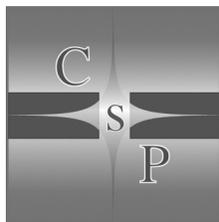


African American Humor, Irony, and Satire

African American Humor, Irony, and Satire
Ishmael Reed, Satirically Speaking

Edited by

Dana A. Williams



CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS PUBLISHING

African American Humor, Irony, and Satire: Ishmael Reed, Satirically Speaking,
edited by Dana A. Williams

This book first published 2007 by

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

15 Angerton Gardens, Newcastle, NE5 2JA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2007 by Dana A. Williams and contributors

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system,
or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or
otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN 1-84718-214-3; ISBN 13: 9781847182142

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
Dana A. Williams	
CHAPTER ONE	7
<i>THE MESSENGER</i> MAGAZINE AND ITS ICONOCLASTIC DESCENDANTS: OR, ALL THE THINGS YOU COULD BE BY NOW IF GEORGE SCHUYLER WERE YOUR LITERARY FATHER	
Darryl Dickson-Carr	
CHAPTER TWO	26
OF RACIALISTS AND ARISTOCRATS: GEORGE S. SCHUYLER'S <i>BLACK NO MORE</i> AND NORDICISM	
André Hoyrd	
CHAPTER THREE	36
ISHMAEL REED AND THE DISCOURSE OF WONDERFUL	
Eleanor W. Traylor	
CHAPTER FOUR	48
ISHMAEL REED REPAIRS "THE [AFRICAN] DIASPORA'S DIRECT LINE TO Olódùmarè": YORUBA LANGUAGE AND MYTHOLOGY IN <i>JAPANESE BY SPRING</i>	
Pierre-Damien Mvuyekure	
CHAPTER FIVE	62
THE ART OF WAR: ISHMAEL REED AND FRANK CHIN AND THE U.S. BLACK- ASIAN ALLIANCE OF MULTICULTURAL SATIRE	
Christopher A. Shinn	
CHAPTER SIX	84
THE NOVELS OF ISHMAEL REED: A LIFETIME OF DISSENT	
Reginald Martin	

CHAPTER SEVEN	94
“YOU MUST BE ABLE TO LAUGH AT YOURSELF:” READING RACIAL CARICATURE IN THE WORK OF ARCHIBALD MOTLEY, JR. Phoebe Wolfskill	
CHAPTER EIGHT.....	103
WHAT THE MAN TRYIN’ TO LAY ON YOU IS PORKITIS: THE LITERARY CONNECTIONS OF RICHARD PRYOR IN BERKELEY, 1969-1971 Brian Flota	
CHAPTER NINE	118
DAVE CHAPPELLE, WHITEFACE MINSTRELSY, AND “IRRESPONSIBLE” SATIRE Marvin McAllister	
CHAPTER TEN.....	131
HUEY AND RILEY IN <i>THE BOONDOCKS</i> : SOMETIMES I FEEL LIKE A WOMANLESS CHILD Jennifer A. Jordan	
BIBLIOGRAPHY	144
LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS.....	158

INTRODUCTION

“I LOVE MYSELF WHEN I’M LAUGHING,
AND THEN AGAIN WHEN I’M LOOKING
MEAN AND IMPRESSIVE”:
HUMOR, IRONY, AND SATIRE IN AFRICAN
AMERICAN LITERATURE AND POPULAR CULTURE

DANA A. WILLIAMS

Each year for the past thirteen years, the Department of English at Howard University has held a national conference that has come to be known affectionately around the African American literary community as *Heart’s Day*. Free and open to the public, this conference commemorates the legacy of Howard University professor Sterling A. Brown by honoring a national artist who has made a significant contribution to African American letters. Sterling A. Brown was a professor and scholar extraordinaire, among his many accomplishments. During his tenure at Howard, he inaugurated the first and thus ground-breaking formal study of African American literature in the Academy, in a course then known as *English 102*. Thus, the artists honored at *Heart’s Day* speak to the tradition of African Americans making seminal contributions to American and world cultures in general and American and world literatures in particular. In years past, honorees have included Toni Morrison, James Baldwin (posthumously), Paul Robeson (posthumously), Chinua Achebe, Gwendolyn Brooks, Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Paule Marshall, Haki Madhubuti, Maya Angelou, and Black Women in the Academy. In 2006, the department chose as its honoree *Ishmael Reed*.

Once we determined the general theme for the conference—“Humor, Irony, and Satire”—Reed emerged as an obvious choice. Appropriately, the evolution of the theme was both humorous and ironic in its own way. Emerging from a discipline (English) that, at times, can be unabashedly elitist and from a department that is equally, unabashedly progressive (at least for those who have, first, been dutifully trained classically) would be a conference that would

encourage formal scholarly interaction between literature and popular culture. Satire, of course, offered us the perfect medium to pursue this end. In our call for papers we asked scholars to consider humor, irony, and satire broadly, and the breadth of that consideration is reflected in the essays that follow.

As fate would have it, in the months between the initial planning stages of the conference and its actualization, a number of events occurred that made the conference and the corresponding presentations seem all the more timely. In April 2005, comedian Dave Chappelle, creator of the highly successful “Chappelle Show,” left the United States and headed to South Africa where, after two weeks of rampant rumors about his whereabouts and his state of mind, he told *Time Magazine*’s Christopher John Farley that he had fled the U.S. and his \$50 million contract with Comedy Central in order to “check his intentions.” In November of the same year, Aaron McGruder’s award-winning comic strip, *The Boondocks*, extended its reach from print to television when it premiered as an animated comedy series on the Cartoon Network’s late-night sister network, Adult Swim. And one month later, in December, Richard Pryor, easily one of the greatest modern day comedians, died. Only a few days after Pryor’s death, two members of the conference planning committee separately expressed wishes that a paper on Pryor would emerge, and, of course, one did. Much to our delight, a McGruder paper and a Chappelle paper would also be presented, thus facilitating our commitment to providing critical assessments of smartly contentious popular culture icons and literary satirists.

By all accounts, it seemed that Heart’s Day 2006 would elude being a Dunbar-esque sport for the gods of humor. That good fortune continued through the evening gala event, which saw Haki Madhubuti, Amiri Baraka, Rome Neal, Kalamu ya Salaam, and Jerry Ward among others pay tribute to Reed and his satirical genius. Yet, the significance of this collection rests not in our escape of folly and vice or even in our smartness in paying tribute to the indefatigable Reed. Rather, this collection gains its primary significance in the more seminal ways of Sterling Brown. As Darryl Dickson-Carr, who contributes an essay to this collection, notes in *African American Satire*, very little scholarship exists specifically on satirists in African American literature. While Mel Watkins’s *On the Real Side*, as Dickson-Carr argues, offers an exhaustive history of African American humor as it relates to African American culture, it is limited in its assessment of humor, irony, and satire in literature specifically. Thus, this collection seeks not only to build on the strength of both Dickson-Carr and Watkins’s texts but to assert a position of its own by including essays on both literature and popular culture.

Secondarily, this collection is especially useful for the obvious reasons—it adds to the body of scholarship on the traditional and non-traditional texts examined here; the lens of humor, irony, and satire as a way of reading texts is

especially useful in highlighting the complexity of African American life and culture; and the essays collected here reveal crucial but not so obvious connections between African American and other world cultures. Its lone limitation, as I see it, is its perpetuation of the gender limitations that characterize the traditions of satire. Though we were able to achieve some semblance of gender balance among presenters and contributors, each essay focuses on a male-authored text, and only Jennifer A. Jordan's essay on *The Boondocks* offers a gender-specific critique. This limitation, however, makes the collection no less useful. It simply reminds us of the work that is yet to be done on women who work in the traditions of humor, irony, and satire.

