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The Representation of Segregation

In The House behind the Cedars, Cane and Black Boy

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Contents

1	<i>Acknowledgements</i>	1
2	<i>Abbreviations</i>	2
3	<i>Introduction</i>	3
4	<i>Historical Background</i>	6
5	<i>Segregation Narrative</i>	12
6	<i>Categories</i>	14
6.1	Racial Cartography	14
6.2	Fear and Violence	15
6.2.1	<i>Intimate Violence</i>	15
6.2.2	<i>Disciplinary Violence</i>	16
6.3	Folklore	18
6.4	Language and Education	19
6.5	Cross-Racial Contact	20
6.6	Political Critique	21
7	<i>Black Boy</i>	22
7.1	Richard Wright - Biography	22
7.2	Black Boy	23
7.2.1	<i>Racial Cartographies</i>	27
7.2.2	<i>Violence and Fear in Black Boy</i>	28
7.2.2.1	Domestic Violence (“Intimate” Violence)	29
7.2.2.2	Extralegal Violence (“Disciplinary” Violence)	30
7.2.2.3	“Retributive” Violence	31
7.2.3	<i>Folklore in Black Boy</i>	32
7.2.3.1	Catalogues	33
7.2.3.2	The “Street Gang Code”	34
7.2.3.3	Religion.....	35
7.2.3.4	The Blues	37
7.2.4	<i>Language and Education</i>	37
7.2.4.1	Language.....	38
7.2.4.2	Education.....	39
7.2.5	<i>Cross-Racial Contact</i>	42
7.2.6	<i>Political Critique</i>	44
8	<i>The House Behind the Cedars</i>	47
8.1	Charles Chesnutt - Biography	48
8.2	The House Behind the Cedars	51
8.2.1	<i>Racial Cartographies</i>	51
8.2.2	<i>Fear and Violence</i>	56
8.2.3	<i>Folklore</i>	57
8.2.3.1	The Cakewalk in the Fiction of Charles Chesnutt	58
8.2.3.1.1	The Tragic Mulatto	59
8.2.3.1.2	The Faithful Darky	62
8.2.3.1.3	The Southern Gentleman	63

8.2.3.2	Dreams	65
8.2.3.3	Religion.....	68
8.2.4	<i>Language and Education</i>	69
8.2.4.1	Language.....	69
8.2.4.2	Education.....	71
8.2.5	<i>Cross-Racial Contacts</i>	73
8.2.6	<i>Political Critique</i>	75
9	<i>Cane</i>.....	77
9.1	Jean Toomer – Biography	77
9.2	<i>Cane</i>	80
9.2.1	<i>Violence and Fear</i>	82
9.2.1.1	Retributive Violence.....	83
9.2.1.2	Intimate Violence	89
9.2.2	<i>Racial Cartographies</i>	91
9.2.3	<i>Folklore in Cane</i>	96
9.2.3.1	Religion.....	97
9.2.4	<i>Language</i>	101
9.2.4.1	Language as an Operational Tool.....	101
9.2.4.2	The Representation of Black Speech.....	102
9.2.5	<i>Cross-Racial Contacts</i>	103
9.2.6	<i>Political Critique</i>	104
10	<i>Results</i>.....	106
11	<i>Conclusion</i>	109
12	<i>Bibliography</i>.....	110
12.1	Primary Sources.....	110
12.2	Secondary Sources.....	110
12.2.1	<i>Books/Essays in Books</i>	110
12.2.2	<i>Articles in Periodicals</i>	115
12.2.3	<i>Internet-Based Resources</i>	117
13	<i>Index</i>	119
14	<i>Abstract in English</i>	122
15	<i>Abstract in German/Deutsche Kurzfassung</i>.....	123

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2 Abbreviations

Black Boy

BB

The House behind the Cedars

HBC

3 Introduction

“The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the Color Line.”
W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, p. 9.

Houston A. Baker once wrote that when reading black texts, a critic needed to adopt a „sociohistorical, biographical, and consciously ideological approach to criticism.” (Baker, 13) While in this case, he referred to the Black Aesthetic temper of the Civil Rights era, which called for a firmly sociohistorical criticism, Baker’s words ring very true for the critic approaching texts that have been created in the light of an institution such as segregation. Segregation penetrated every sphere of public and private life, denying African Americans very basic rights such as justice, equality, freedom of movement, and freedom of speech. Thus, approaching such a text without sociohistorical, biographical and ideological knowledge seems absurd.

Segregation, albeit in different forms and levels of intensity, has taken place on every continent of this world. Its basic principle, racism, has always been a part of human society. For some reason, the human being has always seen a need to classify ‘the self’ as opposed to ‘the other’. Such a widely spread phenomenon has certainly found its way into art, especially literature. While subgenres dealing with other forms and consequences of racism, such as Diaspora Literature, Slavery Literature and Apartheid Literature have already been identified as unified bodies of literature, Segregation Literature remains a virginal field of research.

The point of origin of this thesis is a book-length study on the Representation of segregation, edited by Piper Hendricks and Brian Norman. With the intention of providing a first examination of the subject, the two critics began outlining certain categories that could help in identifying a body of Segregation Literature. My aim in this thesis is to further develop these categories and apply them to three primary texts, namely *The House behind the Cedars* by Charles Chesnutt, *Black Boy* by Richard Wright, and *Cane* by Jean Toomer. By applying these categories,

it is my intention to find out whether the three primary texts could be denoted as Segregation Literature as defined in this thesis.

The three primary texts analyzed in this thesis describe African American society at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. As elaborated below, segregation was considered natural law in these times, enforced both by social customs and legal codes. Thus, the primary texts incorporate segregation and its consequences for both white and black citizens on some level, although they approach the subject from very different viewpoints. In fact, I have chosen the three texts precisely because they approach the subject so differently. Through the diversity of the primary texts, I hope to reveal the universality of the categories I establish in this thesis.

Naturally, I approach the primary texts with an understanding of the cultural and historical situation they were produced in. To this end, this paper includes words such as 'black', 'white', 'race', 'Negro' and in quotes, even 'Nigger'. I use these words with the full realization that they are not politically correct, which is why I refer to the ethnic group of Africans Americans as such, whenever I can. Due to the material with which I work, and due to the contemporary use of the above-mentioned words, a complete avoidance of these words was impossible. Thus, it is important that I state the following: At no point is it my intention to label any ethnic group that I mention in this thesis, nor is it my intention to pass any kind of judgment on any ethnic group at all. I write about 'race' and 'racial relations' because segregation was based on the assumption that 'race' is a true natural category, and not an artificial social concept, created by human beings. The Civil Rights Movement, thankfully, has erased the official use of these concepts in the US, while sadly, many people around the world still label their world accordingly. Segregation in the US, however, has been abolished, and I salute every man and woman that has helped in accomplishing this.

I begin this thesis by outlining the historical development of segregation, which has its origins in antebellum times and Slavery. I continue by describing the categories I will use to analyze the three

primary texts. I then focus on each text individually, only to compare the results of my research in a final chapter.

4 Historical Background

Segregation, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, refers to, among other things, the “enforced separation of different racial groups in a country, community or institution” (890 f.). Fact is that segregation has come to stand for a period of almost a hundred years, in which the separation of races in the US was enforced on a social, cultural, educational and legal level. Segregation encompassed laws, social customs, linguistic expressions, behavioral maxims – in other words, segregation was evident on every level of the public and private sphere.

While mainly associated with the South, segregation was far from regional. In addition, it was never a unified phenomenon. Its ideological origin is based on assumptions of white supremacy and Negro inferiority, dating from the slavery period (cf. Woodward, 11). In the United States, this was considered to be a ‘natural’ fact, argued for in pseudoscientific volumes from Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia*, published in 1785 (cf. Moody, xi), to the eugenicists of the twentieth century, idolized by Hitler (cf. Scales-Trent, 290 – 291).

Before the Civil War, slavery in the southern part of the country enforced intimate contact between the races. Domestic slaves usually lived in the same house as their owners, which established a unique situation of a common family life (cf. Woodward, 12). In the northern part of the country, separation of races was common in urban centers. In cities like Chicago, legal and extra-legal codes supported the social custom of separating African Americans from white society (cf. 18).

After the defeat of the Confederate States, the signing of the Emancipation Declaration and the subsequent occupation of the southern territory, a period now known as Reconstruction began. While this period only lasted from 1865 to 1877, race relations were more flexible and continually changing until 1900 (cf. Woodward, 42).

During Reconstruction, under a Republican Congress, African Americans were finally legally allowed to vote, to seek an education, travel freely, and to establish churches and clubs, among other newly acquired rights (cf. Wormser, 7). Politically, the period saw three separate ideologies on the ‘Negro Question’: Firstly, the liberal race theory

paralleled the elevation of the South from a rural, agricultural society with the elevation of the Negro from a field hand (cf. Woodward, 48). Secondly, the conservative approach, mostly characterized by aristocratic paternalism and noblesse oblig  , wanted Negroes in positions they were fit to occupy. Supporting the elevation and education of African Americans, conservative thinkers preferred distinctions of class, rather than distinctions of race (cf. 48 – 49). Remarkably, it seems to have been characteristic for lower class whites to want complete separation, whereas upper class members (former slave owners) seemed not to mind ‘well behaved and classy’ Negroes (cf. 50 – 51). Thirdly, the short-lived Populist Party wanted to integrate the Negro, being most outspoken about their equalitarianism, based on the kinship of a “common grievance and a common oppressor” (cf. Woodward, 60 – 61). They believed race antagonism to perpetuate a monetary system suppressing both white and colored people of lower classes (cf. 63).

Yet at the same time, the economic collapse of the southern region after the Civil War had not been reversed (cf. Wormser, 27). The depression of 1873 further aggravated the situation.

In this period, political power returned to the Democrats (cf. Wormser, 30). The compromise of 1877, resulting from a bitter presidential campaign between candidates Hayes and Tilden, ended all hopes of Reconstruction and equal rights. In order to win the hung election, Hayes promised the South the end of all federal interference in its politics. Though Republican, Hayes agreed to overthrow his own party’s views in order to draw the conservative ex-Whig planters, part of the southern Democrats, to his side (cf. Woodward, 52 – 53). Instead of leading a Republican revolt, however, as Hayes had hoped, the southern Democrats proceeded to use their influence to consolidate conservative values (cf. 53).

During the subsequent decade, the South finally profited from the Industrial Revolution. Though still behind regarding technical advancement, the South buzzed with new ideas. Many African Americans moved to the cities, expecting wealth in factory work. A new black middle class emerged, deeply committed to the advancement of their people. A

black sub-society formed in answer to the increased segregation in social life (cf. Wormser, 60).

Contrary to public opinion, the African American group was not immediately disenfranchised after 1877 (cf. Woodward, 53). They continued to vote and hold office well into the 1890's. Only one Congress between 1869 and 1901 saw no black member from the South (cf. 54). Yet slowly but surely a new doctrine gained ground. By the late 1880's, many public spaces had already been segregated, such as trains, theaters and public parks. The southern Democrats slowly regained control in every former confederate state, disenfranchising African Americans along the way (cf. Wormser, 64). The adoption of extreme racism in the South was due not so much to a conversion, but "a relaxation of the opposition." (Woodward, 69) The Jim Crow ideology, supported by racial hatred, fear and fanaticism, had been in existence all along, yet the forces that had kept it in check – moderate southern opinion, liberal northern opinion, the nationwide press, the courts, the federal government – had become absent or consenting forces (cf. Lewis, xx), often with the aim of reconciling the country (cf. Woodward, 71). In several US Supreme Court decisions between 1873 and 1896, rights and immunities protected by federal law were further curtailed (cf. 71).

Finally, in *Plessy v Ferguson* (1896) the court established that racial feelings in the South were innate to its citizens, to an extent that laws could not influence or guide them (cf. 71). Thus, the court employed the "separate but equal" dictum, in order to justify segregation, outlining newly appointed spheres for blacks and whites respectively (cf. Moody, xii). Overstepping these boundaries often resulted in violent retribution, as the practice of vigilante justice against African Americans occurred more often all over the States (cf. xii). The increasing animosity in an industrialized country asked for an abstract system of control, contrary to the personal dominance during slavery. Hence, Jim Crow laws came into existence, legalizing the separation of the races (cf. Ritterhouse, 15 – 16).

The origin of the term Jim Crow is unknown, but was featured in a very popular song and dance by performer Thomas Dartmouth Rice, while impersonating a black character. Published in 1832, the song described a

stereotypical Negro, a common feature of minstrel shows in the nineteenth century. Minstrel shows featured white actors with grotesquely painted black faces, singing, shuffling, cavorting and bantering in comic, stereotypical dialect (cf. Lewis, xi).

By 1900, the disenfranchisement of African Americans had been completed. They were denied access to the legal system, to public transportation, to places of entertainment, to sufficient medical care, as well as being subject to separate working unions and conditions, in addition to a separate educational system. Their life was severely restricted in every sphere, as the dictum of “separate but equal” was hardly true.

Politically, the Republican Party had embraced the radical racist frame of mind. Supported by an overly racist southern democratic president - Woodrow Wilson (1913 – 1921) - and his almost entirely southern cabinet, federal departments were segregated, government applicants were required to attach photographs, and intermarriage became a felony in Washington, DC (cf. Lewis, xxi).

Two of the most influential African American educators and thinkers of that time, W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington, voiced opposing theories as to how the Negro should react. In his famous 1895 “Atlanta Compromise” speech, Washington opined as follows: “In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress.” (Washington, 100) In other words, African Americans should only seek integration as a means to advance both races economically. In social matters, however, the two races should remain separate.

Du Bois rejected this opinion from the very beginning, stressing the importance of higher education. He was later supported in his campaign for complete equality by the NAACP (The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), founded in 1909 (cf. Lewis, xxi).

A form of protest that was less obvious, but just as dangerous for African Americans, was the act of ‘passing’. Offspring of miscegenation were legally categorized as mulattoes but were often white in appearance. ‘Passing’ represented a threat to the basic argument behind the Jim Crow

ideology: The genetic character of race and inferiority. An estimated 2500 men and women had passed into white society by 1940. The benefits of avoiding segregation laws were counterbalanced by the danger of being exposed, and isolation from family and native community (cf. Lewis, xxii).

Culture and art became powerful tools for protest. In the 1920's, black literary and artistic endeavor thrived all over the South, but New York became the center of what was to be known as the Harlem Renaissance. Writers such as Zora Neal Hurston, Langston Hughes, Nella Larsen, Jean Toomer and many more emerged during this period. In addition, Harlem was home to several organizations fostering the Negro, as well as bringing together black entertainers and their white audience on small stages throughout the borough (cf. Lewis, xxiii).

Progress was visible in the era of the Great Depression. For the first time, black and white voters politically united in support of future president Franklin D. Roosevelt, a candidate for the Democratic Party. Surprisingly, the Democratic Party now became closer associated with civil rights, whereas the Republican Party became associated with conservative, supremacist attitudes (cf. Lewis, xxiii).

Jim Crow was slowly starting to dissolve. Before, during and after the Second World War, as many as twenty-seven civil right bills were introduced in Congress. This led a small part of the Democratic Party, popularly referred to as "Dixiecrats", to join the Republican Party, due to their segregationist and socially conservative ideology no longer matching the program of the Democratic Party (cf. Lewis, xxiv).

A major blow to Jim Crow was accomplished by Harry S. Truman in 1948, when he finally desegregated the armed forces by Executive Order 9981. Yet the progress that had been made came to a halt when Eisenhower was elected in 1953. The new president firmly believed that he was unable to influence people's minds and beliefs by laws and orders. After the Supreme Court decided to desegregate schools in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case (1954), this attitude became prevalent. Despite a second Supreme Court ruling on the subject matter in 1955, several (southern) schools remained segregated until the Seventies as the government refused to enforce desegregation (cf. Lewis, xxv – xxvi).

The arrest of Rosa Parks, a Birmingham seamstress who refused to yield her seat to a white passenger on a Montgomery public bus, finally sparked off what was later to be known as the Civil Rights Movement, bringing a certain Baptist minister by the name of Martin Luther King Jr. into focus. The events at Little Rock, Arkansas further spiked people's attention, as federal troops were needed to integrate Central High School (cf. Lewis, xxvi). Throughout the nation, student-led sit-in campaigns and other protests erupted. The practice of nonviolent action was admired and imitated. The inauguration of President Kennedy was seen as a turning point, as he openly supported the movement. Measures to desegregate schools and universities were still met with violence. By 1962, Alabama, Mississippi and South Carolina still segregated schools. In response, Kennedy threw all his personal effort into a bill that would desegregate schools, give equal access to public accommodations, and cover employment and labor unions. He was assassinated before its passing, which left the task, ironically, to a Southerner: Lyndon B. Johnson. After seven months of intense negotiation the Civil Rights Act was finally passed in July 1964. Effectively ending legal segregation, it paved the way for the Voting Rights Act in 1965 (cf. Lewis, xxix).

Sadly, segregationist and racist tensions have not been completely abolished in the US. Trials like that of the Jena Six in 2007 or the recent shooting of a young black man in Florida show that racist tensions are still very much a reality (SPIEGEL Online, 24.09.2007, NY Times, 19.09.2007, Reuters, 26.03.2012).

5 Segregation Narrative

“I learned to play that dual role which every Negro must play if he wants to eat and live.” (Wright 1940, 13) Richard Wright summarizes what it means to be colored in a segregated society. It involves constantly acting out a role. In the presence of white citizens, the Negro is forced to follow a predetermined set of behavioral maxims, implanted by the social and educational system of the South. In the presence of other colored citizens, a different set of rules applies. Thus, a colored person is never able to ‘be’ – acting needs to become an inherent part of his character. Wright thus implies the existence of an artificial color line, necessitating the adoption of a set of social rules for situations in which this line is crossed, and a set of rules for when it is not crossed (cf. Norman/Williams, 2). “To lie, steal and dissemble” (Wright 1940, 13) becomes the survival strategy whenever the boundaries of racial spheres are pushed.

In literary representations of a segregated society, writers depict the consequences of crossing the color line, be it to reveal how segregation operates or to instigate a change of mind in the reader. At the same time, writers like Charles Chesnutt, Richard Wright, Nella Larsen and Lorraine Hansberry rise to meet the aesthetic challenge of representing a discriminatory phenomenon (cf. Williams/Norman, 2).

As it is such a crucial issue in American history, segregation has often been described in fictional settings. The racial landscape serves as a backdrop for most of the African American literary canon between 1890 and 1970. Thus, Brian Norman and Piper Kendrix Williams argue for the existence of a body of Segregation Literature, related to Slave Literature. The impact of slavery on African American literature can hardly be denied, thus Norman and Williams turn to a connected question: To what extent has the historical reality of legal and de facto racial segregation had an impact on African American literature? Is there “a critical mass of representational works not only based on but in meaningful ways organized around, structured upon and informed by the logic of racial segregation”? (Wonham, 554) Similar to the intellectual work that was required to create the literary category of the Slave Narrative, the two scholars began, with the help of numerous other scholars in the field, to

outline some of the characteristic parameters of such a 'Segregation Narrative'. Yet as the two emphasize, the process is far from completed, and it is questionable whether there ever will be such a universally recognized category, as race segregation is a far more diversified phenomenon than slavery ever was (cf. Norman/Williams, 3).

Nevertheless, the questions asked in this thesis are based on the research Williams and Norman have published in their book. Which tactics do authors employ to represent segregation and how do they differ? What are some of the aesthetic challenges a writer must confront in order to address this difficult topic?

Segregation was a collective experience of a whole society, and still fundamentally influences how group identity, group membership and freedom are viewed in the United States today (cf. Norman/Williams, 1). As such, it has had a profound impact on the literary imagination. Much like Norman and Williams, this thesis intends to find out if writings about racial divisions and segregation practices share aesthetic properties, as well as political concerns (cf. 7). I further develop Norman's and Williams' premises, as outlined below, so as to avoid reproducing their argument.

I have chosen to study Charles Chesnutt's *A House behind the Cedars* (1900), Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923) and Richard Wright's *Black Boy* (1945). While these works represent different genres and different authorial backgrounds, they share themes, intention, as well as the cultural and historical background. I refrain from claiming outright that a unified body of Segregation Literature exists, as the dimension of this paper is far from representational. I aim to highlight similarities as well as differences that could be used in future research to develop the genre of Segregation Literature.

6 Categories

Norman and Williams have begun to outline several generalizations that Segregation Literature may have in common. Because their enumeration is limited, I have further developed their categories of aesthetic qualities and political critique in these narratives.

6.1 Racial Cartography

Norman and Williams recognize that race infuses the landscape, meaning that bodies, much as the spaces they move in, are colored (cf. Norman/Williams, 4). The demarcation of race is most obvious in segregated spaces, and this is one of the most often used aesthetic tactics of segregation narratives. In order to present segregated bodies, the author must create a segregated world, clearly ascribing characteristics to either side of the color line, in order to differentiate them. Landmarks such as railroad tracks, a street or a river might aesthetically segregate spaces.

Often, writers assign different sets of colors to segregated spaces, or reveal the divided space by using visual metaphors (cf. Norman/Williams, 4). Stepping into a segregated space results in similar conflicts as crossing the color line. As an African American person, being in a white, black or public space asks for different ways of behavior and different ways of communication (cf. 4). In order to reveal the artificialness of these demarcations, and their transgression into the lives of segregated bodies, segregation narratives often depict children's reactions to their limitations (cf. 5).

The spatialization of race is often accompanied by the spatialization of power – as race determines the location of a body within a space, so does power. In a segregated world, power is directly related to race, as the hegemonic group has power over the minority (cf. Basu, 259). Whereas racial spatialization is artificially constructed and follows no linear structure, power relationships are always arranged vertically (cf. 259). In writing, this is often realized by one body standing, while the other kneels,

one body being undressed, the other body dressed, and other such scenes (cf. 259 – 260).

6.2 Fear and Violence

Norman and Williams argue that the spatialization of fear is a common part of Segregation Literature, reinforcing the demarcating lines of segregated spaces (cf. Norman/Williams, 5). African American literature shows that fear is essential to survival (cf. 5), and as such is implanted by both white and black society (cf. 6). It operates on several levels, and is closely related to marking, crossing and not crossing the divided space of segregation (cf. 5). As a literary device, fear enforces segregated spaces, much as it enforced real Jim Crow boundaries (cf. 5). Fear is implanted through constant threats of violence, which is always present, coming from both black and white patrons. Gussow identifies these different types of violence as 'intimate' violence, as in violence between blacks, driven by strong emotions, such as jealousy, hatred or fear (cf. 144), 'disciplinary', as in the violent threat by white society upon the black body (cf. 143), and finally 'retributive', as in black violence towards white society, usually in answer to the issuing of disciplinary violence (cf. 143).

6.2.1 Intimate Violence

In this analysis, there are few instances of intimate violence caused by strong emotions, thus calling for an expansion of this category. Most importantly, the African American society served as educational sphere with regard to racial etiquette (cf. Ritterhouse, 17). The majority of middle-class African Americans taught their offspring to subsume the performance of racial etiquette in a broader performance of personal dignity. Thus, the children were forced to suppress individual and contrary impulses in ways very unnatural to them (cf. 17). In this manner, the constant fear of white reaction towards their behavior was passed down from parents to children, and the racial system was thus reinforced (cf. Ritterhouse, 40).

Establishing authority within the African American household is an important function of intimate violence, as these subordinate relationships

mirror the segregated society. This might not always include actual abuse, but it does encompass a certain amount of terror. The behavioral pattern of subordination within the household allows black children to learn how to navigate cross-racial contacts in much the same way (cf. Ritterhouse, 55).

Depicted in literature, the African American household reveals how even the smallest institution of society, the family - usually a source of comfort and security against the outside world - participates in the repressive system.

6.2.2 Disciplinary Violence

The system of Jim Crow laws was unjust and disenfranchising in itself, yet it was accompanied by a culture of vigilante justice, fostered by the existence of secret violent clubs, such as the Ku Klux Klan. Vigilante justice might be a misleading term, as the offence committed might have been only a lingering look of a white woman, passing on the street. Lynching and other forms of violent retribution were common forms of vigilante justice, with 3,220 murders of African American men, women and children having been recorded between 1882 and 1930 (cf. Goldsby, 15). Rarely, if ever, were the participants legally pursued. The refusal to accord African Americans their citizens' rights went so far as that lynching exceeded the number of legal executions between 1885 and 1900 (cf. Goldsby, 31). Lynching offered an uncivilized alternative to the inefficiencies and anti-humanitarianism of bureaucratized power (cf. 31). Interestingly, the phenomenon has been analyzed as being peculiar to the South, a problem of a still largely agrarian, rural and feudalistic community, reinforcing white supremacy in the light of technical industrialization (cf. Goldsby, 21). As often, it is not that simple: Lynching was far from being an exclusively 'southern' problem, as is being proven by recorded mob murders in states such as Colorado, Minnesota, New York and Pennsylvania (cf. Goldsby, 15).

