

## **“The Congo is flooding the Acropolis”: Art, “Exhibits,” and the Intercultural in the New Negro Renaissance**

In Claude McKay’s *Banjo* (1929), Ray recalls his experience working as a nude artist’s model in Paris. In marked contrast to McKay’s unhappy spell as a cash-strapped model in the 1920s, Ray breezily remarks that “the posing went along famously.”<sup>1</sup> While the students “seemed interested” in what he had to say about African sculpture, Picasso, and Cézanne, their construction of him as “savage” meant that they could not countenance a black Caribbean man “getting on to civilized things.”<sup>2</sup> In this scene, McKay stages the complexities of intercultural encounter, exploring fascination and spectatorship in relation to concepts of modernity and primitivism by way of an allusion to a life drawing class in a European art studio. Taking McKay’s play upon visual, verbal, and mental forms of the image as a starting point, this article examines associations between visual art and intercultural exchange, paying particular attention to representations of the display and viewing of cultural artefacts (or people, in Ray’s case) in museums and studios.

In the past decade, the dynamic interplay between word and image in the New Negro Renaissance has received considerable critical attention. A fascination with visual art among New Negro writers is suggested by a proliferation of characters who are trying to make their mark as artists. Consider, as examples, Angela Murray in Jessie Fauset’s *Plum Bun* (1928), who pursues her artistic ambitions by passing in the bohemian world of Greenwich Village, and Wallace Thurman’s dark tale of thwarted artistic ambition, *Infants of the Spring* (1932), which features a whole household of aspiring artists, singers, and writers. Beyond this fascination with the figure of the artist, several writers, including James Weldon Johnson, Nella Larsen, Gwendolyn Bennett, and Jessie Fauset, sought to introduce something of the immediacy of modernist visual culture into the literary domain. As Miriam Thaggert has

observed, the period saw “heightened attention to and experimentation with visual and verbal techniques for narrating and representing blackness.”<sup>3</sup> More recently, Jeremy Braddock has shifted attention to “the [modernist] collection as both form and practice,” analyzing the presentation of African American and African culture in museums, anthologies, and archives (including the Barnes Foundation and Alain Locke’s landmark volume, *The New Negro*).<sup>4</sup> Such an approach yields a nuanced assessment of how “cultural and institutional practices” governed “the conditions of modernism’s reception,” an issue that is a central concern in writings as diverse as Countee Cullen’s “Heritage,” Helene Johnson’s “Bottled,” and Langston Hughes’ short story “Slave on the Block.”<sup>5</sup> Lena Hill pursues these connections between cultural institutions, asymmetrical power dynamics, and reception to different effect, exploring texts by Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, and Anne Spencer that represent “black women poet speakers and fictional protagonists as creators of plastic art – or as individuals possessing a savvy understanding of art objects” in order to “invert the expected power dynamic of the gaze.”<sup>6</sup>

This preoccupation with the multimedia scope of early twentieth-century African American writing has emerged alongside a growing body of criticism that has documented the transcultural contours of the movement. Since the 1990s, an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective has transformed understanding of the New Negro Renaissance, exposing a cultural and political movement that stretched from the United States to the Caribbean, Cuba, Mexico, and the Soviet Union.<sup>7</sup> This essay seeks to reconcile these critical trends, which are usually addressed in isolation, interpreting the thematic preoccupation with exhibition, display, and museums in W. E. B. Du Bois’s *Dark Princess* (1928), Wallace Thurman’s *Infants of the Spring*, and selected drawings by the Mexican caricaturist Miguel Covarrubias in relation to concepts of intercultural encounter, which are often marked by Orientalism, primitivism or exoticism. As suggested by McKay’s focus, in *Banjo*, on

“posing,” a term suggestive of both theatricality and transgressive sexuality, such scenes, which include depictions of African American viewers of African art, put notions of cultural authenticity and legibility under pressure in ways that highlight the possibilities and limitations of intercultural understanding. Moreover, representations of visual art and exhibition are often situated in European locations or engage with European art that emerged from a hybrid, multiracial world. Consequently, these tropes serve as a vehicle for exploring intercultural understanding, but they are also haunted by colonialism because museums played a central role in the formulation of national identities (not least through the display of colonial loot). Indeed, as Ruth Hoberman has demonstrated, some of these contradictions stem from the fact that the modern public museum’s “identity as a refuge from commodification and greed was in tension with its acquisitiveness, its cosmopolitan identity as the ‘epitome of civilization’ conflicting with its ties to the nation.”<sup>8</sup>

Analysis of the display and viewing of art – a fascination captured in references to “exhibits” in several Harlem Renaissance novels and Covarrubias’s use of this term to describe his caricatures for *Vanity Fair* – opens up a fresh perspective on visual aesthetic practices and cross-cultural dynamics in the New Negro Renaissance. Scenes of artistic interpretation feature prominently in explorations of the liberatory potential of art, but any conception of an idealized artistic realm is complicated by the colonial and capitalist assumptions embedded in the display of art in museums and art galleries. Even when conceived in opposition to such ideas, black modernist imaginings of liberation through art are entangled, and sometimes even complicit, with modes of commodification, Eurocentricism, and Orientalism.

### **Miguel Covarrubias’s “Exhibits”**

It is not difficult to find representations of viewers gazing on paintings and sculptures in museums in New Negro culture, scenes of interpretation that prompt exploration of the limitations of particular ways of seeing, which are often governed by assumptions about race and gender.<sup>9</sup> Miguel Covarrubias's caricatures for *Vanity Fair* in the 1920s demonstrate an enduring fascination with the interpretative spaces opened up in the museum, just one element of the artist's broader interest in notions of spectatorship in the cinema, the theatre, and other public spaces such as the street, Coney Island, and the cabaret.<sup>10</sup>

The Mexican artist Miguel Covarrubias's central role as a non-black chronicler of New Negro scenes and culture has been eclipsed by better-known figures such as the German American artist Winold Reiss and the white American writer and photographer Carl Van Vechten, but he is central to any discussion of the thematic preoccupation with exhibits and exhibition in the New Negro Renaissance. Not only did Covarrubias secure a position as an illustrator for *Vanity Fair* – a “slick” magazine with a predominantly white readership that cultivated sophistication by publishing avant-garde art and literature alongside advertisements for luxury products, witty caricatures, and high-quality photography – on the strength of a recommendation from the prominent white Harlem Renaissance promoter Carl Van Vechten.<sup>11</sup> He also collaborated with the New York-based Caribbean writer Eric Walrond on sketches about the New Negro, illustrated W. C. Handy's *Blues: an Anthology* (1926) and Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men* (1934), and designed the dust jacket for Langston Hughes' first collection of poetry, *The Weary Blues* (1926).

Notwithstanding his active participation in the New Negro Renaissance, Covarrubias's abiding fascination with scenes of intercultural interpretation in the pages of *Vanity Fair* is complicated by his position as a caricaturist fascinated by what Shane Vogel has called “the scene of Harlem cabaret.”<sup>12</sup> Although the reproduction of Covarrubias's caricatures in *The New Negro* signals his significance to what Alain Locke conceived as the

“multiracial inheritance” of a cultural renaissance that drew inspiration from nationalist movements across the globe, his artwork was condemned by black intellectuals such as Allison Davis (and W. E. B. Du Bois) for a sensationalism that “represent[ed] the Negro as essentially bestialized by jazz and the cabaret.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, what Locke celebrated as Covarrubias’s ability to slip the yoke of static documentary realism through a dynamic style that transformed sketches of social types into “living documents” is summarily dismissed, in Allison Davis’s 1928 *Crisis* essay, “Our Negro Intellectuals,” as “exhibitionism” capitalizing on the vogue for black cultural expression.<sup>14</sup> This slippage between the exhibit and exhibitionism, and attendant anxieties about the commodification of blackness, is something to which I shall return in later analysis of these motifs in New Negro Renaissance literature.

