CHARACTER VS. CARICATURE:

THE CONSTRUCTION OF BLACKNESS IN

CARL VAN VECHTEN'S *NIGGER HEAVEN* AND

CLAUDE MCKAY'S *HOME TO HARLEM*

Master's Thesis

North American Studies

University of Leiden

Annemarie Moeijes

S1017632

July 1, 2017

Supervisor: Dr. J.C. Kardux

Second reader: Prof. Dr. P.T.M.G. Liebregts

Contents

Note to the reader

Although the word "nigger" is personally abhorrent to me, and I have tried to circumvent or eliminate it wherever possible in this thesis, the citations used may incorporate this word. In addition, literal citations from the works under analysis contain British as well as American spellings and are often erratic in their punctuation; *Nigger Heaven* for example, uses no double quotes to signify dialogue. For the sake of clarity, I have not altered spelling, but have in some cases added punctuation marks.

Introduction: Harlem is Roaring

"East of Eighth to the Harlem River, from 130th to 145th streets, lay black Harlem, the largest, most exciting urban community in Afro-America – or anywhere else, for that matter," proclaims David Levering Lewis, referring to the Harlem of the jazz age (27). Aided by National Prohibition, the Harlem cabarets drew large crowds of white thrill seekers in their search for alcohol and new and exotic excitements (Drowne 137). Carl Van Vechten was such a thrill seeker. "I frequented night clubs a great deal," he said in an interview, looking back on the twenties, "they were very popular at the time in New York – at least they were popular after I started going because I used to get other people to go and it became quite a rage for a year or two, to go to night clubs in Harlem" (qtd. in Huggins 100). Clearly, Van Vechten's attitude mirrored that of many whites at the time: Harlem was a black and foreign paradise where white rules were temporarily suspended, and a thirst for the primitive and exotic could be slaked. "Daytime Harlem reverberated with sober conversations about the state of the race. At night, however, Harlem roared" (Bernard, *Carl Van Vechten* 31).

Although Van Vechten started his career as a theatre and music critic, once he was introduced to the Harlem cultural elite he quickly became interested in Harlem's "state of the race" as voiced in black contemporary literature, lambasting black authors for being too invested in Du Bois's contention that "all Art is propaganda and ever must be" ("Criteria of Negro Art") and that these authors therefore projected an image of blackness whose sole aim was racial uplift. According to Van Vechten, black writers were either unable or unwilling to use the raw and politically incorrect material that made up "real" black Harlem life (Bernard, *Carl Van Vechten* 122). In a 1926 issue of *Crisis* magazine, he went so far as to ask whether "Negro writers [are] going to write about this exotic material while it is still fresh or will they

continue to make a free gift of it to white authors who will exploit it until not a drop of vitality remains?" (qtd. in Helbling 42).

Harlem was "producing art, music, and theatre that reflected the energy of the changing demographics produced by the Great Migration. Black people were making culture that was, in turn, creating a change in the collective racial self, claimed Harlem writers" (Bernard, *Carl Van Vechten* 26). Vocal proponents of this new cultural emancipation were, among others, Alain Locke, with his influential notion of the "New Negro," James Weldon Johnson, and W.E.B. Du Bois. The theory they implicitly adhered to, however, was that this collective racial self must be constructed on the stage of its white surroundings. Through their emphasis on education, civilization, economic uplift via a subscription to the American Dream, and through their insistence that a "Talented Tenth" – a black intellectual elite – should lead the race towards equality with whites, they unintentionally became "Stage Negroes" themselves. The traditional "Stage Negro" stereotypes of "sambos, pickaninnies, bucks, mammies, Uncle Toms" should, according to them, be replaced with a new standard, the "New Negro" (Bernard, *Carl Van Vechten* 27). Yet, adversely, this new standard of intellectualism was framed within its white dominant paradigm to the same degree that the old stereotypes were.

Both Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* and African American author Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem*, published in 1926 and 1928 respectively, are proponents of "New Negro" philosophy, although perhaps not in the sense that Locke intended it. Both novels address Harlem night life and its denizens and are concerned with the so-called "state of the race" – although they provide divergent solutions to the "Negro problem" – but their literary strategies were disparaged by the black elite. As both authors dismissed the value of social assimilation into white culture and intellectual uplift, but instead presented sensationalist portraits of a Harlem infused with jazz, sex and drugs, it is perhaps no surprise that both

McKay's *Home to Harlem* and Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* were condemned by the Talented Tenth. In his review of *Nigger Heaven*, Du Bois charged that "life to [Van Vechten] is just one damned orgy after another, with hate, hurt, gin and sadism," advising readers to "dispose of this book in the sewer, where it belongs." Instead, Du Bois contends, nightclubs were only a marginal feature of life in Harlem. "The average colored man in Harlem is an everyday labourer, attending church, lodge and movie and as conservative and as conventional as ordinary working folk everywhere" (Bernard, *Carl Van Vechten* 150). McKay's *Home to Harlem* met similar contumely. Marcus Garvey charged that "the time has come to boycott such Negro authors whom we may fairly designate as 'literary prostitutes.' We must make them understand that we are not going to stand for their insults indulged in to suit prejudiced white people who desire to hold the Negro up to contempt and ridicule'" (qtd. in Roberts 128). Both reviews make abundantly clear that the reviewers themselves have internalized Du Bois's "double consciousness" to the degree that they cannot view cultural expressions by or about African Americans without anxiety with regards to the "white eye on the black guy," to paraphrase a popular expression.

Van Vechten was so convinced of the importance of his role as "midwife to the Harlem Renaissance" (Shaw 34) that he bequeathed his private papers, notebooks and scrapbooks to Yale University for perusal by future generations. Modern scholars have engaged with this material in various ways; it offers inroads into gender studies, art history and black literary history, as Van Vechten knew everyone who was anyone in Harlem and was a prolific letter-writer. *Nigger Heaven*, however, has largely escaped scholarly scrutiny, aside from the impact it had on black literati at the time and a few articles in the fields of philosophy and queer studies which focus on his eroticized and exoticized construction of male blackness. Just like *Nigger Heaven*, McKay's *Home to Harlem* was until recently never "'accorded a major position in the lineage of African American cultural expression,' having

most often been categorized and then sidelined as 'primitivist' fiction" (Maiwald qtd. in Rottenberg 119). The past decade, however, has seen the publication of more nuanced analyses of the novel (Rottenberg 119), most of which focus on the interaction between primitive Jake and educated Ray, and many of which address – at least peripherally – the theme of prostitution, and some of which construe *Home to Harlem* as a socialist pamphlet.

This thesis will give a close analysis of the two novels – which have striking similarities, although McKay did not read *Nigger Heaven* until *Home to Harlem* was almost complete (Maiwald 826) – in the context of concepts taken from critical race theory and gender studies. Most importantly, the analysis will incorporate W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of "double consciousness" and Frantz Fanon's conception of "Self" and "Other." Du Bois, in his seminal *The Souls of Black Folk*, first published in 1903, described the black man as looking at the world through a veil. "The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, - a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (2). Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, although published in 1952, long after Van Vechten's and McKay's novels, highlights the pernicious effects of this double consciousness. If one measures one's Self with the tape of the Other, to paraphrase Du Bois, the result is an internalization of white dominant prejudice and an alienation from the black Self. Although Fanon wrote at another time and from another background – a psychiatrist, he was born in Martinique and spent most of his life in Algeria and France – the difficulties inherent in constructing a Self based on the model of a dominant and disapproving Other offer a framework within which McKay's novel can be understood.

Both Van Vechten and McKay wrote from a context which invested the dominant white culture with more value than its black counterpart. Although Van Vechten was sympathetic to African Americans, his white patriarchal perspective bleeds through the cracks of his narrative and his novel's characters fail to escape stereotype and allegory. McKay shows himself as aware of black stereotypes as Van Vechten is, but he sometimes challenges them explicitly. The trouble, however, is that McKay's construct of blackness depends to a far greater degree on an adherence to the dominant white paradigm than the author himself seems aware of: he has internalized the white value system of his Other. Constructing the Self on the stage of the Other, as Frantz Fanon would say, proves perpetually problematic.

Chapter 1: Van Vechten's Passing Acquaintance with Blackness

It is a matter of debate whether the author's intent should be factored into the analysis of their work, especially as the effects of literature are intensely personal to the reader and they are thus necessarily divorced from the intentions of the creator. In the case of Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven*, however, it is perhaps incumbent upon us to consider the effect of his writing in the light of his authorial intent. After all, as Van Vechten's friend Edna Thomas commented in a letter to Van Vechten, he could "fool the reader if you must darling; but you and I know that you've gotten a lot of propaganda off your chest, don't we?" (qtd. in Pfeiffer ix) Yet, while writing of his progress on the novel in his own notebooks, Van Vechten remarked that "this is not a propaganda novel. It is neither pro-Negro nor pro-anything else. It purports to show what might happen to two young people under certain circumstances" (qtd. in Pfeiffer xxiv). The circumstances of which he speaks, however, are politically charged. *Nigger Heaven* was first published in 1926, a time of economic and social segregation. The simple fact that he portrayed black people – their lives, thoughts, and inner struggles – for a white audience is an act of propaganda in and of itself.

Van Vechten, a child of affluent and progressive parents, was taught from an early age to view all people, no matter their gender or ethnicity, with respect. Household staff in the parental home were addressed as Mr. Oliphant and Mrs. Sercey, and not – as was more usual at the time – simply by their first names (Bernard, *Carl Van Vechten* 12). In fact, Van Vechten's father attempted to persuade him to change the controversial title of his novel. "I have myself never spoken of a colored man as a 'nigger'. If you are trying to help the race, as I am assured you are, I think every word you write should be a respectful one towards the blacks" (Bernard, *Carl Van Vechten* 121). Yet Van Vechten was a cunning commercialist: if he wanted to reach a large audience, he knew that a controversial title would aid this cause

(Huggins 112). The phrase literally refers to the balcony of New York theatres where the black audience was segregated from the white below, and the term was in common usage by black Harlemites – it is in fact employed quite unselfconsciously several times in McKay's *Home to Harlem*. The use of the N-word, however, especially by someone who is not culturally entitled to do so, adds a political and sensationalist undercurrent to the novel's title. Ironically, Van Vechten himself comments on the use of the controversial racial moniker in a footnote within the novel. "While this informal epithet is freely used by Negroes among themselves, not only as a term of opprobrium, but also actually as a term of endearment, its employment by a white person is always fiercely resented. The word Negress is forbidden under all circumstances" (26).

Van Vechten defended the title of his work as metaphorical and ironic. In the novel itself, the term is used by various characters to alternately laud and lambast Harlem. "Dis place, where Ah met you – Harlem. Ah calls et, specherly tonight, Ah calls et Nigger Heaven! I jes' nacherly think dis heah is Nigger Heaven!" exclaims Ruby Silver, a small-time prostitute, when commenting on a perfect Harlem evening of drink and dance (15). Byron, the tormented male protagonist of the novel, uses the phrase with utmost bitterness. "'Nigger Heaven!' Byron moaned. '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 in the good seats in the orchestra. Occasionally they turn their faces up towards us, their hard, cruel faces, to laugh or sneer, but they never beckon'" (149). The positive connotations of the word "heaven" are inversed, and thus intensify Byron's frustration with contemporary social reality; the literal positioning of black above white is the reverse of their societal situation. Byron then extends the metaphor until it is infused with a note of threat. "'It doesn't seem to occur to them […]' he continued fiercely, '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'" (149). The helplessness of the first part of his observation – the African American audience needs to be beckoned in order to join white society and can take no initiative of its own – is translated to agency. There is no need for beckoning if a power for violence is unleashed by the black public. The potential for a violent overthrow of the social system is in fact echoed in McKay's *Home to Harlem* when protagonist Jake remarks that, if all men were to carry guns, "theah'd be a regular gun-toting army of us up here in the haht of the white man's city…" (286), yet both novels speak of violence no more. It seems that, for both authors, a literary attack on the dominant white system is preferable over physical intervention.