The arrangement of the essays follows a kind of loose logical chronology, beginning with examinations of George Schuyler's work as a satirist. The essays on Reed, then, center the text, and the final essays examine the comedic genius of three contemporary popular culture artists. As one of the leading authorities on African American literary satire, Dickson-Carr brings to the collection his body of knowledge in "The *Messenger* Magazine and Its Iconoclastic Descendants: Or, All the Things You Could Be by Now If George Schuyler Were Your Literary Father," where he suggests that literary scholars should perhaps reconsider much of Schuyler's work, especially the satirical jabs of his "Shafts and Darts" column for the *Messenger* magazine. First examining the evolution of *Messenger* as magazine to highlight its natural fit for Schuyler and his ideologies, Dickson-Carr then argues that

Schuyler's columns provide not only the best and most incisive criticism of the New Negro to be found among his contemporaries, but they also help push African American politics and literature into modernity both through repeated calls for rationalism and simply by their very existence.

In the sense that it investigates an under-examined aspect of Schuyler's best known work, André Hoyrd's "Of Racialists and Aristocrats: George S. Schuyler's *Black No More* and Nordicism" answers Dickson-Carr's call for scholars to reconsider Schuyler's work. Hoyrd argues that focusing on the scientific racism that dominated the era and by examining select writings of Madison Grant as its leading Nordic practitioner, "readers not only can observe the intertextuality of *Black No More* but also better understand its Happy Hill lynching episode" and the novel's critique of Grant's worship of the Nordic male body, his scorn of womanhood, and Grant himself through the characters of Snobbcraft and Dr. Buggerie.

Eleanor W. Traylor's "Ishmael Reed and the Discourse of Wonderful" (the keynote address) opens the examination of Reed by identifying the ways his novels (and those of his contemporaries) rebuild the novel as city, moving it from the periphery to the center to ensure that "serious re-negotiations could and

can take place.” Tracking the evolution of African American literature’s *linguistic refusal* of limiting terms, Traylor highlights how Reed builds on this tradition to find new narratological approaches to the novel, approaches that free language “to work its best possibilities” by rejecting “the deformation of inaccurate and destructive identity markers.” Pierre-Damien Mvuyekure’s “Ishmael Reed Repairs “The [African] Diaspora’s Direct Line to Olódùmarè”: Yoruba Language and Mythology in *Japanese by Spring*” reinforces Traylor’s reading of Reed as a novelist concerned with recovering and renegotiating identity as Mvuyekure argues that

Reed achieves the highest degree of post-colonial discourse (the highest degree of abrogating and appropriating the English language) and African Diaspora re-connection via Yoruba language and mythology within a multicultural perspective.

In doing so, Mvuyekure asserts, Reed re-establishes the primacy of pre-colonial Yoruba and, correspondingly, of African philosophy in antiquity.

While Mvuyekure uses multiculturalism as a frame to emphasize Reed’s revisionist project, Christopher A. Shinn, in “The Art of War: Ishmael Reed and Frank Chin and the U.S. Black-Asian Alliance of Multicultural Satire,” examines Reed and Chin’s works as precursors to current debates surrounding multiculturalism. As Shinn notes, since the 1970s, Reed has fervently criticized multiculturalism “for its many excesses and power plays.” Arguably taking its cue from Reed’s of engagement with satire, Chin’s writing, according to Shinn, is a

potentially useful resource in the twenty-first century for analyzing the roots of a cross-cultural vernacular politics and the activist-oriented recuperation of meaningful but lost literary works ... in the spirit of Reed’s coalitional vision of publication and culturally diverse pedagogy that stands against a bland homogenous ‘otherness,’ which critics say subtends official multiculturalism.

It is Reed’s spirit of cultural diversity, in fact, that Reginald Martin, in “The Novels of Ishmael Reed: A Lifetime of Dissent,” argues rendered Reed an outcast from any traditional literary school. In the final essay on Reed, Martin shows how Reed’s novels establish a tradition outside of traditional literary schools—black-based or white-based—and use as their narrative base Reed’s understanding of an African American literary aesthetic, an aesthetic that “failed to meet the demanded criteria from the major new black aestheticians on several points.”

Phoebe Wolfskill’s “You Must Be Able to Laugh at Yourself:” Reading Racial Caricature in the Work of Archibald Motley, Jr.” opens the section on

non-literary artists. Examining aspects of racial caricature in select Motley paintings, Wolfskill acknowledges this caricature as deliberate iconography. She argues, however, that

Motley's methods of distortion were in no way the product of a simplistic or negative understanding of the black populations he observed. On the contrary, Motley's images convey his keen discernment of the social diversity of Bronzeville; they communicate a complexity of black identity unusual to artistic imaginings of urban African Americans at this time.

Following Wolfskill's essay is Brian Flota's "What the Man Tryin' to Lay on You is Porkitis: The Literary Connections of Richard Pryor in Berkeley, 1969-1971," where Flota explores "the intertextuality between Pryor and his Berkeley comrades," Ishmael Reed among them. Flota convincingly argues that these two years of Pryor's growth as a comedian can be linked, in no small part, to the Berkeley writers group, which challenged him to take his comedy in "new and exciting directions." To develop this argument, Flota examines Cecil Brown's debut novel *The Life and Loves of Mr. Jiveass Nigger* (1969), Al Young's faux-revolutionary poet O.O. Gabugah, and Ishmael Reed's Neo-HooDoo Aesthetic to infer how these works and their authors influenced Pryor's later comedy.

In "Dave Chappelle, Whiteface Minstrelsy, and 'Irresponsible' Satire," Marvin McAllister examines how Dave Chappelle

constructs whiteface acts that unpack the cultural baggage of America's black/white binary, specifically in his stand-up comedy special *Killing Them Softly* (2000) and on season one of *Chappelle's Show* (2002).

The essay also raises an enduring but no less important question for African American popular culture artists, particularly satirists—what is their social responsibility? Even as, and perhaps because, Chappelle privileges the integrity and freedom of his artistic process, he is able to

displace and share cultural stereotypes across the racial divide, expose and question our deeply ingrained national inequalities, and undermine the myth of fixed racial categories in a country where cultural identification can be a matter of choice.

In "Huey and Riley in *The Boondocks*: Sometimes I Feel Like a Womanless Child," Jennifer A. Jordan reminds us of Aaron McGruder's many engagements with this question of the social responsibility of artists and non-artists alike. His open critique of popular culture icons, especially BET's Bob Johnson for instance, is directly related to their failure to be socially responsible. But as Jordan suggests, even as McGruder is to be applauded for his willingness to be

the progressive voice amid conservatism, he too must be critiqued for participating in the same type of negligence he castigates in his strips. What Jordan's examination of "a world in which Huey and Riley have no mothers, grandmothers, sisters, or aunts" reveals is that it is

one in which self-identified Black women are strangely absent. On the rare occasion in which they do appear, they are inevitably objects of derision and/or nonentities lacking voice and will.

