

NEW YORK: «THE NEW FRONTIER»

MARÍA DEL MAR GALLEGO
Universidad de Sevilla

The dream of an ideal community in which Afro-Americans could live in harmony and equality with whites had been long-cherished within the Afro-American cultural stock. This dream seemed to come true in New York during the twenties, period in which it became the social and intellectual centre of black America and where racial friction was almost non-existent. In this sense, New York was acknowledged as «the new frontier», that is, a city that offered open and wide possibilities for Afro-Americans as far as personal, social and even cultural self-realization was concerned. This potentiality brought about irreversible changes that challenged white assumptions on Afro-American identity and culture to the point that these were re-defined by blacks on their own terms from then onwards. Clearly it marked the end of an era in racial relationships and the beginning of another brighter one.

Hence the symbolism of the frontier attributed to New York during this period reveals the main targets that the Afro-American community had in mind which were reflected onto its literature: in the first place, their opposition to racist and derogatory images that catalogued them as rural, and therefore, unable to equal urban white inhabitants and their superior social status; secondly, and a consequence of the first one, the establishment of Afro-American culture as part of the canonized American culture following the white paradigm of «urban-cultural identification» and, finally, the patent confirmation of the existence and authenticity of an Afro-American conscience, unique but, at the same time, wholly compatible with white mainstream ideology.

Focusing on the first objective or the transition from rural to the affirmation of the urban character of Afro-Americans, many writers of the period refer to it. Especially revealing is Charles S. Johnson's account that actually opens with this contradictory statement: «By tradition and probably by temperament the Negro is a rural type.»¹ The

1. Charles S. Johnson, «The New Frontage on American Life», *The New Negro*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1992), 279.

critic here is undoubtedly stating two important facts: the former would respond to a historical truth about the black population mainly located in the agricultural South due to the enslaving tradition and the latter would specify the racist conception of blacks as intellectually limited and thus adequate only to perform tasks related to manual labor.

However, he immediately goes on with a relation of different black individuals that make the decision to «go up North», that is, to leave their actual surroundings and look for a better fortune in the Northern cities. The result of this choice is that, as he himself affirms, «a new type of Negro is evolving—a city Negro» (285). In fact, his intention is to describe this new type and its import in connection to the alteration of the social and economic milieu, that he summarizes in «there is a reorganization of attitudes. There is a racial as well as a social disorientation» (287). These statements corroborate the fact that the historical migrations of blacks during this period signalled a transition between a traditional and agricultural way of living to a city-oriented one, which also altered the prevailing value system.

This sense of newness, of novelty is expressed by very different characters that flee to the city in order to escape from the restricted life they lead in the South. The motivations in each case differ but all of them search for the liberation the city seems to symbolise. At this point it seems interesting to take the protagonists of two well-known novels of the epoch, *Quicksand* by Nella Larsen and *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* by James Weldon Johnson, as basic examples to depict this transition from rural to urban life in literary terms.

Both characters, Helga and the ex-colored man respectively, feel the compelling need to forsake their Southern location due to the fact that both of them are not integrated in it, although their motives are quite different: while the ex-colored man escapes from the community of Jacksonville because, being a mulatto, he cannot identify with an only black part of himself; Helga's flight is due to the spiritual and moral narrowness of the Southern school where she teaches, Naxos, that she describes as following: «This great community ... was no longer a school. It had grown into a machine» (4). Therefore in both characters there is a previous feeling of confinement, as if the constraints of their Southern lives had grown almost unbearable for them and the prospect offered by the «city experience» could liberate them from the repressive lives that they are forced to live in the South.

This release is viewed upon by both characters as an internal modification that makes them feel at home for the first time. This is Helga's account of the fresh feeling she experiences when arriving in the city: «...there came to her a queer feeling of enthusiasm, as if she were tasting some agreeable, exotic food... And, oddly enough, she felt, too, that she had come home. She, Helga Crane, who had no home» (30). The same feeling of novelty is testified in the ex-colored man's case: «My blood ran quicker and I felt that I was beginning to live» (66). So, they almost coincide in the way they internalize this experience as if it were a rebirth, a new chance to start all over again.

