Chapter I: Historicizing African American Literature

Historically speaking, the collective enterprise we now know as African American or black literature is of rather recent vintage. In fact the wine may be newer than generally acknowledged, which is to say that it was neither pressed on the African continent nor bottled during the slave era. Rather, African American literature was a post-emancipation phenomenon that gained its coherence as an undertaking in the social world defined by the system of Jim Crow segregation that ensued after the nation’s retreat from Reconstruction. This social order, created by local and statewide laws, statutes, and policies, received Constitutional sanction in 1896 with the US Supreme Court’s decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, and was maintained for decades by violence and intimidation, buttressed not only by the work of scholars, scientists, artists, and writers, but also by the quotidian social practices of ordinary citizens. It was also through many of these same means that this order was challenged and sometimes acquiesced in by its victims, until it was finally dismantled, at least judicially and legally, in the 1950s and 1960s. African American literature took shape in the context of this challenge to the enforcement and justification of racial subordination and exploitation represented by Jim Crow. Accordingly, it will be my argument here that with the legal demise of Jim Crow the coherence of African American literature has been correspondingly, if sometimes imperceptibly, eroded as well.

Admittedly, my insistence on this rather constricted historical frame for something called African American literature may seem at the very least, counterintuitive
and at the most simply wrongheaded. Indeed, much recent literary criticism and scholarship has sought to justify taking a longer historical view of African American literary practice. Some have argued that African American literary texts are distinguished by the way black authors, consciously and unconsciously, have worked and reworked rhetorical practices, myths, folklore, and traditions that derive from the African continent. Others have maintained that African American literary texts are defined by a prolonged engagement with the problem of slavery, system of labor exploitation that was central to the development of not only the United States but the whole of the western world. Those making the latter claim have held that writing against or under the influence of the slave regime has defined not only the literature written prior to abolition but also subsequent black literary practice because black literary practice as a whole has been indelibly marked by the ways that enslaved blacks coped with the brutalities of the middle passage and chattel slavery.¹

Also arguing against the view I am taking here is that individuals of African descent certainly wrote during the period before the historical advent of Jim Crow America and have certainly continued to do so, in ever increasing numbers in the years since the dismantling of de jure segregation some 45 years ago. Why should the works of Phillis Wheatley, Jupiter Hammon, Frederick Douglass, and so many others written during the antebellum period not count as African American literature? And what of the undeniable fact that African Americans continue to write what they understand to be African American literature? To insist that African American literature “was” is to raise the question of what all of this ongoing production “is.”
The last of these objections might have been met more easily had I given this book the title, “What Was Negro Literature?” for it is undeniable that while most, if perhaps not all, of the writers who published work during the Jim Crow era understood themselves to be Negro writers, publishing, sometimes willingly, sometimes unwillingly, Negro literature, none (or at least very few) contemporary writers of African descent describe themselves as writers of Negro or colored literature, preferring instead, black or African American—a difference that reflects broad and significant social and political changes. Indeed when contemporary writers do allow themselves to indulge a fondness for earlier nomenclature they tend to do so nostalgically, reproachfully, or perhaps in a manner combining both moods, as indicated, for example, by a brief exchange in Andrea Lee’s episodic 1984 novel *Sara Phillips*, where upon hearing the white girlfriend of the title character’s brother urge him to “do a black history project on your family,” the narrator’s elderly Cousin Polly objects, saying, “I don’t like that word ‘black’ . . . Colored folks used to think that word was an insult!” Of course, embedded within Cousin Polly’s objection is her disapproval not only of the word itself but of the interracial relationship she is being presented with, and the paradox that only in a world where black and African American prevail as favored terms will the genteel sons and daughters of the colored elite be able routinely to consider, even if only to reject, the possibility of marrying “outside” the race. For a character whose “southern voice,” has already prompted the novel’s eponymous heroine to describe the old woman as “a living fossil, one of the Paleozoic creatures that are periodically discovered in deep waters,” it will clearly not avail to learn that “black” is not an insult but merely “what kids are saying now.”²
Yet, however small the number of people at the present moment who share the full measure of Cousin Polly’s distaste for the word “black” (or her association of the term with interracialism), her belief that the bygone era when we were all colored (to paraphrase the titles of two mid-1990s memoirs by, respectively, Gates and Clifton Taulbert) may still surpass the post-Jim Crow world in terms of nurturing a sense of group cohesiveness and pride, has found ready affirmation among a variety of critics and writers.³ And though this nostalgic yearning rarely crystallizes as an injunction to rehabilitate this older terminology, it does coalesce in a concern that the baby of racial unity is in danger of being thrown out with the bathwater of segregation just at that moment when such unity is presumed to benas necessary as ever.

That these changes in preferred nomenclature, from colored and Negro to black and African American, can be correlated, however imperfectly, with the political and legal dismantling of Jim Crow does indeed beg the question of whether these shifts marked more than a shift in terminology.⁴ My contention is that to a great extent something significant has changed. Yet my decision not to use “Negro” literature in my title was determined by a sense that African American writers and critics of the post-segregation era have often remained oriented by the project of Negro literature as that project was defined by responses to Jim Crow, partly as a result of the above-mentioned nostalgia, but more fundamentally as a consequence of a belief that in some crucial ways Jim Crow has not ended and that in “the aftermath of the civil rights movement, the most obvious expressions of segregation and discrimination gave way to more covert but equally pernicious manifestations of racism.”⁵ My objection to this point, which will be elaborated more fully as this argument unfolds, is not that racism has disappeared from
the nation’s socio-political landscape, but that pointing out the persistence of racism is not to make a particularly profound social observation or to engage in trenchant political analysis. Rather, I think it important to see that a political and social analysis centered on demonstrating that current inequalities are simply more subtle attempts to reestablish the terms of racial hierarchy that existed for much of the 20th century misunderstands both the nature of the previous regime and the defining elements of the current one. By glancing at a few relatively recent texts I hope to show that this previous orientation can no longer provide coherence for a contemporary African Americanist literary project. As Danielle Allen has argued, the period between the Brown v. Board of Education decision in 1954 and the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965 constituted an “epochal shift in the country’s history . . . [that] remain[s] still undigested.”

