QUADERNA

5 | 2021

Elisa Cecchinato

Encoding Queerness as Blackness: Representations of the Black English Vernacular in Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* (1926)

Résumé

En 1926, la maison d'édition new-yorkaise Alfred A. Knopf publie le scandaleux roman *Nigger Heaven* de Carl Van Vechten, auteur, photographe et mécène blanc de la Renaissance de Harlem. Le roman se déroule dans un Harlem décadent et raconte les mésaventures de Byron, un écrivain bohème noir en rupture avec l'élite Noire réformiste de son époque. *Nigger Heaven* est accompagné d'un court "*Glossary of Negro Words and Phrases*" qui figure à la fin du texte. Dans cet article, je discute de la sélection de termes du *Black Vernacular* qui composent le glossaire du roman, dans le but d'interroger les codages fictionnels du désir queer blanc à travers une symbolique de la noirceur, que *Nigger Heaven* déploie. J'inscris ensuite ces codages dans ce que je lis comme une tentative ratée d'auto-ironie poétique de son auteur, un queer blanc. Enfin, j'esquisse la récupération satirique et politique de *Nigger Heaven* par les jeunes artistes Noir.e.s à l'origine du magazine à numéro unique *FIRE!! Devoted to Young Negro Artists* (1926), une entreprise artistique qui convoque de manière polémique l'activisme culturel réformiste d'Alain Locke et des doyens de la Renaissance. Dans ma discussion de *Nigger Heaven*, j'inclus des références aux transformations urbaines de Harlem aux années 1920s et je les mets en rapport avec le livre. Je cherche notamment à réfléchir la publication de *Nigger Heaven* comme contemporaine des migrations et implantations croisées, dans le quartier, de communautés Noires Américaines, ainsi que des clubs et lieux de sociabilité non-normative (homoérotique et/ou interraciale) bannis d'autres secteurs de la ville par les réformes de la *Progressive Era*.

Abstract

In 1926, New York publishing house Alfred A. Knopf put out the notorious novel *Nigger Heaven* by white author, photographer, and Harlem Renaissance patron Carl Van Vechten. Set in a decadent Harlem, the novel tells the misadventures of Byron, a black bohemian writer who is in rupture with the reformist Black elite of his time. *Nigger Heaven* is supplied with a short "*Glossary of Negro Words and Phrases*" that appears at the end of the text. In this paper, I discuss the selection of Black Vernacular terms that makes up for the novel's glossary, to interrogate the fictional encodings of white queer desire as blackness that *Nigger Heaven* deploys. I then inscribe such encodings in what I read as a failed attempt at poetic self-irony of its white queer author. Finally, I sketch the satirical and political recuperation of *Nigger Heaven* by the young Black artists that created the one-number magazine *FIRE!! Devoted to Young Negro Artists* (1926), an artistic enterprise that polemically summons the reformist cultural activism of Alain Locke and the deans of the Renaissance. I frame my discussion of *Nigger Heaven* by historically situating its publication as coeval to the urban transformations of 1920s Harlem. At the time, the neighborhood appeared as a space of intersecting migrations and settlements of Black American communities, as well as of non-normative (homoerotic and/or interracial) places of socialization and entertainment expelled from other sectors of the city by Progressive Era Reforms.

Référence électronique : Elisa Cecchinato, « Encoding Queerness as Blackness: Representations of the Black English Vernacular in Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* (1926) », © 2021 *Quaderna* [en ligne], 5 | 2021, mis en ligne le 26 février 2021, url permanente : https://quaderna.org/?p=926.

Tous droits réservés

Encoding Queerness as Blackness: Representations of the Black English Vernacular in Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* (1926)

Elisa Cecchinato, Université Paris Est Marne-la-Vallée/Université de Nanterre

In Harlem (NY), from the late 1910s to the early 1930s, a major production of literary works by black American authors accompanied the political activism of New Negro intellectuals engaged in the struggle for civil desegregation.[1] The decade is known as New Negro Renaissance or Harlem Renaissance and it coincided with the first years of the long migration that saw many African American and black American immigrants settle in the urban centers of the North of the United States. During the Harlem Renaissance, the intellectual production of African American philosopher of aesthetics Alain Locke and the intellectual and political militancy of African American philosopher and sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois encouraged, and at the same time attempted to organize, artistic representations of blackness, to gain political cooperation from white American reformists in the process of institutional integration. The monthly editions of *The Crisis,* the journal of the white-led National Association for the Advancement of Colored People curated by Du Bois, and the literary anthology *The New Negro* (1925), curated by Alain Locke as a special edition of the sociological magazine *The Survey*, are two major instances of the efforts of imagining black artistic production in propagandist terms, in favor of the struggle for civil emancipation. Also, more market-oriented editorial enterprises such as the National Urban League's black magazine *Opportunity* crossed over the propagandist efforts of New Negro reformers, to facilitate the encounter between perspective black authors and artists, and wealthy and mundane white patrons: Mary Ovington and Carl Van Vechten are two of the most active figures of white patronage during the Harlem Renaissance.

At the time, the issue of written representation of the Black English Vernacular[2] was part of the aesthetic debates of African American reformers, and a highlight in the artistic productions of black American modernists. These debates issued from pragmatist, cultural nationalist and cultural pluralist schools of thought, engaged by Du Bois and Locke in their academic studies, and were deployed in the processes of the definition of a 'New Negro' national identity. Also, as George Hutchinson notes,

> the experiments [with the use of the vernacular in literary and poetic production] of African American writers – notably James Weldon Johnson, Hughes, Toomer, Sterling Brown, and Hurston – did not emerge within a strictly black context [...]. The great precursors [...] were Whitman and Mark Twain. But the more contemporary models were the Irish dramatists, particularly John Millington Synge. The challenge of escaping the minstrel show tradition was a parallel, if more dramatic and momentous, task for the African American writer.[3]

---

[1] Carl Van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven*, Chicago, University of Illinois Press, (1926) 2000. In the paper, all quotations from the novel are followed by the page number in parentheses.

[2] George Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*, Cambridge (Mass.), The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1995, p. 111.

