

CHAPTER I

*Cultural Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism
 in the Harlem Renaissance*

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Ishmael Reed, whose fascination with the Harlem Renaissance informed his celebrated novel *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), claims that “multiculturalism in the United States has come to mean everybody but blacks.”¹ While “white” America is subdivided into various hyphenated identities – Italian-American, Irish-American, and so on – “black” or “African American” functions to homogenize that which Reed describes as the most multi-ethnic group of all.² This chapter attempts to explore the relationship between cultural nationalism and cosmopolitanism during the Harlem Renaissance in the light of Reed’s claim.

Two common metaphors have been deployed in order to illustrate the opposing positions within the debate on multiculturalism. The first is the “melting pot,” a metaphor for the assimilationist ideal in which peoples jettison their particularities and blend into one culture. The second is the “salad bowl.” This is preferred by contemporary multiculturalists for it is not based on assimilation, but rather on the co-existence of different cultures.³ The ingredients within the salad can cohabit within the same space, but can also retain their distinctiveness. Both symbols speak to significant strains within liberal and progressive cultural thought, and both are threatened by exclusionary forms of racism. Yet Reed’s comment forces us to ask a more fundamental question: what constitutes the “pot” or the “bowl” itself?

Werner Sollors has noted that the “very language used to create national unity and a sense of coherence” via the assimilationist “melting pot” can also serve “to support the ethnogenesis of regional and ethnic groups that could challenge national unity.”⁴ Minorities may resist assimilation by claiming a distinctive pot or bowl of their own, thus emphasizing their own internal diversity and ability to integrate others. Indeed, the desire to foreground their hybrid, multicultural credentials has been a characteristic of minority literatures. Alain Locke, for example, described Harlem as “the

laboratory of a great race-welding” and attempted to capture its diversity in his seminal *The New Negro* (1925) anthology that seemed to offer a catalogue of the intra-ethnic diversity of African America.⁵ In Harlem, African America was itself the “bowl” or “pot” with the potential to confer what Locke described as “culture-citizenship” on its members.⁶ Later critics, such as Houston A. Baker, have described Locke’s anthology as an unambiguously “nationalist” text, constructing within its diverse pages the sounds, songs, images, and signs of a distinctive African American “nation.”⁷

If *The New Negro* anthology seemed to gesture toward a form of “culture-citizenship,” Locke’s term also draws our attention to the lack of a distinctive territorial, linguistic, or political frame for African American claims to “nationhood.” Indeed, the grounds on which Locke could make his famous statement of 1925 that “Harlem has the same role to play for the New Negro as Dublin has had for the New Ireland or Prague for the New Czechoslovakia” were somewhat unclear.⁸ That sentence’s first clause is often omitted. It reads: “Without pretense to their political significance.” However, had Prague not become the capital city of the new Czechoslovakia in 1918 following the collapse of the Hapsburg Empire, and had Dublin not become the capital of the Irish Free State in 1922, what “role” precisely would these cities have played? Can cultural activity be seen to be “nationalist” if it is not projecting some form of political independent statehood? If their “political significance” is occluded, on what basis is the comparison between Harlem, Prague, and Dublin made? Given that African American nationalism could not lead to the kind of independent statehood achieved by Czechoslovakia and Ireland, did it in fact amount to what W. E. B. Du Bois described as “assimilation *through* self-assertion”; an emphasis on the “gift” or “contribution” that black America could make to the larger American nation?⁹ Or, again adopting Du Bois, was the nationalism of the Harlem Renaissance primarily engaged in the “conservation” of the race; a cultural resistance to assimilation into the American melting pot?¹⁰ The ways in which these questions were answered tell us much about the relationship between cultural nationalism and cosmopolitanism within the Harlem Renaissance.

Black, Brown and Beige: Duke Ellington

In an article of 1934 entitled “Towards a Critique of Negro Music,” Alain Locke called for “constructive criticism and discriminating appreciation”

