



PROJECT MUSE®

Unlike Many Others: Exceptional White Characters in Harlem
Renaissance Fiction

Emily Bernard

Modernism/modernity, Volume 12, Number 3, September 2005, pp.
407-423 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mod.2005.0072>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/186756>



Unlike Many Others: Exceptional White Characters in Harlem Renaissance Fiction

Emily Bernard

My curiosity about the origins and literary uses of this carefully observed, and carefully invented, Africanist presence has become an informal study of what I call American Africanism. It is an investigation into the ways a nonwhite, Africanlike (or Africanist) presence or persona was constructed in the United States, and the imaginative uses this fabricated presence served. I am using the term 'Africanism' . . . as a term for the denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people.—Toni Morrison¹

In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison explores the singular role that black characters have played, not only in the American literary canon, but in the nation's very understanding of itself. White authors have historically used dark bodies to articulate and address a multiplicity of anxieties and fantasies, all of them as complex as they are contradictory in nature. What do white American writers say about themselves in their representations of black people? This question, only one among many Morrison addresses in *Playing in the Dark*, is compelling, and like most fascinating questions, it begs others, among them: in what ways have *white* characters historically served *black* authors? Despite rapid developments in whiteness studies, whose very premise is based upon the urgent necessity for interrogations of whiteness, this question appears only infrequently on the scholarly landscape.² In this essay, I will not attempt to resolve this prodigious quandary conclusively, but

MODERNISM / modernity

VOLUME TWELVE, NUMBER

THREE, PP 407–423.

© 2005 THE JOHNS

HOPKINS UNIVERSITY PRESS

Emily Bernard is

Assistant Professor of

English and Alana U. S.

Ethnic Studies

at the University of

Vermont. Her first

book, *Remember Me to*

Harlem: The

Letters of Langston

Hughes and Carl Van

Vechten, was a New

York Times Notable

Book of 2001. Her

second book, *Some of*

My Best Friends: Writers

on Interracial Friendship,

will be published in

paperback in July 2005.

This essay is part of

her current project, a

monograph on interracial

dynamics during the

Harlem Renaissance.



408 rather to offer some thoughts on the matter by way of an exploration of white characters in two prominent Harlem Renaissance novels, *The Blacker the Berry* (1929) by Wallace Thurman and *Passing* (1928) by Nella Larsen.

I use the Harlem Renaissance, or the New Negro Movement, as my focus *because* of the particular significance of its place in African American literary and cultural history. Today, scholars are given to questioning the disproportionate amount of attention traditionally paid to the Harlem Renaissance by the publishing industry. The fact that it was not an organic movement but a “forced phenomenon,” in the words of David Levering Lewis, does not, in my view, undermine its undeniable importance in African American cultural history.³ In fact, as J. Martin Favor suggests in *Authentic Blackness*, the methods by which African American artists and intellectuals went about rewriting African American identity for public consumption during this period are, in their very self-consciousness, instructive.⁴ Attempts to reconstruct the black self were not invented during the Harlem Renaissance, but became central to African American cultural discourse “almost as soon as blacks could write,” Henry Louis Gates, Jr. explains.⁵ This essay uses the Harlem Renaissance as its locus because it is the first moment in which public discussions about the representation of black people in fiction reach a crisis point. African American artists and intellectuals during this period disagreed passionately about how the Negro should be portrayed in art, to paraphrase the title of the 1926 *Crisis* symposium. The symposium “The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed?” does not include queries about white characters, but white characters in black fiction are charged with tasks as central to the projects of black-authored novels as are black characters. In addition, because of the public controversy over black characterization during the Harlem Renaissance, I would like to argue, it is to white characters that we should look to understand even more fully the complexity of the missions undertaken by black-authored books during this movement.

Harlem Renaissance authors used literature as a means of self-creation. The New Negro movement, as a whole, set before itself the formidable task of reconstructing “the very *idea* of who and what a Negro was or could be” (“T,” 148). If literature was such a significant part of this racial reinvention, then why use white characters at all?⁶ Why were they necessary? White characters had specific functions in black-authored fiction of the Harlem Renaissance. Most practically, they served to authenticate fictional representations of the New Negro movement. Ironically, an accurate, authentic, if you will, representation of Harlem life during the New Negro Renaissance demanded the inclusion of white people. White go-seers were often annoying and sometimes predatory, but Harlem spaces were swarming with them—they were everywhere and largely unavoidable. Like speakeasies, race uplift balls, and passionate discussions about the future of “the race,” white characters are staple features in narrative portraits of the Harlem Renaissance.

The wide spectrum of the white presence in New Negro fiction bears examination. Most Harlem Renaissance fiction contains white characters; many of them tend to be obnoxious, if not outright loathsome, and prominent among these undesirables are whites whose intentions toward Harlem are purely exploitative or otherwise threaten-

ing. However, significantly among these unsavory types are other white characters, who “unlike many others” (as such a character is described in *The Blacker the Berry*), have something useful to offer the black people he encounters. Harlem Renaissance authors invented white characters that were not only symbols of resented white presence in Harlem, but also *counterpoints* to unwanted white interlopers who, by the time these books were written, had firmly insinuated themselves into Harlem life—particularly Harlem night life. Consequently, literary landscapes were as much a means to punish and control harmful white ways in Harlem, as they were opportunities to construct ideal white intimates, equals across the color line, useful in the New Negro enterprise to reconstruct the black self. It is theretofore as striking as it is important that exceptional white characters in Harlem Renaissance fiction exist to serve black characters. These characters do their most important work as mediators in relationships between black characters. Discussions about race and sex that dominate the critical work on both *The Blacker the Berry* and *Passing* are only enriched when we examine the roles played by two exceptional white male characters in bringing the major conflicts in both books to a head. In order to assess the significance of interracial dynamics in these novels, however, we must first appreciate the intraracial conflicts that constitute the central themes in both narratives.