[3] *Ibid.*

In this paper, I study the representation of the Black English Vernacular in Carl Van Vechten's 1926 novel *Nigger Heaven*, paying particular attention to the code established by the glossary which was inserted as an appendix to the novel. Besides being a patron of Renaissance artists, Carl Van Vechten, born in Iowa in 1880 and emigrated to New York in 1906, was a white photographer, journalist and writer of fiction and theater. Van Vechten lived in Manhattan, was regularly married to actress Fania Marinoff, and lived his extramarital affairs with other men rather publicly. In 1926, Alfred A. Knopf published one of Van Vechten's novels, titled *Nigger Heaven*, set in Harlem and developing a plot around the decadent and sensual lives of young black American characters. The novel quickly earned notoriety in Harlem, and its fictional subjects were argument of heated debate. Harshly criticized by the deans of the Renaissance, the novel was appropriated by the younger black writers of the period who, still in 1926, self-published a one-number literary magazine, *Fire!! Devoted to Younger Negro Artists*[4]. Edited by Wallace Thurman, *Fire!!* was published autonomously and collected texts by Richard Bruce Nugent, Zora Neal Hurston, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, among others. The closing editorial of the magazine, signed by Thurman, made a bet on the possibility that Van Vechten's novel would sooner or later be as "stupidly acclaimed" as it was being now "stupidly damned"[5]. Although Thurman's prophecy was never fulfilled, his critique of the limits of proper representation of black American subjects did not exist in a void. One of the bones of contention concerning the publication of *Nigger Heaven* was its portrayal of eroticized and low-down Harlem, at a moment when institutional segregation was being fought by black American reformers also by appeal to art as propaganda, that came with injunctions to proper representations of New Negro identities. In the hopes of the reformers, the renditions of the black American experience in literature ought to follow the disciplined guidelines of respectability, that among other things maximized urban configurations of policed heterosexual masculinity and femininity. The aim of this paper is also to highlight the queer homoracial encoding of blackness in *Nigger Heaven*. Marlon B. Ross "[coins] the term homoracial to indicate the different dynamics that result from the pressure of a gendered hierarchy of the races – indicating how in the United States culture homosociality historically relies on the systematic exclusion of black men, as well as the central targeting of women as sexual objects and homosexual men as scapegoats"[6]. *Nigger Heaven* is a fictional rendition of social proximities characterized by interracial homosociality, and sometimes inspired by interracial homoerotic intimacies. In tension with institutional heteronormative political alliances between black and white reformists, the artistic proximities between black and white queer artists are encoded in *Nigger Heaven* with ambiguous yet artistically generative results.

---

[4] AA. VV. *FIRE!! Devoted to Younger Negro Artists*. 1926. Reprint 1982, curated by Richard Bruce Nugent and Thomas H. Wirth.

[5] AA. VV. *Fire!!*, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

[6] Marlon B Ross, *Manning the Race. Reforming Black Men in the Jim Crow Era*, New York, New York UP, 2004, p. 11.

The code of the *Glossary of Negro Word and Phrases*: Blackening White Queerness.

Nigger Heaven is a play-like novel in three acts, composed of a *Prologue* and two books. Almost all the characters in the novel are black Americans. Book I is subtitled "Mary" and Book II is subtitled "Byron," after the names of the two protagonists. The novel is supplied with a *Glossary of Negro Words and Phrases* (285-286) and an index of "the songs and snatches of Blues [...] written especially for Nigger Heaven (sic.) by Mr. Langston Hughes" (287). The novel tells the tragic love affair between Mary, a young and nubile "golden-brown" librarian, and Byron, a celibate black writer. Mary is a lonely heart who rejects all the marriage proposals she receives, and who has recently turned down the attentions of the rich and shady black entrepreneur, Rudolph Pettijohn. Byron meets Mary at a social dinner, where his father has addressed the young irresponsible artist who is new to New York. Mary and Byron begin an affair that Mary wishes to stabilize, but which Byron shuns. Not long after the affair between Mary and Byron begins, he meets a rich "golden-brown" stage diva, Lasca Sartoris, at a mundane party that he is attending with Mary in Harlem. At the social event, the popularity of Lasca is palpable, and to Mary's dismay, Byron manages to dance with the woman. From that moment on, the tensions between Byron and Mary augments, as Byron starts a clandestine relation with Lasca. Dumped by the diva, for whom he has an obsessive attraction, Byron attempts to commit a murderous act of vengeance against Ralph Pettijohn, who has become Lasca's new partner. After this attempted murder, Byron goes back to Mary to be pardoned and gain his salute. The story of Byron and Lasca is replicated in the subplot of the affair between the black pimp Anatole Longfellow, alias the Creeper, and his "golden-brown" protégée Ruby; since Ruby abandons Anatole for the favors of the richer Pettijohn, Anatole also looks for his revenge by killing his rival. The settings of the novel continuously shift between at least two highly parodied spaces: a bourgeois and domestic black Harlem, the realm of Mary, and the underground, hyper-erotic spaces of the clubs, Lasca's enticing world. Byron oscillates between these two worlds to finally find himself trapped in the criminal underground from where, in a redemptive move, he implores for Mary's pardon.

The focal space of the criminal underground in *Nigger Heaven* is the Black Venus, a favorite venue for several characters of the novel. The *Glossary* provides the linguistic codes to read the Black Venus as a black queer masculine space. It also provides the codes to decipher the racial and gender taxonomies of the club's patrons.

The type of the "golden-brown" (although this expression is absent from the *Glossary*) functions as a central metonymy that helps decode the *Glossary*. This type needs first to be understood in reference to a taxonomy that largely deploys popular codes of colorism to represent characters: on a surface level, a "golden-brown" can thus be imagined as a light-skinned black character. The "golden-brown" figure also inscribes elements of masking and double meaning because it is associated to the possibility of passing as white. The novel introduces the golden-brown type in the *Prologue,* bringing about the first reference to the club Black Venus on the occasion of a dialogue between Anatole Longfellow and Ruby. We learn that the Creeper is in a feud with Pettijohn, who is acquiring more and more power in Harlem, and threatening the Creeper's business as protector for cabaret escorts. Early in the story, the Creeper is approached by "golden-brown" Ruby, who is looking for his protection:

> [Ruby] was a golden-brown and her skin was clear, as soft as velvet. As pretty a piece, [the Creeper] reflected, as he had seen around these parts for some time, and he had not happened to see her before [...].
>
> After they had played this game of mutual duplicity for some time, she, losing patience or acquiring courage, accosted him
>
> Hello, Toly.
>
> He turned, without a smile, and stared at her.
>
> Ah doan seem to recerllec' dat Ah got duh honour o' yo' acquaintance.
>
> You ain', Mr. 'Toly, an' dat's a fac'. Mah name's Ruby [...]. Ah been jes' nacherly crazy to meet you. (9-11)

The use of the nominalized taxonomic attribute "golden-brown" to describe Ruby has at least two functions. On the one hand, it situates *Nigger Heaven* in an intertextual web of black modernist novels and short stories, where the codes of colorism intersect with the codes of gender, and the use of the attribute "golden-brown" *also* signals queer types of referents. A major instance of the use of the nominalized attribute "golden-brown" as a code for a feminine crossdresser in black homoerotic contexts can be found in Claude McKay's 1928 novel *Home to Harlem*[7]. On the other hand, the nominalized attribute alerts the reader as to the fact that, within *Nigger Heaven*, the space of the Black Venus contains (and is characterized by) the queer referent that the "golden-brown" encodes. *Nigger Heaven* itself provides textual hints to understand the "golden-brown" character as a male character in drag. In Book II, Byron and his friends comment on the arrival of the Creeper at the Black Venus with an exchange that allows to associate the nominalized adjective of "golden-brown" to a feminine drag:

> The Creeper had swirled into a dance with a handsome mulatto. His palms were flat across her shoulders, his slender fingers spread apart. There was an ancient impiety about the sensual grace of their united movement.
>
> Take your eyes off the golden-brown, Dick warned, laughing.
>
> You know my type! (215)

The gender of the golden-brown dancer, with whom the Creeper moves with "ancient impiety," is suggested by the use of the term "handsome mulatto," constituted by an attribute normally connoted as masculine ("handsome") and by a noun, mulatto, that makes the reader wonder why, for a female dancer, the widely used term of 'mulattress', that we can find in several novels and texts of the time, was not preferred.

In the *Prologue,* once the Creeper sees the convenience of accepting "golden-brown" Ruby's profitable company (she assures him: "Ah been full o' prosperity dis evenin'" (11)), he offers her to find a place where to go and dance. It is at this point that the Black Venus is introduced. The Creeper and Ruby consider a list of clubs where they may go, and the Black Venus is chosen as the perfect spot:

---

[7] Claude McKay, *Home to Harlem*, Boston, Northeastern UP, (1928) 1987.

Winter Palace? She inquired.

A nasty shadow flitted across Anatole's face.

Naw, he retorted. Too many ofays an' jig-chasers.

Bowie Wilcox's is dicty.

Too many monks.

Atlantic City Joe's?

Too many pink-chasers an' bulldikers.

Where den?

Duh Black Venus. (12)

Every club on the list is connoted metonymically by way of referencing its regulars; the list provides a qualification of what the Black Venus is *not*, through a taxonomy of club patrons that the *Glossary* clarifies: The Black Venus is not a place of "ofays," which reads as "white person[s]" (286), nor of "jig-chasers" or "white person[s] who [seek] the company of Negroes" (286). It is not "dicty," meaning, according to the *Glossary*, "swell, in the slang sense of the word" (285): in *Nigger Heaven*, this signifies that the Black Venus is not a snobbish dance venue. The Black Venus is not attended by "monks" or "monkey-chaser[s]" (286), a way to call the "Negro[es] from the British West Indies" (286). Nor is the Black Venus frequented by "pink-chasers," read "Negro[es] who [seek] the company of whites" (286), or by "bulldykers," read "Lesbians" (285). From this list of types and their metonymic function in the dialogue between the Creeper and Ruby, we gather that the Black Venus includes non-lesbian feminine patrons; non-British-West-Indian black patrons; black patrons who are not looking for the company of white patrons; and non-white patrons. This taxonomy can usefully be read next to the very name of the club, and together with Ruby's "golden-brown" identity as an identity which is autochthonous to the venue: the toponym "Black Venus" shows how in the very name of the club is embedded a specific intersection between a code of colorism (black) and a gendered code (Venus, a symbol of femininity).

What about the identities encoded by the spectrum of color that the *Glossary* provides? What do "white" and "black" stand for in the *Glossary* and in the novel? Arguably, the Black Venus is an underground space of homoerotic, same-sex encounters of a spectrum of patrons whose personas span from more masculine to more feminine ones. In the *Prologue*, in neat contrast to the list of qualifiers provided in the dialogue between Ruby and the Creeper, the Black Venus is described as follows:

> Couples were dancing in such close proximity that their bodies melted together as they swayed and rocked to the tormented howling the brass, the barbaric beating of the drum. Across each woman's back, clasped tight against her shoulder blades, the black hands of her partner were flattened. Blues, smokes, dinges, charcoals, chocolate browns, shines, and jigs. (12-13)

The Black Venus is represented as a strictly black-American, "Negro" space: "blues," according to the *Glossary* is the plural form of a nominalized attribute that means "a very black Negro. Not to be confused with the Blues, Negro songs of disappointment in love" (285); all the other terms, used in the nominal form are also synonymous with "Negro:" "smoke: Negro," "dinge:

Negro," "charcoal: Negro," "shine: Negro," "jig: Negro" (285-286). In the toponym "Black Venus," "Black" encodes at least the cipher of "masculinity" implicit in the crossdressing of its queer feminine referent, and by extension it becomes a code for homoerotic intimacies. In the code of *Nigger Heaven*, then, American blackness as queer/homoerotic masculinity is constructed in opposition to West Indian blackness (this is a topic I will not tackle in this paper) and to American whiteness.