so that the standard of Negro music could be raised “far above the curb-stone values of the market-place,” making it “far more exacting than the easy favor of the multitude.”¹¹ In both its aspirations for African American art and its denigration of “the multitude,” Locke’s article was a late expression of the cultural values informing the more conservative wing of the Harlem Renaissance. While writers such as Langston Hughes would seek to root their works in the lives of the “multitude,” the dominant view had been established by writers such as James Weldon Johnson who famously prefaced his *Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922) by noting that the “final measure of the greatness of all peoples is the amount and standard of the literature and art they have produced,” an argument reinforced by Locke who believed that the “greatest rehabilitation” of the “Negro” would be “in terms of his artistic endowments and cultural contributions.”¹² In the “Foreword” to *The New Negro*, Locke emphasized that “nine-tenths” of the “voluminous literature” on the Negro is “about” rather than “of” him, and encouraged a shift from external observation to “the internal world” of “artistic self-expression.”¹³ Sitting among the capacity crowd of 3,000 at Carnegie Hall on January 23, 1943, listening to Duke Ellington perform his new forty-five minute “tone parallel to the History of the American Negro” entitled *Black, Brown and Beige* at a benefit concert for Russian War Relief, Locke might have considered that the cultural aspirations that had informed his writings for over twenty years had now been realized.¹⁴ For, in keeping with Locke’s desire for a shift of perspective from external observation to internal exploration, Ellington described the composition as an attempt to

rescue Negro music from well-meaning friends. . . . All arrangements of historic American Negro music have been made by conservatory-trained musicians. . . . It’s time a big piece of music was written from the inside by a Negro.¹⁵

To compose “from the inside” did not, however, require conformity to pre-ordained conceptions of what African American culture should be.

Indeed, the reviews of Ellington’s most ambitious composition fell short of the “constructive criticism” that Locke desired, partly because it was deemed to be insufficiently authentic. The young white editor of *Jazz* magazine, Bob Thiele, felt that the “over rich layer of cake and ideas and tones” manifest in *Black, Brown and Beige* were “in direct opposition to the fundamentals of jazz.”¹⁶ Record producer, talent scout, and promoter of African American music John Hammond agreed in asking whether the Duke was “deserting jazz,” and in wondering why Ellington would seek to

“tamper with the blues form” in such a way that he “alienated a good part of the dancing public.” In hoping that Ellington “would be able to find himself again” sometime in the future, Hammond alludes to the fact that Ellington was well established by 1943.¹⁷ Having moved from Washington, DC to New York in 1923, Ellington and his orchestra had become associated with Harlem to the extent that Langston Hughes recalled that when he “first came up out of the Lennox Avenue subway” he instinctively “looked around in the happy sunlight to see if I saw Duke Ellington on the corner of 135th street.”¹⁸ *Black, Brown and Beige* was a late product of the Harlem Renaissance, begun in 1930 as an “opera” named “Boola” inspired by wide reading in the works of Alain Locke, Joel A. Rogers, and others that Ellington claimed was best “concealed” as the “heavily underlined paragraphs about the exploits of Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey” would not add to his “popularity in Arkansas, say.”¹⁹ By desiring that Ellington should “find himself again,” John Hammond was exposing his ignorance of Ellington’s long-standing ambitions, and unconsciously foregrounding the cultural straitjacket in which African American musicians were expected to operate by the predominantly white commentariat.²⁰

What Hammond described as Ellington’s “tampering” is most prominent in the final part of the “Brown” movement, where Betty Roche’s vocal lament, written by Ellington, is a series of negations:

The Blues,
 The Blues ain’t,
 The Blues ain’t nothing,
 The Blues ain’t nothin’ like nothin’ I know.²¹

Roche’s singing is almost rubato, and the piece certainly “ain’t nothin’ like” a blues until Ben Webster enters on tenor saxophone, but even then the harmonic structure oscillates between the keys of C minor and D flat and, as Harvey G. Cohen notes, “there is no relief, no spirited reprise of the tonic chord” at the end of “The Blues” as would be typical of a big-band performance.²² Ambiguity and alienation are the dominant moods evoked, and this reflects the veiled message with which Ellington introduced his second movement. “The Blues” he announced, resulted from “the many love triangles that developed in the life of the great Negro heroes of the Spanish-American War.”²³ There is little in the music that evokes the battle of San Juan Hill, but the idea that the blues was created by returning heroes rather than rural folk musicians was a subtle critique of those, such as John Hammond, who located the roots of African American music in

the rural south. Ellington was surely also addressing wartime ideological considerations, not least the “Double V” campaign which called for a simultaneous struggle against fascism abroad and racism at home. In introducing “Beige,” Ellington was more explicit in his description of African American disaffection. He clothed his social critique in a patriotic “vener” that is perhaps similar to the aesthetic primitivism that, he suggests, hid the reality of African American lives. If Alain Locke advocated a shift from writing “about” to being “of” the African American community, then Ellington’s interpretation of the Harlem Renaissance “from the inside” encouraged his audience to question surface appearances:

