, associate with the "right" people rather than "ruffians", and to acquire "the respectable bearing and attitude towards life" (283). Sandy hated "the word 'nice.' His Aunt Tempy was always using it. All of her friends were nice, she said, respectable and refined" (278). But Sandy did not like them. He found them arrogant and racist. Sandy wonders about black leaders like Booker T. Washington and Du Bois and whether these men were "like Tempy's friends" or snobs just because they were educated (279).

Tempy keeps many books by black leaders. She condemns the black poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar "because he had written so much in dialect and so often of the lower classes of colored people" (259). Tempy imitates whites in their tastes. "Tempy subscribed to *Harper's Magazine*, too, because Mrs. Barr-Grant had taken it" (259). In *The Crisis*, the black monthly she subscribed to, Sandy finds "stirring and beautifully written editorials about the frustrated longings of the black race, and the hidden beauties in the black soul. A man named Du Bois wrote them" (259). Tempy finds Du Bois a great man, for she is a mouthpiece for his school of thought and attitudes. Sandy thinks Du Bois is great like Booker T. Washington, and Tempy responds "Teaching Negroes to be servants, that's all Washington did!" (259). Du Bois, she thinks, wants "our rights. He wants us to be real men and women. He believes in social equality. But Washington—huh!" (259). After he reads Washington's *Up from Slavery*, Sandy thinks both men are great. "The fact that he had established an industrial school damned Washington in Tempy's eyes, for there were enough colored workers already. But Du Bois was a doctor of philosophy and had studied in Europe!...That's what Negroes needed to do, get smart, study books, go to Europe!" (259-260). Tempy's mother Hager used to wear a white apron. "Of course, it was clean and

white and seemed to suit the old lady, but aprons weren't worn by the best people" (257). Tempy is ashamed of her family, tries not to mention them, and associates just with the professional class like "doctors, school-teachers, a dentist, lawyer, a hairdresser" (256). She takes her mistress's racial insult about her being smart and efficient yet unfortunately not white as a compliment (254). Tempy hates blues and spirituals as "too Negro" (255). She and her husband love money and find in not being black or forgetting that one is a means of securing it. White people picture black people stereotypically as "colored folks with huge slices of watermelon in their hands. Well, she was one colored woman who did not like them! Her favorite fruits were tangerines and grapefruit, for Mrs. Barr-Grant had always eaten those, and Tempy had admired Mrs. Barr-Grant more than anybody else—more of course, than she had admired Aunt Hager, who spent her days at the wash-tub, and had loved watermelon" (255). Colored people "needed to come up in the world, Tempy thought, up to the level of white people—dress like white people, talk like white people, think like white people—and then they would no longer be called 'niggers'" (255). However, Sandy does not like this life and decides to join his mother in Chicago. Tempy is thus satirized for her blatant assimilationist stance and blind belief in racial uplift at the expense of her heritage and black identity. In this anatomy of Harlem's intellectual politics, she represents the philosophical attitudes of the genteel school. The fact that Hughes satirizes her shows how Hughes himself held a different mental attitude in this debate.

B. Problematic Social Satire

***Home to Harlem* by Claude McKay**

In *Home to Harlem* (1928), McKay offers a piece of stark social realism/naturalism. The novel was attacked for its "liberal talk of sex and prostitution" (Roberts 124) and dwelling on "the passionate Harlem underworld" (Roberts 127). McKay wrote defiantly about working-class people and seedier aspects of Harlem life in the name of truth and aesthetics. The product was something similar to Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven*. Major black intellectuals, hence, objected to this "problematic" novel on the grounds that it does not help in the positive representation of blacks. The novel was controversial among black middle-class critics and reformers because they assumed that McKay was catering to white stereotypes about blacks by writing about the black ghetto life of drugs, sex, alcohol, poverty, fighting, and overcrowded slums. However, McKay wrote against the wishes of racial uplift propagandists by presenting Jake as a primitive man, a picaro surviving through folk wisdom and primitive lore in the industrialized surroundings of urban capitalism.