In Book II on the contrary, whiteness is made to encode an undesirable injunction whose nature the *Glossary* does not clarify. During a casual encounter between Byron and his friend Dick at the Black Venus, the two characters talk about Dick's new life. Indeed, Dick has decided to pass as white:

> [...] Are you white or coloured tonight?
>
> Buckra, of course. And so are my friends [Baldwin and McKain], but they'll be delighted to meet you [...].
>
> Byron turned to his companion and looked at him earnestly. Dick, I want to ask you something, he said. Now... Now... that you've gone white, do you really want... pinks for boody?
>
> Dick averted his eyes. That's the worst part of it, he groaned. I just don't. Give me the blues every time. Baldwin and McKain rejoined them.
>
> Talking to a fellow who's making drawings, the novelist explained. God, but this place is great! I could live up here. Is all Harlem like this?
>
> The question awakened a swarm of perverse, dancing images in Byron's brain. They crowded about each other, all the incongruities, the savage inconsistences, the peculiar discrepancies, of this cruel, segregated life. (215)

In the *Glossary* we read that "buckra" and "pink" stand for "a white person" (285-286). Nevertheless, Byron's question to Dick, "Now... that you've gone white, do you really want... pinks for boody?", ironically forestalls decoding, since the *Glossary* provides a circular indication: "*boody*: see hootchie-pap" (285) and "*hootchie-pap* : see boody" (286). Whiteness, quite clearly, encodes at least a willful and ironical secrecy around queer orientations and erotic practices. It is in the racialized code of blackness that, in the novel, these practices are encoded and made representable. The *Glossary* selects a list of terms from the expressions and graphisms that the novel uses to represent the Black English Vernacular, in order to re-encode the notion of "Negro" (the full heading of the glossary is "*Glossary of Negro Words and Phrases*") to signify queer masculinity.

Arguably, the Black Venus, with its homoerotic nature encoded through color, is inspired by the interracial, low-down clubs known as 'Black and Tan.' Crossdressing and racial blackface in the plot of *Nigger Heaven* have the effect of representing the Black and Tan in a peculiar way, where a marginal white queer masculinity can be assimilated, however with a certain anxiety concerning the subverted relations of power that the white patron experiences in these informal clubs. Discussing the state-regulated formation of racialized vice districts in the urban North at the beginning of the twentieth century, Lewis Mumford describes the Black and Tan as follows:

> [T]hese interracial clubs did not gain acceptance, or move into the geographical mainstream, but stayed in the slums. In fact they defined the slums.
>
> Beginning in the late nineteenth century, discussion of the so called Black and Tan surfaced in reform reports, sociological studies, and newspapers. The term Black and Tan apparently originated in the South [...]. The expression was coined to denote interracial cooperation [against white supremacy] [...]. Most cities with a sizeable black population probably had at least few Black and Tans, but some urban areas were reputed for their black/white vice districts. Chicago, New York, Detroit, and Cleveland reportedly included numerous racially mixed clubs [...]. Of all the forms of public, interracial contact, black/white dance elicited the sharpest, most impassioned responses from authorities. Thus the dance halls that welcomed black and white patrons but prohibited interracial dancing were often viewed as more respectable than the typical Black and Tan.[8]

The fictional construction of the Black Venus as a place where there are no "jig-chasers" ("white person[s] who [seek] the company of Negroes" (286)), suggests that its blackness encodes not only homoeroticism, but also homoerotic interracial intimacies. In *Nigger Heaven*, both interracial homoerotic intimacies and queer homoracial relations are being fictionalized through taxonomies that pertain to the Black and Tan, and to the subverted racialized and gendered relations of power that characterized these clubs. Mumford further discusses the Black and Tan as a place that

> triggered such an anxiety among white people because it both represented and symbolized the prevailing racial order turned upside-down: black men were on top. It was more than a matter of race, however. Within the world of the Black and Tan [...], because of contested inversions, even the gender hierarchy – that women were subordinate to men – remained unstable [...]. In the history of black/white sexual relations [...] a recurrent and complex tension is ever present: racial privilege pulling against gender privilege, with eroticism of sexual transgression exacerbating the already volatile situation.[9]

Anxiety over the subversions-inversions of power in the Black and Tan is encoded in *Nigger Heaven* through double speech. A perfect instance of this is provided by the tension around the use of the insulting idiomatic expression "nigger heaven." In the *Prologue* the "black" Black Venus, with its wild music and homoerotic atmosphere, prompts Ruby to tell the Creeper that the way she calls "[d]is place, where Ah met you – Harlem. Ah calls et, specherly tonight, Ah calls et Nigger Heaven! I jes' nacherly think dis heah is Nigger Heaven!" (15). Through Ruby's voice, the formula "nigger heaven" functions as a naively exalted description of Harlem, which is blurt out through the almost alluring use of an insulting vernacular attribute. Here, such insulting attribute functions on its extra-meaning, the queer connotation whereby blackness is made to encode male queerness. Ruby's enthusiastic naming of the neighborhood is underscored by the major ambiguity/secrecy that organizes the play of voices novel and which mirrors the willful secrecy encoded by *whiteness*.

---

[8] Kevin J Mumford, *Interzones. Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century*, New York, Columbia UP, 1997, p. 30-31.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 62.

On the other hand, towards the end of Book I, Byron uses the expression "nigger heaven" with reference to its derogatory and racist social currency. After a racist attack in a park where he is strolling with Mary, Byron "[moans]:"

> Nigger Heaven [...]! Nigger Heaven! That's what Harlem is. We sit on our places in the gallery of this New York theatre and watch the white world sitting down below in the good seats in the orchestra. Occasionally they turn their faces up towards us, their hard, cruel faces, to laugh or sneer, but they never beckon. It never seems to occur to them that Nigger Heaven is crowded, that there isn't another seat, that something has to be done. It never seems to occur to them neither, he went on fiercely, that we sit above them, that we can drop things down on them and crush them, that we can swoop down from this Nigger Heaven and take their seats. (149)

In his rant, Byron recurs to the abusive expression to name the seats reserved to black Americans in Jim-Crow, segregated theaters of the South. From his role as a writer, Byron observes that the white "world sitting down below in the good seats" and turning "their faces up" to the policed and segregated subjects, do not "beckon" (or "name") what they see above them, unless they do it using abusive categories of othering.

Double speech raises issues of representation and alienation of the marginal other, who looks at himself as he is being looked at by a normative/disciplinary gaze. The title of the novel, as well as its fictional spaces (Harlem and the Black Venus) are built through a play of narrative voices that use the ambiguity of this double speech, in an anxious movement between creative linguistic appropriation of the vernacular and alienating irrepresentability outside Standard English.

The representation of the Black English Vernacular Beyond the Glossary: *Nigger Heaven* and failed irony.

