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Imagining "Harlem" in the 1920s

One aspect of American modernism that has been emphasized recently is its complex interaction and unequal exchange with black and ethnic cultures.¹ The desire for cultural renewal led many artists to search for spontaneity and uninhibited access to a natural creativity in presumed "primitive" people — lower classes increasingly conceived in ethnic terms and African-Americans. Hence the paradoxical observation that many modern works of art which rebel against social, moral, and aesthetic conventions simultaneously reproduce age-old clichés and stereotypes. At the same time, the controversial debates surrounding questions of ethnic and national identity produced a plethora of stereotypes as part of political rhetoric and agitation. Inasmuch as artworks also provide a symbolic space for conflicting views and values, it seems hardly surprising that novels, plays, movies, and other media evoke these controversies and abound with stereotypes. But what happens when stereotypes enter literary texts?

Does the fact that they become part of an aesthetic structure affect their ideological content? Or does the stereotype simply import a whole barrage of assumptions into the text where they are reproduced unaltered by surrounding textual strategies? Obviously, these questions involve the issue of an artist's control over stereotypes through his or her way of using them, however limited this control may turn out to be. While this issue may easily be avoided when we assume a writer to agree with the associations of the stereotype, it becomes crucial when we expect disagreement. Apparently, when stereotyped people take up stereotypes about their group, their hope, at least, is that stereotypes are not immune to artistic transformation, or, as Pierre Barbéris puts it, that even "within a system of necessity, liberty is always possible."²

¹ See for instance Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism. Race, Language & Twentieth-Century Literature*, George Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*, and Heinz Ickstadt, "Die Amerikanische Moderne," *Amerikanische Literaturgeschichte* 218-281.

² Pierre Barbéris, Introduction 9. The original reads: "Il y a toujours de la liberté possible, à l'intérieur d'un système de nécessité."

A number of studies stereotyping in literature carefully support this hope. Admitting that stereotypes will never be "converted to purely harmless expression," as Sander Gilman notes, Mireille Rosello's analyses of French novels, movies, and other media center on strategies with which stereotypes are (re)appropriated, diffused, subverted, or disarmed and thus "turned into a *relatively* harmless event, or at least deprived of most of its effectiveness" (Gilman 12, Rosello 40).

A crucial assumption underlying this endeavor is the distinction between "stereotypes and the ways in which they are used" (Rosello 30). Ruth Amossy explains:

The stereotype, as a recurrent and frozen pattern which can be summarized in a doxic statement culled from public opinion, is necessarily reductive. This does not, however, mean that it is always involved in reductive enterprises or that it is only used for purposes of schematization. What is important to examine are the *functions* attributable to the stereotype by virtue of its essential characteristics. It does indeed participate in the elaboration of the text as network, in a reworking of models and problematization. ("Stereotypes" 700)

The small amount of freedom artists may hope to exploit is due to the fact that the stereotype in art is doubly coded: it is charged by social and political repercussions of its cultural usage, but it is also embedded in a textual structure; it refers to and reminds us of a presumed consensus outside the text, but it also participates in textual strategies within the context of the work itself. The stereotype is thus situated at the interface between an individual work and the collective imagination at a given time. Their study should be both historical and aesthetic; it involves an inquiry into the contemporary psycho-social realm of public opinion and collective imagination as well as into their function in a particular text.

The literature emerging from the Harlem Renaissance provides a particularly virulent challenge to this approach. Surrounded by the crude racism of white supremacists on the one hand and the "refined racism" of white patrons and modern primitivists on the other, black artists had to struggle for artistic expression amidst existing stereotypes (Kellner 93). Through Alain Locke's *The New Negro* (1925), the site hopefully created between and beyond contemporary stereotypes came to be envisioned as "Harlem," and inevitably, with each artistic representation, the question whether it enhanced black artistic emancipation or merely reproduced white projections was raised anew. Because of its similarities with Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* (1926), Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1928) was particularly vulnerable to the accusation that he sold out to a white audience; studied in conjunction, the two novels and Locke's essays may

illuminate the processes through which an artist searches for that space of artistic "liberty" between contemporary representations of Harlem. The awareness of stereotypes in all the texts also underlines that the concept of "stereotype" is already available and much reflected upon among artists and intellectuals. There is a reading and judging agency to brand representations explicitly as stereotypes. A decisive step in the conceptualization of stereotypes was certainly Walter Lippmann's book *Public Opinion* (1922) which may fruitfully be read as complementing and contrasting Alain Locke's sophisticated awareness of the ambivalence of stereotypes in *The New Negro*.

