

The Pan-African Movement and American Black Political Fiction 1920s to 1950s: Themes of Alienation

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This paper focuses on the role of the writer as a social activist. Accordingly, I examine novelist/essayists who published during the Harlem Renaissance period 1920 to 1930 and in some cases beyond. I am interested in part in the Pan-African movement as it impacted on this era of Afro-American history. The central question explored is what are some of the dynamics that exist between the writer, movement elites, movement rank-in-file, and the broader Afro-American community? The central focus is on the kind of interactions that take place between the writer as a political activist, movement elites, and movement activists. The following writers seem to reflect this particular period - W.E.B. Du Bois, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes among others.

The Harlem Renaissance: A Historical Overview

What makes a novel political is its subject matter. Politics need not be the central focus of a piece of fiction so long as it is interwoven throughout the story and has at least a secondary impact on the characters. The author may be both observer or participant observer in the events recorded within the novel. Alienation, as a theme in most political fiction, has many different facets. It has social, psychological, and, in certain situations, political ramifications. There has been a tendency in the recent past to define "political fiction" in a far too narrow sense "as fiction focusing on the lives of politically prominent individuals," an example being Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*.¹ The purpose here is to somewhat broaden the parameters.

A major point to explore in this paper is to what extent can a certain genre of novels be a source for predicting the rise, transforma-

tion, or decline of social movements? I think the answer to this question may be partially dependent on such factors as: 1) when a novel is published and the size and composition of the readership, 2) the circumstances surrounding the publication of the novel, especially where publisher demands may tend to alter the content of the novel in a political direction or which could obscure the intended message, 3) the author's craftsmanship and communications skills, 4) the author's identification with a cause, 5) the communications processes between the author and the leadership of a movement which can often speak to the maturity level of the movement as well as the author's, and 6) the communication processes between the author and the movement's rank-in-file. The above points are difficult but not impossible avenues for empirical research. Of the six points, the question of links between author and social movement is most significant and also quite complex. The careers of W.E.B. Du Bois and Claude McKay have been selected for exploration in this paper, although I will also touch on a few additional authors.

It can be assumed that even the most popular novel, i.e., widely read work, reaches only a small segment of the population, particularly now with the advent of television but also during the period under discussion. Thus, politically oriented novels do not, in most cases, reach a mass audience. Their impact is therefore an indirect one--from author to the reader--to a much larger audience.

It may be that the author who identifies with a social-political movement has the ability to reach a broader public, thus contributing to its efforts to expand and win support. The author thus becomes a spokesperson. Can the author or the artist retain artistic integrity under these circumstances? This is the dynamic I will return to later on in this discussion.

What Constitutes 'Black Political Fiction'?

What has been said about politically oriented novels holds true to a large extent for black political fiction. The Harlem Renaissance era was an important historical time frame in black America. It was a period in which African Americans were struggling to regain their African identity within an American context. The black intelligentsia took the lead in this process, or at least a significant segment of it was active in this endeavor, including people like Du Bois and McKay. The Harlem Renaissance reflected a clash between intellectual stirrings and political ideological controversy over goals and the tactics necessary to achieve those goals. The Pan-African movements of 1919 through 1929, and in some cases well into the 1930s, contributed to the process of consciousness raising.

To the extent that it was a single movement, Pan-Africanism represented the growing awareness that people of color, in this case

black people, were in fact a force in international politics even though they were still fighting the centuries old effects of European colonialism; effects which are still being felt on the continent of Africa as this paper is being written. In many ways the current conflicts pre-date the arrival of European colonialism but were nevertheless exacerbated by its arrival. Even the deliberations of the League of Nations (1919-20s) were impacted by the Pan-African movement. In any case one cannot discuss the Harlem Renaissance period without at least acknowledging the presence of Pan-Africanism as a vital force.

Pan-Africanism fed into the Harlem Renaissance period by breaking the isolation of African Americans from their historical roots. As with any social movement that crosses geographical boundaries and even oceans, it had within it conflicting ideological currents. It is also not surprising, given the geo-political realities of the time, that the impetus for the Pan-African movement had its beginnings outside the African continent lead by people like Du Bois and George Padmore. The major conflicting currents were black nationalism and Marxism, with divisions in each camp. These currents were also a part of the Harlem Renaissance era. In many ways, the Harlem Renaissance movement embraced Pan-Africanism and resisted it at the same time, and this was certainly a central part of the politics of identity. Pan-Africanism was a movement for cultural renewal, revitalization, and in some cases cultural transformation; and thus at times it was and still is at war with itself.