After conducting a close reading of the few frames in which women are indeed present, examining these frames in the context of the broader strip, and declaring the significance of McGruder's work to a variety of traditions, Jordan ultimately asserts that the artist's "inability to envision a world in which Black women and Black men can coexist is a serious failure in the otherwise admirable achievement that is *The Boondocks*."

While there are certainly aspects of the conference that cannot be recreated on paper (the dialogues that ensued during question and answer periods, the energy created by the brass band tribute to Reed, or the fullness of black life expressed in the dance troupe's choreography, for instance), we have tried to capture here a representative selection of the presentations rendered in hopes that the essays will inspire further conversations about African American humor, irony, and satire. We also hope that we have honored the legacy of Sterling Brown as our scholarly forefather and the legacies of African American artists past and present who contribute to and enhance the traditions of humor, irony, and satire. Ultimately, in our attempt to blend the seriousness of scholarship with the artistry of these traditions, we find ourselves echoing our very own humorist extraordinaire, Zora Neale Hurston, whose voice shall never leave this place and whose variability, captured at least in part in the lines that follow, we embrace wholeheartedly—"I love myself when I'm laughing... and then again when I'm looking mean and impressive."

CHAPTER ONE

THE MESSENGER MAGAZINE AND ITS ICONOCLASTIC DESCENDANTS; OR, ALL THE THINGS YOU COULD BE BY NOW IF GEORGE SCHUYLER WERE YOUR LITERARY FATHER¹

DARRYL DICKSON-CARR

Prelude: The “Black Mencken”

In July 1923, Howard University Professor and Harlem Renaissance midwife Alain Locke wrote Jean Toomer to solicit submissions to “a volume of race plays or rather plays of Negro Life” he and a collaborator were organizing. Although Toomer had already garnered some fame for his poetry and short stories, Locke asked whether he

could...not give us something more mature. Either in the same vein or a satirical vein. Both are needed—the great lack as I see it is in these two fields of the polite folk-play and the satire.²

Locke’s request comprises one of the earliest references to satire during the Harlem Renaissance that explicitly recognizes the importance the genre would have for literature of the New Negro movement. Ironically, Locke’s words echo ideas that H.L. Mencken had shared with National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) official Walter White nine months earlier, in which he argued that “[i]f [the African American writer] functions as an insider, he will treat...‘the drama within the race, so far scarcely touched,’” and “[i]f he functions as an outsider, he will write satire upon the smug, cocksure master race.”³ If Locke had been cognizant of George S. Schuyler’s

potential, perhaps Locke would have done better to ask Schuyler to fill this particular bill. Toomer, while easily among the most talented, influential, and “modern” authors of the Renaissance, had a rather limited feel for satire. Toomer’s *Cane* remains the period’s landmark text but owes its power more to an understated irony regarding the complexities of Southern and Northern race relations than to an openly satirical mode. While Toomer’s obvious literary intelligence convinced Locke that Toomer was capable of engaging in satirical projects, this same intelligence could be found in Schuyler, who had a far more prolific, albeit less obviously influential literary career than Toomer.

Although the general public remains unaware of his genius today, Schuyler was for decades the most prominent, prolific, and talented journalist in African America and a preeminent critic of the prevailing trends in black politics. During the “New Negro” or Harlem Renaissance—an event Schuyler characterized as a fraud—his scathing wit earned him the sobriquet of “The Black Mencken,” after H.L. Mencken, arguably the foremost journalist in the early 20th century and an enormous influence on the writers of the period, black and white. Like his professional namesake, Schuyler was well-read and respected during his time, but his reputation fell as tastes changed and his career went in different directions, particularly after his death. Between 1924 and 1964, Schuyler’s best-known and most abundant work appeared in the pages of the *Pittsburgh Courier*—second only to the *Chicago Defender* in popularity among African American newspapers—where he served as a reporter and editor until the *Courier*’s publisher demoted Schuyler for his continuous criticism of the Civil Rights movement as a front for international Communism and his characterization of Martin Luther King, Jr. as a “sable Typhoid Mary” after King won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. Schuyler then became a freelance columnist, writing occasionally for the *Courier* for a few more years but increasingly for William Loeb’s ultraconservative *Manchester Union Leader* and similar publications until his death in 1977 at the age of 82. By that time, Schuyler’s politics—he and his daughter, Philippa Duke Schuyler, wrote and spoke frequently for the ultra-Right John Birch Society in the 1960s—were so out of step with the African American mainstream that his decades of meticulously researched, impeccably written, inarguably challenging, and generally popular journalism and opinion had long disappeared from the public eye. Schuyler’s ideological descendants may be found in the black neoconservatives who rose to prominence in the 1980s and 1990s, but as Jeffrey Tucker writes, “[t]he claims of [Thomas] Sowell, [Randall] Kennedy, [Clarence] Thomas, [Shelby] Steele, and others merely echo” Schuyler, “one of the most important, if least recognized, figures in the history of African American letters.”⁴ In the early 1990s, Schuyler regained some recognition as his descendants entered the national discourse and such critics as Henry Louis

Gates, Jr. took another look at Schuyler and black conservatism. After Northwestern University Press reprinted his early novels *Black No More* (1931) and *Black Empire* (serialized in the *Courier* between 1936 and 1938), the public again had access to some of his best work; this access increased with the Modern Library's more affordable 1999 edition of *Black No More* and Yale University Press's recent publication of Jeffrey B. Ferguson's *The Sage of Sugar Hill: George S. Schuyler and the Harlem Renaissance* (2005), the first major biography of Schuyler and the only one since Michael Peplow's eponymous volume for Twayne's United States Authors series (1980).

All of this is excellent, of course, for those wishing the larger canon of African American literature to expand, but none of it means that the literary and scholarly worlds have completely warmed to Schuyler. Charles Scruggs once wrote that when

the subject of Mencken and race is mentioned, the old bugaboo of his racial slurs is dutifully brought up and lamented over, and all discussion stops right there. Furthermore, this obligatory condemnation is rhetorical; it is meant to show the audience that the critic is a good, right-thinking man or woman.⁵

Similarly, interest in Schuyler has clearly grown in the last fifteen to twenty years, due primarily to interest that Gates generated in satirists and that Schuyler admirer Ishmael Reed continued in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Yet Scruggs's assessment of scholarly discussion of Mencken could apply equally to Schuyler, with "his slur of Martin Luther King, Jr." replacing "racial slurs" as the great offense that still ends discussion of Schuyler before it begins.

This essay argues that we should instead keep the discussion open and active for a new consideration of Schuyler's best work, in particular the satirical jabs of his "Shafts and Darts" column for the *Messenger* magazine, published between 1923 and 1928. I argue that Schuyler's columns provide not only the best and most incisive criticism of the New Negro to be found among his contemporaries, but they also help push African American politics and literature into modernity both through repeated calls for rationalism and simply by their very existence.