In 1928, Marcus Garvey attacked McKay's novel for its stereotypical representation of blacks as immoral, depraved people: "Our race, within recent years, has developed a new group of writers who have been prostituting their intelligence, under the direction of the white man, to bring out and show up the worse traits of our people. . . . They have been writing books, novels and poems, under the advice of white publishers, to portray to the world the looseness, laxity and immorality that are peculiar to our group. . . ." (quoted in Ikonné). Hughes liked McKay's novel as "undoubtedly it is the finest thing 'we've' done yet. . . . Your novel ought to give a second youth to the Negro vogue" (quoted in Cooper xix). In 1928, Du Bois accused McKay in *The Crisis* in the following terms: "It looks as though McKay has set out to cater to that prurient demand on the part of white folk for a portrayal in

Negroes of that utter licentiousness which convention holds white folk back from enjoying” (quoted de Jongh 31). Du Bois added that “after the dirtier part of its filth [he felt] distinctly like taking a bath” and hoped that McKay would present a “beautiful theme” (quoted in Helbling 35). McKay delivers an insult to black and white respectability and directs the brunt of his satire at them. By contrast, he glorifies the poor, the instinctive, the ignorant, and the dispossessed.

McKay's protagonist Jake Brown is the natural, instinctive man who roams the streets of Harlem and enjoys its nightlife of cabarets and jazz clubs. He is not a “talented tenth” man. He deserts the American army in France and returns after World War I to Harlem to find a prostitute named Felice in a cabaret and satisfy his sexual hunger. He works for a while as an assistant cook on the Pennsylvania railroad. The happiness he experiences is disrupted by the disappearance of Felice. Jake searches for her and in the process sees and enjoys the jazz clubs of Harlem. He finally finds her by the end and both prepare for a new life in the West. Against this natural instinctive man, we have the Haitian waiter Ray who stands for the black man negatively influenced by western culture and education. Jake meets and befriends Ray on his dining car. Ray is an embodiment of formal education and literary aspirations rather than instinct as Jake. Rural black folk culture is contrasted with the mechanized urbanized Western civilization, and the latter is critiqued in the contrast. The harshness, exploitation, loneliness, violence and frustration are also depicted and form part of the novel's social realism. The novel captures a gap between different classes and backgrounds of black people. It highlights the vitality of the common people as opposed to the corrupting/weakening impact of western/American culture. In other words, it dramatizes the ideological split between primitivism and assimilation at the heart of intellectual debates during the Harlem Renaissance.

Ray finds in Harlem, ironically the Mecca of the "New Negro," a congested pig-pen unfit for marrying and starting a family. He decides to leave Harlem, unable to accept its “brutality, gang rowdiness, promiscuous thickness” and “hot desires” yet acknowledging the happiness and joy he had there (267). Jake, by contrast, endures racial strife and oppression and lives through humor, courage, and wit. Other characters are representative of working-class black life, dock and train workers. Billy Biase is a gambler and loan shark; Zeddy is Jake's inept rival in love; Gin-head Suzy is pathetic yet self-reliant. Rose is a bisexual singer who wants Jake to beat her as a sign of his masculinity. Jake and Zeddy retreat to the company of men. Jake escapes Rose and Zeddy escapes Miss Curdy and Susy who give parties and free alcohol to find sexual partners. Only Ray is the odd one out. He is the intellectual who does not belong—being frustrated, alienated, and inhibited. His self-consciousness torments him. Suzy tells Zeddy: “What makes you niggers love Harlem so much? Because it's a bloody ungodly place where niggers nevah go to bed. All night running around speakeasies and cabarets, where bad, hell-bent nigger womens am giving up themselves to open sin” (79). Harlem emerges as the true (anti)hero of the novel. Jake's landlady says to Billy on the occasion of Jake's illness due to excessive drinking: “All you know [young generation in Harlem] is cabarets and movies and the young gals them exposing them legs a theirs in them jumper frocks” (220). However, the willingness to live and the joy with which life is embraced are celebrated. McKay uses primitivism towards a satirical end, to counter what was to him an oppressive propaganda machine.

***Nigger Heaven* by Carl Van Vechten**

A white writer like Carl Van Vechten in *Nigger Heaven* (1926) similarly sheds light on the political, social, and intellectual life of Harlem. His contribution as a white patron was central and controversial to the ongoing debate about the function of black art and the representation of blacks in literature since he seems to attack seamy aspects about black life he was familiar with through visits and personal contacts in Harlem. Like McKay's *Home to Harlem*, the novel was controversial because it gives a vivid picture of Harlem life: its jazz clubs, cabarets, and social events. The novel also shows a gap between the upper-class elite who discuss art in drawing rooms, drunks in jazz clubs and speakeasies, and political young intellectuals debating the race problem in walk-up apartments. Many Harlem Renaissance intellectuals tried to conceal any unflattering or unrepresentative aspects about black life. Van Vechten's inside knowledge of Harlem life makes us question notions of black identity and who gets the right to represent Harlem and how.