Van Vechten himself responded to the controversies regarding his title in a manner which is emblematic of his own unconscious racial prejudice. Over thirty years after publishing his novel, he defended his turn of phrase, and added "it was used ironically, of course, and irony is not anything that most Negroes understand, especially the ones who write for the papers" (qtd. in Wood 96). In a letter to his wife, he stated that "it never occurred to me that they would behave differently than other people. I wrote about them exactly as if they were white" (qtd. in Pfeiffer xxii). While consciously asserting himself as a color-blind progressive of the jazz age, his statements now carry the taint of white privilege. Fanon speaks of white authors addressing blackness when he asserts: "I sincerely believe that a subjective experience can be understood by others. It would give me no pleasure to announce that the black problem is my problem and mine alone and that it is up to me to study it," yet his condemnation of author M. Mannoni, to whose work Fanon refers in this passage, can be extrapolated without difficulty to Carl Van Vechten: like Mannoni, Van Vechten has not "tried to feel himself into the despair of the man of colour confronting the white man" (63-64). Precisely the fact that an author of Caucasian descent and – more specifically – of Caucasian experience, would construct black characters "exactly as if they were white"

indicates a colonial impulse and a blindness to the intrinsic problem of a racialized society, or "racist structure," as Fanon would dub it (64). Van Vechten showed himself vaguely aware of this fact when he wrote to Langston Hughes, observing that "it would have been comparatively easy for me to write it before I knew as much as I know now. Enough to know that I am thoroughly ignorant!" (qtd. in Bernard, *Carl Van Vechten* 108). Jennifer Piper Wood encapsulates Van Vechten's struggle with his whiteness succinctly when she contends that "Van Vechten doubtlessly knew the pernicious and denigrating history of [the word "nigger"], yet he was still unable, even after decades of writing on black culture, to consider what it meant for him to employ it or grapple with the many reasons why African Americans would have responded negatively to the text and its title. His suggestion instead that they were simply unable to grasp his ironic meaning is an insulting generalization that provides a profound example of his white privilege" (96-97).

White and privileged he may have been, as well as a child of his – racist – time, but Van Vechten probably meant well. Kathleen Pfeiffer, in her introduction to Van Vechten's novel, argues that "none of Van Vechten's private writings offer any hint of racial hatred or prejudice or bias" (xvi). In the context of the current debate regarding cultural appropriation, Lionel Shriver argues that the very act of writing is proscribed if all elements of cultural appropriation are to be exterminated: "the kind of fiction we are 'allowed' to write is in danger of becoming so hedged, so circumscribed, so tippy-toe, that we'd indeed be better off not writing the anodyne drivel to begin with," she remarked in her landmark speech at the Brisbane Writers Festival in 2016. Yet, counter to Shriver's remarks, the result of Carl Van Vechten's cultural appropriation of black Harlem life and black intellectual strivings is an anodyne and lifeless product. While many African American intellectuals at the time praised Van Vechten's efforts to create a black literary voice that would be heard by a white audience, they felt the contents of the novel itself to be of debatable literary quality – McKay,

for example, termed the novel "apologetic and almost plodding" (qtd. in Wood 225) and influential critic Hubert Harrison called it "a poor specimen of literary craftsmanship" (Bernard, *Carl Van Vechten* 145). As an "outsider" looking in, Van Vechten was perhaps too anxious regarding his own privileged status in relation to his black subjects to concern himself solely with the quality of the text.

Indeed, Van Vechten was almost the quintessential "outsider." As a reviewer of theatre and music, he was a maven of the new and fashionable, promoting productions and artists that were later to become spectacularly successful when they were still relatively unknown (Huggins 94). In essence, he had made of spectatorship his life's work. He was a collector of curiosities and an avid photographer. His interest in music and theatre brought him to Harlem, where jazz was creating a buzz (Bernard, *Carl Van Vechten* 70). Starting from the early twenties, he acted as an unofficial tour guide to Harlem for his white acquaintances (Huggins 100) and was the incarnation of the "ethnographic investigator" – the colonial investigator of black habits – that Fanon so derides (155). Van Vechten himself, although he obviously enjoyed the raucousness of Harlem night life, saw it as his duty to expose Harlem to the white luminaries of the time, and vice versa: "That was almost my fate, for ten years at least: taking people to Harlem," he ruminated later in life (qtd. in Wood 89). His motivation for acting as an ambassador to Harlem seems, in retrospect, to be intertwined with his penchant for collecting – both things and people. As he wrote to Gertrude Stein, "There is always something in New York, and this winter it is Negro poets and jazz pianists" (qtd. in Pfeiffer xx). Yet by his own admission, although he was "dramatically stimulated" by these black cultural offerings, "doubtless I shall discard them too in time" (qtd. in Wood 88). In a letter to H.L. Mencken, he joked, "Now that I have thoroughly explored Harlem, I think I shall take up the Chinese" (qtd. in Wood 89), displaying an awareness of his own dilettantism in these matters.

Van Vechten's involvement with Harlem night life brought him into contact with members of the black cultural elite, some of whom he came to call his friends. His passion for photography ensured that many of them found their way in front of his lens. Van Vechten's portraits of Harlem dignitaries, now available in the Carl Van Vechten Photographs Collection at the Library of Congress and the Beinecke collection at Yale, provide a glimpse of his attitude towards his black contemporaries. As these photographs align the eye of the creator with that of the spectator, more so perhaps than in a work of literature, an analysis of his photographs furnishes a framework within which one may view *Nigger Heaven.*

Fig. 1: Claude McKay, by Carl Van Vechten, date unknown

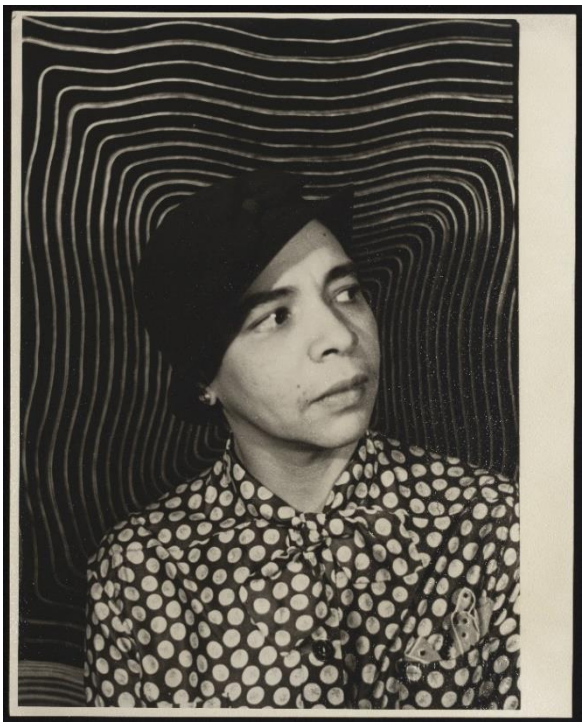

Fig. 2: Nella Larsen, by Carl Van Vechten, 1932

The photographs above, courtesy of the Beinecke collection, were both reproduced in Nathan Huggins's *Harlem Renaissance*. The following photographs were not, but are available online and are characteristic of his treatment of the, almost exclusively black, subjects.

Fig. 3: Nella Larsen, by Carl Van Vechten 1932

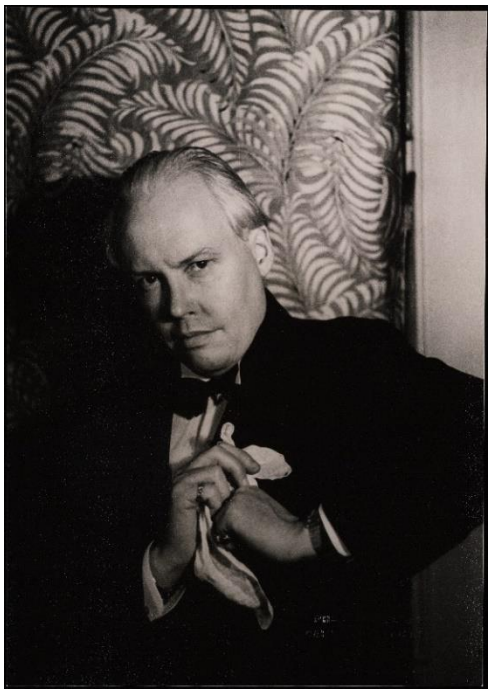

Fig. 4: Carl Van Vechten self-portrait, 1934

Both the photographs which Nathan Huggins selected as well as others in the Van Vechten collection display an aesthetic which treats the human element within the photograph as an extension of the background pattern; in case of figures 1 and 3 even to the point of merging the individual with the background. This strategy objectifies the subject of the picture, depersonalizing them to some extent – de-emphasizing individuality instead of foregrounding the subject's humanity. Although figure 2, Van Vechten's portrait of Nella Larsen, seems superficially to contrast the subject with the background through the use of a violently oppositional patterning of blouse and background, the depersonalizing effect is the same. Nella Larsen becomes a stencil, a device for creating an aesthetically pleasing whole. Even though Van Vechten uses the same strategy of intrusive background patterning for his self-portrait as he does in other photographs with himself as the subject matter, the effect is antithetical to the portraits of his black friends. Because Van Vechten engages the camera with his eyes, unlike his other subjects, and because of the fact that his manner of dress does not seem to be coordinated with the background to the same degree as that of the other photographs, the invasive patterning loses its foregrounding power and recedes to the

background. It serves as a foil for the subject's presence. The effect is that the subject, Van Vechten, is illuminated by the background instead of being incorporated into it.

In addition to Van Vechten's portraits of (clothed) celebrities, the Beinecke collection contains a vast number of his homoerotic images of African American men, stylized and posed with an eye to the primitivist. As James Smalls contends, "They […] illustrate his need to demarcate racial and sexual subject and object and to seek jurisdiction over both" (25). Essentially, Carl Van Vechten's photographs suggest that while admiring African American culture, he was unable to view his subjects as individuals, and perhaps even unable to view them as fully human. He saw them as a carrier of culture and an indulgence of his – both sexual and aesthetic – primitivistic lust. In spite of Nathan Huggins' contention that part of *Nigger Heaven*'s project was to project Van Vechten's idea that "Harlem was no monolith, and the Negro fit no stereotype" (102), Van Vechten's photographs contest his articulated mission. "These interracial and homoerotic visualizations are representative of the tensions between Van Vechten's public persona as a respected patron and promoter of African-American art and culture, and his private thoughts and feelings" (Smalls 27).

The subject matter of his photographs clarifies the nature of his spectatorship, but also indicates Van Vechten's liminal status. A happily married man – in a private letter he professed to be distraught when his wife temporarily left him – he nevertheless openly carried out affairs with men, some of them African American (Bernard, *White Anxiety* 216). Racially, he pretended liminality as well. In a letter to Langston Hughes, Van Vechten referred to himself as "this ole cullud man" (qtd. in Sanneh 54), and David G. Holmes repeats an anecdote in which Van Vechten reportedly was "delighted" to be taken for a black man passing as white when he escorted African American Aurelia Veta Clement to a party (294). The result of such liminality might be a sense of belonging to both genders or races, but as often engenders a feeling of permanent "outsidership," where one exists in the void between

normative gender and race positions, necessarily observing established binaries – however theoretical they may be – from the outside in (Halberstam qtd. in Gallini 27). Although Van Vechten challenged the binary of race and gender in his private life, his authorship seems to stem from this outsider position, and is unable to transcend the borders to establish real and actual empathy. His status as an outsider precluded a genuine understanding of his subject matter, although the import of his effort has been touched upon by Emily Bernard, who argues that "Carl Van Vechten provides evidence that a cohesive black movement occurs; he is the necessary outsider who, through his outsider status, proves the existence of this community" (Bernard, *Black Anxiety* 126).

