

National and Kapodistrian University of Athens  
Department of English Language and Literature  
M.A. Programme “English Studies: Literature and Culture”  
“Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Anglophone Literature and Culture”  
2021-2023

“As we Dwell through this Concrete Hell, Callin’ it Home”: Racism and  
Empowerment from Harlem to Hip-Hop

Elpida Lourandou

563122100008

Supervisor: Dr Stamatina Dimakopoulou

Supervising committee:

Dr. Stamatina Dimakopoulou

Dr. Asimina Karavanta

Dr. Konstantinos Blatanis

Date of Submission: February 10, 2023

Declaration: This submission is my own work. Any quotation from, or description of, the work of others is acknowledged herein by reference to the sources, whether published or unpublished.

## Table of Contents

Table of Contents.....	i
Abstract.....	ii
INTRODUCTION.....	1
1. INTERNALIZED RACISM, COLORISM AND INSTITUTIONALIZED RACISM FROM JAMES WELDON JOHNSON TO KENDRICK LAMAR.....	4
2. WHITENESS FROM HARLEM TO HIP-HOP: INVISIBLE, VIOLENT, OMNIPRESENT.....	17
3. “TRUST, IN NO ONE BUT US”: THINKING EMPOWERMENT FROM HARLEM TO HIP HOP.....	29
CONCLUSION.....	43
Works Cited.....	44

## Abstract

This dissertation sets out to examine the co-articulation of black liberation, the critique of internalized racism and black empowerment through a range of cultural forms, namely, novels from the Harlem Renaissance and contemporary hip-hop artists. The literary texts I will be focusing on are George Schuyler's 1931 *Black No More*, James Weldon Johnson's 1912 *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, Wallace Thurman's 1929 *The Blacker the Berry* and Octavia Butler's 1979 *Kindred*, and the hip-hop songs are Wu-Tang Clan's 1997 "A Better Tomorrow", Tabib Kweli's and Jean Grae's 2004 "Black Girl Pain", Dr. Dre's 2015 "Animals", Inspectah Deck's 2003 "City High", Kendrick Lamar's 2015 "Complexion" and "The Blacker the Berry", and Nas' 2002 "I Can". In terms of the literary texts, I aim to focus on the ways in which they portray the African American experience as one of great complexity and ambiguity. Instead of presenting the Harlem Renaissance subject as an idealized New Negro, as "[liberated] psychologically, socially, and even politically – from the denigration of the slave past" (Hutchinson 30), I aim for an approach which showcase the struggle experienced by said subject to adhere to the arbitrary regulations of a fundamentally discriminatory society. An initially marginalized music genre that emerged in the Bronx borough of New York City, hip-hop music has been viewed as a continuation of the Harlem Renaissance legacy. Against this backdrop, I aim to explore the dichotomy of racism and empowerment that is prominent in the texts of the Harlem Renaissance, by focusing more closely on the institutionalization of racism and how it is constructed in inner-city America. Ultimately, I aim to argue that although, from Harlem Renaissance literature to hip-hop music, internalized racism and black liberation appear to co-exist, the sub-genre of conscious hip-hop music – without shying away from the harsh realities and inner struggles of African American people - ultimately provides a more empowering view of the black experience through demonstrating a stronger sense of awareness of the inherently racist system, optimism for black progress and will to take more concrete steps in order to make change a real possibility. In conclusion, through my analysis of these two different African American art forms, I aim to showcase the complexities of

the black experience and the persistence of a prominent dilemma between struggling with self-acceptance and challenging white oppression.