To this end I will offer a brief analysis of literary works published during the later part of the 1920s and, to a lesser extent, the 1950s, since the impact of the Harlem Renaissance extends beyond the 1920s. In many ways they reflect the process of struggle toward consciousness raising. In fact if one were to examine Du Bois' *Dark Princess*² and his later work--*Black Flame: The Ordeal of Mansart*,³ *Mansart Builds a School*,⁴ and *Worlds of Color*⁵--one can see a continuing theme unfold. The trilogy is not strictly autobiographical but does contain features that have those overtones.

Alienation and the Black Identity--1920s to 1950s

W.E.B Du Bois' political activism is well known, as are his journalistic writings and essays. His fiction pieces are less well known but deal with issues and themes covered in his non-fiction.

Dark Princess and his *Black Flame Trilogy* are linked together in terms of thematic development, yet the trilogy is a far more extensive piece of work published late in his multi-faceted career. The trilogy actually depicts an important crossroads in his political evolution. In 1961 he openly declared his support of the U.S. Communist Party as the final segment of *Black Flame - Worlds of Color* was published. However, Du Bois had always supported socialist ideals since fairly early in his career

and part three of *Black Flame* represented the culmination of his political involvement despite attempts, fairly successful during the 1950s, to ostracize and isolate him from the Afro American community.

Du Bois' fiction works, like many others of the period, reached a relatively small segment of the population even within the Afro American community, yet it touched a larger audience because of major events that were taking place. This holds true for the 1920s as well as the 1950s. Thus his novels managed to capture the spirit of the times. He was a leading participant in the numerous Pan-African congresses, particularly from the early 1920s to the late 1930s. He was in every sense of the phrase a participant observer during the time frame under discussion. This was to be the case up until the day he died.

As Part One--*The Ordeal of Mansart* opens the reader finds that Manuel Mansart's father was murdered by members of the Ku Klux Klan because he was attempting, with some success, to organize black and poor whites against the landed aristocracy in the South, most likely Georgia. The murder took place the same night Manuel Mansart, the principal character in the trilogy, was born. Part Two--*Mansart Builds a School* picks up the story about twenty years later as Mansart became a black educator. This facet of the story is somewhat autobiographical except that Du Bois was not born in the South but in New England of a mixed racial heritage. The last segment *Worlds of Color* depicts Mansart at a fairly late stage in his life. He traveled abroad to Europe and Asia and this represented an important turning point in his life. Again, the time frame is more than suggestive. In the book the time period is circa 1936 highlighted by the rise of fascism in Europe and Japanese militarism in Asia. Part Three came out on the wake of the McCarthy period 1950-57. It is also important to remember that Du Bois died in 1963 during the historic march on Washington. At the time he was working on an edition of the *Encyclopedia Africana* in newly independent Ghana. Thus, *Black Flame* literally covers the life span of one of the greatest men of this century.

To some extent Du Bois stood above the internal in-fighting that was a frequent fact of life in left-wing politics throughout the 1920-1950 period. The question of how one "stands above" internal in-fighting within a social movement is itself complex. Somehow Du Bois was able to retain his commitment and avoid most of the battles over personal egos. I do not mean to suggest that he was totally immune to these kinds of pressures, but, for the most part, he did manage to retain a sense of balance over the years.

Unlike certain other writers of the period, for example Jean Toomer and Jesse Fauset Nella Larsen, Claude McKay was also very much the participant observer at least during the first two decades. This is one of the significant differences between him and Du Bois, who remained active throughout his life. McKay was a co-editor of *Liberator*

magazine, a socialist periodical of that era. He also brought a West Indian caribbean perspective to the African American experience. He was primarily a poet but his novel *Home to Harlem* stirred up almost as much controversy as Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* published two years earlier, and for many of the same reasons. Du Bois attacked both Van Vechten's and McKay's writings in his editorials appearing in *Crisis* magazine. Most of the criticisms of the two novels revolved around what many people felt was a one sided portrayal of life in Harlem. Van Vechten, who was white, was attacked because many people felt he betrayed the confidences of people he interviewed while doing research for his novel. As a friend of Mabel Dodge, patron saint of the Greenwich Village movement, he served as a link of sorts with the Harlem Renaissance people.