Lippmann regards stereotypes as both an obstacle and yet a necessary constituent in the formation of public opinion, which depends to a large degree on "the pictures in our head" (19), a "pseudo-environment" (10) of stereotyped representations. As collective categories, shared with a larger community and handed down by tradition, they connect the individual to the social body. They are part, even a "defense," of a shared history and identity and provide internal coherence of a community (cf. 63). What can be regarded as "defense," however, can also be a viable tool for propaganda and indoctrination. This is where stereotypes become stumbling blocks to social and political reform, where they are used to discriminate against people, where they stand in the way of critical and differentiated judgment. Here, the ability to denounce and demystify stereotypes is vital to fight racism, defamation, and discrimination. The concept of stereotypes is a weapon in the hands of those who want to fight discrimination and improve democracy. However, as Lippmann's book itself demonstrates, it is a double-edged weapon for, while the concept of stereotypes can be used to reveal false conformity of opinion, it can also become a means of social distinction. It distinguishes those who criticize stereotypes and who may use this term as a rhetorical weapon to denounce arguments.

Yet, without strong dissent about public representations the notion of stereotype would not have been formed. For Lippmann's examples, which range from Aristotle's defense of slavery to the contemporary immigration debate, also suggest that stereotypes as a problem of social representation do not arise because society has suddenly stepped over some mysterious threshold of complexity in the 20th century in need of simplification. Rather, our awareness of them is sharpened whenever we are forced to acknowledge that there are different and sometimes contradictory ways of representing society to itself — in other words, when our stereotypes clash with those of others. It is in the moment of controversy over social representation that public opinion is seen as such and it is therefore hardly surprising that some of the earliest attempts to conceptualize stereotypes, but also to work with or against them, should have been made by members of minority groups. As

Lippmann noted, "a great deal of confusion arises when people decline to classify themselves as we have classified them" (97). Almost ten years before Lippmann's book was published, the foundation of the Anti-Defamation League drew attention to the power of public opinion on social behavior and the treatment of minorities in the U.S.; accordingly the ADL's efforts were directed against defamatory images in magazines, newspapers, advertising, on stage and movie screens, or in textbooks.³

In view of the continuing fight against defamatory representations, Lippmann's insistence on the ambivalence of stereotypes as both necessary and dangerous may seem to play down their ideological power. Today's "obsession with stereotypes" often demands that we unequivocally refute them as an aspect of defamatory rhetoric.⁴ "The word 'stereotype' is today almost always a term of abuse," writes Richard Dyer, and Mireille Rosello summarizes the self-critical recognition of a number of recent studies by saying that "there is a stereotype of the stereotype: the stereotype is always bad, simplistic, idiotic" (Dyer 11, Rosello 32).

In this critical environment, it is hardly conceivable that writers such as Alain Locke or Claude McKay, who give all indications of seeing through stereotypes, do not abstain from new cultural constructions of collective identities that seem to others to be just as stereotypical. Yet, Alain Locke's project of denouncing stereotypes and simultaneously proposing a new type can be understood when studied in conjunction with his contemporary Walter Lippmann, for then it seems that Locke tries to exploit the empowering functions of stereotypes as outlined in *Public Opinion* while avoiding their negative, restraining aspects.