While critics and writers like Van Vechten himself, Hughes, Larsen, Thurman liked the novel because of artistic freedom and frankness, others like Du Bois and Locke regarded it as an exploitative insult to blacks and a perpetuation of racist stereotypes. Du Bois in his critique of the novel says that he finds it "neither truthful nor artistic. It is not a true picture of Harlem life, even allowing for some justifiable impressionistic exaggeration" (Lewis 106). He charges that for Van Vechten "the black cabaret is Harlem" (Lewis 106). He then denounces it as "a blow in the face. It is an affront to the hospitality of black folk and to the intelligence of white" (Lewis 106). James Weldon Johnson thought the book itself was more important than the title; he admired its artistic merit for art's sake and though it was "all life ... all reality" and "does not stoop to burlesque or caricature" (quoted in Ikoné 26). Benjamin Brawley, like Du Bois and Charles Chesnutt, expressed his resentment about *Nigger Heaven* as "the perfect illustration of a book that gives the facts but that does not tell the truth" (quoted in Bontemps 22). Black intellectuals had different notions of "truth" and "beauty" based on their differing agendas.

In the novel, the love of a serious, quiet librarian and an aspiring writer is stifled by racism. Mary is a refined middle-class woman with a taste for black exhibits and sculpture. She reads new black books and Harlem Renaissance novels. She thinks the color problem will go with time as long as blacks continue to refine themselves. She has "an instinctive horror of promiscuity, of being handled, even touched, by a man who did not mean a good deal to her" (54). Mary realizes that her race spends more money on hair-straighteners and skin-lighteners than they spend on food or clothing and that while African-American women try hard to have straight hair white ones try hard to have curly or wavy hair (78). Ironically, blacks view themselves negatively while whites can see natural beauty in being black. Byron Kasson is the aspiring writer who is race-conscious and seeking success. He came from Philadelphia to New York to get published and become successful. While Mary prefers hard work and detachment as a way out of the race problem, Byron prefers protest literature. This plot then becomes controversial. Middle and working classes are then juxtaposed. While black middle-class members discuss the color problem, racism, passing, and Booker T. Washington and Du Bois and their different strategies of "conciliation" and "an aggressive policy" (49), Harlem nightlife is rampant: jazz clubs, cabarets, prostitution, speakeasies, violence, pimps, and sweet men, gigolos, gamblers, among others, all color the narrative. Van Vechten depicts this exotic side about Harlem for white readers and to show the richness of its social life.

The romance between Mary and Kasson is disrupted when Byron's conception of himself as a failed black writer makes him give up Mary. He falls in love with another woman, the femme fatale Lasca Sartoris, and shoots her lover, the Bolito King Randolph Pettijohn, when she jilts him. The dead lover the enraged Kasson shoots twice in a Harlem cabaret was already fatally wounded by a pimp called the Scarlet Creeper for a similar reason. The police arrest Byron. The action leading up to this end is sensational and "obscene" in the standards of the genteel school of the "New Negro" movement. Harlem is rendered as a jungle of savages, blacks with extreme mood swings, violent, and sensual. Cabarets are treated as jungles where primitive black bodies full of sensuality and animalism dance closely. Lasca appeals to white stereotypes about voracious black sexuality. She tells Byron: "I want you to possess me, to own me. I want to be your slave, your Nigger, your own Nigger!" (239). Emotional extremes, violence, and sexual jealousy in cabarets are also depicted. In the Black Venus cabaret, for example, "Couples were dancing in such close proximity that their bodies melted together as they swayed and rocked to the tormented howling of the brass, the barbaric beating of the drum" (12). Cabarets are crowded by dancers from the lower Harlem strata and drunk people are reduced to oblivious animals: "The drummer in complete abandon tossed his sticks in the air while he shook his head like a wild animal" (14). In another image of degradation: "The band snored and snorted and whistled and laughed like a hyena" (14). Mary loves and admires her race yet contemplates that her race react impulsively to and lose themselves in "a burst of jazz or the glory of an evangelical Spiritual, recognizing, no doubt, in some dim, biological way, the beat of African rhythm" (89). She finds them "Savages! Savages at heart!" (89) and mentally relates to their "love of drums" and delight in "warm, sexual emotion" (89-90). Mary tells Byron "You talk like a savage!" (145) and he responds: "I'm an African cannibal! Son of a king! Going to eat you up for my dinner!" and growls and exposes "his even, white teeth." (145). Byron dances "with that exotic Negro sense of rhythm" (163). Mary attacks Lasca for trying to win Byron and has a potential for violence despite her respectability: "How Mary hated her! How she longed for the strength, the primitive impulse that would urge her to spring at Lasca's throat, tear away the collar of sapphires, disfigure that golden-brown countenance with her nails" (166).

