

## JOSEPH MILLS

### **The Absurdity of America: George S. Schuyler's *Black No More***

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others....One ever feels his two-ness – an American, a Negro – two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

– W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903)

What do we want?...We want to be Americans, full-fledged Americans, with all the rights of other American citizens. But is that all?...We who are dark can see America in a way that white Americans can not. And seeing our country thus, are we satisfied with its present goals and ideals?

– W. E. B. DuBois, "Criteria of Negro Art" (1921)

In 1931 George S. Schuyler published *Black No More*, a satire about Americans' obsession with race. The book was controversial, in part, because Schuyler mocked African-American leaders. The novel contains parodies of Marcus Garvey, N.A.A.C.P. figures, and Tuskegee leaders. For example, Shakespeare Agamemnon Beard, a caricature of W.E. B. DuBois, writes ornate overblown editorials for *The Dilemma*, claims an "exotic" heritage, and "like most Negro leaders, he deified the black woman but abstained from employing aught save octoroons."<sup>1</sup> DuBois, himself, however, praised the book. He recognized that it would be "abundantly misunderstood," because, "the writer of satire . . . is always misunderstood by the simple."<sup>2</sup> Although *Black No More* contained "scathing criticism of Negro leaders," DuBois noted with admiration that the satire then "passes over and slaps the white

people just as hard and unflinchingly straight in the face.” In many ways, *Black No More* demonstrates satire’s democratic potential. Mockery becomes the great leveller, and by ridiculing all, the novel calls into question racial and class hierarchies. In a letter to H. L. Mencken, Schuyler stated his intentions: “What I have tried to do in this novel is to laugh the color question out of school by showing up its ridiculousness and absurdity...I have tried...to portray the spectacle as a combination madhouse, burlesque show and Coney Island.”<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, as DuBois anticipated, the novel has been misunderstood. In a 1971 introduction to the book, Charles Larson states, “It would be easy – and some people would perhaps say better – to ignore Schuyler's first novel,” and Margaret Perry’s comment that “we cannot dismiss [*Black No More*] entirely” reveals a desire to do just that.<sup>4</sup> In fact, for decades Schuyler's work overall has been denigrated or overlooked. To give only one example, in Cary Wintz’s *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance*, a table of “Year-by-Year Publication of Major Works of the Harlem Renaissance, 1922-1935” has almost fifty titles but does not include Schuyler's books.<sup>5</sup> In the 1990s, however, Robert A. Hill and R. Kent Rasmussen recovered a significant amount of Schuyler's pulp fiction, and, in doing so, they demonstrated the need to re-evaluate Schuyler's work. In particular, *Black No More*, Schuyler's major literary achievement, needs to be reassessed. Considered by Arthur Davis to be “the best work of prose satire to come from the New Negro Movement,” and one of the few works of the time to use satire, the novel makes an important contribution to the discourse of race and national identity.<sup>6</sup>

The neglect of Schuyler's work may seem surprising considering both his productivity and the acclaim he received from his peers. The best known African-American journalist of his time, Schuyler's career spanned over fifty years. He wrote

thousands of articles, hundreds of short stories, dozens of essays, several serialized novellas, two novels, and memoir. At one point, Mencken called him “the best columnist, of any race, now in practice in the United States,” and Melvin B. Tolson believed Schuyler's essay “Our Greatest Gift” to be the “greatest satire on the race problem in this country that has ever been written.”<sup>7</sup> However, Schuyler's reputation declined as he grew older and more conservative. A crucial member of A. Randolph's socialist newspaper *The Messenger*, and briefly a member of the Socialist Party of America in the twenties, later in life, Schuyler became adamantly anti-communist. Eventually, he joined and wrote for the John Birch society. Long after Senator Joseph McCarthy had been discredited, Schuyler continued to call him a “great American.” He criticized those involved in the Civil Rights movement, insisting Martin Luther King Jr. was a type of “typhoid” spreading unrest and suggesting that Malcolm X was a traitor. In short, Schuyler ended up radically out-of-step with the mainstream African-American community. As a consequence, most critics avoid his work, refer to it only in passing, or misinterpret it.

Schuyler's reputation has also suffered because he has been seen as the loser of a debate with Langston Hughes. The two authors articulated different positions about the importance of a racial aesthetic. In 1926, Schuyler published “The Negro-Art Hokum,” an essay containing an infamous claim that African-Americans are simply “lamp-blackened Anglo Saxons.”<sup>8</sup> Although this statement was deliberately provocative, the main thesis of “The Negro-Art Hokum” argues that people are products of cultural conditioning. Their identities are determined by their education and environment. Since blacks and whites work the same jobs, wear the same clothes, use the same products, such as cars, cigarettes, books, and magazines, see the same films, and speak the same language, it is not surprising that they have the same

views and create similar “art.” Schuyler states, “In short, when [a Negro] responds to the same political, social, moral, and economic stimuli in precisely the same manner as his white neighbour, it is sheer nonsense to talk about ‘racial differences’ as between the American black man and the American white man.”<sup>9</sup> Schuyler rejects ideas of essentialism as racist, and he sees the insistence on a distinctly black sensibility as no different from, indeed perhaps originating in, the racist beliefs of whites who insist on “fundamental, eternal, and inescapable differences” between the races. He concludes the essay saying,