As we dwell through this concrete hell, callin' it home  
Mama say, Take your time, young man, and build your own  
Don't wind up like your old dad  
Still searchin' for them glory days he never had

Wu-Tang Clan, "A Better Tomorrow"

## INTRODUCTION

The Harlem Renaissance was an African American cultural movement that started in the late 1910s and continued until the 1930s. It is widely regarded as a “golden age” (Orr 8) for African American artists and a defining part of African American history and literary tradition. The Great Migration, the movement of millions of African Americans from the Southern to the Northern United States during the Jim Crow era, was instrumental in facilitating the growth of such an influential movement. Even though some Harlem Renaissance writers favored a “deliberately subversive and anti-didactic art for art’s sake philosophy” (Desmarais & Weir 519), the movement was at its core a political one, with a strong emphasis on redefining and reconstructing the idea of blackness in a predominantly white and racially prejudiced society. The emerging idea of the New Negro, the new, liberated and independent black subject “signaled an age of redefinition” (Jenkins 65) for black artists and intellectuals. Part of that redefinition was the realistic portrayal of the African American experience, which was at that point either underrepresented or misrepresented, and included narratives that tackled issues of internalized racism and colorism. Although the narratives contain explicit instances in which internalized racism is presented, it is far more challenging and more important to explore its more nuanced occurrences, which is what this dissertation will attempt to do.

After having explored the theme of internalized racism in the Harlem Renaissance era, it is significant to highlight its existence in contemporary African American art. Harlem Renaissance lasted merely two decades, its legacy lived on and inspired the development of subsequent Black movements. Hip-hop music should be regarded as a continuation of the legacy of the Harlem Renaissance. The Harlem artists had lived through the Jim Crow era, whereas hip-hop artists have lived and are living through the realities of mass incarceration and police brutality. Therefore, both of these generations of black artists lived through systemic racist practices in times that shaped their worldview and perspective. Exploring the connection between the Harlem Renaissance and hip-hop, Reiland Rabaka argued that both generations “understood themselves to be rupturing their relationships with what they found to be the constricting public image and conservative politics” (Rabaka 57) of the generation

that came before them. Consequently, there is a clear connection between the New Negro – Old Negro division of the Harlem Renaissance and the clear distinctions that are witnessed between hip-hop subgenres. As Rabaka argues:

Who can deny that in many ways “pop” rap, or what we currently call “commercial” rap music, and hip hop culture seem to mirror the white folk-friendly, moderate Old Negro aesthetic, where the “political” or “conscious” rap school almost patently parallels the black radical and more militant “New Negro” or “Niggerati” aesthetic of the Harlem Renaissance – not to mention the “Black Aesthetic” of the Black Arts Movement? (Rabaka 197)

Moreover, Marvin J. Gladney also states that there is a link between the Black Arts and hip-hop music, with the two artforms presented as sharing “creative and ideological connections” (Gladney 299) with each other. Another significant common element between Harlem and hip-hop is the fact that the socially conscious and political aspect of both movements, though extremely vital, is often dismissed; Harlem artists are usually perceived as mere aestheticists, whereas hip-hop music is often reduced to a genre that glorifies violence and materialism. Therefore, both art forms have been marginalized, undermined and reduced to one aspect of their being. Additionally, I argue that the hip-hop movement is not merely a continuation of the legacy of Harlem, but rather a development. Even though Black struggle and internalized racism appear strongly in the works of hip-hop artists, it is more commonly done with a stronger sense of self-awareness and awareness of discriminatory practices, far greater than the one expressed by their Harlem counterparts. This is a more optimistic view regarding race in the black community, since there is a clear historical distance between the two movements. A more empowering view of the black self in hip-hop is a sign of progress. The sub-category of hip-hop music that will be analyzed in this dissertation is what has been referred to as “conscious rap”, which is defined by Cary Nelson as “a socially minded, often radical, black nationalist strain of hip-hop” (Nelson 644 ) that emerged in the mid-1980s, as opposed to the earlier forms of hip-hop that did not have political undertones and were instead more commercial and festive in nature.

My dissertation will be divided into three chapters. The first one will tackle the themes of colorism, internalized racism, as well as the institutionalization of racist

practices as seen in both the Harlem Renaissance novels and the hip-hop songs I have chosen to analyze. The second one will explore the specific ways in which whiteness – as ‘invisible’ and as violence – operates in order to subjugate black individuals and the extent to which it does so. The third and final chapter examines the concept of empowerment and black liberation.