As for the status of the fiction, poetry, and letters written before the Jim Crow era, my claim is that the mere existence of literary texts does not necessarily indicate the existence of a literature. James Weldon Johnson’s introduction to Sterling Brown’s 1932 collection of poetry, Southern Road, expresses a view along the lines I’m tracing here. Johnson writes,

The record of the Negro’s efforts in literature goes back a long way, covering a period more than a century and a half, but it is only within the past ten years that America as a whole has been made consciously aware of the Negro as a literary artist. It is only within that brief time that Negro writers have ceased to be regarded as isolate cases of exceptional, perhaps accidental ability, and have gained group recognition. It is only within these few years that the arbiters of
American letters have begun to assay the work of these writers by the general literary standards and accord it such appraisal as it might merit.⁷

Although Johnson’s words provide plenty to quibble with, including (for my purposes) the exactness of his chronology, his observation helpfully distinguishes between the existence of writers from an ascriptive group (even writers whose merit is broadly acclaimed) and the conceptualization of works by multiple authors from this group as a literature. The former does not depend on the latter. In Johnson’s brief comments, 1920s’ black writers such as Brown, Langston Hughes, and Claude McKay were writers of Negro (African American) literature, while figures such as Phillis Wheatley or Frederick Douglass, had been simply Negroes who were writers—or perhaps one could helpfully say that they were writers who were not yet Negro writers, and that antebellum writing by black Americans became African American literature only retroactively.⁸ I’ll add here that while I think my claim in regard to antebellum black writing is correct, my argument does not stand on making it categorical. That is, I would be willing to concede in the face of textual evidence that some black writing before the Civil War was understood by its practitioners and readers as something like a distinct literature, but I would still insist that whatever this literature was, it was changed significantly by the necessity of confronting the constraints of the segregation era. Indeed, it was largely in the light of imperatives determined by the Jim Crow era that antebellum texts were assimilated into the collective project we recognize as African American literature.

Of course, this being said, it bears observing that the transformation of “not yet x” writers into the status of ancestors and progenitors of more recent authors is a prerequisite for establishing any national literature, a fact that in turn, raises the question of whether
or not the observations I am making here significantly distinguish African American literature from other literatures. By way of providing an answer I’ll turn briefly to a core insight in Erich Auerbach’s *Literary Language and its Public*, which has been suggestive in helping me articulate my sense that African American literature might be viewed as an “historical” entity rather than as the ongoing expression of a distinct people. Writing in the late 1950s, Auerbach asserted,

> European civilization is approaching the term of its existence; its history as a distinct entity would seem to be at an end, for already it is beginning to be engulfed in another, more comprehensive unity. Today, however, European civilization is still a living reality within the range of our perception.

> Consequently . . . we must today attempt to form a lucid and coherent picture of this civilization and its unity.9

With some significant qualifications I am arguing here that, *mutatis mutandis*, African American literature as a distinct entity would seem to be at an end, and that the turn to diasporic, transatlantic, global, and other frames indicates a dim awareness that the boundary creating this distinctiveness has eroded.

What I’m interested in pursuing here is not so much Auerbach’s “method” of attending to the historical processes, institutional effects, and social pressures as these broader forces are reflected in and refracted through authorial style. Rather, I’m more interested in Auerbach’s insights that these contextual forces shape a shared set of assumptions about what ought to be represented and that as these contexts themselves undergo change, those representational and rhetorical strategies, which at their peak served to enable authors and critics to disclose various “truths” about their society, can
begin to atrophy and become conventionalized so that they no longer enable literary texts
to come to terms with social change, but operate instead as practices of evasion. Along
this line, my argument is that African American literature is not a transhistorical entity
within which the kinds of changes described here have occurred but that African
American literature itself constitutes a representational and rhetorical strategy within the
domain of literary practice that was responsive to conditions that by and large no longer
obtain.

From this standpoint recent claims that either distinctly African traditions or the
experiences of slavery and the middle passage constitute the center of African American
imaginative and expressive practice should be seen as symptoms of the breakdown of a
former coherence. The “public” of African American literature was the public, both
black and white, defined by the assumptions and practices of the segregation era.
Whether African American writers of the segregation era acquiesced in or kicked against
the label, they knew what was at stake in accepting or contesting their identification as
Negro writers. By contrast, the entailments of being regarded or not being regarded as an
African American writer at the present moment are comparatively less clear. My
argument presumes, then, that African American literature can be treated as an historical
designation that exhibits both the precision and fuzziness accompanying all period labels.
Of course any insistence on historical periodization is justified only if it leads to
interpretive clarity, and my contention here is that this periodization can aid our
interpretive efforts by drawing attention to some of the factors that almost unavoidably
oriented African American literary practice during the Jim Crow era. Specifically, black
writers knew that their work would in all likelihood be evaluated instrumentally, in terms
of whether or not it could be added to the arsenal of arguments, achievements, and propositions needed to attack the justifications for, and counteract the effects of, Jim Crow. As James Weldon Johnson observed in 1928, “I judge there is not a single Negro writer who is not, at least secondarily, impelled by the desire to make his work have some effect on the white world for the good of his race.” Writers also knew that their work would likely be viewed as constituting an index of racial progress, integrity, or ability. Added to this was the paradox that the success of black literature as a political tool threatened to undermine its status as an index of black integrity. The pressure exerted by these instrumental or indexical expectations show up not only in the way that writers and critics regard African American literary texts, but also within the works themselves.

To paint in somewhat broad strokes, “The After-Thought” to Du Bois’s *Souls of Black Folk*, in which Du Bois pleads that his “book fall not still-born into the world-wilderness” exemplifies a “instrumental” understanding of his own book as having been written to achieve a social end. On the other hand, Du Bois expresses an “indexical” view of African American literary writing when he puts forward the “Sorrow Songs” as evidence of the inner nature and capacity of the Negro race, or when he writes in “The Negro in Literature and Art” (1913) that the “time has not yet come for the development of American Negro literature” because “economic stress is too great and the racial persecution too bitter to allow the leisure and the poise for which literature calls.” To expect literature to serve as an indictment of this economic stress and racial opinion is to make an instrumental demand on literary practice; to expect African American writers to produce great literature once economic stress and persecution wane is to take an indexical view of literature.
That Du Bois approaches literature both instrumentally and “indexically” should make clear that these two terms cannot produce a neat taxonomy of African American writers, or even African American texts for that matter. That is, my aim here is not to define one set of writers who can be grouped under the heading “instrumental” and another set under the “indexical” label, although, to be sure, it might be possible to credit a claim that “instrumental” applies better to a writer like Sutton Griggs who was more likely to treat his fiction as merely another means of achieving the same social ends he pursued through his essays, lectures, sermons and the like, than it does to someone like Claude McKay who insists that his racial identity was so inescapable part of his work and the work of all great writers that “a discerning person would become immediately aware that I came from a tropical country and that I was not, either by the grace of God or the desire of man, born white.” That is, McKay, despite his political activities, was more inclined to view writing as an end to itself than was Griggs for whom social and moral ends were always paramount. In describing his approach to his writing McKay insisted that while his “social sentiments were strong, definite and radical,” he nonetheless “kept them separate from [his] esthetic emotions, for the two were different and should not be mixed up.”

By contrast, such mixing defines Griggs. And yet, even Griggs was not indifferent to the idea of a novel as an art form whose successful execution would redound to the credit of the race as a whole. “Observe that all of the races of mankind that have achieved greatness have developed a literature,” Griggs wrote in his book of philosophical and ethical musings, Life’s Demands; or, According to Law. He continued:

Not a single race that has no literature is classified as great in the eyes of the world . . .
Where people have not the habit of reading there will not be much writing.