Additionally, new technology (photography, voice recording, postcards) allowed mass-media representations of such violence to leave the South and appear in newspapers all over the United States (cf. Goldsby, 15). The aggression igniting the masses to parade, torture and kill a human being was common to the country during that time (cf.

Goldsby, 25). Abrasive progress towards modernity, an instable economy, labor strikes, expansion towards the West and nativist vigilantism characterized an epoch and forced a society into desperately seeking an outlet (cf. 24). Thus, the phenomenon of anti-black lynching is symbolic of a social dilemma that America and its citizens were faced with at the turn of the new century (cf. 26).

Writing and visual representations were vital means for Americans to make sense of lynching's violence. Literature, not being confined to accuracy and straightforwardness, provides an open ground for responses to history's events and influences (cf. Goldsby, 33). Unlike actual pictures of bodies, or other, more 'real' forms of mass-media representations, literary depictions of lynching retain the ineffability, the secret horror of lynching that shaped African Americans' lives much more than the actual acts themselves (cf. 35). As Wonham argues, lynching in Segregation Literature fulfills what the "middle passage" in the Slave Narrative did. It represents an unspoken horror - a collective trauma - regardless of the fact that only a small part of the collective ever actually lived through it (cf. Wonham, 554).

The end of the 'era' of lynching is commonly associated with the 1940's, as the mechanization of agriculture, the industrialization of manufactured goods, the broader spread of wealth and market commodities, and the liberalization of politics and culture loosened most of the tensions causing mobs to accumulate (cf. Goldsby, 288). Moreover, other forms of discrimination, albeit less violent, but still highly effective, became more popular. Denying African Americans their citizens' rights could now be accomplished by taking away their bank credit, and much more easily so. Simple disenfranchisement of the Negro population, instead of its obliteration, constituted a 'modern' approach to the 'Negro problem' (cf. 289). Modernist works such as *Cane* present lynching as a formless threat, which never disappears, albeit assuming different shapes (cf. 289 – 290).

6.3 Folklore

As an aesthetic property, folklore in written form can be used to represent the rich African American traditional culture, as opposed to white popular culture. Folklore initially emerged as an oral tradition, and is viewed to be “a mode through which groups, irrespective of race, class, gender, or region, communicate values, beliefs, attitudes, feelings, traditions, and histories.” (Moody-Turner, 200) Thus, when early African American writers adopted and mastered Western literary traditions, in order to prove their inherent humanity and their ability to reason, they did so without neglecting their ancestors’ art of telling stories (cf. 201). In this manner, folklore became the basis for most African American literature (cf. 201).

Within black culture, issues of race identity, citizenship and equality were vividly debated. Richard Wright contends that blues, spirituals and folk tales formed the channels through which racial wisdom flowed (cf. Wright 1937, 47). Next to religion, it is one of the two sources of true Negro culture (cf. 46).

Authors include folklore in their literary texts not only out of aesthetic motivation, but largely to debate issues of survival, representation, self-determination and freedom (cf. Moody-Turner, 201). Unfortunately, emerging scholarship on folklore communities in the late nineteenth century neglected the positive aspect of folklore, instead strengthening social Darwinism as well as Jim Crow segregation. Black folklore was distorted and manipulated to become a marker of less civilized behavior, as evident in the then popular minstrel shows and in romanticized literary depictions of the “old plantation days” (Moody-Turner, 203). To oppose this abuse, African American writers began to employ motifs of folklore in literary texts, so as to assert this tradition, while at the same time challenging the exploitation of black folklore on cultural and political fronts (cf. 203).

On the other hand, African Americans view folklore to be a human strength, a “personal and community resource for enduring, connecting and celebrating.” (Mechling, 275)

Folklore is evidence of an African culture long gone and as such represents a historical thread tying the cultural heritage of Africans brought forcibly to the American continent to the cultural heritage they left behind (cf. Ogunleye, 436). Throughout the eras of enslavement, Reconstruction and Post-Reconstruction, folk literature, belief and myth have captured the African American struggles and victories (cf. 454). Thus, any African American literary tradition cannot be thoroughly analyzed without looking at folklore as an inherent aesthetic tradition.

6.4 Language and Education

In literature, as in real life, language marks a person as far as race, class, and region are concerned. Not only does it immediately assign a person to a certain social group, language can also be a tool, one that has traditionally been denied African Americans (cf. Poulos, 54). Just as characters frequently struggle with adequately expressing themselves, so do African American authors.

During the last years of the nineteenth century and of the early twentieth century, Negro education, as every other part of life, was subjected to the doctrine of separate but equal. Statistics prove, however, that the United States spent much less money on an African American child, than it did on a white child ("This, Too, Is America", Charles J Rolo in *Tomorrow*, 4 (May 1945) p. 63, reprinted in Kinnamon/Fabre, 67). Thus, correct English spoken by an African American was a marker of education as well as a marker of escape (cf. Poulos, 54). African Americans that managed to abandon their vernacular at the same time escaped from white oppression and its stereotypes (cf. 54). Ascent through language, education and literacy were important themes in slave narratives, but these themes continue to matter in segregation narratives as well. The right of free expression had always been limited for African Americans, even during a time when their basic rights had been granted. Access to African American institutions for higher education was limited, both due to poverty and a subsequent lack of time due to necessary work.

Their quest for literacy, at the same time a quest for language and education, thus becomes a quest for freedom, as education, language and

literacy enable a person to form and express thoughts that might challenge the established order (cf. Poulos, 54).

Another possibility to employ language as an aesthetic principle is the depiction of authentic African American speech. In narratives, dialect can be employed to represent orality, contrary to literacy. Characters speaking in the vernacular are automatically regarded to be less educated, maybe even illiterate. Even in the earliest written examples of popular speech in Europe, the peasant dialects were humorously juxtaposed to the language of the court (cf. Minnick, 4).

As such, language and dialect can be employed to assign characters to a certain group, placing them on respective sides of the color line. The tension between “capitulating to stereotypes and the desire to find an audience for African American literature” (Sundquist, 304) is especially evident for African American writers, such as Charles Chesnutt (cf. Minnick, 11). Dialect can also be used to create distance between the author, the audience and characters (cf. 11). Thus, in a society based on ranks of class and race, dialect can signify attempts to restructure social hierarchies (cf. 12). The three books discussed below employ the themes of education and ascent through literacy in ways very different from each other, and use language and dialect as a means to represent differences in race, age or class.

6.5 Cross-Racial Contact

Segregation narratives offer many situations of cross-racial contact, because these situations reveal the above mentioned aesthetic qualities of segregated spaces. These scenes range from outright violence to “subtle psychological wrestling matches” (Norman/Williams, 6), highlighting the effects and injustices of segregated societies (cf. 6). However, thought needs to be given to the fact that segregation narratives also employ more subtle ways of highlighting racial injustices, not always tied to scenes of cross-racial contact. In fact, often the precise absence of cross-racial contact highlights how deeply the segregated system has been implanted in the minds of segregated bodies.

6.6 Political Critique

During the Post-Reconstruction era, it was nearly impossible for an African American writer not to write about race (cf. Sundquist, 12), and most of them did so to voice their own political or ideological critique. Literature had become an adequate medium to reach the masses and to challenge popular views. Most importantly, nowhere but in literature could African Americans reach a white audience, either by obscuring their own racial identity or by subtly concealing their point of view. These writers intended their narratives to be a social mirror, so their readers would realize the artificiality of a system that was propagated to reflect the natural racial instinct of the southern people (cf. Sundquist, 236).

7 Black Boy

7.1 Richard Wright - Biography

While *Black Boy* is based on Richard Wright's life, certain details may not have happened exactly as described. Nevertheless, it is useful to briefly discuss the life of the author, at least the period dealt with in *Black Boy*. The book had originally been composed of two parts, *Black Boy* and *American Hunger*. The latter deals with Wright's time in Chicago and his experience with the communist party, and is now published in a separate edition.

Richard Wright was born on a plantation near Natchez, Mississippi in 1908. His father came from a long line of plantation slaves and remained a sharecropper all his life, only briefly interrupted by an industrial job in the city of Memphis (cf. Fabre 1973, 2). Wright's mother, Ella, was an educated woman, teaching to support her family. On his mother's side, the family belonged to the mulatto middle class of Jackson, MS, as evidenced by the large house they owned (cf. 5). His mother's family's rich tradition and high moral standards deeply influenced Wright and stayed with him throughout his life (cf. 6).

Nathan Wright, Richard's father, deserted the family when the boy was 5, subsequently forcing his mother to move in with different members of her family. Consequently, young Richard moved around the South quite frequently, as he grew up in different suburban slums (cf. 14 -15).

Unfortunately, Ella Wright suffered a stroke only a couple of years later, leading to partial paralysis and physical impairment for the rest of her life. Thus, she could no longer provide support for her young sons and remained in her own mother's house (cf. Fabre 1973, 28). Leon, Richard's younger brother, was sent north to live with his aunt, while Richard stayed with an uncle for a short period of time (cf. 29). He returned to live with his mother and grandmother in Jackson at the age of thirteen (cf. 32). Ella Wright's mother must have been an impressive person, greatly impacting Richard's mind, if not always positively. She was greatly respected and influential, even in the white community, due to her moral and deep religious beliefs (cf. Fabre 1973, 16 – 18).

Wright, up until that point, had never had a full year of schooling (cf. Fabre 1973, 38). After finishing ninth grade in Jackson, Wright vowed to move north and proceeded to live in Memphis until he could afford the passage to Chicago (cf. Fabre 1973, 54). In Memphis, Wright still experienced racial tensions albeit less intense than in Jackson. Still, he had problems with any situation that did not allow him to act openly (63). Failing to fully adapt to the standards of African American behavior in the segregated South, Wright finally, at the age of twenty, could afford to move to Chicago (cf. 71). This passage signifies the end of *BB*, as Richard reflects on his upbringing in the South.

In Chicago, while being a member of the Communist party until 1942 (cf. Fabre 1973, 229), Wright proceeded to pour all his political ideas and sentiments into writing (cf. 95 ff). His first published work was a collection of short stories, entitled *Uncle Tom's Children* (cf. Fabre 1973, 157). After his move from Chicago to New York, he met both his future wives in Brooklyn of 1939, and got married to Dhimah Rose Meadman in that same year (cf. 198 – 200). Due to irreparable differences, they were divorced only a year later (cf. 206). Wright then married Ellen Poplar in March of 1941 (cf. 220).

Later in life, Wright moved to Paris, after realizing that he was never going to enjoy his full rights as an American citizen (cf. Fabre 1973, 297). After a longer sickness, on the way to recovery, Richard Wright died of a heart attack in November 1960 (cf. 520).

7.2 *Black Boy*

“I wrote the book to tell a series of incidents strung through my childhood, but the main desire was to render a judgment on my environment [...] because I felt the necessity to. That judgment was this: the environment the South creates is too small to nourish human beings [...] I wanted to lend, give my tongue, to the voiceless Negro boys.” (“How Richard Wright looks at *BB*,” *PM Magazine*, April 14th 1945, p.3 – 4, reprinted in Kinnamon/Fabre 1993, 64)

Richard Wright admittedly used several incidents of his own life to create the storyline of *BB*. At the same time he suppressed certain details

and exaggerated others (cf. Hodges, 116). Taken together, *BB* is based upon Wright's biography, but has been generalized until approaching fiction (cf. Davis, 84). Thus, the reader needs to be careful not to believe every statement made as a fact, but within the context of the story that Wright wants to tell (cf. 84). *BB* becomes what James Olney has called an "autophylography", "[a life] lived countless times before, shaped by the ritual stages of birth, naming, initiation, marriage, parenthood, eldership, and death that have given form to the life of the people for as far back as the legendary, mythic memory of people extends." (Olney, 218) In this manner, Richard's experiences are symbolic for an African American culture during segregation.

In this analysis, I will distinguish between Richard Wright - the author of *BB*, and Richard - the main character of *BB*, and will be careful to avoid drawing parallels between the two. A twofold narrative strategy is employed in *BB*: Two distinct voices narrate the story (cf. Hodges, 116). On the one hand, young Richard experiences and relates his experiences, reacting just as a child in his situation would. On the other hand, the author – at a considerable distance in time, in place and in environment - needs to distance himself from his unhappy childhood, while presenting the characters in such a way that their shortcomings are clearly to be blamed on social circumstances (cf. Hodges, 116/Olney, 220).

As a narrator, the young boy reveals the hypocrisy and ruthlessness of the situation in the South. As an innocent and sensitive character, the reader racially 'awakens' alongside Richard, as he moves through the three spheres in his society: his own household, the black community, and the white community, at first experiencing, then slowly realizing, their respective bigotry and racism (cf. Hodges, 118).

Richard Wright's autobiography, albeit partly fictional, can very well be situated within the canon of African American autobiography, governed by the negotiation of the dilemma between complete honesty and white reader's reservations (cf. Andrews 1993, 271). Before Wright, African American autobiography had to stress the "genuineness and good character" (271) of the author, and the "truthfulness" of the story (271). This calculated discourse of 'sincerity' required self-expressiveness and

self-presentation by reconstructing the truth so as not to offend the reader, instead presenting a truth that would set the white reader free of responsibility for the life described (cf. 277).

Black Boy, however, refuses to adhere to the concept of sincerity, by presenting a narrator that cannot help but be himself (cf. Andrews 1993, 277). Richard is authentic, not because he refuses to conform, but because he continuously tries to adapt to what is expected of him, yet fails miserably, every time. His persona is constitutionally incapable of being anyone but himself (cf. 277).

The more people, black or white, judge him strange, intractable, offensive and threatening, the more the reader is encouraged to conclude that he is the only truly authentic person in his world (cf. Andrews 1993, 277). Wright reveals how truth to the self leads to ruptures with every community the narrator tries to join (cf. 277). In order for the narrator to be presented as uniquely authentic, the entire society around him must be rendered inauthentic (cf. 278).

Eventually, every community fails Richard, and as such, he continues with only a vague sense of hunger to guide him (cf. Andrews 1993, 278). Despite the fictional character of *Black Boy*, Wright has contributed immensely to a change in traditional values of African American autobiography. Wright condemns the black community as being at least partially operative in racial segregation. At the end of *BB*, Wright depicts a young man, whose development happened *in spite of* community (cf. 280).

In the opening scene of the narrative, young Richard accidentally burns down the house of his grandparents, because he is bored. He is beaten severely and subsequently suffers from a high fever, which gives him nightmares of white udders, suspended from the wall. After his father deserts the family, the narrative is coined with the image of hunger.

At the age of nine, Richard becomes an alcoholic, amusing the patrons of a bar by repeating swear words for a few sips of their drinks. When his mother, who is forced to leave the boys during the day due to her job, finally realizes his addiction, she pays a neighbor to watch the brothers.

Due to poverty, Richard and his family are forced to move several times, which does not allow for a continuous education of the boy. In a particularly severe hardship, Richard's mother goes so far as to put her boys into a children's asylum. Eventually, Richard and his already sick mother move in with his grandparents, where the boy is subjected to his relatives' fanatic religiousness.

When he is a little older, Richard is finally allowed to work. He begins by delivering newspapers, spends a summer travelling with an insurance agent and finally, enters the white world by working as a kind of handy man in white households.

After he graduates from school, Richard sets out to seek jobs which will help him save enough money to move north. He begins as a porter in a clothing store, where he witnesses what white people do to "niggers when they don't pay their bills." (*BB*, 182) After holding a series of petty jobs, he obtains a job in an optical company, where the northern owner proposes to train him in the optical trade. His two southern co-workers, however, refuse to initiate him into the work, instead treating him like a common errand boy.

After that, Richard begins working as a hall boy at a hotel, where white prostitutes sit nude around their room, feeling no sense of shame, as the black hall boys were not considered human anyway.

In 1925, Richard finally moves to Memphis. He stays with a black family, whose daughter immediately falls deeply in love with Richard, who is appalled and refuses her. He finds a job with an optical company, where his white co-workers conspire to instill a fight between Richard and another black boy, and eventually succeed. As African Americans are not allowed to borrow books from the library, he is able to convince an Irish Catholic colleague to give him a library card, forging notes so he can read the books that will eventually open his eyes. He is finally able to move to Chicago with his mother, aunt and brother.

7.2.1 Racial Cartographies

In a segregated society, racial cartographies are often very neatly separated. Within a shared space, however, they constantly need to be negotiated.

As Richard and his friends negotiate the space of their shared neighborhood, there is an artificially created boundary, embodied by the roundhouse, acting as a color line, agreed upon by both groups. Importantly, both groups need to participate in the negotiation, in order for them to be separated. A crossing of the line has physical consequences, as the boys will soon learn. Perhaps unknowingly, the groups mimic larger social operations that will soon dominate their existence.

The roundhouse was the racial boundary of the neighborhood, and it had been tacitly agreed between the white boys and the black boys that the whites were to keep to the far side of the roundhouse and we blacks were to keep to our side. Whenever we caught a white boy on our side we would stone him; if we strayed to their side, they stoned us; (*BB*, 81)

Racial cartographies in *BB* are realized mostly by separation, not by contrast. Upon riding the train, Richard realizes that the white and Negro passengers are completely separated (cf. *BB*, 44), but he does not comment on the shabbiness, or lack thereof, in the different compartments. Descriptions of the different neighborhoods Richard and his family live in are sometimes positive, sometimes negative. Upon moving in with his Aunt Maggie and Uncle Hoskins, Richard exclaims: "... Aunt Maggie lived in a bungalow that had a fence around it. It looked like a home and I was glad." (*BB*, 47) In contrast, their neighborhood in Memphis (assumably black) is characterized by the "absence of green, growing things," (*BB*, 8) and is seemingly dead to Richard. Another time, they live in a neighborhood which "swarmed with rats, cats, dogs, fortunetellers, cripples, blind men, whores, salesmen, rent collectors, and children." (*BB*, 57)

Spatial separation is enforced when Richard accompanies his mother to her servant job in a white family's home. While he can watch the family from the kitchen, he is separated, forever confined to the symbolic black space, the kitchen (cf. *BB*, 17). The first time Richard ever

encounters a truly white neighborhood, he sees “wide clean streets and big white houses,” “marveling at the cleanliness, the quietness of the white world.” (*BB*, 67) Later, when Richard starts working in white neighborhoods, he not so much comments on their appearance, but mostly on the behavior of his employers. Nevertheless, he and his friends compare descriptions of houses and the behavior of white people. They always remain a homogenous group, distant and alien to the black boys.

Racial cartographies in *BB* are visible, but rarely so. A certain aesthetic symbolism is evident, however, by aligning black and white with darkness and light respectively. “Lightness” and “Whiteness” are deadly to “Darkness” and “Blackness”. Wright speaks of the “southern night” (*BB*, 170), associating the Negro situation with darkness. The image of the South, beautiful and sunny, thus collides with the darkness of the alien race, and their situation. When Richard walks out “into the sunshine”, and goes home “like a blind man” (*BB*, 195), the binary society is represented, in which the dark race is figuratively blinded by the white race.

7.2.2 Violence and Fear in Black Boy

Richard Wright composed *Black Boy* with the intention of demonstrating the damaging effects of the situation in the South on an African American child (cf. Gibson, 41). As a black boy growing up in Mississippi, Richard has yet to learn what this means. Violence, as one of the prevailing themes of the story, is always present, coming from both white and black patrons.

Richard depicts how he learned to be afraid of whites, even when they were not present. The black community depicted in *BB* is just as operative in passing on tales of lynching and violence, as the white community is in issuing threats of lynching and violence.

7.2.2.1 Domestic Violence (“Intimate” Violence)

BB depicts a twofold source of fear for young Richard: While he grows up in a hostile society taking away his chance to accomplish anything in his life, the more immediate source of anxiety comes from his family. Truthfully, human relationships are always determined by the society they occur in (cf. Gibson, 52). Hence, Wright depicts how African American parents (and family members), perhaps unknowingly, participate in the suppression of their own children, so as to protect them and teach them how to ‘be’ black (cf. Norman/Williams, 6). In the blues tradition, intimate violence is usually represented between two lovers, whereas *BB* mostly depicts it as a kind of second-degree disciplinary violence, so as to internalize and reinscribe white hegemony (cf. Gussow, 146).

To Richard, his family was never a great source of love, trust or stability. His father is depicted as a cold man, abandoning his young children and wife. Within the family, Richard depicts administration of authority and punishment, yet scenes of love are never directly described. There is a subtle but strong love relationship between Richard and his mother, who, despite her crippling disease, frequently comforts the young boy and attempts to limit the impact of being black for the boy. In fact, it might have been her fault that Richard was never able to conceal his true feelings in the presence of whites:

‘They’ll call you a colored man when you grow up.’ She said. Then she turned to me and smiled mockingly and asked: ‘Do you mind, Mr. Wright?’
I was angry and did not answer. I did not object to being called colored, but I knew that there was something my mother was holding back. She was not concealing facts, but feelings, attitudes, convictions which she did not want me to know; and she became angry when I prodded her. (*BB*, 47)

Ella Wright clearly tries to protect her curious son from the truth and the future. Additionally, she is faced with the problem of explaining an artificial, segregated system, designed to take this curiosity away from her boy. Wright not only points at the difficulty of growing up with Jim Crow, but also shows how parents struggle to keep their children alive, while at the same time fostering and protecting them.

The church, the second pillar of stability in a young African American's life, is equally negative to Richard (cf. Skerrett, 86). To his denial of faith and religion, his family, especially his grandmother, only reacts with more violence, but they cannot convert him, finally leaving him alone.

Yet the distrust and misery Richard feels in his grandmother's house is subjective. Indeed, his family very thoroughly tries to hand him the tools for survival in the South. Signs of middle class respectability, such as high moral values and deep religious belief are evident within the family. These values, Skerrett argues, are signs of psychic numbing in the African America community. Psychic numbing occurs when the conditions of life in the South are accepted and the mind begins to strive only for values that are reachable within the restricted sphere of African Americans (cf. Skerrett, 89).

Richard refuses psychic numbing, as his need for individual expression is perhaps greater than that of his peers (cf. Helton, 151). Whenever he feels restricted in his expression, Richard reacts violently, and in return, so does his environment: the black community has the intention of keeping the boy alive, before the white community disciplines the boy (cf. 151).

The depiction of personal relationships in literature very often reveals how a segregated society penetrates every level, as far down as the family. The pervasiveness of the system is shown by the fact that psychological terror and violence within the family, as depicted in *BB*, are actually expressions of concern for the child, a feeble attempt to prepare the child for life.

7.2.2.2 Extralegal Violence (“Disciplinary” Violence)

The narrative of *BB* is punctuated by scenes of white violence, inflicted for multiple reasons. As Richard himself had never been molested by a white mob before, most of the terror he feels is inflicted upon his mind collaterally. Stories and whisperings are enough to incite in him a fear unlike anything else. In fact, Richard confesses that the unknown terror

was far more effective than anything he might have directly witnessed (cf. *BB*, 173). In this way, Wright reveals how the system of the South constantly reinforced itself by conditioning its individuals to always be afraid (cf. Wells, 876).

Lynching appears twice in the text, yet Richard witnesses these incidents only passively, through reports. His Uncle Hoskins, a shop owner in Elaine, Arkansas, is murdered by several white businessmen, because he had been too successful (cf. *BB*, 52). Richard is only a small boy and thus encounters his “first baptism of racial emotion” (*BB*, 47). He claims: “We [...] had fallen on our faces to avoid looking into that white-hot face of terror that we knew loomed somewhere above us.” (*BB*, 52 – 53)

Later in the story, Richard learns of the lynching of a classmate’s brother. The young man had allegedly been involved with a white prostitute at the hotel he worked at (cf. *BB*, 172). With this scene, Wright also refers to the gendered character of race relations, as more often than not, male African Americans were lynched for ignoring the color bias in this respect. The image of the black brute raping the virginal, innocent white lady often served to ignite racial hate (cf. Ritterhouse, 46). By explaining how Richard reacts, Wright manages to reveal how disciplinary violence operates: Richard feels lynching’s “full effects in the deepest layers of [his] consciousness,” “creating a sense of distance between [him] and the world” (*BB*, 173). Thus, Wright exposes disciplinary violence to the core: Disciplinary violence serves to implant fear in Afro-Americans, to an extent which renders them incapable of revolution.

7.2.2.3 “Retributive” Violence

There is only one instant of retributive violence stated in the text, but it leaves a great impression on Richard, and is one of the few detailed descriptions of violence at all.

One evening I heard a tale that rendered me sleepless for nights. It was of a Negro woman whose husband had been seized and killed by a mob. It was claimed that the woman vowed she would avenge her husband’s death and she took a shotgun, wrapped it in a sheet, and went humbly to the whites, pleading that she be allowed to take her husband’s body for burial. It seemed that she was granted permission to come to the side of her dead husband

while the whites, silent and armed, looked on. The woman, so went the story, knelt and prayed, then proceeded to unwrap the sheet; and, before the white men realized what was happening, she had taken the gun from the sheet and had slain four of them, shooting at them from her knees. (*BB*, 71)

This story was “emotionally true.” (71) Richard often fantasizes that “[i]f anybody tried to kill [him], then [he] would simply kill them first.” (*BB*, 47) As a boy, Richard followed his natural impulse to strike back, should anyone strike him. The educational system of the South, both institutionalized and within the family, was designed to quench this impulse. The phrase “emotionally true” from the passage above refers to the empowering character of the story. After all, in US society, the Negro was disenfranchised, which included the right to justice. Perpetrators in crimes against African American, if identified, were seldom held accountable (cf. Harris, 96). In fact, *only one* southern white man was convicted and sentenced to life in prison for killing a black person between Reconstruction and 1966 (cf. Foley, 189).