Nigger Heaven itself embodies the duality of the author's character. Its sensationalist opening and closing chapters contrast strongly with the main body of the novel. Structurally, the Harlem night life scenes, which feature man-about-town Anatole Longfellow – otherwise known as the "Scarlet Creeper" – and good-time-girl Ruby Silver, frame the story of the emerging love between Mary and Byron, both of mixed race and belonging to the middle class. Mary, a librarian, attends the house party of affluent black Adora Boniface. The guests are fun-loving and carefree, but Mary reflects that "on the whole, [they] were not her kind" (19). It is precisely her aloofness and respectability that catch the eye of Randolph Pettijohn, the "Bolito King." Having made his money through gambling and wise investments in real estate, Pettijohn is an emblem of economic uplift, yet Mary views him simply as a parvenu. When Pettijohn proposes marriage, Mary turns him down with the words "it's impossible" (38). Her social snobbery may have prompted her answer, but there is also the matter of Byron Kasson, whom she fleetingly speaks to at the house party, and who haunts her thoughts in the following months. These months are spent working at the library, visiting friends, chatting with her roommate and generally living a markedly uneventful life, which is interspersed with discussions of the "Negro problem" with various black intellectuals. Nathan

Huggins has commented that "on reading *Nigger Heaven*, it is impossible to escape the feeling of being forcibly drawn to acknowledge these facts of Negro life [segregation and social inequality], which have little, if anything, to do with the story. They are *obiter dicta* and no less propaganda because they condescend to the reader" (106). At the end of the first section of the novel, which is titled "Mary," the protagonist meets Byron Kasson again and falls in love. He awakens her sexually and the "coldness" which had previously gripped her is driven away. Yet the spectre of Lasca Sartoris – a beautiful and enchanting woman of great sexual power – has hovered over the narrative in the form of allusions and anecdotes from the outset. The final paragraphs of Mary's section thus describe Byron and Lasca meeting for the first time and dancing as if possessed. "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 saphires, disfigure that golden-brown countenance with her nails" (166). Yet Mary, of course, does nothing. She is far too well-behaved.

Section two deals with Byron Kasson, and is focalized solely through him, just as the section regarding Mary is written from her perspective. Byron struggles with his love for Mary because of the duality of his character. He is inherently sexual – even stereotypically "hypersexual" in the words of Jennifer Piper Wood (138) – but intellectually and emotionally impotent. He is an aspiring author; at his white college, his teachers and peers grudgingly admitted that he was a good writer, but Byron has read the subtext. "'At college they said I had promise. I know what they meant.' He added, 'Pretty good for a coloured man'" (36). His ambition gives rise to various musings on the nature of black authorship and many meta-discussions on the efficacy of literature as a means of racial uplift. While struggling to sell his stories, he is forced to take a menial job as an elevator operator. As he is listening to his companions when "they spoke freely about their amorous adventures, their games of craps, about dives on Lenox Avenue" (192), Byron realizes that this is the segment of black life that

would be commercially viable if it were caught on paper. "'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" (192). Byron thus divorces himself from his ethnicity, yet he is also puzzled and disgusted by his acquaintance Dick Sill, who is so light that he passes successfully as white halfway through the novel. Byron's struggle with his racial identity is mirrored by the struggle for sexual agency. While he loves Mary because she is "sweet" and "pathetic" (275), she also enrages him when she attempts to help him with his writing and its subject matter. His pride simply cannot allow anyone – especially a woman – to comment adversely on his efforts. He seeks distraction in the arms of Lasca Sartoris. While Mary's section of the story ends with a scene in which Byron and Lasca are simply dancing and Mary rebukes herself for her jealousy, Byron's narrative is clear on his sexual interest in Lasca. He desires her with a passion, but she uses him sexually and discards him when he becomes too invested in their affair. Van Vechten then brings the novel full circle by introducing Randolph Pettijohn as Lasca's new lover. The final nightclub scene is one of "Jungle land. Hottentots and Bantus swaying under the amber moon" (281). Byron has come to the club with a revolver, determined to kill either Lasca or Pettijohn. While his rage ferments in alcohol, Byron sights the Scarlet Creeper, accompanied by Ruby Silver – the first time these characters are introduced in the narrative since the prologue, aside from an interlude in which peripheral character Pettijohn is shown to have an affair with Ruby. Byron is hesitating towards action when suddenly "weapon in hand, the Creeper stood poised for a fraction of a second. 'Yo' won't hitch on to no mo' mah gals!'" he mutters, and shoots Pettijohn (283). Byron is robbed of his revenge and is left to fire his bullets into the body of his deceased adversary. It is a violent ending which illustrates

Byron's character to perfection: spiteful, petty, and impotent, his last act can only be one of symbolism and not of actual agency.

"I don't know so much about our people that is different. We are born and we eat and we make love and we die," says Byron in one of the novel's many discussions on the "state of the race" (126). Although Van Vechten may have attempted to sketch the universality of the human condition, it is significant that he selects those aspects that are most often associated with stereotypical black folk: eating and loving. "I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetichism (*sic*), racial defects, slave-ships" notes Fanon when discussing black stereotypes, "and above all else, above all: 'sho' good eatin'" (84). Food does play a role in *Nigger Heaven*, in the sense that it is a means for women to lure men. Mary, a terrible cook, is urged by Olive to not prepare a meal for Byron until after they are married, implying that her intrinsic sexual worth is tied to her ability to provide "sho' good eatin'." Because of her elemental coldness – "priggishness," as it is called at various points in the novel – and her inability to feed her man, Mary's sexual identity does not align with that of the clichéd predatory black nymphomaniac (Carby qtd. in Wood 114). Mary herself muses that this might "have something to do with her white inheritance" (54). Virginal Mary's whiteness is thus "blamed" for her non-conformity to the black stereotype. Fortunately, there is still Lasca – lithe, provocative, primitive Lasca – who poises Byron's head between her palms and speaks "in a voice raucous with passion: 'I want you to possess me, to own me. I want to be your slave, your Nigger, your own Nigger!'" (239). Indeed, Van Vechten does not hesitate to emphasize formulaic black sexuality, echoing Fanon's contention that stereotypically, "in relation to the Negro, everything takes place on the genital level" (Fanon 121). Counter to common practice, however, Van Vechten projects this hypersexuality mainly onto Lasca, a female. Wood posits that the novel's opening sequence sets the tone with regards to sexual stereotyping when she discusses the Creeper's first

interaction with Ruby Silver. "'As they strolled, their bodies touching, down a side-street, his hand freely explored her flesh, soft and warm under the thin covering of coral silk', confirming both the sexual nature of this encounter and his acute awareness of her body beneath the slight covering of material, thereby framing the black man in hypersexual terms from the very first pages of the narrative" (104). Yet both Anatole and Byron, although described as sexually active males, are not overly promiscuous – at least not in the "burly black brute" stereotypical manner. In Byron's relationship with Lasca, it is Lasca who is the sexually dominant partner – the black predator.

The formal structure of the novel – the main body being divided into the narratives of Mary and Byron, both of whom are described in third-person narration which is focalized through both protagonists – creates a sense of caricature. Although Van Vechten has avoided the seduction of third-person omniscient narration, which would have provided inroads into overt propaganda, the effects of his narrative technique nevertheless result in burlesque, more than realism. Mary's narrative is interspersed with those scenes which Huggins characterizes as *obiter dicta*: descriptions of the practical effects of segregation and the difficulty for blacks to fulfil their ambitions when the white world is determined to thwart them at every turn, and lengthy discussions of the advantages of passing, which – Van Vechten's characters affirm – is the only way to ascend the social ladder. After all, as Fanon remarks ironically, "for [African Americans] there is only one way out, and it leads into the white world" (36). These passages on passing, incidentally, betray Van Vechten's essentialist view of race. "I couldn't [pass]," says Olive, "I just couldn't do it. Somehow I feel my race" (48). Huggins allows that "the points of view are authentic enough, but they are designed to instruct the reader more than to develop the novel" (Huggins 106). As a result, Mary remains a flat character, a tool in Van Vechten's hands rather than an actual developed and developing protagonist.

Van Vechten's construction of Byron is similarly flawed, although his inner conflicts are drawn with more finesse and compassion than those of Mary, especially when they relate to Byron's struggles in becoming an author. "Apparently he had no sense of construction," mused Byron. "Somewhere along towards the middle, his stories fell apart. They were spineless" (175). Van Vechten has – albeit unconsciously – infused Byron with the inherent feeling of inferiority which is imposed upon black men through their sense of double consciousness. When Byron comments on his writing being "pretty good, for a coloured man," he adds: "that doesn't satisfy me. I want to be as good as any one" (36). The white man's projection of his literary and cultural values have been internalized – epidermalized, Fanon would term it (4) – as Byron here concedes that "pretty good for a coloured man" cannot live up *his own* cultural standard.

Because of the structure of the novel, both protagonists operate solipsistically. Van Vechten's choice is mainly harmful towards his construction of Mary, the absence of whose emotional development in Byron's section renders her character bloodless (Wood 116). Both characters are reduced to types. This did not bother some contemporary critics, who felt the *project* of the novel was successful, even if its literary merits were debatable. Arthur Spingarn wrote that there was "no book in English (by ofay or jig) about Negro life that could compare with it, whether for the knowledge of its milieu or for fine objective sympathy," and Nella Larsen lamented "Why, oh, why couldn't we have done something as big as this for ourselves?" (qtd. in Pfeiffer xxx, Bernard, *Carl Van Vechten* 147).

Indeed, Spingarn was correct in one respect: Van Vechten did have extensive knowledge of the milieu. His experience, however, was limited to the life of the nightclub. "No cheer but dance and drink and happy dust… and golden-browns. Wine, women, and song, and happy dust. Gin, shebas. Blues and snow" (*Nigger Heaven* 278). His many descriptions of jazz artists pounding on drums and waiters dancing the Charleston while

serving drinks have some ring of truth, but they were dismissed as salacious sensationalism by many reviewers, most famously by W.E.B. Du Bois, who "argues that the book does violence to black folk. 'Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* is a blow in the face' he charged in *Crisis* magazine" (qtd. in Pfeiffer xiii). Black criticism thus focused mainly on the vignettes related to the Scarlet Creeper and the primitivist scenes of African American abandon in nightclubs. Van Vechten, however, was very much aware that the exotic details of Harlem night life were precisely what drew the white audience and made the novel such a commercial success. "Was [Carl Van Vechten], by his own words, 'violently interested in Negroes' because he was a generous visionary, eager to help an excluded people gain cultural visibility? Or was he a crass oddball, exploiting the exoticism of black culture for the salacious appetites of white voyeurs? The most likely, and least popular, answers are yes and yes" (Greenfield qtd. in Wood 83). Whatever his motivation, there is significant contrast between the main body of his novel and his scurrilous Harlem night life vignettes, the one a bloodless propaganda-piece intent upon uplifting black humanity through its adherence to white middle-class standards, the other a sensationalist, lively and relatively sympathetic account of colorful characters.