The title *Nigger Heaven* was meant to be ironical in tone. Indeed the same phrase "Nigger Heaven" appears in context in McKay's novel. It is spoken by one of the minor characters in the story:

I should think the nigger heaven of a theater downtown is better than anything in this heah Harlem said Sussy. When we feels like going out its better we enjoy ourself in the li'l corner the white folks' low us, and then shuffle along back home. It's good and quiet ovah in Brooklyn.⁶

The above can be contrasted by dialogue spoken by another relative minor character in *Home to Harlem*. It too is highly suggestive of class conflict within the African American community. The lines are spoken by Miss Curdy: "I never did have anytime for Harlem....When I was high up in society all respectable colored people lived in Washington. There was no Harlem full of niggers then. I declare!"⁷

In Van Vechten's novel the principal character Bryan Kasson introduces the phrase "Nigger Heaven" in this context:

Nigger Heaven! Nigger Heaven! That's what heaven is. We sit in our places in the gallery of this New York theater 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 doesn't seem to occur to them either, 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. No, they have no fear of that! Harlem! The mecca of the new Negro! My God!⁸

Looking back on this period I get the impression from reading these two novels and reviews of them, including those from the black press as well, that some of the criticisms were knee jerk reactions. This is not to imply that McKay's and Van Vechten's works were without stylistic problems, particularly with the lack of fuller development of the main characters--Jake Brown and Bryan Kasson.

During the Harlem Renaissance era, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay and Du Bois each had direct ties with organized political movements. Hughes was probably the more widely read of the three, with the possible exception of Du Bois' articles in *Crisis*.⁹ Their ties, however, were ambivalent especially with the various leadership elites. Some of this ambivalence can be traced to clashes of personality, disagreement over movement tactics in a given situation, arguments over the meaning of particular events, or often a combination of these factors. A distinction should be made between being aligned with a movement and being tied to a particular political party. There is also the question of being a party sympathizer and/or a member subject to the discipline of party membership. All these factors suggest different kinds of pressures.

It has been argued in times past that a writer who is subjected to the discipline of a political party cannot retain his/her artistic integrity. The charge has more often than not been leveled at writers who were members of the Communist Party.¹⁰ I would argue that it depends on how one chooses to define artistic independence and, more importantly, artistic integrity. Furthermore, it depends on whether the party in question has a sufficient sense of its goals as well as the tactical sense of how to reach them. The writer who identifies with a movement rather than a political party faces a different set of problems related to the diversity of social movements like the civil rights movement, women's liberation and so on. Their goals are more often than not ill-defined and the tactics are usually adapted on a day to day basis. In this situation the artist as social activist has little sense of direction. This is not to imply that the artist is incapable of plotting his/her own sense of direction. However, it is a different matter if one is to identify with and work for a specific social cause. The question then becomes how does one use their talents for the benefit of the movement and at the same time perfect their craft? This can be a complex process which may depend on such factors as clearly defined goals, coherence in the development of sound tactics, and the degree of internal dialogue within the specific political organization. It might be better for the artists who are committed to revolutionary ideals to align themselves with a political party rather than a broad based social movement.

Hughes remained relatively aloof from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), yet continued to function as an artist committed to revolutionary ideals as he saw them. McKay became disillusioned during the 1930s as did many others. The reasons

for such widespread disillusionment are many and vary with each individual artist. Du Bois remained active even after his break with the NAACP leadership. Except for *Dark Princess* and the trilogy most of his writings are in the non-fiction genre. I also believe that Du Bois was a better historian than either Hughes or McKay due in part to his academic training, as well as his unique sense of history. It appears that Du Bois moved from a generalized commitment to social change to a particularistic commitment in 1961, keeping in mind the historical factors then in place at that time. Certainly the rise of the African independence movements and the U.S. Civil Rights movement were among the major social forces of the period. There is little doubt that his nonfiction journalistic writings had a greater mass appeal than either of his two fiction pieces. However, his non-fiction writings did reach a small but growing elite within the African American community.