The future progress of the Negro race calls for an awakening on the part of the people to the necessity of cultivating the habit of reading and stimulation of the art of making literature as indispensable aids to the development of the spirit of patriotism.  

Here, the instrumental and the indexical intertwine as Griggs combines a hortatory call for blacks to read and write literature with a view of literary achievement as a metric for assessing the progress of the race as a whole. Likewise McKay, despite his insistence to the contrary, did not fully insulate literature from political ends. As every student of the Harlem Renaissance knows, his most famous poem, “If We Must Die,” was taken as an eloquent protest against the violence of the Red Summer of 1919.

The point here is that no writer of this period could operate indifferently either of the expectations that African American literature ought to contribute demonstrably to some social end or of the belief that novels, poems, or plays constituted proxies for the status or the nature of the race as a whole. Writers could, and did, insist that their works be judged without regard to their identities and without reference to the political or social status of the black race, but the mere insistence was an acknowledgment of the pressure of these expectations.

It is also true, however, that calls for writers to do their part in achieving social ends were not indifferent to art’s special status as a realm apart. Even Du Bois’s well-known claim in “Criteria for Negro Art,” that “all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of purists” is not so much a disparagement of the idea that art should be an end to itself as it is an argument that, for the time being, art must serve
instrumentally as “propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy.” In other words, until society had realized the conditions in which black artists could practice art as an end unto to itself, art would have to bear the burden of serving as a means to an end. The recognition of African American art simply as art would depend on society’s achievement of racial equality. Or, as Du Bois writes, once “the ultimate art coming from black folk” is deemed “to be just as beautiful, and beautiful largely in the same ways, as art that comes from white folk, or yellow, or red”—that is, once “the art of the black folk compells [sic] recognition, [then black folk] will . . . be rated as human.”

Such a view has not fared well in recent decades. Writing in the late 1980s, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. remarked and lamented the role played by indexical and instrumental imperatives in producing black literature. Tracing the problem back to the 18th century and Thomas Jefferson’s dismissal of Phillis Wheatley’s poetry as lacking originality, and therefore as an indication of the inferior status of the race as a whole, Gates writes,

Unlike almost every other literary tradition, the Afro American literary tradition was generated as a response to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century allegations that persons of African descent did not, and could not, create literature. Philosophers and literary critics, such as Hume, Kant, Jefferson, and Hegel, seemed to decide that the absence or presence of a written literature was the measure of the potential, innate humanity of a race. The African living in Europe or in the New World seems to have felt compelled to create a literature both to demonstrate implicitly that blacks did indeed possess the intellectual ability to create a written
art and to indict the several social and economic institutions that delimited the humanity of all black people in Western cultures.\(^\text{16}\)

Gates adds, “Few literary traditions have begun or been sustained by such a complex and ironic relation to their criticism: allegations of an absence led directly to a presence, a literature often inextricably bound in a dialogue with its potentially harshest critics.” Accordingly, Gates writes, “black criticism, since the early nineteenth century, seems in retrospect to have thought of itself as essentially just one more front of the race’s war against racism,” which meant that “an author tended to be judged on his or her fidelity to ‘the Black Experience.’” This conception of critical practice, Gates describes as “a dead end for black literary studies.”\(^\text{17}\)

As I hope is clear to my reader by now, my claim is that had African American literature not been viewed “as essentially just one more front of the race’s war against racism,” it would not have existed as a literature. So that although Gates is right in noting that racist assumptions did mar much criticism of black literature, his complaint conflates levels of observation that were better kept separate. For example, it is important to recognize that Jefferson’s reprehensible criticism of Wheatley did not stem from an expectation on his part that distinct races ought to produce distinct literatures. Rather, he was decrying what he believed to be the absence of any worthy achievement by blacks in the literary and creative arts. In the same section of Notes in which he disparages Wheatley, Jefferson also faults Ignatius Sancho, whom he ranks as the more accomplished of the two but still places at “the bottom of the column” of literary achievement, for failing to evince the “sober reasoning” appropriate to his subject.\(^\text{18}\) The norms championed by Jefferson, while applied invidiously, are not norms that align
specific peoples with specific literary sensibilities. The alleged shortcomings of black
writers as noted by Jefferson, and the response of black writers throughout the 18\textsuperscript{th} and
the first half of the 19\textsuperscript{th} centuries to charges of black intellectual inferiority, were not
expressed as a failure to achieve a literature, but rather as a failure to achieve in literature. The literary societies that Elizabeth McHenry describes as proliferating among free
blacks in the antebellum north were not workshops for the production of a distinct black
literature but salons for producing works of literary distinction.\textsuperscript{19}

By contrast, the imperative to produce a black literature could not become fully
operative until later in the century. It was only subsequent to the abolition of slavery that
black and white writers in the US context came collectively to hold the race accountable
for producing a literature. Whether or not writers condemned slavery for the cruelties it
visited upon black people or whether, like Booker T. Washington and (at various points)
Sutton Griggs, they credited slavery for having introduced blacks to Christianity and the
West, no one could argue that slavery provided the optimal conditions for producing a
literature. To be sure, the incorrigible Jefferson in \textit{Notes on the State of Virginia}
compared chattel slavery in North America favorably to Roman slavery during the
Augustan era in order to draw invidious comparisons between the capabilities of blacks
and whites. But notwithstanding his conviction that literary genius could overcome the
obstacles of enslavement, widespread calls for the production of a literature by black
Americans did not become standard until late in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century.\textsuperscript{20} At that point, despite
the poverty facing most of the former slaves and the political and social barriers erected
against them, emancipation did unleash a host of predictions that in the wake of abolition,
the nation and the world would see what the true capacities of the black race were—an
expectation voiced not only by skeptical whites but also by black northern elites intent on proving the worth of black people and constituting themselves as the true representatives of the race.

But there is more at stake here than distinguishing the Jim Crow era from the preceding period. It is also important to place in its appropriate context Gates’s desire to extricate African American literature from indexical assessments of racial progress and instrumental responses to systematized second-class citizenship. Problematic for Gates has been the way the “functional and didactic aspects of formal discourse assumed primacy in normative analysis” of literary texts. Lamenting what he describes as a “confusion of realms,” Gates observes, “the critic became social reformer, and literature became an instrument for the social and ethical betterment of the black person.”