In the story, however, the woman resolves to take control, even if she will not survive. This, in turn, reminds Richard of his own place, as he had already “grown to feel that there existed men against whom [he] was powerless.” (*BB*, 71) Richard resolves to imitate the woman, should he ever be subjected to such a situation. Thus, retributive violence returns power and control to African Americans, even if only for a short period of time, and even if only in imagination. Thus, as Richard admits, his imagination enables him to keep his emotional integrity, serving to provide an outlet for the strenuous life lived under the threat of violence (cf. *BB*, 72).

7.2.3 Folklore in Black Boy

Folklore is an important African American oral tradition, sustaining and recreating African American culture and values (cf. Mechling, 292). As an African American writer, Wright must have been aware of this tradition, even if folklore is not a homogenous category. As an aesthetic device, folklore is employed to advance the fictive world created in the story (cf.

Mechling, 276), evidence of which can be found in *BB*. Most importantly, Wright has included four lyrical catalogues, of differently motivated images, myths and beliefs, appearing at different stages in the prose text.

These lyrical passages could well be excluded from the text and be read as a separate work. Only one of these four catalogues features actual folklore content, but their purpose is to advance the storyline and subtly convey messages that the narrator cannot yet express clearly. In this discussion, only the two longest and most meaningful catalogues will be analyzed, due to their importance for the storyline.

Timothy Adams contends that Wright never claims to tell the complete and factual truth – rather, he stresses the emotional truth of life in the South, to decode the myths about the South (cf. Adams, 182). In this, folklore is helpful as an emotionally charged, oral tradition. The catalogues thus advance the emotional truth of the story.

Similarly, Wright depicts how folklore was an important part of African American culture, and how stories about struggles and victories serve to sustain black tradition.

Folklore appears in different form and content in the narrative, but nevertheless its purpose is to advance the story, parallel to offering a glimpse of African American urban life during segregation.

7.2.3.1 Catalogues

The first catalogue (*BB*, 4- 7) lists nostalgic childhood images, creating a picture of the landscape Richard grew up in. Despite the initial positive association, at a second sight, several key words highlight the negative connotation of this catalogue. Words and phrases such as “liquid alarm” (6), “tantalizing” (6), “disdain” (6), “cosmic cruelty” (7), “cloudy notion of hunger” (7), “aching glory” (6), among others, clearly indicate the duality evident in African American life in the South (cf. Camp, 31). Forever caught between idealism and terror, the beauty of the landscape and the subtle threat of violence which it contains, this catalogue reveals a human being trying to come to terms with his place in the world (cf. 31). The catalogue represents the child’s slow realization that he is black, and everything this encompasses (cf. Camp, 33). As such, the childish

nostalgia is short-lived, only serving to juxtapose reality and fantasy, as the reader well knows that the idealistic image of the South depicted in these lines is far from true (cf. 33). The lyrical character of this passage also serves to foreshadow Richard's realization that his imagination is a "medium of survival" (Camp, 33), and a medium of fight. Significantly, this catalogue ends in ellipsis, "indicating that final conclusions have not yet been drawn and that some hope remains" (Camp, 32).

While the first catalogue subtly represents an important step in Richard's development, the second catalogue (*BB*, 69 – 70) lists superstitions and "magical responses" (Camp, 35), created by the African American community to cope with impossible situations (cf. 35). As Carolyn Camp argues, these superstitions allow the black community the illusion of mystical insight, defense and power (cf. 35). This catalogue is different from the previous one, in that it clearly represents the importance of tradition and culture to the black community. Religion, another important source of folklore and superstition, does not occur in any of these catalogues (cf. 36). Wright's refusal to incorporate religious aspects in this catalogue could be viewed to represent his conviction that religion failed to "solve the Negro's plight in the South" (Camp, 36). Both catalogues move Richard closer to the realization of what it means to be black in the South. The juxtaposition of reality and fantasy becomes sharper, as the reader realizes that Richard's childish joy is short-lived (cf. 36).

7.2.3.2 The "Street Gang Code"

Segregation even pervades daily conversations – so called "pragmatic paradoxes" (Mechling, 283) – children must learn to resolve. This is especially evident when Richard describes the "street gang code" of communication, the themes and topics these young men talk about in their spare time (cf. *BB*, 76 – 80).

The African American community provides clear guidelines of conversation and topics that are safe, as determined by the white hegemonic group. In these afternoon conversations, cultural values are transmitted from one household to the other, and its inherent folk tradition is thus reproduced (cf. *BB*, 79). According to Richard: "Our attitudes were

made, defined, set, and corrected; our ideas were discovered, discarded, enlarged, torn apart, and accepted.” (*BB*, 79)

The urban gang, as well as the family represent an African American institution producing a survival guide for children (cf. Helton, 148). Here, children are taught the strategies and attitudes necessary to survive in the South. Though hate of the white establishment, bitter pride in being feared and naïve rebellion are important emotions discussed and shown, the underlying objective is to learn how to solve the above mentioned pragmatic paradoxes. The community corrects and guides what is expressed. In the society of the South, more is left unsaid than said, and children must learn how to distinguish between the two (cf. 148).

Richard was unable to ever acquire a full command of these strategies suggesting that folklore might not be a sufficient way to cope with the powerlessness of Negro life in the South (cf. Mechling, 291). Nevertheless, the author has later acquired full insight into the code of the street gang. Through his comments, he both aligns himself with and distances himself from the group of young men. On the one hand, he knows their world view intimately, from having been one of them not so long ago. On the other hand, his comments sustain proof of an educated mind, looking back at events in the past. The adult Richard has clearly escaped his street gang past.

7.2.3.3 Religion

According to Richard Wright, religion and folklore are closely related as sources of African American culture and tradition. In fact, he contends that the American Negro first entered western culture through the “portals of the church” (Wright 1940, 46 – 47). During slavery times, religion became a struggle for human rights, at the same time serving as an antidote for the suffering and oppression of those years (cf. 47).

It is interesting, with these arguments in mind, that religion is pictured very negatively in *BB*. It plays a prominent role and has a profound impact on Richard’s life. Yet it does not obtain any of the positive features mentioned above. Richard does not acquire culture through religion, nor does he find in it an antidote to his suffering and oppression.

On the contrary, the young man comes to realize that religion in the black community is just another expression of hunger, "...the hunger of the human heart for that which cannot be and never will be, the thirst of the human spirit to conquer and transcend the implacable limitations of human life." (*BB*, 117 – 118)

The young boy cannot find comfort in the promise of a glorious afterlife, nor is he able to take control of his limited personal sphere by following religious teachings, such as the rest of his family tries. The only positive feelings he associates with the church have to do with his approaching adolescence, as he falls passionately in love with the elder's wife. The hymns possibly stimulate him sexually, yet as soon as Richard leaves the church he is overcome by the 'realness' of life (cf. *BB*, 110 – 111). Richard is not faithless, but the concept of God is too abstract. Knowing that his peers will not understand, he tries to explain:

I had not settled in my mind whether I believed in God or not; [...] Embedded in me was a notion of the suffering in life, but none of it seemed like the consequences of original sin to me; [...] My faith, such as it was, was welded to the common realities of life, anchored in the sensations of my body and in what my mind could grasp, and nothing could ever shake this faith, and surely not my fear of an invisible power. (*BB*, 113)

During slavery, religion was used to mask the slaves' real feelings to their white owners. Within the black community, biblical rhetoric served to safely discuss issues of slavery and freedom without fear of retribution (cf. Moody-Turner, 204). In much the same way does the segregated black community of *BB* turn to religion: To answer questions that simply cannot be answered truthfully and logically within a caste system that has been artificially created by a hegemonic group. Richard constantly seems to ask "Why?" throughout the book, if not in words, then in actions. Clearly, religion does not provide a sufficient answer, as the concept of the original sin is too abstract for Richard. Instead of religious expression, he turns to literary expression and its empowering qualities.

7.2.3.4 The Blues

Despite all the above-mentioned features associated with folklore traditions, *BB* also stands at the margin of a blues textual tradition (cf. Gussow, 148). Ralph Ellison has argued that *BB* resembles a blues performance, in that it “keep[s] the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness [...] As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically.” (Ellison, 90) While rich in literary strategies that resemble blues’ expressiveness, Wright erases all traces of blues culture from Mississippi life. Wherever he encounters other black families, there is an absence of the thriving blues culture that represented what little fortitude and liberation black families in the segregated South possessed (cf. Gussow, 148). Richard sees black life to be lacking everything except religion. “I saw a bare, bleak pool of black life and I hated it; the people were alike, their homes were alike, and their farms were alike.” (*BB*, 136) While this depiction certainly does not represent the truth, it represents the “unrelieved bleakness of black southern life” (Gussow, 148). Wright’s focus, after all, is not to represent the thriving native culture of African Americans, but to record what life in the South meant for a young black person. Wright’s realism thus serves to depict the Negro not as a caricature, but as a human being, so that the white population conceives of him as an equal. (“Richard Wright stresses Realism in dealing with fictional Negro Types,” Coit Hendley Jr., *The Sunday Star*, November 11th, 1945, p, C3 – C7, reprinted in Kinnamon/Fabre, 83)

7.2.4 Language and Education

Robert Stepto has called *BB* a narrative of ascent (cf. Stepto 1979, x), as Richard continuously tries to gain authorial control of the text and his environment. To move upward, Richard needs to identify and read his culture’s signs, and then proceed to transcend them in some sense (cf. Stepto 1979, 134). Expressions of literate mobility slowly supersede expressions of illiterate immobility (cf. 132). Richard clearly struggles

throughout the narrative, both to make sense of his culture and to find his voice and identity as a writer.

7.2.4.1 Language

Language in *BB* follows a certain protocol. African American speech is limited by white presence, but just as much is it limited within the black community. The narrator, more than once, suffers punishment for using bad language. Bad, in this case, refers to profane language. A breach of the linguistic protocol often has extensive consequences, resulting in physical punishment, or worse.

After his mother is paralyzed, Richard is ‘adopted’ by his Uncle Clark and Aunt Jody. Both offer a comfortable and orderly life for the narrator, if only he defers to their code of life (cf. Basu, 254). For Richard this means assuming his daily chores, none of which are too strenuous for a boy his age, but more importantly, Aunt Jody watches closely how Richard expresses himself. She expects him to utter “Good Morning,” upon sitting down for breakfast, and she corrects Richard’s grammar (cf. Basu, 254). Richard’s language had never been as closely watched as then, so understandably, he struggles to conform to his Aunt’s wishes.

Yet Richard commits the ultimate breach when he spills a bucket of water, only to let out a string of profanities, not knowing that his Aunt is within earshot (cf. *BB*, 95). To his aunt and uncle, this behavior is inexcusable. Richard is lashed with a strap, but is able to achieve his wish to be afterwards reunited with his mother. Uncle Clark and Aunt Jody punish Richard for disobeying their rules, but more importantly, they are unable to understand where he learned this kind of language. Both had tried to induce discipline in Richard, by regulatory controls, such as chores and the linguistic code (cf. Basu, 254). Even though this episode might be referred to as only a ‘micro narrative’ (cf. Basu, 255) within the greater structure of *BB*, it supports the overall theme of the struggle for free expression, and how literacy continuously needs to be negotiated because in a segregated society it also has a disciplinary function (cf. 255). The narrator struggles constantly with power relations, and most of them are

negotiated through language. Hence, his ability to articulate his feelings becomes a struggle for freedom.

Richard encounters stories for the first time through a young teacher named Ella, boarding with his family (cf. *BB*, 37 ff.). Knowing that Granny “would not like it if [she] talked to [Richard] about novels,” (*BB*, 36) Ella nevertheless tells the boy the story of *Bluebeard and His Seven Wives* and it wakes in Richard a profound longing for the emotions this story evokes. Everything he is unable to feel (and express) in real life, he can feel (and express) while listening to this horrific story. In this quest, Richard has to struggle against all those that banish literacy as “the Devil stuff” (*BB*, 37). Ella reveals to Richard what to him will mean life (cf. *BB*, 38), in more than one sense. Not only will literature give him a profound sense of being alive, but it will also show him a world where life is full of possibilities.

In the beginning, language represents only a tool for evoking emotions and imagining situations that real life lacks. Yet later in life, as Richard discovers authors like H. J. Mencken, Theodore Dreiser, Fyodor Dostoyevsky and others, he realizes that language can be operative in fighting, in revealing the truth of life, and thus in changing people’s minds.

7.2.4.2 Education

African American and white children were segregated in school, just as in nearly every other sphere of their lives. Negro schools were notoriously underfunded, as the State of Mississippi, for example, only spent 5 \$ a year on the education of a Negro child, whereas 40 \$ were spent on white children. (“This, Too, Is America”, Charles J Rolo in *Tomorrow*, 4 (May 1945) p. 63, reprinted in Kinnamon/Fabre, 67)

In *BB*, Richard’s schooling is very limited. His frequent moves, his mother’s poverty, and his family’s religion hinder the young boy’s learning, despite the fact that he likes to learn, and does so easily. Richard is not only educated in school, however. He has to learn what it means to be a Negro in southern society, just as much as he is educated by constant hunger, poverty and violence (cf. Vogel, 195). Thus, Richard grows up in a

world where society offers him little chance of ever escaping his plight. The vague picture of the North holds a promise of hope for the young boy, and so Richard puts all his strength into progressively moving in that direction (cf. 195).

The different types of education white and black children receive will forever set them apart. The social system forced on black youths, beginning with the white man on top, then the black community, the black church and school, and finally, the black family, is designed to keep him stunted in his sense of self (cf. Hakutani 1996, 130).

An African American child receives a formal education, as well as learning how to survive in the South. Responsibility for this informal education is assumed by the black family, the black urban gang, the church, and white society (cf. Helton, 148). Richard's education separates him from white society, just as much as from his peers, who have learned how to behave. Characters such as Griggs and Shorty have managed to adopt the role of the clown in the presence of whites, which does not necessarily mean they are stupid, or have less self-worth. They simply have realized that in order to eat, they must dissemble.

As mentioned before, Richard's formal education is tainted by racial segregation. Not only does he receive less education as his white peers, even in the triumph of becoming valedictorian, Richard is asked to subordinate himself to white society. The principal of his school in Jackson asks him to accept a prewritten speech, so as not to offend the white people in the audience, upon whose donations the school depends (cf. *BB*, 175). Richard refuses the "bought" professor, and writes his own speech. This is one of the first instances of successful literacy, as Richard wins the negotiation. His speech might not be as well written as the professor's, but he is able to say whatever he likes. Throughout his whole youth, Richard has continuously resisted the oppressing forces, disguised as 'help' or 'teachers'. Neither has Richard's spirit been crushed, nor has he adopted any strategies to dissemble or lie.

I knew that I lived in a country in which the aspirations of black people were limited, marked off. Yet I felt that I had to go somewhere and do something to redeem my being alive. I was building up in me a dream which the entire educational system of the South had been rigged to stifle. (*BB*, 170)

Richard's inherent resistance to adopting the behavior of his peers would be regarded as 'good' because he resists a system that would crush his individuality, and by default, his soul. In the segregated society of the South, however, 'good' behavior becomes 'bad', because it poses a threat to the dominant class (cf. Poulos, 54). In his quest for individuality and free expression, Richard faces alienation from other African Americans, who are well aware of the danger such a quest poses. From the white side, as expected, Richard faces incomprehension and surprise coupled with violence. The young boy challenges their stereotypical picture of a Negro, as shown in the surprise he faces upon admitting that he does not know how to milk a cow (cf. *BB*, 148). At the end of *BB*, the author refuses to give an easy answer as to how Richard had managed to escape the pressuring forces of southern society. There remains only one option for Richard, if he wants to survive. Finally, he comes to terms with what living in – and escaping – the South had really meant:

[...] I knew that I could never really leave the South, for my feelings had already been formed [...] So, in leaving I was taking a part of the South to transplant in alien soil, to see if it could grow differently, if it could drink of new and cold rains, bend in strange winds, respond to the warmth of other suns, and, perhaps, to bloom... And if that miracle ever happened, then I would know that there was yet hope in that southern swamp of despair and violence, that light could emerge even out of the blackest of the southern night. [...] With ever watchful eyes and bearing scars, visible and invisible, I headed North, full of a hazy notion that life could be lived with dignity, that the personalities of others should not be violated, that men should be able to confront other men without fear or shame, and that if men were lucky in their living on earth they might win some redeeming meaning for their having struggled and suffered here beneath the stars. (*BB*, 262)

All that remains at the end of this last lyrical passage is, again, hope.

7.2.5 Cross-Racial Contact

Key scenes of cross-racial contact set in motion the atmosphere of fear and threatening violence, and are thus common to segregation narratives. In *BB*, the society Wright depicts is designed to suppress individuality in African American children. In scenes of cross-racial contact, the forces of subordination issued by white society are made evident (cf. Ellison, 51).

Richard has never been able to subordinate his individuality, so he struggles with every scene of cross-racial contact. In theory, he knows what is expected of him, but the mental strain is often too much for him.

As Richard very well knows, there is a period in every African American child's life, when "there had been developed in them a delicate, sensitive, controlling mechanism, that shut off their minds and emotions from all that the white race had said was taboo." (*BB*, 199)

For Richard, this period happened very late in life. He had never been aware of "Black" and "White", until he heard of an incident involving the beating of a black boy by a white man (cf. *BB*, 22). The concept of race is highly abstract to the boy, as his mother fails to explain the truth of the matter.

Most of the scenes of cross-racial contact in *BB* are designed to reveal the arbitrariness of race relations and segregation:

A 'white' policeman came to me and I wondered if he was going to beat me. He asked what was the matter and I told him that I was trying to find my mother. His 'white' face created a new fear in me. I was remembering the tale of the 'white' man who had beaten the 'black' boy. [...]

He asked me questions in a quiet, confidential tone, and quite before I knew it he was not 'white' any more. (*BB*, 30)

At the same time, Wright manages to express both the racial fear that is already instilled in the young boy, and the artificiality of this fear, as Richard forgets the race question as soon as the policeman reduces his fear. The color of the man fades into oblivion as in Richard's mind he turns into a regular man. Through the innocent eyes of a child, without knowledge of politics, history or philosophy, the concept of white and black is broken down to its basic functions in a society: To instill fear, to keep in check, to limit contact between the races; Richard's initial fear, as well as his later abandonment of that same fear as soon as the policeman acts,

reveal how easy it would be to decode these meanings and desegregate society.

Other scenes of cross-racial contact are just as expressive of Wright's obvious condemnation of racial segregation.

Uncle Hoskins had simply been plucked from our midst and we, figuratively, had fallen on our faces to avoid looking into that white-hot face of terror that we knew loomed somewhere above us. This was as close as white terror had ever come to me and my mind reeled. Why had we not fought back, I asked my mother, and the fear that was in her made her slap me into silence. (*BB*, 52 – 53)

Keeping in mind how Wright's goal was to represent his past in such a way as to reveal racism's effect on the personality, on personal and family relationships, racism's pervasiveness and insidiousness (cf. Gibson, 40), this scene serves as a good example for all of the above. After Uncle Hoskins' murder, Richard describes his own despair, as well as that of his mother and aunt. His mother is shaken to the point where she slaps him for asking a potentially suicidal question, revealing how the black family serves as an institution to keep the black child alive. The African American person is taught never to feel safe, always to be prepared for the unexpected tragedy. Thus, segregation pervades every level of society and the private life. Even in their own homes, African Americans are controlled by the social forces that claim them to be inferior.

Segregation, as mentioned before, is based on the argument of the alleged natural inferiority of the African American race. Wright reveals how this argument works, and how it influences white people's thinking. Every cross-racial conversation is tainted by this basic argument, as evidenced by the following excerpt from a job interview with a white woman:

Then I recalled hearing that white people looked upon Negroes as a variety of children, and it was only in the light of that that her question made any sense. If I had been planning to murder her, I certainly would not have told her and, rationally, she no doubt realized it. Yet habit had overcome her rationality and had made her ask me: 'Boy, do you steal?' Only an *idiot* would have answered: 'Yes, ma'am. I steal.' (*BB*, 146, emphasis added)

Later in the book, Richard comments on the fact that most of his black friends stole - something that was good-humoredly endured by their white bosses:

But I, who stole nothing, who wanted to look them straight in the face, who wanted to talk and act like a man, inspired fear in them. The southern whites would rather have had Negroes who stole work for them than Negroes who knew, however dimly, the worth of their own humanity. Hence, whites placed a premium upon black deceit; they encouraged irresponsibility; and the rewards were bestowed upon us blacks in the degree that we could make them feel safe and superior. (*BB*, 202)

Wright reveals his tactics in representing scenes of cross-racial contact: To highlight how segregation operates, even in daily conversation. Through segregation, language and free expression are limited, few topics are allowed. Cross-racial contacts reveal how Richard is incapable of following the social protocol for African Americans, thus revealing that this protocol is artificial and has been established by white power, so as to calm their fear of the 'savage' black man.

7.2.6 Political Critique

The unique situation of the African American in the United States during the segregation period had fostered a uniquely nationalist black life – forcing Negroes to establish a “Negro way of life in America” (Wright 1940, 48). In his essay “Blueprint for Negro Writing”, Wright criticizes that African American writing during that period had been so much occupied with pleading for justice that it lost most of its unique character, neglecting to address the Negro audience (cf. 45). Negro writers had the ability to guide at least educated African Americans, yet their role had been minimized as such (cf. 45). According to Wright, “Negro writers who seek to mould or influence the consciousness of the Negro people must address their messages to them through the ideologies and attitudes in this warping way of life.” (Wright 1940, 48)

A black writer must grasp and understand the history of his race, and in the mind of his reader, create “a relationship between a Negro woman hoeing cotton in the South, and the men who loll in swivel chairs in

Wall Street and take the fruits of her toil.” (Wright 1940, 51) As an author, Wright thus tries to be aware of the whole history of his ‘race’, from the origins of their culture in Africa through the long struggle to regain a whole culture in a strange country (cf. 51). With this knowledge in mind, he turns to the task of “[lifting] the level of consciousness higher.” (Wright 1940, 53)

Wright had a materialistic understanding of race relations, as he once contended in an interview. Racial relations in the US had been based on the cheap workforce the Negro represented (cf. Young, 695). *Black Boy* represents an argument against the biological inheritance of race characteristics, as he frequently portrays their artificialness. Much like Richard and his friends learn to “play” their roles, “as though it was in [their] blood,” (*BB*, 81) the subtle message here is that different conditions would enable them to learn a different role (cf. Young, 695). Richard’s subjectivity is forever controlled by social parameters, as his environment tries to shape his personality. Yet unlike his peers, Richard is painfully aware of the controlling forces around him, making it physically and psychologically impossible for him to succumb to them (cf. 695).

The contemporary natural argument for the inherent difference of races is thus revealed to be constructed in *Black Boy*. White society is the hegemonic power, whereas African American society functions as a censorship body. At the mere threat of individuality, the black community would try to “pull the crab back into the basket”, as Booker T. Washington once said (cf. Ellison, 57).

Wright’s basic assumption is that there is no escape from the social. Implicitly, Wright demotes human agency, choice and will to a certain extent. He does not deny the individual’s experience, but highlights how this experience is guided and controlled by social forces (cf. Young, 697). Wright accomplishes this by juxtaposing his experiences, thoughts and feelings to state or educational structures, among other controlling forces (cf. 698). As Robert Young states, “Wright’s experiences are dialectically related to ideological state apparatuses, which Wright demystifies through ideology critique.” (698)

In *BB*, Wright’s purpose is to represent and therefore expose the system of the South (cf. Hakutani 1996, 130). He differs from other African

American writers, such as Charles Chesnutt and Laurence Dunbar, because he insists on discrimination not only based on race, but also on the basis of political, economic and social considerations (cf. Hakutani 1996, 9). *BB* depicts multiple facets of American society, shown by multiple black points of view (conservative, religious, radical) as well as multiple white points of view (KKK, conservative, northern liberal). The goal is to create a distinct, independent voice to express universal humanism, a conviction that prevails over any other point of view (cf. Hakutani 1996, 17). The material character of the 'Negro problem' is revealed when Richard seeks to be trained at an optical company in Memphis (cf. *BB*, 191ff)¹. In an exchange with the two white workers supposed to train him, access to resources is at stake (cf. Young, 696). The white working class has successfully defended their place in a higher position, leaving less important work to African Americans (cf. 696).