“Why *had* her mother married a black man? Surely there had been some eligible brown-skinned men around.”⁷ From the opening pages of *The Blacker the Berry*, readers are invited to consider the relationship between sex and color—not race, at least not initially. Importantly, it is not her race that Emma Lou bemoans, but her color: “Not that she minded being black, being a Negro necessitated having a colored skin, but she did mind being too black” (*BB*, 21). The darkness of Emma Lou’s skin is ironic; it bears an inverse relationship to the degree of her actual race pride. In the early chapters, we see Emma Lou as a victim of the color prejudice in which her environment is steeped: “It was an acquired family characteristic, this moaning and grieving over the color of her skin” (*BB*, 21). But ultimately, readers are meant to understand that Emma Lou perpetuates the same anti-black prejudice of which she herself has been a victim. Will Emma Lou triumph over the odds she faces as both a victim of racism as well as a perpetrator of it? The resolution of her conflict will turn on, and be measured through, her relationship with two exceptional white male characters.

Thurman’s intention to expose the ironies of intraracial color prejudice is evident from the opening lines of the book, when Emma Lou’s skin color is presented as the root of her family’s unhappiness and a target of her community’s cruelty. In Emma Lou’s world, “it was the custom always of those with whom she came into most frequent contact to ridicule or revile any black person or object” (*BB*, 24). Since childhood, Emma Lou has been derided by playmates, and her mother, Jane, has been bombarded with remedies purporting to discharge the blackness from her daughter’s skin: “Try some lye, Jane, it may eat it out. She can’t look any worse” (*BB*, 32). Jane fields these kinds of comments routinely, often within earshot of Emma Lou. Even Emma Lou’s one source of comfort, her Uncle Joe, sports a picture on his bedroom wall of a “pickanniny” splayed out “like a fly in a pan of milk and a white expanse of bedclothes” (*BB*, 22).

410 To Jane, the problem of Emma Lou's skin color is intimately connected with gender. "Oh, if you had only been a boy!" Jane continually laments (*BB*, 34). The reader is relieved and hopeful when Jane relents to Uncle Joe's entreaties that Emma Lou should be allowed to leave Boise and attend the University of Southern California in Los Angeles where, "he reasoned, she would find a larger and more intelligent social circle" (*BB*, 34). Like Uncle Joe, the reader imagines that a more cosmopolitan, intellectual environment will at least provide Emma Lou with some reprieve from the seemingly constant assaults on her self-worth that she has been forced to navigate in her hometown.

The first white people in *The Blacker the Berry* are indistinguishable but hardly insignificant. Emma Lou is the lone black student in her high school; the first white characters comprise the mass of her peers. In the opening scenes of Emma Lou's high school graduation, white presence is implied if not actualized: Emma Lou sits in a row of "pale-faced graduates" and feels the stares of white audience members who must not have known that "Emma Lou Morgan was Boise high school's only nigger student" (*BB*, 23). When Emma Lou arrives in Los Angeles to attend USC, white characters are again present mainly to represent the "white normative gaze," a depersonalized, forbidding, constraining white presence whose sudden force in Emma Lou's consciousness is coincident with the introduction of another black character, Hazel Watson.

"My feet are sure some tired!" Hazel Watson says by way of an introduction (*BB*, 39). A native of Prairie Valley, Texas, Hazel owes her opportunity to attend college as well as her new Stutz roadster to the newly discovered oil resources on her father's property. Emma Lou is humiliated by Hazel's presence, and outraged that such a person would address her as an equal. What exactly is wrong with Hazel? She says "is" when the rules of grammar call for "are"; she wears flashy clothes; she is loud; and, perhaps most important to Emma Lou, she "did not seem to know . . . that Negroes could not afford to be funny in front of white people." In fact, Emma Lou believes that "Negroes must always be sober and serious in order to impress white people" (*BB*, 55). Emma Lou quickly dismisses Hazel Watson as a "typical southern darky" (*BB*, 42).

Until this point in the book, readers are inclined to be sympathetic to Emma Lou's friendless predicament. She has come to USC hungry for black faces, and we root for her to establish connections with other black students. But her attitude toward the first black student she encounters spoils the blameless portrait given us in the opening pages and reveals Emma Lou to be as prejudiced as the folks back home. The fact that Emma Lou's own response to Hazel is mediated through her experience of the depersonalized whiteness around her demonstrates how alienated Emma Lou is from her own sense of blackness. Even as abstractions, white characters are useful here to reveal Emma Lou's own hypocrisies and distorted racial ideals.

Emma Lou's self-censoring attitudes around white people are hardly unique within the context of the 1920s' discourse about race and representation. But against the backdrop of the rhetoric of New Negro ideology, Hazel's apparent lack of concern with what white people think is figured by Thurman as the only admirable response to white hegemony. When Langston Hughes extols the virtues of "the low-down folks"

in his 1926 essay, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” he describes the Hazel Watsons of the world as

the people who have their hip of gin on Saturday nights and are not too important to themselves or the community, or too well fed, or too learned to watch the lazy world go around . . . Their joy runs bang! into ecstasy. Their religion soars to a shout.⁸

Hazel Watson’s hip of gin effectively gets her kicked out of school; just before mid-term, faculty members advise Hazel to take a leave and try college again the following year. Hazel’s role in the novel is brief but substantial. But finally, her job is *not* to represent the folk community lauded by Harlem Renaissance intellectuals, even though she is given to playing the “low-down blues” on the piano in the school gymnasium and is dismissed by dicty USC students who refer to her as “Topsy” (*BB*, 55–6). Rather, Hazel Watson exists mainly to alienate the reader from Emma Lou, and her purpose recalls a commentary made by Thurman in the 1926 journal *Fire!!* about the “lamentable victims” that, as he saw it, dominated black characters in American fiction.⁹ With Emma Lou, Thurman has strayed far from pitiable caricature and given us, instead, a character about whom it is difficult to care at all. After her initial encounter with Hazel Watson, when Emma Lou encounters snubs because of her dark skin, the reader is given to wonder if it is her noxious personality, and not her blackness, that others find revolting. This conundrum will not be resolved until much later in the novel, when a white character modeled on Carl Van Vechten enables Emma Lou to find her way out of self-hatred and intraracial strife, and into a self-love that includes an acceptance of her dark skin.