## 1. INTERNALIZED RACISM, COLORISM AND INSTITUTIONALIZED RACISM FROM JAMES WELDON JOHNSON TO KENDRICK LAMAR

Internalized racism has been a consistent theme in African American narratives for centuries. In sociologist Karen D. Pyke's terms: "the individual inculcation of the racist stereotypes, values, images, and ideologies perpetuated by the White dominant society about one's racial group, leading to feelings of self-doubt, disgust, and disrespect for one's race and/or oneself" (Pyke 553). This internalization of feelings of inferiority by historically oppressed groups can manifest itself in a variety of ways, sometimes explicitly but mostly in a rather subtle fashion. While exploring this important aspect of the Black experience as white scholars, it is significant to point out that, as Pyke emphasizes, internalized racism "[is not] the consequence of any weakness, ignorance...or other shortcoming of the oppressed" (Pyke 553), but rather a cruel consequence that is an integral part of any oppressive system.

James Weldon Johnson, in his 1912 *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, tells the complex story of an unnamed mixed-race narrator who decides to live his life as a white man. The namelessness of the mixed race character who is colonized by colorism and self-loathing is rather intriguing, since it points to the universality of his condition as well as to a deliberate dehumanization. Even though in several parts of the novel the narrator experiences inner conflict regarding his mixed identity, he does not fully embrace the Tragic Mulatto stereotype, the "historical stereotype of the damned mixed-blood [character]" (Joseph 40) that is constantly torn between two opposing worlds and two contrasting racial identities. On the contrary, he appears to have unconsciously rejected his Black identity since his childhood, years before he articulated his decision to live as a white man. While recounting the systematic torment that Black students at his school were constantly subjected to, he maintains a rather indifferent stance by simply describing the verbal abuse which included racial slurs and racially charged imagery. He indirectly appears to perceive himself as a mere observer of the events that transpire in front of him and does not attempt to critically evaluate the situation or even acknowledge the fact that his fellow Black classmates are victims of racial discrimination. However, when one of the Black students decides to fight back, the narrator immediately inserts himself into the story both linguistically and literally. He uses the pronoun "we" in reference to the other

white students, thus establishing himself as an agent in the story and he finally takes a transparent stand, in favor of the white students. From a mere observer, he suddenly becomes an agent by describing how “*we* ran after them pelting them with stones” (Johnson 13).

After the event, while talking to his mother, he uses a racial slur to refer to the black students, fully oblivious of his mother’s – and consequently, his – black identity. Despite the fact that he is a mixed race subject, his blackness, though invisible to him, is clearly noticeable to other people in his environment. His teacher and the other black students of his school directly acknowledge his blackness, but to him, the very recognition constitutes a shocking revelation. He starts looking at his black mother’s face “searching for defects” (16), when on the contrary he starts “becoming conscious” (15) of his own beauty, thus embracing the myth of the exoticized racially ambiguous body. The only time in which the narrator favors blackness is to glamorize its exoticization. He is staring at the mirror for hours, clearly in awe of his characteristics and describes his blackness in favorable terms, referring to “the softness and glossiness of [his] dark hair” (15), thus reducing his black identity to mere physical characteristics. As the novel progresses, he continues to undermine his blackness, even in moments where, if analyzed on a surface level, could be perceived as instances of self-acceptance. He cites music performed by black artists as one of the cultural forms “which refute the oft advanced theory that they are an absolutely inferior race” (84), thus perpetuating two racist notions: that black subjects need to prove that they are not inferior and that their worth lies in their ability to entertain a predominantly white society. He refers to his music training, which allowed him to become familiar with the Black community of Jacksonville as his “entrance into the race” (72), a sentiment that points to his problematic relationship with black music and his assumed position as an outsider to the black community, someone that had to be initiated in it rather than someone that is a natural member of it. Moreover, his already problematic acknowledgment of the artistic excellence of black music is refuted, since he begins profiting off slave music – which he refers to as “material which no one had yet touched” (14) – while simultaneously undermining its value.