Like others before him, he denounces stereotypes of "aunties," "uncles," and "mammies" with their roots in plantation culture by pointing to the changed social situation of black Americans due to Northern migration and increasing urbanization ("New Negro" 5). Moreover, these old stereotypes have become invalid because of growing intraracial differences, or in Locke's words "with the Negro rapidly in process of class differentiation, if it ever was warrantable to regard and treat the Negro *en masse* it is becoming with every day less possible, more unjust and more ridiculous" (6). Diversification seems to undermine any attempt to treat blacks collectively — but this is not the conclusion Locke is driving at. Rather he proclaims the New Negro as a

3 A text documenting the ideas of one of the founders of the ADL is Adolph Kraus, "Anti-Defamation League" 1. See also Leonard Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America* 102.

4 Ruth Amossy, *Les idées reçues. Sémiologie du stéréotype* 65. In this book, Amossy also traces the rise and function of the concept from the 19th century onwards into contemporary culture and criticism.

new public representation, providing the same kind of comprehensive knowledge that earlier stereotypes offered. So why should someone who is obviously aware of the dangers and abuses of stereotypes still proclaim a new essentializing image?

To make his case, Locke retrieves another aspect of collective representations, namely their role in establishing a sense of group belonging and solidarity, a common consciousness underlying an imagined community — Harlem. Evoking the familiar metaphor of the Melting Pot but applying it to intraracial rather than interracial processes, Locke presents Harlem as "the largest Negro community in the world" and argues that a race has been welded, to be represented by the New Negro (6). Encapsulated in this representative type is a vital link between the individual and the community for this allows the self-expression of black Americans to be the expression of a collective experience: "In Harlem, Negro life is seizing upon its first chances for group expression and self-determination. It is — or promises at least to be — a race capital" (6).

The last two sentences indicate that this great synthesis is somewhat unstable. It is Locke's language that welds together present and future, the artistic and the political, self and group in an argument that hovers between representing the New Negro as something that exists already and prophesying a collective identity that still has to be realized. How this is possible is the subject of an essay called "Negro Youth Speaks." (Note again how the title merges the individual with the group in the choice of "youth" as a noun which can be used as both singular and plural.) In this essay, Locke argues that the assumed link between the black individual and the group is a natural outcome of their experience as an oppressed group — one that is simultaneously "unique" and "common." This crucial experience is not specified much further as Locke is not interested in the specific historical past of blacks but rather in "a particular representativeness" of oppressed people that allows him to intertwine the Harlem Renaissance with Modernism as a national American movement of cultural emancipation ("Negro Youth" 47).

Ethnic communities have been the focus of efforts of national self-criticism and self-definition for quite some time. Deploring the crude materialism and excessive individualism of American culture, writers and critics had "discovered" immigrant communities with a mixture of envy, nostalgia, and hope (cf. Matthews 5). As even the titles of their books sometimes proclaimed (Hutchins Hapgood, *The Spirit of the Ghetto*, Theodore Dreiser, *The Color of a Great City*), the Lower East Side, Little Italy, or the Bowery were invested with artistic imagination and seemed to offer what a white, Puritan America was lacking: spirituality, sensuality, a sense of *communitas*, and a distinctiveness that set them apart from the

uniformity of the urban masses. Blacks had also become subject to this form of subtle racism which claimed to find in them a source of rejuvenation and replenishment of American culture. Carl Van Doren, for instance, claimed that "what American literature decidedly needs at the moment is color, music, gusto, the free expression of gay or desperate moods. If the Negroes are not in a position to contribute these items, I do not know what Americans are" (144-145).

The hope that a break with the conventions of representation will lead to a genuinely American modern art underlies many of the critical and artistic projects of the time. Its "cultural nationalism" may be discerned in *The Seven Arts'* manifesto, which again expresses a longing for a close relation between the artist and the community:

It is our faith and the faith of many, that we are living in the first days of a renescent period, a time which means for America the coming of that national self-consciousness which is the beginning of greatness. In all such epochs the arts cease to be private matters; they become not only the expression of the national life but a means to its enhancement.[...]