On this baseless premise, so flattering to the white mob, that the blackamoor is inferior and fundamentally different, is erected the postulate that he must needs be peculiar; and when he attempts to portray life through the medium of art, it must of necessity be a peculiar art. While such reasoning may seem conclusive to the majority of Americans, it must be rejected with a loud guffaw by intelligent people.<sup>10</sup>

A week later, in the same forum, Hughes published his seminal essay, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.” Arguing for a racial aesthetic, Hughes criticizes those artists who refuse to identify themselves as black. He maintains that someone who wants to be considered as simply a “poet” rather than a “black poet,” is revealing an “urge to whiteness.” His opening paragraph defines the “urge within the race toward whiteness” as a desire “to be as little Negro and as much American as possible;”<sup>11</sup> thus Hughes equates “white” and “American.” Hughes’ position gained prominence, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, and his essay was adopted as a manifesto, by, among others, the Black Arts movement while Schuyler came to be regarded as an “assimilationist” and even an “Uncle Tom.” Attacks on Schuyler often utilize Hughes’ language. For example, Robert Bone accuses Schuyler of a “denial of racial ... identity,” a “revulsion toward the Negro masses,” and a “desire to behave like a white person – and a middle-class white person at that.”<sup>12</sup>

Such attacks oversimplify Schuyler's thinking and misrepresent his position. One of the Harlem Renaissance's most complex characters, Schuyler cannot and should not be easily categorized. He repeatedly insisted that arguing against a "peculiar" Negro art or psychology was not the same as denying a black heritage. Throughout his career, he emphasized the need to know one's racial heritage, and he called for memorials to commemorate "the achievements, sacrifices and tribulations of Sojourner Truth, Denmark Vesey, Paul Laurence Dunbar...[and] Frederick Douglass."<sup>13</sup> He insisted, "I have always felt that a knowledge of the history and achievements of the Negro in America and elsewhere would do much to dispel [the] illusion of inferiority."<sup>14</sup> Schuyler published *Fifty Years of Progress in Negro Journalism* to illustrate African-American contributions to the profession, and he convinced J. A. Rogers to write a regular article on "great men and women in Negro history."<sup>15</sup> He also tried to organize a co-operative of black-owned businesses and develop a "publication exclusively devoted to belles lettres, to the encouragement and development of Negro writers and a medium for publishing their wares."<sup>16</sup> As George Hutchinson points out, many of Schuyler's contemporaries urged a respect for "racial" accomplishments and resisted the idea of a black cultural nationalism. For them, "Race pride did not conflict with a militant integrationism or even assimilationism; it seems to have been considered essential to achievement of true integration."<sup>17</sup> Thirty years after the publication of "Negro-Art Hokum" Schuyler answered the question of his essay "Do Negroes Want to be White?" with an emphatic "No." He explains, "The goal is not to be white but to be free in a white world" and to have "full and immediate citizenship rights under the Constitution."<sup>18</sup>

Throughout his career, as he examined the intersection between race and nationalism, Schuyler resisted the discourse which equated "American" with "white,"

and “black” with “different” or “African.” He insisted that one could be “black” and “American,” and that these identities were not in conflict. As Arthur Davis notes, “The assumption of the Negro's essential American-ness undergirds all of [Schuyler's] published works.”<sup>19</sup> It is not a radical position; it was shared in some form by many, including Harlem Renaissance leaders Alain Locke, Charles Johnson, and James Weldon Johnson. George Hutchinson argues, “The issue of American national identity was...the dominant problematic structuring the literary field relevant to the Harlem Renaissance. Appeals to national identity could challenge the dominant, racist consensus, encouraging diversity, reform, subversion on some levels while ultimately assenting to a very ‘American’ utopian vision, however different from earlier such visions.”<sup>20</sup>

For Schuyler, an insistence on the “Americanness” of the Negro did not imply a desire to be white, but rather that the “blackness” of America be acknowledged. He repeatedly claims his own racial heritage and his national identity. Throughout his work, Schuyler uses the term “Aframerican,” insisting on both aspects of his identity; as Ann Douglas explains, the non-hyphenated word shows that Aframericans were not immigrants to America, but rather founders of America.<sup>21</sup> Many of his contemporaries held similar views. James Weldon Johnson states, “...the American Negro considers himself, and is, as much an American as any one.”<sup>22</sup> At the same time, Schuyler continually critiques both racial and national assumptions.