But before encountering white characters with messages of self-love, Emma Lou navigates the thicket of ridicule and disgust that seems to confront her nearly every time she encounters other black people. Her most pivotal romantic relationship begins, in fact, as a result of her having been derogated by other blacks because of her dark skin. Emma Lou meets the most commanding object of her desire, Alva, after she has grudgingly agreed to accompany her employer, Arline Strange, and Strange’s brother on an outing to the legendary Jazz club Small’s Paradise. Strange, a white actress, is currently playing the role of a mulatto in the Broadway show, “Cabaret Gal.” Strange’s brother, well acquainted with the Negro section of Chicago, is eager to see if his sister’s stage antics resemble anything he can find in Harlem. Small’s is a let-down: “Why there ain’t nothing here but white people. Is it always like this?” (*BB*, 107) Arline’s brother’s disappointment recalls the 1927 essay, “The Caucasian Storms Harlem,” Rudolph Fisher’s account of his experiences upon returning to Harlem after his residency in Washington, D.C. where he encountered nothing but white people during his visits to former haunts:

I descended the same old narrow stairs, came into the same smoke-misty basement, and found myself a chair at one of the ancient white-porcelain, mirror-smooth tables. I drew a deep breath and looked about, seeking familiar faces. “What a lot of ‘fays!’” I thought, as I noticed the number of white guests. Presently I grew puzzled and began to stare, then I

gaped—and gasped. I found myself wondering if this was the right place—if, indeed, this was Harlem at all. I suddenly became aware that, except for the waiters and members of the orchestra, I was the only Negro in the place.¹⁰

Fisher recounted wandering “in a daze” to different nightclubs—including Small’s—and confronting the same phenomenon. He catalogued various black reactions to this change in the “complexion” of Harlem nightlife. The managers of Harlem cabarets, he reported, “don’t hesitate to say that it is upon these predominant white patrons that they depend for their success” (“CSR,” 115). The fact of black economic dependence on white patronage left black patrons like Fisher “frequently uncomfortable and out of place,” as well as caught in a surreal reversal of traditional interracial interactions in Harlem. “Time was when white people went to Negro cabarets to see how Negroes acted; now Negroes go to these same cabarets to see how white people act,” Fisher quipped (“CSR,” 115).

In *The Blacker the Berry*, the atmosphere at Small’s is exactly what Fisher narrated, and Emma Lou notices “in all that insensate crowd of dancing couples there were only a few Negroes” (*BB*, 107). Even as the well-lubricated evening wears on, and begins to feel “unrestrained,” Emma Lou continues to remain “conscious of a note of artificiality, the same as she felt when she watched Arline and her fellow performers cavorting on the stage in ‘Cabaret Gal’” (*BB*, 109–110).

Arline Strange and her brother represent the more insidious variety of white people making eager appearances in Harlem in the 1920s. They symbolize the resented white presence that made it difficult for blacks like Fisher to feel at ease in Harlem by 1927. Arline and her brother are in Harlem to gape at black people, to seek “tonic and release,” in the words of Nathan Huggins.¹¹ If the siblings Strange are aware of the larger cultural complexities of race relations unfolding around them, they do not let this knowledge interfere with their nighttime pursuits. By day, Arline Strange “cavorts” as a mulatto on stage, when black actresses of all skin tones are having difficulty finding work.¹² In her capacity as Arline’s maid, Emma Lou is the black Harlem community personified, dependent upon white financial support, and helpless before its clout and caprices.

In the middle of this drunken evening, Emma Lou meets Alva, and is immediately impressed by his “smiling oriental-like face, neither brown nor yellow in color, but warm and pleasing beneath the soft lights” (*BB*, 111). He asks her to dance, and Emma Lou forgets that he has just emerged from a table of young men who were, only moments before, watching her and laughing. They dance, Emma “[glows] inside,” and Alva eventually returns to his table. Before she leaves for the evening, Emma glances his way and is greeted by the stares of the young men, including Alva: “One of them said something and made a wry face. They all laughed, uproariously and cruelly” (*BB*, 112).

Emma neither storms out of the place in tears, nor angles over to the table to offer the hecklers a piece of her mind. Instead, she seems to forget the insult, and becomes obsessed with Alva, wandering all over Harlem, hoping to run into him. “He was her ideal,” she decides. “He dressed well. His skin was such a warm and different color, and she had been tantalized by the mysterious slant and deepness of his oriental-like eyes”

(*BB*, 124). Again, Emma Lou's own preference for light-skin and un-negroid features makes it difficult for readers to sympathize fully with her as much as it reveals how effectively white racism has taught her to hate the blackness in herself and others.

Readers are inclined, if not to like, then at least not to despise Alva, even though we learn that the only reason he finally returns her advances is to delude his friends into believing he doesn't actually mind their ribbing about Emma Lou (*BB*, 132). As their relationship progresses, however, we see how much Alva actually minds Emma Lou's dark skin. He does not take Emma Lou out among his friends because "he knew too well that he would be derided for his unseemly preference for 'dark meat,' and told publicly without regard for her feelings, that 'black cats must go'" (*BB*, 138). In order to placate Emma Lou's growing suspicions about his reluctance to show her off publicly, Alva invites Emma Lou along to a rent party that he plans to attend as a cicerone for a group of young Harlem writers and artists. As creative types, Alva reasons, this group "would be more or less free from the color prejudice exhibited by his other friends" (*BB*, 138). True to form, Emma Lou believes the setup; she responds to Alva's invitation with a certainty "that Alva loved her, certain that he was not ashamed or even aware of her dusky complexion" (*BB*, 139). Still, before the party, she goes through her beauty rituals, which included "applying various creams and cosmetics to her face in order to make her despised darkness less obvious" (*BB*, 139).