This dehumanization of blacks was problematic for many readers and reviewers. The representation of an inhibited, intellectually impotent black middle-class does not redeem the novel either. Byron feels stifled by racism in Harlem, the assumed haven for blacks. He complains to Mary about Harlem life and its racism: "Nigger Heaven! That's what Harlem is. We sit in our places in the gallery of this New York theatre and watch the white world sitting down below.... Occasionally they turn their faces toward us...to laugh or sneer.... It never seems to occur to them that Nigger Heaven is crowded, that there isn't another seat, that something has to be done. It does not seem to occur to them either...that we sit above them, that we can drop things down on them and crush them, that we can swoop down from this Nigger Heaven and take their seats. No, they have no fear of that! Harlem! The Mecca of the New Negro! My God!" (149). Van Vechten's account mocks the optimism of the "New Negro" Movement by showing how claims about advancement are undermined by rifts in social classes and emotional extremes.

C. Light Satire

***Black No More* by George Schuyler**

Commenting on George Schuyler's *Black No More* (1931), Darryl Dickson-Carr argues that "African American satire's earliest purpose in both oral and written form was to lampoon the (il)logic of chattel slavery and racism itself" (3). As a light satire devoid of the moralizing tone of more serious satires, the novel sweepingly satirizes the commodification of race, the foolish myth of racial purity, the Ku Klux Klan, religious notions, the response of blacks to racism, black organizations/leaders, racial pride, and anthropological research. Nothing is spared and the point is that humanity does not change according to skin color. True to the assumptions elaborated in his critical writing and cited in my introduction, Schuyler rejects the whole notion of racial art and complicates the very concept of "race." Through the scientific achievement of a black physician, Dr. Crookman, Max Disher changes his dark skin and becomes the white Matthew Fisher. Many doors are open to him now. He becomes assistant to Reverend Givens, the leader of a racist organization affiliated to the KKK. He also marries Givens's daughter. In the meantime, thousands of blacks rush to Crookman's clinics to turn white, and Harlem, ironically the cultural capital of the "New Negro," is deserted. Anthropological studies prove that Givens, a fanatic believer in racial purity, like many supremacist leaders, has black ancestry and his daughter delivers Matthew's brown-skinned child. They all flee to New Mexico. At the end of the novel, Dr. Crookman also discovers that his machine makes blacks whiter than the supposedly authentic whites and that there are shades of whiteness. This reverses the race problem and revives racial discrimination. Now dark skin is the vogue and people are willing to stain their skins brown. Being black is suddenly desired and beautiful. Schuyler proves then that the race problem can be easily revived and reversed and that human nature is the same despite differences in skin color. Schuyler uses satire and science fiction to make fun of the race problem and to suggest that it does not exist or simply that it is not a problem at all. The race issue is exposed as a social rather than natural phenomenon. Thus, he critiques the very foundations of the "New Negro" movement and all the theorizing of its leaders about the race problem.