To insist that someone born and raised in the United States is “American” is not the same as being patriotic. Schuyler spent his life vigorously attacking the prejudice, hypocrisy, and exploitation that existed in the country he called the “United Snakes” and “this expansive penitentiary.” His work indicts “America” for its obsession with colour and its oppression of minority groups. In the thirties, Schuyler

spoke out frequently against fascism, but unlike his contemporaries, he argued that it was a domestic concern. Impatient with the focus on European fascism, Schuyler insisted, “African-Americans derive a certain amusement from the hubbub in this country over fascism and whether or not it can happen here...The simple truth of the matter is that we already have fascism here and have had it for some time, if by fascism one means dictatorial rule in the interests of a privileged class, regimentation, persecution of racial minorities and radicals, etc.”<sup>23</sup> Opposed to US entry into World War II, Schuyler joined the America First Committee in 1940; he “refused to be a flag waver because of the ‘blather’ about fighting for democracy, freedom, and the American way.”<sup>24</sup> He insisted that “our war is not against Hitler in Europe, but against Hitler in America. Our war is not to defend democracy, but to get a democracy we have never had.”<sup>25</sup> He was also one of the first to speak out against the Japanese internments of World War II. Even at his most conservative, later in life, Schuyler never downplayed or ignored the significance and extent of racism in American culture, but he rejected as unrealistic calls for some type of black national separatism or back-to-Africa plans.

Schuyler regarded separatist movements, especially with regard to literature and art, as traps. A belief in “Negro Art” has as a corollary a belief in “Caucasian Art,” and he knew the former would always be upheld as superior to the latter by those in power. Almost twenty years after “The Negro Art Hokum,” the editors of *The Negro Caravan* make the same claim: “[We] consider Negro writers to be American writers, and literature by American Negroes to be a segment of American literature ... The chief cause of objection to the term is that ‘Negro literature’ is too easily placed by certain critics, white and Negro, in an alcove apart. The next step is a double standard of judgement, which is dangerous for the future of negro writers.”<sup>26</sup> Most

recently, Walter Benn Michaels has argued in *Our America* that the formation of modernist and nativist discourses in the twenties involved “two important shifts in racial logic, one that emphasized not the inferiority of ‘alien’ races but their ‘difference,’ and a second that began to represent difference in cultural instead of political (and in addition to) racial terms.”<sup>27</sup> These shifts were used to argue against the “Americanness” of minority groups. They were seen as having different cultures. Pluralism, containing at its foundation a belief in essentialism, became a way to re-encode racial ideologies.<sup>28</sup> It is as a counter-argument to this dynamic that Schuyler's “The Negro-Art Hokum” can be fruitfully read.

In insisting on the “Americanness” of Black Americans, Schuyler rejected claims of an African heritage. He believed, “There is more in common between the white and colored folk in America than there is between the colored folk here and the colored folk anywhere else.”<sup>29</sup> This was not, however, to deny that American blacks were oppressed – in fact, Schuyler simultaneously asserted that “without running the risk of being called Garveyistic it can be truthfully said that the colored people all over the world have something in common in these days of white military, economic and financial domination”<sup>30</sup> – but it was to say that blacks raised in the United States think like Americans and not like Africans. Schuyler believed that not only was it arrogant for people involved in Back-to-Africa movements to assume that they would be welcome, but that most of them knew nothing of native cultures. He pointed out the prejudice that existed among African-Americans, many of whom contributed funds to missionaries, stating, “I do not believe I am exaggerating when I estimate that a large proportion of our people firmly believe most of the tripe written about Negroes and about Africa, and are convinced that Africans are simple-minded, ‘primitive’ folk obviously inferior to us in every way because their habits, customs

and thought processes vary from us.”<sup>31</sup> He insisted that such thinking was nonsense, and he also warned against speaking of Africa as a single entity. He emphasized the pluralities of its nations, tribes, and cultures.

In 1931, the year *Black No More* appeared, Schuyler also published *Slaves Today*, a book which contrasts negative “American” values and positive “African” ones. On a trip to Liberia to investigate rumours of corruption, Schuyler discovered the nation's leaders were engaged in a type of slave trade. The ruling class was black, the descendants of free Americans who colonized Liberia, and of its officials Schuyler writes that they “were but slightly less dark than the natives over whom they ruled but they felt no kinship with [them] for that reason. It was no more difficult for them to oppress and exploit fellow black men than it usually is for powerful whites to do the same thing to fellow white men. Color did not enter here – it was class that counted.”<sup>32</sup> Schuyler continually points out that the brutal leaders have been educated in America and Europe. Sammy Williams, the Vice-President of the Republic, spent time at Sing Sing for forgery “where he learnt much from his associates that was useful when he entered Liberian politics later on.”<sup>33</sup> The other corrupt government officials “had not studied American political practices in vain.”<sup>34</sup> In the opening chapter which describes the Liberian President’s view, Schuyler repeats three times that the office contains French windows. It has a view shaped literally by European material. The District Commissioner Johnson, who has no qualms about whipping someone on the slightest pretext, loves his five o’clock tea. He drinks scotch, eats breakfasts of ham and eggs, and travels throughout the Liberia jungle with a bathtub and dinner service, all habits he picked up while living in England.<sup>35</sup> In short, he behaves like a British colonial. Such “leaders” of Liberia decimate native populations, devastate various tribal economies and destroy native towns.