The first theme of our third movement is the inculcation, or the vener that we chip off as we get closer and find that all these people who are making all this noise and responding to the tom toms, are only a few people making a living, and they’re backed really by people who, many don’t have enough to eat and a place to sleep, but work hard and see that their children are in school. The Negro is rich in education. And it develops until we find ourselves, today, struggling for solidarity, but just as we are about to get our teeth into it, our country is at war and in trouble again, and as before, we, of course, find the black, brown, and beige right in there for the red, white, and blue.²⁴

To “chip off” the “vener” is to remove the primitivist mask imposed upon African Americans (including Ellington himself, whose compositions were described as “jungle music” in the 1920s) to reveal the inner lives of individuals; a shift, in Locke’s terms, from speaking “about” a people at a distance of alleged objectivity, to manifesting “the internal world” of “artistic self-expression.”²⁵ If a surface “vener” might render all pieces of furniture homogeneously alike, to chip it away would entail revealing the diverse gradations of color. Culturally, this act of “chipping” may be seen embodied in the transition that takes us from Paul Whiteman’s performance of his “symphonic jazz” by an all-white ensemble at Carnegie Hall in 1928, to Ellington’s performance of *Black, Brown and Beige* with an African American ensemble at the same venue in 1943.²⁶ Having removed the vener, however, the description of what is revealed in the second half of the quotation from Ellington is ambiguous. The patriotic expression of fighting for a common cause is clear enough, but to equate the “black, brown and beige” with the “red, white and blue” seems to suggest national distinctiveness; it is as though below the surface propaganda promoting wartime unity, African Americans have a nation and flag of their own. Duke Ellington’s son, Mercer, recalled that *Black, Brown and Beige* was his father’s criticism “of his own race, and their prejudices within itself. There

were these different castes: the black, the brown or tan ones and the ones light enough to pass for white.”²⁷ David Schiff suggests that the title “might simply be a description of the range of flesh tones in the Ellington Orchestra, or it might stand for the entire nonwhite population of the planet.”²⁸ Yet Ellington himself said in 1956 that the title referred to a “state of mind, not the color of the skin,” explaining that the self-image of African Americans “gradually . . . got lighter” after emancipation, “but it never got quite white.”²⁹ Do the three shades of Ellington’s title represent a sequence of increasing assimilation and acceptance in an American melting pot, or do they co-exist within an African American crucible? Is the “Black Brown and Beige” a diachronic sequence marking a development over time, or a synchronic spectrum of coexisting colors in the present? These questions speak to one of the key tensions that define the literature and culture of the Harlem Renaissance.

In Solution: Jean Toomer

In the works of Ellington’s fellow-Washingtonian, Jean Toomer, the “black, brown and beige” would represent a diachronic sequence; an inevitable process of racial and cultural intermingling. Duke Ellington’s claim in 1943 that his movement “Black” sought to “chip off” the primitivist “veneer” imposed on African American culture by those people “making all this noise and responding to the tom toms,” was a late expression of a widespread desire – informed by Freudian explorations of the psyche and anthropological excavations of “buried cultures” – to “dig up” historical roots, or to return to a “repressed” past existing beneath the shiny surfaces of modernity.³⁰ Toomer produced a template for this process of probing and revelation in his novel *Cane* of 1923. *Cane*, as has been well documented, was the product of a “visit to Georgia” where Toomer “heard folk-songs come from the lips of Negro peasants. . . . And a deep part of my nature, a part that I had repressed, sprang suddenly to life and responded to them.”³¹ The first third of the multigenre novel seeks to probe this “repressed” dimension of the self, for it is set in the South, and largely seen through the eyes of a narrator who, like the author, is a northerner who repeats the urban African American’s journey “to the soil of his ancestors.” He shares the story of “Fern” with a northern audience “against the chance that you might happen down that way.”³² The whole section is pervaded by a sense of tropical otherness, dominated by erotic and primitivized female characters with the opening of the first story, “Karintha,”

setting the tone: “Her skin is like dusk on the eastern horizon / . . . When the sun goes down.”³³