The issue here is not a matter of endorsing or dissenting from the idea of black literary critic as social reformer (although as I’ve argued elsewhere, that posture is often at the present moment deeply problematic). Rather, I want to argue the irrelevancy of bemoaning or advocating for what Gates sees as inattentiveness to literary matters among black writers and critics. One cannot treat African American literature as a literature apart from the necessary conditions that made it a literature. Absent white suspicions of, or commitment to imposing, black inferiority, African American literature would not have existed as a literature. Writers of African descent would have certainly emerged and written novels, plays, and poems that merited critical attention, but the imperative to produce and to consider their literature as a corporate enterprise would not have obtained. The achievement of black writers lay in their having responded creatively to the imperatives that derived from the establishment of a social order on the basis of assumed
black inferiority, and not in any transcendence of these imperatives. Black writers, both as creative writers and critics, to paraphrase Marx, made African American literature, but they did not make it just as they pleased, and certainly not under circumstances chosen by themselves. More importantly, black writers made black literature only and precisely because they encountered circumstances they would not themselves have chosen.

So what were some of the other entailments of writing against and in the shadow of Jim Crow that proved decisive for the development of black literature? One was facing the paradox that the condition one was fighting to overcome was the very condition that gave one’s own existence meaning. As an instrument for pursuing social justice this literature was forced at least to contemplate its own wished-for obsolescence. To some extent such, of course, is the paradox of all reformist or revolutionary movements, but when we consider Du Bois’s self-assessment in his “Apology” to his 1940 autobiography, *Dusk of Dawn*, the paradox takes on a specific form. Du Bois writes,

My life had its significance and its only deep significance because it was part of a Problem; but that problem was, so I continue to think, the central problem of the greatest of the world’s greatest democracies and so the Problem of the future world.²³

The wording here suggests that the deep significance of Du Bois’s life hinges less on his contribution to the resolution of the problem than on his being a part of a problem that appears as if it is going to be around for a long, long time. The sentence’s syntax balances the contingency of being a problem in the first clause with the assurance of the problem’s persistence in the second. I don’t mean at all to imply that Du Bois relished the
second-class status of Jim Crow or that he didn’t wish and work fervently for its defeat. I do, though, want to draw attention to the way that for Du Bois and other African American writers, the limitations of the black condition get rewritten as a paradoxically fortunate turn. These writers posit an American ideological machine so powerful in its capacity to turn its citizens into soulless automatons, that, paradoxically, its most obvious victims turn out to hold within themselves the only hope for its redemption. In the third chapter of _Dusk of Dawn_ Du Bois writes, “had it not been for the race problem early thrust upon me and enveloping me, I should have probably been an unquestioning worshiper at the shrine of the social order and economic development into which I was born.”

Or one could paraphrase Du Bois by saying, but for the race problem, he would likely have been a run-of-the-mill, reasonably wealthy white man—an outcome we would be inclined to reckon as a loss given the esteem in which we hold the man Du Bois did become. And if we harbor any doubts about which path we ought to prefer for Du Bois’s career, we can settle the matter by turning to the plot of James Weldon Johnson’s 1912 novel, _The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man_, a work that can be seen as exploring the road not taken in Du Bois’s assessment of his own life. The story of a young man who lives out his early childhood not realizing that according to prevailing social mores he is black, Johnson’s novel—which explicitly mentions Du Bois’s _Souls_—attempts to play out Du Bois’s cultural programme as laid out in both _Souls_ and “The Conservation of Races,” in which the race’s mission is to develop its own message or gift to the world. Accordingly, in the wake of being informed that he is black, Johnson’s protagonist believes for a time that the path to heroism, distinction, and service is the path
that runs through black identity, which for him entails working up black folk culture into high art that could contribute to the broader cause of racial equality. Unfortunately for his quest, he witnesses a lynching in the south, and the consequent trauma derails him from his ambition, sending him north where he allows himself once again to be taken for white. The fate awaiting him along this alternate route through white identity, however, is a course that leads to undistinguished financial success in Du Bois’s “dusty desert of dollars and smartness.”

This journey, from white identity to black identity and back, is meant to impress on Johnson’s readers that his protagonist has lost something almost invaluable in being black no more. Or as Johnson’s narrator puts it, when he considers “that small but gallant band of coloured men who are publicly fighting the cause of their race” he sees himself as “small and selfish . . . an ordinarily successful white man who has made a little money.”

But to grasp the full import of this observation we must take it a step further: If to live without a sense of racial mission counts as a loss when the race as a whole still faces the challenge of overthrowing Jim Crow, then might it not also be possible that the ultimate overcoming of Jim Crow itself will also be experienced as a loss as well as a gain? That is, if in Johnson’s novel the appeal of black identity derives significantly from the opportunity that identity provides for living heroically—the opportunity to be something more than run-of-the-mill—then will not such an appeal dissipate once such heroism is no longer demanded? Is the future as imagined by African American literature to be understood as a world in which the destiny of black character is to be, so to speak, run-of-the-mill?

Du Bois attempts to conjure such fears, in order to allay them in “Criteria of Negro Art,” an essay that seeks to highlight the emptiness of American whiteness by
hypothetically turning black people white. That is, after describing the boorish behavior of a group of white “Americans” whom he encountered while on a trip to the Scottish border, a land he describes as steeped in the romance and poetry of his youth, Du Bois asks his listeners:

If you tonight suddenly should become full-fledged Americans; if your color faded, or the color line here in Chicago was miraculously forgotten; suppose, too, you became at the same time rich and powerful;--what is it that you would want? What would you immediately seek? Would you buy the most powerful of motor cars and outrace Cook County? Would you buy the most elaborate estate on the North Shore? Would you be a Rotarian or a Lion or a What-not of the very last degree? Would you wear the most striking clothes, give the richest dinners and buy the longest press notices?

Even as you visualize such ideals you know in your hearts that these are not the things you really want. You realize this sooner than the average white American because, pushed aside as we have been in America, there has come to us not only a certain distaste for the tawdry and flamboyant but a vision of what the world could be if it were really a beautiful world.27 Although Du Bois presents his answer as if it were axiomatic that absent racial barriers blacks would not, want to be white, buried not too deeply within his claim is the anxiety that race might be merely skin deep and the difference between black and white aims nothing more than a fairytale told by the black elite to give luster to what were, for the most part, petit bourgeois concerns. The devastatingly realistic portrayal of black Chicago politics in the second section of his 1929 novel Dark Princess fleshed out Du
Bois’s apprehension that for those who had gained a modicum of relief from the strictures of Jim Crow a life defined by buying press notices, giving rich dinners, and the like were indeed the ideals that guided black striving.

In fact, throughout the Jim Crow era African American writers have sought to build support for a racial project by giving their readers a glimpse of the emptiness, or at least the insufficiency, of dominant white American ideals. For example, Erma Wysong, the heroine of Sutton Griggs’s 1901 novel, The Overshadowed, advises a distressed vernacular-speaking black preacher, “we must learn to quit accepting customs as good and grand, simply because the white people have adopted them.” The lesson of Jessie Fauset’s Plum Bun is that the best white society has to offer are soul-destroying temptations. Ralph Ellison’s review of Gunnar Myrdal’s American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy (1941), chastises Myrdal for concluding, “it is to the advantage of American Negroes as individuals and as a group to become assimilated into American culture, to acquire the traits held in esteem by the dominant white Americans.” By way of demurral Ellison notes that aside “from implying that Negro culture is also not American,” Myrdal’s analysis “assumes that Negroes should desire nothing better than what whites consider highest” even though in the ‘pragmatic sense’ lynching and Hollywood, faddism and radio advertising are products of the “higher” culture, and the Negro might ask, “Why, if my culture is pathological, must I exchange it for these?”