In contrast to the ruling class, the indigenous Liberians display no such brutality. In addition to praising the country's bio-regional richness, Schuyler states that "its greatest wealth is its people. The aborigines are as admirable as most of their American-Liberian taskmasters are despicable. Everywhere in the hinterland one finds natives self-supporting in every way, whereas their rulers are not. The native towns are uniformly clean and neat, and their inhabitants are generally honest, truthful and trustworthy." Each of the villages is "a perfectly organized and functioning society."<sup>36</sup> Schuyler romanticises these Liberian villages, but in doing so, he also makes it clear that they are "foreign." They have their own distinct cultures, and it would be impossible for an American to emigrate to these places.

Concentrating entirely on America, *Black No More* contains no romantic notions. No one behaves admirably. The novel is, as Carl Milton Hughes describes it, "one of the most scathing attacks upon American color phobia to be found in American literature."<sup>37</sup> In *Black No More*, the scientist Dr. Junius Crookman invents a machine that alters skin colour and racial identifiers, such as hair, by a process of "electrical nutrition."<sup>38</sup> For a fifty-dollar fee, African-Americans can undergo a three-day series of treatments and emerge "white." Crookman believes his invention will perform an altruistic service. After all, when there are no more Negroes, there can be no "Negro problem." Seeing the economic potential, two black "businessmen" – a "numbers" banker and a realtor – fund Crookman's work, form a corporation, Black No More, Inc., and open branches in most major northern cities. As more and more blacks become white, what began as a novelty becomes a national crisis. Politicians and factory owners bemoan the loss of the racial distinctions which have formed a crucial part of their strategies to keep power. Civil rights organizations become desperate as they see the very issue on which they depend disappear. In the end,

because those who received treatment are actually paler than “whites,” a new round of discrimination against “the New Caucasians” begins.

In an introduction to *Black No More*, Charles Larson characterizes the novel as “a plea for assimilation, for mediocrity, for reduplication, for faith in the (white) American dream.”<sup>39</sup> He sees the book as having no “pride in being black” and suggesting that “the New Negro will be white or nothing at all.” Few critics have misunderstood the novel as drastically. *Black No More*’s very premise mocks the practice of African-Americans trying to make themselves look more Caucasian. Throughout his career, Schuyler attacked businesses which marketed cosmetic products like Kink-No-More and Wonder Uncurl hair straighteners, and Cocotone Skin Whitener and Fan Tan skin “lighteners.” In a *Messenger* column eight years before the publication of *Black No More*, Schuyler again used a science-fiction premise to make the same point. A Martian, exploring Harlem in the future asks, “Who were those fellows, Kinknomore and Facebleach, to whom you have erected these great monuments?” A Harlemite responds, “They were the gods of our parents. They solved the race question!”<sup>40</sup> Schuyler feels a fundamental hypocrisy exists in the Harlem community. As he explains in his autobiography, “One of the ironies of the time was the huge skin-whitening advertisements in *The Negro World* opposite flaming editorials extolling pride of blackness.”<sup>41</sup> Schuyler explored this contradiction again and again. In *Black No More*, Mme. Blandish earns her living by straightening hair and lightening skin, and “because of her prominence as the proprietor of a successful enterprise engaged in making Negroes appear as much like white folks as possible, she had recently been elected for the fourth time a Vice-President of the American Race Pride League.”<sup>42</sup> Like Hughes, Schuyler sees the “urge to whiteness” as a problem, and *Black No More* illustrates its crippling

dynamic. Larson, Bone, and other critics confuse its portrayal with an acceptance on the part of the author when in fact Schuyler criticizes the desire to look more Caucasian and the industries that profit from this desire. *Black No More* can be read as an exploration of Hughes's statements.

Schuyler mocks blacks for being as obsessed about skin colour as whites. Like his friend and one-time roommate Wallace Thurman, Schuyler explores the prejudice African-American men have towards "dark" women. In *Black No More's* opening chapter, Max Disher drinks with his friends, and they talk about "yallah gals." After Disher says that he might date a "black gal," his astonished friend points out that "you ain't never had one. Ever' gal I ever seen you with looked like an ofay."<sup>43</sup> From the beginning, the book emphasizes the role colour consciousness plays within the black community itself. Disher criticizes his girlfriend Minnie for being "stuck on her color," yet it is precisely because she is a "high yallah flapper" that he values her. After becoming "white," Disher sells his story to a newspaper. He is then upset to see his picture on the front page because he had gone through the experience "in order to escape the conspicuousness of a dark skin and now he was being made conspicuous because he had once had a dark skin! Could one never escape the plagued race problem?"<sup>44</sup> Yet like his feelings toward Minnie, such a reaction is ironic because he has helped perpetuate the very dynamic he hates. He chose to tell his story and thus make his skin an issue and himself conspicuous. He simultaneously complains that colour is an issue and contributes to the cultural forces, i.e. the newspaper, that makes it one. Furthermore, he does so because it is profitable. He makes a thousand dollars, and the newspapers sells copies with a sensational exclusive. Throughout the novel, Schuyler emphasizes the fact that racial distinctions are a crucial element of a capitalist society.