The second section shifts to an urban, vibrant world of “jazz songs and love, thrusting unconscious rhythms” into the rather sterile, urban North represented by “the white and whitewashed wood of Washington.”³⁴ Ellington seems to be a presence here in the figure of the pianist “Dan” who “turns to the piano and glances through a stack of jazz music sheets” before creating a music that is both modernist and primitivist, and is evoked phonetically as “Ji-ji-bo, JI-JI-BO!”; the music of a “crude new life” that is Negro only “in the boldness of its expression.”³⁵ The final section seeks to offer a synthesis in the form of “Kabnis,” a northern intellectual returning to his southern roots in Georgia where, in Father John, he encounters the “dead blind father of a muted folk who feel their way upward to a life that crushes or absorbs them.”³⁶ African American culture seems to have no distinctive future of its own in *Cane*, a novel conceived by Toomer as a “swan-song” to African American cultural distinctiveness.³⁷

Toomer described himself as having “seven blood mixtures: French, Dutch, Welsh, Negro, German, Jewish, and Indian.” Drawing on this multi-ethnic background, he envisaged a future transcendence of cultural differences:

[T]he Negro is in solution If one holds his eyes to individuals and sections, race is starkly evident, and racial continuity seems assured. One is even led to believe that the thing we call Negro beauty will always be attributable to a clearly defined physical source. But the fact is, that if anything comes up now, pure Negro, it will be a swan-song.³⁸

For Toomer, African America is “in solution,” facing absorption but not yet wholly dissolved and therefore still available for exploration and documentation. The stories of Karintha and Fern he noted, were “derived from a sense of fading, from a knowledge of my futility to check solution.”³⁹

Sadness and melancholia are the dominant moods that pervade the novel. Judith Butler argues that gender identity – especially among those who identify as heterosexual – is melancholic. In repressing queer leanings the heterosexual constructs an identity that is socially permissible, but is haunted by that loss and repression.⁴⁰ Anne Anlin Cheng adapts this argument for racial identity, noting that the binary black/white terms in which race is understood in the USA results in the marginalization of interracialism which remains in the nation’s repressed memory.⁴¹ *Cane* enacts such forms of marginalization, perhaps most explicitly in the story

of “Becky” who gives birth to “mulatto” boys and is ostracized as a scapegoat by both white and black communities. Scenes of lynching in *Cane* also foreground the extent to which the color line is violently policed and the prospect of interracial relationships regarded impermissible. In the final section, any hope for an integrated future, suggested as the “soft belly of a pregnant Negress, throbs evenly against the torso of the South,” is undercut by an earlier description of white lynchers murdering a mother for attempting to hide her husband, before impaling her living black fetus to a tree.⁴² Robyn Wiegman argues that “the lynch scenario” in literature forces a recognition of “the symbolic force of the white mob’s activity as a denial of the black man’s newly articulated right to citizenship.”⁴³ This is the case in *Cane*, though here the psychic effects of lynching permeate even the most intimate of relationships, as in “Portrait of Georgia”:

Hair – braided chestnut,
 coiled like a lyncher’s rope,
 Eyes – fagots,
 Lips – old scars, or the first red blisters,
 Breath – the last sweet scent of cane,
 And her slim body, white as the ash
 of black flesh after flame.⁴⁴

In its fusion of two people, a white woman and a lynched black male, the poem seeks to construct a new identity after trauma. George Hutchinson argues that the poem “embodies both a union of black male and white female and the terrifying method of exorcising that union to maintain a racial difference the poem linguistically defies.”⁴⁵ This is a shrewd reading, suggesting that the logic of the poem could take us toward an intensified division of the races, or a potential union. *Cane* continually testifies to the terrible consequences of crossing the color line, as embodied in the isolated lives of mixed-race characters such as Fern and Esther. Yet the novel’s narratives continually seek to cross the racial boundary.

“Bona and Paul” is an interesting meditation on such crossing, a story said to be based on a relationship between Toomer and a young woman that came to an end due to rumors of his African American ancestry.⁴⁶ In its emphasis on gradations of color, the story seems to reach aesthetically toward a world beyond the binary of black and white. Art is a “pale purple facsimile of a red-blooded Norwegian,” Paul’s “dark” skin turns “rosy” with embarrassment as the “white” skins and surfaces turn “crimson” and “greys” become “lavender” in the sunset.⁴⁷ Yet, while the story aims to

transcend racial binaries, it also enacts the effects of American racial hierarchies:

Suddenly he knew that people saw, not attractiveness in his dark skin, but difference. Their stares, giving him to himself, filled something long empty within him, and were like green blades sprouting in his consciousness.⁴⁸

Paul finds his potential multicultural identity replaced by an awareness that his “black” ancestry is his “cloudy, but real” self. While others ask whether he is “a Spaniard, and Indian, and Italian, a Mexican, a Hindu or a Japanese,” Paul finds the possibility of sustaining several simultaneous identities increasingly difficult.⁴⁹ It seems that to be American is to face a racial division, and to be forced to embrace one’s “real” race on either side of that black and white binary.