The narrator’s internalized racism does not solely manifest itself in terms of his self-image. Instead, similarly to white artists, he actively contributes to the exploitation of

Black art forms. However, the most striking illustration of the narrator's internalized racism appears towards the end of the novel, when he witnesses a lynching. Even though he does not react strongly to this violent hate crime, he appears to be essentially approaching it from an outsider's perspective, echoing the schoolyard scene at the beginning of the novel. Despite his utter revulsion and shock, certain phrases suggest a clear detachment from the horrors that he is witnessing, "...the impression made upon me was that everything was being done in quite an orderly manner" (182). It is clearly absurd and insensitive to describe a public execution as orderly and this is not a term that would be ordinarily used by someone that is truly affected emotionally. It is unclear if Johnson deliberately aimed at exposing this profound alienation as an indictment of internalized racism. Even though his choice of words may seem sarcastic, if analyzed in the general context of the narrator's oblivion and ignorance, it is rather strange and insensitive to fixate on the orderly manner of the execution. This apathetic approach to a violent crime further highlights the emotional detachment experienced by the narrator. As Samuele F. S. Pardini pointed out, "the crime worked as a counter-epiphany for him" (86), causing him to choose to fully live his life as a white man, instead of fighting to eliminate racial prejudice. As horrified as he is by the lynching, he accepts it as a plausible reality and even refuses to acknowledge the prevalence of racism in the South, as is seen through his stance towards Southern white people that he describes as: "...in many respects a great people. Looked from a certain point of view, they are picturesque" (Johnson 185). Paradoxically enough, he understands the power that race divisions have as something pragmatic, but at the same time, he makes the choice to live as the member of another race, which ironically points to the arbitrariness of race as a concept. These contradictions are not apparent to him, because he has fully assumed a position of inferiority. He is, as Autumn Womack argues, trapped "...in his own kind of permanent racial purgatory" (Womack 108). Steven Wandler views the narrator's choice to live as a white man as a decision "...made from...a cold, practical perspective: the stakes in being black are simply too high to justify the gamble" (Wandler 51). He is so detached from his black identity that the abandonment of his community is seen by him as a mere practicality instead of a life altering decision.

His fleeing to New York is extremely interesting from a historical perspective, since the lynchings in the South led African Americans to the Great Migration. As Colin

Webster writes “lynching encouraged migration and at the same time was a violent response to it” (Webster 75). It is quite ironic that many black people that fled the South became the artists and writers of the Harlem Renaissance and celebrated a rebirth of their identity, whereas the fictionalized autobiographical self in Johnson’s narrative experienced even further self-loathing. This is quite disturbing and problematizes the idea of the New Negro of the Harlem Renaissance, a subject that is liberated and willing to celebrate their black identity, free of any literal or figurative chains. The narrator’s instinctive – or even conscious - self-identification as a white person during his childhood years, his later adoption of racial slurs, and his subsequent conscious choice to live his life as a white man all speak of internalized racism as a pre-determined inherent characteristic, a largely problematic idea that fails to confront the deliberate and consistent overrepresentation of whiteness through cultural and social forms and practices.

Wallace Thurman’s 1929 *The Blacker the Berry* is an interesting contrast to Johnson’s text. In Thurman’s novel, internalized racism is not demonstrated by a biracial man; instead it is being represented by a young black woman. Along with internalized racism, the novel tackles the issue of colorism, which Marlese Durr and Shirley Ann Hill define as “intra-racial discrimination based on skin color” (Durr & Hill 46). Since the era of slavery, class divisions among African American people were also established on the basis of skin complexion since black people with white ancestry tended to receive greater privileges, especially in the South. Inculcating colorist ideas into the mind of the oppressed black subject was deliberate on the part of the slave owners. Willie Lynch, a slave owner proposed an infamous theory, which is analyzed by Bernard Grenway as follows:

The objective was not to focus too much on physical control, but to pit slaves against each other, manipulate the slave’s confidence, and reduce the slave’s desire for education. Lynch suggested that slave owners should separate the slaves by way of complexion, thereby constituting a caste system that held dark skinned Blacks at the bottom of the hierarchy. Such actions would propel the slave into an unwinnable battle against himself and shift the struggle for power away from the master. (Grenway 56)