Of course, the answer to Ellison’s question goes without saying—as it does in a large array of African American texts. For example, the advertisement for the “miracle of a kitchen” that beguiles Lutie Johnson, the ill-fated protagonist of Ann Petry’s The
Street (1946), and leads her to accept a housekeeping job in Connecticut where she sees firsthand the pathologies of rich white existence is another example of this gambit. And from Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye where white baby dolls, movie stars, and spotless kitchens stand for false white ideals through Tar Baby, Song of Solomon, and Sula in which various characters fall short of becoming who they ought to be, a witting and unwitting capitulation to “white” ideas is the recurrent problem. Morrison, of course, is a post-Jim Crow writer, but I’ll address this complication later.

In the meantime, suffice it to say that other instances from within the Jim Crow era abound. Indeed, one telling measure of how appealing it was for writers to contrast the potential richness of black identity with the baseness of white American ideals is the fact that Richard Wright, who was more likely to remark “the cultural barrenness” and “the essential bleakness of black life in America” than to extol black cultural resources, resorted to this tactic on occasion. In his autobiography Black Boy/American Hunger, he recalls that the white waitresses with whom he worked in Chicago often told him of “their tawdry dreams, their simple hopes, their home lives, their fear of feeling anything deeply, their sex problems, their husbands.” He continues:

They were an eager, restless, talkative, ignorant bunch, but casually kind and impersonal for all that. They knew nothing of hate and fear, and strove instinctively to avoid all passion.

I often wondered what they were trying to get out of life, but I never stumbled upon a clue, and I doubt if they themselves had any notion. They lived on the surface of their days; their smiles were surface smiles, and their tears were surface tears. Negroes lived a truer and deeper life than they, but I wished that
Negroes, too, could live as thoughtlessly, serenely as they. The girls never talked of their feelings; none of them possessed the insight or the emotional equipment to understand themselves or others. How far apart in culture we stood! All my life I had done nothing but feel and cultivate my feelings; all their lives they had done nothing but strive for petty goals, the trivial material prizes of American life. We shared a common tongue, but my language was a different language from theirs.

. . . . .

And I was convinced that what they needed to make them complete and grown-up in their living was the inclusion in their personalities of a knowledge of lives such as I lived and suffered containedly.

The resemblance between Wright’s observations here and Du Bois’s from “Criteria” is striking, down to each author using the same adjective “tawdry” to describe the goals of white society. For Wright the paradox and pain of having “suffered containedly” is that he, as a figure for all African Americans, has come to possess a depth of experience and complexity of vision clearly superior to the dominant society he is supposed to value and emulate. Within this condemnation is an argument that in order for American society finally to grow up, it would have to learn to speak in the occluded language that it had forced on Wright and those like him.

To see what his white female co-workers see and value is to recognize that theirs is not a kingdom of culture. Rather what comes to the fore is the way that their (constant outward-looking, their mania for radios, cars, and a thousand other trinkets made them dream and fix their eyes upon the trash of life, made it
impossible for them to learn a language which could have taught them to speak of what was in their or others’ hearts. The words of their souls were the syllables of popular songs.)

For Wright, then, the “essence of the irony of the plight of the Negro in America, to me, is that he is doomed to live in isolation while those who condemn him seek the basest goals of any people on the face of the earth.” Wright concludes this tirade by musing that it might “be possible for the Negro to become reconciled to his plight if he could be made to believe that his sufferings were for some remote, high, sacrificial end; but sharing the culture that condemns him, and seeing that a lust for trash is what blinds the nation to his claims, is what sets storms to rolling in his soul.”

Yet, notwithstanding the litany of complaints Wright levels against the culture of the United States, one sentence tucked into his critique, sounds a different note. As we have seen, Wright observes that Negroes lived a truer and deeper life than did the white waitresses, who existed only on “the surface of their days.” Nonetheless he also expresses a wish “that Negroes, too, could live as thoughtlessly, serenely as they.” That is, however superficial white life might be it was not unthinkable to wish to trade the depth born of oppression for life’s gleaming surfaces, provided that there be no more oppression—as if after all was said and done, hankering for the “trash of life” would not be the worst thing in the world provided Jim Crow were given the boot. It would be wrong to overstate the force of this wish in Wright’s writings—his criticism of American society is profound and thoroughgoing. Yet, that this wish for the superficial, or for what I’ve also called the run-of-the-mill, finds its way into Wright’s critique, points again to what I’ve described as a feature constitutive of what we know as African American
literature, namely, a fear or hope, an assertion or denial, that black difference—what Wright describes as his “culture”—was little more than a function of an oppressive society.

This being said, the central thrust of Wright’s critique was not assimilating African Americans into the dominant order as it was. The nature of Wright’s appeal—what gives it its instrumental status—is that it presumes an audience, both black and white (albeit with the stress on the latter) that can be persuaded to recognize the integral connection between the nation’s failure to realize worthwhile political, social, and moral ideals and its oppression of a minority population. Wright and the other black writers are speaking to an audience they believe possesses the capacity to recognize that merely including the Negro within American society as it exists would be tantamount to giving up something significant—something lofty—for something tawdry, accepting a mess of pottage for one’s birthright.

In order to realize this loftier something, many black writers were expected to produce work that exhibited or presumed black difference as a distinct and needful thing, even as they acknowledged, lamented, and sought to overcome the conditions that produced that difference. Meeting this demand was a tall order. Believing that black difference would persist absent the systematic social and political constraints imposed on the nation’s black population raised the specter of innate racial difference, or something close to it. During the 1920s with the rise of what Walter Benn Michaels has termed nativist modernism, reconciling these opposing demands was facilitated by a cultural pluralism that sought to de-hierarchize racial difference by ascribing unique cultures to different groups, whose respective projects were to realize the cultures of their unique
groups. Groups differed because of their cultures, and the responsibility of writers was to develop their work by making it congruent with their culture. The cultural project of the moment was to realize one’s identity. But for the satirist, George Schuyler, who authored the provocative article, “Negro Art Hokum” (which served as the provocation that gave us Langston Hughes’s “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”) as well as the novel *Black No More*, the idea that black literature could preserve black difference (or that there was a black difference to be preserved in the first place) was a scam perpetuated by a black elite for securing its dominance. *Black No More* uses the invention of a process to turn blacks into whites as an attempt to explode the belief that the experience of having lived as a despised group within American society had given black Americans a degree of moral and psychological depth and reflectiveness lacking in white society. In Schuyler’s novel, rank and file blacks, given a chance to become white in appearance, do not hesitate to take the leap, leaving black organizations and institutions capsized in their wake. One can read *Black No More* as a book-length rejoinder to the question “What do you want,” that Du Bois poses to the audience of “Criteria.” Here, however, much to Du Bois’s chagrin, outracing all the cars in Cook County and throwing the richest dinners are precisely the answers his listeners would give him.