In short, *The Seven Arts* is not a magazine for artists, but an expression of artists for the community.⁵

It is this call that Locke takes up when he presents the Harlem Renaissance as part of a national endeavor. Harlem as a new spiritual community of blacks responds to the quest of black and white people for a new expressive art that matters to the community and ultimately the nation for it heals not only the split in black consciousness as diagnosed by W.E.B. DuBois' *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), but also bridges the chasm between an increasingly alienated Modernist avant-garde and the American public.

So what is this new art based on a necessarily vague "experience" and, furthermore, how can the new collective representation be prevented from becoming as fixed and redundant as old stereotypes? In his sketch of the New Negro as a modern black artist, Locke carefully maneuvers between providing us with a black aesthetic and evading various entrapping positions that threaten to freeze the new representation into just another stereotype. Blacks had been associated with stereotypes in art for a long time. Minstrel shows, for instance, associated blacks with an exaggerated theatricality of dance, music, and verbal play. Local color fiction depicted them as queer but lovable uncles and mammies who were sentimental singers and cunning story tellers. Against both, Locke proclaims a Modernist aesthetic as a possible model for black art.

⁵ The term "cultural nationalism" and the manifesto are both from Arthur F. Wertheim, *The New York Little Renaissance* 178.

Accordingly the anthology defamiliarizes the Old Negro by associating him with new and unfamiliar African artworks. Yet, as the generic titles of the illustrations, the mythology invoked by the masks and statues, and programmatic claims like "The Negro is a poet by birth" suggest, Art and Africa as major constituents of a new identity can easily be as simplistic and reductive as old stereotypes. This is particularly the case as Primitivism had already become an important aspect of artistic Modernism. In the works of Gertrude Stein, Eugene O'Neill, Sherwood Anderson, or T.S. Eliot, the deviation from Standard English, the new liberty in depicting sexuality, the emphasis on the body, the psychological, and the grotesque were all associated with "blackness" as the artists liked to imagine themselves as "racial outsiders" (North, Preface n.p.). Moreover, while the emphasis on Africa exoticizes familiar blackness and revalues it as aesthetically desirable, it also renders it less "American," excluding it again from mainstream American culture.

A complementary strategy is therefore to re-import the potentially exotic and claim that this source of creativity is already part of an indigenous national culture. "Folk culture," however, threatened to bring back old stereotypes of mammies, uncles, and aunties, returning us to where we started. Locke's style and structure of argument are marked by the attempts to avoid existing stereotypes and lead to a concept that allows him to obviate the danger of fixed images in general: he proclaims a concept of art based on the central category of "experience" and he ties that experience to the ordinary life of black Americans. The expression of that experience can be art because black life is always already inherently aesthetic. As the most salient aspect of black life is change and transformation, the proclaimed aesthetic identity appears likewise variable, open to historical development, and yet is always also the expression of a collective experience. Captured in a style that is marked by an almost excessive use of gerunds and progressive forms (as, for instance, "In the very process of being transplanted, the Negro is becoming transformed"), Locke's emphasis is on transformation not foundation of a concept; the New Negro is a project and a projection, not a new fixed image ("New Negro" 6). Locke knows that it is only the changeability of any proclaimed collective identity that can save the new type from the rigidity and redundancy so characteristic of the stereotype.

Locke's attempt to transform a public representation without founding a new one is based on an intellectually challenging but also extremely fragile argument. Not only is it difficult to imagine how an identity in process can have the positive effect of providing a sense of group belonging, the idea is also vulnerable because of general developments in the literary and artistic production of the time. Nowhere, I think, does this vulnerability become more apparent than in Carl Van Vechten's bestseller *Nigger Heaven*,

published a year after *The New Negro*. Here, the white writer and critic, who enthusiastically supported the anthology, uses stereotypes in an argument that seems strikingly similar to Locke's and yet involves entirely different ideas about the relation between an individual artist and a community.

Nigger Heaven opens with a "Prologue", offering a whole barrage of stereotypes about urban blacks, centering on the impressive figure of the Scarlet Creeper (cf. 3-16). His dress, manner, and speech, displayed in entertaining scenes staging mock-aristocratic blacks, clearly evoke the minstrel show and its stereotype of the urban dandy, Zip Coon. At the same time the scenes play upon white expectations about night life in Harlem: its sensuality and sexuality, gambling, alcohol, music, and parties in excess.