As we’ll see, the complexity of Covarrubias’s relationship to the New Negro movement disappears from view in the framing of his artwork in *Vanity Fair*. As James Davis has explained, Covarrubias and Walrond’s portrayals of Harlem life in the magazine “hinged on the status of the artists as insiders,” but “neither was African American.” Covarrubias only arrived in the United States in 1923. Seen from this perspective, it is evident that his work “involved strategies of mimicry that were obscured by the presumption of intimacy with the community ... depicted.”<sup>15</sup> Moreover, revealing affiliations and substitutions arise as a consequence of an unrelenting emphasis upon Covarrubias’s Mexican identity, which seeks to guarantee the authenticity of his caricatures by hinting at a natural affinity with primitivism. Given that most straplines in the 1920s introduced him as “the young Mexican artist” (December 1924), “A Mexican Neighbour” (January 1925), and “the visiting Mexican artist” (August 1925), it is difficult to miss the unexpected correspondences with Alain Locke’s praise, in *Negro Art: Past and Present* (1936), of Covarrubias as one of “the painters with foreign backgrounds [who] were the first to be sensitive to the broadest social implications of the Negro subject and theme.”<sup>16</sup> Like Frank Crowninshield, the editor

of *Vanity Fair*, Locke assumes that Covarrubias's Mexican identity furnishes privileged insight into black culture, contending that the artist's emergence as one of the "outstanding interpreters" of New Negro life "comes from both his close knowledge of Mexican folk types and from his deep understanding of primitive life of no matter what race or clime."<sup>17</sup>

Given these tensions, it is striking that Covarrubias's caricatures of Americans in museums compulsively return to the question of the interpretation of culture, playing upon notions of proximity and distance. The most famous of these images is Covarrubias's portrait of a young, fashionable black couple's surprise at the angular, abstract forms of African sculpture (from March 1929), which conjures up ideas of recognition and defamiliarization (fig. 1). The caption, "To Hold, as t'Were the Mirror Up to Nature," an allusion to Hamlet's advice to the players before their performance of *The Mousetrap*, invokes the mirror as "the traditional king of metaphors for verisimilitude," but any straightforward understanding of mimesis (or cultural affinity) is undercut by the artist's deployment of *vacilada*, "a word which has no direct English translation, but connotes irony, satire, and humor that Mexican artists manifested in a fascination with the grotesque, the macabre, and the absurd."<sup>18</sup>

To some extent, the sophisticated young man's bemused response to African sculpture – "What sort of a woman is that?" – disrupts any romantic narrative of cultural continuity across the black diaspora.<sup>19</sup> It recalls Countee Cullen's "Heritage," with its famous description of Africa as "A book one thumbs | Listlessly, till slumber comes," a formulation that associates reading with detachment to capture the difficulties involved in connecting with African heritage given the cultural dislocation engendered by slavery.<sup>20</sup> If Covarrubias transposes Cullen's scene of cultural alienation to the museum, he also inscribes affiliations between the modern black couple and the sculpture, shifting the viewer's attention from their interpretation of art to a "primitivist modernist" delineation of their bodies as the locus of a static, essentialist racial identity.<sup>21</sup> This recourse to a reductive visual vocabulary of racial

(and gendered) types, which is complicated by an ironic awareness that the modernist encounter with African art inspired artistic experimentation, comes into sharp focus in Covarrubias's deployment of repeated patterns and stylistic techniques which generate correlations between the flattened, streamlined bodies of his ultramodern museum visitors and the polished, smooth surfaces of the sculpture. To emphasize a physical mirroring that goes unnoticed by the couple, he positions them face to face with the sculpture, raising it to eye level in order to establish correspondences between specific body parts, such as the eye, the protruding jaw, the perfectly arranged, "sculpted" hair, and the curved, flowing arms of each figure. In short, Covarrubias's use of "black and white to create palpable volume forces attention on [the] body," assigning the couple a sculptural quality as ethnographic "type studies," rather than potential artists who might, in Alain Locke's words, advance from "as alienated and misunderstanding an attitude [towards African art] as the average European Westerner" towards meaningful, creative engagement with "ancestral" African forms and styles.<sup>22</sup>

The viewer's position as a privileged observer who can interpret both the sculpture and the museum-goers is, however, complicated by the issue of gender. It is no coincidence that the besuited gentleman's baffled response to the sculpture is to raise questions about types of femininity, a mode of thinking that underlines how, as Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias have shown, women are often constructed as symbolic carriers of national or ethnic identity.<sup>23</sup> In this context, the woman's position at the centre of the image seems to underline her position as an index of modern African American culture. Taken together with the sculpture's piercing eyes (which signal a departure from realistic representation to stylized exaggeration), the sharply pointed, jutting elements of the sculpture (the breasts, stomach, and knees) are contrasted with the more rounded figures of the couple in such a way as to emphasize the artwork's insistent (and remarkably human) demand for attention. Although

the captions provide no insight into the young woman's reaction to the sculpture, her rapt gaze hints at a fascination with the "primitive" that is resisted by her male companion.

Indeed, the looks exchanged between the sculpture and the young man (over the head of the young woman) and the firm but protective placement of his arm, which appears to pull her back from the sculpture, is suggestive of a tussle between the lure of primitivism and the acculturation symbolized by the young man's sharp suit.

It is less often remembered that this image originally appeared in the midst of a collection of caricatures that reveal spectators' varied emotional responses to Greek, African, Italian, and Egyptian art, responses that range from unhealthy attachment and boredom to mindless imitation and glib consumerism. The full page caricature of the couple's encounter with Africa art was printed opposite four smaller sketches set in famous European and American art galleries, a format that allows readers to identify (and ridicule) American social types and to register the convergences and divergences between them judging from their engagement with art exhibits in museums. Taken together, the caricatures at once depict the museum as "a means of constructing and consolidating national identity" and a space for self-fashioning, in which individuals identify with particular artefacts (as in the case of Irene Frisble, whose affinity with the mummies on display in the Metropolitan bespeaks of sexual repression and a gothic threat of violence).<sup>24</sup> In line with this penchant for self-absorption, there is a subtle critique of the American tourist or museum spectator in two of the smaller caricatures, which implies that black and white American museum-goers share an inability to fully appreciate the artwork of other countries. One makes fun of an "American tourist" who has stolen a statue from the Vatican, a story that ridicules a tendency to reduce art to its monetary value, and another depicts "Mr T" from Toledo, Ohio, "something of a wag," who responds to the sight of the Venus de Milo with a glib quip about "disarmament."<sup>25</sup> Such humour is of a piece with Covarrubias's taste for lampooning the philistinism of American

tourists in *Vanity Fair* more generally, a cultural trait that he labels “Babbitry Abroad” in one particularly scathing portrayal of American families who “flock” to Mexico, “Our Southern Neighbour, Mexico; in Movies and Reality: Riotous Romance of the Screen Shown-up by a Truthful Tourist” (January 1927). Even though the tourists carry all the paraphernalia of the modern tourist (“Each tourist has his camera”), they are ill-equipped to understand artistic achievements because of a parochial outlook that leaves them yearning for place names that “were easier to pronounce” and dependent upon banal reference points that lead them to “rate” Aztec architecture as “pretty punk compared with the new Frisbie Building in Cedar Rapids.”<sup>26</sup>

What stands out in these caricatures is the emphasis on artistic appreciation’s entanglement with consumerism: museums are depicted as a capitalist enterprise that is sustained by various kinds of labour, whether that be the shivering guard, who has been positioned in a doorway to thwart further thefts of precious artefacts from the Vatican, or the unproductive “copy-cat” art painted “so industriously” by Miss Dolman in Florence.<sup>27</sup> To some extent, readers of the magazine are exempt from such criticism, positioned as discerning cultural arbiters (and consumers) who are alert to irony and nuance. Addressing this point, Nina Miller has demonstrated that the brand of humour employed in *Vanity Fair* was “highly marketable in a culture of self-conscious sophistication... [because it] afforded them license for detachment: they could be clever without the implication of intellectualism, critical without affiliation with any positive ideological model, and ironic in relation to themselves, rendering their own social identifications indeterminate.”<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, tensions emerge when the caricatures are interpreted as a collection, with attention being paid to the dynamic interplay between individual sketches. First, the vocabulary used to describe the caricatures, with its emphasis on snapshots “[g]leaned” from galleries around the world that promise a “Tour Around the Art World in Several Flashes,” casts the artist as a tourist

whose sketches are the equivalent of photographs from the scene, an idea that inadvertently exposes Covarrubias's complicity in the commodification of art (and viewers). Secondly, the size of the caricature of the young black couple, which dwarves the other sketches, betrays discrepancies in how women are depicted in these images. Several sketches revel in the transgressive potential of the erotic, "hot-house atmosphere" created by the presence of female nudes in hallowed art galleries, but the unnamed black woman is the only spectator whose body is positioned an object of male curiosity.<sup>29</sup> All the other female museum-goers are dressed in long coats that shield their bodies from view, which only serves to underline the extent to which the caricatures have been shaped by a racialized, gendered gaze.