*Black No More* is unsentimental in its treatment of the illusion of black cultural difference and of the black elite who trade in that illusion. To be sure, after changing his skin from black to white, the central character, Max Disher, finds himself prey to some second thoughts for having left blackness behind. While visiting a cabaret for whites he admits to finding the atmosphere “pretty dull” and recalls that blacks “enjoyed themselves more deeply and yet they were more restrained, actually more refined” than
their white counterparts whose “joy and abandon” was “obviously forced.” Contrasting the “easy grace” of blacks on the dance floor to the “lumbering” white couples who were “out of step half the time and working as strenuously as stevedores emptying the bowels of a freighter,” he feels “a momentary pang of mingled disgust, disillusionment and nostalgia for “black folk.” This pang is “temporarily” displaced by the sight of “pretty and expensively gowned” white women only to return a short while later when Max finds himself among a crowd of Harlem blacks, whose “jests, scraps of conversation and lusty laughter all seemed like heavenly music. Momentarily he felt a disposition to stay among them, to share again their troubles which they seemed always to bear with a lightness that was not yet indifference.” This race feeling, however, does not blossom into anything like deep regret: Max, “suddenly realized with just a tiny trace of remorse that the past was forever gone” and that his only recourse is “to seek his future among the Caucasians with whom he now rightfully belonged.” The black cultural past proves to be almost no obstacle whatsoever to Max and the millions of blacks who avail themselves of the Black-No-More process.

The novel explores a further irony in portraying Dr. Junius Crookman, who invents Black-No-More, not as a victim of racial self-hatred, but as “a great lover of his race”:

He had studied its history, read of its struggles and kept up with its achievements. He subscribed to six or seven Negro weekly newspapers and two of the magazines. He was so interested in the continued progress of the American Negroes that he wanted to remove all obstacles in their path by depriving them of their racial characteristics. His home and office were filled with African masks
and paintings of Negroes by Negroes. He was what was known in Negro society as a Race Man. He was wedded to everything black except the black woman—his wife was a white girl with remote Negro ancestry, of the type that Negroes were wont to describe as being “able to pass for white.” While abroad he had spent his spare time ransacking the libraries for facts about the achievements of Negroes and having liaisons with comely and available fraus and frauliens.

The satire here cuts in a number of directions, with some clear shots at Du Bois towards the end (although in the novel Du Bois is chiefly sent up in the portrait of another race leader, a Dr. Shakespeare Agamemnon Beard), and a broad swipe at the preference for lighter skin among the black elite, but the central insight is Schuyler’s twinning of the idea of racial love with the disappearance of race as a social marker. In solving the “Negro Problem” for millions of black Americans, Crookman (whose name creates a degree of uneasiness about his character, which the novel never fully spells out) also turns Negro art and literature into history, so to speak.

In the novel’s plot, the groups most discomfited by the transformation of race into history are the political leaders of both races. The novel sheds crocodile tears for black “Officials, [who] long since ensconced in palatial apartments, began to grow panic-stricken as pay days got farther apart,” and who on “meager salaries of five thousand dollars a year . . . had fought strenuously and tirelessly to obtain for the Negroes the constitutional rights which only a few thousand rich white folk possessed. And now . . . saw the work of a lifetime being rapidly destroyed.”\(^35\) (89). On the other side of the disappearing color line, it is the whites who wield political and economic power in the south who are undermined by the success of Black-no-More, because to them blacks “had
really been of economic, social, and psychological value,” in serving “as a convenient red
herring . . . when the white proletariat grew restive under exploitation,” and by permitting
the capitalist class and public officials to relegate segments of the population to
ramshackle railway cars, streets “without sewers or pavements” and “tumble-down”
apartments and houses,” thereby enriching those at the top by exploiting those at the
bottom. In Black No More erasing the color difference between black and white changes
all that. People whose demands as blacks could be conveniently ignored now find as
whites that their desires and needs cannot be so easily disregarded.

There is something disarmingly simple—one might even say, simplistic—in the
novel’s satirical solution to the race problem. The almost childish sentiment that we’d
all be better off if everyone were the same color is treated with a devilish seriousness that
defies us to take it seriously. But if we are to appreciate fully the stakes of racial debate
of that moment, we could do worse than take seriously the book’s claim that race is only
skin deep. Schuyler was writing at a time when, despite the fact that most black
Americans lived lives significantly constrained by racist assumptions and practices, the
intellectual and scientific tide had shifted away from biological justifications of racial
difference towards an understanding of racial difference as the result of economic
processes. As Jonathan Holloway writes, such major sociological scholars as Abram
Harris, E. Franklin Frazier, and Ralph Bunche, all of whom rose to prominence during
the interwar decades, “worked steadily, if in different ways, to reorient America’s
obsession with the Negro problem away from an answer based upon racial solutions
toward one grounded in class dynamics.”

The Second Amenia Conference, which all three men attended in 1933, provided occasion for leading black scholars to articulate an
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economic view of group subordination in the US and the world. Bunche’s *A World View of Race* published a few years later, predicted, in contradiction to Du Bois’s dictum that the problem of the 20th century was the problem of the color line, that world events for the foreseeable future would turn on class and not race relations. In *A World View*, Bunche writes, “The plain fact is that the selection of any specific physical trait or set of traits as a basis for identifying racial groups is a purely arbitrary process.” To which he adds “that though racial antagonisms constitute a serious world problem, they have no basis in biology, nor can they be accepted as the inevitable result of group difference. Such antagonisms must be analyzed and understood in their social and historical setting. Group antagonisms are social, political, and economic conflicts, not racial, though they are frequently given a racial label and seek a racial justification.” Bunche concludes, “so class will some day supplant race in world affairs. Race war then will be merely a side-show to the gigantic class war which will be waged in the big tent we call the world.”

The 1930s was also, of course, the decade when, influenced by the Communist Left, Langston Hughes made his political and aesthetic turn to poetry that cast the problems besetting black Americans in terms that highlighted their status as oppressed workers. Accordingly, Schuyler’s imaginary dissolving of racial difference to bring into view a world structured along lines of economic domination should nonetheless be understood as standing within rather than outside of black intellectual thought of the moment.