Once white, Matthew exploits his new skin color. He moves to Atlanta and becomes involved in a racist organization similar to the KKK, The Knights of Nordica, to gain money. Part of his desire to whiten himself is to explore the new sexual horizon of "the haughty blonde" (14). When Dr. Junius Crookman claims to change blacks into whites, Max thinks about the outcome in terms of assets and privileges: "No more jim crow. No more insults. As a white man he could go anywhere, be anything he wanted to be, do most anything he wanted to do, be a free man at least...and probably be able to meet the girl from Atlanta. What a vision!" (10). Crookman himself is interested in this affair as a "lucrative experiment of turning Negroes into Caucasians" (13). After his treatment, Matthew realizes the inhibitions and limitations associated with his ex-color: "He was free! The world was his oyster and he had the open sesame of a pork-colored skin" (19). He sells his story to a newspaper office for a thousand dollars and goes on a date with a white newspaper woman to a Harlem cabaret. He exploits his new skin color just as the old one exploited him. His disillusionment is minor, and he momentarily misses his people's "jests, scraps of conversation and lusty laughter" (27). However, being white makes him think of the "greatly enlarged field from which he could select his loves" (27) and other privileges. The money-minded, lusty Dr. Crookman is not the hoped for talented tenth man: "He was what was known in Negro society as a Race Man. He was wedded to everything black except the black woman"

(35). African Americans start drawing their money from banks for the treatment. “A lifetime of being Negroes in the United States had convinced them that there was great advantage in being white” (37). They ironically start leaving Harlem in scores, and the social and economic repercussions are manifest. Many whites start associating with African Americans in the daylight while black people in the business of powders and hair-straightening industry start to lose money and power they previously possessed because of race prejudice. The newspapers advertising whitening and straightening chemicals also suffer.

Matthew finds whites “uniformly less courteous and less interesting” (43). However, his harsh life as black makes him easily forget this. He begins to associate with a racist organization founded by the greedy Rev. Givens to get more money. Givens, his wife, and his daughter Helen are all satirized for their religious hypocrisy and shallow materialism. Blacks want to turn white, forgetting in the process “all loyalties, affiliations and responsibilities” (61). Black officials and leaders lose money and privileges because of Crookman’s machine. Without lectures and conferences on the race problem, without dues paid by people to the black leagues, they are put out of business. Du Bois is caricatured as D. Shakespeare Agamemnon Beard of the National Social Equality League, i.e. the NAACP. He becomes a man distant from the masses and absorbed in his intellectual theorizing, a man who does not practice what he preaches: “For a mere six thousand dollars a year, the learned doctor wrote scholarly and biting editorials in *The Dilemma* [i.e. *The Crisis*] denouncing the Caucasians whom he secretly admired and lauding the greatness of Negroes whom he alternately pitied and despised. In limpid prose he told of the sufferings and privations of the downtrodden black workers with whose lives he was totally and thankfully unfamiliar. Like most Negro leaders, he deified the black woman but abstained from employing aught save octoroons. He talked at white banquets about ‘we of the black race’ and admitted in books that he was part-French, part-Russian, part-Indian and part-Negro. He bitterly denounced the Nordics for debauching Negro women while taking care to hire comely yellow stenographers with weak resistance” (65). Another black leader, Dr. Joseph Bonds, “garnered many fat checks. For his people, he said, he wanted work, not charity; but for himself he was always glad to get the charity with at little work as possible. For many years he had succeeded in doing so without any ascertainable benefit accruing to the Negro group” (71). Working for the racist Knights of Nordica, Matthew makes connections, amasses wealth, and “as a former Negro and thus well versed in the technique of amour, he availed himself of all offerings that caught his fancy” (79). Matthew has an interest in black leaders: “He realized that they were too old or too incompetent to make a living except by preaching and writing about the race problem, and since they had lost their influence with the black masses, they might be a novelty to introduce to the K. of N. audiences. He felt that their racial integrity talks would click with the crackers” (87). A white commission appointed by the President and consisting of leading citizens to study the activities of Black-No-More, Inc., are not spared: “the commission toured the entire country, visiting all of the Black-No-More sanitariums, the Crookman Lying-in Hospitals and the former Black Belts. They took hundreds of depositions, examined hundreds of witnesses and drank large quantities of liquor” (118).

