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Atelier 14 « Perdre le Nord: territoires, subjectivation et épistémologies dans le Sud global »

Titre : Loosing the North and publishing FIRE: short stories of double consciousness in 1920s Jim-Crow Harlem

The philosophical notion of double consciousness elaborated by W.E.B. Du Bois pertains to his early philosophical works on the theory of the state. Between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, Du Bois was reflecting on the elaboration of a national identity that the black American individual could reclaim for political and civil enfranchisement within the constitutional perimeters of the US republic. As Shamon Zamir has amply shown in Dark Voices,1 Du Bois’s intellectual formation can be traced back to Midwestern, ‘indigenous American’ versions of Hegelian idealism. However, Du Bois rejected the transcendentalist tendencies of American Idealism and focused on the legal and material condition of the black American subject as “negative historical consciousness” – a continuous, stuck antithesis in the dialectic triangle thesis/antithesis/synthesis. The synthesis of a subjectivity that bears in its processes of subjectivation a “negative historical consciousness” translates into the fluid, unstable condition of a double consciousness, that constantly navigates across states of objectification and subjectivation.

When he mentioned the objectifying effects of his experience as the sole black American member, and the sole waged member, of the board of directors of the NYC chapter of an interracial organization created in the 1910s, Du Bois substantiated what he meant by double consciousness with a practical instance. The organization, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, provided the spaces and a network of anti-segregationist political coordination, policymaking and propaganda in early-twentieth-century US cities. The struggles against racist lynching and against institutional segregation were a central focus of the action of the NAACP. For Du Bois, in the NAACP, objectification and subjectivation assumed racialized, gendered and sexualized declinations. In Manning the Race,2 Marlon B. Ross explains for instance how the subaltern relation of Du Bois to one of the white founders, Oswald Garrison, reflected the racist codes of the anti-miscegenation ethos of the time; this dynamic shaped the relations that Du Bois had to other members of the organization. Garrison considered the public space of the NAACP as the sole space where his interaction with Du Bois could legitimately happen. To the contrary, Du Bois was barred from the private space of Garrison’s house. The racist anxiety of framing Du Bois as a possible concurrent to Garrison’s masculine white power in the household, was replaced in the space of the NAACP by the tension of gendered and sexual innuendoes and their performativity in power-games over the board’s decisions. The possibility of masculine competition between Du Bois and Garrison would manifest in a re-sexualized self-representation of Du Bois in his relation to the white female patron Mary Ovington. The idea of double consciousness evokes, in the space of the NAACP, Du Bois’s faltering performances of a sexualized and de-sexualized, racialized male identity that some white members of the organization tailored on him – playing with this identity can also be read as constitutive part of the alienation as waged cultural worker for the organization. The effects of this performance can be searched in the lines of Souls of the Black Folk that

Charles Nero has convincingly argued that Du Bois’s early imagination of political male interracial relations hides a “queer” aspect. Nero uses the term “queer” in the way this term was used at the beginning of the twentieth century in spaces other than the white urban middle class, where the adjective signified homoerotic relations – although this connotation is part of the discussion. In Nero’s argument, “queer” means “odd,” “quirky.” This adjective is connected to a recurrent element of absence in Du Bois’s narrative construction of black masculinities. In texts like “On the Coming of John” (1903), the only fictional insert of Souls, the plot resigns on the impossibility of interracial masculine solidarity, and it does so through an act of masculinization of the black character that convokes the enactment of deadly violence against his white enemy. At the same time, the representation of black masculinity completely erases any sexual element of from the black character. This choice, according to Nero, serves to reassure the largely white intended audience of Souls, to whom Du Bois is suggesting a patriarchal interracial union for anti-segregationist state-building. The de-sexualized character of the black male subjectivity mirrors a conservative, Christian version of black identity; one of its central tenets, according to Nero, is the homosexual panic it inherits from the coeval production and heteropatriarchal management of sexual identities in modern, industrializing urban spaces. The radically unbalanced power relation between racialized masculinities and white masculinities plays a big part on Du Bois’s representation of black masculine subjectivity. In a social and legal reality where the black man is lynched over the alleged raping of white women, and where black women are potentially accessible to every white man, the female exchange that defines the roleplay of homosociality and its effective success is impossible. Therefore, the impossible interracial patriarchal bond that Du Bois is testing informs the continuous objectification and subjectivation that characterize what he describes as his experience of double consciousness within the NAACP.