The propagation of colorist ideas was a well-calculated process that aimed at extinguishing the sense of unity and solidarity in the African American community, and at forcing the oppressed black subject to view his/herself as the enemy, instead of the oppressive white society. Colorism survives and has since taken different forms. Eurocentric beauty standards have been consistently promoted in mainstream media, complicating black women's self-image and sense of self-worth. Emma Lou, the protagonist of Thurman's novel, is established early on as a black person that experiences feelings of alienation, both in her school environment, by being the only black girl, and her family, by being the family member with the darkest skin complexion. As opposed to the unnamed narrator in Johnson's novel, Emma Lou's internalized racial prejudice is presented as an acquired characteristic that she has come to adopt after being mistreated and alienated. Consequently, she appears to have internalized arbitrary policies that dominate her life and disregard her black identity, such as the rule that obliged all students to wear white clothes in graduation. She does not question these regulations; her general frustration does not stem from her rejection of a dominant white society, but rather from her inability to fully conform to these rules as a black person.

She makes several attempts to fit in white society and, while referring to her feelings of internalized racial prejudice, she nonchalantly states that she "regretted her darkness" (Thurman 21). This interesting choice of words is quite paradoxical, since the notion of regret is closely connected to aspects of one's life that are directly under their control, unlike the color of one's skin. It could be argued that the choice 'regret' in relation to blackness - or in this case darkness - sets a non-white identity as otherness, as something that needs to and can be altered. It is a figurative embrace of the white as the default, and every other identity that does not conform to it as something to be assimilated by it. However, the Willie Lynch theory has not been accepted by Emma Lou solely in terms of what is perceived by her to be her own inferiority; she also has incorporated colorist thinking while interacting with other black people that she deems inferior. This is demonstrated through her thoughts regarding Hazel Mason, a dark-skinned black girl that she rejects as a possible companion. She refers to her as "flagrantly inferior" (42), and "a typical southern darky" (42), while connecting her blackness to her lower social class. In fact, one of

the few instances in the novel where Emma Lou displays a sense of confidence regarding her appearance is when she juxtaposes herself to Hazel:

There was no sense in any one having a face as ugly as Hazel's, and Emma Lou thanked her stars that though she was black, her skin was not rough and pimply, nor was her hair kinky, nor were her nostrils completely flattened out until they seemed to spread all over her face.  
(43)

This description echoes racially charged stereotypical images that are very often used in anti-black propaganda. Her rejection of Hazel mirrors the rejection that is constantly experienced by Emma Lou herself, which points to an instinctive appropriation on the part of the oppressed subject, of tactics of exclusion. This foreshadows a potential continuous practice of intra-racial forms of discrimination, which is later seen through Emma Lou's rejection of a black sorority that she aspired to be a part of, due to the complexion of her skin.

George S. Schuyler's *Black No More*, published just two years after Thurman's novel, uses the fantasy genre in order to probe the issue of internalized racism. The novel is clearly satirical in nature and takes place in a world where it is possible for black people to change their color to white. The main character, Max Disher, is a rather cartoony and exaggerated version of a black man who experiences self-hatred and aspires to – both literally and metaphorically – be integrated into white society. He is infatuated with a white woman whose father is a part of a racist organization and marries her upon becoming white, evidently signifying that he feels no connection or responsibility to his own community. However, even though the character of Max does pose several interesting questions regarding internalized racial prejudice, interestingly enough, he is not the only character that is worth examining. In the case of Johnson's and Thurman's novel, both main characters harbored feelings of inferiority early on in their lives and did not appear to be able to make any concrete attempts in order to accept their black identity, and Schuyler's Max Disher is similar to them in that regard.