In describing the Harlem Renaissance movement and its essential difference from the Greenwich Village movement of the same period, observers such as Harold Cruse and Nathan Huggins noted that "whatever difficulties of art for the white man, the American Negro has a special burden."¹¹ There was a dialogue between the black novelist and other members of the elite structure within the African American community. There exists, as suggested earlier in this paper, an indirect link between novelist and social movements. Where the author has a direct involvement with a cause and attempts to perfect his/her craft in the furtherance of that cause the link may be more direct depending on other historical factors. The author attempts to build support, or at least empathy, for the cause in the broader society.

The Greenwich village movement, dominated by white artists and intellectuals, and the Harlem renaissance, led by their black counterparts, shared a common frame of reference in that they were highly critical of mainstream American society. However, as Huggins observed in talking about the Negro's special burden:

His art is self-consciously national while, at the same time, special--ethnically regional. It attempts to speak with two voices, once from the stage of national culture, and the other from the soul of ethnic experience.¹²

All newly arriving immigrant groups have faced the problem described by Huggins. However, African Americans differed in two important respects--first, they faced the problem of surviving in a color conscious society and a hostile environment, and second, they were not newly arriving immigrants, especially during the early part of the renaissance period - 1920s. This is an important part of the historical context.

Potential Linkages Between Novelist and Social Movement or Political Party

Previously, in this discussion, I made a distinction between broadly based social movements and an ideologically oriented political party. It is an important distinction to make especially for the writer who is also an activist who seeks to use his/her skills to promote a cause. I contend that the line between art and propaganda is a thin one at best, if not non-existent. The question is not whether there is a message, but what is that message? In a sense some of the questions raised earlier in this paper might well apply to all serious literature in a broader context having to do with the total human condition. My focus has been on literature which has a fairly well defined political-philosophical theme that attempts to go beyond current events commentary, although this could serve as a part of its central thrust. A social movement provides inspiration for the writers who in turn use their skills and insights to inspire a movement. Thus an important dynamic can be established. A political party, on the other hand, can provide the writer with discipline, assuming it also includes a framework for meaningful dialogue between the writer, party leadership, party rank-in-file, and outside supporters. This kind of situation can also lead to cross pressures, albeit in a framework from which the writer can operate.

How the writer approaches the theme of alienation is of no small importance, particularly since it is such a broad theme. Judging from his works of fiction, Du Bois tended to focus on the notion of powerlessness and the means to overcome it. He did not dwell on hopelessness, yet he was well aware of the complexities of bringing about social change. Both the novel *Dark Princess* and the trilogy end on a note of hope but continuing struggle. Thus, his writings can be seen as epic works in every sense of the term. Du Bois's sense of history is what kept his commitment alive. His eventual link with a specific ideological framework helped to further anchor him up to that point in time.

George Padmore, who collaborated with Du Bois during the period 1919-29, represented and gave voice to one of the major streams of Pan-Africanism. For him, as well as others, marxism was seen as irrelevant to the African experience. On the other hand, Du Bois saw marxism, and many still do, as blending into the African political and economic developmental process. There remains the ongoing struggle for cultural identity. In the long run Pan-Africanism will continue to struggle to redefine itself on the continent and elsewhere. The artist will play an important role in this process, and this is particularly true for the black artist.

Notes

¹ Robert Penn, *All the King's Men* (New York: Modern Library, 1953).

² W.E.B. Du Bois, *Dark Princess* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1928).

³ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Ordeal of Mansart* (New York: Mainstream Publishing, 1957).

⁴ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Mansart Builds a School* (New York: Mainstream Publishing, 1959).

⁵ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Worlds of Color* (1957), 59,61.

⁶ Joseph Blotner, *The Modern American Political Novel* (Austin, TX: University of Texas, 1966).

⁷ Claude McKay, *Home to Harlem* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1928), 98.

⁸ McKay, 98.

⁹ Carl Van-Vechten, *Nigger Heaven* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926).

¹⁰ Eugene Lyons, *The Red Decade* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1941).

¹¹ Nathan Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 195.

¹² Huggins, 195.