The “American” and the “Negro [soul]” that Du Bois describes as “two unreconciled strivings” can be further instanced thinking about a literary querelle of the late Harlem Renaissance. During the years of editorship of the NAACP magazine The Crisis, Du Bois had flanked his anti-segregationist political reformism with a staunch commitment to art production as propaganda. The (gendered, sexual, racialized) constrictions imposed to the representation of the New Negro by The Crisis editorial policies mirrored the homoracial power relations that characterized political venues such as the NAACP. These constrictions exploded when, in 1926, the white-authored novel Nigger Heaven by Iowan Carl Van Vechten was published. A collective of young black authors, among whom Wallace Thurman, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Bruce Nugent, reclaimed and fully parodied Van Vechten’s novel in the self-funded magazine FIRE!!, published on that same year. FIRE!! also rejected the prude attacks waged on Nigger Heaven by black American reformers and by part of the Harlemite black middle class. The title of the magazine uses an evocative biblical metaphor, apt to suggest the rejection of the

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5 Marlon B. Ross “[coins] the term homoracial to indicate the different dynamics that result from the pressure of a gendered hierarchy of the races – indicating how in the United States culture homosociality historically relies on the systematic exclusion of black men, as well as the central targeting of women as sexual objects and homosexual men as scapegoats. Ross. Manning the Race, p. 11.
7 AA. VV. FIRE!! Devoted to Younger Negro Artists. 1926. Reprint 1982, curated by Richard Bruce Nugent and Thomas H. Wirth. Unless otherwise stated, in-text bracketed page numbers after the quotations will always refer to this edition.
pastoral power8 incarnated in the political action of reformers like Du Bois, but also like the philosopher Alain Locke, who had more liberal positions on race and art, and who had published the year before an important collection of contribution on these issues titled *The New Negro* (1925). The figure of fire recalls the manifestation of God to Moses in the moment of delivery of the tables of the law. In an act of refusal to delegate this transmission to one representative of the race (who claims a white-disciplined power over the perimeters of artistic representation of the black race), the magazine collects a multiplication of artistic and poetic contributions (short stories, poems, illustrations, comments) that, moving from a parody of the fictional architecture of *Nigger Heaven*, tell tales of objectification and subjectivation that were deemed decadent, crude, inappropriate and offensive by the detractors of the novel and of the magazine.

Adopting Du Bois’s language (for sake of clarity, it is useful to recall that Du Bois’s expressions pertain to an intellectual production linked to Hegelian idealism, theory of the state, and the question of assimilation of the “black folk” to the segregationist republican constitution), *Nigger Heaven* can be read as the “American” element of the “soul” that the “Negro[es]” behind the project of FIRE!! had been struggling with. What does *Nigger Heaven* say about the “American” (hegemonic) element of black double consciousness? Which kind of objectivations and/or subjectivations does it fictionalize? *Nigger Heaven* is a ventriloquist, theatre-script-like novel in three acts. Mary, a “golden brown” librarian, typifying the New Negro intellectual in drag (all “golden brown” characters in the novel are characters in feminine travesty), struggles to keep Byron, a young black writer, from the voracious, sadistic sexuality of the “golden brown” stage dive Lásca Sartoris. Byron, enamored of Mary until he falls madly in love for Lasca, is involved in a murderous shooting at the end of the novel. At the same time as the Creeper, a black pimp who functions as a proxy character for Byron, Byron kills Rudolph Pettijohn, a black cabaret owner, pimp, and enriching black capitalist, who with his power has attracted Lasca away from Byron, and a “golden brown prostitute,” Ruby, away from the Creeper. At the moment of the shooting, Byron invokes the name of Mary, begging to be pardoned by her for the action he has committed.