In the novel itself, Byron is urged by both Mary and his publisher to "write what you know" (205, 222), which Van Vechten certainly has done. In the context of the novel's "project," it is unfortunate that specifically his account of the subject matter which he did know so intimately fell on such stony ground with the majority of the Harlem elite. Du Bois contended that "probably some time and somewhere in Harlem every incident of the book has happened; and yet the resultant picture built out of these parts is ludicrously out of focus and undeniably misleading" (qtd. in Wood 93). Wood charges that "Van Vechten's depiction was overdone with his emphasis on the scandalous or colorful as his bold-stroke portrayals depicted life not as it was truly lived in Harlem but according to his romanticized and

eroticized understanding of blackness" (93). Yet it is these very bold-stroke portrayals – though carrying a faint taint of caricature – that, through contrast, focus the eye of the reader on the lifelessness and propagandist aspects of his main narrative. The disparity between the "black" characters on the one hand and Mary and Byron on the other draws attention to the fact that Mary and Byron are the paper outlines of a white author with a propagandist story to sell. The problem is not so much with the sensationalist aspects of his novel as it is with their juxtaposition to the moralistic, indeed almost allegorical, main narrative which creates a sense of the burlesque.

An unmistakably allegorical aspect of Van Vechten's novel concerns the naming of its characters. Frans Willem Korsten once commented on the matter of names, remarking that it is worth considering that the one aspect which captures and essentializes your identity to the outside world, your name, is the one thing over which you yourself traditionally have no control. Indeed, the matter of naming is troubled, specifically in the context of slavery. Peter Caster argues that slaves were given new names by their masters in order to eradicate their identities. Often these names conveyed a sense of irony concerning their social status. What, after all, could be funnier than a powerless field hand with the classically powerful name of Caesar or a kitchen boy called Atticus (Buckner and Caster 144-146). Some of these names, such as "Uncle Rastus" have entered the collective consciousness through the field of minstrelsy and have become code for social pretension and foolishness (Buckner & Caster 137). Names have thus become types, resulting in a "danger of corrosion of the self […] and surely a rending of identity" (Huggins 262).

Van Vechten's characters, through his structural choices and the novel's propagandist undertow, barely escape type-hood. Their names enforce this impression of caricature. Consider, for example, the Scarlet Creeper, his lover Ruby Silver and Mary's roommate Olive. Taken individually, their names are not conspicuous. Collectively, however, they echo

Van Vechten's prologue, a whirling maelstrom of Harlem dancing: "On all sides of the swaying couple, bodies in picturesque costumes, rocked, black bodies, brown bodies, high yellows, a kaleidoscope of colour transfigured by the amber searchlight. Scarves of bottle green, cerise, amethyst, vermillion, lemon. The drummer in complete abandon tossed his sticks in the air while he shook his head like a wild animal" (14). Through the amalgamation of skin color and hues of fabrics, the scene becomes a starburst of color, both racial and sartorial. The effect is patternlike, Van Vechten creates a picture in which the individuals are fused into a mass – a primitivist, animalistic mass no less. Individuality is transformed to pattern; a narrative strategy which is reminiscent of Van Vechten's photographic efforts. By naming his characters for colors, Van Vechten objectifies them and reduces them to brush strokes on his literary canvas.

Additionally, Van Vechten subscribed to the tradition of imbuing the names of characters with a significance which is not innate but projected by a white western consciousness; the Scarlet Creeper's actual name is Anatole Longfellow – a geographical reference which is paralleled by characters Piqua St. Paris and Arabia Scribner, and hints at the eurocentrism and exoticism which will be discussed in more detail below. Longfellow is an almost literal reference to the Creeper's masculinity and implies the stereotypical hypersexuality which Jennifer Piper Wood contends is Anatole's preeminent characteristic, and Byron's name is a clear reference to his tortured authorial ambition and dark romanticism. Mary Love is interlinked with Adora Boniface: Miss Love being the courtly counterpoint to corporeal Adora, who indeed acts as a boniface – a proprietor of a nightclub – when hosting a house party in the opening sequence of the novel. Van Vechten must surely have been aware of the rather obscure word, as he was known for his "notorious weakness for exotic vocabulary" (Fadiman qtd. in Wood 86). The name is double-edged: not only reducing Adora Boniface to type, but also introducing another racial stereotype when, during the house

party, Adora comments on "that ink-fingered trash downstairs. Oh, a few of them are all right. But most of them come here to drink my booze and eat my food and raise hell at my expense. If I was poor, they wouldn't come near me, not a damn one of them" (27). Her boniface aspect thus introduces another clichéd black *imago,* as Fanon would call it (130): that of the lazy and parasitical black man.

Adora is aching to be adored. "'My life's nothing but dust and ashes, she sobbed. They all treat me like that, like dirt. They go and they come and they never think of me, and when a young pretty flapper comes along…'" (87). Mary, on the contrary, is as virginal as her namesake. "She had an instinctive horror of promiscuity, of being handled, even touched, by a man who did not mean a good deal to her" (54). The association with her biblical namesake is bolstered by her choice of dress; she is described variously as dressing in pale blue, dove grey and powder blue (66, 109, 138), while her rival's first corporeal appearance on the literary stage is "in red. A loud shade of red. […] 'Scarlet', snapped Hester. 'Bright scarlet'" (154). Lasca Sartoris thus embodies the scarlet woman, with her mocking allusion to Hawthorne's novel, while Mary plays the part of the virgin. Lasca Sartoris's name in itself is significant, as her sartorial choices underline "the abundant sex-appeal in this lithe creature's body" (80). Lasca has an almost animalistic, feline quality, which this scarlet woman enhances by wearing leopard fur (231). When speaking of authorship, Mary comments to Byron that "it isn't the story that counts; it's the treatment" (204). If that were true, the choices Van Vechten has made in the treatment of his characters' names places his novel firmly in the realm of allegory, even minstrelsy.

As Huggins points out, "Negro dialect was commercial" (197). Caster builds upon this contention when he argues that "almost exclusively, African American speech was offered as dialect in phonetic spelling, as a rule for comic effect and with pronunciations that likely reflect linguistic minstrelsy rather than any authentic dialect" (137). Van Vechten's

frame characters – the Creeper, Ruby, Pettijohn – speak exclusively in dialect. He may simply have attempted to add *couleur locale* to the verbal exchanges, but Wood argues that "the dialogue often seems forced. Indeed, Charles S. Johnson jokingly noted that while all of the novel's phrasings might be used by African Americans, the sheer proliferation of such slang did not ring true to him, while Rudoph Fisher, commenting on the manuscript, noted that page 63 'sounds like CVV to me rather than speaker'" (93). The projection of unrealistic, exaggerated speech onto his characters reduces them to minstrelsy; it becomes a "cloak of travesty for the Stage Negro" (Huggins 265). Fanon's view of the use of black dialect is even more damning: "to make [the black man] talk pidgin is to fasten him to the effigy of him, to snare him, to imprison him, the eternal victim of an essence" (22). To project a fictional white creation of pidgin African American dialect onto black characters is indeed a supremely patronizing tactic.

Van Vechten was aware that his white audience would probably be unable to comprehend his version of Harlemese. He added a "Glossary of Negro Words and Phrases" to his novel, which contains several obfuscations and jokes. In her preface to the novel, Kathleen Pfeiffer insists that "the glossary points in sum to the larger project of the novel itself – to offer a glimpse into the contours of black culture, but to obscure and thereby protect the integrity of that culture's meaning" (xxviii), because Van Vechten plays with the white audience which is dependent on the glossary; the definition of "boody" reads "see hootchie-pap" and when looking up "hootchie-pap," we find "see boody" (285-286). Wood argues that the existence of the glossary simply points towards the fact that the intended audience was probably white, or the black upper class (110). Yet the glossary, combined with Van Vechten's curious footnote on the absolute taboo of using the N-word as "a white person" (26), hints at another possibility. Through translating not only black dialect, but also black mores to his audience while he himself flaunted those very mores, he was subtracting

himself from the equation – the taboo on using the N-word does not apply to a superior outsider, after all. He thus claims a dominant position towards his subject matter. The novel becomes an almost colonial anthropological study of the habits of black Harlemites.

According to Huggins, nineteenth-century white Americans struggled with cultural postcolonialism and a form of double consciousness. "Americans anxiously measured themselves through European eyes. And the nineteenth century was filled with contemptuous and condescending observations of American character and manners by Europeans" (254). As a country with no deeply rooted white cultural history – besides the negatives of slavery and the abominable consequences of Manifest Destiny – Americans looked towards Europe for a blueprint of "acceptable" subjects and literary style (Huggins 294-306). This Eurocentrism is reflected in Van Vechten's work. Not only is the novel stylistically reactionary, "at a time when some American literature and art was truly innovative and fresh" (Huggins 306), its black characters are whitewashed through their admiration of European values and art forms. Mary and her social circle reflect Fanon's argument that

> the Negroes' inferiority complex is particularly intensified among the most educated, who must struggle with it unceasingly. Their way of doing so […] is frequently naïve: the wearing of European clothes; using European furniture and European forms of social intercourse; […]; using bombastic phrases in speaking or writing in a European language; all these contribute to a feeling of equality with the European and his achievements (14).

Mary has a reproduction of the Mona Lisa on her wall, and the room is "brightened by framed reproductions of paintings by Bellini and Carpaccio which Mary had collected during a journey through Italy" (40). Mary has thus made a version of the "grand tour," which affluent white Americans were wont to do. Her sexual awakening is even referred to in Eurocentric terms: "Like Brünnhilde, Mary too had been awakened by a kiss" (127). Mary, as

a vessel for Van Vechten's obsession with European culture, is acquainted with a blue vein family which has sent its children to boarding school in Europe. When she visits them, "on the tea-table, a Sèvres service, in turquoise and amethyst paste, was laid out" while the walls are adorned with "Fragonard or Boucher sketches" (79). The mixed-race blue vein set, Van Vechten implies, is no different from affluent white society. Indeed, intellectually they can measure themselves against the best of them; at a dinner party, Mary converses at length with the Haitian consul in French regarding an exhibition she recently mounted of African tribal art. The effect is pretentious, the full dialogue probably being obscure to most white American readers. At the same dinner party, Mary astounds a white guest by quoting, in full, a Wallace Stevens poem. She is therefore portrayed as being not only conversant with other languages and cultures, but also with the giants of American contemporary literature. "Negroes among themselves," Van Vechten muses, "behave and react very much as white people, *of the same class*, behave and react among themselves" (qtd. in Pfeiffer xxi). Yet, as in the case of his use of African American vernacular, Van Vechten overplays his hand. His black protagonists, some of whose names, as argued before, imply eurocentrism or exoticism in themselves, become a pastiche of the white euro-hankering elite.

Harlem was "overrun with fresh, unused material," Byron's editor tells him. "No-body has yet written a good gambling story; no-body has touched the outskirts of cabaret life. […] 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. Well, if you young Negro intellectuals don't get busy, a new crop of Nordics is going to spring up who will take the trouble to become better informed and will *exploit* this material before the Negro gets around to it" (222-223, emphasis added). Undoubtedly, Van Vechten saw himself as an insider, one of this new crop of Nordic blonds who would seize and exploit Harlem material to create

sensationalist and exotic literature. Wood asserts that "just as African American cultural productions were being applauded and lauded, a flood of white tourists (led by Carl Van Vechten) was headed to Harlem to commodify black bodies" (12). In his commodification of black Harlem, Van Vechten's project, however lofty his ideals may have been, never escapes the taint of minstrelsy. Through his use of dialect, his allegorical strategies, the position of superiority that he claims by adding a glossary and the reduction of characters to type or pattern, he has not succeeded in creating a work of literature that transcends caricature. Ironically, he would have been well-placed to use that fresh and unused material, as he was one of the only white men to have access to this black segment of culture. It is unfortunate that the contemporary context prevented him from viewing African Americans as anything other than a project.