Wright had already become a literary naturalist by the time he began working on *BB*, as he started his fictionalized autobiography relatively late. (It was published about 20 years after the fact.) As a literary naturalist, he creates a milieu taken from life and projects characters that act in accordance with the milieu. Wright then records, without commenting or interpreting, what happens (cf. Hakutani 1996, 115).

Importantly, Wright never blames individual white people for the situation; he depicts European Americans just as much as victims of the system as black people are. They must endure the hypocrisy of a Christian society, regarding African Americans as incapable of self-government (cf. Hakutani 1996, 123). Even after the incident at the optical factory, Richard cannot bring himself to hate his co-workers². For him, they are "part of a huge, implacable, elemental design toward which hate was futile." (*BB*, 196) Wright portrays an America that is stunted by its own exploitative social conditions.

¹ See p. 17 – 18 for a more detailed description.

² See p. 17 – 18.

8 *The House Behind the Cedars*

The House behind the Cedars depicts the fate of two siblings of mixed-race ancestry, Rena Walden and John Warwick (John changed his name when he moved away). In the beginning, John returns to his former home of Patesville, to visit his mother and sister. His colored mother had been the mistress of a rich white Gentleman; therefore both her children are white in appearance, although legally, they are colored.

Consequently, John moved to Clarence, SC, where he has taken up office as a white lawyer. Nobody knows his real identity. He has returned for his sister, as in his opinion, she deserves an equal chance in life. Additionally, his wife has died, and he longs for company. Thus, Rena follows him along to Clarence.

After attending a boarding school in Charleston, Rena is immediately introduced into white high society of Clarence. Thereupon she meets George Tryon at a mock tournament. He is a wealthy young friend of her brother, who has traveled to Clarence on business. The two begin courting and fall madly in love with each other.

All the while, Rena is constantly worried about her mother, who now lives alone in the house behind the cedars. After she dreams her mother is ill for three nights in a row, she feels compelled to return to Patesville, as in her folk belief, a dream three times repeated is a bad omen.

Unfortunately, George travels to Patesville at the same time as Rena. The two meet in the town square where George is told about Rena's colored ancestry, forcing him to end their engagement. Despite the hypocrisy of the situation, he feels betrayed - even repulsed - by her. Rena is heartbroken by George's rejection – while her brother intends to simply move on to another town, she decides to accept her fate and stay with her mother.

Encouraged by Jeff Wain, a mulatto friend of the family and secretly in love with Rena, she takes on a job as school mistress, not far from where the Tryons live. Naturally, Rena and George meet again. At the same time, Jeff Wain starts pursuing Rena more aggressively. One afternoon on her way home, both men follow Rena, causing her to flee. She gets lost in the woods as a storm approaches.

Exposed to the winds and the rain, Rena falls seriously ill. As her life is in danger, Frank, a friend of the family and also secretly in love with Rena, comes to take her home. George follows Frank in a final attempt to win Rena back, but he is too late. As he arrives at the house behind the cedars, Rena is already dead.

8.1 Charles Chesnutt - Biography

Charles Waddell Chesnutt was born in 1858 into a free African American family living in Cleveland, OH, at that time (cf. Chesnutt 1952, 2). Shortly after the Civil War, they returned to Fayetteville, NC, where Chesnutt's parents were originally from (cf. 4). Charles went to Howard School and eventually became principal of the State Colored Normal School at the age of twenty-two (cf. Brodhead 2-5, Chesnutt 1952, 25). Yet teaching did not provide the opportunity for economic prosperity Chesnutt desired for himself and his family, especially as an African American. He was determined to acquire the stenography skills and seek his fortune in the "golden North" (Chesnutt 1952, 31). Initially employed as a journalist in New York, he eventually returned to Ohio, passed the State Bar exam and began a successful business as a legal stenographer (cf. 35, 40- 42).

Always regarding education to be the most important good one could possess, he was enraged about his limitations in this regard, due to his being an African American (cf. Müller-Hartmann, 43). While often being mistaken for white due to his pale skin, Chesnutt nevertheless belonged to the African American group. At the age of twenty-two, Charles Chesnutt had already resolved to write a book, dedicated to "the elevation of the whites³," (Chesnutt 1952, 21) as he considered racism "a barrier to the moral progress of the American people" (21).

As a mulatto, he willingly participated in the contemporary debate on miscegenation (cf. Chesnutt 1952, 152). In his lifetime, Chesnutt produced a biography of Frederick Douglass, two collections of short

³ Chesnutt here refers not to the elevation of blacks, but to the fact that the European American needed to be educated on the humanity of the African American. Thus, he considered the elevation of whites from racism to be the principle objective in the fight for equality.

stories, and three novels (*The House behind the Cedars*, *The Marrow of Tradition*, *The Colonel's Dream*), all dealing with racial issues. *Mandy Oxendine*, *Paul Marchand*, *F.M.C.*, *A Business Career* and *Evelyn's husband* were published posthumously.

Dialect and local color fiction had gained importance in American letters shortly after the Civil War, increasingly reflecting the American society's diversity due to the rise of immigration caused by the Industrial Revolution (cf. Minnick, 7). While this was a positive development, black speech incorporated by white authors often served to express nostalgia for simpler times as well as being part of a strategy to reassure the reconciliation between North and South. Popular literature served as an example that the 'Negro problem' was under control without further Northern intervention, and that the conditions under slavery had been exaggerated before the Civil War. Thus, the so-called Plantation Fiction⁴ of the post-war years had very specific political intentions (cf. Minnick, 10). African American writers before Chesnutt often avoided dialect speech, so as to prevent capitulation to already popular stereotypes (cf. 11).

With the publication of the short story "The Goophered Grapevine" in 1887, Chesnutt marked a new movement of African American writers increasingly representing spoken varieties of American English (cf. Minnick, 14). Significantly, Chesnutt used dialect both as a marker for race and class, as only "characters with a particular social, regional and educational status" (Minnick, 15) were depicted to speak nonstandard English.

As a writer, Chesnutt needed to address the question of how to balance the depiction of African American speech with his antiracist message, and the ideals of the white publishing industry (cf. Minnick, 77).

⁴ Plantation Fiction, as produced by Thomas Dixon, Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page, provided a nostalgic look on antebellum times, romanticizing the conditions on antebellum plantations. People still had values in common, among them chivalry, pride and patriotism, and the plantation family included white and African American members, living together in harmony. Thus was created the image of the happy 'darky', ideally juxtaposed with poor, potentially dangerous and free African Americans in post-Reconstruction times. Frame narration and dialect were key features of this type of fiction. (cf. Campbell, "The Plantation Tradition in Local Color Fiction", 2010)

Ultimately, he had hoped to depict a Negro that would gain respect by white society (cf. 78).

It seems that Chesnutt deliberately employed popular means of local color and plantation fiction stereotyping in order to achieve his “potentially unpopular ends” (Minnick, 82) of “elevating the white race” (Chesnutt 1952, 21). Significantly, plantation fiction sought to evoke nostalgia for a lost past, the antebellum South. To this end, freed African Americans were depicted to be innocent, ignorant, submissive, and inferior – which was largely achieved by juxtaposing black dialect with white Standard English – necessitating continued subordination to the white man (cf. Minnick, 82). Chesnutt’s fiction, especially his novels, demonstrates only limited parallels to plantation fiction. The crucial feature of all of his fiction, however, is the depiction of stereotypes, which are inconspicuously but progressively revealed not to be so stereotypical after all. Chesnutt acted in such a way as to “get his antiracist message out in a subtle, and for a mostly white readership and white-controlled publishing industry, nonaccusatory way.” (Minnick, 85)

In employing this technique, Chesnutt acted similarly to Booker T. Washington. Washington frequently used the so-called ‘minstrel mask’ to gain financial support for Tuskegee off his white supporters. In an age when the South had political, economic and cultural reasons to promote the “plantation mythology of kind masters and contented slaves – or, in modern guise, benevolent white employers and happy, subservient black laborers,” (Sundquist, 273) Washington’s conservative views on black education, suffrage and civil rights allowed him to promote black power. While accused of being the white man’s spokesperson, Washington managed to lead a successful industrial school for African Americans, Tuskegee Institute, mainly supported by white money (cf. 274). At the very boundary of Jim Crow, at the intersection of politics and cultural typology, Washington adopted the paradoxical performance to promote his own interest (cf. 274). He evoked the image of the old faithful servant in order to calm southern white fears, and refrained from political activism to assert that blacks would start from the bottom up (cf. Müller-Hartmann, 45).

While Chesnutt and Washington remained friends throughout their careers, Chesnutt critiqued the “Washingtonian ethos” (Sundquist, 274). While he praised Washington’s call for industrial education, the two disagreed on issues like black suffrage. In this, Chesnutt positioned himself closer to Du Bois’ demand for liberal education and civil rights (cf. Render, 95/Müller-Hartmann, 43).

Palpable in Chesnutt’s fiction is the “double moral necessity of racial justice and African American cultural consciousness.” (Sundquist, 276) Instead of relying on racist formulas, as Washington increasingly did, Chesnutt developed an “ironic realism,” (Keller 1978, 203 quoted in Müller-Hartmann, 46) an African American aesthetic “capable of engaging the most serious issues of the nation’s racial politics.” (Sundquist, 276)

In his fiction, Chesnutt concentrated on the depiction of the inherent humanity of African Americans, the mulatto especially. He presented well-educated, morally upright African Americans of mixed ancestry. Striving for acceptance in an oppressive system, they are left no other choice but to pass for white (cf. Müller-Hartmann, 46). This class had to this point been neglected in literature, while being central to the contemporary political debate on miscegenation and ‘passing’ (cf. Müller-Hartmann, 43). Laws against miscegenation and interracial marriage had been in existence since the eighteenth century, based on the theory that such unions would lead to racial degeneration. ‘Mulism’, the origin of the term, referred to the contemporarily established ‘fact’ that mulatto children were incapable of reproduction (cf. Scales-Trent, 273). Legally, mulattoes were a separate group, but were equally limited in their rights as ‘full-blooded’ African Americans (cf. 275).

8.2 *The House Behind the Cedars*

8.2.1 Racial Cartographies

Charles Chesnutt was very careful to assign specific functions to settings he used in his fictions. He paid detailed attention to historically identifiable times, places and events, which included the depiction of appropriate natural phenomena, industry, architecture, folkways and folk speech (cf. Render, 48). Accordingly, he limited the use of settings to those he knew

intimately. Most of his fiction is either set in the Cape Fear Area in southeastern North Carolina, or in Ohio. In *HBC*, Patesville is meant to represent Fayetteville, NC, Clarence represents Florence, SC (cf. 48).

In the beginning of *HBC*, the reader discovers Patesville through the eyes of John Warwick, who returns after ten years of absence. Warwick notices the changes in the quaint old town, “a few years after the Civil War,” (*HBC*, 1) which is evident in the occasional fire gutted building.

Architecture in Patesville both serves as a symbol of former black oppression, and of southern pride and resilience. The center of Patesville is the market-house, a large building set on a square with a tall clock tower (cf. *HBC*, 2). The building embodies antebellum times, as the tower “[rises] as majestically and uncompromisingly as though the land had never been subjugated.” (*HBC*, 2)

As John remembers, the bell tower used to “peal out the curfew bell,” (*HBC*, 2) as African Americans were not allowed to stay out after 9 pm. Additionally, the market-house served as court building, where once a free Negro had been shot shortly before his examination under a criminal charge (cf. *HBC*, 3). In close vicinity, Liberty Point, ironically the former setting of slave auctions, serves as another spot John relates to slavery (cf. 4). “The Hill”, the designated white aristocratic neighborhood, used to be crowned by a Federal arsenal. Of what had been the pride of the town, the conquerors had only left ruins and broken cannon (cf. *HBC*, 89). Yet the most obvious change in town is the colored policeman John sees in the old constable’s place (cf. *HBC*, 2).

The character of Dr. Green verbalizes what Patesville’s buildings mutely symbolize: The old South’s opinions of white superiority have not changed, despite Emancipation. Assumptions based on blood and breeding still rule the highest class. Some of the buildings, just like the strict social hierarchy of slavery times, have been destroyed. Yet the people of Patesville need more time to adapt to new circumstances (cf. Williams, 163).

Since segregation racializes space, ‘passing’ becomes a spatial as well as a cultural issue. The person passing between black and white must leave their native place behind, where people know him or her to be

black, and move on to a different place, where he or she can be white. At the same time, the person moves into a different culture, with entirely different social norms, histories and behaviorisms (cf. Ritzenberg, 51). Cartography in *HBC* reflects this movement. For John and his sister Rena, Patesville is 'black' space, whereas Clarence is 'white' space.

The binary system of racial relations is gradually introduced to the reader, strictly separated by physical boundaries. The elite white society lives on "the Hill" (*HBC*, 13) whereas the black quarter is situated on the outskirts of town. The path leads down Front Street, further and further out, until the street turns into "mother earth" (5), and a residential area, which "gradually declined from staid respectability to poverty, open and unabashed," is revealed (*HBC*, 5). In this uninviting neighborhood, the house behind the cedars is finally to be found, surrounded by a luscious garden, which, on wintry days, seems to be "a fit place to hide some guilty or disgraceful secret." (7)

Indeed, Mis' Molly and her children were the disgraceful secret of a white gentleman protector, who left his children none of his rights or property. The cedars thus serve as a geographical boundary, both to the inside and to the outside. They must keep the secret of miscegenation inside, but also distinguish the mulatto family from their black neighbors because "the women in the house behind the cedars, who, while superior in blood and breeding to the people of the neighborhood in which they lived, were yet under the shadow of some cloud which clearly shut them out from the better society of the town." (*HBC*, 20)

At first, the secret remains hidden to the reader. Chesnutt's language of description fails to mention any typical characteristics that would allow the reader to immediately conclude Rena's and John's racial ancestry. On the contrary, beauty, education, speech, fine clothing and social respectability seem to suggest that the siblings are white. Chesnutt passes his protagonists for white, suggesting that race is not a marker for personality or social respectability (cf. Ritzenberg, 52).

Consequently, John Warwick's walk from the hotel of Patesville, where he registers as a respected white South Carolinian gentleman, to his birth home, retraces the path John had to walk in order to become

white. By physically returning to his hometown, John reenters the sphere where he is black (cf. Ritzenberg, 53). Even John's mentor, Judge Straight, acknowledges the danger in which he is:

I wouldn't stay too long. The people of a small town are inquisitive about strangers, and some of them have long memories. I remember we went over the law, which was in your favor; but custom is stronger than law – in these matters custom *is* law. (*HBC*, 22)[...] Right and wrong [...] must be eternal verities, but our standards for measuring them vary with our latitude and our epoch. We make our customs lightly; once made, like our sins, they grip us in bands of steel; we become the creatures of our creations. (23)

Customs, albeit created by humans, become natural law. The religious analogy of the second quote implies that in Patesville, customs are religiously adhered to, having much more power than any legal clause which would be in John's favor (cf. Ritzenberg, 53).

Much as customs endanger John's whiteness, so they turn Rena from a white woman into a colored woman. As John follows the girl down Front Street, he admires her seemingly white body, her "handsome," "stately beauty" (*HBC*, 5), her tasteful dress and her "elastic step that revealed a light heart and the vigor of perfect health." (5) Chesnutt thus highlights segregation's emphasis on the human body, "since the political and legal subordination of both women and slaves was predicated upon biology." (Sánchez-Eppler, 94 quoted in Ryan, 42)

By traversing from the center of town to the lower class neighborhood, Rena's body is transformed from a young white beauty into a colored woman. The closer she gets to her home, the more out of place she seems, as Warwick takes her for a "young lady from the upper part of the town, bound on some errand of mercy." (*HBC*, 6) Only when she opens the gates to the house behind the cedars, her true identity is revealed (cf. Ryan, 42).

Chesnutt highlights how racial identity is determined more by the mindset of the apprehender, not so much by the features of the apprehended (cf. Boeckmann, 276). Rena switches frequently between her 'white' and 'black' body, but only in dreams does she truly transform. George Tryon, her later white lover, dreams after Rena's exposure that "her fair young beauty" was transformed by "some hellish magic" into "a

hideous black hag.” (*HBC*, 99) Rena’s body will from hereon be black, after George has learned that she is corrupted by Negro blood.

Rena’s body continues to confuse her environment. She is forced to continuously assert her black identity. Yet after Rena goes missing, George describes her as a “young white woman with dark eyes and hair,” (*HBC*, 189) because he realizes that in her black body, she would be invisible (cf. Ryan, 43). Chesnutt questions the concept of binary racial designations, and highlights how they are insufficient to describe human beings (cf. 43). ‘White’ and ‘black’ are not enough to express all that a person is.

Significantly, at the very end of *HBC*, Rena has returned to the house behind the cedars, and to being black. Here, at the place where she was born and raised, there is no doubt as to her identity as a black woman. In her death, she is a “young cullud ‘oman,” (*HBC*, 199) *passing* on to *the other side*. Interestingly, the terminology describing the act of ‘passing’ is similar to dying. Rena and her mother frequently compare white society to a glorious, “far-off world,” (*HBC*, 13) in which the white man has built his “celestial city” (108). In this manner, Chesnutt subtly suggests that ‘passing’ requires a figurative death of the old, black body, in order to adopt the new, white body.

Chesnutt contrasts the beauty of the land – the South - with the tragedy of its social relations, either by emphasizing the binary of shade and light, or by describing the flora in idyllic terms. In this manner, Warwick expresses concern for his sister, who is heartsick after having been discovered by Tryon: “She had flowered in the sunlight; she must not pine away in the shade.” (*HBC*, 121 – 122) Whiteness is associated with sunlight, blackness with shade and darkness. Similarly, by the time Frank finally finds Rena in her delirium, “[...] the sun shone as brightly as before, the mocking-bird sang yet more joyously. A gentle breeze sprang up and wafted the odor of bay and Jessamine past them on its wings. The grand triumphal sweep of nature’s onward march recked [sic] nothing of life’s little tragedies.” (*HBC*, 195)

On their way back to Patesville, Frank encounters several white people, all of which feel no obligation to help or be concerned once Frank

assures them of Rena's color. Nature, as well as society, is indifferent to Rena's and Frank's tragedy.

8.2.2 Fear and Violence

Fear, more so than violence, is a constant companion of Rena as she becomes a part of white society in Clarence. As soon as George's courtship becomes serious, she is confronted with guilty thoughts of lying and the fear of being found out.

As a 'passing' character, Rena is always in a liminal state, both physically and in race and culture (cf. Boeckmann, 274). Thus, she suffers constantly from the mental strain of either losing the connection to her mother and friends, or losing the desired status in society, which could never be reached as an African American (cf. 278).

Fear and Violence are consequences of this liminal state, and in turn result in physical consequences. After she is found out, George's rejection and her subsequent return to the black world result in a long illness (cf. *HBC*, 120), from which Rena never fully recovers. Whereas no deliberate physical violence occurs in the novel, Rena suffers from extreme mental violence as a consequence of her liminal experience.

Significantly, the end of *HBC* serves as an example of how the mental strain of being stuck between two worlds can only be resolved radically. Rena believes to have finally found peace in her duty as a teacher, dedicating her abilities to the task of elevating the children of her race. Yet George Tryon and Jeff Wain still want her.

At the end of the novel, Rena is again stuck between the two, as she pursued by both men with questionable intentions. George, convinced that "the great superiority of his position" (*HBC*, 179) would lead Rena to accept a secret relationship with him, disregards her plea to leave her alone. Jeff, also ignoring Rena's refusal, pursues her to fulfill his violent and lustful intentions (cf. Worden, 10).

Accentuated by the scary atmosphere of an approaching storm, Rena is violently afraid of the sexual choices these men represent, and runs into the swamp, the literal representation of the liminal space between her racial identities (cf. Boeckmann, 279). Rena's fear leads her

into a mental stupor, from which there is no escape. Chesnutt has found no other solution to Rena's dilemma, than her death. Thus, the instable condition of her racial status can only be resolved in the stable condition of death (cf. 273).

Chesnutt deepens the sense of frustration by showing that neither John nor Rena can escape from fear associated with 'passing' (cf. Flusche, 14). Whereas John does not suffer as much as his sister, he is far from triumph. The loneliness of 'passing', which he partly tried to overcome by taking his sister in, will always remain with him. Furthermore, his fear of being exposed by Tryon has already forced him to abandon his political ambitions, and subsequently, might even force him to leave Clarence.

Thus, Chesnutt accentuates how 'passing' is accompanied by fear and psychological violence, a burden that is carried solely by the African American who is trying to pass. As such, fear and violence separate one group from the other, and in the case of Rena, isolate her from both groups. She cannot neutralize the liminality of her person, so it overwhelms her.

Through Rena's death, Chesnutt asserts the figure of the tragic mulatto, for whom there can be no success in American society (cf. Worden, 12 – 13). As society is ruled by binaries, that which belongs to no side simply cannot exist. Thus, Chesnutt questions the "very possibility of progressive racial authenticity and identity." (Worden, 13)

Even if Rena, at the end of *HBC*, becomes a colored woman again, her spirit leaving the body is welcomed by "the red and golden glory of the setting sun, triumphantly ending his daily course," (*HBC*, 198) indicating perhaps, that Chesnutt had a vision of a better future (cf. Worden, 14).

8.2.3 Folklore

HBC, contrary to Chesnutt's earlier short fiction, does not make use of any forms of conjure or folklore. Witchcraft, ghosts and folk stories are depicted to be part of black culture, but are never explicitly used to advance the story, except in the case of dreams. Dreams are part of a certain superstition that is ascribed to women, as the spiritual world is

usually associated with women because it assigned them a certain amount of power, where in contemporary society they had none (cf. Ryan, 44). Consequently, Rena and her mother believe in the power of dreams to convey messages and to express deeply hidden feelings.

A common feature of folk stories is irony, which is employed to subtly convey meanings that could not be expressed explicitly. During slavery, folk stories served as an outlet for slaves to ridicule their masters. Stereotypes employed in folk stories mirrored a binary society in which stereotypes and prejudice were common.

8.2.3.1 The Cakewalk in the Fiction of Charles Chesnutt

Chesnutt, as an African American writer, saw himself faced with two worlds and multiple problems connected to the color line (cf. Sundquist, 271). Chesnutt needed to find a way to represent the intricate rituals of segregation, by reaching “back into the decayed world of antebellum law” (Sundquist, 273) to find the origins of modern racism while at the same time reaching into the world of slave culture, to find the “origins of modern African American cultural resistance to racism.” (Sundquist, 273)

Among the typical Negro cultural events from antebellum times remained the cakewalk, a dance, “derived in its stage form from the ‘walk-around’ [...], a grand promenade in which couples dancing in a circle competed with fancy improvised steps and struts.” (Sundquist, 277) Despite the fact that the cakewalk became one of the most popular features of black minstrel shows, it had originally derived from the “work songs, dance, spirituals, and verbal and material arts in which African retentions, a consciousness of resistance to white subjugation, and the creation of a new African American culture were uniquely combined.” (Sundquist, 277)

The cakewalk was a Sunday entertainment, performed by slaves dressed in hand-me-down finery, doing a takeoff on the high manners of their masters (cf. Sundquist, 278). As such, the cakewalk was a satire on the fanciful behavior of white upper class society. The masters, undoubtedly aware of the real meaning, awarded a cake to the best

couple (cf. 278). Thus, “[t]he cakewalk’s original meaning [...] lay in its combination of satire and cultural celebration, and in the resulting complexly layered consciousness – at once derivative and original, subordinated and resistant – that marked the evolution of much African American literary and material expression.” (Sundquist, 281)

While damaging black stereotypes were featured in newspapers, comedy, magazines and literature, the cakewalk represented an inversion of these stereotypes (cf. Sundquist, 282). It stands for an African American aesthetic, in which stereotyping by black artists provided a subtle reflection upon the role of African Americans within the culture and economy of the US (cf. 282).

The problem of a black artist in Chesnutt’s times was that many doors were closed even for talented performers. The highly popular stereotypical black music or dialect literature thus brought fame and independence to most of them (cf. Sundquist, 285). The paradox and potential risks were obvious: African American writers, singers and performers had to adopt stereotypes damaging to their own race, in order to voice their concerns and become popular (cf. 284). Charles Chesnutt employed racist figures of popular culture to seize and subvert cultural power (cf. 285). The question remains whether he was successful in employing stereotypes in order to voice social critique and highlight racist judgments.

8.2.3.1.1 *The Tragic Mulatto*

The genre of tragic mulatto fiction was very popular at the turn of the nineteenth century, with its conventions of white beauty and its literary depiction of the act of ‘passing’ (cf. Duncan, 13). Historically, the character had developed as “literary props [sic] for fictionalized arguments for or against racial assimilation.” (cf. Williams, 138) Belonging to neither side of the color line, the tragic mulatto character was the “fictional symbol of marginality” (Berzon, 100 quoted in Watson, 48). Chesnutt’s concern, however, was to show the mulatto’s humanity, to “dramatize the miscegenation issue as an individual psychological and moral dilemma.” (Williams, 138) As such, Chesnutt focused on the individual characters’

decision of how to deal with their mixed-blood ancestry, instead of depicting an abstract sociological phenomenon (cf. 138).