The novel combines the tradition of blackface and white minstrelsy to the more coeval American indigenist construction of blackness as an atoning force for a racially unified American national spirit and progressive, anti-racist manifest destiny. In the novel, blackness is constructed upon an analogy that associates marginalized (white) homoeroticism to the marginal position of the black race in US society. Only when the novel attempts to create a blackness that can include the liminal position of the modern white queer man, the blackface ventriloquism of the text might seem challenged. Indeed, the plot attempts a form of ironical self-critique, by arguing that if the black artist moves towards heteropatriarchal black reformism (Mary), this is also because the queer white man (Lasca) falls prey to anxiety over the defense of his white hegemonic status, betraying his marginal ‘black’ position and alliances, and constantly profiting of the world of structural white privilege (Pettijohn) where he can pass, to reaffirm his social position. This thematic thread can be evinced considering that Lasca is the blackface for the authorial emplacement9 as ‘white queer man passing as white heterosexual man.’ However, irony does not last.

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9 “The author-function is linked to the juridical and institutional system that surrounds, determines, articulates the universe of discourse; this function is not exercised uniformly and in the same fashion on all discourses, in every epoch and in every civilization form; it is not defined by spontaneous attribution of a discourse to its producer, but by a series of specific and complex operations; it does not purely and simply refer to a real individual, it can produce several subject-positions which
long, and the analogy of blackness and white queerness on which *Nigger Heaven* is constructed ultimately shows to be harbinger of colonial difference as opposed to fostering differentiation.\(^\text{10}\) Indeed, since the device of blackface allows the authorial emplacement to take different shapes, Byron too can be read as a blackface for the author, this time imagined as the ‘white queer man (not passing).’ The fact that Byron asks to be atoned for the murder of the black capitalist (capitalist that grants Lasca her privileged social power all the while implementing the policing of gender and race) only mirrors the more general epistemic economy that the novel encodes: acknowledged or not, the analogy blackness/queerness that ultimately functions is dictated by the colonial white representation/use of black America as an atoning force that grants the Manifest Destiny of the national project (white) America shall accomplish. Quite notably, as the representation of black vernacular shows, blackness is encoded and constructed to articulate the otherwise unspeakable queerness of the authorial position.

The magazine *FIRE* ‘welcomes’ Van Vechten’s objectification of blackness as an atoning force for (queer) white America to make an open satire of it. Borrowing from Sayida Hartman, I clarify that the material and discursive condition of “negative historical consciousness” informed both the reformists’ and the middle-class black bohemians’ writings, since for both surely it was a tricky matter to detail the civil existence of a subject who is socially dead and legally recognized as human only to the degree that he is criminally culpable. Yet it is the anomalous status of the enslaved that determines the specific use of the slave as object of property and the relation between citizens and those who can be identified as civil subject in the most circumscribed and tentative fashion. Hence what is striking […] are the myriad and nefarious uses of slave property and the ways in which slaves become property of all whites, given their status in civil society.\(^\text{11}\)

In the argument that Hartman develops in *Scenes of Subjection*, theatrical and literary blackface is strictly interrelated with a legal and material genealogy of the black body as property “of all whites.” However, the slippery border between blackface objectification and reification is interrupted in *FIRE* by the multiple instances of literary subjectivation it poeticizes, moving from the objectifications that the novel constructs: the contributions to the magazine can be imagined, in the geographies of early-twentieth century US, as mirrors for subjectivations of gendered, racialized, caste-based and sexual objectifications. To begin with, the “American” religious symbolism of atonement and salute associated by *Nigger Heaven* to blackness, is rejected and substituted by the more intimate and polemical use of the biblical image of fire, that specifically signifies, within the space of the forming urban black community, the diatribe between the young artists and the reformers. The magazine reclaims an autonomous interpretation of the (white) law, specifically as far as artistic self-representation is concerned. The closing editorial ‘Fire Burns’ penned by Wallace Thurman protests that “Negroes would have all Negroes appearing in contemporary literature made as ridiculous and as false to type as older school of pseudo-humorous, sentimental white writers made their Uncle Toms, they [sic.] Topsys, and their Mammies, or as the Octavius Roy Cohen school now make their more modern “cullud” folk’’’ (48). The editorial different classes of individuals can get to occupy.” My translation. Foucault, Michael. “Qu’est-ce qu’un auteur?,” in *Dits et écrits. 1954-1988*. Tome I. Paris: Gallimard, 1994, pp. 803-804.