Chapter 2: McKay's Escape from Harlem to a Post-Racial Utopia

Published in 1928, just two years after *Nigger Heaven*, McKay's *Home to Harlem* garnered the same sort of criticism from black intelligentsia that Van Vechten's novel did. Du Bois famously wrote that McKay's work made him feel "distinctly like taking a bath" (qtd. in Maiwald 827). While Du Bois blamed Van Vechten for portraying the salacious side of Harlem life and not investing enough in racial uplift, his criticism of McKay conveys a deeper awareness. He accuses McKay of 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" (qtd. in Piep 109). His sentiment echoes that of Fanon, who asserts that stereotypical black licentiousness serves as an escape hatch for white society: "The presence of the Negroes beside the whites is in a way an insurance policy on humanness. When the whites feel that they have become too mechanized, they turn to the men of color and ask them for a little human sustenance" (98). This human sustenance in *Home to Harlem* takes the form of music, food, drugs, and promiscuity: its characters are perhaps sexualized to a greater extent than those of *Nigger Heaven*. Where Van Vechten's novel was only intermittently sensationalist – its Mary and Byron sections consisting of "anodyne drivel," to paraphrase Shriver – McKay's primitivistic motifs are more pervasive, yet the novel's characters reflect more profoundly and self-critically on their base urges. Although McKay employs "types," he rarely reduces to type. However, even McKay cannot escape "the white man, who had woven [the black] out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories" (Fanon 84).

In spite of black elitist protest, *Home to Harlem* was a huge commercial success and even garnered support among some of McKay's black literary contemporaries. In an echo of Larsen's comment on *Nigger Heaven*, Langston Hughes declared that "undoubtedly it is the

finest thing 'we've' done yet… Your novel ought to give a second youth to the Negro Vogue" (qtd. in *Home to Harlem* xix). In fact, *Home to Harlem* remained the best-selling novel by a black author until the publication of Richard Wright's *Native Son* in 1940 (Cooper ix).

Claude McKay was a Jamaican-born black writer, who published several volumes of Jamaican dialect poetry before moving to New York and joining black literary circles. As a man of non-American heritage, he might have been expected to transcend the "psychopathology" of American blackness, as Fanon would term it, always framing oneself according to the projections of the white American Other. Yet the author's colonial heritage has infused his work with the same good-evil binary of white and black as Van Vechten's is saturated with, even though McKay – by mouth of his characters – challenges the binary as well as paradoxically affirming it. One thing is abundantly clear: McKay did not subscribe to the elitist literary uplift credo. According to Wayne Cooper, "McKay had attacked the extreme conservatism of most black critics who often viewed black art simply as an extension of racial uplift efforts" (Cooper xi).

Home to Harlem revolves around Jake, veteran of World War I, New York longshoreman, lover of life and lover of women, sometime chef on the Pennsylvania railroad and incarnation of the "burly black brute" persona – at least outwardly. Consisting of a series of vignettes, McKay's novel transports the reader to a Harlem which is populated with "ordinary folk" and their ordinary concerns. As McKay wrote of his early work, "I make my characters yarn and backbite and fuck like people the world over" (qtd. in Cooper xvi). Significantly, he does not write about them "exactly as if they were white," as Van Vechten did. Instead he aims to present his characters on a universal plane – like people all the world over. Both authors intend to imbue their characters with a universal humanity, but Van

Vechten literally equates humanity to whiteness, while McKay's vision is inclusive of alternative cultural experiences.

McKay's novel opens with Jake's desertion from the army. Although desertion could be constructed as cowardice, Jake's desertion is motivated by his lack of agency as a black soldier. "I didn't run away because I was scared a them Germans. But I beat it away from Brest because they wouldn't give us a chance at them, but kept us in that rainy, sloppy, Gawd-forsaken burg working like wops. They didn't seem to want us niggers foh no soldiers" (331). After "beating it away from Brest," Jake is enticed to London by a white English sailor and finds a white woman to live with. But after armistice, he is "seized with the awful fever of lonesomeness" (7); even his white lover "was now only a creature of another race – of another world" (8). On his first night back in Harlem, he meets lovely "golden-brown" Felice. After leaving her apartment in the morning, he can't find his way back that same night. Her elusive presence continues to haunt the rest of the narrative: "I ain't gwine to know no peace till I lay these hands on mah tantalizing brown again" (27). Jake then meets Rose, a night-club singer who cannot compare with the lovely golden-brown of his memory, but he moves in with her anyway. The narrative becomes fragmentary, including accounts of nightclub evenings, gambling, rent parties, moneylending, prohibition raids, drugs and the practicalities of working longshore. It becomes increasingly clear that Rose's vision of black manhood includes violence. When they fight and Rose provokes a physical escalation – "she jest *made* me do it," says Jake (116) – he finally acts in line with Rose's image of black manhood. "Honey, it's the first time I ever felt his real strength. A hefty-looking one like him, always acting so nice and proper. I almost thought he was getting sissy. But he's a *ma-an* all right…" (117). Jake, however, cannot reconcile this kind of violence with his self-image, and leaves New York to work on the railroad. Various sketches of life in the dining cars ensue, but – most importantly – he meets Ray, an educated Haitian who acts

as a counterpoint to Jake's "happy-go-lucky darky" mask and becomes his best friend. After an interval in which Jake is laid up with a sexually transmitted disease, Ray moves Jake into his own apartment building in New York while he himself decides to sign on as a mess boy on a freighter, the motivations for which will be explored in some detail below. After Ray leaves New York, Jake quickly picks up his old life of booze and women, and is lucky enough to meet his lovely Felice again. After an encounter at a nightclub in which sexual jealousy induces an old acquaintance to threaten to expose Jake as a deserter, Jake and Felice decide to move to Chicago and start life afresh.

Structurally, *Home to Harlem* mirrors Van Vechten's novel in both its framing of the narrative and its division into two main accounts, but while *Nigger Heaven* is framed by sex and violence – in the form of the Scarlet Creeper tale – the frame McKay employs is more subtle. Upon meeting Felice, Jake falls hopelessly and helplessly in love. While he does indeed satisfy his sexual appetite with other women, he still hankers after "the strange-sweet taste of love that he had never known again" (281). The narrative centers on Jake, and is divided into two distinct parts: Harlem and the railroad. While Van Vechten aims to exhibit human experience based on a split male/female narrative, McKay's novel is divided into home and away, implying that there is the possibility of movement, evolution. When Van Vechten's novel comes full circle, violence ensues. In McKay's universe, Jake's hunger for love is satisfied. *Home to Harlem*'s ending curiously inverts that of Van Vechten's novel. While sexual jealousy in Van Vechten's case leads to death and a virtual "unmasking" of the male protagonist as cruel and impotent, McKay's ending also turns upon sexual jealousy, but the scene plays out in a very different manner. After Zeddy fights Jake in the club, he follows Jake outside:

> "Don't shoot!" Zeddy threw up his hands. "I ain't here foh no trouble. I jest wanta ast you' pahdon, Jake. Excuse me, boh. I was crazy-mad and didn't

> know what I was saying. Ahm bloody well ashamed a mahself. But you know how it is when a gal done make a fool outa you. I done think it ovah and said to mah inner man: Why, you fool fellah, whasmat with you? Ef Zeddy slit his buddy's thwoat for a gal, that won't give back the gal to Zeddy…" (333)

McKay thus favors rationality over emotionality. Although Zeddy may have been "crazy-mad" in following his primitive instinct, the dialogue with his "inner man" allows him to overcome his bloodthirst. Hence, the novel suggests that black manhood is civilized at its core, although Fanon would perhaps argue that this rational frame of civilization is white in origin and should therefore not be applied in any valuating manner. One may even argue that his rational ending points towards an internalization of the white value system on the part of McKay. However far the argument is taken, it is certain that McKay subverts the stereotype of the Vechten's primitive, yet impotent black emotionality when he introduces Zeddy's rational dialogue with his inner man.

As mentioned previously, McKay wrote several volumes of dialect poetry before embarking on a career as a novelist. His treatment of dialogue in *Home to Harlem* seems to reflect contemporary use of dialect by black folk reasonably accurately. Dialect was a way of signifying social class, and his characters are aware of it. Jake laments to Ray, "ef I was edjucated, I could understand things better and be proper-speaking like you is…," and shows himself aware of the way that language cements one's social position when he adds, "then we could all settle down and make money like edjucated people do" (273). In general, McKay's *couleur locale* seems a fairly realistic reflection of contemporary reality, but there are various moments when McKay slips into a minstrel use of dialect. Critics have argued that the intended effect of dialect in minstrelsy is to emphasize the foolishness of the speaker, specifically when pretentious and multisyllabic words are mangled and misunderstood, creating narrative confusion between the black characters on stage (Caster 142, Huggins

255). The intended humour of these scenes roots in the audience's feeling of superiority. It validates the white audience's construction of the stereotypical "uppity" and ignorant African American, as to whites "the language and speech of great oration coming from the mouth of a blackfaced minstrel was humorous in its disproportion" (Huggins 266). McKay seems to utilize this action/reaction in a dialogue, the setting of which is the railroad. The much-hated railway chef says, "I'll throw you off this bloody car. S'elp mah Gawd, I will. You *disnificant* down-home mule" (emphasis added), to which the waiter replies, "'I ain't no mule, and youse a dirty rhinoceros.' The chef seemed paralyzed with surprise. 'Wha's that name you done call me? Wha's rhinasras?'" (167). Clearly, the chef is in this scene the quintessence of the black minstrel. His assumed position of ascendance, reflected in his use of the epithet "*down-home* mule," is undercut by his maiming of "insignificant" to "disnificant," and he is then further undermined through his incomprehension of the term "rhinoceros." The scene is intended humourously, and derives its humour from a derision of the chef's position through derision of his language skills. Through his imperfect use of English, he is almost literally told "you'd better keep your place" (Fanon 21).

The character of the railroad chef introduces another theme which harks back to minstrelsy: food. Yet McKay's treatment of food is threefold and thus more complex than Van Vechten's. Firstly it is used to debunk racial stereotypes, secondly it is a marker of black solidarity, and lastly there is an element of eroticization, just as one finds in Van Vechten's novel. Caster argues that black racial stereotypes were enforced by pictorial caricatures outlining a black love of food, especially chicken and watermelon, to the point of criminalizing blacks by representing them as thieves who go so far as to sate their hunger by stealing these foodstuffs (133-140). These caricatured depictions of black folk were so pervasive that McKay consciously addresses them. "The chef had a violent distaste for all the stock things that 'coons' are supposed to like to the point of stealing them. He would not eat

watermelon, because white people called it 'the nigger's ice-cream'. Pork chops he fancied not. Nor corn pone. And the idea of eating chicken gave him a spasm" (161-162). The chef thus intentionally abjures stereotyping, but the effect is that the railroad crew mock him for his efforts; they have internalized black food stereotypes and mock him for being stereotypically "uppity." In fact, he is described by McKay's narrator at one point as "a great black bundle of consciously suppressed desires (160), implying that the chef's desires should be allowed to run free, but that his self-consciousness is too intertwined with his double consciousness to be in any way natural. The interpretation of the chef's maligning stereotypical black food is thus complex. It seems that although McKay shows himself cognizant of racial stereotypes, his characters appear to have internalized them as legitimate. Then again, McKay asserts the universality of a love of food. "'All this heah talk about chicken-loving niggers,' [chef] growled chucklingly to the second cook. 'The way them white passengers clean up on mah fried chicken I wouldn't trust one o' them anywhere near mah hen-coop'" (162). Significantly, chef applies the stereotype, including its criminality, to his white patrons. He thereby emphasizes that the stereotype itself is a construct which has been projected onto black folk irrespective of the fact that fried chicken makes a wholesome meal for anyone, black or white. By introducing the possibility of white criminality, he subverts the stereotype even further and universalizes the necessity born of poverty to provide for yourself and your family. The chef here "overturns the stereotype by demonstrating how all hungry men appreciate roast chicken and in dire circumstances will steal to get it" (Buckner & Caster 139).