That is, Schuyler’s turning of blacks into whites for the purpose of illuminating the nation’s social landscape is consistent with the narrative devices employed by a host of black authors who, by creating characters of mixed lineages, perform genealogically, what Schuyler does through biotechnology, namely give black people the right to choose
to be black or white. Schuyler differs from most of his predecessors (as well as his successors I might add), however, in that he not only presumes that blacks would choose to be white if they could, but also in that he does not condemn them for doing so or convict them of self-hatred for making the choice. In fact, what rules out self-hatred as a problem is that in the logic of Schuyler’s novel, blacks who become black-no-more are not denying themselves but merely revealing themselves as what they already were, namely “lamp-blacked Anglo Saxons.”

In fact, self-denial in the novel turns out to be all on the “white” side of the ledger, as we discover when a genealogical scheme perpetrated by two of the novel’s white supremacists backfires. Unable to tell by skin color the differences between white and black, the Anglo-Saxon association assumes that genealogy will tell. Poised to reassert race through genealogical statistics, Mr. Samuel Buggerie discovers instead that these statistics we’ve gathered prove that most of our social leaders, especially of Anglo-Saxon lineage, are descendants of colonial stock that came here in bondage. They associated with slaves, in many cases worked and slept with them. They intermixed with the blacks and the women were socially exploited by their masters. Then, even more than today, the illegitimate birth rate was very high in America.”

This discovery is made just in the nick of time to save Max from having to tell Helen, his racist, pregnant wife, that he is not really white. Instead the data reveal that Helen, whose refusal to date “niggers” is was one of the reasons behind Max’s decision to undergo the black-no-more process, is herself black. Ironically, this turn in the novel’s plot required little inventiveness on Schuyler’s part: Walter A. Plecker, the first registrar of Virginia’s
Bureau of Vital Statistics, and the driving force behind that state’s 1924 “Racial Integrity Act,” which made it “unlawful for any white person in this State to marry any save a white person, or a person with no other admixture of blood than white and American Indian,” also undertook a study similar to that described in Schuyler’s novel with similarly embarrassing results. Schuyler titled his novel *Black No More*, but “White No More” would have done as well as indicated both by Buggerie’s statistical findings and the concluding scene of the novel in which everyone is trying to make themselves just a little browner in the wake of another discovery by Crookman declaring “that in practically every instance the new Caucasians were from two to three shades lighter than the old Caucasians.”

The ambiguity of the novel’s ending, in which race-consciousness appears to be just as strong as ever among the nation’s populace, coupled with grudging and or indifferent responses by the novel’s critics over the years, has led some of the *Black No More*’s most astute recent readers to reach conclusions that bear helpfully on the argument here. On the one hand, what I’ve described as Schuyler’s indifference to the idea of black culture has prompted Gene Jarrett to assert that as the skin color of the novel’s characters “becomes black no more, through fantasy and satire, *Black No More*’s textual color also becomes black no more, to the extent that the novel, in a sense, becomes black literature no more.” By contrast, Jeffrey B. Ferguson insists that resistance to orthodoxy has been constitutive of Schuyler’s career in a way that makes him and his work “representative.” Accordingly, for Ferguson, despite the novel’s freewheeling satire:
Black No More celebrates the integrity of black American communal life under segregation, which derides blacks themselves for underrating in their rush to join the greedy and indistinguishable members of the vast American herd. In Black No More taking Crookman’s formula is the act of a fool.

The novel, in Ferguson’s estimation, champions “the hard-won values that make [black] group life worthy of dissemination” and the “qualities that made blacks resilient, one might even say triumphant, under difficult environmental circumstances.”

On the one hand, Jarrett overstates Black No More’s status as an outlier. As Ferguson’s survey of the immediate critical reception of the novel reveals, despite the divergent assessments that often attend a bitingly satirical work there were enough positive reviews of the novel to warrant calling it a successful work of African American fiction in its moment. Nor did the novel entirely disappear from critical consideration until recently. Indeed, in 1950 a critic writing in Phylon deemed Black No More a “minor classic.” Yet on the other hand, despite Jarrett’s overstatement, he is onto something in noting that the novel raises important questions about how African American literature ought to be defined and in insisting that an accurate description of African American literature ought to include Black No More and other “white life” fiction without rendering them anomalous. While, for his part, Ferguson is right in declaring Schuyler and his work “representative,” they are not representative quite in the ways he suggests. That is, although Black No More destroys any illusions that white society is somehow better than black society, which as we have seen above is a standard critique within African American literature, it doesn’t produce much in the way of grounds for preferring black society. Beyond the ease and grace exhibited by black
dancers on the dance floor and “the music, laughter, gaiety, jesting and abandon” of the “Negro ghetto”—that is, beyond the realm of expressive and leisure culture—the novel depicts or alludes to little that represents the “integrity of black life,” save, Madeline Scranton, the wife of Bunny Brown, Max Fisher’s best friend, who is mentioned briefly only near the end of the novel as “the last black gal in the country” and a “race patriot.” Madeline, however, plays virtually no role in the novel’s plot.45 (87, 194). In fact those characters who speak directly of the “integrity of Negro society” and the race’s “marvelous record of achievement since emancipation” are the black leaders whose wellbeing depended on being able to count on the support of the black rank and file (94-95). And when the narrator laments that Black-No-More has caused ordinary black people to forget “all loyalties, affiliations, and responsibilities” he quickly undermines that lament by listing organizations and individuals whose viability had been a by-product of black subordination, the “Negro politicians in the various Black Belts, grown fat and sleek ‘protecting’ vice with the aid of Negro votes which they were able to control by virtue of housing segregation.”

Of course, if one reads the novel’s conclusion as demonstrating the durability of the nation’s ongoing commitment to racial domination of some sort or another, then it might be right to infer that the key lesson to be drawn from *Black No More* is the folly of abandoning the values that had proved “resilient” under “difficult environmental circumstances.” Indeed a prominent strain of recent black culturalist scholarship associated with such scholars as Paul Gilroy and Robin D.G. Kelley, would insist that we ought to view the loss of black cultural spaces described in the novel as profound because it was in such spaces that black solidarity and opposition to Jim Crow and oppression
developed and was nurtured. In Kelley’s words, the congregating that occurred in places of leisure and worship enabled “black communities to construct and enact a sense of solidarity; to fight with each other; to maintain and struggle over a collective memory of oppression and pleasure, degradation and dignity; to debate what it means to be ‘black,’ ‘Negro,’ ‘colored,’ and so forth.” For Gilroy the most transformative features of black politics are transacted in the idiom of black music, which he credits with having produced a “distinctive counterculture of modernity.” While there is no gainsaying, generally, the possibility that leisure spaces and activities may permit exploration of behaviors and ideas proscribed in other social arenas, the pertinence of this social fact is limited in any consideration of Black No More. In the novel, the black Americans who most frequently avail themselves of these activities and leisure places prove no more resistant to the blandishments of Black-No-More than do those blacks who would have found such places anathema. The claim that such spaces promote black solidarity could only make sense as a lament that the black working class is abandoning the very things that made them a people—the kind of lament that finds voice in Jean Toomer’s “regret” in the 1920s that black “folk-spirit was walking in to die on the modern desert” or Cornel West’s warning in the 1990s that “the cultural structures that once sustained black life in America are no longer able to fend off the nihilistic threat” he sees as plaguing black life in the late 20\textsuperscript{th} century. Yet there is little space for such worry in Black No More where whitened blacks become just as neurotic as other whites—no better, no worse.