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contends that “Carl Van Vechten was rendered sincere during his explorations and observations of Negro life in Harlem, even if he remained characteristically superficial” (47), and it shows how the statement made by “one young lady, prominent in Harlem collegiate circles,” that Mary Love is the only “typical life model” of Van Vechten’s novel confirms the black elite’s ultimate reproduction of “a typically American practice” proper to “white authors,” to imagine and solicit the creation of black stereotypical characters, in the tradition of white sentimental representation of blackness, common to the white hegemonic abolitionist discourse of the nineteenth century.

The opening short story of FIRE, “Cordelia the Crude,” can be regarded as a counterpoint to Du Bois’s homosexual panic. The text deploys a female travesty of the authorial emplacement, that ironically contests the black middle-class policing of its ‘absent’ queers to the low-down, hustling spaces known as Black and Tan clubs. Nigger Heaven is parodied because the Black and Tan club is the topical venue on whose reversion of gendered, racial and sex power relations the plot of Van Vechten’s novel is constructed. In “Cordelia,” the Black and Tan club is not valorized as a space of queer/black ‘freedom’ destroyed by the agency of the passing white homosexual; rather, it is a space of urban hustling where the passing colored queer subject relegates the explicit black queer individual. The main character of the story, Cordelia, is a black girl who migrates from the South to the North of the country. Her liberal sexual mores ‘win her’ the position of sex worker in a city neighborhood where the ‘dicty kid’ (6) pays for sex outside of his ‘snobbish’ quarters, least he be deemed a ‘fag.’ In the short story, the black vernacular offensive adjective “dicty” carries both meanings (snobbish/fag). “Dicty” appears also in Nigger Heaven, to describe the clubs where the Creeper and Ruby do not wish to go; in the novel, the double connotation of “dicty” is ignored, and the word is used only with its connotation of ‘snobbishness.’ In “Cordelia,” the narrative voice is that of the “dicty kid,” who comes out as the first-person narrator only late in the text, with the effect of strengthening the idea of self-concealment that is attached to his social identity. The short story begins on the descriptive statement of the narrative voice according to which “[p]hysically, if not mentally, Cordelia was a potential prostitute” (6). The narrator develops a quasi-positivist description of how Cordelia, although unwilling to work, becomes a prostitute in the urban North. Through the agency of the narrator himself, who is the first partner ever to pay for her love, the city disciplines Cordelia’s explicit desire into segregated sex-work in the city sex-district. The city is the theatre where the black/colored middle-class queer male performs a disciplinary and heteropatriarchal class passing, in the attempt to participate to an impossible social compact with the colonial white citizen. In the process, he misrecognizes the love that his queer progeny, Cordelia (the reference is to Shakespeare’s King Lear) has for him, in a filial relation that is evocative and that subverts the racist rhetoric associating blackness with the progeny of Cain, who would have looked upon the nudity of his drunken father and hence forever damned to poverty and toil. In “Cordelia the Crude,” double consciousness oscillates between an impossible union with the reformed black masculinity, and the staunch attempt to resist the objectifying

12 “[T]hese interracial clubs did not gain acceptance, or move into the geographical mainstream, but stayed in the slums. In fact they defined the slums. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, discussion of the so called Black and Tan surfaced in reform reports, sociological studies, and newspapers. The term Black and Tan apparently originated in the South […]. The expression was coined to denote interracial cooperation [against white supremacy] […]. Most cities with a sizeable black population probably had at least few Black and Tans, but some urban areas were reputed for their black/white vice districts. Chicago, New York, Detroit, and Cleveland reportedly included numerous racially mixed clubs […]. Of all the forms of public, interracial contact, black/white dance elicited the sharpest, most impassioned responses from authorities. Thus the dance halls that welcomed black and white patrons but prohibited interracial dancing were often viewed as more respectable than the typical Black and Tan. Mumford, Kevin J. Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997. Pp. 30-31.
force of the homosexual panic induced by colonial/imperial white administration and its heteropatriarchal and racist management of sexuality.