This stereotype is then countered by two strategies: anti-stereotype and diversification. First, Mary and her friends, the "New Negroes" of the novel, are presented as anti-stereotypes. This is most pronounced in Mary, who so much contrasts with the Creeper as to be an almost lifeless complement to him. The most interesting difference is that the Creeper is all "body" and presented from the outside, while Mary is pure "mind," continuously reflecting and thus presented from the inside. We even learn about her physical appearance through her mental reflection upon her reflection in a mirror which is a fitting comment on her repulsion of the physical and her way of experiencing things only through the lens of aesthetic perception (cf. 25). While the Creeper is a spectacle to enjoy, the librarian Mary is a rather boring art and literary critic.

Accordingly, Mary's most remarkable feature is her broad knowledge of art and literature. Twice she is the center of a kind of educational overkill that demonstrates the cultural sophistication and education of New Negroes. While the New Negro thus counters the initial stereotype of the Creeper, she or he cannot claim to be representative of the race. For Mary is also the center of a sociological survey of Harlem, encompassing the "Harlem variety," compared to the "Washington society" and the "Brooklyn set," rich and poor people, highly cultured and uneducated ones, pimps and professionals, Victorians and Modernists (cf. 65). As in Locke, diversification creates the impression that "the Negro" as a collective identity with unified interests does not exist; therefore "race" as a meaningful social category is dismantled. This, however, not only plays down the stereotype of the Creeper, it also undermines his counter-image the New Negro as, indeed, all socio-political endeavors based on the idea of an existing, unified black community.

This has an almost sinister but, as I will show, well-planned side-effect. Now that the respectable anti-stereotype is dismantled, the original stereotype, which was far more interesting anyway, seems to gain in strength and can be used for what I see as the main project of the book, namely to

reintroduce "race" as an aesthetic category. Thus the Creeper is transformed into a representative of a particular kind of art. He is presented by a narrative voice that is highly sensitive to visual effects and arrangements — the perception of an art critic. Although the Creeper evokes the minstrel show stereotype, this traditional image is carefully connected and associated with new meanings, just as color is reevaluated as both a racial and an aesthetic term. The colorful clothes and the glistening stone the Creeper wears, for instance, might seem rather funny, but Harlem itself that night is decorated with "a canopy of indigo sky, spangled with bright stars" (3). Moreover, the Creeper is not only a spectacle for us as (white) readers but also for the characters in the text. Harlem as a whole is presented as a synaesthetic work of art, a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. There is something inherently theatrical in it, providing a perfect stage for a number of artistic practices that occur throughout the book: music, sexuality, and dance.

As they are deeply associated with "blackness" their presentation is worthwhile describing in more detail. The concept of art implied in them does not only entail the already mentioned appeal to the senses and the challenge to Victorian decorum. They also provide an intensity of experience that is also due to the short duration and the variety of different moods created through music or silence, the abruptness of changes, shrill interruptions, a potential wildness, and unexpected endings. Likewise, black life as lived in Harlem can be "art" for it also contains all the above-mentioned characteristics. Its presentation in the book with its abrupt transitions from one social group to the next highlights various discrepancies between different social realms and modes of living. No wonder that Van Vechten is not interested in differentiated psychological portraits; he uses stereotypes to create strong effects through extremes. It is precisely the stark contrasts that initially undermined a generalization about blacks, which are now, on a different level, used as the distinguishing characteristic of black life.