This notion of the rebirth is widely applied to New York during the twenties

connected to the idea of the frontier. Obviously, it is not only related to individual changes, but, on the contrary, these individual transformations are representative of a widespread movement that regarded New York as the new «home» for Afro-Americans, the substitute of the paradise on earth, where all things seemed possible. The identification of New York as the land of opportunity and freedom allowed for a whole set of associated images such as «frontier», «paradise» and «home» that created high expectations about what was happening in this city and contributed to the founding of a large and strong Afro-American community in Harlem.

This newly-found optimism in the chance that New York could represent for blacks is also reflected in both novels. Helga summarizes her first year in the city with very telling words: «New York she had found not so unkind, not so unfriendly. There she had been happy, and secured work, had made acquaintances and another friend. Again she had had that strange transforming experience ...that magic sense of having come home. Harlem ...had welcomed her» (43). Apart from its optimistic tone, this passage is also noticeable because it relates Helga's «transforming experience» with her ascent of social status due to the fact that now, working in an insurance company, she has become part of the upper black middle-class.

The same enthusiasm is revealed in the ex-colored man's portrayal of his life in the city: it «completely dazzled and dazed me. I felt positively giddy» (72). He also thinks that he has finally come home and is decided to stay at all costs. The hopefulness that gets through in both novels articulates the Afro-American desire to build in New York an urban ideal community that could finally embody their social ambitions. In order to do so, Southern traditions had to be systematically forgotten or destroyed, as Johnson puts it: «Old traditions are being shaken and rooted up by the percussive of new ideas» (296). This urge to break with the past is understandable in a generation that is still closely related to slavery times, especially in the South where certain racist practices are still alive.

The need to do away with the past and its manifestations in the South is the impulse that moves both characters to feel contempt towards their Southern communities. For instance, Helga's thoughts seem to echo this idea: «Soon she was able to reflect with a flicker of amusement on that constant feeling of humiliation and inferiority which had encompassed her in Naxos. Her New York friends looked with contempt and scorn on Naxos and all his works. This gave Helga a pleasant sense of avengement» (43). This feeling of revenge is clearly Helga's excuse to actually feel blameless and, therefore, to finally be capable of forgetting her bitter past experiences while in confinement in the Southern school.

Likewise, the ex-colored man voices his conviction of the importance of a black middle-class that he defends on the grounds of its being «well-disposed towards the whites and always willing to meet them more than half-way» (58). This defence of an educated middle-class that lives mainly in the city connects then the rejection of the Southern way of life with the acceptance of the urban community as the ideal location

for Afro-American social and cultural development. In this sense, it is necessary to link both the social ambitions that attracted Afro-Americans to New York during this period with their claims for a place within accepted cultural canons.

As above stated, the cultural target was another crucial objective of the twenties. Obviously, it is important to mention that both cultural and social aims were intimately interrelated to the extent that it is impossible to analyze one without taking into account the other. That is to say, Afro-Americans in their effort to become urban refused any ties with the past and, significantly enough, with the slavery tradition and its extant forms such as slave songs and the like. As Johnson continues, Afro-Americans chose to «rule out the Sorrow Songs as the product of ignorant slaves, taboo dialect as incorrect English, and the priceless folk lore as the uncultured expression of illiterates» (297). This passage comprises the very rejection of all slaves' tradition which is termed as «ignorant», «incorrect» and «illiterate», clearly stating the abysmal difference between those and the new generation that, by opposition, were defined as «literate» according to white cultural standards.

The critic Charles Scruggs examines the role that another critic, H. L. Mencken, played in the advancement of the literary movement known as the «Harlem Renaissance» affirming that «he personified an idea of the city for them—the city as a community of sophisticated men and women» (86).² The adjective «sophisticated» is charged with a long list of connotations, namely all those referring to highly educated urban individuals. What is important here is the fact that Afro-Americans assumed a racist idea—that blacks were rural people and thus devoid of any «sophistication» or education—and turned it around to take the maximum advantage of it. Consequently, by accepting the white measure of education and literacy mostly present in urban life, blacks attained for the first time in history the possibility of entering the cultural and intellectual sphere as equals to the whites.