As McKay's characters spend a lot of time eating, drinking, and making merry, the author valorizes the stereotype to some degree. Food is a binding element; it is shared and appreciated in company and many conversations take place over a plate of fried chicken and collard greens. In that sense, food is a symbol of community, which is made explicit when

one of Jake's acquaintances says, "it's no wonder you nevah see niggers in the bread line. And you'll nevah so long as theah's good black womens like Aunt Hattie in Harlem" (270). Aunt Hattie runs a "chitterling joint" and feeds both those able and those unable to pay (20). Yet the black solidarity which is expressed in the character of Aunt Hattie is somewhat complicated by the eroticization of the provision of food by women to men. Just as in Van Vechten's work, food is a way to a man's heart, and McKay's characters do not hesitate to make the causal link between food and sex explicit. "Aunt Hattie admired her new customer from the kitchen door and he quite filled her sight. And when she went with a dish-rag to wipe the oil-cloth before setting down the cocoanut pie (*sic*), she rubbed her breast against Jake's shoulder and a sensual light gleamed in her aged smoke-red eyes" (21). Thus, food is also used as a pretext for sexual advances, and McKay even extends the connection to metaphor. When Jake visit's a pie shop, he flirtatiously asks the pretty shop girl, "got a bite of anything good?" She answers, "'I should say so, Mister Ma-an.' She rolled her eyes and worked her hips into delightful free-and-easy motions" (141). The conflation of an appetite for food and lust appears to indicate the primal level on which McKay's characters operate. In the words of Van Vechten's Byron, "We are born and we eat and we make love and we die" (126).

When Jake meets Felice, "they walked along Lenox Avenue. He held her arm. His flesh tingled. He felt as if his whole body was a flaming wave" (*Home to Harlem* 12). If the author were then to continue with "as they strolled, their bodies touching, down a dark side-street, his hand freely explored her flesh" (*Nigger Heaven* 11), the scene would seem to have dramatic continuity, moving from sexual expectation and excitement to physical foreplay. Yet the first episode is taken from McKay and the latter, more overtly sexual scene is Van Vechten's. Both authors have thus selected the exact same setting to introduce the sexualization of blackness in the very first pages of their work. The scene may be the same,

but the differences in their treatment are remarkable. In Van Vechten's more overtly physical narrative, Ruby has paid Anatole for his sexual favors *before* they take their walk. Anatole's interest in Ruby is thus commercial in nature, more than sexual. While Ruby herself is possibly a prostitute – the money to pay Anatole comes from "an ofay [who] wanted to change his luck. He gimme a tenner" (11) – the burden of sin is transferred to Anatole, who is the explicit "fallen man" in this scene. McKay's Jake and Felice spent the evening flirting in a cabaret before they take their walk. Her excitement is thus sexual before it is commercial. Felice "was intoxicated, blinded under the overwhelming force. But nevertheless she did not forget her business. 'How much is it going to be, daddy?'" she demands (13). In spite of her sexual intoxication, Felice is a rational woman who has got to make a living, although she returns his money to him the next morning. Kimberly Roberts contends that "not only does this move displace the definition of the prostitute onto Jake, as, in a sense, she is paying him for his services, but it simultaneously evens the score between them" (121), yet her interpretation does not cover the full complexity of the passage. Black sexuality, which McKay first constructs with all the negative connotations of prostitution, is redeemed through the elimination of the commercial element. There is, McKay appears to suggest, the possibility of love. Perhaps that is why, as Roberts postulates, "protagonist Jake feels no moral revulsion toward his sweet 'little brown' whom in the second chapter of the novel he pays to have sex; in fact he tries to find her again for a good part of the rest of the novel." Moreover, as Roberts points out, "later in the text Jake is similarly forgiving toward Congo Rose and her moral laxity, thereby taking a position that jabbed at the hegemony of black middle-class ideology" (121).

The casual commodification of black bodies does indeed "jab at" a black middle-class ideology, but it probably also played a role in the popularity of both novels with a white middle-class audience. Huggins has contended that the American Dream caused the white

population angst and anxiety. “The American, who saw himself as a man characterized by risk-taking, enterprise, and achievement, was defining the American Dream in terms of individual success and upward mobility. But crisis was built into such a concept. For as the American Dream denoted success, it implied the possibility of failure and since success meant individual achievement any failure was personal” (252). When the mechanical movement upwards failed, or the pressures of individual achievement and a civilized striving for ascendance became too much, there was the possibility of escape. “Oh, certainly,” Fanon comments on this white yearning for the primitive, “I will be told [by white men], now and then when we are worn out by our lives in big buildings, we will turn to you as we do to our children – to the innocent, the ingenuous, the spontaneous. We will turn to you as to the childhood of the world. You are so real in your life” (101). Whites will turn, in other words, to the primitivism that they perceive black men to embody, to their fantasy of the easy sexuality of black women, to the good food, the good loving. The trouble with this vastly eroticized, exoticized and patronizing view of blackness, was of course that it also gives rise to a discourse of miscegenation. Lust and fear are thus two sides of the same discursive coin. The perniciousness of an exoticized projection of black folk is commented upon by Roberts: “By playing on fears of miscegenation, fears made manifest by the figure of the black prostitute, racist whites could successfully impede the progress of black civil rights. As a result, the sexualized ‘fallen’ black woman became the discursive tool for a host of issues, occupying a space in both white and black reform literature, as well as in the black middle-class imagination” (Roberts 108).

The fallen black woman is indeed a recurring subject in *Home to Harlem*; in his entire novel there is hardly a “respectable” woman to be found. Some critics have argued that this denotes a misogynistic impulse on McKay’s part (Maiwald 846, Roberts 130). Yet it appears these critics have internalized white middle-class anxiety regarding black female sexuality to

some degree. A "fallen woman" does not become a figure of derision purely through her profession. In McKay's novel, black prostitutes are consistently portrayed as sexually unfettered, but strong and independent. A more plausible interpretation, therefore, is that McKay wished to affront the black middle classes and their black middle-class morality. He did not subscribe to the literary racial uplift ideology, and the author contended that the Negro elite "can scarcely perceive and recognize true values through the screen of sneering bigotry put between them and life by the dominant race…" (qtd. in *Home to Harlem* xii). An analysis of McKay's protagonist reveals some of these "true values." McKay's characters occupy a marginal position – not only in society as a whole, but also within the Harlem community itself. They are uneducated, violent, and they are martyrs to their base desires (Cooper xxi). Yet there is also a code – a code of honor, one might say – which is reflected in their interactions and embodied in Jake. The first aspect of this code is solidarity: intraracial solidarity as expressed through the sharing of food, as discussed previously, but also more politically, in the adoption of an adversarial attitude towards authority. Jake is himself a deserter, and many more can be found in Harlem. "Pohlice and soldiers were hunting ev'where foh them. And they was right here in Harlem. Fifty dollars apiece foh them. All their friends knowed it and not a one gived them in. I tell you, niggers am amazing sometimes" (23). McKay expands upon the importance of humanitarian values over monetary value when Jake is tricked into scabbing. After Irish dock-workers have gone on strike, Jake unknowingly takes over their job. When he finds out, he exclaims, "but it ain't decent to scab" (48). A sense of interracial solidarity prevents him from profiting personally.

The scabbing episode also introduces a second theme – that of independent thought and action. "Nope, I won't scab, but I ain't a joiner kind of a fellah," Jake says when he is approached to join a union. "I ain't no white folks' nigger and I ain't no poah white's fool" (45). Jake, in fact, "in his frame and atmosphere, was the Alpha and the Omega himself"

(234). Unlike many other characters in the novel, Jake refuses to profit from the commodification of black female bodies. When Congo Rose says, "If you'll be mah man always, you won't have to work," Jake responds: "Me? I've never been a sweetman yet. Never lived off no womens and never will. I always works" (40). Jake strives for economic independence and does not buy into the system of prostitution. Although superficially McKay might be charged with condoning the sexual exploitation of women, as many critics have done based on the prevalence of prostitution in the novel, the code is more complex. Although prostitution is a common theme and Jake does not disapprove of prostitution per se, all "sweetmen" are constructed implicitly as weak and untrustworthy: "there is something slimy about [them]" (237). Indeed, Jake's refusal to profit financially from a woman's sexuality is expanded upon by another of McKay's characters, who says: "a man's heart is cold dead when he has women doing that for him. How can a man live that way and strut in public instead of hiding himself underground like a worm? […] When you drop down in that you cease being human" (241-242). McKay's contention appears to be that it is not prostitution which should be excoriated, it is the imbalance of power between the pimp and the prostitute that is abhorrent. Through his derision of male exploitation of women, McKay comments implicitly on the fundamental wrongness of treating humans as slaves.

The slave/master relationship was problematic for McKay not only in terms of black heritage, but also as relating to his own quotidian reality. Harlem literati were all the rage with white cultural innovators, and many black artists were sponsored by white patrons. Van Vechten himself aided quite a few black aspiring writers by utilizing his network in publishing (Bernard, *Carl Van Vechten* 53), but there were also patrons who simply provided money, in return for the frisson of being on the exotic cutting edge of culture. As Huggins points out, "Sadly, all of Harlem – especially the entertainer, the artist and the writer – was in some way, at one time or another, obliged to the white patron. The racial character of the

relationship made it more damaging to the art and more galling to the artists." McKay himself was "strangely tied to some white patron" throughout his career (Huggins 127), including the infamous Charlotte Osgood Mason, a white woman who had "an avid interest in Negroes, which grew out of her equally avid interest in Native Americans. In both cultures, she saw a spirit of primitivism, which she insisted her black protégés reproduce in their art (Bernard, *Carl Van Vechten* 51). The quid pro quo nature of McKay's relationship with Mason, which chafed at his artistic independence, is displaced onto his vicious disparagement of "sweetmen" – more so than of the prostitutes themselves – and is paired with a self-hatred which comes to the fore when Susy reflects that she "soon found out it wasn't womens alone in the business, sposing thimselves like *vigitables* foh sale in the market. No, mam! I done soon l'arned that the mens was most buyable thimselves" (86, emphasis added). McKay equates the system of patronage with prostitution; patrons are to be despised, and there is tragedy in the figure of the buyable human; they are dehumanized and reduced to a vegetable state.

Although Jake partakes of all the pleasures that Harlem has to offer, his independent spirit is illustrated further when Billy Biasse – a gambling master and McKay's embodiment of the American Dream – is described as liking him "because Jake played for the fun of the game and then quit. Gambling did not have a strangle hold upon him any more than dope or desire did. Jake took what he wanted of whatever he fancied and... kept going" (269). He is self-sufficient even in his potential for violence: "I don't carry no weapons nonetall, but mah two long hands" (287). Although Jake is tall and strong, he does not exercise this potential. The one instance in which he uses his fists – against Congo Rose – leads to critical self-reflection: "Walking down the street, he looked at his palms. 'Ahm shame o'you, hands,' he murmured. 'Mah mother useter tell me, nevah hit no woman'" (116). Jake's masculine moral code which underlies the narrative like a substrate, upon which the superficial elements of

immorality are constructed, consists of solidarity between races and genders, and an independence of thought and action. The "true values" of which McKay speaks thus incorporate a strong strain of non-conformism; on both the superficial erotized level and this deeper plane of the narrative black conformist elitists had plenty to dislike.