Whereas the storyline involving Rena evolves in a typical tragic fashion, her brother refuses to accept any stereotype that is pressed upon him. Both have tried to come to terms with their identity, in a world where the social status-quo has been turned upside down ('The bottom rail on top') and in a binary society, in which they belong to neither side.

The tragedy of the story is based on the belief that Rena and John must pay for their mother's and their white ancestors' sins (cf. Sundquist, 399). Accordingly, they must forever carry the burden of looking white, while not being white.

The main difference between John and Rena is their ambition and intention. Whereas John passes mainly to advance his own social status, and to become "everybody's master," (*HBC*, 111) Rena only has faint romantic notions. Thus, once her real ancestry is discovered, she sees this as God's punishment for her 'sin' of crossing the color line. John, however, is determined to remain white, even if he has to leave the South and sacrifice his political ambitions. He is practical and reasonable, whereas Rena is guided by her feelings and emotions.

Early on, John had been shown a glimpse of white culture, both through the books his father left at the house, and by working for Judge Straight. He decided to become white, already adapting in his thoughts, opinions, feelings and behavior, so the final act of leaving Patesville to settle in South Carolina was only the finishing touch to a deed that had already been accomplished (cf. Ferguson 1982, 76). After finishing law school he awaited the right opportunities, and married an orphaned white girl. He is rooted in Clarence, by his house, his wife's good name, his profession and most importantly, his son.

In contrast, Rena neither had had the intention, nor the opportunity, to pass before. Thus, she is much less prepared to fully adapt to white culture, as she had been raised to be black. This encompasses also her belief in conjure, dreams and religion, which John has already discarded. John, "[o]nce persuaded that he had certain rights, or ought to have them, by virtue of the laws of nature, in defiance of the customs of mankind, [...]"

had promptly sought to enjoy them,” (*HBC*, 53) whereas Rena’s “Patesville life was not far enough removed to have lost its distinctness of outline. Of the two, the present was more of a dream, the past was the more vivid reality.” (40)

It had not been difficult for Rena to conform her speech, her manners, and in a measure her modes of thought, to those of the people around her; but when this readjustment went beyond mere externals and concerned the vital issues of life, the secret that oppressed her took on a more serious aspect, with tragic possibilities. (*HBC*, 49-50)

In this manner, Rena is destined to fail at ‘passing’, which is the ultimate reason for her death. Whereas John, even though exposed, still possesses the inherent belief that he deserves whiteness, Rena returns to her honest and secure black identity. In this, opportunity and freedom are both racialized and gendered. John represents the American dream of “perpetual renewal and reinvention,” (Ryan, 39) at the same time as Rena is “born and bound” (*HBC*, 122) to her place.

The idea that ‘passing’ requires sacrifice is fulfilled even by John. He did have nostalgic feelings toward his childhood home, and is angry at society that he must give up one or the other, turning toward his sister so that she might represent his roots in his current life. The punishment for John involves the loss of his beloved sister, as well as the abandoning of his political aspirations. While these losses seem meager in contrast to Rena’s death, they still signify the tragedy of a mulatto - while John was successful in maintaining his social status, he is not entitled to everything. The access to the dream requires payment, the mulatto must choose.

Both John and Rena represent “fine character[s] forced inevitably into a false position”, “living, loving, suffering” (Chesnutt 1997, 118) like everybody else. Caste consciousness and race prejudice forces these people to deceive and pretend. Chesnutt’s goal was to engage sympathy for those suffering tragedy in their pursuit of the American dream (cf. Williams, 144). Thus, despite the conventional ending of *HBC* in the form of Rena’s death, it is a novel of “protest *against* race pride, caste consciousness, and separatism.” (Williams, 143)

8.2.3.1.2 *The Faithful Darky*

Upon first glance, Frank Fowler seems to be a simple-minded, faithful character. He works with his father as a cooper and has long been in love with Rena. Their workplace faces the house behind the cedars, as it is “on the other side of the neglected by-street.” (*HBC*, 8) Rena and Frank are not only separated geographically, by the cedars and the street, but also socially: As a light mulatto woman, Miss Molly taught her daughter to disregard lower class blacks like Frank.

Upon closer analysis, Rena and Frank are both free blacks with similar moral and economic backgrounds. In fact, Frank is an intelligent, independent young man, who has overcome the restriction of caste and race by acquiring a learned trade and being literate. Despite his dialect, Frank has unquestionable morals and is the only man in the novel never asking more of Rena than what she is able to give.

Frank's love for Rena is unconditional and unselfish. He takes care of Molly while Rena is away, never minding that she regards him to be inferior. Whereas Frank takes no offence in being regarded as such, his father very much minds the intraracial racism Rena and her family have adopted. He tells Frank: “An’ you need n’ ‘sturb yo’self ‘bout dem folks ‘cross de street, fer dey ain’t yo’ kin’, an’ you’re wastin’ yo’ time both’in’ yo’ min’ wid ‘em [...]” (*HBC*, 8).

Frank, whose features indicate kindness, intelligence, humor and imagination (cf. 24) knows how hopeless his devotion to Rena is:

Yes, he was wasting his time. The beautiful young girl across the street would never be anything to him. But he had saved her life once, and had dreamed that he might render her again some signal service that might win her friendship, and convince her of his humble devotion. For Frank was not proud. A smile, which Peter would have regarded condescending to a free man, who, since the war, was as good as anybody else; a kind word, which Peter would have considered offensively patronizing; a piece of Mis’ Molly’s famous potato pone from Rena’s hands, - a bone to a dog, Peter had called it once; - were ample rewards [...] (*HBC*, 25).

Peter condemns Frank's attitude towards Rena and her mother. In his eyes, Frank's servant-like behavior discredits the new status of the Negro. Similarly, Rena's attitude toward Frank significantly changes after her return to Patesville:

Her words were not less kind, but they seemed to come from a remoter source. [...] If Frank felt the difference in her attitude, he ascribed it to the fact that she had been white, and had taken on something of the white attitude toward the negro [sic]; and Frank, with an equal unconsciousness, clothed her with the attributes of the superior race. (*HBC*, 87)

Frank is the real chivalrous hero of the novel, as he saved Rena's life once, and attempts to save her a second time, but fails. It is Frank who finds Rena in the woods, proving the fact that he always had her best interests at heart. Thus, he is the only one of her suitors that is allowed a chance to say goodbye to the dying girl, upon which she finally realizes that Frank was the one that "loved [her] best of all." (*HBC*, 198)

As such, Frank is far from being the lower class dandy that he is viewed by others to be. In fact, he is a young, independent, morally upright young man, who could provide for his wife and children. The tragedy of his position is that in the society he lives in, deserved respect would forever be denied because of his skin color. In a world where whiteness equals power, Rena and Frank are deprived of their happy ending.

8.2.3.1.3 The Southern Gentleman

The Southern Gentleman is a stereotype left from the old days of slavery, usually associated with the highest class of southern society, the former slave holding and plantation owning class. They come from the aristocracy of the South, old families that honor blood and breeding over anything else.

George Tryon, Judge Straight and Dr. Green belong to this class, similar in ancestry and wealth, different in their nostalgia for "a past and happier age." (*HBC*, 74) Dr. Green and Tryon find the African American race to be inferior to them, and believe in the alleged fact that one drop of such blood would taint their own blood. Judge Straight, however, serves as an example of how Chesnut molded stereotypes so that he could express his own thoughts on racial relationships. While having lived "seventy years under the old régime," (*HBC*, 80) he is "a man of imagination; he had read many books and had personally outlived some prejudices." (*HBC*, 80) Thus, Straight has overcome the stereotypical opinions of his class and adopted a more complex point of view. He is

quite aware that “there was dark blood among the white people,” and that “so long as it was sedulously concealed or vigorously denied” it had “no perceptible effect upon the racial type.” (*HBC*, 79)

Judge Straight contends that race is a social category, because blood is an insufficient marker of race. As an intelligent and studied man, he also realizes that “[u]nder a system where men might sell their own children without social reprobation or loss of prestige, it was not surprising that some of them should hate their distant cousins.” (*HBC*, 79) As a consequence, Judge Straight aided John ten years ago in escaping to South Carolina and starting a new life.

With the intention to assist the two siblings, Straight concludes that a wedding would be canceled if Rena’s ancestry was discovered, mainly because the news would leak – marrying a mulatto might be something that a man of George’s class does in secret, but never openly (cf. *HBC*, 80). As a result, Judge Straight aids them in concealing Rena’s presence in Patesville from George because “there was a possible future for her under the new order of things; but white people had not changed their opinion of the negroes [sic], except for the worse.” (*HBC*, 80)

While his attempt to warn Rena fails, Judge Straight represents a stereotypical character not so typical after all – his opinions do not match his class. Without proclaiming the Negro his equal, he recognizes that Rena’s and John’s situation is more complex than social prejudice would allow. Thus, he cannot resist helping the “misbegotten son of [his] old friend,” (*HBC*, 80) who, in his opinion, was entitled to live a happy life.

Interestingly, George Tryon and Dr. Green initially agree on race-related questions, represented by their toast to white supremacy (cf. *HBC*, 92). As George goes through the emotional journey of losing Rena, however, his viewpoint changes: Struggling with the tragic awakening to Rena’s ancestry, “[h]is consciousness becomes a skirmish ground for the social proscriptions and emotional justifications surrounding the issue of interracial love.” (Williams, 170) Chesnutt evolves the romantic character of the southern aristocrat by depicting how Tryon admits to loving Rena despite her color. Tryon’s mental struggle takes the discussion of interracial love to an individual level, showing how love defeats the

southern custom of pride in blood. In the end, Tryon does not “blame Rena for passing,” (Williams, 170) and resolves his mental struggle by returning to Rena’s home. For Rena, he is too late, but his change of heart evokes hope for such a change in the southern heart (cf. 170).

8.2.3.2 Dreams

Dreams are a very prominent feature of *HBC*, as Chesnutt employs them both to advance the story, and to express emotions and thoughts (cf. Ritzenberg, 52). As Ritzenberg contends, the act of ‘passing’ parallels the fulfillment of a dream, the dream of belonging to white society (cf. 56). As John tries to persuade his mother to let Rena come with him, so she can wipe out the “stain” (*HBC*, 17) of blackness, which seems “impossible – a mere idle dream,” (17) Rena is first introduced to the possibility of access to the dream (cf. Ritzenberg, 56).

Shortly before her departure for South Carolina, Rena again has “[a]ll sorts of vague dreams [...] as to what the future might bring forth.” (*HBC*, 26) Access to social integration in white society will bring opportunities to her that up to this point have only been vague dreams.

At the beginning of her introduction into white society stands the reenactment of the famous *Ivanhoe* tournament scene, which is indicative of the collective she is about to enter. Based on a feudal model that no longer exists (cf. Ritzenberg, 57), the people of Clarence enact the fantasy of living in a “culture of honor, love and beauty, nobility, and chivalry, [...] whose traditions stand outside of history, whose true identity hovers above and beyond the materiality of its surroundings.” (Ritzenberg, 58) Thus, Chesnutt ironically reveals the absurdity of the “Sir Walter Scott sensibility,” (58) which regards the oppressive caste structure of the South as organic and inherent (cf. 58). Whereas the tournament is viewed to be an entertaining masquerade, it reveals the importance of rank and caste in the social system of the South. Only the “best people” (*HBC*, 30) find seats in the grand stand, poor white and colored people sit elsewhere. The ‘knights’ are adorned with cardboard and gilt paper, the marble columns are really pine trees and the iron lances are made of wood. While the accessories might be fake, the people of the South regard chivalry as

characteristic of their society. As such, the tournament scene symbolizes the dream of whiteness Rena is about to enter.

As Rena is chosen as the 'Queen of Love and Beauty', she is accepted as a natural member of the best society, and finds herself at the center of it (cf. Ritzenberg, 60). While she recognizes that the tournament is only a fantasy, she fails to realize that it is a collective fantasy, not just her own (cf. 60). Even though the fantasy of being the 'Queen of Love and Beauty' will end after the ball, the fantasy of being part of white society will not. A parallel is drawn to 'passing' which is also a masquerade, but still has profound impact on the mind and her life.

The irony, then, is that Rena's waking dream is interrupted by an actual dream during her sleep, which in the tradition of black consciousness is a highly regarded transmitter of unconscious needs and meanings. Superstition generally erases color and caste boundaries, as during the nineteenth century a belief in signs, spells, spirits and the supernatural was common both in white and black culture. Superstitious beliefs flourished on plantations and in the rural community of the South, thus travelling from black slaves to poor whites and eventually, even rich whites (cf. Render, 56).

Despite their feeling superior to their neighbors, both Rena and her mother believe in the power of dreams, so that when Rena has the same dream in three consecutive nights, she is bound to follow its message. Shortly before her wedding to George, Rena dreams that her mother is ill and bed-ridden. As the dream recurs, Rena becomes more and more anxious. Even though she has left her black ancestry behind, she cannot ignore the dooming quality of the dream. Yet even if she had been able to forget her upbringing, Chesnutt suggests that even a white lady of Clarence would not have been able to remain "undisturbed by a vivid dream, three times repeated, of some event bearing materially upon her own life." (*HBC*, 61)

Her fears are confirmed after she receives a letter from her mother, who indeed has been confined to bed for a couple of days. In her anxious state, Rena immediately leaves Clarence, to return to her mother's side. Well aware of the possible consequences, Rena would never be able to

simply ignore her mother. A dream, thus, advances the story and ultimately settles Rena's fate, as her secret is revealed to George in her hometown.

In this, the dream also provides a benchmark between the first and the second parts of Rena's story. Whereas the first part depicted her rise in white society, the second part follows her decline and eventual death after she is forced to return to black society (cf. Ritzenberg, 62).

John, who seems so settled in his role as a white lawyer, is also frequently disturbed by dreams. In fact, several clues in the text point to the fact that John returns to Patesville, possibly because his memories continue to haunt him in his dreams. In fact, the first time the word 'dream' occurs in the text is in the very beginning, as he walks through the town: "He saw little that was not familiar, or that he had not seen in his dreams a hundred times during the past years." (*HBC*, 2) Thus, even though John has received access to the dream of white society, he is unable to completely forget his roots. In this manner, Chesnutt also reveals the impossibility of 'passing', as no human being can truly forget their upbringing. In fact, John returns to Patesville not just to help his sister. Albeit unconsciously, he is truly alone in his waking dream, saying: "[H]appiness is a relative term, and depends, I imagine, upon how nearly we think we get what we think we want. I have had my chance and haven't thrown it away, and I suppose I ought to be happy." (*HBC*, 15) Bringing forth his concern about his child, he contends: "If I had some relation of my own that I could take into the house with me, [...] the child might be healthier and happier, and I should be much more at ease about him." (*HBC*, 15)

Despite the fact that bringing 'a relation' into his house could endanger his status as a white lawyer, John is unable to resist the temptation. Rena would be able to escape the boundaries of the cedars and finally be recognized for her personality, without the stain of blackness. By bringing Rena to Clarence, John is able to have a part of his old identity, but the story shows that clearly, 'passing' asks for more sacrifices. The person that passes must choose between past and future, between black and white. In the binary society of the South, there is no life

straddling the color line; a person is forced to live on either one of the two sides.

Thus, dreams in the story are racially categorized: White society is characterized by living in a waking dream or fantasy, by which people are able to justify the oppressive structure they have built. No white character in the story dreams as Rena and John dream. 'Black' dreams in the story either express unconscious wishful thinking, of the past or the future, or they express superstitious beliefs in that they foreshadow events that have not happened yet. The folk tradition of interpreting dreams is an aspect of black culture that Rena is unable to abandon, just as she can never fully abandon her roots.

Chesnutt employs dreams as part of a narrative strategy not just to reveal a deeper layer of consciousness within his characters, but also to reveal how deeply segregated society really is. Even though legal segregation had not been effective yet, white and black society were already separated from each other by much more than laws. Dreams reveal inner ambitions and drive human beings to achieve more, yet within a segregated society some objectives are simply inaccessible. By the act of 'passing', if one is 'lucky' enough to possess the necessary complexion, an inaccessible dream can be made accessible, but there is a price to be paid. Both Rena and John pay the price for participating, however shortly, in the dream of white society.

8.2.3.3 Religion

Religion only appears at a very late stage in the novel, despite the frequent biblical allusions apparent from the beginning. At first, the Waldens do not seem to be a religious family. Molly seems to have been introduced to religion only after the Civil War was over, once preachers came to educate former slaves. She attends a white church where she accepts being confined to the gallery, due to her nostalgia for the days when her white protector was still alive.

Once Rena awakes from her dream of being white, she turns to religion in order to cope with her fate. John believes that God is nothing more than a "convenient stalking-horse for human selfishness." He notes

that “[i]f there is anything to be done, so unjust [...] that human reason revolts at it, there is always some smug hypocrite to exclaim, ‘It is the will of God.’” (*HBC*, 122)

Nevertheless, Rena contends that “God made us all [...] and for some good purpose, though we may not always see it. He made some people white, and strong, and masterful, and – heartless. He made other black and homely, and poor and weak.” (*HBC*, 122) She concludes that “God must have meant me to stay here, or He would not have sent me back.” (122) Whereas John urges her to return with him to Clarence, as Tryon had promised to keep his silence, Rena has realized that she has overstepped her boundaries, both as an African American and as a woman. As such, she is “born and bound” to her place, and she vows to accept her fate (*HBC*, 122).

In her belief, Rena has been punished for her selfish decision to leave her old mother to seek her fortune elsewhere. In this manner, Rena’s dream was turned into a sin, for which she promptly had to bear the consequences. Interestingly, as much as Rena chooses to believe that God had revealed her place to her, so John chooses to believe that “God [...] had made him white.” (*HBC*, 109)

Religion is employed to justify either ‘passing’ or remaining black, which seems to undermine the southern idea of a God-created supreme race, and a God-created race of servants, which was a popular interpretation of the bible in certain circles.

8.2.4 Language and Education

8.2.4.1 Language

Chesnutt distinguishes between race and caste, both of which instigate prejudice and segregation. Both white and black societies follow caste distinctions. Whereas white society is divided in rich and poor whites, Patesville used to have a separate community composed of free, mixed blood mulattoes, either bright or dark. Bright mulattoes constitute the highest caste within black society. Dark mulattoes and blacks are distinctly lower class, a fact which causes animosity between the three groups, as is

seen by Peter Fowler's contempt for his neighbors. In *HBC*, Chesnutt uses language to designate bodies as belonging to a certain caste.

Consequently, Frank and his family speak a crude African American dialect of English, similar to the dialect of Julius McAdoo, folk narrator in Chesnutt's *Conjure Tales*⁵. Peter and Julius are both former slaves in Patesville, North Carolina. Thus, the Fowlers are portrayed as regional characters of the recent past (cf. Minnick, 81).

Peter and Frank Fowler's speech is characterized by distinctly dialectal features, such as "yo'se'f" (*HBC*, 8) instead of yourself, "dem", "dey" (8) instead of them and they, "nuthin'" (*HBC*, 125) instead of nothing, to name but a few (cf. Minnick, 87). Grammatical features of African American dialect, such as multiple negation⁶, subject-verb nonconcord⁷, existential it/they⁸, and Object pronoun them for subject pronoun those⁹ (cf. Minnick, 93), set Chesnutt apart as a "conscientious and definitive recorder of late nineteenth century black speech in North Carolina." (Minnick, 94)

Mulattoes have a similar accent as blacks in *HBC*. Despite their lighter skin, Molly and her friends are of similar economic status as Frank and his family. Their speech puts them in the same caste as the Fowlers, even though they perceive themselves to be superior.

Rena and John display a remarkable proficiency in high Standard English, which in John's case is not surprising, as he apparently received higher education in the form of law school. In the past, however, young John is depicted to have spoken dialect with his family before he left for South Carolina (cf. *HBC*, 117).

Rena has had enough education to be able to pass the teacher's examination. Her peers speak local dialect. Her phonology is thus designed to set her apart from the community in which she grew up, indicating that she belongs to a different caste.

⁵ Chesnutt, Charles. *The Conjure Tales and Stories of the Color Line*. Penguin Books: New York, 2000.

⁶ "You would n' never hafter to do dat, Miss Rena." (*HBC*, 26)

⁷ 'W'ite folks has deir troubles[...]' (27)

⁸ "Dey ain' one er dem ladies w'at could hol' a candle ter her." (33)

⁹ "[...] one er dem ladies [...]" (33)

Chesnutt employed language as a mimetic device, both to accentuate stereotypes while at the same time subverting them. As such, he explored how language is “perspectival and coded with assumptions of hierarchy and power.” (cf. Sundquist, 305) In a society divided by an invisible color line, based on assumptions of (invisible) blood, language is a visible marker – more so, as revealed in *HBC*, than appearance. At the same time, Chesnutt contends subtly that race does not define people as much as their education, economic situation and environment.

Through language, Chesnutt associates John and Rena with a race they legally do not belong to. Charles W. Foster, in the course of a lengthy study on southern African American speech and its representation in Chesnutt’s *Conjure Tales*¹⁰, concluded that “there is no reason to believe that the phonology of the Negro differs significantly from that of whites on the same economic and educational level.” (Foster, 3) Similarly, Chesnutt seems to assert that the Negro could achieve anything the white man achieved, if he was on the same economic and educational level. Thus, language does not have to be a marker of inferiority.

8.2.4.2 Education

“Under the Old Régime”, a chapter of *HBC*, is dedicated entirely to Molly’s history, and the youth of John and Rena. It depicts how John learned that he was black, and how he dealt with the knowledge.

Molly, child of free African Americans, loved a southern gentleman, whose name is never mentioned. This gentleman provided for her amply, and while he lived, Molly and her children lacked nothing. As he died unexpectedly, however, he never had the chance to provide a will in which Molly and her children were named, and so his estate went to distant relatives, who condemned his secret relationship to a colored woman.

Yet still, her admiration for the white race never faltered. Even though she would be forever separated, she liked to sit in the segregated gallery of the church, just to revel in the “distant glow of the celestial city.”

¹⁰ Chesnutt, Charles. *The Conjure Tales and Stories of the Color Line*. Penguin Books: New York, 2000.

(*HBC*, 108) Contrary to other African Americans, she longed for the old days, because to her they had been the good days. Her son grew up with the knowledge that his father's ancestors were of a great race, and that he, by inheritance, also belonged to that race. Thus, he was surprised and incredulous, when the boys on the street taught him differently, calling him black.

Yet John refused to succumb to the implications of being black. After having learned to read, the books his father left at the house behind the cedars open to him the world of possibilities open to a white man, and he resolves to live life as a white boy would. He is determined to become a lawyer.

Judge Straight refrains from discouraging the young boy and instead proposes to pass as white. As they peruse the South Carolinians laws, which are more generous than North Carolina's laws, the lawyer recognizes that John has "the somewhat unusual privilege [...] of choosing between two races." (*HBC*, 116)

Whereas being a mulatto would be described as disadvantage in society, Judge Straight calls it a "privilege", as John is able to choose for himself a better life. Yet the Judge also warns John that he can only be white in position and in law. Thus, Judge Straight realizes that the laws mean nothing in a country ruled by customs and traditions.

Hence, Chesnutt uses a number of biblical or religious allusions to reveal the meaning of race relations in the South. He does so to suggest that race and segregation were viewed as natural facts. Both Molly and her son know about the quality of race relations in the South, having "eaten the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge." (*HBC*, 107+ 110)

Her white lover is compared to God, as Molly had "worshiped the ground upon which her lord walked," and had been "faithful" to him (*HBC*, 107). She likes to sit in the gallery of the segregated white church, just to get a glimpse of the "celestial city" in whose radiance she had once basked (108). At the same time, John realizes that "God, the Father of all, had made him white; and God, he had been taught, made no mistakes, - having made him white, He must have meant him to be white." (108 – 109) Having learned all that, John can never be content in the black

sphere again and must “set about getting the object of his desire.” (110) Thus, John demands “entrance to the golden gate of opportunity,” (113) which, like the heavenly gates, is barred to those that do not fulfill its demands.

After John has left Patesville for Clarence, and is living as a white man, his mother tells people that “[h]e’s gone over to the other side.” (*HBC*, 117) The wording indicates that someone has died and gone to heaven, which is, figuratively, what John has done. He has died as a black man and gone to the “heaven” of white society, where he passes as a white man.

The awakening to the knowledge of the discrepancy between his skin color and his social color has kindled in John the rebellious streak which enabled him to leave his old life so as to remove the stain of ancestry from his children. While he did not choose the easy path, John is successful in maintaining his adopted identity, even while Rena fails.

8.2.5 Cross-Racial Contacts

Interestingly, most of the depicted cross-racial contacts are in fact same-race contacts, at least as perceived by the participants. Through the act of ‘passing’ both Rena and her brother have become white, and thus interact with other white people. Literally, these interactions constitute interracial contact, but Rena and John have adopted the white man’s mannerisms so well that no significant difference can be declared.