As Harlem is inherently aesthetic, it can easily integrate art into its life and mood. This is the meaning of what I have ironically called "educational overkill" for the frequent intertextual references demonstrate how black life is interwoven with art, particularly modern art. When Mary quotes from Gertrude Stein's "Melanctha," for instance, the passage happens to correspond exactly to her own feelings. More importantly, when she goes on to murmur a Spiritual, Stein's technique of repetition and variation is suddenly set in relation to a simpler version of the same technique in this form of folk art, suggesting a "spiritual" connection of these different genres. Harlem thus brings together high and low culture, modern and folk art, literary texts and oral tradition, to say nothing of the variety of different art forms evoked or alluded to in the text. What is inherently artistic is the whole

of black life consisting of diverse and incongruent parts, of extremes and discrepancies that border on the absurd or ridiculous or tragic or comic.

That Harlem is already a composite form of art is still strikingly close to Locke's concept developed in "The New Negro." The crucial difference between his idea and Van Vechten's, however, is the assumption of a community in Locke's "The New Negro" and a highly individualistic strain in Van Vechten's novel. This is most clearly shown in the relationship between Byron, the New Negro and would-be writer, and Lasca.

Byron fails as a writer because, on the one hand, his despair at the continuing racism he is subjected to leads him to write sentimental stories about "the Negro problem" (175); on the other hand, his embeddedness in black life does not allow him to see it with the defamiliarizing eye of the Modernist. The harshest criticism of his race-consciousness and his sketch for a story comes from Lasca, who asks him to ignore "the race" (257). Lasca, of course, is also an artist but only vaguely introduced as singer and dancer. Rather, her body and her sexuality are presented as living art. Actually, her critique of Byron's story is part of an erotic foreplay provoking a sado-masochistic sexual performance. Lasca uses sexuality imaginatively and she choreographs another *Gesamtkunstwerk* that is again characterized by contrast and discrepancies, by rhythm, music, and an abrupt ending (cf. 261).

As a complementary figure to the Creeper, Lasca is also a stereotype transformed to embody a particular understanding of art and a way of life. Through her, Van Vechten now celebrates blackness as unconstrained individuality, a cultivated hedonism marked by its disregard for conventional morality and the claims of society. This allows Van Vechten quite an unexpected twist within Locke's pragmatist idea of art as experience: If life in Harlem is inherently aesthetic, one need only immerse oneself in it and write about that experience in order to create art oneself. If, furthermore, black experience and expression are highly individualistic and thus separated from a black community, then there is no reason why a white man could not be a "black" artist. Through the careful manipulation of stereotypes *Nigger Heaven* re-conceptualizes blackness as an aesthetic term which allows the white Van Vechten to fashion himself as a "black" writer.

Even though Van Vechten's novel seeks to revalue "blackness" as inherently artistic and modern he is also "blackening up" and thus repeats the main gesture of the minstrel show. Still, the new stereotype of the urban black is not just related to minstrelsy whose characters were, after all, mainly comical and harmless; the Creeper and Lasca are also a fascinating and perhaps frightening spectacle because of their sexuality, and this is what relates them to the vicious images employed by, for instance, Thomas Dixon. The concepts of art and society envisioned in Dixon's novels are, of course

entirely different from those supported by Van Vechten. They propagate a segregated society, the political disempowerment of blacks, and a racially "pure" white America, while Van Vechten celebrates the transgression of cultural conventions and an expressivist notion of art that includes the body.⁶ That two opposed views may yet employ similar stereotypes helps to explain their resilience and also emphasizes the need to investigate closely into *how* they are used.

To project a new image despite and in between existing stereotypes and to transform black people from mere objects of white fantasies into subjects of artistic creation was precisely what Alain Locke attempted to do; two years later, the black Jamaican writer Claude McKay explored this possibility in fiction. His novel *Home to Harlem* (1928) has often been unfavorably compared to *Nigger Heaven* and, although McKay claimed not to have read Van Vechten's novel, the two texts still illuminate the difficult situation of black artists in view of white fantasies of Harlem. McKay had offered manuscripts of a novel about black lower class life to publishers for quite some time and had always been rejected. When *Nigger Heaven* proved to be a success, publishers were suddenly interested in the Harlem theme and urged McKay to finish something as long as the fashion prevailed. Thus his novel was framed by competing conceptions of Harlem as a community of artists, a theatrical world for individualist expression, or just a sleazy slum with an exciting night life. In view of the different transformations of black stereotypes, McKay's novel explores Harlem as an almost overdetermined cultural space and investigates its potential for black community and identity.