The scene that precedes the rent party, a gathering at Alva's house, is pivotal because it introduces an important white character, Ray Jorgenson. At the gathering we meet a group of Harlem writers: Cora Thurston (Zora Neale Hurston), Tony Crews (Langston Hughes), Mr. Paul (Bruce Nugent), and Truman Walter (Wallace Thurman). Perhaps here, among this enlightened bunch, Emma Lou will finally find community and solace, just as Alva has imagined. But as soon as Emma Lou enters the room, we see that she is ignorant of the cultural revolution going on around her (she has neither seen nor read Tony Crews's book) and uptight (she is "shocked to see that Mr. Paul's shirt was open at the neck and he was sadly in need of a haircut and shave" (*BB*, 141). But Emma Lou reveals the true degree of her philistinism when a white friend of the black writers, Ray Jorgenson, enters the room: "Emma Lou gaped, and was more bewildered than ever. All of this silly talk and drinking, and now—here was a white man!" (*BB*, 142) Unsettled initially by his simple presence, Emma Lou finds even more objectionable the frank conversation—peppered with the word "nigger"—about intra-racial prejudice that continues between the black artists unabated even after Jorgenson's entrance. "Such extraordinary people—saying 'nigger' in front of a white man! Didn't they have any race pride or proper bringing up? Didn't they have any common sense?" (*BB*, 143) Antonio Gramsci defines the "common sense" Emma Lou advocates as "opposed to novelty and ultimately conservative."¹³ In the context of New Negro ideology, this kind of "common sense" is decidedly illogical and anti-progressive.

If Emma Lou's job in *The Blacker the Berry* is to symbolize the hypocrisy of traditional beauty standards, then this episode represents an attempt on the part of New Negro intellectuals to liberate black people from these harmful ideologies. Truman Walter takes center stage and delivers an impassioned speech condemning a news

414 item about the intentions of a Negro couple to exclude dark-skinned people from their upcoming Brooklyn wedding:

Mulattoes have always been accorded more consideration by white people than their darker brethren. They were made to feel superior during slave days . . . made to feel proud, as Bud Fisher would say, that they were bastards. It was for the mulatto offspring of white masters and Negro slaves that the first schools for Negroes were organized . . . [BB, 144]

In her distorted sense of reality, in her lack of “common sense,” Emma Lou “couldn’t comprehend all of this talk . . . She wasn’t sure that they weren’t all poking fun at her” (BB, 147). This could have been a moment of Emma Lou’s education and liberation, but instead, she can only make sense of this new language through the vocabulary of suspicion and fear. The New Negro intellectuals offer Emma Lou an opportunity, but she interprets it as an insult. She is hopeless, the book seems to suggest.

Alva uses the Harlem intellectuals for the impression that he hopes their liberal intellectual attitudes will make on Emma Lou. In turn, the Harlem writers and artists are convinced that Alva’s social fluidity at the rent party will grant them a measure of acceptance. They are correct—up to a point. At the rent party, Alva easily navigates his way through the undulating bodies emitting “animal ecstasy” while the New Negroes cluster by the window, talking in “hushed, almost reverential tones” (BB, 148,149). There’s only so much that Alva can do for them. As much as they want to distinguish themselves from the starchy black intellectuals who avoid these licentious scenes, they wear an alienation from their rent party counterparts that is as conspicuous as Paul’s wardrobe. Their failure to integrate themselves into the scene can be read as Thurman’s explicit critique of the New Negro Movement’s outsized sense of its centrality to the greater Harlem community.

If Alva’s presence fails to collapse the sociocultural distance between the New Negroes and the rent partiers, then the presence of a white man, Ray Jorgenson, comes much closer to this objective. Paul addresses Ray Jorgenson: “‘Look at ‘em all watching Ray.’” Truman Walter teases Ray: “‘Tonight you’re “passing.” Here’s a new wrinkle, white man “passes” for Negro’” (BB, 149).

Ray Jorgenson, who may or may not be modeled on Carl Van Vechten, emerges as central to this scene as a shield onto which these New Negro figures deflect their own sense of discomfort in this alien environment. Ray is not just convenient but necessary: it is *solely* within the context of Ray’s presence that these New Negro intellectuals feel at home. Only in relationship to Ray’s status as a veritable outsider can they consider themselves insiders.

How does Ray Jorgenson feel about being watched? The subjective experience of this white man is unimportant to the story. The rent party scene forms an authentic counterpart to the scene at Small’s, where Emma Lou was constantly aware that, even though it was after hours, she was with her white employer, and in Arline’s eyes only “a Negro and a hired maid.” At Small’s, the comfort of whites dominated Emma Lou’s consciousness as much as it did that of the black wait staff and the performers. At the

rent party, however, a “swarm” of “lewd bodies” undulated in “animal ecstasy,” liberated, at least temporarily, from the expectancy on white faces. This scene in *The Blacker the Berry* reverses the typical dynamic between whites and blacks in Harlem, empowering black characters with the normative gaze that is habitually trained on them.

In this “authentic” space, Emma Lou experiences something of a spiritual/sexual awakening and becomes “very fluid, very elastic” (*BB*, 149). Even though the cabaret scene rang false to Emma Lou and her white escorts, she still “forgot herself” and gaped and giggled. At the rent party, however, she has to restrain herself from “flying into an emotional frenzy.” Here, we learn that Emma Lou is not only a symbol of the annihilating effects of racism, but a complex subject, with nuanced desires and real capacities for self-expression. All is not lost, we see here. But it will take a final white character to help Emma Lou transform herself into a self-respecting individual.

By the end of *The Blacker the Berry*, Emma Lou has come to believe that she has been the main source of her own unhappiness, although she had been heretofore “too obtuse to accept it.” In the last pages she realizes “what a complete fool she has been. It was clear to her that she had exercised the same discrimination against her men and the people she wished for friends that they had exercised against her—and with less reason.” It takes two white characters to reveal the distance that Emma Lou has traveled. If Emma Lou is the “complete fool” she describes above when she meets Ray Jorgenson, then her interaction with another white man, Campbell Kitchen, both marks and occasions the full extent of her personal transformation. The final white character in *The Blacker the Berry* is the canvas onto which Emma Lou fashions a new sense of self.