Analysis of these caricatures in the context of *Vanity Fair*'s regular two-page spreads featuring Covarrubias's drawings (and Eric Walrond's captions) underscores how his transcultural aesthetic is implicated in consumerism. The best-known set of vignettes in the series, from December 1924, announces the arrival of the New Negro, with the headline "Enter, the New Negro, a Distinctive Type Recently Created by the Coloured Cabaret Belt in New York."<sup>30</sup> Although an ironic tone seeks to forestall the formulation of fixed sociological types, the material is formatted in such a way as to present the scene of the Harlem cabaret "as a commodified form for [the] entertainment and consumption [of a predominantly white audience]."<sup>31</sup> Eight small caricatures, accompanied by ironic captions in dialect by Eric Walrond, record the emergence of new modern urban types such as the "Strutter," "The Sheik of Dahomey," and "That Teasin' Yalla Girl" who populate the cabarets and streets of Harlem. "The Sheik of Dahomey," a fluid, stylized portrait of a young man posing in elaborate, dandified dress captures in its dynamics an expressive culture characterized by the inventive sartorial self-expression that Richard J. Powell associates with "cutting a figure," a tradition of portraiture in which subjects establish black agency by "boldly positioning themselves in the public eye."<sup>32</sup> Yet, it is difficult to escape the feeling that these sketches have been

packaged up to entertain a well-heeled white audience. For one thing, Covarrubias's apparent debt to styles of racist caricature with their roots in minstrelsy, which finds full expression in his exaggerated renderings of lips and teeth, inserts the vignettes into a long tradition of racialized cultural commodification. Next, when read as a collection, the sketches not only provide a tour guide to Harlem's night life, complete with advice about recommended timings ("2 A. M. at "The Cat and the Saxophone"), but they also establish an editorial frame that undercuts any idea that slumming might be exploitative or voyeuristic: "We have also seen a great number of Negro cabarets which have flared up in every part of New York," the editor announces, "from the fashionable districts to the Harlem black belt – all flourishing under white, or partial white, patronage."<sup>33</sup>

Comparable tensions – between ethnography and comedy, type and individual, ethnographical cultural description and cultural commodification – animate Covarrubias's visual travelogues for *Vanity Fair*. Among other things, he produced satirical vignettes about the representation of Mexico and Mexicans in film, "Fancy Foreigners" in Paris, and a tour of North Africa, topics that showcase the artist's cosmopolitan sophistication.<sup>34</sup> Taken as a whole, his caricatures are characterized by a sharp awareness of the commodification of particular cultures in the context of thriving tourism and entertainment industries at home and abroad. There are, for example, striking parallels between Covarrubias's fascination with the shaping influence of an economy of tips upon the performance and reception of the well-known dance, the Black Bottom, in a Harlem cabaret, and his understanding that any quest for authentic cultural experiences in North Africa is doomed, given his immersion in a tourist industry that is "a relentless extension of commodity relations and its consequent inequalities of power between center and periphery, First and Third Worlds, developed and undeveloped regions, metropolis and countryside."<sup>35</sup> When introducing his caricature of the sheik, a figure that American audiences would immediately associate with Rudolph Valentino, one of the

first sex symbols of silent cinema, Covarrubias not only notes that the man was “liberally paid for posing,” but he also mentions that “Secret Sorrow,” another “rare exhibit from the French Soudan,” harbours a “secret desire to quit the sands of Sahara and remove to Harlem” where his brother runs a “extremely successful night-club.”<sup>36</sup> For all their wit and self-mockery, such details conspire to expose the extent to which a vocabulary specifically associated with visual art, notably “posing” and “exhibit,” has been infused with commercial connotations, an observation that in turn raises questions about how economic demands might skew representation in “the New York magazine most strongly associated with the commercialized circulation of modernism.”<sup>37</sup> In this context, it is revealing that Covarrubias often deployed the word “exhibit” to describe his caricatures, a term that invites readers to engage critically with the material on display, partly by introducing an element of self-consciousness into the artist’s selection of representative (national, racial, cultural or society) types.<sup>38</sup> Yet, the word “exhibit,” which carries associations of immobility and passivity, also serves to accentuate how, as Sonnet Retman puts it, “racial authenticity is both capitalized upon and produced within consumer capitalism.”<sup>39</sup>

Competing notions of aesthetic and economic value are also central to Covarrubias’s sly insertion of his museum caricature from March 1929 into a tradition of representation that staged modernist fascination with African art, often by including a rapt spectator within the picture frame. In particular, the (often ironic) visual echoes between human and sculptural form in Covarrubias’s sketch recall Man Ray’s *Noire et blanche* (1926), a well-known series of photographs of his partner and model, Kiki of Montparnasse, posing with a Baule mask.<sup>40</sup> If Covarrubias executes a playful transformation of the racial dynamics of Man Ray’s image by substituting the fetishization of white female passivity with precise modernist silhouettes depicting two alert black spectators, he also reinscribes many of the cultural assumptions that underpin Man Ray’s primitivist modernism. Given that the initial circulation of Man Ray’s

images as fashion photography in Paris *Vogue* underlines that the photographs are heavily invested in “concepts of the fetish originating in Western Europe which encouraged the deployment of bodily fragments,” it is striking that Covarrubias’s fluid renderings of the body also place a premium upon fashion, especially through the juxtaposition of the “naked” woman depicted in the sculpture with the fashionably dressed female spectator, whose figure-hugging clothing, from her flowery dress to her hat, at once reveals the form and conceals the surface of her body.<sup>41</sup>

Both images “belong within” what Whitney Chadwick has described as “an aesthetic discourse that assigns exchange value both to images, and to objects and artifacts, that substitutes the fabricated for the natural, and that commodifies images of women and the objects and artifacts of other peoples.”<sup>42</sup> To be sure, Covarrubias’s caricature participates in modernist fascination with the supposedly sculptural qualities of the black body. Such images blur distinctions between the fabricated and the human (as in Nikolas Muray’s photographs of Paul Robeson and Richmond Barthé’s sculptures of the Senegalese dancer Féral Benga, who performed alongside Josephine Baker in Paris), but they also summon up the spectre of slavery through substitutions that assign exchange value to both African artefacts and bankable performers from across the black diaspora.<sup>43</sup>

### **Exhibits and Exhibitionism in Wallace Thurman’s *Infants of the Spring***

In their complex staging of concepts of cultural affinity and distance, Covarrubias’s images of museums and galleries encapsulate a much broader preoccupation with museums and exhibitions during the New Negro Renaissance, an issue that received attention in texts as diverse as essays and editorials for *Opportunity* magazine, commentaries by art collectors such as Albert Barnes, the writings of Boasian anthropologists, and Nancy Cunard’s *Negro* anthology (1934).<sup>44</sup> Some commentators depicted the encounter with African art in galleries

and museums as a transformative, even spiritual, experience for modern African Americans. Take, for example, Gwendolyn Bennett's November 1927 account of a visit to the Barnes Foundation in her *Opportunity* column, "The Ebony Flute," in which her celebration of the "delicate chiseling" and "fine sculpturing" featured on a fourteenth-century Baule bust of an African woman plays a pivotal role in a gendered fashioning of ethnic pride.<sup>45</sup> What stands out is Bennett's imaginative transformation of tangible artefacts in the exhibition into a pantheon of images (both real and imagined) that occupy space within an enriched mental landscape, a "visual minded" mode of representing female subjectivity that recalls Jessie Fauset's portrayal of Angela in *Plum Bun*.<sup>46</sup> In this vein, Bennett speaks of "my 'Head of an African woman'" as a "link ... with the selves of Lost and Undiscovered Africa," a portable image that she can "bring away something in [her] mind's eye." In short, the sculpture serves as a mnemonic for cultural continuities and solidarity across the black diaspora that connect an anonymous African woman, who is represented in terms that afford her image a "universal" aesthetic appeal ("this piece of age-old wood ... [is] something of life and breath that belongs to all climes and peoples"), with enslaved women separated from their children, an old woman in South Carolina, and a modern Harlem girl.<sup>47</sup>

If Bennett presents engagement with a specific artefact as a gendered mode of spiritual communion with the past, other black intellectuals were more centrally concerned with the development of cultural institutions that might facilitate modern America's reassessment of black cultures. Nowhere is this awareness of the shaping influence of practices of display upon the interpretation of particular artefacts (and even whole cultural traditions) clearer than in Alain Locke's 1924 essay, "A Note on African Art," an examination of the implications of Euro-American modernist reassessments of African art:

Our museums were full of inferior and relatively late native copies of this material [African art] before we began to realize its art significance. Dumb, dusty trophies of imperialism, they had been assembled from the colonially exploited corners of Africa,

first as curios then as prizes of comparative ethnology. Then suddenly there came to a few sensitive artistic minds realization that here was an art object, intrinsically interesting and fine.<sup>48</sup>