In the 1920s urban geography of Manhattan, the porous border between the neighborhood of Harlem and the subjacent, largely white metropolis delimited a segregated black neighborhood that also functioned as a marginalized interracial sex-zone, or vice district as a consequence of administrative urban policies of the Progressive era. The ambiguous double connotation of the expression "nigger heaven" used by Ruby and Byron is to be understood in the frame of the interracial, ultra-marginal and non-respectable background of the Black and Tan club, poorly tolerated by white reformers, policed by the white urban administration, and dismissed by the precarious African American urban communities of the North, cyclically subject to vicious racist, white supremacist lynching often cautioned by "alleging rape of white women"[10]. The representation of the Black English Vernacular in *Nigger Heaven* – at least from how it is encoded in the *Glossary* – produces a fictional "blackening" of the interracial Black and Tan to include a white masculinity which falls out of alignment from white normative, heterosexual national identity, and re-creates a low-down linguistic code able to incorporate this disidentified voice.[11] Ruby's and Byron's

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 32.

[11] I attempt here the use of a notion that I borrow from José Esteban Muñoz's work on disidentification, for which he gets inspiration discussing Gloria Anzaldua's and radical women of color's political

words metaphorize Harlem as the space from where different subjectivities that experience social marginalization are looked at from the stage of masculine heteronormative whiteness, at the same time as they follow whiteness's theatrical and mundane movements, as it enters and exits the neighborhood without its own normative power being ever named or challenged.

The antagonistic connotations of "nigger heaven" as a naively literal "heaven," and that of a segregated space of silence and disciplinary pressure, coexist in the plot in ambiguous fashion. The attempt made by the novel to ironize on the practices of secrecy of white male queerness, by representing and naming queerness through blackness, is after all reinscribed in a larger white indigenist/modernist code of colorism, that identifies blackness with the exceptional source of white redemption (the appeal of Byron to Mary on which the novel closes).

The character of Lasca Sartoris functions as metonymy for white patrons of the Black and Tan that, although profiting from the system of privilege granted to them by the political and social structure of the country, do not identify with the proper white masculinity of the customers of more regulated interracial venues. Such disidentification, however, is fraught with ironical fallibility: Lasca cannot help but associate with Pettijohn, a powerful masculine figure, a reassuring agent of discipline and normativity.

It is the crossdressing inscribed in all the "golden-brown" characters of the plot to suggest that Lasca (of whom Ruby is a *mise-en-abyme*) is also a male character in drag. The first time Mary sees Lasca, who is dancing with Byron, the scene is described as follows:

> There [Byron] was, dancing with that exotic Negro sense of rhythm which made time a thing in space. In his arms was the most striking woman Mary had ever seen. A robe of turquoise-blue satin clung to her exquisite body, brought out in relief by every curve. The dress was cut so low in front that the little depression between her firm, round breasts was plainly visible. Her golden-brown back was entirely nude to the waist. (163)

Lasca is represented as a golden-brown by Mary as well as in Byron's thoughts: "[his] mind travelled irrationally to a consideration of Lasca Sartoris [...]. Never before had he met so vibrant a personality... and golden-brown, his colour" (179).

---

writings of the 1970s (notably Moraga's and Anzaldua's *This Bridge Called My Back).* Muñoz writes: "I refer to disidentification as a hermeneutic, a process of production, and a mode of performance. Disidentification can be understood as a way of shuffling back and forth between reception and production [of discourses]. For the critic, disidentification is the hermeneutical performance of decoding mass, high, or any other cultural field from the perspective of a minority subject who is disempowered in such representational hierarchy." José Esteban Muñoz. *Disidentifications. Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics.* Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999. p. 25. However, my attempt rests on a contradiction that, if not visibilized, risks to produce a colonial expropriation of the idea of disidentification. Such contradiction depends on Van Vechten's authorial positioning across the spaces of the disempowered queer man and that of the dominant white heterosexual man. As I claim later in the article, the ambiguity of Van Vechten's positioning is mirrored in the novel by the use of mainstream, white codes of redemption, through which the text ends up re-signifying its own disidentificatory moves.

Given the continuity of characterization between Mary, Lasca, and Ruby, it is relevant to consider how the differences between these characters are rendered. Voices play a major part in distinguishing the three women, and the representations of the vernacular and of standard English are central in the construction of their voices. The use of an eroticized Black English Vernacular appears in the representation of the relation of Mary to Byron; the Black English Vernacular is instead almost absent from the representation of the relation of Byron with Lasca. Ruby, the Creeper and Pettijohn are strongly connoted by their constant use of the vernacular.

Mary, a character that embodies and parodies Alain Locke's ideas and vision, occupies a middle position between the downcast golden-brown Ruby, and the upper-crust golden-brown Lasca. The representation of language and its distribution to racially connote the three characters proves it. Mary is the third major "golden-brown" character of the novel: in one of Byron's self-victimizing streams of consciousness we read: "Mary, sweet Mary, golden-brown *too*. She was his friend. She stuck by him. She wouldn't make a fool out of him" (280, italicized in the text). Another male character in drag, Mary meets Byron at the beginning of the novel, during a formal dinner with several black professionals, intellectuals and outstanding personalities of Harlem. Mary is often portrayed in domestic or bourgeois settings where, as when she works at the public library, she is attempting to trigger the attention of both black and white audiences to black modernist and white American indigenous literatures (as opposed to Western or sentimental literature), primitivist African art and the blues, the spirituals or jazz as opposed to classical music. When Byron goes to see her at the library, he mocks Mary by claiming that he "[knows] all the passwords" because he calls Harlem "The Mecca of the New Negro;" he also asks Mary, pretending to give her authority, whether she thinks he is "a New Negro" (113). The relation of Byron and Mary parodies the relation of young black Renaissance authors to New Negro intellectuals. Before their first love night, Mary is trying to persuade Byron to write about "Christophe" (123), an Afrocentric masculinist heroic figure. In the plot, the exchange, in standard English, functions as a lubricant to open to the amorous encounter:

> Christophe was laconic [...]. Six feet tall, of pure African blood, black as coal, Christophe's nature was violent and impatient of all restraints. Loving splendor and power, he created a court and a nobility. Bravery and humility failed to touch him [...].
>
> Why don't you choose a subject that you know all about? Something about our people? She asked him again.
>
> I don't know so much about our people that is different. I told you that [...]. I suppose we are just like the others.
>
> I suppose we are, Mary replied, only we don't eat where we want to or die where we want to.
>
> But we make love where we want to... Joining her on the couch, Byron seized her hand. (125-126)

A second intensely amorous scene between Byron and Mary takes place in a park. Here, Byron is excited by Mary's whimsical use of the Black English Vernacular:

> I'm not scolding you. Ah'm jes' nacherly lovin' you, mah honey.
>
> I adore when you talk like that. Makes me feel I'm your daddy!