Emma Lou comes to know Campbell Kitchen once she begins working for his wife, Clere Sloane. When Emma Lou’s employer, Arline Strange, decides to go to Europe, she arranges for Emma Lou to have a job with Sloane, “a former stage beauty who had married a famous American writer and retired from public life,” much like Carl Van Vechten’s wife, Fania Marinoff (*BB*, 185). These similarities and others encourage readers to make an association between Kitchen and Carl Van Vechten. Thurman explicitly equates the two men: “Campbell Kitchen, along with Carl Van Vechten, was one of the leading spirits in this ‘Explore Harlem: Know the Negro’ crusade” (*BB*, 186). Importantly, Kitchen, “unlike many others,” was “sincere,” and used his cultural capital to champion spirituals in the mainstream press, to publicize unknown blues singers, and to promote “younger Negro writers,” personally carting their work to publishers and editors (*ibid*). Like Carl Van Vechten, Kitchen has written a book about Harlem that, in Thurman’s assessment, “had been a literary failure because the author presumed that its subject matter demanded serious treatment” (*BB*, 187).

Thurman’s language here recalls his prose in “Fire Burns: Department of Comment,” an essay that appears on the final pages of *Fire!!*, in which Thurman defends Van Vechten and his 1926 novel, *Nigger Heaven*, and castigates black critics of both—the “Harlem intelligentsia”—for their “inherent stupidity” (*F*, 47). Thurman wanted his readers to understand, not only his position on Van Vechten and *Nigger Heaven*, but also his attitudes about a multiplicity of issues, including censorship and racial parochialism in

416 literature. After *Nigger Heaven* appeared in 1926, black writers used Van Vechten as a shorthand and articulated their positions on these and other issues by defending or condemning Van Vechten and his infamous Harlem novel.¹⁴ In *The Blacker the Berry*, Campbell Kitchen served essentially the same purpose for Thurman.

In addition, Thurman uses Kitchen as a vehicle to underscore Emma Lou's former parochialism which led her to expect, in Kitchen, "a sneering, obscene cynic, intent upon ravaging every Negro woman and insulting every Negro man." Instead, Emma Lou finds him to be "such an ordinary, harmless individual that she was won over to his side almost immediately" (*BB*, 187). Emma Lou becomes not only a fan but also a disciple of Kitchen's when she discovers that he knew more about Negro life "than she or any other Negro she had ever met." Her talks with Campbell lead her to take stock of herself: "Was she supersensitive about her color?" (*ibid*) Campbell invites her to use his library and supplies her with tickets to musical concerts and the theater. After some time, and much more drama with Alva, Emma begins to subscribe to Kitchen's belief that "every one must find salvation within one's self" (*BB*, 216). Kitchen's words mirror those her Uncle Joe used to say to her back in Boise when he, then her only champion, would tell her "as long as one was a Negro, one's specific color had little to do with one's life. Salvation depended upon the individual" (*BB*, 35). Now that, through Kitchen, she has rediscovered and enlarged upon Uncle Joe's wisdom, Emma Lou might begin to release all of the demons that have long plagued her.

Campbell accomplishes much for a character without any speaking parts. Indeed, in the course of the book's narrative, the volubility of white men consistently diminishes. First, it is upon Arline Strange's brother's vocal insistence that we venture to Small's; then, Ray Jorgenson is verbal but hardly outspoken before and during the rent party scene; and finally, Campbell Kitchen is represented, not as a commanding subject, but as a sum of his encouragements, achievements, and aphorisms. Kitchen's single most important vocation in *The Blacker the Berry* is to serve as a barometer of Emma Lou's internal changes. It is through her relationship with Kitchen that we see the distance Emma Lou has traveled since her first day at USC, when white people only existed for her as an inhibiting, proscriptive, faceless mass.

Despite the book's multiple weaknesses, *The Blacker the Berry's* complex rendering of white characters is instructive, particularly with regard to its historical context in early-twentieth-century Harlem where the relationship between whites and blacks formed such a source of controversy within black intellectual discourse. Traditionally, scholarship on this book has looked elsewhere for the narrative's significance: David Levering Lewis, for example, concludes that "Emma Lou . . . stands for those Afro-Americans in whom the obsession with respectability extinguishes personality and self-respect—those for whom the least evidence of white influence is revered" (*WHV* 237). If Thurman begins *The Blacker the Berry* with the intention of exposing black people who are obsessed with whiteness, then this intention is, at the very least, confused by the novel's resolution, in which a white man enables Emma Lou to love her blackness. Lewis connects Thurman's novel to his ambitions with *Fire!!*: "The aesthetics of *Fire!!*, in which the real resource of Afro-America resides in honest, noisy common

folk and its unconventional artists, inspires Thurman's novel on every page" (*WHV*, 237). The aesthetics of *Fire!!* which actually crackle on the pages of *The Blacker the Berry* are inextricably intertwined with Thurman's belief in the utility of cultivating beneficial relationships with whiteness. The presumably "honest, noisy common folk," as represented in Hazel Watson and the rent party attendees, are merely backdrops to this larger issue.

Similarly, in Larsen's *Passing* color and sex create conflicts that are articulated and resolved partially through the vehicle of white characters. An important white character, Jack Bellew, Clare Kendry's racist husband, rarely makes an appearance in critical work on the novel, despite the fact that he is responsible—either directly or indirectly—for his wife's defenestration at the end of the story. Another white character who is, arguably, more significant than Bellew, also receives relatively little scholarly attention—Hugh Wentworth. In her critical work on *Passing*, Deborah E. McDowell has argued that Irene Redfield's delusions result in her failure to see the hypocrisies inherent in her beliefs about race and class.¹⁵ McDowell is not alone among Larsen scholars who routinely overlook the role Wentworth plays in exposing these unsettling truths about Irene. Wentworth is a primary lens through which we see aspects of Irene that she is unwilling to recognize in herself. But before I discuss the crucial roles played by Bellew and Wentworth, I would like to begin with the invisible whiteness that hovers over the opening scenes of *Passing*.

The first signs of whiteness in the novel are powerful in their very absence. In the scene of the first encounter between Irene and Clare, Irene moves easily on the crowded streets of Chicago as she shops for her sons, the sweltering heat, not racism or colorism—the issues that jump start *The Blacker the Berry*—her only preoccupation. When she starts to faint, a taxi driver conveniently appears and "jumps out and guides her to his car," nearly lifting her inside. "The Drayton, ma'am?" he suggests respectfully. On the roof of the Drayton hotel, Irene has the sensation of "being wafted upward on a magic carpet to another world, pleasant, quiet, and strangely remote from the sizzling one that she had left below."¹⁶ Privacy, safety, and comfort on demand—this is the stuff of white privilege. Irene's happy bubble is nearly burst when she spots a woman's intent gaze upon her. She muses, "Did that woman, could that woman, somehow know that here before her very eyes on the roof of the Drayton sat a Negro?" (*QP*, 150) Suddenly, Irene is jolted out of her fantasy to confront the reality of racism, and the all too real possibility of being ejected from the Drayton. Her sense of privilege is exposed as a fragile ruse, made possible only because others fail to perceive her racial identity. Irene is powerless before the whiteness all around her whose threatening force has been distracted momentarily by the apparition of racial homogeneity.