Schuyler's earliest and most incisive work remains generally out of reach, despite recent interest in his work, especially Ferguson's work. From 1924 until 1928 Schuyler was an editor at the *Messenger* magazine, with the exception of nine months spent on an extensive tour of the South for the *Courier* to solicit subscriptions, find agents, and garner material for the "Aframerica Today" series, which tracked the status of African Americans in every city and town in the region with a significant black population. Both the atmosphere in the *Messenger*'s offices and the magazine itself comprised a heady, fiery mix of economic, social, and political analysis from an unapologetically socialist

perspective. Although the *Messenger's* early issues were partially underwritten by the Socialist Party of the United States, the magazine's co-founders, A. (Asa) Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen were ultimately responsible for its tone and approach. They sought to tear down the icons of the American and African American political scenes. In Schuyler they found an intellectual simpatico, a shrewd—if overworked—editor, and a mind that helped shape the magazine's iconoclasm into crisp, merciless satire. Together they shaped the *Messenger* into more than a vehicle for socialism; the magazine's refusal to accept the hegemony of bourgeois culture and capitalism made it a crucial alternative African American challenge to the program of the NAACP and its official organ, *The Crisis*, edited by W.E.B. Du Bois.

Schuyler's lasting contribution to the *Messenger* was his regular column, "Shafts and Darts" (later subtitled "A Page of Calumny and Satire"), which debuted in February 1923. "Shafts and Darts" sprang organically from both Schuyler's mind and from the general editorial policy of the *Messenger*. Both the magazine and its resident satirist were instrumental in grinding into dust the reputations of such "race leaders" as Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, James Weldon Johnson, Robert Russa Moton of the Tuskegee Institute, Dean Kelly Miller of Howard University, Mississippi's race-baiting Senator Bilbo, and Cyril V. Briggs's stridently Marxist African Blood Brotherhood. Schuyler, an inveterate Red-baiter, reserved special scorn for the last group; after all, he later called Joseph McCarthy a "great American" and once wrote, regarding the "witch hunt" for Communists in the 1940s and 1950s, that "[I]f these Communist witches want society to stop hunting them, they have only to stop giving society cause to fear them."⁶ Schuyler's wrath for the African Blood Brotherhood, however, had just as much to do with ideology and later ties to the Communist International as it did to the Brotherhood's ruling Sanhedrin of *five*, which Schuyler liked to pretend was the entire membership. Schuyler excoriated individuals and their supporting organizations with impunity, often for pretending to know anything at all about rational, hard-nosed leadership. As I will show shortly, Schuyler levied very similar accusations toward the black literary scene in Harlem and elsewhere, arguing that it was largely the invention of intellectuals, most of whom knew nothing about African American culture and history; even fewer actually lived in Harlem. Curiously, though, when patron of the arts Carl Van Vechten died in 1964, Schuyler wrote a tribute to his friend acknowledging that Van Vechten's work in sponsoring African American writers and artists made him largely responsible for helping along a "revolution" that "overturned the established order of things" in terms of the "fixed, fast and frozen concepts of color caste which had retarded American civilization for centuries."⁷ If this seems contradictory, consider also that Schuyler's objection to the "so-called Negro renaissance" was based upon his belief that the

movement relied upon fetishizing the “Negro” *qua* a Negro and that it was one of “the onslaughts of modernism for change’s sake,”⁸ untempered by a rational look at the illusion of race. Schuyler insisted that the movement was, in fact, barely moving at all, at least not in a direction that would establish a pattern of sustainable, consistent progress for African Americans economically and socially. Celebration of history and culture came at the expense of cold, hard economic rationalism. Schuyler repeated this critique *ad infinitum* in his columns, weaving it into many different genres, including one-act plays, fabulations, parodies of news items, and short stories. Prior to analyzing selected passages from “Shafts and Darts,” however, I should like to discuss the *Messenger* itself to discover how it became a natural home to Schuyler’s work.

The *Messenger* and Radical Iconoclasm in Harlem

When a 25-year-old radical named A. Philip Randolph met Columbia University student Chandler Owen in early 1915 at one of the parties thrown by cosmetics entrepreneur Madame C.J. Walker, the groundwork was laid for the *Messenger*, one of the most groundbreaking magazines in American history. Chandler and Owen bonded over their common interest in economics, particularly the economic status of African Americans. Randolph was inarguably more radical than Owen, who evidenced a greater interest in his *personal* economic situation than did his friend, an ardent devotee of Eugene Debs and Karl Marx.⁹ Nevertheless, both were inveterate iconoclasts likely to read and appreciate anything that questioned the social and economic state of the world. By the end of 1916, each had joined the Socialist Party and, taking a cue from Hubert H. Harrison, Harlem’s celebrated black socialist and vocal Black Nationalist, began speaking on Harlem street corners to espouse their radical economic and social views. This also allowed them to receive the feedback that corner soapbox speakers in Harlem generally enjoyed: frank, blunt, and immediate.¹⁰ Over the next year of working the crowds and attending Socialist meetings, Randolph and Owen became seasoned speakers and organizers, “the most notorious street-corner radicals in Harlem,” more audacious than Harrison himself.¹¹ They also reorganized the Independent Political Council, which Randolph had founded in 1912 as a political discussion group, around an explicitly radical, quasi-socialist program. Randolph and Owen’s plan was to educate the populace by distributing literature and continuing their schedule of public lectures “on the vital issues affecting the colored people’s economic and political destiny,” among other issues, but their goals “to examine, expose and condemn cunning and malicious political marplots” and “to criticize and denounce selfish and self-styled leaders” both led

their iconoclasm shine through and best presaged the founding principles of the *Messenger*.¹²

In early 1917, Randolph and Owen began publishing the *Hotel Messenger* magazine at the behest of William White, president of the Headwaiters and Sidewaiters Society of Greater New York. This arrangement gave the two young men a new office space for their radical activities, an equally advantageous printed outlet for advocacy, and rapid connections to such major players in Harlem's political world as Hubert Harrison, W.A. Domingo, Cyril V. Briggs. They also found themselves in a bind eight months later, when they exposed a kickback racket among their readership.¹³ White fired Randolph and Owen, who immediately set up an office next door and, with the financial assistance of Randolph's wife Lucille, founded the *Messenger: A Journal of Scientific Radicalism* in November 1917 as an outlet for unabashed socialism and trade unionism. That November 1917 debut, of course, coincided with the United States' involvement in World War I, when anti-sedition laws suppressed most dissent in the press and rumors of German subversion of the war effort via propaganda aimed at African Americans abounded. It was, perhaps, the least auspicious time to begin a magazine that not only called for a socialist program but also openly and vociferously opposed the war effort. In that regard, Owen and Randolph spoke and wrote for African Americans who gave material support to the war in hopes that it would help bring an end to Jim Crow but who also quietly opposed the war in principle. Thus, the mavericks would blast President Wilson in January 1918, arguing that

Lynching, Jim Crow, segregation, discrimination in the armed forces and out, disfranchisement of millions of black souls in the South—all these things make your cry of making the world safe for democracy a sham, a mockery, a rape on decency and a travesty on common justice.¹⁴

In view of the tenor created by the Espionage Act of 1917 and the Sedition Act of 1918, which allowed the government to prosecute those who would “willfully utter, print, write, or publish any language intended to incite, provoke, or encourage resistance to the United States,”¹⁵ it was no surprise when the Department of Justice began monitoring Randolph and Owen and arrested them publicly at a rally in Cleveland, charging them with treason. The charges were later dismissed; the judge in the case could not believe, as Theodore Kornweibel writes, that “the two twenty-nine-year-old ‘boys’ could possess the knowledge and intelligence to write the inflammatory editorials presented as evidence by the prosecutors,” thinking instead that they were mere fronts for white agitators. Nevertheless, Randolph was ordered to report for induction into the Army (although he requested and received a deferment), and the *New York Age* declared him “the most dangerous Negro in America”;¹⁶ Harlemites later

nicknamed them “Lenin and Trotsky.”¹⁷ The United States Post Office, operating within the broad boundaries it enjoyed under the decidedly jingoistic tenor of the war years, read such sentiments as sedition and therefore unworthy of First Amendment protection and yanked the magazine’s second-class mailing permit in mid-1918 and did not return it for three years after Owen and Randolph were arrested for sedition.¹⁸

