Wallace Thurman's Marginality and his Quest for Recognition through Primitivism: A Critical Analysis of his Play *Harlem*

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ABSTRACT: *From the beginning of their presence in the United States, blacks faced an all-encompassing process of marginalization and inferiorization imposed by the dominant white America, so they had to adopt different kinds of strategies in order to fight marginalization and find the respect and recognition they longed for. In the 1920s, young African American writers, greatly influenced by the modernist primitivism of the post-war Europe and the hedonistic zeitgeist of the Jazz Age America, opted to give a primitive, exotic portrait of Negro life. They naïvely believed that their primitivist representational strategy could prove their unique features and worth to whites and thus could bring them a more secure status in society by fascinating the post-war disillusioned Americans. Wallace Thurman was one of these writers who was extremely marginalized because he was not only black, but also homosexual. Trying to dispose of his subalternized status in society, Thurman went for a decadent, primitivist representational strategy since he held that an exotic portrait of Negro life, which catered to the taste of dominant whites, could grant him recognition and respect of which he had been deprived due to his "non-normative" skin color and sexual orientation. This paper tries to analyze Thurman's marginality and its influence on his choice of primitivism through a critical analysis of his play Harlem. It also aims to show that Thurman's goal to achieve recognition through the exotic representation of Negro life was a naïve, simplistic agenda which never materialized.*

Keywords: Wallace Thurman, Marginality, Homosexuality, Primitivism, Harlem, Recognition, Decadence, Rent parties

I. Introduction

Ever since the first encounter between Columbus and Native Americans in the fifteenth century, the Western consciousness has Otherized the non-white subject as different and inferior (Fredrickson 36). This process of inferiorization, or "niggerization" as called by Ossie Davis (Yancy 217), was a useful practical tool in the hands of the advocates of the institution of slavery in the United States since it could easily justify the atrocious deeds perpetrated against blacks. Through degrading Negroes as depraved, promiscuous, lazy and heathen just because of their skin color, white America managed to extremely marginalize blacks and deprive them of their basic civil rights not only in the slavery era, but even after the Emancipation(Brown 659-60; Mocombe 8).

However, racial marginalization was not the only kind of marginalization imposed on minorities in the United States. The mainstream American society, obsessed with the concept of "normality", excluded and subalternized minorities which were deemed as "deviant" in relation to the "normal" dominant group (Carter 26; Collins 96). And homosexuals, as a minority group, were no exception and had to undergo the same processes of labeling and inferiorization. Just as whiteness which needed the construction of the inferiority of blackness in order to establish itself as the norm, heterosexuality attempted to place itself at the top of the hierarchical binarism of sexual orientation through stigmatizing homosexuality (Carter 23). This hegemonic discourse was so powerful that "homosexuality was considered criminal under the law and evil by the church" (Rondeau 445) and was even rejected by science as an omen of degeneration and turpitude (Collins 94). In the following section, we will analyze the insecure sociopolitical and professional status of the marginalized Wallace Thurman, the African American homosexual writer of the early twentieth century, in the white-heterosexual-dominated United States, and its influence on his choice of primitivist representation strategy in his works on Harlem life.

II. Wallace Thurman, Marginality and His Choice of Decadent Primitivism

Thurman's works were embedded in the context of the Harlem Renaissance, the first major African American literary movement. It should be borne in mind that the early twentieth century movement, far from being a monolithic and coherent entity, lends itself to various interpretations: some critics hail it as the outburst of black Americans' self-assertion against the white America's oppressive and exclusionary

attitude; some consider it as closely related to the burgeoning anti-colonial movements all around the world and there are even critics who dismiss it as an elitist local phenomenon which failed to cross the restricted boundaries of its hotbed in Manhattan and have an indelible impression on the daily lives of the ordinary, impoverished and underprivileged black masses. Despite such differences of opinion with regard to the origins and orientations of the Harlem Renaissance, critics are unanimous in asserting that the movement was marked by an unflinching determination on the part of young black writers to prove their artistic merit and arrive at an adequate self-definition in the face of the racist and supremacist zeitgeist of the era (Roshnavand 37-38).