In spite of his humanitarian and benevolent character, Jake carries all the physical markers of the "burly black brute" stereotype. In an oft-quoted passage from *The Marrow of Tradition* – a novel published in 1901 which relates the story of organized white-on-black violence in the Wilmington "riot" of 1898, and which questions black stereotypes very explicitly – African American author Charles W. Chesnutt writes that "all over the United States the Associated Press had flashed the report of another dastardly outrage by a burly black brute – all black brutes it seems are burly" (233). With "outrage" being code for rape, the black man is reduced to a phallus in contemporary white consciousness – a threatening phallus, to be precise. In Fanon's words, the black male member has become phobogenic (117). Although McKay's construction of the black man is heavily sexualized, the element of threat is not made explicit: *Home to Harlem* is free of the black rape narrative in the literal sense. Men do not dominate women sexually; they may exploit female sexuality for their financial gains, but sheer sexual domination based on physical power instead of economic power does not tinge the narrative. The pervasive white fear of the male black member, the phallicizing of the "Negro" (Fanon 120), superficially does not enter the equation, just as Van Vechten avoids the topic. In fact, the explicitly dominant phallus in both novels is white, as quite a few characters allude to the role the white phallus has played in their mixed racial heritage. Van Vechten's Mary is of partially white decent, claiming a white grandfather (134) and McKay's Susy reflects on the fact that "*civilization* had brought strikingly exotic types into [her] race" (57, emphasis added). The white phallic gaze upon the black body is made explicit in *Home to Harlem* when "a colored couple dawdled by, their arms fondly caressing

each other's hips. A white man forking a bit of ground stopped and stared expressively after them" (280). Yet both Van Vechten and McKay deploy the essentialist notion of black male sexuality and rape discourse implicitly in their construction of female characters. Van Vechten's Lasca is the dominant partner, yet she begs Byron to possess her, to make her a slave to his sex (239), and McKay's "Rose was disappointed in Jake. She had wanted him to live in the usual sweet way, to be brutal and beat her up a little" (113). Lasca and Rose comply with the stereotype of the fallen woman, but furthermore their urge to be dominated sexually projects onto the male characters a potential for black brutalism. The construction of a black masochist female and her expectation of sexual violence perpetuates the myth of black outrage (Fanon 138). Although the burly black brute is thus not explicitly present in these pages, his implicit presence infuses the novels with his pernicious stereotype.

McKay's characters are socially marginal, as Cooper contends in his foreword to *Home to Harlem*. Van Vechten's protagonists tend to belong to the middle-class, but they are gripped with the urge to climb the social ladder, whereas McKay's characters lead a life that is "a free coarse thing" (71) and are mainly content to remain so. The theme of passing is ubiquitous in Van Vechten's novel – it comes up in almost every conversation and is presented as a solution to the "Negro problem": Van Vechten's Dick Sill would "like to start a movement for all us near-whites to pass. In a short time there wouldn't be any Negro problem" (48). Passing and social mobility are not thematized in *Home to Harlem*. McKay's characters instead are geographically mobile, as reflected in the novel's structure – its division between "home" and "away." Ray extracts himself from Harlem society by literally sailing away into the blue, and the open ending which Jake and Felice's move to Chicago provides speaks of promise and the possibility of a happily ever after – all without evading their black heritage. Passing, it seems, is neither a feasible option nor a desirable one for McKay's protagonists. The only allusion we find to passing in *Home to Harlem* is a rather

ambiguous one. "Zeddy's wife, after deceiving him with white men, had run away from him to live an easier life" (55). Fanon's assertion that in a racialized society blacks have but one desire – to turn white and to avoid slipping back (38) – does not apply to McKay's characters.

Education as a means of social uplift *is* a theme in *Home to Harlem*, however, although the success of this strategy is called into question. The personification of the "educated Negro" is Ray, a Haitian black man whom Jake meets on the railroad. In an echo of the eurocentrism which Van Vechten demonstrates, Jake comes upon Ray as the latter is reading Alphonse Daudet's *Sapho* (*sic*) (128). Apparently, even for McKay, education is signified by a familiarity with the European classics. Ray, however, is an independent thinker. He is hungry for intellectual stimuli and, even though he no longer has the means to attend university, he says he is "never going to stop [studying]. I study now all the same when I get a little time. Every free day I have in New York I spend at the library downtown. I read there and I write" (138). While Byron used his education explicitly to conform to the white paradigm – "I wanted to try a white college. I've got to get along in white world […] and I thought it might help" he says (118) – Ray is intrinsically motivated to educate himself, but he acknowledges the difficulty in being educated within the white framework: "Modern education is planned to make you a sharp, snouty rooting *hog*. A Negro getting it is an anachronism. We ought to get something new, we Negroes. But we get our education like – like our houses. When the whites move out, we move in and take possession of the old dead stuff. Dead stuff that this age has no use for" (243, emphasis added). Through Ray's voice, we hear McKay's criticism of Booker T. Washington's educational philosophy, which held that – at this time of industrialization – black men should be trained to become craftsmen and farmers.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Ray uses his education not to conform to whiteness, but to introduce Jake into another world of blackness. Their very first conversation is about

Haïti's Toussaint L'Ouverture, and Jake is moved by the concept of black agency: "It was a revelation beautiful in his mind. That brief account of savage black people, who fought for collective liberty and was (*sic*) struggling to create a *culture of their own*. A romance of his race, just down there by Panama. How strange!" (134, emphasis added). Ray thus projects the possibility of an existence outside the white cultural frame. Ray is conflicted, however, calling himself "a misfit with my little education and constant dreaming" (274). In spite of the wide world of his imagination, he is still caught by social and economic reality. Jake illustrates this fact when he tells Ray, "what in the name of mah holy rabbit's foot youse doing on this heah white man's chuh-chuh? It ain't no place foh no student!" (137). Ray's education has made him unfit, in a sense, to conform to the white stereotype of a black man, but there is no alternate position which he can inhabit. He is the student on the train, caught in the white man's reality. Under the influence of drugs, Ray has post-racial utopian dreams: "And the world was a blue paradise. Everything was in gorgeous blue of heaven. Woods and streams were blue, and men and women and animals, and beautiful to see and love. He was a blue bird in flight and a blue lizard in love. And life was all blue happiness" (158). Karsten Piep postulates that Ray is in search of a transnational identity. "Central to [the novel] is the perilous quest for a transnational identity that transcends not just national parochialisms, but ethnic and racial stereotypes as well" (111). While he does indeed challenge black middle-class parochialism when he refuses to marry his girlfriend – stating that he does not want to become "one of the contented hogs in the pigpen of Harlem, getting ready to litter little black piggies" (263), in words curiously reminiscent of his critique on black education – and instead signs on as a mess boy on an ocean freighter, the aim of his quest is perhaps broader than simply transnational. The possibility of a "blue" post-racial utopia is suggested by the fact that he leaves Harlem for "the big *blue* beautiful ocean" (272, emphasis added). The attainment of the post-racial universalism which Fanon preaches and which depends on a

deep understanding of each Other, thus creating the equality of multiple racial Others (181) is problematized, however, by the intrusion of black reality into this utopian dream. He is, after all, still "slinging hash on the white man's chu-chu" (274) and therefore still embedded in white power structures.

Ray escapes from Harlem. Whether or not he reaches his post-racial ideal is an open question. Jake and Felice similarly escape from Harlem; their escape is geographical, not ideational, but similarly significant on the plane of black stereotype as it introduces the notion of black superstition. They have agreed to meet in a nightclub to catch the train to Chicago: "Jake was the only guest left in the Baltimore. The last wriggle was played. The waiters were picking up things and settling the accounts. 'Whar's the little hussy?' irritated and perplexed, Jake wondered" (338). The explanation is soon given. Felice had left her good-luck charm, a necklace which her grandmother had given her at birth and which she wears religiously, in her ex-lover's apartment a few weeks before. At the last minute, she decided to return for the necklace, as her new life would not be complete without it. Jake is on the point of departing for Chicago when she runs op to him, panting, necklace in hand. Speaking of the very occasion which has caused them to leave, the fracas at the nightclub, she says, "Ah, daddy, ef I'd a had mah luck with me, we nevah woulda gotten into a fight at the cabaret," Jake replies, "you really think so, sweetness?" and Felice then asserts, in the very last sentence of the novel, "I ain't thinking, honey. I knows it. I'll nevah fohgit it again and it'll always give us good luck" (340). Her magical good-luck charm will guarantee a happily-ever-after. The stereotype of childlike black magical thinking which is borne out in conjure tales and a half-fearful derision of voodoo by white culture is thus to be responsible for their luck in life. It is up to the reader to decide whether it is the stereotype of black magical thinking that sets the lovers up for success, or whether it is the stereotype which almost held them back from moving forward. Jake, after all, was on the point of leaving without Felice.

Just as black superstition is a stereotype which McKay consciously employs and subverts, so does he introduce ambiguity to the figure of the "Stage Negro."

> Zeddy also took along Strawberry Lips, a new pal, *burnt-cork black*, who was thus nicknamed from the peculiar stage-red color of his mouth. Strawberry Lips was proof that the generalization has some foundation in truth… You might live your life in many black belts and arrive at the conclusion that there is no such thing as the typical Negro – no minstrel coon off the stage […], then one day your theory may be upset by meeting with a type by far more perfect than any created counterpart (63-64, emphasis added).

Strawberry Lips is the embodiment of blackface, yet is described as far more "perfect" than any created counterpart. He is therefore far more "real" than any construct white men may create. McKay concedes that there is some truth to the stereotype, but hastens to add that the embodiment of the stereotype is rare indeed, and supersedes the construct of the "stage Negro." He is an individual, a rare individual, and should by no means be taken to represent the "race."

The individuality of black folk, their many shades and colors, their diverse interests and the uniqueness of their black souls is underlined in a Seventh Avenue evening scene: "All the various and varying pigmentation of the human race were assembled there: dim brown, clear brown, rich brown, chesnut (*sic*), copper, yellow, near-white, mahogany and gleaming anthracite. […] The girls passing by in bright batches of color, according to station and calling. High class, menial class, and the big-trading class, flaunting a front of chiffon-soft colors framed in light coats" (289-290). Superficially, there may be a resemblance to Van Vechten's "kaleidoscope of colour" (*Nigger Heaven* 14), yet the differences are remarkable. While Van Vechten ranks his skin-tones according to social status – black, brown, yellow – McKay vitiates the perceived social scale by moving from brown to yellow to near-white to

anthracite. More precisely, he distinguishes multiple shades of brown, but avoids the extremes of white and black, pointing out the spuriousness of racial categorization: white people are not literally white, African Americans are never literally black. Additionally, the sartorial tints which Van Vechten employs in his scene are vibrant and glaring, implying a primitivist, exoticized perception of the colored mass; McKay speaks of "chiffon-soft colors," introducing a sense of tenderness and nuance to the scene. But the principal disparity between the two authorial viewpoints consists of the fact that McKay individualizes and humanizes his people, while Van Vechten objectifies them by referring to them as a "kaleidoscope." Van Vechten's scene dehumanizes its subjects by reducing them to pattern, just as McKay invests them with individual identities and highlights their humanity.

While Van Vechten employed the stereotype of the lazy, parasitic black man in his construction of Adora Boniface McKay deconstructs it. He may explicitly censure sweetmen, even having Ray literally equate the sexual exploitation of women to parasitism (241), there are passages in *Home to Harlem* which echo Van Vechten's use of the theme. Gin-Head Susy is McKay's version of Adora Boniface, an affluent woman who hosts an all-male salon. Although men disparage her behind her back, they concede that "she may be fat and ugly as a turkey, but her eats am sure beautiful" (78). Susy's tragedy is that, in her loneliness, she attempts to entrap men using food and drink: "She desired a lover […], but she desired in vain. Her guests consumed her gin and listened to the phonograph, exchanged rakish stories, and when they felt fruit-ripe to dropping, left her place in pursuit of pleasures elsewhere" (58-59). The stereotypical theme of the commingling of food and sex yields no "fruit" for Gin-Head Susy; she is thwarted by the stereotype of parasitism.

McKay's Susy is reminiscent of Van Vechten's Olive. Both are excellent cooks and are aware of the power of food in the sexual realm, though Susy discovers its empowering capacity is limited. Additionally, both betray an essentialist view of race. While Olive is said

to "feel her race," Susy on the one hand reflects on "all the fascinating new layers of brown, low-brown, high-brown, nut-brown, lemon" which comprise the Harlem population, but then concludes reductively that they are all "sucked back down into the current of black by the terribly sweet rhythm of black blood" (58). In Susy's conjunction of food and sex, and essentialist notions of race, McKay, by not explicitly challenging these notions, appears to adhere to contemporary white perspectives on blackness.