Both possess the intellect, verbal skills and cultural and historical knowledge to make communication with white people possible. Traveling to Wilmington on a boat, John asserts his identity as a white man by interacting with several white passengers.

“Apparently sound on the subject of negroes [sic], Yankees, and the righteousness of the lost cause, he yet discussed these themes in a lofty and impersonal manner that gave his words greater weight than if he had seemed warped by personal grievance.” (*HBC*, 28) In this scene, John’s ancestry is actually an advantage. As an African American, he obviously never lost any slaves, nor was curtailed of his rights, nor will he pine for the nostalgic antebellum days. Yet his fellow passengers believe that he

must be a true gentleman, “speak[ing] thus lightly of his own losses.” (HBC, 28)

Rena and John seemingly fit seamlessly into white society. Yet the irony of these contacts, only perceived as intraracial contacts by white people, is always evident. At the tournament, embodying the chivalrous myth of the South, John Warwick comments at length on the ‘fakeness’ of the whole ordeal:

It is the renaissance of chivalry, [...] and, like any other renaissance, it must adapt itself to new times and circumstances. [...] Our knights are not weighted down with heavy armor, but much more appropriately attired, for a day like this, in costumes that recall the picturesqueness, without the discomfort, of the old knightly harness. [...] It is a South Carolina renaissance which has points of advantage over the tournaments of the olden time. (HBC, 31)

By repeatedly using “we”, he both asserts himself as a part of the aristocratic group, as well as referring to the racial hierarchies implied by southern chivalry, a residual effect of the “historic moment of slavery.” (Worden, 8) His white counterpart, Mrs. Newberry, only understands to a limited degree what John means, as she replies: “I’m afraid [...] that you’re the least bit heretical about our chivalry – or else you’re a little too deep for me.” Much like the reader, Mrs. Newberry cannot know whether Warwick is truthful or sarcastic. As she perceives him to be white, she cannot know that according to racial hierarchies, Warwick would not be sitting next to her, had he not denied his true racial identity.

In the first half of the book, all scenes between the two siblings and other white people are infused with irony. Rowena is named ‘Queen of love and beauty’, just like her namesake in the novel *Ivanhoe*. Her appearance, however, aligns her more with Rowena’s counterpart, Rebecca, the woman *Ivanhoe* passionately loves, but cannot be with, as she is Jewish. Thus, already the ending of this classic romance is foreshadowed. Further, Rena “colored deeply” (HBC, 37) upon her encounter with George. Mrs. Newberry compliments her “white waist.” (HBC, 39) Thus, Chesnutt continuously stresses the similarity of Rena and John to the legitimate white aristocracy.

With regard to intraracial contact, however, differences are highlighted starkly, both through speech and education. When compared

to characters like Jeff Wain, Molly and Mary B., who belong to the class of bright mulattoes, both possess more taste, more education and higher morals – thus they are associated more with the southern ideal of the belle and the gentleman. Chesnutt uses cross-racial and interracial contact to emphasize that character, more so than race or caste, determines the worth of a person.

8.2.6 Political Critique

The narrator of *HBC* accompanies the story, sometimes accelerating the plot, sometimes explaining the characters' feelings and emotions, but most importantly, he serves as a political and social commentator. As mentioned before, Chesnutt often employed irony to disguise his critique, voicing critical statements through a slightly removed third-person narrator.

In the very beginning of the plot, the narrator foreshadows the historical development of segregation. Warwick remembers vividly how a free Negro had been shot on a stairway in the market-house, his murderer having only had to serve a year in prison. Upon this, the narrator comments: "As Warwick was neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, he could not foresee that, thirty years later, even this would seem an excessive punishment for so slight a misdemeanor." (*HBC*, 3)

Obviously, Chesnutt condemns the phenomenon of lynching, which often took place before the charged person could be examined or questioned. Yet this bold statement is disguised again by irony, which is made obvious by the fact that the narrator states the complete opposite of his actual meaning. Because the statement is so exaggeratedly positive about such a negative practice, it immediately seems unnatural and therefore ironic.

Yet irony does not always serve to voice the opinions of the narrator, as it seems that some statements were too important to the author. After George has already travelled to Patesville, and the fateful meeting of the former lovers is inevitable, the narrator asks the reader to put himself in the siblings' shoes:

The taint of black blood was the unpardonable sin, from the unmerited penalty of which there was no escape except by concealment. If there be a dainty reader of this tale who scorns a lie, and who writes the story of his life upon his sleeve for all the world to read, let him uncurl his scornful lip and come down from the pedestal of superior morality, to which assured positions and wide opportunity have lifted him, and put himself in the place of Rena and her brother, upon whom God had lavished his best gifts, and from whom society would have withheld all that made these gifts valuable. To undertake what they tried to do required great courage. Had they possessed the sneaking, cringing, treacherous character traditionally ascribed to people of mixed blood – the character which the blessed institutions of a free slave-holding republic had been well adapted to foster among them; had they been selfish enough to sacrifice to their ambition the mother who gave them birth, society would have been placated or humbugged, and the voyage of their life might have been one of unbroken smoothness. (*HBC*, 86 – 87)

Later, the commentator appeals to the humanity of his reader, by asking for consideration of the inherent qualities of fidelity and devotion in a Negro heart. The author sees the future for both races in a society which tried “some other weapon than scorn and contumely and hard words upon people of our common race – the human race, which is bigger and broader than Celt or Saxon, barbarian or Greek, Jew or Gentile, black or white; for we are all children of a common father, forget it as we may, and each one of us is in some measure his brother’s keeper.” (*HBC*, 119)

Yet the narrator also tells of the “witty and original remarks about the advantage of being black upon occasions where one’s skull was exposed to danger,” (*HBC*, 33) after Frank is hit by broken pieces of a shattered lance. He refers to Rena’s black students as a “docile race,” (*HBC*, 165) expressing very popular stereotypical white beliefs about the black race. There is no reason to believe that these statements were meant to be serious. Rather, Chesnutt mixes dramatic irony with dark humor, to undercut the melodramatic surface (cf. Hattenhaur, 32) and to be able to express his opinion cloaked in popular beliefs.

9 Cane

"Cane is a book of gold and bronze, of dusk and flame, of ecstasy and pain, and Jean Toomer is a bright morning star of a new day of the race in literature."

William Stanley Braithwaite,
*The Negro in American
Literature*, 1924

9.1 Jean Toomer – Biography

Jean Toomer's life is characterized by intense emotional ups and downs, by drifting and an ever-pervading sense of searching for something. Toomer grazed almost every political and philosophical idea popular at his time, moving from a high mulatto society background to elevated literary circles, to the existential philosophy of Gurdjieff, to Quakerism and back to Gurdjieff.

His grandfather, P.B.S. Pinchback, was governor of Louisiana - the first and, up until 1990 the only, black lieutenant governor of any state in the Union (cf. Kerman/Eldridge, 16). Originally settled in New Orleans, LA, Pinchback used his considerable wealth to build a house in a semi-rural area of Washington, DC, where Toomer eventually grew up. With English, Scotch, Welsh, German, African and Indian ancestors, Toomer was white enough to pass (cf. 15).

Nina Pinchback and Nathan Toomer, Toomer's parents, were married in March of 1894, shortly after which Nathan Pinchback Toomer was born. The name 'Jean' was based on Eugene, a name which he was given after his father had deserted the family, and Nina was forced to return to her family's house (cf. Kerman/Eldridge, 28 – 29).

Growing up in his grandfather's house, the relationship between the two soon became very close. Pinchback encouraged in his grandson a love for poetry, often urging him to recite favorite pieces before company

(cf. Kerman/Eldridge, 32). Equally influential was Toomer's uncle, an intellectual and learned man who "fed Jean's eagerness for investigating, reading and writing." (Kerman/Eldridge, 33)

Albeit being legally 'colored', Jean's life revolved around his friends from around the neighborhood, mostly white children with middle- or upper-class background. The boy felt the existence of the color line only in the fact that he attended a different high school (cf. Kerman/Eldridge, 37 – 38).

Toomer's mother remarried in 1906, immediately relocating to New York City. Her son and his grandparents followed her. After she died in 1909, Toomer moved back in with his grandparents (cf. Kerman/Eldridge, 46).

After finishing high school, a period marked as "four years of chaos" (Kerman/Eldridge, 70) began. Toomer attended several Universities, pursued different degrees but finished not a single program (cf. 63 – 70).

While living in Chicago with a friend, Toomer became deeply interested in Naturalism, Darwinism and Socialism (cf. 67). Never being particularly religious, he was nevertheless overwhelmed by the idea of a world without a God. After a brief period of intense withdrawal, he proceeded to study these ideas more closely. "The systematizing quality of Socialism" (Kerman/Eldridge, 67) thus became the order by which he subsequently structured his world.

After a brief period of stability in New York, Toomer volunteered to be drafted in 1917, only to be declared unfit to serve (cf. Kerman/Eldridge, 69). Instead of going back to his courses at New York City College, Toomer moved back to Chicago, where he did his first writing, including the short story "Bona and Paul", which was later included in *Cane*. The drifting continued until he acquired some money by means of selling his mother's house in Washington, DC, enabling him to settle for some time in New York City. He devoted his time to reading, writing and music (cf. 72).

At a party given by Lola Ridge, then editor of the magazine *Broom*, he met Waldo Frank, a Jewish author of some fame in literary circles. Inspired by the budding friendship and once again financially destitute, he returned to Washington, DC to live with his grandparents so he could

concentrate on writing. He had finally found his true calling and was eager to begin (cf. Kerman/Eldridge, 73).

Living with his dominant but meanwhile feeble grandfather was far from ideal and so Toomer jumped at the opportunity to be the temporary head of a black agricultural and industrial school in Sparta, Georgia, in 1921. It was there that he collected most of the experiences and images that were to provide material for *Cane* (cf. Kerman/Eldridge, 75).

Sparta was a rural community in the red hills of Georgia, about 80 miles southeast of Atlanta. As principal, Toomer dealt not only with his students, but with businesses and churches around town (cf. Kerman/Eldridge, 81). Even though the school was only about a mile out of town, the community settled around the building was profoundly different from the people in Sparta (cf. 82).

Toomer for the first time witnessed folk songs expressing the pains and joys of daily life – the black families living in town condemned such practice and intended to leave this heritage behind (cf. Kerman/Eldridge, 82). He was able to recognize the ambivalence between the beauty and the waste and despair “in the experience of southern blacks and whites.” (Kerman/Eldridge, 82)

His experience in Georgia also encouraged him to seek publication of his work. By April of the following year he had completed most of the pieces that were eventually to be in *Cane* (cf. Kerman/Eldridge, 86). At the same time he began to have regular contact with Waldo Frank again, and an intense literary friendship began.

Frank was an important asset as Toomer composed and revised his pieces for publication. As an established writer, Frank advised and voiced critique; Toomer in return deeply admired the older man (cf. Kerman/Eldridge, 87). He also kept up a correspondence with other contemporary writers of significance, such as Sherwood Anderson and Hart Crane (cf. McKay, 3).

After returning from a trip to Spartanburg in South Carolina with Waldo Frank (cf. Kerman/Eldridge, 88), Toomer worked for two weeks at the Howard Theater in Washington, DC. His work there also served as inspiration for *Cane* (cf. 91).

Cane was released in 1923, and despite the fact that the publishing company Liveright had agreed to accept Toomer's next two books, he never again produced anything of greater public importance (cf. Kerman/Eldridge, 100). After Toomer had begun an affair with Frank's soon-to-be ex-wife Margaret Naumburg in 1923, the relationship to his friends in the literary world slowly began to falter (cf. 112).

He became deeply fascinated with the philosophy of George Gurdjieff, a Russian philosopher promoting the idea of a complex "universe that joins space and time into a continuous flow of 'now', in which fragments of past and future are revealed in a present moment." (Kerman/Eldridge, 114) Within the group of Gurdjieff followers he met Margery Latimer, also a writer, and married her in 1931 (cf. Kerman/Eldridge, 199). She died only ten months later, after having given birth to a baby daughter (cf. 205 – 206).

In 1934, Toomer married a woman named Marjorie Content. While not being a writer, she had been on the fringes of New York's literary circle. In 1938, the couple became interested in the quiet way of worshipping that the Religious Society of Friends, or Quakers, promoted (cf. Kerman/Eldridge, 238). Gurdjieff and Quaker philosophy overlapped in several areas, which served as a justification for the couple's enthusiasm (cf. 267).

In 1952, Toomer returned once again to the teachings of Gurdjieff, in the hope of curing a physical and mental problem that had been troubling him for several years (cf. Kerman/Eldridge, 321). It was this inexplicable ailing that caused a withdrawal from his wife as well as from his friends (cf. 332). After 1955, Toomer was unable to leave the house and adopted an affinity for alcohol (335). Thus, his wife and daughter placed him in a nursing home, where Jean Toomer died in 1967, at the age of seventy-two (cf. 335).

9.2 *Cane*

Cane was published in 1923, yet its segments were written over a period of three years and had partially already been published in magazines and journals (cf. Kerman/Eldridge, 79).

The book depicts African American culture, which is ironic given the fact that for all his life Toomer struggled with the question of his racial identity. The literary circle he belonged to after the publication of *Cane* supported the creation of a new American, released from the caging quality of racial or class identity. Toomer, agreeing with his friends, considered himself to be an American, and frequently struggled with publishers' and acquaintances' all too quick tendency to label him an African American (cf. Kerman/Eldridge, 99).

Toomer's writing centers on racial tensions between white and black, as well as within the individual. *Cane* expresses both his exhilaration for as well as his grief over the folk-spirit of black cultural heritage. The book recognizes that there was no room for this spirit in the contemporary modern world, in which the African American race sought to establish itself as an economic and cultural force (cf. Kerman/Eldridge, 79 – 80).

Despite the fact that a relatively limited number of copies were sold, *Cane* was received well within literary circles, especially with African Americans. Critics praised the force of imagery in the book, which pleased Toomer immensely (cf. Kerman/Eldridge, 108 – 109). By the end of the 1920's, *Cane* had gathered fame in black circles as a "seminal novel of the African American experience." (Kerman/Eldridge, 128)

The structure of the book reflects the importance of its individual parts as a whole. In a letter to Waldo Frank, Toomer contended that the design of *Cane* is a circle: Aesthetically, it moves from simple to complex forms, only to return to simple forms. Regionally, it moves from the South to the North and then back to the South. (cf. McKay, 83)

Thus, *Cane* really starts with "Bona and Paul", ascends through the Georgia narratives only to end in "Harvest Song". The curves in the print version of the book reflect this design (see *Cane*, p. 37 and p. 79), even though the first curve has been deleted from all editions after the original (cf. McKay, 83). The narratives in the book take place either in Sempter, GA, Chicago or Washington.

Cane features a multitude of literary forms, containing realistic details as well as impressionistic artistry. It has been called a modernist

work as well as belonging to the tradition of stream of consciousness writing (cf. McKay, 86). With its lush descriptions of nature, it features elements of pastoral art (cf. MacKethan, 229), as well as containing obvious gothic elements in its extended description of fear, violence and hidden secrets (cf. Bell, 223). The first section contains 10¹¹ poems and 6¹² short-stories focusing on African American life in the South. Protagonists in this section are mostly female. The second part of *Cane* contains 5¹³ poems, 5¹⁴ short-stories and 2¹⁵ vignettes, only a page long each. This part features stories set in the North, either in Washington, DC or Chicago. The third part consists of one short-story, "Kabnis", again set in the South.

In my analysis of *Cane*, I focus on particular poems, vignettes and stories, not on the whole book. In order to find evidence of the categories of analysis I employ, a close reading has been done. If I do not examine every single piece of *Cane*, it is only to be able to pay closer attention to the instances of segregation which I find important for my thesis.

9.2.1 Violence and Fear

Cane is concerned with the past, present and future of African Americans, both in the South and the North of the United States. Thus, the narrator focuses on aspects of black life, many of them negative. While he presents a people close to nature and rich in culture, he gives voice to conflicts, insecurities and pressures, both internal and external, dominating these people (cf. McKay, 90). As such, the author presents human beings surviving in a society of buried secrets and violence.

¹¹ "Reapers", "November Cotton Flower", "Face", "Cotton Song", "Song of the Son", "Georgia Dusk", "Nullo", "Evening Song", "Conversion", "Portrait of Georgia";

¹² "Karintha", "Becky", "Carma", "Fern", "Esther", "Blood-Burning Moon";

¹³ "Beehive", "Storm Ending", "Her Lips are Copper Wire", "Prayer", "Harvest Song";

¹⁴ "Rhobert", "Avey", "Theater", "Box Seat", "Bona and Paul";

¹⁵ "Seventh Street", "Calling Jesus";

Indeed, many instances of violence are implied by language or mood, rather than actual description. Especially the first and the third parts, set in the South, incorporate this feature. Subtle and not-so-subtle traces of violence are palpable in almost every story, evidence of a society dominated by the color line.

Most importantly, both retributive and intimate violence take place between the people Toomer depicts. He does not only show how the threat of mob violence and economic dependency stunt African Americans, but also traces the impact interracial relations have on intraracial relationships.

9.2.1.1 Retributive Violence

“Georgia Dusk” describes the evening ambiance of a small Georgia village (*Cane*, 13). The first four lines incorporate an ambiguous lyrical description of the sunset. “Night’s barbecue”, in connection with “[a] feast of moon and men and barking hounds” reverberates with the cries of an angry mob, “an orgy” so to speak, in which blood-thirsty men and dogs come together to chase after a supposedly guilty human being. The fourth stanza reads the following:

Smoke from the pyramidal sawdust pile
Curls up, blue ghosts of trees, tarrying low
Where only chips and stumps are left to show
The solid proof of former domicile. (*Cane*, 13)

“[F]ormer domicile” refers to someone’s residence that has been burned down, reminiscent of the barbecue from the first stanza. Mob violence and lynching are never actually mentioned, but the poem’s imagery is not entirely positive. Dusk in Georgia is certainly a time where more than feasts take place. As Jaqueline Goldsby argues, the poem hints at lynching’s omnipresence in the South. While it might not actually happen, the threat of it always lurks in the background (cf. Goldsby, 290).

“Portrait in Georgia” (*Cane*, 27) introduces an imagery continued in the last short story of the section, “Blood-Burning Moon”. The poem describes features of the face, only those features become distorted by an act of violence. Braided hair is compared to a lyncher’s rope, eyes and lips

to fagots and red blisters. "Portrait in Georgia" has been read to represent what a black man sees when looking at a white woman's face – physical attraction becomes a threat to the black man's life in the context of the southern myth of white female innocence (cf. Webb, 211). The analogy is supported by the last two lines, in which the color of a woman's body is compared to the color of ash after black flesh has been burned.

The analogy between woman and death is continued in "Blood-Burning Moon" (*Cane*, 28 - 35). The short story is concerned with a love triangle between a woman and two men. Louisa, an African American house keeper and servant, fools around both with Bob Stone, white son of former slave owners, and Tom Burwell, a black field hand (cf. 28). The discovery of the respective other lover leads to a violent fight between the two men, in which Tom slits Bob's throat only to be burned at the stake by a white lynch mob.

"Blood-Burning Moon" is the last piece of the first part for a reason – the sexual oppression and racial tension already introduced in the previous pieces culminate in a violent finale. From the beginning, imagery of decay and foreboding dominate the narrative. A full moon tinted red, an evil omen for "Negro women" (*Cane*, 28), sets the mood for the coming events. The reddish colored moon forebodes a night of violence, based on an old Latin belief that Mars, the God of war, colored it (cf. Turner 1988a, 30).

Louisa loves two men, and both love her. One of them is white and one of them is black, but their difference in color oddly balances each other (*Cane*, 28). In her mind, the two are connected, and this causes in her "a strange stir." (28) Much as her song on her way home becomes "agitant and restless," so do the animals in the black "factory town" sense the tremor in the air (cf. 28). Dogs bark and roosters crow as if "heralding a weird dawn or some ungodly awakening." The choice of words foreshadows Louisa's rough awakening from her thoughts of two men.

The story contains elements of the Gothic. While reminiscent of the typical Gothic triangle of heroine – villain – lover, the question of identity in the story is more complex (cf. Borst, 16). In fact, it is impossible to discern whether Tom or Bob poses as villain in this particular triangle, as either

man causes the other one's violent death. It is equally impossible to discern which of the two represents the lover, as neither man loves Louisa unselfishly. Bob has been raised to be a white man, which renders him incapable of seeing in Louisa anything other than a black woman. Tom, on the other hand, views Bob to be a threat to his own sphere – as a black field hand, Tom has limited control over his life due to the oppression practiced by white society. Within the black community, he has control over his life, yet Bob threatens that.

Louisa also defies the stereotypical Gothic heroine, as she admittedly feels a pull towards both her lovers, who actually balance each other out in her mind (cf. Borst, 15). Much like the other heroines in *Cane* she is rendered powerless – in her case by the moon and the men in her life. Initially, it seems as if she controls the love triangle, yet the men take that control from her.

Toomer shows how archaic prejudice still governs the actions of the inhabitants of Sempter. Louisa and Bob Stone are dominated by their ancestry of slave and slave-owner. Bob, despite his obvious affection for Louisa, cannot help being a white man. He broods over the fact that “his family had lost ground.” (*Cane*, 31) Not just literally, but also figuratively – while the family still employs African Americans as housekeepers and field hands, they do not belong to them anymore. As such, Bob is forced to sneak out to meet Louisa, whereas in old times, he would have been able to carry on the affair without having to hide (cf. 31).

During slavery, miscegenation had been a public secret. After Reconstruction and during the years of segregation, it became an outright taboo. By loving a black woman, even in secret, Bob challenges his own race's status. Thus, he denies his love by downgrading Louisa's attraction and importance, instead focusing on the fact that “his family still owned the niggers, practically.” (*Cane*, 31) He even asks himself: “Beautiful nigger gal. Why nigger? Why not, just gal?” (32) Bob cannot think of any other answer than “it was because she was nigger that he went to her.” (32)

As a white man, Bob cannot bear the insult of having to compete with a black man. Tom has had no physical relations with Louisa yet. He values her honor, dreaming of owning a small farm before he marries her.

Tom wants to be self-sufficient before making Louisa his wife, so he can afford all the things she now receives from her white lover. Yet Tom is equally infuriated by the news that Louisa received silk stockings from Bob Stone (cf. 29).

Whereas natural law would have the two lovers compete for a girl, leaving the decision to her, in the social environment of the South other rules apply. Louisa is rendered forceless as social law dictates an unequal fight between the lovers (cf. Blake, 222). The white man cannot lose to a black man. Tom challenges social law by inflicting a terminal injury on Bob (cf. 222). Consequently, a mob forms, as it has multiple times before, and as it undoubtedly will again. Tom is dragged to the old factory and burned at the stake.

The “ghost” of the mob’s yell escapes the scene only to flutter down the single street of factory town (cf. *Cane*, 35). In the final scene, Louisa, after the death of her white lover and her black lover, realizes she is now shunned from both communities. She sings, in an attempt to retreat from the violence of the night. The moon, as a symbol of violence, becomes the only witness of her song, in a literal depiction of ‘lunacy’. Louisa, knowing that she has lost everything, also lost her mind. (cf. Ford, 59) Thus ends the first section of *Cane*, and the scene changes to urban “Seventh Street”, “bastard of Prohibition and War.” (*Cane*, 39) Lynching’s deadly call has traveled with the reader to Washington, only to dissipate into other social forms and institutions that cripple African American life (cf. Goldsby, 291).

The violent imagery continues in “Seventh Street” (*Cane*, 39). “Money *burns* the pocket,” (39, emphasis added) just like Tom Burwell was burned. “Crude-boned [...] black reddish blood” of “nigger life” enters the “white and whitewashed wood of Washington.” The imagery of “Seventh Street” is destructive, emphasizing blood throughout the vignette, figuratively pointing to African American bodies. “Soft skin burn[s] away to crude bones” (Ford, 92) as Seventh Street is haunted by Tom Burwell’s murder (92).

Oddly enough, “Seventh Street” also evokes a positive attitude. Southern blacks invigorate Washington’s rusty and soggy wood. A fresh

breath of air blows down the street as they bring with them their “loafer air, jazz songs and love.” (*Cane*, 39) Clearly, the migration is compared to the rising of the sun as indicated by the partial ellipsis before “.. the sun.” (cf. Ford, 93) Demolition and removal symbolically make room for new people and attitudes. The metaphorical violence is needed to clear away the bourgeois conformity, yet reminds the reader of the “physical violence of Southern racism.” (Ford, 93)

Following “Seventh Street” is “Rhobert”, the story of a man weighted down by his own house (*Cane*, 40). Suggesting the risk of capitalism’s greatest promise – property ownership – Rhobert’s house is dead and sinks him deeper and deeper into the mud. Goldsby argues that considering how many “twentieth century race riots began as conflicts over blacks owning homes in white neighborhoods in the urban North,” (Goldsby, 291) material things indeed become life-threatening to African Americans. Rhobert’s heavy house also implies the white ethical code that still rules African American life, even in the North (cf. Baker, 20). Thus, the ghost of the mob’s yell has travelled with the migrated people to other regions of the country – they are thus unable to flee their plight.