In this passage, Locke asserts that the narratives brought to bear on African art in the context of the museum, which either encouraged the collection of exotica for consumption as “primitive” art or inserted artefacts into triumphalist historical accounts that sought to confirm western cultural superiority, led to an impoverished understanding of rich cultural traditions. African art objects were presented in such a way as to emphasize their ethnological significance rather than their artistic qualities, an approach that rendered them “dumb.” In the most resonant phrase of the extract, Locke hails the reinterpretation of “dumb, dusty trophies of imperialism” as fine art objects, a transformation that was achieved through the pioneering efforts of a few visionary critics and interpreters, such as the art collectors Paul Guillaume and Albert Barnes. Working against a tradition of museum practice that viewed so-called “primitive art” as “objects that were deemed appropriate for superficial consumption rather than deeper intellectual contemplation,” Locke suggests that a reframing of existing collections carries the potential to retrieve neglected art objects from the archives, making them “speak” to the modern world.<sup>49</sup> In this context, he places a premium upon authenticity, following the cue of pioneering museum designers such as Matthew Prichard and Benjamin Ives Gilman in his dismissal of “inferior copies” in favour of the careful presentation of a smaller number of “authentic” exhibits to highlight “their aesthetic quality ... in a way most fitted to affect the mind of the beholder.”<sup>50</sup>

Notwithstanding the centrality of a reassessment of African art to the formulation of a “usable past” comparable to that of “the imagined pasts of European immigrants and their children,” discourses of exhibition and display were often freighted with negative associations, especially in relation to such thorny questions as the relationship between politics and aesthetics in the New Negro Renaissance.<sup>51</sup> As a leading figure among a group of

younger artists who rejected racial propaganda in favour of self-expression and avant-garde experimentation, Wallace Thurman used images of dusty artefacts in museums to encapsulate the constraining influence of an expectation of a political imperative for black art. Aware that demands for an unswerving commitment to the ideology of racial uplift might have a detrimental impact on black cultural expression, Thurman argued, in “Negro Artists and the Negro” (1927), an essay for *The New Republic*, that the requirement to “always appear in public butter side up” threatened to transform individual artists into passive, curated objects who had little choice about how to respond to the dilemmas posed by what Kobena Mercer has termed the “burden of representation.”<sup>52</sup> In his evocation of the museum, associations with stasis, silence, and spatial confinement abound as he describes expectations that consigned black artists to enclosed, limiting social spaces. In the rarefied parlour and the museum, he implies, there is no room for the vogue for primitivist representations of black working-class culture associated with the cabaret and the street since “[African Americans] feel as if they must always exhibit specimens from the college rather than from the kindergarten, specimens from the parlor rather than from the pantry.”<sup>53</sup>

The following year, in “Negro Poets and their Poetry” (1928), Thurman expanded his concept of “exhibition” in order to emphasize a long tradition of manufacturing racial authenticity in the cultural marketplace. In the midst of an account of the constraints imposed upon black cultural production by limiting stereotypes and audience expectations, he identifies a history of patronage that had robbed writers of artistic independence, starting with the career of Phillis Wheatley, who was “exhibited at the Court of George III, and the homes of the nobility much as the Negro poets of today are exhibited in New York drawing rooms.”<sup>54</sup> Significantly, the encroachments of an exploitative economic system are never far from view: “Phillis in her day was a museum figure who would have caused more of a sensation if some contemporary Barnum had exploited her.”<sup>55</sup>

Associations between “exhibits,” exhibitionism, ways of seeing, and the commodification of black art also become governing tropes in Wallace Thurman’s roman-à-clef *Infants of the Spring*. Drawing attention to art displayed outside the confines of the gallery and the museum, Thurman focuses on the art staged and performed within “Niggerrati Manor,” a house conceived as a “monument to the New Negro.”<sup>56</sup> Aiming to supply artists, musicians, and writers with both a room (and a studio) of their own in a cramped, noisy section of the city where inhabitants were, in Thurman’s words, “struggling for more room and for more air,” Euphoria, a successful African American businesswoman, decides to support the emergent New Negro movement by allowing artists to live and work in her Harlem townhouse for free.<sup>57</sup> Notwithstanding the apparent generosity of Euphoria’s patronage, her ambitions encapsulate the encroachment of capitalist values into the cultural sphere: guided by a plan to “make money, achieve prestige as a patron, and at the same time profit artistically from the resultant contacts,” she spends much of the novel wondering “if the house is going to be productive artistically” (6, 30). This incorporation of art into capitalist structures results in a restrictive, diminished understanding of both liberation and art: “only with money,” Euphoria insists later in the novel, “can Negroes ever purchase complete freedom. With money and with art. That’s the reason I started this house” (54).

Given this focus on the demands placed on black writers by the cultural marketplace, it is worth pausing to reflect on how Thurman’s thematic preoccupation with exhibitionism and exhibits in his fiction differs from his interventions in debates about the politics of art and Covarrubias’s caricatures for *Vanity Fair*, a magazine that was explicitly concerned with the consumer. As Terrell Scott Herring has pointed out, *Infants of the Spring* “spends most of its time dwelling on the detrimental effects that public exposure has for the Negro artist,” which only serves to underline that modes of expression conceived as being outside the marketplace (such as vernacular expression and decadent sexuality) are in fact thoroughly incorporated

into capitalist structures.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, the more expansive form of the novel allows Thurman to explore how cultural commodification is entangled with questions of race (especially by way of scenes that dramatize whites' interpretation of black artists and art). Building upon a sustained engagement with the trope of the exhibit or display, Thurman explores the promises and perils of exhibitionism as a mode of expression that seems to promise liberation from the constraints of consumerism and racialist thinking.

In this context, it is significant that Niggeratti Manor is figured as a kind of museum: Raymond (Thurman's alter ego) repeatedly describes it as harbouring "a rare collection of individuals" who have to be "seen" to be "appreciated" (9, 6). The spatial dynamics of the house – its layout, furnishings, and décor – are delineated in meticulous detail, not least in the opening paragraphs when the arrival of two white visitors (including the Nordic-Canadian Stephen Jorgenson) to Ray's studio is aligned with voyeurism or spectacle through a sequence of images of doorways, openings, thresholds, and looking. Given the prominence of these tropes, Thurman's first description of Niggerrati Manor might be read as a sustained exploration of the various preconceptions that interpreters bring to bear on their readings of black art. For one thing, a description of the "decadent" décor in Ray's studio is interspersed with a satirical account of how such aesthetic choices might be interpreted in line with white cultural assumptions about primitivism. In a pointed critique of how uplift ideology constrains individual expression in a straitjacket of racial respectability, Ray mocks Sam, a white Negrotarian with a parasitic relationship to the New Negro Renaissance, for his disapproval of "the red and black draperies, the red and black bed cover, the crimson wicker chairs, the riotous hook rugs, and Paul's erotic drawings" that adorn Ray's studio (1). Such décor recalls Aaron Douglas's cover design for *Fire!!*, the short-lived journal that Thurman edited in 1926 featuring younger artists who rejected racial propaganda in favour of defiant self-expression. Douglass's iconic image in black and red employed Egyptian imagery to

fashion a bold image of racial pride that underlines his credentials as an avant-garde, cosmopolitan black modernist who synthesized art deco techniques with ancient Egyptian motifs to develop his signature style of flat silhouettes, layered geometric shapes, and concentric circles. Given these associations, any dismissal of Ray's studio as "a confession of [his] inferior race heritage" is wide of the mark (1).

Later in the passage, Stephen's bewildered responses to two inhabitants of the house – the queer painter Paul Arbian (who was modelled on Richard Bruce Nugent), one of the few genuine talents in a novel full of failed artists, and the gentleman tenor Eustace – encapsulate a broader tendency to blur artist and art object: he sees them as "two strange beings who had ... forced themselves into the spotlight" (8-9). Although the scene includes a description of Stephen "minutely examining the various drawings [by Paul] which adorned the wall" (2), Stephen's "keen blue eyes" are more often caught in the act of scrutinizing the inhabitants of the house, not least Ray, an aspiring writer who takes on the aesthetic qualities of an art exhibit under Stephen's penetrating gaze, with "smooth dark skin" that glows red under the "amber colored bulbs," a "slender outline," and eyes that seem to be "covered by some muddy mask" (4-5). In short, Thurman's exploration of the trope of the "exhibit" encapsulates Stephen's interest in Paul's erotic drawings, which are dismissed by Sam as "disgusting," the wry response to the misplaced confidence of figures like Pelham who are "childishly eager to exhibit" art with little merit, and a sustained fascination with how individuals like Ray become "exhibits" who are scrutinized at close range but with an emotional detachment that allows Stephen, at least initially, to view him as a type, "neither Nordic nor Negroid, but rather a happy combination of the two" (7, 15, 5).