Despite this setback, the *Messenger* continued to expose the fallacies of capitalism, racist political figures, segregation, Black Nationalists, mainstream African American leaders, lynchings, and the various outrages being perpetuated in all parts of the country against African Americans, especially in New York City and the South. True to the magazine’s original subtitle, the *scientific* character of the editors’ socialism focused upon their perception that America constantly teetered between fundamentalism, capitalist economic exploitation, and racism on the one hand, and modernism, science, and socio-economic freedom on the other. Socialism provided the means to organize the African American populace—especially in the South—into a modern economic force that would slough off the influence of the ruling class once it set aside the prejudice and superstition in established black institutions from the Black Church to the normal/industrial school model that flourished under the leadership of Booker T. Washington. In the wake of Washington’s death in 1915—despite the gradualism of his successor, Robert Russa Moton—Randolph and Owen argued that black workers could create wealth and institutions that would effectively destroy segregation and peonage.

Over the magazine’s eleven-year run, Randolph and Owen managed to attract—and break with—a wide variety of Black progressives and radicals to their editorial staff, including George Frazier Miller, William Colson, Ernest Rice McKinney, Abram L. Harris, J.A. Rogers, Robert Bagnall, William Pickens, Wallace Thurman and, of course, Schuyler and drama critic Theophilus Lewis. Due to the magazine’s sponsorship by various radical or socialistic organizations, more than a few white radicals, including Eugene Debs and Morris Hilquit¹⁹, either contributed to the magazine or received praise and support in its pages.

The *Messenger’s* editorial stance was inarguably a reflection of its times. Not only was the labor struggle capturing the attentions of the American public, but the nation was also experiencing what could be euphemistically called one of its many periods of racial revisionism. The body politic was once again calling the so-called “Negro question” in its deliberations over its fate as a nation, and the results were mixed, steering precariously to the negative. More specifically, post-World War I era America saw the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan and the deadly “Red Summer” in 1919, which included frequent race riots and an equally horrifying rash of lynching. Out of fear that social equality would be

granted African Americans after their impressive performance in the war, the nation as a collective body felt compelled to answer the Negro's cry for equal treatment with a resounding "no," with the South being the most conspicuous voice in this cruel chorus. The *Messenger's* response to this milieu was to transform racial injustice into a primary satirical target. The editors' original purpose of advocating and spreading Socialism among African Americans, however, eventually diffused as numerous distractions—such as the "Garvey Must Go" campaign of 1922 that Owen helped spearhead—and an increasingly improbable financial status made editorial consistency virtually out of the question by the early 1920s, when Schuyler joined the masthead. Given Schuyler's own affinity for satire, his tenure with the magazine was virtually inevitable.

Schuyler's work at the magazine may have had humble beginnings—his duties initially included substantial work of the clerical and janitorial variety—but he soon became a vital force on its editorial staff. A mere two months after the publication of Schuyler's first essay, "Politics and the Negro," in April 1923, he was listed on the magazine's masthead as one of its contributing editors after Owen began to question the efficacy of the Socialist Party in the wake of a personal crisis.²⁰ In Owen's absence, Randolph relied more heavily upon Schuyler to manage the magazine's affairs and to act as a cynical intellectual foil in much the same way Owen did prior to his personal troubles. Schuyler, deep-set cynic that he was, was more than happy to fulfill this role, despite the ludicrously low pay of \$10.00 a week (\$60/week in today's dollars) Randolph offered him.

Schuyler's motivation for editing the magazine, however, was greater than the paltry monetary reward; as recounted above, he had an opportunity to use his "attractive writing style," in Randolph's words, to "[make] fun of everything—including socialism," thereby fulfilling his greatest calling. Moreover, Schuyler was thrilled to have a cadre of intellectual peers in the form of Randolph's Friends of Negro Freedom organization, founded in May 1920, which, albeit ostensibly a political organization, was primarily a weekly bull session for Randolph and his friends. The attendees included Owen, Socialist Frank Crosswaith, progressive Robert Bagnall, NAACP official William Pickens, historian J.A. Rogers, Theophilus Lewis, and Schuyler. Although the organization would later be one of the many forces opposing the cult of personality that sprung up around Marcus Garvey and the UNIA, it did little more at first than sponsor local lectures in Harlem and provide Harlem's stronger intellects an opportunity to gather and hash out the world's problems. (Anderson 139-40; Schuyler 138-39) More important, the intense parley that was invariably part of these gatherings supplied much of the material that Schuyler would later use for his columns in the *Messenger*.

Schuyler and The Messenger

Schuyler's career as a Socialist was a rather short and comparatively passive one, so short that one wonders if he had any sincere investment in socialist ideals at all. From his early writings, though, we may easily argue that Schuyler's temporary subscription to socialism was but one of many opportunities he perceived to engage in intellectual debate with those individuals he considered his intellectual equal and to emulate such exalted figures as Mencken, the 1920s' most notorious satirist and iconoclast. By his own accounts, Schuyler's dedication to the Socialist Party had less to do with ideological affinity than it did with Schuyler's need to avoid intellectual boredom.

On the surface, Schuyler's association with Randolph and Owen alone in any form would seem to indicate that their political views were highly similar. With their irreverent magazine and political activism, the two young Socialists had managed to run afoul of the United States Justice Department, risk prison sentences, and become regarded as two of the most dangerous Negroes in America. It seems logical to assume, therefore, that as a regular contributor to and managing editor of the *Messenger* from 1924 until the magazine's folding in 1928, Schuyler was a dyed-in-the-wool radical.

In his autobiography, *Black and Conservative*, however, Schuyler indicates that any flirtation he might have had with the Socialist Party was at best brief and superficial compared to that of other *Messenger* staffers. His employment was far less an opportunity to advocate socialism than it was an opportunity to gain invaluable experience as a journalist and editor.

the *Messenger* was a good place for a tireless, versatile young fellow to get plenty of activity and exercise. I swept and mopped the office when necessary, was first to arrive and last to leave, opened the mail and answered much of it, read manuscripts and proofs, corrected copy.... In between these chores I would take Randolph's dictation directly on the typewriter.

Many a time we would stop and laugh over some Socialist cliché or dubious generalization, and at such times I realized Randolph was wiser than I had imagined.²¹

Moreover, Schuyler avers that Owen was even less dedicated to socialism than was co-publisher Randolph:

He [Owen] had already seen through and rejected the Socialist bilge, and was jeering at the Bolshevik twaddle at a time when most intellectuals were speaking of the 'Soviet experiment' with reverence. Incongruously his conversation contradicted or disputed everything for which the *Messenger* professed to stand.