Honey, you is, fo' sho'.

Where did you learn that delicious lingo?

Out of Jezebel Pettyfer and Porgy.

Glancing hastily up and down the path to be sure no one was approaching, he kissed her.

That was nice, Mary assured him.

Say thank you!

I didn't get enough to be thankful for.

He kissed her again.

Byron, don't, please! Not so hard, dearest. You're mussing me all up.

I like to!

You talk like a savage!

I am. I'm an African cannibal! Son of a king! Going to eat you up for my dinner! Growling, he exposed his even, white teeth.

She shouted with laughter. (145)

The references to primitivist imagery typical of white modernist art, but also of black modernist debates on cultural representations of the race, are redeployed here to create an erotic and grotesque effect where crossdressing and racial blackface play a central role: Mary is represented as a feminine drag of the New Negro intellectual that rivals with Lasca, feminine drag of Van Vechten (the white queer patron of the Black and Tan), over the influence to be exerted on the rising black American artist (the white queer modernist writer in disguise). The use of Black English vernacular traces the growing dependence of Mary on her "emotions," which are threatening and thrilling at the same time: a few scenes before, Mary is "no longer the mistress of her emotions. To all intents and purposes, she admitted, she was their slave" (135). To ventriloquize the New Negro intellectual through the character of Mary, *Nigger Heaven* has Mary occupy an ambiguous, uncertain position oscillating between representations of the vernacular speaker and of the standard-English speaker.

Mary, whose voice oscillates between this eroticized use of the vernacular, a more lyrical, refined and poetic incorporation of the dialect as literary device for the definition of black American national culture, and the use of standard English, is opposed to Lasca, whose voice is mostly associated to standard English. Lasca even gets to the point of asking a club owner to stop the vernacular "entertainers'" performances (250) and move to an old band whose songs are much less represented through vernacular graphisms: "I looked at the clock and the clock struck three/ I said, now daddy, that's one on me" (250). All the encounters between Lasca and Byron are narrated in standard English, and in the dialogues there is no trace of the vernacular, except for the use of the derogatory term "nigger" that in the text encodes both blackness and queerness:

You kiss very well, she remarked.

Lasca! I adore you! I want you always!

> I'm not going to leave you, she assured him, and now, for the first time he noted a strange, musical throbbing in her voice, and I'm not going to let you go. Didn't I tell you that I always get what I want.
>
> Nut why do you want *me*? What can I give to *you*?
>
> She posed his head between her palms and spoke in a voice raucous with passion: I want you to possess me, to own me. I want to be your slave, your Nigger, your own Nigger! (239, italicized in the text)

Since Lasca speaks only standard English, her voice signals that the character is situated above and *elsewhere* from where the Black English Vernacular is normally spoken – the blackened Black and Tan, and the underworld of the Creeper. From her position of externality from black Harlem, Lasca expresses the desire that Byron treats her as his "slave" and his "Nigger:" Lasca's request is articulated in the jocular terms of a sadomasochistic game, and it answers Byron's question of what the black artist (or the *white queer and non-passing modernist*) can offer to her ambiguous drag-persona (the *passing/secretive white queer slummer*). Lasca's request of being Byron's "slave" and "Nigger" expresses an injunction to a queer homoracial affiliation under the signifier of blackness. The glossary allows to decode Lasca's request of being possessed through taxonomical naming ("Nigger") that betrays alienation and anxiety, but that also articulates the possibility for literary representation of the white queer persona.

It is because of Lasca's request, of this liminal and intimate construction of blackness as white queer desire, that *Nigger Heaven* closes on an ironical ending: Lasca cannot help to reclaim the power that distinguishes her from the entire neighborhood of Harlem (as the white man attempts to restore his power in the inverted power-scene of the Black and Tan club), which is why she gets rid of Byron and chases him out of her luxury apartment, provoking Byron's folly, his ultimate pseudo-murderous act, and his redemptive plea to Mary, to pardon him:

> He drew his revolver and shot once, twice into the ugly black mass.
>
> Immediately his anger left him. The gun slipped from his fingers. His legs, shaking with terror, refused to support him. He sank to his knees.
>
> Mary, he cried aloud, I didn't do it! I didn't do it!
>
> He was curiously conscious that a white hand was reaching for the gun. He looked up to face a coat of blue buttoned with brass. (284)

The killing of Pettijohn is a liberatory act of rebellion against heteronormative masculine agency in Harlem – it explicits and reverses the theme of the policed condition of vice-district clubs. Doubling the murderous act committed by the Creeper, Byron shots at the dead body of Pettijohn to have his vengeance over Lasca. Pettijohn, that had already taken Ruby away from the Creeper (hence the Creeper's seeking for revenge), is indeed metonymical of urban economic speculation and normalization of the vice-district club. Pettijohn's economic power attracts to him the "golden-browns" that Byron (and his mirror-character Creeper) desires the most. Pettijohn's hetero-normalizing and disciplining function is verified from the beginning

of the novel, by his social-climbing attempt to marry Mary, the golden-brown representative of New Negro national culture:

> Ah doan never seem to fin' no chance to speak to you, Miss Mary, he began.
>
> Byron Kasson turned and walked away. Mary realized that she had no right to stop him.
>
> An' Ah got somethin' to say, an' dere ain' much time lef' to say et in, the King continued. Ah knows Ah ain' yo' kin', but you's mine. Ah wants a nice, 'spectable 'ooman for a wife... Mary opened her mouth to speak... Wait a minute. Ah ain't elegant. Ah ain' got no eddication lak you, but Ah got money, plenty of et, an' Ah got love. Ah'd mek you happy an' you'd give me what Ah wants, a 'spectable 'ooman [...].
>
> At last Mary succeeded in stopping him. I'm sorry, Mr. Pettijohn, she said, but it's no use. You see, I don't love you [...].
>
> The Bolito King [alias for Pettijohn] regarded her fixedly and with some wonder. You cain't mean no, he said [...]. Ah gotta git you. You jes' what Ah desires. (38)

That Pettijohn metonymizes a disciplining and heteronormative power-figure is clear when he grotesquely addresses Mary by saying "you'd give me what Ah wants, a 'spectable 'ooman." It is then not a case if Lasca hurries to associate herself to Pettijohn, who can have her pass for a woman and not for a "nigger" (read, a queer man), a game that Lasca discretely plays when she more wishes so.