This sense of being invited to interpret the house (and its inhabitants) as a kind of viewer at a museum is compounded by the fact that observation, especially the interpretation of the people and art of Harlem, is a motif that runs through the novel. The text is populated

with internal audiences with divergent agendas – from Ray, Euphoria, and Stephen to African American intellectuals with an investment in the ideology of racial uplift such as Dr A. L. Parkes (Thurman’s stand-in for Alain Locke) and journalists who are only interested in the interracial rent parties that take place in what Euphoria eventually condemns as a “miscegenated bawdy house,” yet another image that underlines the house’s incorporation into exploitative (and gendered) capitalist structures (177).

The individual who attracts the most attention from these internal audiences is “Paul the debonair, Paul the poseur, Paul the irresponsible romanticist,” who draws inspiration from European decadents such as Oscar Wilde, Andreas Huysman, and Charles Baudelaire to defy notions of authenticity (184). By posing, adopting a veneer of “cultivated artificiality” that flouts “all conventions of dress and conduct” (184), and embracing self-consciously ambiguous racial, sexual and gender identities, he develops, to borrow a phrase from Anne Cheng, a “brand of exhibitionism [that] actually relies on the layered conflation of concealment and exposure, of essence and performance, of flesh and skin.”<sup>59</sup> Yet, as Monica Miller explains in her compelling study of black dandyism, Stephen misreads Paul’s posing (in both life and art) as “a frustrated wish to be white” when it is in fact the manifestation of “a desire to escape the demand that he personify a certain kind of blackness.”<sup>60</sup> Paul refuses the role of “exhibit” or racial spokesperson that Stephen assigns to him, adopting instead an exhibitionism that equates posing with a kind of liberation through art, a liberation that depends upon the creation of opaque and ambivalent visual surfaces. Even so, he remains at the mercy of misreadings that reimpose ideas of racial uplift and authenticity, smoothing over the ambiguities of his contradictory performances to generate simplistic narratives of resistance or racial disidentification.

These tensions come into sharp relief when Thurman closes the novel with an account of Paul’s suicide, a set piece combining the themes of intercultural encounter and aesthetic

interpretation that signals the final dissolution of Niggerati Manor. When Raymond arrives at Paul's apartment in Greenwich Village, he is (once again) cast in the role of a spectator to a final performance piece. Paul has decorated the "dingy calcimined wall" of his bathroom with a group of his portraits and "carpeted the floor with sheets of paper" from his unfinished novel before slitting his wrists (186). Sadly, what Ray interprets as an attempt to garner publicity for Paul's novel *Wu Sing: The Geisha Man* is doomed because the manuscript has turned into an illegible, "sodden mass" (186). In many ways, the account of Paul's suicide, a "gruesome yet fascinating spectacle," accords with Thurman's sustained critique of the destructive impact of the "white light of publicity" upon black artists (128). In Paul's case, the corrupting influence of "delightful publicity" leads him to take his own life (186).<sup>61</sup>

In this scene, Paul's corpse becomes an aesthetic object, and the dynamism of his exhibitionism is stilled in a manner that refuses notions of racial authenticity, but risks transforming him into an exhibit whose objectification and commodification is entangled with Orientalist motifs. Thurman's recourse to Orientalist discourse that is complicit in the discursive practices of colonialism opens the way for alternative interpretations of Paul's aborted career. Paul's adornment of his body with various Orientalist markers (a mandarin robe, joss sticks, a batik scarf, and a Chinese dagger) without any regard for cultural specificity, raises questions about voyeurism, commodification, and performativity. The self-conscious artificiality of what Thurman calls Paul's "exaggerated poses" (32) rejects both racial propaganda and defiant bohemian self-expression in such a way as to interrupt the expectations placed upon black artists to "always appear in public butter side up."<sup>62</sup> Paul circumvents demands for a racially distinctive aesthetic by engaging in a different kind of exhibitionism, a theatrical, if silent, masquerade that abandons notions of sincerity and psychological depth in favour of racial disidentification, affective illegibility, and artificial surfaces. Allusions to Orientalism, Oscar Wilde, and decadence not only mark Paul's

participation in a queer tradition of European dandyism that placed a premium upon posing and leisure; they also distance Thurman's construction of the Orient from any model of fruitful intercultural exchange. After all, these images have been raided from European cultural representations that accord with Edward Said's account of a western tradition of cultural description, which sought to exert "a kind of intellectual *authority* over the Orient."<sup>63</sup>

A notable feature of Thurman's Orientalism is his fascination with superficiality: he eschews racially distinctive aesthetic models that rested upon the idea of a deep-rooted, inner identity for a mode of racial fantasy that signals its preoccupation with fabrication and masquerade by way of a proliferation of images of surfaces, wraps, clothes, furnishings, and theatrical visual props. Judith Brown has argued that Paul's embrace of "primitive glamour" is "a mode of objectification based in the pleasure of losing the self" that "plays both with racial and gender destabilization as it loosens rigid boundaries and undoes, at least momentarily, the stranglehold of identity."<sup>64</sup> Reading this scene in relation to the trope of the "exhibit" in New Negro art and literature, which so often uncovered the complexities of intercultural encounter, complicates Brown's interpretation by reminding us that art does not occupy an idealized realm outside historical signification. When Paul adorns his body with Oriental objects that have become elaborate decorations stripped of cultural meaning, his actions not only recall "the appropriative (imperialist) dimensions of ... consumerism" depicted in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890); they also open the way for a recognition of unacknowledged parallels between his fetishization of the Orient and the early twentieth-century vogue for black culture and primitivism.<sup>65</sup> Ironically, Paul turns to Oriental objects to escape the imperative to speak for African Americans, but ends up enacting an alternative kind of racialization that recapitulates an acquisitive attitude towards culture.

### **The Politics of Art in *Dark Princess***

In accounts of debates about the politics of art during the New Negro Renaissance, it is a matter of routine to draw a dividing line between the rebellion against racial uplift embodied by the so-called “Cabaret School” (with which Thurman and Covarrubias were associated) and Du Bois’s uncompromising insistence, in “Criteria of Negro Art” (1926), that “all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists.”<sup>66</sup> In line with his self-appointed role as a moral and artistic gatekeeper, who would guide New Negro cultural production away from the pitfalls of bohemianism, Du Bois even went so far as to joke that he “could exist quite happily if Covarrubias had never been born.”<sup>67</sup> Attention to the thematic preoccupation with visual art in Du Bois’s novel *Dark Princess*, however, reveals that Thurman and Du Bois shared a fascination with art’s democratic potential to cut across cultural boundaries and a taste for Orientalism. The question of the liberatory potential of art, and the extent of its entanglement with capitalist and colonialist structures, emerges as an important issue within black modernism that is neither limited to a particular cultural and political position nor a specific genre or media, spanning as it does the novel, the caricature, and the essay.

Du Bois’s *Dark Princess* explores the promises and perils of pan-Africanism by way of a rather improbable romance between Kautilya, an Indian princess, and Matthew Towns, an African American who is, at various stages in the novel, a medical student, an anarchist, a Chicago politician, a labourer, and a Pullman porter. The narrative keeps circling back to the question of what role visual art might play in black internationalism. If Covarrubias’s vivid “exhibits” and Thurman’s carefully curated scenes of interpretation zoom in on individual spectators and social types to explore how cultural difference is framed or exhibited in museums, magazines, tourism, and art works, Du Bois focuses instead on the intellectual ideas inspired by engagement with specific works of art, whether in discussions about the revolutionary potential of visual art or the animated conversations of theatre-goers and

museum visitors. In “Criteria of Negro Art,” Du Bois insists upon what Russ Castronovo has called “the impossibility of cordoning off ‘the beautiful’ from the content of racial life,” but *Dark Princess* looks beyond the nation-state to explore how “the beauty of truth and freedom” described in the essay might contribute to political activism along the color line.<sup>68</sup> On the one hand, the flow of ideas and styles across the black Atlantic in international modernism encapsulates the ideals of Kautilya’s political movement. On the other hand, profound disagreements about how such international modernism should be interpreted capture some of the tensions involved in formulating alliances across the black diaspora, a discourse that was, in Brent Hayes Edwards’s words, marked by “unavoidable misapprehensions and misreadings.”<sup>69</sup> Moreover, these tensions spill over into Du Bois’s own aesthetic practices. His portrayal of India as what Dohra Ahmad has called “an imaginary and ahistorical place” at once attests to the galvanizing effect of intercultural encounter on the literary imagination and the stubborn persistence of “the language of Orientalism, and its attendant imagery of wealth, luxury, and spice.”<sup>70</sup>

Associations between visual art and black internationalism are foregrounded from the moment that Matthew and Kautilya meet. After their chance encounter in Berlin, the princess tells Matthew about her recent visit to an exhibition at the Palace of Berlin. She is particularly interested in one specific painting, a depiction of the coming of the Messiah featuring what she describes as “a weird massing of black shepherds and a star.”<sup>71</sup> For Kautilya, the religious dynamics of this image accord with the prophetic spirit of her politics, “stirr[ing]” her to imagine the leading role that “Black America” (17) might play in her vision of political activism “along the color line.”<sup>72</sup> While a fascination with embodied spectatorship lies at the heart of Covarrubias and Thurman’s “exhibits,” Du Bois is primarily concerned with how engagement with individual works of art, especially representations of people of African descent in western art, might inspire new political paradigms.