The Anglo-Saxon Association is another racist group believing in white supremacy and their racial purity. Its president is Arthur Snobbcraft. Dr. Buggerie, a member and a prominent statistician who “seemed about to burst out of his clothes and his pockets were always bulging with papers and notes”

(122). He studies family trees. His new findings are that many whites have tainted blood, including members of the Anglo-Saxon Association and Knights of Nordica. Matthew and others decide to leave the country after the hated discoveries. "He had had such a good time since he'd been white: plenty of money, almost unlimited power, a beautiful wife, good liquor and the pick of damsels within reach" (148-9). Now the democratic leaders he works with are proven to have black ancestry. Helen welcomes her brown baby and even loves Matthew, her husband, more than before when she learns he is black. She becomes a mouthpiece for Schuyler's convictions: "Compared to what she possessed, thought Helen, all talk of race and color was damned foolishness. She would probably have been surprised to learn that countless Americans at that moment were thinking the same thing" (154). Givens, who "had always been sincere in his prejudices" (156), admits "I guess we're all niggers now" (155). They take the money and leave the country in a plane.

Snobbcraft and Buggerie of the Anglo-Saxon Association also flee. Their plane stops for fuel in Mississippi. It crashes as it lands and they blacken themselves with shoe polish to escape. However, they are lynched as 'niggers' in a religious, sexual orgy in Happy Hill. Rev. MacPhule preaches Christian love, hugs and embraces his congregation, especially buxom women (167). The sign he waits for is a "nigger for his congregation to lynch!" (168) as a sign of his power. While they are spared first when people expose their pale flesh, they are then lynched when a man carrying a newspaper with their pictures as democratic leaders with black blood arrives at the scene. They are brutally lynched. Their "ears and genitals cut off with jack knives amid the fiendish cries of men and women" (175). They are allowed to run, shot by many revolvers, and staked. Even little boys and girls participate in the preparations for the lynching. "The flames subsided to reveal a red-hot stake supporting two charred hulks" (176). Then some members of McPhule's congregation take "skeletal souvenirs" (176). Even the whitened blacks present fear suspicious looks and participate by throwing stones, yelling and prodding the burning bodies (176).

By the end the color problem is reversed and black is in vogue. Crookman discovers that his treatment makes blacks whiter in color than old Caucasians. Sheer whiteness means black blood and people renew prejudice to being exceedingly pale. Crookman sees in a newspaper many blacks including the Imperial Grand Wizard, his wife, Matthew, his wife Helen. "All of them, he noticed, were quite as dusky as little Matthew Crookman Fisher who played in a sandpile at their feet" (180). Social and economic advantages become aligned with being black now. "A white face becomes startlingly rare. America was definitely, enthusiastically mulatto-minded" (179). People want to use stains and tans. Racism is now directed at pale people. They are considered inferior socially and mentally. Discrimination is renewed and no one wants to be extremely pale. The color problem is renewed and people like Crookman and other racketeers start to benefit from the color problem and stains industry. Schuyler satirizes the whole endeavor of the "New Negro" movement and the intellectual politics of the Harlem Renaissance by showing that race leaders and organizations are perpetuating racism and profiting from the racial situation.

III. Conclusion

The rift in the literary and intellectual scene of the Harlem Renaissance made the genteel school of older critics and writers deal with a new phase, one dominated by a new generation of younger and more radical writers. It is apparent that no single style or ideology characterized the movement. After all, the movement's diversity was very characteristic of modernism, of which this movement was arguably part. For the younger generation, satire was true to its nature and an iconoclastic, indignant genre. It was not always corrective but rather a playful presentation of the race problem. Satire was used to dramatize racial tensions about the function of art and the acceptable representation of blacks in it. All the novels discussed had a social vision, though a conflicting one. They show that these writers had different views about the meaning of truth and beauty. Satire, direct or indirect, was meant to carry Harlem Renaissance literature a step towards self-conscious aestheticism and beyond the narrowness of traditional propaganda. While this satirical approach allows us to see the Harlem Renaissance literature within the greater canon of modernism and other satirical works in particular, it also makes us assess the achievement of the movement. The moralistic approach of the propagandists sounded patronizing and lacking in verisimilitude, being obviously didactic and low in artistic complication for the sake of a clear moral. Satire was used as counterpropaganda and simultaneously a self-conscious art, yet it did not escape the boundaries of art vs. propaganda in this sense. However, satire is bound to be rooted in its social milieu. Hence, Charles Scruggs assertion that the renaissance "failed not because of racism in America but because its own energies were never integrated" (98) is not necessarily accurate. The lack of uplift propaganda in these satires or their counter propaganda contributed to the failure of the movement in the opinion of some critics. For example, lack of belief in the power of responsible art, some argue, backfired in the 1930s with renewed racial prejudice and race riots during the Depression years. Nevertheless, any cultural failure for the renaissance does not exempt the genteel promoters of the cultural front whose works the satirists engaged.