Conclusion

Carline Blanc's interrogation of the effects of fictional representations of the vernacular is helpful to make some conclusive remarks on the reactions that *Nigger Heaven* produced:

> La représentation d'une variation, d'une divergence et donc d'une altérite par rapport à un réfèrent est toujours au cœur de la question de l'écriture d'une langue dite dialectale, mais le rapport change en fonction de ce qui est choisi comme réfèrent. Entre un dialecte utilisé pour caractériser un autre plus faible, ou moins bien éduqué, que l'auteur ou le narrateur d'une part et la représentation du dialecte comme originalité distinctive par rapport à un standard terne et redondant d'autre part, le positionnement de l'auteur est radicalement différent. S'agit-il de promouvoir la diversité, la multiplicité et le potentiel créatif de l'oralité, ou de réaffirmer la domination de l'unique et du normatif ?[12]

The "darkening" of the Black Venus is the liminal project of the novel for a blackness made to represent (white) masculine queer otherness, (un)able to resist normalizing and disciplinary economic speculation, and to represent, artistically and linguistically, such resistance. On the

[12] "The representation of a variation, a divergence and thus an alteration in relation to a referent is always at the heart of the question of the written form of a so-called dialectal language; however, the relationship changes according to what is chosen as a referent. Between a dialect used to characterize an Other that is weaker, or less well educated, than the author or narrator on the one hand, and the representation of the dialect as a distinctive originality in relation to a dull and redundant standard on the other, the positioning of the author is radically different. Is it a question of promoting the diversity, multiplicity and creative potential of orality, or of reaffirming the domination of the unique and the normative?" Carline Blanc, *Ecrire le folklore: subversions épistemiques chez Zora Neale Hurston et Toni Morrison*, Diss., Université Paris Est Marne-la-Vallée, 2017, p. 52.

one hand, the representation of the Black English vernacular in the novel as part of the search of atonement for white America in black culture reproduces racial difference reifying the roles it encodes; it thus reproduces the racializing language of white cultural nationalism, of which it implicitly confirms "the domination" of "the unique and the normative," in the words of Blanc. We can imagine that the ambiguous request of atonement made in *Nigger Heaven* to black America (Byron that asks Mary for her salute after shooting Pettijohn, or normal hetero-masculinity) was met with Alain Locke's appeal to artists and authors to the "duty [of being] tillers of their own provinces." Although not writing any review of *Nigger Heaven*, Locke commented Van Vechten's novel in a letter that he addressed to the writer. As Robert Worth suggests, Locke's remarks on Clement Wood's novel *Nigger* (1922) might well apply to Van Vechten's work too:

> Alain Locke, writing to Van Vechten from Paris, [called *Nigger Heaven*] a "good corrective sketch for the white reader who takes Negro life under-seriously." He particularly liked the character of Lasca Sartoris, who would shock white and black alike, he thought. "Well, the society approach is at least made for the first time," he concluded, "and the novel of manners is the acid test. I must do a review and say so." Locke did not, however, write the review. The evidence suggests that his feelings about *Nigger Heaven* were far more mixed than he was willing to admit. Four years before, reviewing *The Nigger* in *The Crisis*, Locke had made a similar point about Wood's novel. It was not condescending, he wrote, or at least not intentionally so; the author had done his best to paint a serious, even "weighty" portrait of Negro life. "We can no longer complain of not being taken seriously." Not being taken seriously, however, was not the only danger. Another risk loomed in Wood's gloomy sympathy for the oppressed, ever-fugitive Nigger of his novel. As Locke put it,
>
> > … is there not now a looming danger of another lurch of interest-that of being taken over-seriously? Painstaking realism, the almost microscopic analysis of problem study – commendable as they are, approach the tragedy of our social life through the formula – and from the pathological angle. This must be, so long as the analysis is not self-analysis – done from the psychological intimacy of the race experience itself. We hope our authors, having lost to a considerable extent the glory of pioneers, will not shirk the more serious and steady duty of settlers and tillers of their own provinces.[13]

Locke's comment questions the ambiguous artistic expression of liminality in *Nigger Heaven*: the representation of liminality in the novel is enshrined in the white and national linguistic, literary and social identity that Van Vechten structurally assumed and which, according to Locke, is projected in the almost obsessive microanalysis of black characters in his novel.

However, it is undeniable that *Nigger Heaven* developed a self-satirical theme – that, in a sense, it did "till the provinces" of Van Vechten's own authorial emplacements.[14] Choosing as

---

[13] Robert F Worth, "Nigger Heaven and the Harlem Renaissance", *African American Review*, 29/3 (Autumn, 1995), p. 463.

[14] "The author-function is linked to the juridical and institutional system that surrounds, determines, articulates the universe of discourse; this function is not exercised uniformly and in the same fashion in all discourses, in every epoch and in every civilization form; it is not defined by spontaneous attribution of a discourse to its productor, but by a series of specific and complex operations; it does not purely and simply refer to a real individual, it can produce several subject-positions which different

one of its main settings the underground world of 1920s Harlem and using the resources of orality re-transcribed in prose, the novel explored the ambiguous (im)possibility of representation of "black" intimacies, where "black" was made to stand for homoerotic *and/or* interracial. This was probably a "microscopic analysis" of characters and themes in *Nigger Heaven* that Alain Locke preferred not to tackle, over his own anxieties of political and social heteronormative respectability. There is an irony implicit to the conditions of (im)possibility of representation of queerness that *Nigger Heaven* does play out: the implicit power of the queer white patron of the Black and Tan rests on practices of social passing to whiteness, which is to say to heterosexual normativity and queer secrecy – secrecy which is also visual and representational. These practices of secrecy grant the invisibility of white queerness and reinforce disciplining heteronormativity, confirming an epistemological and visual hegemony of the regime of whiteness as heterosexual and patriarchal, and of the norm as white. To break this regime of invisibility, the queer white author as queer white patron of the Black and Tan enters a world of subverted power relations which he maps, and in which he cannot but obtain a precarious position. In *Nigger Heaven,* blackness and taxonomies of the Black and Tan came to encode both the irony of a failed wielding of white masculine power, and the possibility of (artistic and visual) salvation for the white queer man, that self-identifies as Negro.