_FIRE_ also published a theater script, titled “Color Struck” and signed by Zora Neale Hurston. Also this text might be said to reference _Nigger Heaven_: Emma, a “black woman,” participates with her partner John, a “light-brown skinned man,” to a traditional cake walk, a folkloristic context rooted in Southern slave culture, of which the couple has already won the previous edition. Soon Emma abandons the contest in reason of the explosive jealousy she feels for Effie, “a mulatto girl” (7) to whom John sometimes talks and addresses compliments. Abandoned by his cake-walk partner, John takes part to the contest with Effie, and they win the race. After twenty years of separation, once his wife (who is not Effie) dies, John comes back to look for Emma, and proposes her to marry. However, during this encounter Emma loses her control again when John discovers Emma’s ill “mulatto” daughter; indeed, Emma begins to fear that John will become interested in her. John answer to Emma’s rage can be easily misread as an argument for supposing the alienation linked to colorism and racism a central thematic axe of the play: “So this is the woman I’ve been wearing my heart over like a rose for twenty years! She so despises her own skin that she can’t believe anyone else could love it!” (14) However, Emma’s seemingly pathological hate for her own black skin appears too easy an interpretation, and the theme of self-destructive deprecation too little contextualized (and rather victimizing) to convince. If we read the play in the context of publication of _Nigger Heaven_, it is impossible not to suspect that the “light-brown” and “mulattoes” of the play are silent queer characters, and the relation between John and Effie is indeed a homoerotic flirt.

When John comes back to Emma twenty years after her departure from the cake walk, and tells her that his wife has died, proposing Emma to marry, the woman says: “Bet you’s wife wuz some high-yaller dicty-doo,” to which John replies “Naw she wasn’t neither. She was jus’ as much like you as Ah could get her” (13). Once again, the adjective “dicty” should read as both ‘snobbish’ and ‘fag:’ Emma insultingly associates John’s passion for light-skinned women to a queer (read here homoerotic) interest. John’s revelation to Emma that his wife “was jus’ as much [black] like” her is suspiciously evocative of a heterosexual marriage of convenience. In the second scene, to reassure Emma of his love, dispel her suspicions about Effie, and convince her to dance, John says: “Ah jes’ wants you! You know what they say! De darker de berry, de sweeter de taste!” (10). This popular idiomatic form will be used some years later, in 1929, as the title of Wallace Thurman’s novel _The Blacker the Berry_, a novel that thematizes the interplay of gendered and racialized objectifications that the main black female character Emma (!) Lou fights against, as she crosses different black urban communities and is constantly refused or exploited by lighter-skinned men that she likes. Hurston’s play mobilizes various intertextual elements (golden browns and dicty kids) to convince that Emma’s self-hatred is in fact a dramatic and ironical mask structured on heterosexual and colorist feminine jealousy. This mask, under the covert of self-loathing alienated blackness, stages Emma’s protest for being relegated to the socially reproductive role of wife, which allows the colored queer man to pass in the white-supremacist heteropatriarchal social configuration as heterosexual. I insist on the polemical element of the play as part of the satirical assemblage _FIRE_, that clearly plays with official codes and norms to interpellate black reformists’ problematic reproduction of white categories of bodily and population management. However, the black space of the cake walk is sexually ambiguous and not disciplinary as John makes the private space of his fake, acceptable relation with Emma. So, when Emma leaves the cake walk as a black space that only ironically validates John’s public performance of heterosexuality (indeed, John and Effie win the cake walk!), she is subtracting herself from an objectifying/normative relation that John brings to the scene of the cake walk. In this relationship, Emma’s socially/materially vulnerable condition as a black woman is verified and reinforced by John to secure his structural masculine privilege and to contain his homosexual panic. In “Color Struck,” the “Negro” soul at war with the “American” soul questions a web of political
alliances and the objectifications these alliances produce. At the same time, double consciousness takes the shape of Emma’s own rebellious performance: an ironical subjectivation that engages in an open critique of the objectifying power of the “golden brown” passing man. Emma’s interdiction to John to meet her daughter at the end of the play produces self-hating jealousy only as a theatrical mask filtered through John’s unreliable eyes: in fact Emma is again in the process of disrupting John’s disciplinary and colonial, white-induced cycle of hidden queerness.
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