He dubbed the Socialists as frauds who actually cared little more for Negroes than did the then-flourishing Ku Klux Klan.²²

According to Schuyler, Owen's strange disputation of his own magazine's editorial stance stemmed from personal observations of and encounters with hypocritical Marxists and Socialists who refused to back their own party lines.²³

In the early days of their affiliation, though, Schuyler, Randolph, and Owen downplayed such problems in favor of the promising ideals socialism offered. Schuyler's affiliation with the *Messenger's* editors was less a precise collusion of political views, which varied widely between them, than it was one of basic ideological agreement regarding the plight of African Americans, the importance of some type of collective uplift, and a vehicle that would, at the very least, get African Americans to become more scientific and rational regarding their situation. All three men agreed that African Americans were living in a nation with a deeply entrenched racial caste system begun and perpetuated for the sake of exploitation of Black labor and bodies. Each believed that racism, no matter who practiced or supported it, was a pernicious part of American society and could be abated, if not destroyed, by being carefully and systematically exposed as an intellectual and social fraud. If each man held some reservations about socialism, their consensus was that racism undergirded by American capitalism remained the greater fraud. Socialism was, at the very least, one means to the end of eradicating racist thought and policies in the nation. In short, despite their differences, all three men were progressives on racial questions, even if they were decidedly conservative on other issues.

Perhaps most important was the common rhetorical expression these men chose for their beliefs. Journalism was Schuyler's calling and career, and he was among the best at it in the country, and certainly one of the greatest African American journalists ever. Over a forty year career at the *Courier* Schuyler documented the political, cultural, and social lives of African Americans throughout the country with the ideal of journalistic objectivity squarely in mind. The many trips to the South on behalf of the *Courier* provided Schuyler with ample material for his satirical barbs and slowly transformed his writing from *bon mots*, quips, and false news items to parodic short plays and stories that provided the fodder for his satirical and fantastic novels.

In July 1923, three months after Schuyler first appeared on the *Messenger's* masthead, "Shafts and Darts," made its first appearance. The column began and ended with Schuyler as sole author, but most of its strongest material appeared after Schuyler's friend and regular *Messenger* drama critic Theophilus Lewis joined the fray. The oft-quoted *raison d'être* for the column, published seven months after the column's first appearance and upon the first occasion of Lewis' collaboration, remains a precise representation of both the column's critical stance and of Schuyler's outlook as an intellectual:

[Our] intention is...to slur, lampoon, damn and occasionally praise anybody or anything in the known universe, not excepting the President of the immortals.... Furthermore [we] make no effort to conceal the fact that [our] dominant motive is a malicious one and that our paragraphs of praise shall be few and far between, while [we] go to greater lengths to discover and expose the imbecilities, knavery and pathological virtues of [our] fellowman.... If any considerable body of Americans were intelligent in the human sense, or even civilized,...their manly and dignified behavior would be copied.... It pains this pair of misanthropes even to think of such a state of affairs, and they fervently hope their excursions into morbid humor will not be confused with the crusade of benevolent killjoys to change America....²⁴

Schuyler and Lewis echo here the tenor of Mencken at his most caustic. As Scruggs writes, for both Mencken and Schuyler

the world was made up of knaves, fools, and a few honest men. The fools comprised the bulk of mankind, and the knaves and the honest men were constantly at war over their souls. Usually the knaves prevailed, but the honest men never quite gave up, never quite despaired altogether.²⁵

If the *Messenger* was not always successful in its mission of convincing the Black masses of their need for Socialism, “Shafts and Darts” was inarguably successful at delivering its promised misanthropy, undiluted cynicism, and frequently brilliant satire to its audience. It is perhaps for this reason that Langston Hughes judged Schuyler’s columns to be “the most interesting things in the magazine.”²⁶ Positing themselves as the “honest men” of Scruggs’ assessment, Schuyler and Lewis replenished the stream of cynicism that had been reduced to a slow trickle as Randolph and Owen became distracted by other affairs and as the magazine had attempted, with limited success, to broaden its readership.

By the time “Shafts and Darts” entered *The Messenger’s* regular offerings, the magazine had already shifted noticeably to the right of its original radical position. Although still an organ of racial and economic uplift for African Americans, it replaced its firebrand socialist stance with journalistic and rhetorical content that generally would not have raised an eyebrow if it had been published in the NAACP’s *Crisis* or the Urban League’s *Opportunity*. This does not mean that the magazine had become conservative *per se*; Randolph and his contributing editors consistently blasted individuals and organizations that discriminated against African Americans, and the *Messenger* was by definition a pro-labor publication. But the magazine was no longer in danger of bringing the burden of sedition charges upon the editors’ heads. Its only major burden was finding sufficient sponsors to finance issues every month.

“Shafts and Darts”: Finding the Targets

By July 1923, Schuyler must have felt as if he had found his proper niche at the *Messenger*. The extreme disorganization he found when he first arrived at the magazine's offices had been corrected largely through his strong discipline.²⁷ Its finances—never stable—were at least manageable, and the editorial stance had by now shifted slightly away from the austere socialism of the earliest years. This brought in a readership that went beyond radical circles. Schuyler quickly resolved to extend the journal's content beyond the “solemn and serious” fare found in most African American publications. “Shaft and Darts” was indeed as iconoclastic as Schuyler and Lewis advertised it to be. The most popular targets were groups and individuals who represented the worst of American racism, such as President Wilson, the Ku Klux Klan, and Senator Bilbo. Even fellow leftists who agreed with some of the *Messenger's* positions were not spared. Schuyler took special glee in mocking the political irrelevancy of the African Blood Brotherhood (ABB), a Marxist, sometimes anti-Garvey cadre whose members included respected poet Claude McKay and former *Messenger* contributing editor Cyril V. Briggs. At its height, the ABB had some 7,000 dues-paying members, but since those dues—25 cents or whatever members could afford—were paid on the honor system, its finances were never stable. By the third month, the opening feature of each column was the “Monthly Award,” which first consisted of an “elegantly embossed and beautifully lacquered dill pickle” to be given to the individual most responsible for the “mirth of the nation” in the news. This later became a “beautiful cutglass thunder-mug.” Recipients of the Monthly Award, if African American leaders, had either to display their obsequiousness and accommodation of racism or to reveal their lack of insight. Regular recipients in the first category were Du Bois, Locke, Kelly Miller, Moton, and radical Ben Davis; in the latter, the ABB and Garvey and the UNIA.

Garvey was by far the favorite target of Schuyler and Lewis's ire as Garvey fell from favor as his trial for mail fraud unwound in the Federal Courts. And the calumny was merciless; Garvey was dubbed “Emperor Marcus du Sable,” “Emperor Marcus the First,” “The African Potentate,” and many other dubious honorifics. Schuyler, of course, was simply touting Garvey as an arrogant fool based upon his very public image and pretensions as the future leader of a re-colonized “Africa for the Africans” who somehow managed to alienate many of his purported followers.