Such idealism, however, is almost immediately undercut by elitist arguments about the role of art within any black internationalist political movement. Not long after meeting the princess, Du Bois's African American hero, Matthew Towns, attends a meeting of the Council for Darker Races where most of the committee, with the exception of the princess, believe that African Americans should be excluded because "[t]hey thought of Negroes only as slaves and half-men" (247). The Council comprises Arab, Egyptian, Chinese, Indian, and Japanese aristocrats, who draw "a color line within a color line, a prejudice within prejudice" (22). Their goal is "substitution of the rule of dark men in the world for the rule of white, because the colored peoples were the noblest and best bred" (248), a political programme with elitist and eugenicist overtones that identifies the leaders as colonial "mimic men." Indeed, it is difficult to read this scene without noticing parallels with Du Bois's indictment, in *Darkwater* (1920), of European and Euro-American culture's implication in a global economic system that perpetuates racial inequality. In particular, the vocabulary employed by the leaders in *Dark Princess*, which includes references to the "rabble" and "the canaille" (25-26), recalls Du Bois's description, in his essay "The Souls of White Folk," of the "gospel" that is "preach[ed]" across the world through "literature" and "propaganda": "the necessary despisings and hatreds of these savage half-men, this unclean *canaille* of the world – these dogs of men."<sup>73</sup>

To underline their position as a coterie, a cosmopolitan group with leanings towards avant-gardism, the aristocrats are portrayed as well-informed commentators on the latest "fad[s]" (20) in European modernism, speaking with authority on such subjects as Schoenberg, Vorticism, Kandinsky, and Proust, topics of conversation that give Matthew "baffling glimpses of unknown lands, spiritual and physical" (18-19). Throughout this scene, Du Bois focuses on the conflict and miscommunication between Matthew and various members of the Council, which pivots on a discrepancy in cultural capital. In the meeting,

Matthew is charged with the task of persuading the Council that African Americans would be valuable participants in their anti-colonial, anti-racist struggle, but “the Japanese” and “the Indian,” who are never named, seek to exclude him from the conversation by “stray[ing] to French and subjects beyond him” (20). The class prejudice that motivates their opposition to any pan-African and pan-Asian alliance that would include African Americans is on display when “the Egyptian” raises concerns about the princess’s sympathies with Bolshevism after her visit to Moscow (22). Later, he gives full expression to the elitism that underpins the committee’s view that “the darker peoples are the best – the natural aristocracy, the makers of art, religion, philosophy, life, everything except brazen machines” when he interrupts the princess: “pardon, Royal Highness – but what art ever came from the canaille!” (24-25)

As Yogita Goyal has explained, Matthew’s response is to suggest that “uplifting African-Americans can rejuvenate the ancient and possibly decadent splendor of Asia,” a position that not only highlights a fascination with empire, but also casts African Americans in the role of “natural” leaders in any global movement for liberation.<sup>74</sup> Notwithstanding their cultural sophistication, the Council members are ultimately positioned outside modernity: they are associated with outmoded values, especially in relation to class and gender, which could hinder the development of a new diasporic consciousness. Notice, for instance, how Du Bois’s fleeting descriptions of the Egyptian’s wife as “the silent Egyptian woman,” “a big, handsome, silent woman, elegantly jeweled and gowned, with much bare flesh” reproduce familiar Orientalist tropes (20, 18). Matthew also assumes that African Americans will be in the vanguard of any international movement for liberation. Indeed, his commitment to social and political change is underlined by his military rhetoric: “whether we be bound by oppression or by color,” he insists, “surely we Negroes belong in the foremost ranks” (21). By contrast, the Council remain fixated upon a cosmopolitan culture associated with luxury

that “cannot,” David Luis-Brown notes, “be disentangled from a global political economy that produces beauty for some, but ‘starvation and toil’ for many millions more.”<sup>75</sup>

Visual art remains central to this exploration of obstacles to the formulation of black internationalism. If, as Yogita Goyal argues, *Dark Princess* “dramatizes not only [Du Bois’s] aesthetic principles, but also his insistence that art and politics not only inform each other, but are in fact interchangeable,” such entanglement is often explored through scenes that pinpoint individual critical responses to particular works of art.<sup>76</sup> Specifically, several members of the committee articulate revisionist interpretations of modernism that acknowledge the galvanizing influence of non-European cultural ideas and styles upon avant-garde experimentation in Europe. The princess, for instance, notes, in an astute interpretation of Matisse and Picasso, that “[t]he Congo is flooding the Acropolis” (20), a ringing phrase that recalls Langston Hughes’s celebrated poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” with its generous, humanist vision of a dynamic black identity that spans the Nile, the Congo, the Euphrates, and the Mississippi, and Countee Cullen’s “Heritage,” in which the speaker’s intellectual grasp of his dislocation from his African heritage remains in constant tension with the “pulsing tides” of memory that “surge and foam and fret” through his body.<sup>77</sup>

Even so, Du Bois remains suspicious of an internationalist alliance that emphasizes artistic achievements at the expense of political agitation, not least because cultural production is implicated in a global economic system that perpetuates inequality. As Matthew explains when he treats a southern preacher to a tour of New York’s cultural highlights, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, cabarets, and the theatre: “Without this starvation and toil of our dark fellows, you and I could not enjoy this” (64). Such a challenge to the notion of an idealized cultural realm that transcends politics is, of course, a familiar refrain in Du Bois’s work in the 1920s. To take just one example, in “To the World: The Manifesto of the Second Pan-African Congress,” which was published in *The Crisis* in November 1921, he

insisted that the “comfort and luxury” enjoyed by “the educated and culture of the world” is implicated in a global economic system that “rest[s] on a pitiful human foundation of writhing white and yellow and black and brown bodies.”<sup>78</sup>

Such tensions are compounded by a sequence that seems to come from nowhere towards the end of the novel when Du Bois explores the transformative effect of visual art on a single museum visitor, Matthew Towns. At this stage, Matthew is working as a labourer, digging the Chicago subway, and he records his reflections in copious letters to the Princess. In line with his earlier purchase of a beautiful Chinese rug and a Matisse when he was working in Chicago as an aspiring politician, his decision to abandon his job in order to visit an art gallery speaks of a desire for what he calls “a new world of beauty” (279). He visits “a new exhibit of borrowed paintings from all ends of the world” because his “soul was starving for color and curve and form” (279). Matthew draws attention to European cultural borrowing, noting the “luscious dark folk of Gaugin [sic]” (280) as well as European artists who deployed Orientalism, including Frank Brangwyn, an Anglo-Welsh artist who drew inspiration from his travels in Turkey, Egypt, and Morocco. For Matthew, intensive study of such art “add[s] width to [his] world,” opening the way for democratic engagement (280). After spending an entire week in the gallery (at the cost of his job), he tells the princess: “I was a more complete man, a unit of a real democracy” (280). His earlier insistence that cultural institutions such as museums are implicated in an exploitative global economic system has disappeared from view.