Along the way, they sacrificed their own tradition—that coming from slavery—in order to secure a place within the standardized white culture. The result seemed, nevertheless, fruitful due to the fact that New York, and concretely Harlem, became commonly acknowledged as a place of cultural effervescence, of cultural metamorphosis, what Locke called «a spiritual Coming of Age» (16) in *The New Negro* (1925), which became its literary pamphlet. Actually, this compilation set the tone of the cultural coming of age for the Afro-American community and established black New York—Harlem—as the active centre of this rebirth of intellectual exchange between both races.

Although bound to criticism for many reasons, the main achievement of this literary revival was precisely the acquisition of the right of literary self-expression. Up

2. For an insightful discussion of the significance of H. L. Mencken and his relationship with the black writers of the twenties regarding their urban tendency, see Charles Scruggs, *The Sage in Harlem* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1984).

to that moment, Afro-American literary production had been very limited in scope and audience due to the fact that it was considered «mere propaganda.» The extensive research of many scholars has demonstrated in later years that there was much more to it than that, but, at the time, Afro-Americans rejected it in favour of an integration within dominant cultural parameters in order to gain articulation or what Paul Kellog defines as «an adventure in self-expression.»³ Following the myth of the frontier, New York became the nucleus of a radical attempt to appropriate the cultural tools that belonged to the white canon to make use of them for the benefit of the Afro-American city community.

In accordance with this model, «the city of arts» would replace old oral traditions and culture would be the only standard to differentiate men and women. Certainly this was a way of subverting the racist code based on racial differences by proposing a unique classification of human beings according to intellectual abilities. Likewise, this cultural paradigm would serve to create a common bond within the Afro-American community because blacks' «spiritual coming of age» would also lead to the affirmation of their own worth and thus of their right to define themselves for the first time re-inventing their individual and collective identities.

The re-definition of an Afro-American identity from their own point of view was one of the crucial demands above mentioned. Up to that moment, they had never been given the chance to counteract a whole series of racist images that presented a quite debased version of black identity. The new cultural atmosphere offered them the adequate framework to portray the reality of their lives and to propose a new identity that would eradicate all preceding misconceptions. Helga expresses this with «her joy at seeming to belong somewhere. For she considered that she had, as she put it, 'found herself'» (44). That is to say, Afro-Americans felt for the first time the satisfaction of asserting their individuality and, closely knitted to it, of proclaiming the importance of living in community sharing common experiences and a collective conscience.

Yet, despite this collective identity, an unresolved conflict between two opposite forces lies underneath: on the one hand, the search for self-expression from within was one of the *raison d'être* of the «Harlem Renaissance», but, on the other, blacks' desire of integration in the white world seemed to block out any possibility to create a separate Afro-American community with a distinct identity. Actually, this was one of the focus of major tension during the twenties for intellectuals who felt torn between their allegiance to their race and the need to express this allegiance in a way understandable to their white audience and acceptable within white social and cultural standards.

This conflict is also reflected in the two novels alluded as instances. In *Quicksand* Helga characterizes her «New York friends» through a character called Anne who, using Helga's words, «was obsessed by the race problem»: «She hated white people with a

3. Paul U. Kellog, «The Negro Pioneers» also in *The New Negro*, 275.

deep and burning hatred... But she aped their clothes, their manners, and their gracious ways of living. While proclaiming loudly the undiluted good of all things Negro, she yet disliked the songs, the dances, and the softly blurred speech of the race» (48). It is not surprising that Anne, as representative of that educated black middle class, despises exactly the main traits of the black race while she imitates the white code of behaviour. The same motive was implied in the ex-colored man's defence of the privileged middle class previously commented.