Walter Benn Michaels reads the story as a manifestation of a shift that he traces from the “progressive nationalism” of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries to the nativism of the 1920s. The “Progressive nationalism” of the earlier period entailed a hierarchy of races and desired the assimilation of racial “others” into a dominant national culture. By contrast, 1920s nativism was plural and anti-assimilationist. “Bona and Paul” reflects the logic of the shift from progressive racism to nativism in that it depicts a process by which the “mulatto vanishes” by “being made black.” The desire “not to produce mulattoes,” notes Benn Michaels, “is fulfilled by the assertion that there are no mulattoes. And the discovery that there are no mulattoes marks the literally definitive defeat of the melting pot.”⁵⁰ Michaels’s argument is supported in historical terms by the fact that the term “mulatto” was removed from US census forms in 1920.⁵¹ Yet Toomer resisted forms of nativism, and *Cane* is therefore an odd choice of text for exemplifying the alleged shift from assimilationism to nativist pluralism in the 1920s. In its evocation of the in-between states of dusk and twilight and its focus on characters of mixed race, *Cane* gestures toward a form of identity beyond black and white. Toomer imagined himself to belong to a “new race” that “is neither white nor black nor red nor brown.”⁵² Far from marking the “death of the melting pot,” Toomer’s work may be read as one of the most advanced forms of its articulation. In conceiving of African Americans “in solution,” Toomer ultimately denied that he had any black ancestry, and refused to be advertised as a “Negro” writer. There is some legitimacy, then, to Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s claim that in this denial of his African American self, Toomer exemplified the assimilationist consequences of his universalist vision.⁵³

No “the Negro” Here: Zora Neale Hurston

If Toomer described *Cane* as a “swan-song,” Zora Neale Hurston was to emphasize the living contemporary vitality of African American culture and folk practices. She argued that “Negro folklore is not a thing of the past” for “it is still in the making” and its “great variety shows the adaptability of the black man: nothing is too old or too new, domestic or foreign, high or low, for his use.”⁵⁴ “There is no ‘the Negro’ here” stated Hurston, challenging the simplifying, homogenizing, primitivist view of the outsider.⁵⁵ While she registered a widespread view that “the Negro is easily imitated,” such an impression could only be based on a ridiculously narrow view of what constituted “Negro behavior.” In fact, “nothing is further from the truth” noted Hurston, developing her argument in relation to the Paul Whiteman jazz orchestra that she believed offered a white imitation of a musical culture that was already creatively imitative:

Paul Whiteman is giving an imitation of a Negro orchestra making use of white-invented musical instruments in a Negro way. Thus has arisen a new art in the civilised world, and thus has our so called civilisation come. The exchange and re-exchange of ideas between groups.⁵⁶

If Whiteman was imitating and adding a respectful veneer to the music of African American musicians, the most celebrated African American band-leader, Duke Ellington, embraced a view of cultural pluralism that was similar to that advanced by Hurston. We can turn again to *Black, Brown and Beige* to witness this process of imitative “exchange and re-exchange.” The composition’s most celebrated theme, “Come Sunday,” is initially introduced in the first movement “Black” by chimes ringing in the distance over the brass section’s organ-like chorale, suggesting that this original spiritual is being heard from the distanced perspective of the enslaved listening to a service outside the chapel walls. The theme returns at the end of the “Beige” section in the form of an adopted and adapted African American spiritual and, as David Schiff notes, “an emblem of Harlem’s living piety, not as a vestige of the past.”⁵⁷ To read Ellington’s vision of culture from a Hurstonian perspective is thus to see it as cross-pollinating and hybrid, but not based on the desire to assimilate outwards, for black culture also has the capacity to integrate inwards. This perspective resists the notion that cultures are “in solution” within a single American melting pot. Rather, distinctive cultures constitute pots of their own, able to integrate and assimilate others in their own terms. Hurston’s cultural vision is based on a pluralist model of an “exchange” between distinctive