As the novel draws to a close, Du Bois attempts to smooth over tensions that stem from what appears to be its simultaneous investment in urbane cosmopolitanism (specifically European art housed in museums that are full of colonial loot) and its critique of museums as a place of luxury built upon oppression. To some extent, these contradictions are masked by a concept of racial solidarity that combines recognition of the unacknowledged role of black

labourers in the creation of modernity with an interpretation of black cultural expression that makes room for overlapping discourses of self-determination, internationalism, and anti-capitalism. But it is difficult to overlook the fact that the narrative ends, like *Infants of the Spring*, with a retreat into Orientalist fantasy. Echoing the tension between primitivism and integrationism in Covarrubias's caricatures, *Dark Princess* concludes with what Du Bois terms a "pageant," a highly ritualized celebration of Kautilya and Matthew's mixed race son as "King of the Snows of Gaurisankar!" and "Messenger and Messiah to all the Darker Worlds!" that is patterned after the religious painting in Berlin that inspired Kautilya's political vision in the first place (309-10). When Du Bois describes a "pageant" featuring three shepherds and a star, he brings into focus submerged tensions about the relationship between leader and people, revealing that calling for anticolonial and antiracist resistance does not preclude a romantic attachment to hierarchy. In doing so, he not only falls back on "an Afrocentric nostalgic fantasy" that seems more concerned with beautiful clothes, "rice and sweetmeats" than the genuine challenges of formulating political alliances between "the darker races of the world," but he also reminds us that, during the New Negro Renaissance, unlocking the liberatory potential of visual art often entailed a complex dance with commodification, primitivism, and Orientalism.<sup>79</sup>

## **Conclusion**

I want to round off my exploration of the trope of "exhibits" and exhibitionism in New Negro culture by returning to the scene from *Banjo* with which I began. Significantly, Ray's account of his experiences as a nude model appears in the midst of a chapter entitled "Story-telling," which begins with an argument between Ray and his African American friend Goosey about the social and political responsibilities of black Atlantic artists. Bringing to mind questions about audiences and reception that have been so central to this discussion, Goosey articulates familiar, Du Boisean ideas about "art as propaganda" and racial uplift, while Ray explains

that a “real story-teller” doesn’t “worry about the differences in complexion of those who listen and those who don’t”: “a good story,” he explains, “in spite of those who tell it and those who hear it, is like good ore that you might find in any soil – Europe, Asia, Africa, America.”<sup>80</sup> A humanist vision of artistic expression criss-crossing racial and national borders is central to McKay’s novel, but *Banjo* also attends the obstacles to cultural traffic created by the realities of racism and class exploitation. Indeed, some of these tensions emerge in Ray’s portrait of the students’ reactions when his body is transformed into art in the context of the studio. For a start, notions of economic exploitation (and the spectre of slavery) haunt the scene. If Ray demonstrates an awareness of stories as part of an international cultural marketplace when he describes them as commodities to be mined and exploited, his body becomes a commodity when he enters the studio and poses for the students. Aware of the difficulty in finding “black bodies” to pose, the Scandinavian gallery owner prizes Ray’s value as a curiosity, but she cannot let go of her fears that Americans, her “best-paying students,” won’t be happy if he can’t “behave.”<sup>81</sup> Just as in Covarrubias’s caricatures, *Dark Princess*, and *Infants of the Spring*, spectacle within the studio or museum raises questions about consumerism, exploitation, and elitism, throwing into doubt received ideas about cultural authenticity. After all, Ray is “posing” for a paying audience.

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<sup>1</sup> Claude McKay, *Banjo: A Story Without a Plot* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1957), 130. In his autobiography, *A Long Way From Home* (1937), “posing naked in Paris studios” is presented a last resort through which McKay could “earn [his] daily bread” when in desperate financial straits. Claude McKay, *A Long Way From Home* (New York: Pluto, 1985), 253.

<sup>2</sup> McKay, *Banjo*, 130.

<sup>3</sup> Miriam Thaggert, *Images of Black Modernism: Verbal and Visual Strategies of the Harlem Renaissance* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), 3. Other recent studies that have explored a thematic and formal preoccupation with visual culture during the Harlem Renaissance include Caroline Goesser, *Picturing the New Negro: Harlem Renaissance Print Culture and Modern Black Identity* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007); Lena M. Hill, *Visualizing Blackness and the Creation of the African American Literary Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); and Cherene Sherrard-Johnson, *Portraits of*

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*the New Negro Woman: Visual and Literary Culture in the Harlem Renaissance* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Jeremy Braddock, *Collecting as Modernist Practice* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2012), 4.

<sup>5</sup> Braddock, *Collecting*, 155, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Lena Hill, *Visualizing Blackness*, 82.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Kate A. Baldwin, *Beyond the Color Line and the Iron Curtain: Reading Encounters between Black and Red, 1922-62* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); David Luis-Brown, *Waves of Decolonization: Discourses of Race and Hemispheric Citizenship in Cuba, Mexico, and the United States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993); Frank Mehring, "The Visual Harlem Renaissance; or, Winold Reiss in Mexico," *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 55, no. 4 (2010): 629-640; Theresa Leininger-Miller, *New Negro Artists in Paris: African American Painters and Sculptors in the City of Light, 1922-34* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001); Lara Putnam, *Radical Moves: Caribbean Migrants and the Politics of Race in the Jazz Age* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); Michelle Ann Stephens, *Black Empire: The Masculine Global Imaginary of Caribbean Intellectuals in the United States, 1914-1962* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); Mark Whalan, *The Great War and the Culture of the New Negro* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Ruth Hoberman, *Museum Trouble: Edwardian Fiction and the Emergence of Modernism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 190.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Karin Roffman, *From the Modernist Annex: American Women Writers in Museums and Libraries* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Miguel Covarrubias, "The Many Phases of Fifth Avenue: Eight Aspects and Six Miles of the Avenue," *Vanity Fair*, August 1925, 46-47; Miguel Covarrubias, "A Charleston Lesson in the Great Metropolis," *Vanity Fair*, April 1926, 72; Miguel Covarrubias, "A Summer Afternoon at Coney Island: Native Fauna Observed by Covarrubias," *Vanity Fair*, September 1929, 64-65; "America's Newest Citizens: Covarrubias Illustrates the Adaptability of Some Recent Immigrants to These Shores," *Vanity Fair*, July 1928, 56-57.

<sup>11</sup> See Faye Hammill, *Sophistication: A Literary and Cultural History* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), 154-61 for a good overview of the content and editorial ethos of *Vanity Fair* in this period.

<sup>12</sup> Shane Vogel, *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality, Performance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

<sup>13</sup> Jeffrey C. Stewart, *The New Negro: The Life of Alain Locke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 513, 541.

<sup>14</sup> Alain Locke, *Negro Art: Past and Present* (Washington D.C.: Associates in Negro Folk Education, 1936), 56; Stewart, *The New Negro*, 541.

<sup>15</sup> James Davis, *Eric Walrond: A Life in the Harlem Renaissance and the Transatlantic Caribbean* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 138.

<sup>16</sup> Miguel Covarrubias, "Enter, The New Negro, A Distinctive Type Recently Created by the Coloured Cabaret Belt in New York," *Vanity Fair*, December 1924, 60-61, 61. Miguel Covarrubias, "Six Deliberately Unfriendly Acts: A Mexican Neighbour Wields a Malignant Pencil," *Vanity Fair*, April 1925, 31. Miguel Covarrubias, "Six Deliberately Unfriendly Acts:

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A Mexican Neighbour Wields a Malignant Pencil,” *Vanity Fair*, April 1925, 31. Miguel Covarrubias, “The Many Phases of Fifth Avenue,” 46. Locke, *Negro Art*, 55.

<sup>17</sup> Locke, *Negro Art*, 57.

<sup>18</sup> James A. W. Heffernan, *Museum of Words: the Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashberry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 176. Sydelle Iris Rubin, “Emigrants in Harlem: New Perspectives on Miguel Covarrubias and Winold Reiss” (PhD diss., Boston University, 2002), 12.

<sup>19</sup> Covarrubias, “Gleaned in the Galleries, A Tour Around the Art World in Several Flashes with ... and by ... Miguel Covarrubias”, *Vanity Fair*, March 1929, 64-65.

<sup>20</sup> Countee Cullen, “Heritage,” in *My Soul’s High Song: The Collected Writings of Countee Cullen: Voice of the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Gerald Early (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 105.

<sup>21</sup> Sieglinde Lemke, *Primitivist Modernism: Black Culture and the Origins of Transatlantic Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>22</sup> Martha J. Nadell, *Enter the New Negroes: Images of Race in American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 110. Alain Locke, “The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts,” in *The New Negro* (New York: Touchstone, 1992), 255.

<sup>23</sup> Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias, ed., *Woman-Nation-State* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989).

<sup>24</sup> Hoberman, *Museum Trouble*, 2.

<sup>25</sup> Covarrubias, “Gleaned in the Galleries,” 65.