Crookman's first customer is Disher. After completing the process, he changes his name to Matthew Fisher and passes into white society. He leaves New York and heads South. Eventually he joins a Klan-like organization, the Knights of Nordica, because he sees its money-making opportunities. He manipulates racial hatred to break up union movements and to extort money from industrial leaders. After he develops the Knights of Nordica into a major national force, he arranges for its founder, the white supremacist Henry Givens, to be nominated as a candidate for Vice-President of the United States. He also marries Givens's daughter.

The Disher/Fisher character is not a hero. In one sense he is, as Michael Peplow has pointed out, "an archetypal black trickster who dons a white mask to 'put on Ole Massa.'"<sup>45</sup> He has the protean qualities of the trickster, and Schuyler has said that he had the trickster figure in mind when writing the book. Having been raised on tricksters stories, Schuyler notes, "I heard tales about High John de Conquer – Yankee style – long before I ever travelled in the South or read Hurston."<sup>46</sup> After passing, Fisher/Disher decides "he would just play around, enjoy life and laugh at the white folks up his sleeve."<sup>47</sup> The trickster, like the coyote figure in Native American myths, is not always admirable. These figures frequently are forces of disorder. Disher/Fisher contributes to the chaos of a colour obsessed society. He is amoral, taking advantage of everyone around him. He lies, cheats, and manipulates; he extorts the rich and oppresses the poor. In the book's third sentence, he is even described as having a "satanic cast," an adjective which is repeated in the penultimate chapter.<sup>48</sup>

Those who follow Disher/Fisher and undergo the process do so not to be tricksters, but to pursue greater economic opportunities. For most African-Americans, "A lifetime of being Negroes in the United States had convinced them that there was

great advantage in being white.”<sup>49</sup> *Black No More* explores how issues of class and race intertwine. Schuyler describes the white poor who join the Knights of Nordic as :

hard-faced, lantern-jawed, dull-eyed adult children, seeking like all humanity for something permanent in the eternal flux of life. The young girls in their cheap finery with circus makeup on their faces; the young men, aged before their time by child labor and a violent environment; the middle-aged folk with their shiny, shabby garb and beaten countenances.<sup>50</sup>

Schuyler suggests that the white poor search for purpose, for meaning; participation in the Knights provides them with an identity, one predicated on a racial “other,” that their lives otherwise lack. Capitalist leaders, factory owners and politicians, subsequently use this racial identity as a wedge to prevent union organizing or political instability. A preoccupation with race keeps people from recognizing economic injustices. As a result,

The working people were far more interested in what they considered, or were told was, the larger issue of race. It did not matter that they had to send their children into the mills to augment the family wage; that they were always sickly and that their death rate was high. What mattered such little things when the very foundation of civilization, white supremacy, was threatened?<sup>51</sup>

Poor whites are manipulated and taken advantage of just as poor blacks are. They are also victimized, and any potential rebellion is kept in check by providing them with a scapegoat, a racial other onto whom they can project their frustrations and fears.

Crookman’s process unleashes possible chaos by removing the issue of race and thus drawing attention to the issue of class. In describing the anxiety this causes to those in power Schuyler makes his moral norms clear:

Politicians and business men shuddered at the..horrible visions of old-age pensions, eight-hour laws, unemployment insurance, workingmen's compensation, minimum-wage legislation, abolition of child labor, dissemination of birth-control information, monthly vacations for female workers, two-month vacations for prospective mothers, both with pay...<sup>52</sup>

In this passage, Schuyler's satire serves its traditional purpose, mocking with the intention to reform. If people would stop being obsessed with race, they could begin to agitate for social justice. Schuyler does not want everyone to have the same colour but rather to have the same economic opportunities and security. Ultimately, his vision in *Black No More* is not an assimilationist one, but a socialist one.

Schuyler's eventual anti-communism and conservatism have overshadowed his earlier critiques of capitalism. In 1926, the same year as the "Negro-Art Hokum," Schuyler writes of capitalism:

Here is a system that robs and starves its slaves and then attributes their miserable lot to their lack of thrift and industry. Yet, under no other system of slavery has more goods been produced per capita per hours. Here is a group of masters who live off their slaves year in and year out, only allowing them enough of what they have produced to keep them in condition to produce more commodities and more of their kind. And yet, this is achieved with amazing simplicity: they tell the serfs that the country is really theirs; that the voice of the people is the voice of God; and then they permit these slaves to stick a piece of paper in a box once a year as proof that they are sovereign.<sup>53</sup>

A belief in "democracy" in the value of voting substitutes for real power. A discourse of nationalism consisting of patriotic rhetoric and jingoistic myths mollify the lower class.