The first chapters introduce Jake, an uneducated black man, returning after the First World War from Europe. His dreams of Harlem as a "home" echo Locke's utopian vision. Yet, Jake is not an artist and it soon becomes obvious that the New Negro is utterly inappropriate to capture the life and imagination of a large black working class in Harlem and elsewhere. They, however, are precisely the people McKay wants to portray. He attempts to depict the common life of black workers ostensibly refraining from Modernist aesthetic strategies, using a plain and simple style that suggests an embeddedness of the narrative in the life depicted. His characters are thus more representative than Locke's New Negro, but they also threaten to collapse into the other stereotype of blacks in Harlem: Van Vechten's urban primitives, unambitious blacks largely governed by simple desires for food, drink, entertainment, and sex, who were used as a desirable counterpoint to conventional white life and art.

6 Another difference between the authors lies in the textual strategies with which they employ stereotypes. I examine Dixon's use of stereotypes in *Keys to Controversies. Stereotypes in Modern American Novels* 46-62.

To avoid not so much the fixed image itself but the function it has been employed for, McKay uses stereotypes that seem to reproduce the white view of Harlem except that, for frequent repetition and lack of contrast, black life is not seen as a sensational counterpoint any more but as almost boringly common. Even the sexual adventures of the main character, when happening repeatedly, seem less and less spectacular. The very simplicity of the style itself underlines the idea of the commonplace:

He woke up in the morning in a state of perfect peace. She brought him hot coffee and cream and doughnuts. He yawned. He sighed. He was satisfied. He breakfasted. He washed. He dressed. The sun was shining. He sniffed the fine dry air. Happy, familiar Harlem. (15)

Paradoxically, the very simplicity becomes problematic and dissatisfying here, not necessarily because we believe that it cannot be referentially "true" but because we realize that even a fictional world — perhaps especially a fictional world — has to be more complex than that. The demand for a presentation of simple black life in Harlem has been met but, as it is presented as being, indeed, the common and "familiar" life of blacks, it ceases to be sensational and does not satisfy the desire for the extraordinary that has been roused by the stereotype. This is best illustrated by Strawberry Lips, a figure who is introduced as being more stereotypical than the stereotype:

Strawberry Lips was typically the stage Negro. He was proof that a generalization has some foundation in truth. [...] You might live your life in many black belts and arrive at the conclusion that there is no such thing as a typical Negro — no minstrel coon off the stage, no Thomas Nelson Page's nigger, no Octavus Roy Cohen's porter, no lineal descendant of Uncle Tom. Then one day your theory may be upset through meeting with a type by far more perfect than any created counterpart. (63-64)

Ironically, the "stage Negro" Strawberry Lips is one of the least entertaining characters in *Home to Harlem*. He is the only character who is entirely "at home" in Harlem — but then we have to realize that this fact alone does not constitute an exciting fictional character. What remains of the quoted passage is a rather blunt rejection of the end of stereotypes proclaimed by Locke and the realization that it is rather difficult to represent the common life of common people for which fixed images already exist.

As we might expect, the style changes in the course of the novel. It produces a number of intraracial stereotypes as both narrative and characters appear to become more self- and color-conscious. The mutual stereotyping by blacks of different class, national origin, skin color, and sexual orientation illustrates the prejudices they hold of each other and represent a growing

intraracial tension. This undermines the idealizing idea of any existing black community, let alone a common consciousness. It also draws attention to the fact that blacks do not have one nationality, one history, or even one language and thus questions Locke's project of a black American art.