This scene is crucial because it sets up one of the most important features of this narrative, which is Irene's hypocrisy. As McDowell explains, "Ironically, detail for detail, she manifests the same faults of which she so harshly accuses Clare" ("I," xxv). Irene condemns Clare for passing, yet in this early scene, we see that our unreliable narrator passes for white herself when it is convenient. Not only does Larsen expose Irene's lack of credibility in this scene, she also reminds readers that on the borders of

418 the psychological drama in which we are about to be immersed is a larger white world from whose oppressive power light-skinned characters are ultimately not anymore immune than the dark-skinned Emma Lou Morgan. The same proscriptive white presence that determines Emma Lou's initial response to Hazel Watson in *The Blacker the Berry* lurks at the margins of Irene's fantasy at the Drayton, only to be personified and mobilized pages later through the instrument of Jack Bellew.

Jack Bellew's role in *Passing* is undeniably meaningful. As I have stated, his racist attitudes play a central role in Clare's death. In addition, Larsen uses Jack Bellew to underscore how, again, even in the most privileged and exclusive of environments, black people are never free from the power of the white normative gaze. After all, the entire direction of the novel turns, not upon the kind of catastrophic violence that begets the ending, but on a simple glance from Bellew. Irene happens to be walking with her brown-skinned friend Felise Freeland one day when she encounters Bellew, who has been until this moment ignorant of his wife's actual racial identity. As he regards the women, Irene "was sure, now of the understanding in his face, as he looked at her again and then back at Felise" (*QP*, 226). Irene appreciates the dangerous implications of his knowing look, and yet she refuses to warn Clare, thus setting in motion the novel's tragic denouement.

Bellew is also useful for what he helps illuminate about Irene. In the middle of the scene in which he repeatedly, if unknowingly, verbally assaults his wife's guests by harping on his antipathy for "niggers," Irene "had to concede that under other conditions she might have liked him" (*QP*, 173). It's hard to imagine any circumstances under which anyone, black or white, could find likable a man who insists that Negroes give him "the creeps," and refers to them as "black scrimy devils" (*QP*, 172). Does Irene imagine that, if circumstances should transform her into a white woman, she would enjoy his racist diatribe? Here, again, Irene reveals the hollowness at the root of her race consciousness. With alarming ease, Irene puts his racism aside and assesses Bellew on his superficial merits: "A fairly good-looking man of amiable disposition, evidently, and in easy circumstances" (*QP*, 172-3). Jack Bellew may be a toxic force *in* the novel but he is productive *for* the novel as another means of exposing the extent of Irene's contradictions.

Significantly, in a novel whose atmosphere is permeated with the deadly apprehension created by Jack Bellew, we are given another white male character possessing an altogether different purpose in Irene's world. Nella Larsen wrote to Carl Van Vechten on 7 March 1927: "Heaven forbid that I should ever be bitten by the desire to write another novel! Except, perhaps, one to dedicate to you." When she finished *Passing*, which she did dedicate to Van Vechten and his wife Fania Marinoff, Larsen announced in a letter to Van Vechten that she had finished "[his] novel."¹⁷

At first glance, Hugh Wentworth, like Campbell Kitchen in *The Blacker the Berry*, seems to serve only as an opportunity for homage. Awestruck, Clare Kendry calls him "*the* Hugh Wentworth" (*QP*, 198). An irreverent writer, Hugh is also a certified adventurer, wanderer, a veritable renaissance man. Unlike Hugh Wentworth, Carl Van Vechten never "lived on the edges of nowhere in at least three continents," and

these distinctions constitute the basis of Kathleen Pfeiffer's argument in *Passing and American Individualism* that Van Vechten is not the model for Wentworth.¹⁸ I agree with Pfeiffer that Wentworth is hardly an exact replica of Van Vechten, but I do not believe that specific dissimilarities undermine what may have been Larsen's objective, which was to utilize what Van Vechten symbolized—a celebrated, exceptional white man in Harlem—to her own literary advantage in the figure of Wentworth.

Irene's attitude toward Wentworth reveals more important information about her. When Clare asks her if she was just speaking with "*the* Hugh Wentworth," Irene lets show "a tiny, triumphant smile" (*QP*, 198). Irene enjoys the fact that her privilege as an educated, well-to-do black woman has enabled her to secure the friendship of this famous white man. She encourages and enables Hugh's fascination with blackness, even though she is well-aware that the curiosity of whites like him will have a negative effect on the black community:

This, Irene told her, was the year 1927 in the city of New York, and hundreds of white people of Hugh Wentworth's type came to affairs in Harlem, more all the time. So many that Brian had said: 'Pretty soon the coloured people won't be allowed in at all, or will have to sit in Jim Crowed sections.' [*QP*, 198]

Rather than criticize Wentworth for desiring access to black spaces, Irene participates in and encourages his curiosity. She arranges for him to have his seat of choice at the dance for the Negro Welfare League, an event for which she is chairperson of the ticket committee. Irene's role puts her in the position of veritable gatekeeper at this high profile event. Her relationship to this group is another of this book's wonderfully wicked ironies, because, finally, the only Negro whose welfare Irene expresses concern for is herself.