Indeed, this is, perhaps, the most important criticism imputed to the twenties and, especially, to their intellectual leaders and writers. According to many scholars, the decadence of their literary and cultural movement was mainly due to the lack of a clear resolution to this conflict. As a result of this, the first years of optimism were followed by a feeling of disillusionment and loss, that Johnson depicts as follows: «There comes the testing of long cherished desires, the thirst for forbidden fruit—and disillusionment, partial or complete, almost as inevitably» (288). It seems that, following a first moment of optimism and hopefulness about the possibilities suggested by the cultural and social revolution they proposed, Afro-American intellectuals realized that it was an impossible dream.

The promising future of racial and cultural harmony soon turned to be only a passing illusion and the potentiality and space that New York seemed to offer them was replaced by a sense of confinement within the restricted boundaries of Harlem. This trope of confinement is also pointed out very appropriately in both novels: «My New York was limited to ten blocks; the boundaries were Sixth Avenue from Twenty-third to Thirty-third Streets, with the cross streets one block to the West. Central Park was a distant forest, and the lower part of the city a foreign land»(82-3)—is the ex-colored man's version of New York. The same holds true about Helga's report: «But, while the continuously gorgeous panorama of Harlem fascinated her, thriller her, the sober mad rush of white New York failed entirely to stir her . . . For her this Harlem was enough» (45). Hence New York and its frontier spirit of independence gets crushed under the pressure of racial confrontation that makes it develop into a sort of restrained space where Afro-Americans feel imprisoned as they did before in the South.

This sentiment of hopelessness is also noticed in both novels, in which the protagonists try to find comfort to their loss of ideals by flying away from New York. So the ex-colored man decides to go to Europe justifying his determination with the following sentence: «I felt like one fleeing from a horrible nightmare» (90). He clearly states the impossibility to cope with his life in Harlem which he also identifies with the «lower world» (84), an underground world in which he suffocates. With this, he attempts to adapt to a white identity in Europe crossing the so-called «color line.» But this undertaking is equally unsuccessful and he comes back to the United States to «pass» for white definitely giving up his black identity.

Very similar is Helga's trajectory because she also escapes to Copenhagen to forget racial prejudices. Her flight is also propelled by her visit to a cabaret (easily

identifiable with the lower world) in which she witnesses a sort of bacchanalian orgy that makes her rebel: «she wasn't ...a jungle creature» (59). This imagery harmonizes with that used by the ex-colored man previously and reflects an opposite attitude towards New York from the frontier myth: New York has been transformed from a paradise, a land of opportunity and freedom to a kind of hell, where individuals are unable to cope with the pressure they live under, and where, unfortunately, racial tension is still present.

Although Helga eventually returns to the States too, she immediately gets married to a rural priest and goes back to live in the South. The two resolutions offered in these novels are not very promising indeed: either a total identification with the white culture forsaking distinct Afro-Americans traits or a return to the ancient traditions of the «good old South.» Both of them are only different ways of escaping from the conflicting situation of blacks during the twenties who tried to reconcile two pulling forces: the debt to their supporting black community and the clash with the dominant canonization of white culture. There seems to be no way out of the vicious circle in which Afro-Americans felt entrapped.

Therefore, the myth of New York as «the new frontier» loses importance in light of the uncertain resolution of the conflicts it itself creates. At the beginning of the twenties, Afro-Americans thought of it as their «promised land», where impracticable dreams became tangible and racial differences would be erased. However, this hope diminished and finally vanished because of the opposition between the ideals that Afro-Americans cherished and the impossibility of their actual realization. In this way, the paradise became hellish, devilish and the day turned to night. Despite all this, the twenties set the bases for a new urban Afro-American community that would continue to fight for its personal, social and cultural legitimate rights allowing for the literary development that would flourish especially in the fifties and sixties.

WORKS CITED

- JOHNSON, JAMES WELDON. *The Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man*. 1912; rpt. New York: Penguin Books, 1990.
- LARSEN, NELLA. *Quicksand and Passing*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1986.
- LOCKE, ALAIN, ed. *The New Negro*. 1925; rpt. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1992.
- SCRUGGS, CHARLES. *The Sage in Harlem*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1984.