<sup>26</sup> Miguel Covarrubias, “Our Southern Neighbour, Mexico; in Movies and Reality: Riotous Romance of the Screen Shown-up by a Truthful Tourist,” *Vanity Fair*, January 1927, 48-49.

<sup>27</sup> Covarrubias, “Gleaned in the Galleries”, 65.

<sup>28</sup> Nina Miller, *Making Love Modern: The Intimate Public Worlds of New York’s Literary Women* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 90-91.

<sup>29</sup> Covarrubias, “Gleaned in the Galleries”, 65.

<sup>30</sup> Covarrubias, “Enter, The New Negro,” 60-61.

<sup>31</sup> Caroline Goesser, *Picturing the New Negro: Harlem Renaissance Print Culture and Modern Black Identity* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 99.

<sup>32</sup> Richard J. Powell, *Cutting a Figure: Fashioning Black Portraiture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 9-10.

<sup>33</sup> Covarrubias, “Enter, The New Negro,” 61.

<sup>34</sup> Covarrubias, “Our Southern Neighbour,” 48-49; Covarrubias, “Personages of Paris: A Few of the Fancy Foreigners who Scintillate in the ‘Ville Lumière,’” *Vanity Fair*, November 1927, 56; Covarrubias, “A Tour of Northern Africa: A Sketch-Book of Desert Days and Ways – Some Good Ideas for the Beaux-Arts Ball,” *Vanity Fair*, February 1928, 56-57.

<sup>35</sup> In his portrayal of Lize’s skilful performance of the Black Bottom in “Dark Denizens of Harlem’s Haunts,” 69, Covarrubias emphasizes that “an important feature of [her performance] is the collection of considerable largesse.” John Frow, “Tourism and the Semiotics of Nostalgia,” *October*, 57 (1991): 151.

<sup>36</sup> Covarrubias, “A Tour of Northern Africa,” 56-57.

<sup>37</sup> Braddock, *Collecting*, 201.

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Covarrubias, “Personages of Paris,” 56, in which Covarrubias describes Sonia, “a certified Princess with Romanoff hall-marks,” who is “long on pedigree,” but “short on cash,” as “the prize exhibit.” Such sketches as “Dark Denizens of Harlem’s Haunts,” *Vanity Fair*, June 1927, 69, include the tag “Exhibits by Covarrubias.”

<sup>39</sup> Sonnet Retman, *Real Folks: Race and Genre in the Great Depression* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 26.

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<sup>40</sup> For more on the convergence of discourses about race and sculpture, see Hazel Carby's discussion of Nickolas Muray's photographs of Paul Robeson, which manipulate "light and shadow to sculpt Robeson's muscles into Athenian aesthetics of masculine beauty" without ever allowing the subject to gaze back at the viewer and Miriam Thaggert's analysis of Carl Van Vechten's ironic engagement with Man Ray's *Noire et blanche* in his photographs of Billie Holiday and Bessie Smith, which "embody and visualize irony" in order to "challenge the stereotypical, one-dimensional misreadings and assumptions about blackness." Hazel V. Carby, *Race Men* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 56; Thaggert, *Images of Black Modernism*, 134.

<sup>41</sup> Whitney Chadwick, "Fetishizing Fashion/Fetishizing Culture: Man Ray's *Noire et blanche*," *The Oxford Art Journal* 18, No. 2 (1995): 3.

<sup>42</sup> Chadwick, "Fetishizing Fashion/Fetishizing Culture," 12.

<sup>43</sup> See Hazel V. Carby, "The Body and Soul of Modernism," in *Race Men*, 45-83; James Smalls, "Creating Homoutopia: Féral Benga's Body in the Matrix of Modernism," in *Afromodernisms: Paris, Harlem, Haiti and the Avant-Garde*, eds. Fionnghuala Sweeney and Kate Marsh (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 62-100.

<sup>44</sup> Relevant essays and editorials in *Opportunity* include "Editorial: Dr Barnes", *Opportunity*, May 1924, 133; Albert C. Barnes, "The Temple", *Opportunity*, May 1924, 139-40; Paul Guillaume, "African Art at the Barnes Foundation," *Opportunity*, May 1924, 140-42; Alain Locke, "A Note on African Art," *Opportunity*, May 1924, 134-38; "The Creative Art of Negroes," *Opportunity*, August 1923, 240-45. For a detailed discussion of Albert Barnes's collection practices, see Braddock, *Collecting*, 106-155.

<sup>45</sup> Gwendolyn Bennett, "The Ebony Flute," *Opportunity*, November 1927, 339-40, 340.

<sup>46</sup> Jessie Redmon Fauset, *Plum Bun: A Novel without a Moral* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), 128.

<sup>47</sup> Bennett, "The Ebony Flute," 340.

<sup>48</sup> Alain Locke, "A Note on African Art," in *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Gene Andrew Jarrett (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 537-541, 538.

<sup>49</sup> Stephanie Moser, *Wondrous Curiosities: Ancient Egypt at the British Museum* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 52.

<sup>50</sup> Hoberman, *Museum Trouble*, 63.

<sup>51</sup> Claire Corbould, *Becoming African Americans: Black Public Life in Harlem 1919-1939* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 61.

<sup>52</sup> Wallace Thurman, "Negro Artists and the Negro," in *The Collected Writings of Wallace Thurman*, 198. Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 83.

<sup>53</sup> Thurman, "Negro Artists and the Negro," 198.

<sup>54</sup> Thurman, "Negro Poets and Their Poetry," in *The Collected Writings of Wallace Thurman: A Harlem Renaissance Reader*, 206.

<sup>55</sup> Thurman, "Negro Poets and Their Poetry," 205.

<sup>56</sup> Wallace Thurman, *Infants of the Spring* (London: X Press, 1998), 31. All subsequent references are cited in the text by page number.

<sup>57</sup> Wallace Thurman, "Harlem: A Vivid Word Picture of the World's Greatest Negro City," in *The Collected Writings of Wallace Thurman*, 33.

<sup>58</sup> See Scott Terrell Herring, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Manor: *Infants of the Spring* and the Conundrum of Publicity," *African American Review* 35, no. 4 (2001): 589.

<sup>59</sup> Anne Anlin Cheng, *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 58.

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- <sup>60</sup> Monica L. Miller, *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 213.
- <sup>61</sup> See Scott Terrell Herring, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Manor: *Infants of the Spring* and the Conundrum of Publicity," *African American Review* 35, no. 4 (2001): 581-96 for a fuller discussion of this topic.
- <sup>62</sup> Wallace Thurman, "Negro Artists and the Negro," 198.
- <sup>63</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003), 19.
- <sup>64</sup> Judith Brown, *Glamour in Six Dimensions: Modernism and the Radiance of Form* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 126-27.
- <sup>65</sup> Jed Esty, *Unseasonable Youth: Modernism, Colonialism, and the Fiction of Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 106.
- <sup>66</sup> Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," *The Crisis*, October 1926, 290-97, 290.
- <sup>67</sup> Rubin, "Emigrants in Harlem," 96.
- <sup>68</sup> Russ Castronovo, *Beautiful Democracy: Aesthetics and Anarchy in the Global Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 113. W. E. B. Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," in *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: Henry Holt, 1995), 512.
- <sup>69</sup> Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora*, 5.
- <sup>70</sup> Dohra Ahmad, "'More than Romance': Genre and Geography in *Dark Princess*," *ELH* 69, no. 3 (2002): 787, 783.
- <sup>71</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *Dark Princess: A Romance*, ed. Claudia Tate (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 17. All further references are cited in the text by page number.
- <sup>72</sup> I am, of course, borrowing this phrase from Du Bois's regular column in *The Crisis*, "Along the Color Line," which provided readers with a scrapbook of news, including clippings from newspapers, without providing any overt interpretative framework.
- <sup>73</sup> Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil* (New York: Dover, 1999), 25.
- <sup>74</sup> Yogita Goyal, *Romance, Diaspora, and Black Atlantic Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 90.
- <sup>75</sup> Luis-Brown, *Waves of Decolonization*, 127.
- <sup>76</sup> Goyal, *Romance*, 85.
- <sup>77</sup> Langston Hughes, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," in *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, ed. Arnold Rampersad (New York: Vintage, 1995), 23; Cullen, "Heritage," 105.
- <sup>78</sup> Du Bois, "To the World: Manifesto of the Second Pan-African Congress," *The Crisis*, November 1921, 5-10, 7.
- <sup>79</sup> Goyal, *Romance*, 99.
- <sup>80</sup> McKay, *Banjo*, 115.
- <sup>81</sup> McKay, *Banjo*, 129.