After Garvey's arrest, Schuyler dryly noted in his October 1923 column that Garvey's 2,000,000 (*sic*) members were mighty slow getting that \$25,000 [bail] together. One Negro paper announced ‘Garvey Not to Jump Bail,’ as if you could run that guy away from this gravy-train! It is to laugh!²⁸

In the wake of the “Garvey Must Go” campaign, Garvey’s meeting with the Ku Klux Klan, and the decidedly ill fate of the UNIA’s Black Star Line—comprising four old ships freighters and yachts, all of which the UNIA purchased for well above their actual value, none of which were particularly seaworthy—Schuyler had enough fodder against Garvey to last him years, well beyond Garvey’s conviction and imprisonment in 1924 and deportation in 1927. For Schuyler, Garvey was not only a fool but yet another charlatan who secretly admired the same oppressor against which he inveighed and possessed a phantom following. Of course, Garvey did command a substantial following among African Americans and in the Caribbean, albeit never as great as he claimed.²⁹

Schuyler’s calumny was never intended to acknowledge the positive influence that Garvey has wielded over time by encouraging African Americans to take control of their own identities, economies, and histories via the sort of Black Nationalism that Schuyler sometimes favored. Rather, Schuyler found Garvey the same as any other leader in that his leadership had at least as much to do with rhetoric, ambition, a swaggering image, and the gullibility of the masses as it did with visionary ideas. The height of Schuyler’s personal crusade against Garvey may be found not in “Shafts and Darts,” ironically, but rather in July 1924’s separate “A Tribute to Caesar” column, a perfect example of what Leon Guilhamet calls “demonstrative satire,” a mock oration extolling the dubious virtues of the subject.³⁰ Schuyler berates Garvey’s critics for failing to recognize his leadership abilities, in particular his propensity to lead his followers away from their money and good sense and toward the arms of the Ku Klux Klan.³¹ In Schuyler’s hands, Garvey’s decidedly ill-fated Black Star Line of cargo ships and yachts becomes the stuff of legend, since no other crew before it managed “to quaff \$350,000 worth of liquor” and “signal the historic message ‘Save Us. We Are Drinking.’”³² Schuyler saves special relish for the routine denunciation of racism by white oppressors in the UNIA’s *Negro World*, while “[t]he hair straightening and skin-whitening ads can hold their own with those in any Negro weekly” and the publication “is printed...by a friendly white printer” when “the New York *Age* press (Negro) [is] one block west.”³³ Garvey’s sins in Schuyler’s eyes are many, but none are more severe than the vast difference between the would-be Potentate’s visionary rhetoric calling for a new, modern age for the African Diaspora and his rather pedestrian—albeit spectacularly public—flaws. Garvey becomes no better than the typical demagogue or opportunistic politician. In the “Shafts and Darts” column of August 1924, Schuyler and Lewis transmogrify him into their candidate for U.S. President, Mr. Amos Hokum, whose wisdom in gauging “the strength of Klan sentiment months before the Republicans and Democrats took a tumble” and realizing “that the Klan spirit is virtually indistinguishable from the Spirit of the

U.S.A.” makes him the most viable for the position.³⁴ The populist appeal of both Garvey and the mythical Hokum reveals that populism has little to do with the slow, complex workings of democracy; it is but a manifestation of the “boobocracy” that rejects the rational for the expedient.

Schuyler, like Mencken, simultaneously championed modernity while feigning blindness to the potential of African American leaders and institutions to reshape the face of African American culture and to give it a narrative. Despite portraying them as a collection of mountebanks and charlatans, Schuyler also owed them a number of great intellectual debts, many of which are revealed in the columns. In the item “The Klan versus the Negro” within his January 1927 “Shafts and Darts,” for example, Schuyler echoes Locke’s argument in “The New Negro” that African Americans “have touched too closely” their white counterparts “at the unfavorable level and too lightly at the favorable levels” and are, in fact, “radical on race matters, conservative on others,” and therefore more in league with their white counterparts than a first glance reveals.³⁵ As Schuyler puts it,

[o]n Catholicism, the average Negro being a raging Protestant, is in agreement with the Klansman. Few are in the Catholic church and most of them interviewed express fear of Papal domination. They insist on being booted by their own native Protestant white folks.³⁶

The comparison, of course, is unflattering, but Schuyler’s project highlights the degree to which African Americans and whites alike resist most strains of modernity to their detriment of “social progress,” which Schuyler declares in the same column to be as much a fraud as a personal God and the sanctity of the U.S. Constitution.³⁷ Such recent critics as W. Lawrence Hogue have argued that the Enlightenment ideal of human progress has served the interests of racists more than those of African Americans, inasmuch as it has historically allowed those who would delimit black progress to cite the alleged inability of African Americans to progress on their own to maintain the *status quo*.

In contrast, though, Schuyler argues ironically for a sort of intellectual elitism that both resounds Du Bois’s championing of the Talented Tenth, the “better men” of the race who shall save it, and presages the writings of Ayn Rand, who later became one of Schuyler’s acquaintances in the anti-communist ranks of the 1940s and 1950s. In the same January 1927 column, Schuyler decries public education as a means to transform illiterate independent thinkers into intellectual snobs and camp followers:

Better to go back to illiteracy, in which sad state one’s opinions are at least one’s own rather than those of libidinous clergymen, neurotic philosophers and reptile

editors... [P]opular education is a waste of time and money and helps no one but the yokel fleecers.³⁸

Modernity cannot be found in an institution, a movement, or a consensus; it must come from a decentered attack upon orthodoxies, akin in some ways to Hogue's polycentric ideal, in which the intellectual trends of the moment remain subject to continuous scrutiny. The link between Schuyler and Du Bois, whom the former continually lampooned, may also be found in the latter's pragmatic view of human progress in the 1920s, which deferred any dogmatic adherence to ideology.³⁹

If we were to compare Schuyler and Lewis, then, to more contemporary authors, we find a number of remarkable parallels. Percival Everett's breakout novel, *Erasure* (2001), gives us novelist Juanita Mae Jenkins, author of *We's Lives in da Ghetto*, who learned how to write of black life when she "went to visit some relatives in Harlem for a couple of days" when she was twelve, an oblique swipe at *Push* author Sapphire. The novel's protagonist, Thelonious "Monk" Ellison, a writer of experimental fiction whose novels sell abysmally, save for the one conventional novel in his *oeuvre* which explicitly focuses upon race.⁴⁰ At the novel's opening, Ellison finds that his latest novel cannot find a home; like his earlier fiction, editors and reviewers allow that it is "finely crafted" but cannot see what it "has to do with the African American experience," which would preclude its shelving in the "African American interest" sections in bookstores. His circumstance is not unlike that of Ishmael Reed's character Abdul Sufi Hamid (*Mumbo Jumbo*, 1972), who is told that his translation of the ancient Egyptian Book of Thoth is not "'Nation enough,'" meaning that it does not speak to a constructed black nation.⁴¹ Monk Ellison allows that others have considered him "not *black* enough," despite the fact that he is "living a *black* life, far blacker than [they] could ever know," but he refuses to accept their construction of his subjectivity. His "blackness" has its foundation in Monk's desire to embrace all his complexities, regardless of whether they are "raced" categories. Yet in doing so, his identity constantly risks erasure. If we now accept that Schuyler's earliest writings open up additional possibilities for critiquing popular images of the Harlem Renaissance, his identity as an accomplished journalist is similarly under erasure. Despite researching and being able to recall accurately a vast portion of African and African American history, Schuyler's conservatism seemed for a while to be irreconcilable with a "black" identity. For Schuyler, this would have been apt; he looked upon the idea of reverence for one's "race" with nearly as much disdain as he did for Communism.

Consider as well Mat Johnson's *Hunting in Harlem*, in which journalist Piper Goines find herself at the *New Holland Herald*—aka the *New York Age* or *Amsterdam News*—struggling with impossible deadlines and a nonexistent

budget. In that novel, consider also Bobby Finley, author of *The Great Work*, a novel whose entire plot takes place in a closet in Alaska, who must compete against Bo Shareef, best-selling author of *Datz What I'm Talkin' Bout!* If that's not enough, we can look either at Paul Beatty's aforementioned essay, which contains a poem—"Still I Rise (and unfortunately write)" by "Bayou Angel-You," or the opening pages of his and Everett's novels, each of which eschews the blues narrative that has become popular in contemporary African American fiction. Fran Ross's *Oreo* represents a defiant counter-narrative to the argument of some proponents of the Black Aesthetic, inasmuch as its eponymous hero, Christine Schwartz, ironically bridges two cultures through her very existence.