"Black No More" is the name of a business. In addition to a network of sanatoriums and hospitals, the corporation owns planes, cars, a broadcasting station, and various pieces of real estate. One of its backers, Henry Johnson, continually compares himself to "Henry Ford," and he considers his participation as "getting in on the ground floor."<sup>54</sup> At "Black No More" locations across the North, customers line up and are processed, but rather than stamping out cars, the "factory" stamps out humans (in both senses). Sidney Bremer, exploring the trope of Harlem in Harlem Renaissance literature, finds that Harlem's streets are seen as "alive, generative. In explicit, repeated contrast to the deadening subway machines and dwarfing skyscraper

streets of Anglo New York.”<sup>55</sup> Initially, Black No More, Inc., is housed in an “austere” six-story building with a huge blinking neon sign at which Harlemites “gaze up” in wonder. The business represents the industrialization and the Anglo-ization of the black population. Although Crookman means well, his name labels him. He is a thief, stealing identity. Black No More then acts as an illustration of Hughes’s “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” in which Hughes criticizes those who “desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible.”<sup>56</sup> Black No More, Inc. profits from and fulfils that desire.

The book accepts Hughes's definition that equates “white” and “American” and then explores the consequences. When Disher becomes Fisher, he thinks that “at last he felt like an American citizen,” and he undergoes the process, in part, because “as a white man he could go anywhere, be anything he wanted to be, do most anything he wanted to do, be a free man at last.”<sup>57</sup> Yet he also immediately accepts the myth of white superiority. As soon as he leaves Crookman’s sanatorium, he resolves to be “through with coons . . . from now on,” and he looks “in a superior manner at the long line of black and brown folk.”<sup>58</sup> What he actually does with his “freedom” is to work for an organization dedicated to a racist ideology.

The book's most damning indictment of this “urge towards whiteness” is a shocking lynching scene. Southern aristocrat Arthur Snobbcraft, the head of an elitist Anglo-Saxon association, joins forces with the Knights of Nordica to run a presidential campaign. Snobbcraft organizes a massive genealogy project to determine how much of the population has Negro blood. He intends to use the results to whip up national hysteria over the dangers of miscegenation; however, the plan backfires when his chief researcher, Dr. Buggerie, discovers that at least fifty million people who are

considered “white” have a mixed heritage, including Buggerie, Knights of Nordica leader Givens, and Snobbcraft himself. After his opponents steal the information and give it to the newspapers, Snobbcraft tries to flee the country, but his plane runs out of gas and has to land in Mississippi. Snobbcraft and Buggerie decide to disguise themselves with shoe-polish blackface, but they run into members of the True Love Christ Lover’s Church, a group which has been praying for one last Negro to lynch. When they wipe off their blackface, they are accepted as Caucasians until one of the few church members who can read sees a newspaper article detailing their mixed ancestry. Snobbcraft and Buggerie are then mutilated, tortured and killed in an orgiastic frenzy.

By the conventions of the lynching trope, Disher/Fisher, in marrying the white Helen Givens, should be the victim. In *Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals*, Trudier Harris explains that the largest taboo was a black man's violation (whether actual or imagined) of a white women and “the one ‘crime’ for which lynching became the only punishment for black men was sexual indiscretion with white women.”<sup>59</sup> Examining the ritual portrayal of lynching in African-American literature, a ritual he calls “peculiarly American,” Harris finds a number of common elements:

The ingredients of the ritual and the tradition can be summed up in the following description. A crowd of whites, attributing to themselves the sanction over life and death and viewing themselves as good and right, are reduced to the level of savages in their pursuit and apprehending of a presumed black criminal; they usually exhibit a festive atmosphere by singing, donning their Sunday finery, and bringing food to the place of death. Women and children join the men - women performing their wifely duties and children becoming initiated into the roles they will play in adulthood...Blacks are forced to watch the spectacle...A castration or some other mutilation usually accompanies the killing in addition to a gathering of trophies from the charred body.”<sup>60</sup>

Schuyler's scene contains all these "ingredients." Rev. McPhule, the leader of the "Church" insists that "the ceremonies proceed according to the time-honored custom."<sup>61</sup> After the ritual torture, which includes genital mutilation, the men are tied to stakes and "little boys and girls gaily gathered excelsior, scrap paper, twig and small branches while their proud parents fetched logs."<sup>62</sup> The crowd includes "two or three whitened Negroes" who are forced to take part to allay suspicion that they "might not be one-hundred-per-cent Americans," and after the flames die down, people comb the debris for "skeletal souvenirs."<sup>63</sup>

The lynching is the book's true climactic moment. It represents the inevitable conclusion of racial discrimination. The Presidential election, which in a standard narrative would be the climax, does not matter. Presidents are interchangeable. The real "politics" of America concern how race is played out not who is in the White House. The lynching scene has a jarring grotesqueness, but it contains a crucial thematic importance. Ideas about white superiority cannot be reconciled with the reality of white brutality. If whites are "superior," how can they commit such atrocities, and what does this say about black colour prejudice and its "urge to whiteness?" Metaphorically, the presence of "whitened Negroes" in McPhule's Church represent the logical extension of the "whitening" process. To become white, one must engage in such actions. They also offer a reverse parallel to the experience of Snobbcraft and Buggerie; the oppressors and the oppressed switch positions. The naivete, revealed by Buggerie when he thinks that if he and Snobbcraft pretend to be black, "I'll bet we'll be treated all right," is equalled by the naivete of those blacks who become white believing it will solve their problems. This lynching emphasizes the hypocrisy of "the land of the free." Snobbcraft and Buggerie are tortured and killed because they are black. There is no justification or pretence of legality. They

are simply the wrong colour in the wrong place in America. A figure who is a presidential candidate one moment can be lynched as soon as it is believed that he has black blood in his veins.