The *Glossary of Negro Words and Phrases* organizes the linguistic code to decipher such irony; arguably, this code is conceived in such a way as to be accessible to queer urban readers on both sides of the color line. The *Glossary* encodes a common language and an attempt at visibilization of masculine queerness through a blackening of homoerotic – and a queering of interracial/homoracial – intimacies: "*Negro Words and Phrases*" constitute, basically, a homoerotic and interracial/homoracial code of visibility. In the scheme of the novel, decoded through the taxonomies listed in its *Glossary*, the association of the young black/queer artist (Byron) with a queered official black reformist culture (Mary) appears as an act of atonement that genealogically follows the black artist's attempt to neutralize normalizing heteropatriarchal (white) power (Pettijohn), that grants the reproduction of white queer masculine privilege (Lasca). The Black Venus is the space from where the black artist invokes the atoning acceptance of the black (queer) community through its carnivalesque cultural representative, Mary.

The collective of young black artists that produced the magazine *Fire!!* in 1926 not only reclaimed Van Vechten's novel in a polemical stance against the critiques of New Negro reformers and various groups of more conservative respectable commentators. The magazine also parodied and revised *Nigger Heaven* through the literary contributions it assembled. In *Fire!!* the code and taxonomies of the *Glossary of Negro Words and Phrases* were deciphered and re-signified in several ways. One instance is the use of the adjective "dicty"[15] that in Van Vechten's fictional appropriation simply means "snobbish" (285) and serves to distinguish the normative sort of underground club from the Black Venus/Black and Tan. Wallace Thurman's

---

classes of individuals can get to occupy." Michel Foucault, "Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur? "*Dits et écrits, 1954-1988, Tome I*, Paris, Gallimard, 1994, p. 803-804.

[15] Wallace Thurman, "Cordelia the Crude", *Fire!!*, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

short story "Cordelia the Crude," that opens the magazine, obtains its ironical effect because, in it, the vernacular adjective "dicty" is deployed with its double insulting connotation of "snobbish" and "fag" – a double meaning that Van Vechten's novel ignored[16]. The irony of the short story overwrites the representation of the white-policed vice Black and Tan in *Nigger Heaven*, as a threatening space of liberated black/queer affects, that would trigger white hegemonic anxieties. In fact, in "Cordelia the Crude," the Black and Tan triggers the anxieties of the very black narrative voice, who is privy about his desire, and who passes as straight policing his partner Cordelia into sex work. At the end of the story, Cordelia jokes with her companions about the "dicty kid" who had given her her "firs'two bucks"[17]: this is how Cordelia calls out the snobbish man for what he hides, regardless of his wish to pass as straight. The Black and Tan as a black space of white atonement for Van Vechten's tragic "Prodigal Son"[18] is reworked in *Fire!!* not on the mode of a colonial analogy (which is to say, by associating black liminality and homoerotic liminality)[19], but by stretching out the potential of fictional differentiation embedded in *Nigger Heaven*, to articulate black queer voices beyond the injunctions of New Negro reformism.

Bibliography

BLANC Carline, *Ecrire le folklore: subversions épistemiques chez Zora Neale Hurston et Toni Morrison*, Dissertation, Université Paris Est Marne-la-Vallée, 2017.

FIRE!! Devoted to Younger Negro Artists, cur. Richard Bruce Nugent and Thomas H. Wirth, (1926) 1982.

FOUCAULT Michel, « Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur? », *Dits et écrits, 1954-1988, Tome I*, Paris, Gallimard, 1994, 803-804.

HUGGINS Nathan Irvin, *Harlem Renaissance*, London, Oxford UP, 1973.

HUTCHINSON Georges, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*, Cambridge, Belknap Press/Harvard UP, 1995.

MUMFORD Kevin J., *Interzones. Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century*, New York, Columbia UP, 1997.

MUÑOZ José Esteban, *Disidentifications. Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

---

[16] I wish to thank Marlon B. Ross for bringing this semantic friction to my attention on the occasion of the defense of my PhD thesis, which he presided as member of the jury.

[17] AA.VV. *Fire!! Op. cit.*, p. 6.

[18] Van Vechten himself referred to *Nigger Heaven* as "the story of the Prodigal Son, without the happy ending of that Biblical history." In Worth, "Nigger Heaven and the Harlem Renaissance", *op. cit.*, p. 462.

[19] I refer to the discussion developed in Jean-Paul Rocchi, "Le "sang-melé", le fantasme et l'homosexualité: étude d'une analogie freudienne à trois termes", *Sang impur, autour de la "race" (Grand Bretagne, Canada, Etats-Unis)*, Michel Prum (ed.), Paris, Editions L'Harmattan, 2004, p. 203-231 & p. 206-207.

RAYNAUD Claudine (ed.), *La Renaissance de Harlem et l'art Nègre*, Paris, Michel Houdiard, 2014.

ROCCHI Jean-Paul, « Le "sang-mêlé", le fantasme et l'homosexualité: étude d'une analogie freudienne à trois termes », *Sang impur, autour de la "race" (Grande Bretagne, Canada, Etats-Unis)*, dir. Michel Prum, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2004, 203-231.

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

---, « The New Negro Displayed: Self-Ownership, Proprietary Sites/Sights, and the Bonds/Bounds of Race », *Claiming the Stones, Manning the Bones: Cultural Property and the Negotiation of National and Ethnic Identity*, dir. Elazar Barkan and Ronald Bush, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2002, 259-301.

VAN VECHTEN Carl, *Nigger Heaven*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, (1926) 2000.

WORTH Robert F., « *Nigger Heaven* and the Harlem Renaissance », *African American Review* 29/3, Autumn 1995, 461-473.