Even in the North, they face restrictions in housing, employment and entertainment. In *Cane*, they struggle to adopt an identity in a free world throbbing with the promise of capitalism and wealth. Yet more and more they realize, along with the reader, that access to the dream is barred based on their ‘race’. The feeling of isolation and oppression remains constant.

In “Kabnis”, the longest and final piece of *Cane*, Toomer explores how a young northern man with southern roots experiences life in the South. Originally, “Kabnis” had been written as a play, and still contains traits of a drama. The story is told in six scenes (cf. McKay, 151) and shows parallels to Toomer’s own life. Ralph Kabnis, an educated and shy Northerner, accepts a teaching position in rural Georgia. Knowing about the South only from hearsay and newspapers, he is fearful as to what to expect. Sleep does not come easy in his one-room cabin, as Kabnis tries to make sense of the sounds of a Georgia night.

In a somewhat comic incident, the young man is frightened by the sound of a chicken cackling next door. He uses his slipper to shut the chicken up, rousing the bird even more. Consequently, Kabnis, enraged, chases and catches the chicken, only to rip off its head. He hides the body in the bush, and wipes off his hands in the dry grass.

The incident serves to symbolize racial murder, as Toomer tries to depict what emotions lie behind the seemingly senseless violence of the South. Ralph Kabnis' bloody hands symbolize the "moral irresponsibility of its perpetrator," (McKay, 154) as the beauty of the landscape is tainted with innocent blood.

Kabnis is constantly faced with violence, thus he lives in a perpetual state of fear. While he is visiting Halsey and Layman, a stone is thrown through the window, wrapped in a piece of paper containing a message Kabnis thinks is directed at him. This incident takes place right after he is told the story of "Mame Lamkins" (*Cane*, 90), who was killed in the street, her baby cut out of her stomach and stuck to a tree on a knife. The horrible account is based on the fate of historical Mary Turner, who was hanged and burned in Georgia in 1918 (cf. Meyers, 6).

The conversation between Kabnis, Halsey and Layman on racial violence in Georgia is frequently overlooked by critics, yet bears partial resemblance to actual historical events. Next to Mary Turner, the mentioning of the "peonage cases" (*Cane*, 87) could refer to the 1921 killings on the so-called "Death Farm" about thirty miles from Sparta (cf. Foley, 188). John S. Williams, owner of the farm, was accused and convicted of killing at least eleven of his peonage workers (cf. 188). Layman's account of Sam Raymon's fate – "Th white folks had jes knocked two others like you kill a cow – brained um with an ax, when they caught Sam Raymon by a stream. They was about t do fer him when he up an says, "White folks, I gotter die, I knows that. But wont y let me die in my own way?" (cf. 88) – clearly parallels Harry Price's fate, who begged his killer to let him jump into the river on his own (cf. Foley, 189).

After Kabnis reads the stone's threatening message, the young teacher runs through cane fields back to his cabin, pursued by his fears. "All along the road I saw their eyes flaring from the cane. Hounds. Shouts.

What in God's name did I run here for?" (*Cane*, 91) Even after Halsey and Layman have caught up with him, he is still disturbed.

In "Kabnis", all of the portrayed persons are affected by the social situation. Even Halsey, respected in Sempter for his skills as a blacksmith, admits that work serves as an outlet, because "[t]his burg gets to me when there aint [enough work]." (*Cane*, 96) He also clarifies that things have changed compared to the days of slavery. Hounds to chase African Americans were common in the days of slavery, but "[w]hite folks aint in fer all them theatrics these days." (92) Nowadays, "[i]f what they wanted was t get y, theyd have just marched right in an took y where y sat." (92)

Placed in the context of the above-mentioned real events of the 1920's, Kabnis' fear no longer seems exaggerated or paranoid. In fact, it probably mirrors Toomer's own initial fear at being exposed to such an atmosphere during his stay in rural Georgia (cf. Foley, 193). Whereas Halsey and Layman, both Southerners, have found means to suppress the constant psychological pressure, Kabnis, newly subjected to such a situation, almost caves in.

9.2.1.2 Intimate Violence

"Karintha" and other female stories of *Cane* are redolent with the concept of 'intimate violence' suggested by Gussow¹⁶. "Intimate violence" refers to violence within the African American community, mostly to educate its younger members on racial etiquette. In the author's mind, the subordinated African American society has established its own system of power to retain some form of control. Black men, mainly targeted by white popular stereotypes of 'black monsters' and thus robbed of social and economic power, created a sub-society in which the illusion of social control was maintained.

This double strain on women, as portrayed mainly in the first part of *Cane*, is often responsible for madness, alienation and death (cf. McKay, 91). "Karintha" describes a beautiful, sensuous dark woman, reduced to her sexual attraction by men of all ages. Her beauty, albeit positive, only

¹⁶ See p. 14 of this paper for further explanation.

leads to the girl's victimization, as her soul becomes "a growing thing ripened too soon." (*Cane*, 2) Men had wanted her too early and so her later pregnancy is inevitable.

The girl's innocence and beauty is juxtaposed with imagery of corruption, sexual greed and sordidness. Much like in the other sketches of the first part of *Cane*, sexual acts are always connected to violence, albeit this is only implied. The references to the "bed of pine needles" (*Cane*, 2) and burning after Karintha has given birth to her child could have multitude of meanings, but most likely refers to the death of the child (cf. Williams, 92).

In the first part of *Cane*, Toomer describes how a system governed by white hegemony that devaluates African American men has caused these men to hurt their own women (cf. Grant, 23). Throughout the first part of the book, men constantly see the need to destroy women's beauty through their acts. Karintha is as beautiful and unique as a "November Cotton Flower" (*Cane*, 1), but as she is reduced to a sexual object, her nameless lovers participate in her tragedy. In "Becky", her unknown lover, her two sons and the whole community participate in her oppression and her assumed death. "Carma", a strong and passionate woman, is forced to pretend to commit suicide, because she had had other sexual partners while her husband was away working. "Fern", having had multiple lovers ever since she had been young, has resigned to simple apathy in the face of the maddening world she lives in. "Esther", confused by her mixed racial identity as the mulatto daughter of the richest black man in town, becomes frozen after Barlo, her secret passion, rejects her. Finally, Louisa is driven mad by the fact that both her lovers are dead. Southern racial 'law' has killed them both.

Thus, Toomer contends that the unnatural social situation in the South – before, during and after the Great War – has caused African America to become "naturally chaotic, vengeful, and self-destructive." (Grant, 24) African American society has adopted a unique set of social norms to cope with the fact that its people belong to a sub-society. In a country promoting the idea of freedom, the black man has no right that the white man cannot take away.

In “Kabnis”, the stone thrown through the window embodies the rules the local community has adopted to ensure the safety of its members. The interventions of meddling outsiders are viewed as a threat to social norms by African Americans, thus endangering the whole ethnic group. As such, it is of utmost importance to quench any stirring of public attention (cf. Scruggs/VanDemarr, 199). Thus, the stone acts as a warning to Kabnis, who could upset the racial balance by asking too many questions.

9.2.2 Racial Cartographies

The first section of *Cane* depicts the strong impact nature and geography have on the community and the people. Folk culture and nature are always linked, a fact that once made African American culture rich in its closeness to the natural world. In the face of industrialization and dehumanization, however, this culture is threatened (cf. McKay, 91).

This is reflected in the imagery: whereas the Georgia stories in *Cane* are characterized by nature imagery, connected to the typical vegetation of pine wood, cane brake and cotton plants, the description of the urban environment is simple, mechanical and linear (cf. McKay, 87-88).

Based on the town of Sparta, Toomer adopted ‘Sempter’ as a name for his fictional representation of the small town in the red hills of Georgia. Rather than recreating an actual town in fiction, he created a symbolic geography of Sempter. In modernist fashion, Toomer assembled topographical still images to create an image of a town ruled by silent spaces and buried secrets. Thus, he reveals the hidden history of racial oppression in a rural community still largely dependent on the prices of cotton and labor (cf. Scruggs/VanDemarr, 17).

The landscape of the American South functions both as a site of trauma, as well as a symbolic homeland for African Americans, thus linking them to the soil in more ways than one (cf. Williams, 88).

Pastoral images of nature are consistently juxtaposed with references to violence and secrecy, as the beauty of the South becomes the landscape in which oppression and exploitation of the cheap labor

force occurs (cf. Scruggs/VanDemarr, 18). Along Dixie Pike is where most of the black workers live, a street which “has grown from a goat path in Africa.” (*Cane*, 10) Close are the rail-road tracks, which are of utmost importance in connecting Sempter to the outside world. The spot where Dixie Pike and the railroad tracks meet appears as a spot where inside and outside meet – metaphorically representing white and black society (cf. Scruggs/VanDemarr, 17).

Actual landmarks in Sempter are the little cabins along Dixie Pike and in factory town, in which African Americans live. These little cabins represent the impoverishment of a whole race within the United States, much as they also suggest a peculiar feature of African American culture. Since the cabins are so small, they provide little, if any, privacy for the members of a family. Hence, as delineated in “Karintha”, the cabins allow children to witness their parent’s love making, causing them to imitate the act by ‘playing home’ (cf. Grant, 26/*Cane*, 1).

The sawmill appears often in *Cane*, as it discharges sawdust smoke into the valley, creating the peculiar ambiance at sunset described in the first part. It both represents the economic reality of most African Americans as factory workers, and as it stands as a pillar of the secret violence in the valley. In “Karintha”, for example, it is operative to the destruction of innocence (cf. Grant, 26). After Karintha gives birth to her child, the text subtly suggests an act of violence:

A child fell out of her womb onto a bed of pine-needles in the forest. Pine-needles are smooth and sweet. They are elastic to the feet of rabbits...A sawmill was nearby. Its pyramidal sawdust pile smouldered [sic]. It is a year before one completely burns. Meanwhile, the smoke curls up and hangs in odd wraiths about the trees, curls up, and spreads itself out over the valley... Weeks after Karintha returned home the smoke was so heavy you tasted it in water. (*Cane*, 2)

The ellipsis in the text suggests that some information in this paragraph has been left out. Hence, it can be concluded that Karintha has left her child to be burned (cf. Benson, 53/ Ford, 39 – 40).

Again, geography adopts an important role within the natural world of rural Georgia, as the interconnection of the land and the people can be witnessed every day.

In the third longer story of the first part, “Becky” tells the tale of a white woman who has given birth to two mixed-race sons. Without her ever actually appearing in the story, her tale is spun just like a superstitious folk tale. Because she has committed the ultimate social crime of miscegenation, Becky is cast out of the town, literally. The townspeople secretly build her a shaky cabin on a piece of sandy land between the railroad and the road. Becky is literally ‘islandized’, as the townspeople force her to live between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’.

Yet Becky is both hidden and exposed at the same time. The townspeople refuse to let her live within the town limits, but her little piece of land is exposed both to the passengers of the train that rushes by every couple of hours, and the people travelling on the Dixie Pike. Thus, Becky is never truly hidden from view, but the smoke curling from the chimney is the only evidence of life inside the cabin.

Importantly, much as the location of Becky’s cabin symbolizes her status as an outcast, it also symbolizes her fate. Becky is assumedly buried under her collapsed cabin. The bible thrown on the rubble becomes the cross to her grave as it “flaps its leaves with an aimless rustle on her mound.” (*Cane*, 5)

In “Blood-burning Moon”, location also plays an important role. The factory giving ‘factory town’ its name has not been used ever since Pre-Civil War times. Hence, its floorboards are rotting, but its skeleton walls and beams of oak are standing strong and tall as ever. Thus, they are a testimony to the fact that legally the system of slavery had been abolished, but the ideology which created the system still persists (cf. Grant, 45).

Factory town is a segregated town, inhabited only by Negroes. As such, it is symbolic for the white supremacist thinking still prevalent in the South, together with the motif of the old factory (cf. Grant, 45). The importance of the factory is shown by the poem at the middle and at the end of “Blood-Burning Moon”:

Red nigger moon. Sinner!
 Blood-burning moon. Sinner!
 Come out that fact’ry door. (*Cane*, 31, 35)

The poem foreshadows the violent acts that are about to happen, and highlights their location: Tom Burwell's lynching is about to take place within the old structure of the factory, which is a unique location, considering that Burwell is burned at the stake. The factory, also built of wood, could easily burn down too, but is still chosen as the site for this crime. Much as the structure symbolizes the unchanged structure of society, this symbol is fortified by the crime it witnesses.

Placed in the middle of the first section, "Song of the Son" not only expresses sadness for the decline of folk culture, but also highlights the strong connection of culture and geography. Only by returning to the soil on which his ancestors walked can the poet grasp and accept his long lost identity. By witnessing the "sawdust glow of night", the "pine-smoke air," by returning physically to the "red soil and sweet-gum tree" the poet is able to recognize his "place in time and in the history of Afro-America." (cf. McKay, 90)

Thus, "Song of the Son" stands in stark contrast to the second part of *Cane*, in which the geography of the stories changes significantly. The stories of the second part are set in urban areas, in Washington, DC and Chicago. Actual landmarks such as Seventh Street, V Street, Harpers Ferry, U Street, Soldier's Home, the Capitol, Howard Theater, Lincoln Theater and South-Side L Track suggest that Toomer had written about a landscape that he was deeply familiar with.

While the industrial, urban landscape of Washington, DC and Chicago differs drastically to the cane and cotton fields of the first part, the existence of a "homeland" (*Cane*, 46) is suggested in almost every short story. The narrator of "Rhobert" suggests singing 'Deep River', an African American spiritual. The narrator of "Avey" feels "soil of [his] homeland fall[ing] like a fertile shower upon the lean streets of the city," when "the wind is from the South." (*Cane*, 46) Dorris' "singing is of canebrake loves and mangrove feastings" in "Theater", and her perfume is of "old flowers, or of a southern canefield." (*Cane*, 53) Dan sits next to a Negress whose "strong roots" sink down through the cement floor. "They spread under asphalt streets" and "under the river and disappear in blood-lines that waver south." (*Cane*, 62)

Thus, even in the North, the people portrayed can never quite shake off or deny their ancestry. Even though the visible geography has changed, cane stalks and cotton fields still appear. Northern urban geography is recognizably dominated by houses, streets and concrete. Blacks living in such an environment might have southern roots, but they are constricted by modern society. Their dwelling places, their houses, have become their prison as suggested in “Rhobert” and “Box Seat”. “Rhobert” is weighted down by his own house, as discussed above¹⁷, whereas Dan in “Box Seat” becomes increasingly aware of the bonds that keep his people living in the city. The symbol of the house is continued in the symbol of the vacant seats of Lincoln Theater, where “[e]ach one is a bolt that shoots into a slot, and is locked there.” (*Cane*, 61) The pieces featured in the second part of *Cane* suggest that Toomer believed that the “black peasant’s alienation from the soil had caused him to become emotionally sterile.” (Benson, 79)

In the final part of *Cane*, “Kabnis”, cartography is impressively used to reinforce the theme of segregation. Kabnis, coming from the industrial North, lives in a small cabin with unpainted walls and cracks between the floor boards. The reality of being in the South is brought to him in the very first paragraph of the story, as he hears “vagrant poets, whispering” (*Cane*, 81) their song:

White-man’s land.
Niggers, sing.
Burn, bear black children
Till poor rivers bring
Rest, and sweet glory
In Camp Ground. (*Cane*, 81)

Kabnis recognizes the beauty of his surroundings, but rejects it at the same time. After all, in a land where his fellow African Americans are taught to disregard themselves, beauty can only lead to disappointment (cf. Ford, 120). Kabnis wishes for an ugly world, because he cannot escape the irony of a beautiful landscape ruled by violence (cf. *Cane*, 83).

¹⁷ See p. 81 – 82 of this paper for further explanation.

The courthouse in the town of Sempter stands as a pillar of justice. Yet in the moonlight, Kabnis “sees himself yanked beneath that tower. He sees white minds, with indolent assumption, juggle justice and a nigger...” (*Cane*, 83) The pillar of justice thus actually represents injustice in its most violent form: lynching.

Thus, geography takes up different meanings depending on the color of the person. For whites, the courthouse indeed symbolizes justice, whereas for African Americans, the legal system of the US does not ensure their just treatment.

9.2.3 Folklore in Cane

Evidence of folklore is strongly visible in *Cane*, both in prose and poetry. The book is designed to reflect songs and spirits of African American folk culture. The southern prose stories describe women from a community’s viewpoint, highlighting its great influence on the individual (cf. Akoma, 122). In the northern tales, black people are characterized by their unrestrained energy as a source for their spiritual strength, which they bring along as they travel from the South to the North (cf. McKay, 83).

By critics, *Cane* is viewed to be a “scribal response to a dying oral literary tradition.” (Akoma, 119) The essential aesthetic of the text is oral, which resonates in a quote from the autobiographical notes Toomer composed during the year following the time he spent in Sparta:

There was a valley, the valley of “Cane”, with smoke-wreaths during the day and mist at night. A family of back-country Negroes had only recently moved into a shack not too far away. They sang. And this was the first time I’d ever heard the folk-songs and spirituals. They were very rich and sad and joyous and beautiful. But I learned that the Negroes of the town objected to them. They called them “shouting.” They had victrolas, and player-pianos. So, I realized with deep regret that the spirituals, meeting ridicule, would be certain to die out... The folk-spirit was walking in to die on the modern desert. That spirit was so beautiful. Its death was so tragic. Just this seemed to sum life for me. And this was the feeling I put into *Cane*. *Cane* was a swan-song. It was a song of an end. (Turner 1980, 123)

The prose stories are often accompanied by stanzas or verses reminiscent of black work songs or spirituals, evoking the complex cultural

and political consciousness evident in black folk (cf. Akoma, 120). Tellingly, the book starts with such a composition, the first four lines of “Karintha”, (*Cane*, 1) a story that serves to set the mood for what is to follow (cf. Akoma, 121). The verses act as a refrain to the story, appearing at crucial turning points in the girl’s transition from innocence to experience. Similarly, “Becky”, “Carma”, and “Blood-Burning Moon” feature such compositions, giving the reader a sense of an oral performance (cf. Akoma, 130).

“Song of the Son”, one of the most widely anthologized pieces of *Cane*, stresses the theme of time in connection with the African American cultural heritage (cf. McKay, 89). The poet is described as a long lost son, returning to the soil of his ancestors. An “epoch’s sun” (*Cane*, 12) is declining, referring to the “parting soul” (12) of the folk heritage.

The poet has come just in time to catch the “plaintive soul soon gone,” and so “one plum was saved for [him].” The poet must use the plum’s seed to plant a new “singing tree,” so that the “souls of slavery” may continue to sing. Thus, the poem expresses the poet’s intent to restore some of his folk heritage in art (cf. McKay, 90). He accepts his identity and the responsibility to continue “[c]aroling softly souls of slavery.” (*Cane*, 12)

Thus, *Cane* manifests the oral tradition (cf. Akoma, 130). “[T]he book is a performance that demonstrates the resilience of oral tradition in adapting to changing times and space.” (Akoma, 130)

9.2.3.1 Religion

Cane depicts different aspects of religion, revealing its function in a rural African American community. Jesus is a comforting source of security in a world where slavery is still palpable history (cf. Bone, 181). Yet religion also may serve as an excuse to keep the rigid social system of the South alive.

Religion becomes thematic for the first time in “Becky”, a short story portraying a white Catholic woman with two Negro sons. She is ostracized by both sides of society. White people look down on her, because only a

“common, God-forsaken, insane white shameless wench” (*Cane*, 5) would behave in such a way. African American people call her “poor Catholic poor-white crazy woman” who had a baby by a “low-down nigger with no self-respect.” (5)

Nobody in the small town takes responsibility for impregnating Becky, yet people help her in a hypocritical act of religious benevolence. The villagers work together to build a cabin on an islandized strip of land, where Becky is removed from town, but still close enough to be watched by a “blue-sheen God” (*Cane*, 5), the locomotive rumbling by six times a day.

The town people occasionally bring her food, yet stop after her second son is born. She is never seen, so they begin to assume she is dead. Still the father of her sons remains unknown. Eventually, her sons leave town, angry at members of both races alike for ostracizing them because of their ancestry.

The whole time the narrator is positioned within the community – he is not an objective observer, but participates in setting Becky’s fate. At the end, he, along with Barlo, witnesses the collapse of the cabin under the chimney. As both have just returned from church, Barlo only throws his bible on the pile of rubble, even though the narrator may have heard a groan. Instead of trying to save Becky, or burying her properly, they leave things just as they are, too afraid of what society might think in their pious attitude.

Toomer parallels the townspeople’s religious sentiments, evidenced in the text by the frequent exclamations of prayers to Jesus, with their behavior towards a woman who has violated the social codes. The community’s false religious piety is captured by the Bible that “flaps its leaves with an aimless rustle on her mound.” (*Cane*, 7) (cf. Akoma, 124)

In anticipation of Kabnis’ religious struggle, “Prayer”, a poem in the second part of *Cane*, voices a minor theme of the book (*Cane*, 68). The title of the poem indicates that the speaker wants to establish a connection to a deity, something “outside of himself.” (Ford, 88) While his soul longs for this spiritual connection, his body and mind are “opaque” (*Cane*, 68)– a unity of body, soul and mind is impossible. The spirit is held back by the

body's limitations (cf. Ford, 89). The image of the "soul's flesh-eye" achieves this, representing a closed lid, which the speaker imagines could be opened with his little finger. Yet the little finger is just another bodily appendage, and as such inadequate to achieve the unity the speaker longs for. While the speaker realizes his body – his little finger – is too weak to reach spiritual unity, he issues the real prayer at the end of the poem: The speaker desires to possess a voice loud enough to "carry to you" that "dwell[s] in stars." (*Cane*, 68) Yet the penultimate line suggests defeat, the speaker does not possess that kind of voice, and so the poem returns to the limiting body. The poem ends in partial ellipsis, trailing off without a real ending (cf. Ford, 89).

"Conversion" treats the destruction of African culture by a Christian God (*Cane*, 26). Toomer subtly hints at the fact that religion both served as a reason to exploit the 'wild' African races, and as a tool to suppress them. It highlights how the white man corrupted peaceful living with his "rum" and "strange cassava" (*Cane*, 26), only to force the "African guardian of Souls" to yield "to new words and a weak palabra/ of a white-faced sardonic god." (26) Being subjected to a new God, the African American race was at the same time reduced to grins and cries of amen and hosanna. As such, religion was operative in the realization of slavery in the 'New World'.

Religion is almost absent in the second part of *Cane*. "Calling Jesus", originally to be named "Nora", describes a woman's soul represented by her little faithful dog, which is locked into the vestibule at night (*Cane*, 55). Only in her dreams will Jesus carry it back to her side, while she is "cradled in dream-fluted cane." (*Cane*, 55) Suggesting that northern blacks can only achieve spiritual wholeness in their dreams, in which they return to a land of cane, the vignette voices similar concerns as "Prayer".

Part three then returns to a critical illustration of the role religion plays in the South. Layman - an intelligent clergy-man of the South - represents spiritual and religious consciousness in "Kabnis" (cf. *Cane*, 81f). He is an observer and as such is aware that his race is being violated both physically and mentally, yet he cannot speak up against it. Instead,

he offers religion as a kind of drug (cf. Turner 1988b, 212). Religion, in the South, is what sex and alcohol achieve on another level. All of them function as anodynes for a society which is constantly abused by a hegemonic group (cf. Turner 1971, 24).

In "Kabnis", religion serves to juxtapose the struggles of a young man as he comes to the South for the first time. Kabnis was raised to be an educated, religious man, yet his faith is questioned every time he is confronted with the ugly, hidden truth of the South's social landscape. Racial violence and oppression cause him to question the justness and the beauty of a God, who made the South's landscape, just as he made the people that populate it.

Kabnis struggles with both. The powerfully divergent emotions that he feels – beauty and ugliness, curse and adoration – cause him to both appreciate the beauty of the southern night, the heritage of hills and valleys, fragrant with pine smoke and folk songs, as well as to hate it. "[T]he night's beauty strikes him dumb [...] There is a radiant beauty in the night that touches... and tortures me. [...] [Whats] beauty anyway but ugliness if it hurts you?" (*Cane*, 83) he asks. He struggles to accept a God that created such beauty and permitted white mob violence at the same time. His northern religious conviction clashes with what he witnesses in the South. This double consciousness is one of the major concerns of the story (cf. McKay, 155).