For instance, Langston Hughes, the most famous poet of the movement, resorted to primitivism and exoticism in *The Weary Blues*, his first volume of poetry published in 1926, in an attempt to win admission into the American cultural sphere, then guarded and regulated by white publishers and patrons. By depicting blacks as primitive, happy-go-lucky and hedonistic in his collection, Hughes in fact sought to valorize the African American culture and thereby, grab the attention of the disgruntled white intelligentsia who had come to view their once much-vaunted western civilization as a barren wasteland following the heinous bloodshed of World War I (Beyad and Roshnavand 370-373; Davis 277-80). Hughes's primitivist representational strategy was employed by many other artists active in the Harlem Renaissance including Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay and Wallace Thurman.

Whatsoever kind of marginality was imposed on African Americans in the early twentieth century, it was much more oppressive and stifling for Thurman who was not only colored, but also homosexual. Psychologically wounded by family instability and poor health in his childhood, Thurman learned to rely heavily on books and films to soothe himself, an inclination which accompanied him into his adult life and until his early death. Intent on shaping the chaos of being a black homosexual into order, he continually struggled throughout his life to overcome the desperate sense of estrangement, which had beset him because of his permanent outsider status in society, by means of literature. During his formative years, Thurman, in his quest for a safe emotional refuge, delved into the voracious reading of European literary giants such as Plato, Aristotle, da Vinci, Shakespeare, Goethe, Shelley, Keats, Flaubert, Dostoyevsky, Baudelaire, Stendhal, Ibsen, Anatole France, and Freud, among others (Singh 3-5).

When Thurman embarked on his literary career, the German jurist Karl Heinrich Ulrichs's concept of "uranianism" was in currency, a term which referred to homosexuals as individuals with women's souls ensnared in men's bodies, or the other way around. Trying to explain a kind of hybrid development, Ulrichs propounded that the human embryo could develop a female soul while simultaneously its physical development took a male direction, or vice versa. Employing Ulrichs's theory, Edward Carpenter, the English philosopher, argued that uranians could turn into society's notable artists and teachers because their hybrid spirit made them much more perceptive to the entire gamut of human emotions than ordinary human beings. The idea of uranianism was greatly popular among the late nineteenth and early twentieth century homosexuals since it did not explain their "deviant" sexuality in degrading and criminalizing terms; instead, the term, taken from "uranos" in Plato's *Symposium* meaning "heavenly", even attributed a positive and redeeming connotation to their non-normative sexual orientation. As to be expected, Thurman seems to be fascinated with the concept and even used the term once in his novel *Infants of the Spring* (Ganter 89).

Concurrent with the postulation of the supposedly redeeming power of homosexuality, W. E. B. DuBois' concept of African American double consciousness also gained popularity. DuBois maintained that the exclusionary stance of the white America towards blacks had eventuated in the formation of an African American dual personality; a double consciousness which entailed two cultural identities, each addressing a diverse social role, one black and one white, at conflict with one another in each African American's consciousness owing to the different implications of those identities within the mainstream American society. However, to DuBois, double consciousness was not just a bane, but also a boon. He argued that African Americans, endowed with the gift of "second-sight", had developed a weltanschauung which was unexampled on the planet, and which, due to its race-transcending quality, had the potential to unfetter all persons (qtd. in Rawls 243). In his view "the sensuous, tropical love" of the black American was the only alternative to complement and save "the cool, cautious New England reason" (DuBois qtd. in Mocombe 46).

Ulrichs's notion of "uranianism" and DuBois' concept of "double consciousness" greatly fostered Thurman's fascination with what he thought of as the unique gift of his artistic expression. In other words,

Thurman came to view literature (or better to say primitivist literature) as a vehicle through which he could manifest his meritorious talents and thus his eligibility to achieve a more secure status in society of which he had been deprived due to his blackness and homosexuality.