What they do have in common, however, is emphasized by various, almost claustrophobic settings: blacks live and work in confined spaces, supervised and controlled by whites. Harlem, far from being an artist's utopia, as Locke claimed, or a fascinating alternative to white downtown New York, as Van Vechten metaphorically implied, is a narrow space that exists at the mercy of white people. This impression is intensified by the introduction of characters who have internalized stereotypes and whose behavior is structured by the attempt to avoid them. Both narrative and characters thus demonstrate what emerges to be the characteristic of black life, namely, its being shaped by white dominance and control, either in concrete terms of power in political and employment relations or in terms of representations available to a black artist. Stereotypes structure not only the way blacks are perceived by whites but also how they perceive themselves; stereotypes are thus inevitably part of a black identity. In contrast to Locke and his proclaimed end of stereotypes, McKay insists on their continued significance, both among blacks and in their interaction with whites.

By the time the novel has reached this point, its style is no longer trying to render a simple perspective integrated in the life it represents. It has become more poetic, more painfully aware of stereotypes, and thus also more aloof from the simplicity it depicts and at moments transcends the "frame" of the narrative to lay bare its underlying expectations:

And the pianist! At intervals his yellow eyes, almost bloodshot, swept the cabaret with a triumphant glow, gave the dancers a caressing look, and returned to the ceiling. Lean, smart fingers beating barbaric beauty out of a white frame. (94)

Of course, the image of the eye-rolling pianist already belonged to the Harlem iconography and is thus part of the white framing conceptualization of Harlem. And yet, through the poetry of the passage, McKay manages to create many layers of meaning that open up and transcend this frame. For the pianist uses the "white frame," that is the instrument but also the formal conventions of classical music, and transforms them into something else, Jazz. His "beating" creates something "out" of the frame — not necessarily destroying it but using it in a surprisingly new and beautiful way. Clearly, the language of this sentence differs sharply from the crude subject-verb clauses quoted earlier and no longer attempts to mirror a "primitive" consciousness. Like the pianist, the poet McKay in these phrases plays with the key-words of white racial concepts such as "black," "white," and "barbaric" to "beat"

poetic beauty out of a white frame of representations. The beauty here lies in the fact that Jazz is used neither for purposes of defamiliarization and Modernist innovation nor as a celebration of uninhibited individualist expression, nor as an alternative to a genteel white culture. Rather, the poet is trying to represent a particular aspect of black life, using "white" elements and transforming them to let it stand on its own but change our perception and appreciation of it — and yet, he cannot but reproduce the frame as well.

Home to Harlem illuminates the difficulties of an ethnic writer in reflecting on the stereotypes he cannot escape. The text attests to the power of stereotypes to constrain the expression of the stereotyped artist, yet it also demonstrates that this power is not absolute. Even within the frame there is a margin of liberty that an artist can explore so that to take the presence of stereotypes alone as proof for a mere reproduction is to ignore the changing implication that results from a struggle with them. Stereotypes are never harmless but assuming that we always know the precise nature and degree of harm also prevents our understanding as to why a writer might knowingly risk it. One may too quickly regard a writer as victim or traitor if we do not acknowledge that stereotypes can be employed as instruments to an end beyond that of subversion or commercial interest.

Stereotypes are attractive to writers since they connect a literary text with conflicts and desires of the public realm. Taking up stereotypes, the texts become part of controversies which, in my examples, centered on the relations of art to the individual and to the community. Perhaps the stereotypes in *Home to Harlem* made it easier for McKay to publish at all; they certainly made his book a controversial comment on Locke's concept of Harlem as a community and Van Vechten's desire for individualist self-expression projected onto Harlem. However, being part of the public realm, the use of stereotypes for different, even contradictory purposes lets them easily escape the control of an individual text as their meanings, functions, and effects always depend on both the aesthetic strategies within a text and the cultural controversies interwoven with it. In this vein my inquiry into the ways stereotypes were used in literary texts engages in and suggests a mode of reading. It illuminates the potentials and constraints stereotypes present to artistic expression by reconstructing the surrounding controversies they are charged with. It also explores the textual strategies with which writers manipulate, counter, transform, or avoid stereotypes to intervene with the issues attached to them — the stereotype then appears to be situated in between the social and the literary; it connects them but also allows for a degree of separation.

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IV. FILM & CULTURES