**Shadi Neimneh is an Assistant Professor of literary and cultural studies in the English Department at Hashemite University, Jordan, where he is also the Assistant Dean in the Faculty of Arts. He has published numerous articles on literary modernism and South African literature.*

Works Cited

Beavers, Herman. "[Romancing the Body Politic: Du Bois's Propaganda of the Dark World.](#)"

[Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 568 \(2000\): 250-264.](#)

JSTOR. Oklahoma Univ. Lib., Norman, Oklahoma. 6 Feb 2008.

Bontemps, Arna. *The Harlem Renaissance Remembered*. New York: Dodd, Mead, and

Company, 1972. "The Awakening: A Memoir" by Arna Bontemps 1-26.

de Jongh, James. [Vicious Modernism: Black Harlem and the Literary Imagination](#). New York:

[Cambridge UP, 1990.](#)

Dickson-Carr, Darryl. *African American Satire: The Sacredly Profane Novel*. Columbia:

University of Missouri P, 2001.

Fisher, Rudolph. *The Walls of Jericho*. New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1969.

Griffin, Dustin. *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction*. Kentucky: The U P of Kentucky, 1994.

Helbling, Mark. *The Harlem Renaissance: The One and the Many*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1999.

Hughes, Langston. "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." *The Nation*. 1926.

14 January 2013 <http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/g_l/hughes/mountain.htm>.

---. *Not Without Laughter*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1930.

Ikonné, Chidi. *From Du Bois to Van Vechten: The Early New Negro Literature, 1903-1926*.

Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1981.

Lewis, David Levering, ed. *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*. Penguin: Viking, 1994.

Locke, Alain, ed. *The New Negro: An Interpretation*. Intro. Allan Spear. New York and London:

Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1968.

McKay, Claude. *Home to Harlem*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1987.

Napier, Winston, ed. *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*. New York: New York U P,

2000.

Parascandola, Louis J., ed. *Winds Can Wake up the Dead: An Eric Walrond Reader*. Detroit: Wayne U P, 1998.

Roberts, Kimberley. "The Clothes that Make the Woman: The Symbolics of Prostitution in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem*." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 16.1 (1997): 107-130. *JSTOR*. Oklahoma Univ. Lib., Norman, Oklahoma. 16 Feb. 2008.

Schuyler, George S. *Black No More: A Novel*. New York: The Modern Library, 1999.

Scruggs, Charles W. "Alain Locke and Walter White: Their Struggle for Control of the Harlem

Renaissance.” *Black American Literature Forum*. 14.3 (1980): 91-99. *JSTOR*. Oklahoma Univ. Lib., Norman, Oklahoma. 16 Feb. 2008.

Thurman, Wallace. *The Blacker the Berry*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.

Carl. *Nigger Heaven*. New York: Alfred K. Knopf, 1928.

Edits

Harlem, by James Augustus Van Der Zee Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International
Process: gelatin silver print Credit Line: Gift of Murray Friedman and Edith Galinson

Langston Hughes Wikimedia Commons

Zora Neale Hurston Photographer: Carl Van Vechten
print, 1938

Billie Holiday portrait Carl Van Vechten [Public Domain]
Wikimedia Commons

James McKay by James L. Allen Content From NYPL

American Studies Today *Online* is published by

American Studies Resources Centre, Aldham Roberts Centre, Liverpool John Moores University,
Maryland Street, Liverpool L1 9DE, United Kingdom

Tel 0151-231 3241

International(+44)151-231 3241

Editor-in-Chief:[Bella Adams](#)

Editor: David Forster

E-mail info@americansc.org.uk

American Studies Today Online is published by
American Studies Resources Centre, Aldham Roberts
Centre, Liverpool John Moores University, Maryland Street,
Liverpool L1 9DE, United Kingdom

Tel 0151-231 3241

International(+44)151-231 3241

E-mail info@americansc.org.uk

Follow us on Twitter

The views expressed are those of the contributors, and not necessarily those of the Centre or the University.

© Liverpool John Moores University and the Contributors, 2013
Articles and reviews in this journal may be freely reproduced for use in subscribing institutions only, provided that the source is acknowledged.