"Release from hate complexes will be accomplished only if mankind learns to renounce the scapegoat complex" (Baruk, qtd. in Fanon 141). Van Vechten's novel, and *Home to Harlem* to a lesser degree, illustrate that Black Americans internalized white prejudice to the degree that the social scale mirrored a scale of blackness; the whiter the subject, the more praiseworthy and the more likely to succeed in a society dominated by whites. The pervasiveness of intraracial racism is reflected in both Van Vechten and McKay's work, with "high-yaller" characters disparaging "spade-black" African Americans. Both are subject to the universal human impulse towards constructing the Self in opposition to the Other; the tensions within black identity originated in the fact that black folk internalized the white paradigm to such a degree that black becomes Other. The black Self must be as white as can be. "My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored," writes Fanon. "The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly" (86). With such pervasive prejudice in both the dominant society and black communities, black people are alienated from their own identity; Self is created in the image of the "civilized" white man, in opposition to the Evil of Blackness (Fanon 82-88). The intraracial racist impulse, the construction of a laudable Self in opposition to a deplorable Other is extrapolated to interracial racism. In his quest for identity within the micro-universe of a freighter with an Arab and white crew, Jake "began to despise the Arabs" (2). One of the white sailors "flattered Jake. 'You're the same as us chaps. You ain't like them dirty

jabbering coolies'" (3). It seems even Jake is not free of the impulse to scapegoat. Yet Ray's affirmation of (the possibility of) a black identity through his recounting of Haitian history opens up a new frame of reference. When Ray has recounted the history of Toussaint L'Ouverture, Ray muses, "As an American Negro he looked askew at foreign niggers, Africa was jungle, and Africans bush niggers, cannibals. And West-Indians were monkey-chasers. But now he felt like a boy who stands with a map of the world in colors before him, and feels the wonder of the world" (134). Jake is ready to explore the possibility of an identity which is not grafted onto him by white violence or white prejudice. A global, universal outlook has given him a glimpse of post-racial hope. To paraphrase Fanon, he has opened the door of his consciousness (181).

Conclusion: The Stage of the Other

Although much has changed, politically and socially, since the publication of *Nigger Heaven* and *Home to Harlem* nearly a century ago, the position of black Americans is still problematic, with an overrepresentation of African American males in the U.S. penal system and a social marginalization of black single-parent families. The dominant white paradigm, however, is beginning to shiver on its foundations. It is certainly not shaking yet, but movements such as Black Lives Matter and the emergence of the "Zwarte Piet" discussion in The Netherlands illustrate that traditional narrative constructions of blackness are being questioned; not just by blacks but also by whites. The consistent construction of black men as criminal and inhuman in American police narratives must be investigated and debunked (Polak) and the ascendance of white heritage over postcolonial pain, as illustrated by the "Zwarte Piet" issue, must be questioned. More importantly, people are now standing up in the public arena to pose these very questions. In this context, the mechanisms of double consciousness which underlie the construction of Self in a white racist society are as relevant today as they were during the Harlem Renaissance.

Both authors engage with Du Bois's concept of double consciousness, irrespective of whether they were familiar with the notion. Even Van Vechten, who could be expected to have the single consciousness of a white man gazing on blackness, has constructed the black man following a model of whiteness which displays Eurocentric angst. He could therefore be said to suffer from a double consciousness as it relates to dominant European view of whiteness; he measures the value of his whiteness with a European tape. The majority of Van Vechten's narrative is, of course, simply a product of his patriarchal white view of blackness. His affirmation of black stereotypes serves to highlight the white consciousness which McKay had to contend with, as an author. Additionally, McKay's position as a black artist supported by a white Maecenas necessitates his viewing his art through the eye of not only an

abstract and distant white audience, but literally through that of the dominant white power who pays his bills. The Other, in this case Eurocentric white cultural hegemony, thus penetrates both narratives. The trouble with Van Vechten's work is not the intent; he did indeed want to present blackness to his white audience in a positive manner. However, an analysis of his novel conveys the image of the author presenting his black characters like a child presenting a much-loved toy. Undoubtedly he had a genuine admiration for jazz, for the vibrant cultural life of Harlem, and even for the subjects of his photographs and the characters in his novel. The problem is that he never concedes their humanity, reality, or individuality. His gaze upon African Americans remains that of an outsider looking in; he creates a "New Negro" who is very similar indeed to the old, stereotypical black man, and the only strategy he allows his characters in order to create their black identities is in the mold of the white, quite literally. Passing is the only way forward; it is the only solution to the "Negro problem" he offers.

The penetration of the white Other into McKay's narrative is more complex; it sometimes even defies analysis. While his narrative is rooted in the bedrock of stereotype – sex, food, dialect, magical thinking – he often subverts the white reader's expectations. Yet much of the success of the novel depends on a mutual code, a similar and stereotypical understanding by both black and white readers of the themes of sex, food and conjure, for example. While he does debunk some of these stereotypical themes explicitly or implicitly, there is much that is left intact. His introduction of black phallic threat in the character of Rose, for example, might be deemed problematic as McKay does not engage with that particular topic either implicitly or explicitly, conveying the sense that the stereotype may be true. Additionally, while analysis of his novel hints at the universality of base desire, in fact these desires are only expressed by his black characters, leaving a white audience able to point the finger and laugh at these "stage negroes" eating and "fucking and backbiting" to

paraphrase the author himself (Cooper xvi). Despite the ambiguities of his novel and his striving for a "New Negro" identity, one thing is abundantly clear: his construction of blackness relies heavily on black stereotypes. In the characters of Ray and Jake, however, redemption is possible. A post-racial non-conformist Self may rise from the ashes of prejudice, and allow one to "touch the other, to feel the other, to explain the other to myself" (Fanon 181).

Words of thanks

This thesis could not have seen the light without Boris's understanding and support, our parents' tireless babysitting and Nout's colorful drawings of dinosaurs and robots on the backs of first draft papers. I would also like to thank my employer, the Hollands Midden Fire Department, for partially funding my courses and for being understanding when I had to reshuffle my work schedule to attend classes – it is especially appreciated because the relevance of American literature to firefighting is non-existent.

Works Cited and Consulted

"Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library." *Van Vechten Photographs*. Web. 15 June 2017. <http://brbl-dl.library.yale.edu/vufind/>.

Bernard, Emily E. *Black Anxiety, White Influence: Carl Van Vechten and the Harlem Renaissance.* Dissertation, Yale University, 1998.

---. *Carl Van Vechten & The Harlem Renaissance: A Portrait in Black and White.* New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2012.

Buckner, Timothy R., and Peter Caster. *Fathers, Preachers, Rebels, Men: Black Masculinity in U.S. History and Literature 1820-1945.* Columbus, OH: Ohio State UP, 2011.

Butler, Judith. *Senses of the Subject.* New York: Fordham UP, 2015.

---. *Gender Trouble*. London: Routledge, 1990.

Carby, Hazel V. *Race Men.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1998.

Cooper, Wayne F. Introduction. *Home to Harlem,* by McKay, Northeastern UP, 1987, ix-xxvi.

Drowne, Kathleen M. *Spirits of Defiance: The Influence of National Prohibition on American Literature, 1920-1933.* Dissertation, University of North Carolina, 2000.

Du Bois, W.E.B. "Criteria of Negro Art." *webdubois.org. Ed. Robert W. Williams.* 2 July 2014.

---. *The Souls of Black Folk.* New York: Dover Publications, 1994.

Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks.* London: Pluto Press, 2008.

Gallini, Thomas James. *Being and Becoming: Analyzing the Negotiation of Spiritual, Religious, and Sexual Identities in Nonheterosexual British and American Young People through the Lens of Queer Theory.* Dissertation, Queen's University Canada, 2011.

Helbling, Mark. "Carl Van Vechten and the Harlem Renaissance." *Negro American Literature Forum* 10.2 (1976): 39-47.

Hollingsworth, Lauren C. *Reading the (In)visible Race: African-American Subject Representation and Formation in American Literature.* Dissertation, University of California, 2010.

Holmes, David G. "Cross-Racial Voicing: Carl Van Vechten's Imagination and the Search for an African-American Ethos." *College English* 68.3 (2006): 291-307.

Huggins, Nathan I. *Harlem Renaissance*. New York: Oxford UP, 1971.

Korsten, Frans. "Lessen in Literatuur." Lipsius Building, Leiden. 2014. Lecture.

Lewis, David L. *When Harlem was In Vogue.* New York: Oxford UP, 1981.

Maiwald, Michael. "Race, Capitalism and the Third-Sex Ideal: Claude McKay's 'Home to Harlem' and the Legacy of Edward Carpenter." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 48.4 (2002): 825-857.

McKay, Claude. *Home to Harlem.* 1928. Boston, MA: Northeastern UP, 1987.

Newman, Eric H. "Ephemeral Utopias: Queer Cruising, Literary Form and Diasporic Imagination in Claude McKay's 'Home to Harlem' and 'Banjo.'" *Callaloo* 38.1 (2015): 167-185.

Piep, Karsten H. "'Home to Harlem, Away from Harlem:' Transnational Subtexts in Nella Larsen's 'Quicksand' and Claude McKay's 'Home to Harlem.'" *Brno Studies in English* 40.2 (2014): 109-121.

Pfeiffer, Kathleen. Introduction. *Nigger Heaven,* by Van Vechten, Illinois UP, 2000, ix-xxxix.

Pochmara, Anna. *The Making of the New Negro: Black Authorship, Masculinity, and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance.* Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2011.

Polak, Sarah. “Ferguson and the Humanities.” Blog post. Web. 1 dec. 2014. <http://sarapolak.nl/blog/?p=622>.

Roberts, Kimberly. “The Clothes 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.

Ross, Marlon B. *Manning the Race: Reforming Black Men in the Jim Crow Era.* New York: New York UP, 2004.

Rottenberg, Catherine. “Writing from the Margins of the Margins: Michael Gold’s ‘Jews without Money’ and Claude McKay’s ‘Home to Harlem.’” *MELUS* 35.1 (2010): 119-140.

Rowden, Terry James. *Bodies in Collision: African-American Fiction and the Sexual Politics of Narrative.* Dissertation, Cornell University, 1992.

Sanneh, Kelefa. “White Mischief: The Passions of Carl Van Vechten” *The New Yorker* Feb. 17&24 (2014): 53-61.

Shaw, Phil. *Jean Toomer and Carl Van Vechten: Identity, Exploitation, and the Harlem Renaissance.* Dissertation, University of Denver, 2009.

Shriver, Lionel. “Fiction and Identity Politics.” Brisbane Writers Festival. Brisbane. 8 September, 2016. Keynote Speech.

Smalls, James. “Van Vechten’s Secret: Carl Van Vechten, Male Nude Photography.” *The Gay and Lesbian Review Worldwide* 13.3 (2006): 25-29.

Tabor, Edward N. *Carl Van Vechten’s ‘Nigger Heaven:’ Envisioning and Reinventing American Transatlantic Bohemia in Harlem.* Dissertation, Lehigh University, 2013.

Van Vechten, Carl. *Nigger Heaven.* 1926. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000.

Xavier, Silvia. “Crosstown Jakes in 1920s Manhattan: Racial Formation in John Doss Passos’s ‘Manhattan Transfer’ and Claude McKay’s ‘Home to Harlem.’” *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 54.4 (2008): 715-743.

Wood, Jennifer Piper. *The New Black: Sartorial, Corporeal and Sexual Politics of the Harlem Renaissance*. Dissertation, Yale University, 2009.