In the racist, sexually repressive atmosphere of the early twentieth century United States, it was expedient for the ailing and subalternized Thurman to find the panacea for his psychic in-betweenness in the European artists of the Decadent movement. The fin de siècle Decadent writers were disenchanted with the lassitude, satiety and ennui of their society and therefore embraced a systematic frustration of all the senses, deviancy from conventional norms of behavior, sexual experimentation and the use of drugs to escape the stifling disillusionment and boredom (Abrams and Harpham 55). In a similar manner, Thurman, traumatized by the prevalent racism of the white-dominated society and also by his ingrained ambivalence toward his sexual polyvalence, tried to find a voice through applying "to pleasure, to the sensation of being alive, the idea of the hyperacuity of the senses" and effecting "a creation through the pure logic of contrarity" by moving in the opposite direction (Charles Baudelaire qtd. in Ganter 94). Having experienced a constant reinvention and renegotiation of identity due to his double-consciousness as a black American and his subalternity as a homosexual (Jarraway 38), he called for all artists to trample on all sexual and cultural borders in the pursuit of their art, as Baudelaire, Huysmans and Wilde had done (Ganter 89).

He believed that an artist couldn't find his way into the creative world of the mind unless he dared to cross the boundaries of social conformity and righteousness. With such an iconoclastic mindset, he severely castigated African American audience, since he held they only expected black writers to produce "social jeremiads" or build "rosy castles around Negro society" (qtd. in Scruggs 559). Consequently, Thurman argued against the black bourgeoisie's preoccupation with the notions of uplift and respectability, and also rejected DuBois' idea of propagandist school of theater (Ganter 90-1), which encouraged black playwrights to depict Negroes not only as they really were but also as they desired to be (S. A. Hay qtd. in Bean 93). Rather than describing the Negro culture as it ought to be, Thurman maintained that it should be depicted as it really was, and that was the main reason he opted for the employment of the primitivist vogue which was at the zenith of popularity in the early twentieth century.

Having started in Europe with the groundbreaking paintings of Pablo Picasso, Paul Gauguin and Henry Matisse, the primitivist vogue of the early twentieth century gradually wormed its way into all branches of the Modernist art. Marked by its fascination with "l'art nègre" and the allegedly unrestrictive, spontaneous and uncivilized aspects of black life, primitivist vogue crossed the Atlantic, became one of the indispensable cornerstones of the Jazz Age and quenched the era's predilection for hedonism and exoticism. The outcome of this vogue in the United States was the unprecedented interest of the disenchanted young writers of the 1920s in Negro material. Carl Van Vechten, Sherwood Anderson, Eugene O'Neill, Waldo Frank and DuBose Heyward were among the writers who produced primitivist works addressing the "exotic" lifestyle of black Americans (Washington 32-3).

Having come to appreciate post-World War I white America's fascination with the ostensibly exotic features of African American life, Thurman decided to depict Harlem nightlife and rent parties, blacks Americans' unusual sexual choices and their dissatisfaction with their own skin color in his works (Ganter 90). The result of his primitivist writing was two novels *The Blacker the Berry: A Novel of Negro Life* (1929) and *Infants of the Spring* (1932), and a play *Harlem: A Melodrama of Negro Life in Harlem* (1929), which he wrote in collaboration with William Jordan Rapp, a white writer. In this section of the article, we will analyze Thurman's primitivist play *Harlem* in order to come to a better understanding of his ambitions as a black homosexual writer to be granted admission in the mainstream American society.