Kabnis disapproves of the way people practice religion in the South, as in his opinion, it fosters too much emotionalism (cf. McKay, 159). Race and religion influence the people of the South the most, and both work together to keep conditions just as they are. White oppression and the religious doctrine of subservience cause people to accept, rather than to change, their circumstances. Yet religion also represents the only sphere in which white society allows blacks to take on full responsibility and control (cf. 159). Yet Kabnis also criticizes the preachers of black churches. "This preacher-ridden race. Pray and shout. They're in the preacher's hands. That's what it is. And the preacher's hands are in the white man's pockets." (*Cane*, 88)

At the end of “Kabnis”, the protagonist leaves the basement while “the sun arises from its cradle in the tree-tops of the forest.” (*Cane*, 116) This image, perhaps, could be an image of hope, as the “[g]old-glowing child” sends “a birth-song slanting down gray dust streets and sleepy windows of the southern town.” (116) The emotional power of the African American race, properly channeled, could lead to great future achievement (cf. Gregory, 168). The birth-song of the sun announces the hope of a people in southern towns.

9.2.4 Language

9.2.4.1 Language as an Operational Tool

Language is used most impressively to convey visual impressions in *Cane*. Nature imagery makes the first part vivid, mystical and sensuous (cf. McKay, 87). Toomer’s language is unique, both in poetry and prose, which often features poetic qualities. His prose stories are frequently shaped by repetition, the use of poetic refrain and references to a deity (cf. McKay, 96). Shouts like “Eoho Jesus” (*Cane*, 55), “O thank y Jesus” (5) reverberate with African American religious devoutness; Ellipsis is employed to suggest hidden meanings that cannot be openly revealed.

The first part is dominated by pastoral images of nature, embodied in frequent words like “pine”, “cane”, “dusk”, “red dust” and “pine-smoke” (cf. Bell, 223). Together they recreate the landscape of rural Georgia, dominated by the above mentioned plants, pines, cane and red dust.

The second part of *Cane* is dominated by harsh, stale and bare language (cf. Benson, 70). It signifies the migration north and the subsequent loss of many of the qualities of beauty and art evident in the first part (cf. McKay, 125). The “urban sterility” (Benson, 70) is supposed to represent the psychological and geographical distance between the first part and the second, as well as their location in the country of the US.

The third part represents a return to some of the nature imagery, but Kabnis is unable to experience much of it. While he notices the beauty of the landscape, he is unable to detach it from the ever-persistent threat of violence.

9.2.4.2 The Representation of Black Speech

The dialect tradition of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as previously discussed in this paper, played an important role in the literary negotiation of authenticity for white and black writers of that time. The discourse was still very much active in the 1920's and 30's. Writing about the South, Toomer had to address the question of how to represent black speech so as to avoid reproducing stereotypes as created by the plantation tradition (cf. Whalan 2007, 158).

Yet for Toomer, language and race were closely related. In fact, language was the major medium in which "transformation, translation, understanding and segregation occur[ed]." (Whalan, 2007, 159) While he wanted to represent accurately how Georgia's African American population spoke, he was also well aware of the "centrality of voice" (160) and the "implication of language within racial politics." (161) Additionally, Toomer faced the problem of any ethnographer - that of communicating with and representing a rural working class as an educated middle class man.

This tension is especially palpable in "Kabnis", in which the Northerners' Standard English is juxtaposed to the local dialect, structurally reinforcing binaries of race, gender and class (cf. Whalan 2007, 164). The folk language of rural African Americans was deeply influenced by their experience at the workplace, as evidenced by numerous work spirituals, and by a history both of oppression and sexual exploitation, as well as resistance and resilience (cf. 163 – 165). Kabnis' frustration with the language of religion, used to maintain hegemonic power, and Lewis' inability to understand the emotional tenor of the Southern community represents Toomer's exploration of the fact that language is used to reinscribe racialized identities (cf. Whalan 2007, 165 – 167).

Thus, Toomer avoided giving a final answer to the question which register an 'authentic' black voice could use. Rather, he tactically circumvented the question by shifting emphasis towards "the formal structures within which race was articulated." (Whalan 2007, 167) Thus,

Cane begins to expose modes of language that could destabilize racial politics in the US (cf. 169).

9.2.5 Cross-Racial Contacts

One of the first and most important scenes of cross-racial contact occurs in “Blood-Burning Moon”, as Louisa is drawn both to a white and a black man. Tom and Bob represent different sides of the color line, one of them a sharecropper, the other a member of a former plantation-owning family. Despite the fact that Tom is a sharecropper working Bob’s land, he wants to work hard to be able to afford his own land, so he can take care of Louisa and their future family.

Bob, on the other hand, entertains antebellum dreams of owning Louisa, so he could stop sneaking around to meet her. While he might be attracted to her, in particular to her racial features, he certainly has no intention of continuing their relationship beyond its present state. The consequences of the forbidden union between Bob and Louisa are violence and death. There is no happy ending for Louisa who has crossed the color line when she began seeing Bob.

“Bona and Paul”, a short story from the second part of *Cane*, also deals with interracial love. Paul is of mixed ancestry, having moved from the South to attend college in Chicago. Bona is also from the South, she is strangely attracted to Paul, who seems white enough to pass, but is still sometimes suspected to be black. His racial identity is ambiguous, partly caused by the fact that he refuses to admit to either being white or black.

Both Louisa and Bob’s relationship and Bona and Paul’s relationship are destined to fail. They are part of a society that condemns miscegenation as unnatural, and as such, they would have to overcome their own prejudices, as well as the community’s prejudice.

“Kabnis” features few scenes of actual cross-racial contact, but attitudes of different characters towards the color line are made evident. Whereas Kabnis is rendered speech- and motionless from fear of lynching, other characters demonstrate how African Americans adapt to the limits imposed on them. As discussed above, Halsey’s reaction to the

partial dehumanization of life in the South is to learn a trade. He says, "Shapin shafts and building wagons'll make a man of him [...] what nobody can take advantage of." (*Cane*, 94) Yet Halsey also admits that work is what takes his mind off his situation, as he says: "Not much work these days. Wish t hell there was. This burg gets to me when there aint." (*Cane*, 96)

Halsey is well aware of the stunted way of life he was forced to adapt to, and work is his antidote. Layman, on the other hand, represents an educated preacher who knows more about the South than he wishes to. His journeys through the South have led to his conviction that the status of the Negro cannot be ameliorated in these times. Thus, he offers religion as an antidote to the suffering of his race (cf. Benson, 90).

In a minor scene, Kabnis and Halsey work in Halsey's shop, when a white man named Ramsay enters. Kabnis, in his state of perpetual fear, immediately freezes: "Kabnis burns red. The back of his neck stings him beneath his collar. He feels stifled. Through Ramsay, the whole white South weighs down upon him. The pressure is terrific." (*Cane*, 100) Here, every story that Kabnis has heard about racial relations is encapsulated in a "shriveled, bony white man," (100) as such not a source of danger for young, agile Kabnis. Yet what his skin color has come to represent for Kabnis renders the young man incapable of acting for fear of making a mistake.

Without ever having experienced any racism or violence himself, the stories Kabnis has heard are just as efficient in exerting control over him as actual violence would be. In such a way Toomer depicts how the system of the South is constantly reproduced by European and African Americans alike.

9.2.6 Political Critique

Political Critique is subtle in *Cane*, but still an indictment of considerable force. Yet Jean Toomer's final message is evident, both in form and meaning. Waldo Frank, who had great influence both on author and book, thought that the artist, more so than the revolutionary, could change

American society (cf. Scruggs/VanDemarr, 4). Toomer, at the time he was writing *Cane*, was concerned with socialism and the 'New Negro'. Ideas coming from Frank's 'Young America' group, his stay in Sparta, his mulatto-elite background, ideology of racial uplift and an ongoing effort to define himself foremost as an American all influenced Toomer while he was composing *Cane* (cf. 6).

Toomer depicts African American life partly in a realistic manner, describing how both the beauty of the landscape and the oppression by white society influence these people. In "Kabnis", Toomer suggests a final hope for 'his' people. He presents two African Americans, both young and educated, who return to the South to uplift their people. Both have very different attitudes: Kabnis represents the artist, who is hindered by his own fear and emotionalism. Lewis is stronger and more efficient than Kabnis, but lacks understanding for the simple people he encounters. Both their efforts combined, "the great emotionalism of the race, guided by great purpose and intelligence," (Gregory, 168) would create the possibility of great achievement for African Americans. Toomer thus laments the fact that African Americans deny their folk ancestry rather than view it as a positive characteristic of their heritage.

Cane incorporates both realistic and antirealistic elements, performing a political function through the depiction of indeterminacy of racial identity. Resistance to rigid racial characterization is also clearly visible in the text's ambiguity in its formal structures, representing the impossibility of a stable racial portrayal (cf. Ford, 2). The characters in *Cane*, especially the women, are never easily classifiable, always defying stereotypes.

10 Results

So far, I have analyzed selected works of Chesnutt, Toomer and Wright only individually. The objective of this chapter is to compare some of the results of the analysis. I have found evidence of each of the categories I established at the beginning of this paper.

Notably, violence and fear are important themes in each of the three books, evidence of a society that oppresses almost half of its population. Whereas *BB* and *Cane* depict instances of interracial violence outspokenly, *HBC* incorporates fear on a more subtle level. Only *Cane* features descriptions of an actual lynching, whereas mob violence occurs in stories on several occasions in both *Cane* and *BB*. Stories of such violence are meant to trigger immense fear in the listener and revulsion in the reader. In such a way, African American society ensured its own safety, as the constant threat of violence discourages its members from stepping out of line. Thus, real incidents become 'mythical' and are included in the folk heritage to 'educate' younger members of society.

Both *HBC* and *Cane* feature the figure of the tragic mulatta. Esther and Rena both struggle with their mixed ancestry and the restrictions they face in society. Both are neither part of white society, nor part of African American society. Both women fall in love, Rena with a white man, Esther with a black man. Through love, they hope to finally belong to one side of the color line. Yet both relationships fail. Thus, both women are left alone and their stories end tragically. Whereas Rena falls ill and dies, Esther freezes in the face of her rejection.

Folklore is an important part of African American culture, and is depicted as such in each of the three primary texts. Folk culture had been warped through minstrelsy shows, yet it was not a sign of simplicity in African Americans, but a powerful outlet for the joys and frustrations of a life on the wrong side of the color line. Folklore includes diverse aspects such as stories and tales aiming both to entertain or frighten, certain phrases and behaviorisms, songs, the belief in the importance of dreams, religion, the blues, stereotypical characters and much more. Folklore's aim is to reproduce African American traditions and culture, to ensure its continuation in younger members of society. The uniqueness of the

culture is highlighted especially in *Cane*, which artfully imagines what would happen if African Americans denied their ancestry and heritage in order to be accepted by white society.

All three authors had complex political agendas when composing their books. As part of an ethnic minority with a history of oppression in the United States, they attempted to destabilize widely accepted stereotypes of African Americans. Their objective was to portray complex characters, whether they were educated or not, and to reveal their individuality, emotions and thoughts. In a time when humanity was often denied African Americans, they sought to highlight their rich folk culture. They depicted politically and socially knowledgeable human beings that were capable of guiding others as well. By revealing the artificiality of accepted social categories and stereotypes, they hoped to bring on a change in their readers. It is not the object of this thesis to find out whether or not they succeeded. Both Charles Chesnutt and Jean Toomer produced close to nothing after their early successes. Only Richard Wright continued to be politically active and wrote to the day of his early end.

All three writers depict how segregation changed architecture and cartographies of landscapes. They delineate how buildings take on different meanings for white and black people respectively, such as the court house in *HBC* and *Cane*. Housing was also segregated, which is represented in the black neighborhoods in all three books, usually separated by a physical border such as the railroad tracks, a river, or a certain street. African Americans were denied access to certain spheres and buildings, as is evidenced by the separated railroad cars in *BB*, the tournament seating in *HBC* and the scene in *BB*, in which Richard's mother is taken to the hospital completely covered in bandages, so that nobody recognizes her color – as an African American, she would not have access to the building.

Language plays an important role in a racialized society. Not only is language the key mode of communication and as such operative in expressing stereotypes and assigning roles, it is also a tool that can be restricted. Thus, characters have to negotiate in order to be able to find their own voice, such as Richard's struggle for freedom of expression.

Language can also be used to categorize – dialect can identify someone as belonging to a different region or class. Such is the case in *HBC*, in which Chesnutt employs language to undermine racial stereotypes, as both African Americans and white people speak Standard English.

Cross-racial contacts set in motion the dynamics of language and cause fear and violence. After all, only by juxtaposing opposing sides can differences and similarities appear. The writers' objective very often was to highlight similarities, rather than differences, so as to deny 'the otherness' of the African American.

11 Conclusion

My objective in this paper was to outline how segregation is aesthetically represented in literature. As a complex social and political institution, it penetrated every sphere of public and even private African American life. Thus, it has certainly had an impact on African American culture, arts and literature. To this day, the idea of Segregation Literature as an independent sub-genre has not received much attention. In fact, the first book-length study on this topic had been assembled only in 2010. Thus, there is no generally accepted definition as of yet, but, for the purpose of this paper, I have defined Segregation Literature as encompassing the six categories I outlined in the beginning of this paper.

Due to the limited scope and length of my study, I have focused on three African American writers, selecting one book by each of them. Charles Chesnutt, Richard Wright and Jean Toomer have all contributed immensely to the canon of African American literature. It was the objective in this thesis to find out whether their works could also be ranked among Segregation Literature.

Based on Piper Hendricks and Brian Norman's preliminary argument, I have created six categories, which represent important themes in connection with the institution of Segregation. Each text provides ample evidence for these categories as outlined in the previous chapter. Thus it can be said that all three texts, while approaching the task of representing segregation in very different ways, may be regarded as part of Segregation Literature as defined in this paper.

Violence and Fear, Language, Folklore, Cross-Racial Contacts, Political Critique and Racial Cartographies are important elements of the discussed novels in realizing an aesthetic that represents and at the same time challenges the established order.

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13 Index

- "Avey" 94
 "Becky" 93, 97
 "Blood-Burning Moon" 83, 84, 93, 97, 103, 114
 "Bona and Paul" 81
 "Box Seat" 95
 "Calling Jesus" 99
 "Carma" 90, 97
 "Conversion" 99
 "Georgia Dusk" 83
 "Harvest Song" 81
 "Karintha" 89, 92, 97
 "November Cotton Flower" 90
 "Portrait in Georgia" 83
 "Prayer" 98, 99
 "Rhobert" 87, 94, 95
 "Seventh Street" 86, 87
 "Song of the Son" 94, 97
 access 9, 11, 46, 61, 65, 67, 87, 107
 African American 4, 8, 9, 12, 14, 15, 16, 18, 19, 20, 21, 23, 24, 25, 28, 29, 30, 32, 33, 34, 35, 38, 39, 40, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 48, 49, 51, 58, 59, 70, 71, 81, 84, 86, 87, 89, 90, 91, 92, 94, 96, 97, 98, 99, 101, 102, 105, 106, 107, 108, 109, 112, 113, 114, 115, 116
 ancestry 53, 60, 63, 64, 66, 73, 85, 95, 98, 105, 106, 107
 authenticity 57, 102
 black 4, 7, 8, 10, 11, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 36, 37, 38, 40, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 76, 77, 79, 81, 82, 84, 85, 86, 89, 90, 92, 95, 96, 100, 102, 103, 106, 107
Black Boy 3, 13, 22, 23, 25, 28, 32, 45, 110, 111, 112, 113, 115, 116
 blues 18, 29, 37, 106
Cane 3, 13, 17, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100, 101, 103, 104, 105, 106, 107, 110, 111, 112, 113, 114, 115, 116
 Chesnutt 3, 12, 13, 20, 46, 48, 49, 50, 51, 53, 54, 55, 57, 58, 59, 61, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 74, 75, 76, 106, 107, 108, 109, 110, 111, 112, 113, 114, 115, 116
 child 19, 24, 28, 30, 33, 39, 40, 42, 43, 67, 90, 92, 101
 Civil Rights Movement 4, 11
 color 12, 14, 20, 27, 31, 42, 49, 50, 56, 58, 59, 60, 63, 64, 66, 68, 71, 73, 78, 83, 84, 96, 103, 104, 106, 107, 115
 color line 12, 14, 20, 27, 58, 59, 60, 68, 71, 78, 83, 103, 106, 115
 communication 14, 34, 73, 107
 community 6, 10, 16, 18, 24, 25, 28, 30, 34, 35, 36, 38, 40, 45, 69, 70, 79, 85, 91, 96, 97, 98, 102
 death 24, 31, 55, 57, 61, 67, 84, 85, 86, 89, 90, 96, 103

- dialect 9, 20, 49, 50, 59, 62, 70, 102, 108
- dreams 54, 57, 60, 65, 66, 67, 68, 99, 103, 106
- family 6, 10, 16, 22, 25, 26, 27, 29, 30, 32, 35, 36, 39, 40, 43, 48, 53, 62, 68, 70, 77, 85, 92, 96, 103
- fear 8, 15, 29, 30, 31, 36, 41, 42, 43, 44, 56, 57, 82, 88, 89, 103, 104, 105, 106, 108
- folk culture 94, 96, 107
- Folklore 18, 19, 32, 33, 57, 96, 106, 109, 112, 115
- HBC* 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 75, 76, 106, 107, 108
- hegemonic 14, 34, 36, 45, 100, 102
- heritage 19, 79, 81, 97, 100, 105, 106, 107
- institution 3, 6, 16, 35, 43, 109
- interracial 51, 64, 73, 75, 83, 103, 106
- Kabnis 87, 88, 89, 95, 96, 98, 99, 100, 101, 102, 103, 104, 105, 115
- language 19, 20, 38, 39, 44, 53, 70, 71, 83, 101, 102, 103, 107, 108
- lynching 16, 17, 28, 31, 75, 83, 86, 94, 96, 103, 106
- Mary Turner 88
- migration 87, 101
- Mulatto 22, 59, 77, 90, 103, 115
- nature 55, 60, 82, 91, 101
- Negro 4, 6, 9, 10, 12, 17, 18, 19, 23, 27, 28, 31, 32, 34, 35, 37, 39, 41, 44, 45, 46, 49, 50, 52, 55, 56, 57, 58, 62, 63, 64, 71, 73, 75, 76, 84, 97, 104, 105, 112, 114, 116
- nigger 85, 86, 98
- Nigger 4
- North 40, 41, 48, 49, 52, 70, 72, 81, 82, 87, 95, 96, 101, 110, 112, 113, 115
- oppression 19, 35, 52, 84, 85, 87, 90, 91, 100, 102, 105, 107
- oral tradition 18, 32, 33, 97
- plantation 18, 22, 50, 63, 102, 103
- race 4, 6, 10, 13, 14, 18, 19, 20, 21, 28, 31, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 49, 50, 53, 56, 59, 61, 62, 63, 64, 69, 71, 72, 73, 75, 76, 77, 81, 85, 87, 92, 93, 99, 100, 101, 102, 105, 113
- racial groups 6
- racism 3, 8, 24, 43, 48, 58, 62, 87, 104
- religion
- religious 18, 30, 34, 35, 36, 37, 39, 60, 68, 97, 99, 100, 102, 104, 106
- Rena 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 73, 74, 76, 106, 114, 115, 116
- Richard 3, 12, 13, 18, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 107, 109, 110, 111, 112, 113, 114, 115, 116, 117
- rural 16, 66, 77, 79, 87, 91, 92, 97, 101, 102
- Segregation 3, 4, 6, 12, 13, 14, 15, 17, 20, 24, 25, 33, 34, 40, 42, 43, 44, 95, 107, 109, 110, 111, 112, 113, 116
- Segregation Literature 3, 13, 109
- separation 6, 7, 8, 27

Slavery 3, 4, 114

soul 41, 90, 97, 98, 99

South 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 16, 22, 23, 24,
28, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 37, 40, 41,
44, 45, 49, 50, 52, 53, 55, 60, 63, 64,
65, 66, 67, 70, 72, 74, 79, 81, 82, 83,
86, 87, 88, 90, 91, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97,
99, 100, 102, 103, 104, 105, 111, 115,
116

spiritual 57, 94, 96, 98, 99

stereotypes 19, 20, 49, 50, 58, 59, 63,
71, 89, 102, 105, 107

Toomer 3, 10, 13, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81,
83, 85, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 94, 95, 96,
98, 99, 101, 102, 104, 105, 106, 107,
109, 110, 111, 112, 113, 114, 115,
116

US 4, 8, 11, 32, 45, 59, 96, 103, 110

violence 32, 103

mob violence 11, 15, 16, 17, 20, 28,
29, 30, 33, 39, 41, 42, 56, 57, 82,
83, 84, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92,
95, 100, 101, 104, 106, 108

voice 16, 21, 38, 46, 59, 75, 82, 99,
102, 107

Waldo Frank 78, 79, 81, 104, 116

white 4, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15, 16,
18, 19, 21, 22, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29,
30, 31, 32, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40,
41, 42, 43, 44, 46, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52,
53, 54, 55, 56, 58, 59, 60, 63, 64, 65,
66, 67, 68, 69, 71, 72, 73, 74, 76, 77,
78, 81, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 92,
93, 96, 97, 99, 100, 102, 103, 104,
105, 106, 107, 108

women 10, 16, 53, 54, 57, 84, 89, 90,
96, 105, 106

Wright 3, 12, 13, 18, 22, 23, 24, 25, 28,
29, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 37, 42, 43, 44,
45, 46, 106, 107, 109, 110, 111, 112,
113, 114, 115, 116

14 Abstract in English

This paper deals with the so-called “Segregation Literature”, a sub-genre of African American Literature. The term was introduced in 2010, in a book-length study edited by Brian Norman and Piper Hendricks. The two critics contend that such a widely influential institution as segregation had a great impact on every sphere of African American life, and as such, definitely had an impact on arts and literature. Similar to the slave narratives, Hendricks and Norman created several parameters by which Segregation Literature could be identified, namely racial cartographies, fear and violence and cross-racial contacts.

In this thesis, these parameters are further developed to include folklore, language and education, as well as political critique.

These parameters are then applied to *The House behind the Cedars* by Charles Chesnutt, *Black Boy* by Richard Wright and *Cane* by Jean Toomer. All three texts depict African American life and society at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century.

To establish the sociohistorical context of this thesis, a quick historical introduction to segregation is given, as well as an introduction into the recent field of Segregation Literature. The analysis of the three texts has resulted in a positive answer to the research question, whether these works could be included in a body of Segregation Literature as defined in this thesis. Despite a different approach to the subject, and very different aesthetical means of representation, all three texts sufficiently deal with the concept of segregation to be included.

15 Abstract in German/Deutsche Kurzfassung

Die vorliegende Arbeit befasst sich mit dem so genannten „Segregation Narrative“, einem Sub-Genre der Afro-Amerikanischen Literatur. Die Idee dazu ist relativ jung, weswegen das Gebiet noch weitgehend unerforscht ist. Hier besteht großes Potenzial.

Diese Arbeit baut auf einer 2010 veröffentlichten Studie, herausgegeben von Piper Hendricks und Brian Norman, zur Repräsentation von Segregation in Afro-Amerikanischer Literatur auf. Darin haben Hendricks und Norman die Argumentationskette aufgestellt, dass eine so weitverbreitete Institution wie Segregation, welche Auswirkungen auf jeden Aspekt des Afro-Amerikanischen Lebens hatte, ähnlich wie Sklaverei ebenso Auswirkungen auf Kunst, insbesondere Literatur hatte. Afro-Amerikanisches Leben zwischen 1865 und 1950 darzustellen kommt nicht aus ohne auf die Existenz von Segregation zumindest Bezug zu nehmen.

Hendricks und Norman haben daher erste Parameter aufgestellt, auf Grund dessen Werke verschiedener Autoren unter Segregationsliteratur einordnen. Darunter befinden sich die Darstellung von Gewalt und Angst, die spezifischen geographischen Eigenheiten einer gemeinsamen Landschaft, in der zwei „Rassen“ physisch voneinander getrennt leben, sowie die Art der Darstellung des Kontaktes zwischen diesen „Rassen“. In der vorliegenden Arbeit habe ich diese Kategorien erweitert um die Darstellung einer spezifisch Afro-Amerikanischen Tradition, Folklore, die Behandlung von Sprache, Erziehung und Ausbildung, sowie das Äußern politischer Kritik an den Zuständen.

Ob der beschränkten Länge dieser Arbeit beziehe ich mich in meiner Analyse auf drei spezifische Werke, *The House behind the Cedars* von Charles Chesnutt, *Black Boy* von Richard Wright und *Cane* von Jean Toomer. Diese Texte beschäftigen sich mit Afro-Amerikanischem Leben Ende des Neunzehnten und zu Beginn des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts.

Um den soziohistorischen Kontext zu erstellen, gibt diese Arbeit Einblick sowohl in die geschichtliche Entwicklung von Segregation, sowie in den aktuellen Forschungsstand von Segregationsliteratur. In der erzähltechnischen Analyse anhand der aufgestellten Parameter ergibt sich

daher, dass alle drei Werke sehr wohl unter Segregationsliteratur, so wie sie in dieser Arbeit definiert wird, eingeordnet werden können. Es ergibt daher eine positive Beantwortung der Forschungsfrage, ob die drei Primärtexte unter dem Begriff Segregationsliteratur eingeordnet werden können.

Lebenslauf

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Sprachen:

Deutsch, Englisch, Französisch, Spanisch.