In Ishmael Reed's most controversial novel, *Reckless Eyeballing* (1985), protagonist Tremonisha Smarts avers that "[a]ll of us who grew up in the middle class want to romanticize people who are worse off than we are" and that the time has come for "teen-age mothers" to

begin writing about places like Bed-Stuy themselves, and then all of us debutantes will have to write about ourselves, will have to write about our backgrounds instead of playing tour guides to the exotics.⁴²

In trying to tear down a particular form of oppression—sexism, in the case of *Reckless Eyeballing*—the bourgeois feminist intellectual has instead reified it, constructing a space that will allow her or him to remain in charge of class definitions. Reed demands instead that the middle class clear the space required for others to write their own experiences, independent of class constructions that ultimately benefit all but the least privileged. Inevitably, Reed's imperative presents a dilemma that confronts contemporary writers and their literary forefather alike: creating that space leads inevitably to critical judgment of the products that fill it. Such judgments rely upon the standards developed by middle-class critics, many of whom have access to more privilege than their subjects. Satire allows for enough self-consciousness to highlight this difference, but it remains a product of critical and intellectual distance itself.

Schuyler's condemnation of the purveyors of "hokum," the inauthentic, those intellectual and artistic figures who need an Other to create their own identities, continues to resonate in more contemporary satirical fiction, foregrounding once again the problem of commercial exploitation that confronts the art. If we consider these works as a loosely defined aggregate, products of the "new black aesthetic" simultaneously based upon yet questioning the Black Aesthetics that arose in the 1960s and 1970s,⁴³ then they stand together against a tendency in black cultural movements to worship icons and ideologies for the sake of progress. Instead, these authors, like Schuyler before them, keep the discourse open, saying the impolitic and iconoclastic at will. In these literary

descendants, Schuyler may very well find the metaphorical home he lacked in his time.

Notes

¹ A note on the subtitle: I evoke here the spirit of jazz bassist Charles Mingus by corrupting his most cumbersome and hilarious song title: “All the Things You Could Be by Now if Sigmund Freud’s Wife Was Your Mother,” from *Charles Mingus Presents Charles Mingus* (1960). It seems more apt than substituting Schuyler’s name in “If Charlie Parker were a Gunslinger, There’d be a Whole Lot of Dead Copycats,” aka “Gunslinging Bird,” since that does not quite fit my goals, although Schuyler could be counted upon to be a literary assassin in the most time-honored satirical tradition. When James Weldon Johnson wrote of “Satire as a Weapon,” he understood better than most the powers, mythical or otherwise, often attributed to satire in virtually every culture. If this seems an outlandish claim, witness the reaction to a handful of Danish satirical cartoons that embody the very definition of profane.

² Alain Locke, letter to Jean Toomer, 1 July 1923, JWW MSS 1, box 5, folder 1.

³ Charles Scruggs, *The Sage in Harlem: H.L. Mencken and the Black Writers of the 1920s* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 8-9.

⁴ Jeffrey A. Tucker, “Can Science Succeed Where the Civil War Failed?": George S. Schuyler and Race,” in *Race Consciousness: African American Studies for the New Century*, eds. Judith Jackson Fossett and Jeffrey A. Tucker (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 137.

⁵ Scruggs, *The Sage*, 3.

⁶ George S. Schuyler, “The First Real Witch Hunt,” undated, George S. Schuyler Selections, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York, New York, Box 8, folder 10.

⁷ George S. Schuyler, “Farewell to Carlo,” 23 December 1964, GSS Schomburg, Box 8, folder 10.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Box 8, folder 10.

⁹ Jervis Anderson, *A. Philip Randolph: A Biographical Portrait* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), 74-75.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 79; 81.

¹⁴ Qtd. in Anderson, *Randolph*, 98. “Editorial,” *the Messenger* 2:1, (January 1918): 20.

¹⁵ 50 U.S. Code Sec 31 Act June 15, 1917, ch. 30, title I, Sec. 1, 40 Stat. 217.

¹⁶ Theodore Kornweibel, *No Crystal Stair: Black Life and the Messenger, 1917-1928* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1975), p. 4, note 2.

¹⁷ Anderson, *Randolph*, 115.

¹⁸ Kornweibel, *No Crystal Stair*, 3.

¹⁹ The *Messenger* ran ads in support of Socialist Hillquit’s New York mayoral campaign throughout its sporadic 1918 run.

²⁰ This has much to do with the fact that Chandler Owen's brother had died in March 1923 after struggling to find employment in New York City in the face of rampant racism by supposedly equanimous labor unions. This tragedy caused Owen to be distracted from his duties as *Messenger* coeditor and, later that year, to renounce the Socialist Party and radicalism in general before leaving to greener pastures in Chicago, although he remained titular coeditor for the rest of the magazine's life. See Anderson, *Randolph*, 142-43.

²¹ George S. Schuyler, *Black and Conservative: The Autobiography of George S. Schuyler* (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House, 1966), 136.

²² Schuyler, *Black and Conservative*, 137.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Schuyler and Lewis, "Shafts and Darts." the *Messenger* 6: 4 (April 1924): 108.

²⁵ Scruggs, *The Sage*, 180-81.

²⁶ Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea: An Autobiography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1963; reprint, New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1986), 374.

²⁷ Schuyler, *Black and Conservative*, 141.

²⁸ Schuyler, "Shafts and Darts," the *Messenger*, 5: 10 (October 1923): 841.

²⁹ In 1921's "Back to Africa" essay, Du Bois examined the UNIA's records and receipts to argue that the actual membership of the organization was [several thousand], a mere fraction of the millions that Garvey routinely claimed. Although the tone of his essay was that of the disinterested social scientist, Du Bois's analysis accomplished several purposes at once. It clearly deflated Garvey's claims, highlighted the UNIA's sketchy record-keeping, and plainly begged the question of the viability of Garvey's brand of nationalism. Nevertheless, Du Bois also sidestepped a reality of which he had to be aware: Garvey's influence could not be measured accurately by any records, no matter how well or poorly kept.

³⁰ Leon Guilhamet, *Satire and the Transformation of Genre* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), 1987.

³¹ Schuyler, "A Tribute to Caesar." the *Messenger* 6:7 (July 1924): 225.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 225.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Schuyler and Lewis, "Shafts and Darts." the *Messenger* 6: 8 (August 1924): 238.

³⁵ Alain Locke, "The New Negro," in *The New Negro* (1925; reprint, New York: Atheneum, 1992), pp. 9, 11.

³⁶ Schuyler, "Shafts and Darts." the *Messenger* 9: 1 (January 1927): 18.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Negro and Radical Thought," *Crisis* 22, no. 3 (July 1921), 103. For a detailed analysis of Du Bois's background in pragmatism, see also Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 138-50.

⁴⁰ To be specific, Monk recalls "*Second Failure*: My 'realistic' novel. It was received nicely and sold rather well. It's about a young black man who can't understand why his white-looking mother is ostracized by the black community... I hated writing the novel. I