III. Portrait of Harlem as a Primitive Utopian Non-Place in Thurman' Play

Thurman believed that the Negro representation in white Americans' fiction is limited only to three stereotypes: "the old servant or mammy type", "the lazy slow-foot type" and "the superstitious, praying type", all of which "flatter the white's sense of superiority" and "please him to believe that all colored people are like this" (Rapp and Thurman "*Harlem* as Educational Drama" 373). On that account, as he claimed, Thurman set out to offer a new representation of the Negro in his play which not only differed from the whites' long-held stereotypes, but also frustrated the black bourgeoisie's whitewashed and preapproved conception of Negro life. Aiming to give a "realistic" depiction of Harlem life, Thurman decided to show that "hard work, faith and family

mean little to the new generation north of 125th Street" and that "movies, streets, speakeasies and dance halls are more attractive than home and get Harlem's youth" (Rapp and Thurman "Two Playwrights Look at Harlem" 375). Consequently, Thurman believed that sensationalism should be an inseparable element in the realistic portrait of black urban life. Stressing the exotic qualities of African American modus vivendi, he maintained that a work of art about Harlem life should picture the realities of black life like the fact that "the restaurants, shops, and speak-easies of Seventh and Lenox Avenues are busier at four in the morning than four in the afternoon" (Rapp and Thurman "Two Playwrights Look at Harlem" 374).

The play *Harlem* narrated the story of the Williams family, who migrated North in the hope of getting better salaries and achieving a more secure sociopolitical status. However, instead of finding New York as a Utopian promised land as they had envisioned, they encountered many of the hardships that often beleaguered the families of migration, including unemployment, overcrowded tenements and generational conflicts, intensified by difficulties black migrants had in adjusting themselves to urban life (Krasner 66).

Ironically, under the façade of the seemingly realistic representations of the play, one can arrive at distortions and incongruities which stemmed from Thurman's ultimate desire to dispose of his subaltern status and be integrated into the mainstream American society. It is incontestable that Thurman actively sought to defy the political, racial and sexual isolationisms of the early twentieth century through his decadent primitivist works. Greatly inflicted by his split character and his double marginalized social status, he established his artistic career as a means to challenge the aura of authenticity surrounding the culturally constructed stereotypes of blackness and produce genuine and distinctly African American representations of desire and identity in the urban modern culture (Glick qtd. in Duvall and Peterson 411). However, Thurman's quest for identity, which he pursued as a compensation for his limited and pre-defined status, finally prompted him to construct a utopian dream space (or better to say a non-place) such as Harlem, which provided a greater scope for the (imaginary) realization of his and other subalternized Negroes' frustrated desires. His emphasis on excess, beyondness and unassimilated Otherness of the Harlem nightlife (Jarraway 37) was in fact an egress not only from the racist white America, but also from the black middle class' narrow-minded and

parochial views which derogatorily labeled his homosexuality as a threat to racial unity and a source of social disintegration and corruption (Glick 414-5).

What should be taken into consideration is the fact that his interest in promoting African American identity through primitivist representation of Negroes was not an independent, African American-rooted and African American-oriented agenda. As mentioned earlier, Thurman was greatly influenced by fin de siècle writers and one can easily detect the Decadent, Naturalist and Frenchified spirit of 1890s behind his primitivist works. For instance, in his play *Harlem*, Thurman tried to imitate Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857) and Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900) not only in his choice of a female protagonist, but also in his looking into her sexual and social possibilities and her final defiance and lack of repentance. In a similar manner, Thurman was also under the huge impact of the primitivist tendencies of the avant-garde modernists of the early twentieth century who showed a faddist, superficial interest in the "exotic" black Other. This can be of great importance when one notes that Thurman's claim about giving a realistic picture of Harlem life and its problems, such as the depiction of overcrowded apartment living, unemployed Southern Negroes, color-coded prejudiced among blacks, poverty and corruption, turns out to be a foil for highlighting the exuberant and happy-go-lucky ambiance of Harlem cabarets which were portrayed by him as magical places which could heal all the above-mentioned deficiencies (Ganter 84-8). Racism, poverty and suffering have no place in Thurman's version of black nightlife; a Harlem cabaret is depicted as though it endows the marginalized black with a veil of forgetfulness of his/her misfortunes; it is a place where