Part of what makes it unnecessary in the novel to consider the consequences of prematurely abandoning the culture that in the past presumably provided respite from racism is that in Black No More race is quickly becoming a thing of the past. To be sure
skin color continues to matter in the world of the novel, and Crookman’s announcement that paler skin is now the new black precipitates a set of responses that briefly recapitulate the history of racism and racial protest, including caricatures, letters to newspaper editors, appeals to the president, and the like—all of which gets narrated in a couple of pages under the heading, “AND SO ON AND SO ON,” an apparent indication that the more things change, the more they stay the same. Yet in making skin color the only thing that matters, Crookman’s invention short-circuits the device that allows race, particularly in fiction, to work in the first place. To understand why this is so, one need only consider the many apparently white characters who populate African American literature. For these characters, the problem is not that they don’t look white. Rather the problem is that looking white does not seem to be enough to make them white (or to put it another way, that being black doesn’t require that one look black). These novels present race as being more than skin deep even as they attempt to strike a blow against Jim Crow by insisting that any difference between black and white people is merely superficial.

*Black No More* stresses the superficiality of racial difference common to black fiction while treating the argument that race is deeper than skin color as little more than class ideology serving the interests of black elites and their white southern counterparts. The novel poses the question characteristic of (if often implicit in) African American literature, namely, what would become of black life absent the discriminatory practices required of Jim Crow? The difference that makes *Black No More* appear to be an outlier to the project of African American literature is the tone of its answer, which treats with irreverence what other novels regard as tragedy. Indeed, the concluding portion of
Schuyler’s novel reroutes any tragic impulse with a brutal piece of poetic justice in which the white Democratic leadership and heads of the Anglo-Saxon Association of America, Arthur Snobbcraft and Dr. Samuel Buggerie, are lynched when their scheme to tar the Republican party leadership with the tar of black ancestry backfires. Because the press circulates pictures of both men nationwide, Snobbcraft and Buggerie find themselves in the unenviable position of being almost the only apparently white men in the country who can be identified as black. Attempting to escape by plane to Mexico where Snobbcraft owns a ranch, both men end up, instead in the backwoods of Mississippi where the plane is forced to land after running out of gas. Aware that they now at ground zero of American racial hatred, they decide to disguise themselves by “blacking up,” because, by Snobbcraft’s reasoning, “real niggers are scarce now and nobody would think of bothering a couple of them, even in Mississippi.” Snobbcraft, however, is unaware that a local preacher in the town of Happy Hill, afraid of losing his flock to other congregations, has been praying to God for “a nigger for his congregation to lynch” as “marked evidence of his power.” When Snobbcraft and Buggerie are seized by the crowd, they do manage to forestall their fate temporarily by demonstrating that their faces are merely blackened. But when someone who has seen the newspapers informs the crowd that the two men in their custody are indeed the Democratic leaders who have been identified as black, the lynching begins again with gusto.

In the vision of Black No More the world in which race is more than skin deep—in which even if whiteness is valued it is not enough to show a white skin in order to save one’s skin—is a world in which no sane person would want to live. Of course, what makes the novel a difficult pill to swallow is that it also demonstrates that in a world
where what matters is merely skin color, an attribute that (in this novel) can be changed to suit the prevailing prejudices and fashion, the scramble for preferment and advantage continues unabated—that even when race no longer matters all sorts of inequalities can still count in American social life.

Like all other African American literature, *Black No More*, was written within a context in which all involved were unavoidably trying to figure out just what sort of problem Jim Crow presented to those engaged in creative work. There was indeed no consensus on how literature ought to respond to the social and legal reality of segregation, even down to whether or not black writers should see Jim Crow as the biggest social problem facing black Americans. Nonetheless, black literature was an imaginative response not merely to the lived reality, but also to the legal fact, of segregation. Consequently black writers anticipated that a change in that legal reality would dramatically affect not only their social reality but also the literature that had been produced in response to it. Whatever the virtues they found in black life as it had been lived since emancipation, and whatever the shortcomings that characterized the dominant white society around them—including the literature produced by that society—black writers knew that their work had been produced within constraints, and that as those constraints weakened their writing would be expected to change.

Another way of putting this is to say that despite the attention given to the folk past and the artistic achievements of past greats whose work had gone unacknowledged, African American literature was prospective rather than retrospective. The past was indeed important, but primarily as a way of refuting charges of black inferiority and only secondarily as a source and guide for ongoing creative activity. In the main, writers and
critics tended to speak as if the best work had not been written but was yet to come, and
that the shape of that work was yet to be determined. Indeed if anything separates what
African American literature is now from what it was, that difference ironically, can be
summed up by quoting that most American of American writers, Ralph Waldo Emerson,
“Our age is retrospective.”

Notes to Chapter I

1 The scholars and writers who insist on orienting black literary practice of the past
century around Africanist practices and beliefs or the traumas of the era of slavery are too
numerous to allow me to mention them all here. Certainly, among cultural and literary
histories that insist on African- or slavery-centered accounts of current black cultural
practice, one can mention: Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of
Houston A. Baker Jr.’s *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* (Chicago:
University of Chicago Press, 1984); Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory
and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988);
Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in
University Press, 1997); Asante, Molefi Kete. *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social
Change*. (Chicago Hts, Ill: African American Images, 2003) Sidney W. Mintz, and
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Vintage, 2004) stands out as the novel most associated with claims about the ongoing influence of the horrors of slavery on the collective black psyche.


4 To be sure, this brief list does not exhaust the terms employed in the history of race-group naming, I could add here as well, “Aframerican” and Afro-American” and no doubt several others.


8 To be sure, elsewhere Johnson observes, “the line of American Negro authors runs back for a hundred and fifty years, back to Phillis Wheatley, the poet.” See “The Dilemma of the Negro Artist,” rpt. in The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Gene Andrew Jarrett (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 378. But even if Johnson means to insist that this writing somehow always constituted a literature, his repeated observations that acknowledgement of this literature is a phenomenon of the early 20th century indicates the retroactive nature of the enterprise.

10 James Weldon Johnson, “The Dilemma of the Negro Author,” Rpt. in Gates and Jarrett, eds. *The New Negro*


Wright, *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, 259, 260-261,


Schuyler, *Black No More*, 89.


40 *Black No More*, 218.


44 Ferguson, *Sage of Sugar Hill*, 219-223.