To treat a lynching satirically is an audacious undertaking, yet Schuyler did so several times in his work. In a Pittsburgh Courier column, he criticizes the unoriginality and inefficiency of white lynching:

Some day, perhaps, when white America has reached a more sophisticated cultural stage, unfortunate Senegambians falling afoul of the Nordic mob, will be lynched with more colorful ceremony, and instead of the bodies being totally incinerated or cut into souvenirs, they will be hauled to the nearest barbecue pit and prepared by competent cooks to fill the stomachs of the paupers and unemployed.<sup>64</sup>

Schuyler reworks the conceit of Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal." Combining Swift's technique with African-American subject matter, Schuyler manages to mock what was too often a horrible reality. In doing so, he engages in what Ann Douglas has called the "mongrelization" or "hybridization" of forms. Douglas argues that when black artists use "white forms" for black audiences, it does not automatically signify a "capitulation to white audiences"<sup>65</sup> or, in Hughes's terms "an urge to whiteness." African-American artists in the Twenties insisted on their freedom to work with a variety of forms, not simply "black" ones, but also ones from their Euro-American heritage. In doing so, they transfigured these forms. Houston Baker makes a similar point. Insisting that the sonnets of Claude McKay or the ballads of Countee Cullen "are just as much mastered masks as the minstrel manipulations of Booker T. Washington and Charles Chesnutt," Baker argues that the "necessary ('forced' as it were) adoption" of such white forms "results in an effective blackening."<sup>66</sup> What Cullen does with poetry, Schuyler does with satire. Although he was often called the "Black Mencken" and his work contains numerous allusions and parodies of authors

such as Swift, Petronius, Rabelais, and Kipling, he is not simply Mencken in blackface; rather he adapts and reconfigures these “white” forms and styles. *Black No More* represents the fusion of Juvenalian satire with a black trickster tale.

There occur two dynamics in *Black No More*: a whitening at the level of skin and a blackening at the level of blood. Although the process of Black No More, Inc. “whitens,” the genealogical research of Buggerie “blackens” at least half of the population by revealing their mixed ancestry.<sup>67</sup> When he learns of the research, Givens acknowledges, “I guess we're all niggers now;”<sup>68</sup> his comment echoes one made earlier by one of the owners of Black No More who noted that “Everything that looks white ain't white in this man's country.”<sup>69</sup> In fact, almost nothing is white in the country. Schuyler dedicates *Black No More* to “all Caucasians in the great republic who can trace their ancestry back ten generations and confidently assert that there are no Black leaves, twigs, limbs of branches on their family trees.” The tone conveys his doubt that anyone can do this. Schuyler believed that America refused to admit that it consisted of a mulatto culture. In this sense, when he states in “The Negro-Art Hokum” that “the American Negro is just plain American,” he is insisting not only on the “Americanness” of the Negro, but also on the “Negroness” of America.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> George S. Schuyler, *Black No More* (New York: The Macaulay Company, 1931; repr. Boston: NorthEastern University Press, 1989), 90.

<sup>2</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, ‘The Browsing Reader’, *The Crisis*, 38 (January 1931), 16.

<sup>3</sup> Harry McKinley Williams Jr., ‘When Black Is Right: The Life and Writings of George S. Schuyler’, Ph.D. dissertation, Brown University, 1988, 210.

<sup>4</sup> Charles R. Larson, ‘Introduction to *Black No More*’ (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1971), 15; Margaret Perry, *Silence to the Drums: A Survey of the Literature of the Harlem Renaissance* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1976), 100.

<sup>5</sup> Cary D. Wintz, *Black culture and the Harlem Renaissance* (Houston: Rice University Press, 1988).

<sup>6</sup> Arthur P. Davis, *From the Dark Tower* (Washington: Howard University Press, 1974), 108.

<sup>7</sup> Fred Hobson, *Mencken: A Life* (New York: Random House, 1994), 455; Melvin B. Tolson, ‘George S. Schuyler’, *The American Mercury*, 28, March 1933, 373.