> Body calls to body. They cement themselves together with limbs lewdly intertwined. A couple is kissing. Another couple is dipping to the floor and slowly shimmying belly to belly as they come back to an upright position. A slender, dark girl with wild eyes and wilder hair stands in the center of the room supported by the strong lithe arms of a longshoreman. Her eyes are closed. Her teeth bite into her lower lip. Her trunk is bent backward until her head hangs below her waist and all the while the lower portion of her body is quivering like so much agitated Jell-O. (Rapp and Thurman "Harlem" 337)

The dependence on the white aesthetic and popular predilections is also evident in Thurman's collaboration with William Jordan Rapp in writing the play. He admitted in *The Writing of Harlem: The Story of a Strange Collaboration* that he needed the aid of Rapp "to launch himself in a writing career" (376). In return for Rapp's help, Thurman took the role of a "native informant", as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak called it (qtd. in Maggio 427), and introduced Rapp "to every aspect of Harlem existence" ("*The Writing of Harlem"* 376). Betraying his ultimate desire to catch the attention of the white public, Thurman acknowledged in the same review that he decided to build his play around a rent party, "the most novel and glamorous institution in the Black Belt", to give it show qualities that Broadway required for success ("*The Writing of Harlem*" 377). However, the existence of a rent party is indeed an undeniable testimonial to the enormous overcrowding and prevalent poverty of the Harlem life in 1920s, a fact that didn't receive much attention in the play (Early 140). Moreover, Thurman also had to condescend to the whims of the white producer in order for the play to be staged. In *Detouring Harlem to Times Square*, he explained that Mr. Lewis, the white producer, changed the title of the play and inserted a cabaret scene in the third act in order to add a "wow" to it (371). And as already discussed, this play alongside his novels show the strong influence of Jazz Age white writers' primitivist works, and most notably Carl Van Vechten's notorious novel *Nigger Heaven* (1926), on Thurman and his fellow primitivist writers in depicting the bawdy side of Negro life (D. Scott 326).

IV. Conclusion: The Dream of Recognition Deferred

Thurman's choice of romantic racialization and transgressive imaginative sensibility served him as an escape from his self-hatred as a black and a homosexual, and as a way to gain white society's respect and recognition, wishes that were never realized and he was not even allowed to sit in the white section of the theatre where his play was being staged (F. Scott 438). Thurman considered his generation of black Americans as "Columbuses ... discovering things about themselves and about their environment which it seems to them their elders have been at pains to hide" (qtd. in Ganter 84). Whether what he meant by discovery was the alleged exoticism and spontaneity of black Americans or not, his quest for exploration finally led to more frustration and disillusionment which not only couldn't cure his marginality, but aggravated it. Thurman was an idealist, like the protagonist of his play who said to her unsupportive

family and friends that "when you hears from me again, I'm gonna be livin' high, standin' in de lights above deir heads, makin' de whole world look up at me" (Rapp and Thurman, "Harlem" 369). However, Thurman, and all the other young black aspiring writers of the period who subscribed to the primitivist representation of Negro life, were delusionally naïve since they failed to see that a faddist trend of literature would never be able to remove the traces of centuries-long discrimination and racism, and provide them with the voice and agency they were longing for.

Trapped by the juggernaut of the primitivist fad, Thurman was oblivious to the fact that "efforts to resist domination can readily re-enforce it, if such resistance is cast in the code of the dominator" (Brown 658) and that writing about a culture and its values using techniques and methods contrived in another culture could backfire (Njaka 12). Inattentive to the sociological implications of his primitivist representational strategy, Thurman in effect perpetuated the old demeaning stereotypes of Negroes' spontaneity and sexual freedom which had long for long been looked down upon but then came into vogue as the saving grace of the Western wasteland. By emphasizing on an intrinsic disparity between civilized whites and exotic blacks, Thurman and his fellow primitivist writers of the 1920s could be published and make money, but demoted the American Negroes to the status of an irrevocable, even if enviable, Other who was not American and could not expect to be considered a rightful one (Chinitz 64).

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