Because she values Hugh's celebrity, Irene is uncritical of his tendency to objectify black people. Standing side by side at the dance, they speculate together on the stereotype of white female fascination for dark black men. Irene suggests that its root lies in "the sort of thing you feel in the presence of something strange, and even, perhaps, a bit repugnant to you" (*QP*, 205). In this scene Irene reveals herself to be every bit as voyeuristic as Hugh. She claims an authority here on race matters because of Hugh's outsider status. Irene encourages Hugh's racial speculations because they allow her to share privileged information about race to an outsider; ultimately, this confirms her own sense of herself as privileged and powerful. It is through Hugh that Irene enjoys her status as an insider in this scene. Hugh's "act of looking," to borrow a phrase from cultural critic Andrew Lakritz, partially constitutes Irene's sense of identity.¹⁹ While Irene "found it hard to sympathize with this new tenderness, this avowed yearning of Clare's for 'my own people,'" she encourages Hugh to ogle black faces and bodies at the N.W.L. dance (*QP*, 182). While Clare has to beg before Irene grudgingly sanctions her attendance at the dance, Wentworth seems to have a standing invitation to important black community events.

Further, Hugh Wentworth plays an important role in *Passing* as a screen onto which Irene projects her mounting anxiety that Brian, her husband, and Clare are having

420 an affair. Irene begins to find her husband's behavior mysterious. Suddenly, he seems to her like a "man marking time," although she doesn't know why (*QP*, 214). Finally, on the day that she has organized a party in honor of Wentworth, Irene intuits the "truth" of his affair with Clare during a private conversation with Brian shortly before the guests arrive. While the party is in motion, it is literally through Hugh's eyes that Irene gathers the proof she needs to confirm her suspicions.

Across the room was Hugh. He wasn't Irene hoped, being too bored. He seemed as he always did . . . And as usual he was hovering before the book-shelves. But he was not, she noticed, looking at the book he had taken down. Instead, his dull amber eyes were held by something across the room . . . For a minute Irene hesitated, then turned her head, though she knew what it was that held Hugh's gaze. Clare, who had suddenly clouded all her days. Brian, the father of Ted and Junior. [*QP*, 220]

Irene sees a "scornful" expression in Hugh's eyes, which does not surprise her, since she believes Hugh "had never cared for Clare Kendry," anyway (*ibid.*). But actually, Hugh never expresses anything like disdain for Clare. In fact, at the N.W.L. dance, he is virtually fixated on her, and pesters Irene about her racial identity. "What I'm trying to find out is the name, status, and race of the blonde beauty out of the fairy tale," Hugh tells Irene (*QP*, 204–5). Instead of telling Hugh the truth about Clare, she teases him with the question, dangling in front of him the fact of her own information about the object of his fascination. As much as Clare frustrates her, Irene finds her useful here as a means of holding the interest of her famous white friend.

The scene in which Hugh performs the role of a screen for Irene's anxieties begins with Irene informing Brian that Hugh Wentworth finds Clare unintelligent and boring (*QP*, 216). What motivates Irene to believe that Hugh harbors negative feelings toward Clare? Hugh's antagonistic feelings exist only in Irene's imagination.²⁰ She freely distorts his actual sentiments because he has little purpose in the novel aside from his role as a projection of Irene's fantasies. Hugh belongs to Irene in the novel; he is a device she uses to construct meaning in her world. It is through Hugh's vision that Irene's "unseeing eyes" finally lose their scales, and she is forced to recognize the "truth" about the relationship between Brian and Clare (*QP*, 218). Whether the two actually have an affair or Irene invents this ruse to protect herself from her own errant sexual desires, Irene's complex psychological maneuverings in *Passing* require the mediation of Hugh Wentworth.²¹

Later in this scene, Wentworth is the literal embodiment of Irene's conscience. Watching Clare enchant yet another woman's husband, "rage boiled up in her," and she drops her coffee cup, which shatters to the floor. The room is silent. With all eyes on her, Irene suddenly finds Hugh Wentworth "miraculously at her side" (*QP*, 221). He begins to take the blame for her broken cup and apologizes for pushing her, an act they both know is a cover-up. Irene refuses Hugh's help—cooly, she protests that she broke the cup deliberately—but the "power of his discernment" amazes and frustrates her. "Damn Hugh!" Irene thinks. "She couldn't, it seems, help his knowing . . . But she could and would keep him from knowing that she knew." Irene's overwhelming impulse is to

suppress Hugh's knowledge as she has suppressed her own. "Something would have to be done about him. Now" (*QP*, 221). Irene views Hugh's awareness as so dangerous to her image that it is frankly amazing that he does not, like Clare, wind up on the pavement by the novel's end. He may not take a fateful plunge from the window, but Hugh is effectively dismissed here. After this scene, he is erased from Irene's life as neatly as if he had never existed except as a figment of her imagination. Hugh's ambiguous status as both outsider and insider lends itself neatly to Irene's manipulation. His dependence serves her purposes—and the larger narrative of *Passing*—perfectly.

* * *

In this essay I have attempted to illuminate the significance of a largely under-discussed but eminently curious feature of Harlem Renaissance fiction: exceptional white characters. My discussion has sought to shed some light on two popular Harlem Renaissance novels whose objectives, in part, were to transform the constant, diffuse spectre of whiteness in black lives into a manageable entity that could be manipulated for various purposes in these narratives. I have attempted to carry out a version of Toni Morrison's project in *Playing in the Dark* which she describes as an effort "to avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers; from the serving to the served" (*PD*, 90). I have therefore focused on representations of whiteness in both *The Blacker the Berry* and *Passing* in order to examine how, in both novels, white bodies serve black stories.

If these white characters are so important to Harlem Renaissance novels, why are they so infrequently discussed? A consistent and overwhelming imperative that dominates much of the critical work on the Harlem Renaissance is the recuperation of its blackness, which requires a corresponding denial of its inherent whiteness. George Hutchinson has pointed out the consistent erasure of whiteness in biographical work on Nella Larsen.²² I have argued elsewhere that anxieties about white influence in the Harlem Renaissance have led to a persuasive impulse to erase or diminish Carl Van Vechten's role in the movement. There are multiple historical reasons for such reactions to white influence, but finally, to deny the centrality of whiteness to this black movement is to misapprehend the movement itself.