- <sup>8</sup> George S. Schuyler, 'The Negro-Art Hokum', *Nation*, 122, 16 June 1926, repr. in Arthur P. Davis and Michael W. Peplow, eds. *The Negro Renaissance: An Anthology* (New York: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, 1975), 468.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 469.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 470.
- <sup>11</sup> Langston Hughes, 'The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain', *Nation*, 123, 23 June 1926, repr. in *The New Negro Renaissance*, 471.
- <sup>12</sup> Robert A. Bone, *The Negro Novel in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), 89.
- <sup>13</sup> Michael W. Peplow, *George S. Schuyler* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980), 24.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 538.
- <sup>15</sup> George S. Schuyler, *Black and Conservative* (New Rochelle: Arlington House Publishers, 1966), 159.
- <sup>16</sup> George S. Schuyler, *Black Empire*, eds. Robert A. Hill and R. Kent Rasmussen with a foreword by John A. Williams (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1991), 300.
- <sup>17</sup> George Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (Cambridge, MA.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), 533.
- <sup>18</sup> *The American Mercury*, 82, June 1956, 55-60.
- <sup>19</sup> Davis, *From the Dark Tower*, 104.
- <sup>20</sup> Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance*, 13 (orig. emphasis).
- <sup>21</sup> Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), 308.
- <sup>22</sup> David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 42.
- <sup>23</sup> George S. Schuyler, *Ethiopian Stories*, ed. Robert A. Hill (Boston: NorthEastern University Press, 1994), 38.
- <sup>24</sup> Quoted in Kathryn Talalay, *Composition in Black and White: The Life of Philippa Schuyler* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 93.
- <sup>25</sup> Schuyler, *Ethiopian Stories*, 38.
- <sup>26</sup> Davis and Peplow, *The New Negro Renaissance*.
- <sup>27</sup> Walter Benn Michaels, *Our America: Nativism, Modernism and Pluralism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 11.
- <sup>28</sup> See Abdul JanMohammed and David Lloyd, who argue that "the semblance of pluralism disguises the perpetuation of exclusion", *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 9; and also Aldon Nielsen who insists "the normative pluralism that has become the pedagogical standard in American academies is mendacious to the extent that it reinscribes hierarchy even as it attempts to ensure equality and understanding of diversity," *Writing Between the Lines: Race and Intertextuality* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1994), 19.
- <sup>29</sup> George S. Schuyler, 'Views and reviews', *The Pittsburgh Courier*, 15 September 1934.
- <sup>30</sup> Schuyler, *Ibid.*, 9 October 1937.
- <sup>31</sup> Schuyler, *Ethiopian Stories*, 24.
- <sup>32</sup> George S. Schuyler, *Slaves Today: A Story of Liberia* (New York: Brewer, Warren and Putnam, 1931), 96; repr. (College Park: McGrath Publishing Company, 1969).
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* 88.
- <sup>37</sup> Peplow, 37.
- <sup>38</sup> The novel's central conceit is based on an actual claim of a Japanese scientist. In October 1929 Dr. Yosaburo Noguchi announced that he had changed a Negro into a white man and that "Given time, I could change the Japanese into a race of tall blue-eyed blondes," *Black No More*, 14. Stories about Noguchi ran in most major American newspapers, including a front page article in *The Pittsburgh Courier*. In the same edition of *The New York Herald* as Rudolph Fisher's review of *Black No More* there is an article about whether glandular control can create healthy "Superman."
- <sup>39</sup> Larson, 'Introduction to *Black No More*', 12.
- <sup>40</sup> George S. Schuyler, 'Shafts and Darts', *Messenger*, September 1923.
- <sup>41</sup> Schuyler, *Black and Conservative*, 123; Garvey makes the same claim about *The Chicago Defender*, and his comments are remarkably similar to Schuyler's (see Edward David Cronon's study *Marcus Garvey* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ.: Prentice Hall, 1973), 45-46). It's possible that Schuyler was simply using *Negro World* as a shorthand example for numerous black newspapers that engaged in this hypocrisy.

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- <sup>42</sup> *Black No More*, 59.
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.
- <sup>45</sup> Peplow, 69.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.
- <sup>47</sup> *Black No More*, 48.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.
- <sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.
- <sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 135. These ‘visions’ are similar to proposals advanced by *Messenger* founders, A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen, who called for social reforms that included, “public works, a thirty hour week, social insurance, abolishment of the company store, equality among race and sexes, equal pay for equal work, minimum wage and social security,” Theodore Kornweibel Jr., *No Crystal Stair: Black Life and ‘The Messenger’, 1917-1928* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1975), 178.
- <sup>53</sup> ‘Shafts and Darts’, *Messenger*, January 1926.
- <sup>54</sup> *Black No More*, 52.
- <sup>55</sup> Sidney H. Bremer, ‘Home in Harlem, New York: Lessons from the Harlem Renaissance Writers,’ *PMLA*, 105, January 1990, 47-56.
- <sup>56</sup> Hughes, ‘The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,’ 471.
- <sup>57</sup> *Black No More*, 48; 26.
- <sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.
- <sup>59</sup> Trudier Harris, *Exorcizing Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984), 5.
- <sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.
- <sup>61</sup> *Black No More*, 216.
- <sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.
- <sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.
- <sup>64</sup> ‘Views and Reviews’, *Pittsburgh Courier*, 28 October 1933.
- <sup>65</sup> Douglas, *Terrible Honesty*, 338.
- <sup>66</sup> Houston A. Baker Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 85.
- <sup>67</sup> *Black No More*, 176.
- <sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.
- <sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.