"What is Africa to me?" Countee Cullen asked famously in his 1925 poem "Heritage"; the stanza containing this question serves as the epigraph to *Passing*.²³ Like *The Blacker the Berry*, *Passing* is concerned with Africa not as a geographical entity, but as a metaphorical racial landscape whose import and significance African American authors grappled with urgently in creative work produced during the Harlem Renaissance. Cullen's question, in its numerous implications and variations, was not sufficiently answered during the Harlem Renaissance, and its resolution continues to be elusive. Historically, many of the implicit attempts that have been made to answer it have led only to more confusion and despair.²⁴ I have not attempted here to address Cullen's expansive musing, but only to confuse things further by suggesting that another pertinent and equally knotty question lurks in the shadows of Cullen's query, a question

422 Harlem Renaissance writers wrestled with continuously in their work but that scholars have consistently ignored, and that is: What is whiteness to me? May simple answers to these rich and enigmatic questions continue to elude us.

Notes

1. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 6–7; hereafter abbreviated as *PD*.

2. An illuminating discussion about the significance of Hugh Wentworth, a white character in *Passing* by Nella Larsen, can be found in Pamela Caughie, *Passing and Pedagogy: The Dynamics of Responsibility* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999); hereafter abbreviated as *PP*. Wentworth also plays a large role in my discussion here. For a different interpretation of Wentworth's purpose in *Passing*, see Kathleen Pfeiffer, *Race Passing and American Individualism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003). I discuss Pfeiffer's engaging argument in detail in the pages to come.

3. David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was In Vogue* (New York: Knopf, 1981), xiii; hereafter abbreviated as *WHV*.

4. J. Martin Favor, *Authentic Blackness: The Folk in the New Negro Renaissance* (Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 1999), 3.

5. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black," *Representations* 24 (Fall 1988): 129–55; hereafter abbreviated as "T."

6. There were Harlem Renaissance authors who had no use for white characters. While, in *Home to Harlem*, Claude McKay's characters undisputedly suffer from the effects of racism, there are no white characters with substantial roles. See Claude McKay, *Home to Harlem* (Boston, Mass.: Northeastern University Press, 1987). Similarly, in *When Washington Was In Vogue*, an epistolary novel originally published in 1922 as *The Letters of Davy Carr*, whiteness is the absent presence in this novel of manners set in Washington D.C. See Edward Christopher Williams, *When Washington Was In Vogue* (New York: Amistad, 2003).

7. Wallace Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 21; hereafter abbreviated as *BB*.

8. Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: Penguin, 1981 [1926]), 228.

9. *Fire!!*, ed. Wallace Thurman (New York: The Fire!! Press, 1926), 48; hereafter abbreviated as *F*.

10. Rudolph Fisher, "The Caucasian Storms Harlem," *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: Penguin, 1994 [1927]), 111; hereafter abbreviated as "CSR."

11. See Nathan Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 89.

12. It would be difficult not to make a connection here between the artistic circumstances of Arline Strange and the real-life opportunities offered white actresses but not black ones well into the 1940s. Ethel Barrymore appeared on Broadway in blackface in Julia Peterkin's *Scarlet Sister Mary*, for instance. Arnold Rampersad describes Rose McClendon's reaction: "McClendon's quiet revenge was to keep a scrapbook, which she shared with [Langston Hughes], of the many hostile reviews of Barrymore's performance." A critically acclaimed black stage actress, Rose McClendon because of race, "had no hope of becoming a star." See Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes, Vol. I* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 191.

13. See *An Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings, 1916–1935*, ed. David Forgacs (New York: Schocken Books, 1988), 346.

14. In "What He Did for the Race: Carl Van Vechten and the Harlem Renaissance," I discuss Van Vechten's symbolic importance to the Harlem Renaissance as a vehicle through which black authors established distinct literary identities and philosophies. See Emily Bernard, "What He Did for the Race: Carl Van Vechten and the Harlem Renaissance," *Soundings* 80: 4 (winter 1997): 531–42.

15. See Deborah McDowell, "Introduction," in *Quicksand and Passing* by Nella Larsen, ed. McDowell (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 1986), ix–xxxvii; hereafter abbreviated as "I."

16. Nella Larsen, *Quicksand and Passing* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1986 [1928]), 147; hereafter abbreviated as *QP*.

17. Cited in Pfeiffer, *Race Passing and American Individualism*, 135; hereafter abbreviated as *RP*.

18. Pfeiffer makes the provocative argument that Van Vechten shares more of a connection with Clare Kendry than with Wentworth. She argues that “both Van Vechten and Clare are cast as interlopers.” In addition, she notes the parallels between Van Vechten’s famous “addiction” to Negroes and Clare’s hyperbolic passion for black Harlem. Even more, she writes, “one need only place the names Clare and Carl alongside each other to see their dramatic rhetorical similarity” (*RP*, 135). However convincing, this argument does not take into account the ambivalence Clare feels about her relationship to blackness. This ambivalence is central to Clare’s identity and was never a feature in Van Vechten’s own attitudes about African Americans. Even further, Pfeiffer argues, the famously irreverent, hedonistic Carl Van Vechten was “hardly the sort of a person who would appeal to Irene Redfield” (*RP*, 136). I would like to counter with the suggestion that if Hugh Wentworth’s nighttime pursuits actually did resemble Van Vechten’s own, Irene Redfield probably wouldn’t know or care. As a woman either unable or unwilling to go beyond surfaces, Irene would be satisfied by her association with Hugh’s celebrity alone, and simply ignore those aspects of his life that she found difficult to stomach.

19. Andrew Lakritz, *Who Can Speak?* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 16.

20. Deborah McDowell has persuasively argued that Irene’s antagonism is inextricably bound to her sexual desire for Clare. See “I.”

21. Pamela Caughie writes: “The possibility that what Hugh seems to detect is not fact but fiction is all the stronger given that this scene ends with Irene telling a story meant to mislead Hugh” (*PP*, 134).

22. See George Hutchinson, “Nella Larsen and the Veil of Race,” *American Literary History* 9 (1997): 329–49.

23. Countee Cullen, “Heritage,” *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1997), 1311–14.

24. See Hazel Carby, *Cultures in Babylon: Black Britain and African America* (London: Verso, 1999); Favor, *Authentic Blackness*; and Phillip Brian Harper, *Are We Not Men?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), for compelling arguments about the fallacies inherent in any attempt to define and contain black racial authenticity.