However, what happens when there is a character such as Dr. Crookman that simultaneously accepts and rejects his black identity? Dr. Crookman, the inventor of the supposed cure that makes black people look white, paradoxically enough, "prided

himself above all on being a great lover of his race” (Schuyler 35). The so-called cure that he invents is perceived by him to be a vehicle that will allow black people to prosper in the world, “by depriving them of their racial characteristics” (35). Even if it is assumed that his goal is progress and not profit, which is largely debatable, since he will directly benefit financially from his endeavor, his invention stems from his full and utter acceptance of racist ideals. He essentially does not believe that black progress is a possibility, since his idea of black progress is turning white; in his view, black people cannot prosper by building their own legacy but instead, they have to fully adapt to the rules of white society. Even though this idea could be perceived as a recognition of the limitations imposed by the system, the fact that the solution to these limitations is a submission to the system is largely problematic. Crookman’s supposed love for his race is satirized in regard to his marriage to “a white girl with remote Negro ancestry” (35), a subtle allusion to his colorism. However, this is not the sole allusion to colorism in the novel. Minnie, Max’s light skin girlfriend is described as being “stuck on her color” (3), connecting her sense of entitlement to her light skin complexion. This connection is challenging both on the part of the narrator as well as in terms of the character of Minnie. This arbitrary connection on the part of the narrator between one’s sense of entitlement and their skin complexion is highly problematic, especially when the person in question is a light skin black person. It normalizes the narrative according to which skin complexion differences among the black community are a legitimate force of division. On the other hand, if this connection is to be perceived as genuine, that is, if the character of Minnie truly derives her sense of entitlement from her skin color, this entitlement constitutes a tangible manifestation of the harmfulness of colorist ideas.

After having explored the theme of internalized racism in the Harlem Renaissance era, it is significant to highlight its existence in contemporary African American art, namely, in the sub-genre of conscious hip-hop music. Wu-Tang Clan’s 1997 song “A Better Tomorrow” directly addresses the harsh realities of African American life in the projects, and directly speaks of institutionalized racist practices and its effects on black communities. As opposed to the protagonists of the Harlem Renaissance novels who appear to have embraced to a large extent stereotypes regarding their identity, very often without even questioning or attempting to trace the ways in which these stereotypes were constructed, the hip-hop artists of this song, while acknowledging

their predicament, display a greater sense of awareness as to how this predicament came to exist. In his verse, Inspectah Deck raps:

Vivid thoughts, Devils resort to trick knowledge

They kick garbage, lust for chicks and quick dollars

I know the pain the game bring, I did the same thing

Spaced out in the staircase, performin' a sting (13-16)

This verse underlines how the reality of life in the projects is ridden with drug dealing and paints the picture of a predicament that is almost impossible to rise above. At the same time, these lines acknowledge that black people are put in this bleak predicament by social structures and ideologies that preserve white supremacy and seek to perpetuate class distinctions between black and white people. The Devil - the white man, according to the Nation of Islam (Miyakawa 65) - has tricked black people into internalizing ideas of inferiority, and pushes them to self-destruction. The line “They kick garbage, lust for chicks and quick dollars” (Wu-Tang Clan 2) presents an image of violence and marginalization coupled with the sexualization of desire and consumption. The fact that the verse is written from the point of view of someone that “did the same thing” (15), highlights two important matters: the fact that racist ideas are so ingrained that it is possible for all black people to fall victim to them *and* that, at the same time, a black person may not allow themselves to be controlled by these ideas. The subsequent lines: “Not a role model, I walk a hard road to follow / I sold bottles of sorrow then chose poems and novels” (19-20), speaks of the hope that can be born even after someone has succumbed to internalized and institutionalized racist practices. Pedro Lebron Ortiz, discusses hip-hop subjectivity as a notion that “serves to create space within the world of anti-blackness and racial capitalism for the racialized/colonized subject to develop a first-order consciousness away from the dehumanizing gaze of the white Other” (Ortiz 83), and by extension, away from the dehumanizing practices that the white Other has arbitrarily connected to the black experience. A similar sentiment is expressed through the opening lines of Method Man’s verse: “As we dwell through this concrete hell, callin’ it home/Mama said ‘Take your time, young man, and build your own’” (83-84), pointing to the projects, and by extension, to the black experience in America, as a “concrete hell” (83), which encompasses both the literal as well as the mental struggles of African Americans. As

opposed to the characters of the Harlem novels that do struggle with the concrete hell that they all experience, that notion is never transparently articulated. They exhibit a sense of oblivion regarding their place in that society, a sense that is not present in “A Better Tomorrow”. However, there is still the possibility to “build your own” (84) – your own tomorrow and your own future – thus overcoming the obstacles imposed by society. It is worth noting that the song does contain, a demeaning verse performed by RZA towards black women that live in the projects, which echoes Max Disher’s general disdain for black women in *Black No More*:

Y’all bitches love dances and pulling down your pants

While your man’s on tour, you’re spending up his advances

Your friends ain’t shit, all they do is drink, smoke and suck dick

The whole projects is trapped in stench (68-71)

This verse complicate views that argue that hip-hop artists tend to deal with internalized racism more consciously than the artists of the Harlem Renaissance. Certainly though, the language and imagery perpetuate the Jezebel stereotype of the black woman as “a hypersexual being” (Harris Combs 85), a stereotype that has its roots in slavery and, according to Barbara Harris Combs, “was used to rationalize nonconsensual or otherwise coerced sexual relations between white men and black women” (85). However, if we were to approach that verse in direct conversation with the chorus of the song, it can be read in a completely different light. The chorus is the following:

You can’t party your life away, drink your life away

Smoke your life away, fuck your life away

Dream your life away, scheme your life away

‘Cause your seeds grow up the same way

‘Cause your seeds grow up the same way

‘Cause your seeds grow up the same way (25-30)

In these lines, stereotypes are not employed to propagate racist imagery about black female sexuality, but a warning for the future black generation to not waste their lives

ted to such stereotypes and instead the violent circle of abuse. The cartoony and unfiltered manner in which cliché images are presented does not aim at reproducing these images, but instead at alerting black youth .

The breaking down of the American flag by RZA is perhaps the most significant part of the song, which perfectly encapsulates the harsh realities of institutionalized racism:

The blue is for the Crips, the red is for the Bloods

The white's for the cops, and the stars come from the clubs

Or the slugs that ignite through the night, by the dawn early light

Why is sons fightin' for the stripe? (80-83)

The connection between the colors of the flag and the identifying colors of rival gangs points to the fact that institutionalized racism is inscribed in the very foundations of America. The color white stands as a symbol of violence perpetrated by the system, as either the cops or the slugs. The final line “Why is sons fightin' for the stripe?” (83) is extremely crucial. The stripe stands as a symbol of both the actual country and the institutionalization of racist practices that constitute an infeasible aspect of how this country operates. Therefore, the question posed could be translated as: ‘why do we keep preserving this country’s racist ideas?’. Evidently, this question masterfully manages to depict the normalization of institutionalized racist practices, while the very fact that there *is* a question – and by extension, a general questioning – regarding said practices highlights both the struggle to transcend racist ideas on blackness and the absolute need to do so.

Kendrick Lamar’s “Complexion (A Zulu Love)” approaches colorism and beauty standards in the black community. Through the lyric “Brown skin, but your blue eyes tell me your mama can’t run” (16), Lamar subverts colorist ideas, by evoking the long, painful history of slavery in the United States. However, he does not present himself as immune to these ideas. He says: “I used to be so mistaken/By different shades of faces” (24-25), thus both subtly alluding to the power that these ideas have on the psyche of black people and recognizing that abiding by these ideas is a mistake. Similarly to “A Better Tomorrow”, the persistence of stereotypes *and* the need to transcend them, illustrates the complexity of the African American experience

and foregrounds a sense of hopefulness. This is also foregrounded through the following line, which is directed to an imagined black female listener: “Even if master listenin’, cover your ears, he ‘bout to mention/Complexion” (11-12). Through merging the oppressive past with the oppressive present, a lineage of suffering is created. The master here is the oppressive white society, which uses differences in skin complexion between black subjects as a means to both create hostility among them and, at the same time, to indirectly promote Eurocentric standards of beauty. The lines of the song demonstrate how difficult it is to truly disentangle themselves from these ideas; the woman is asked to cover her ears, thus preventing herself from even listening to these notions. Lamar seems to imply that a black subject is susceptible to – either consciously or unconsciously – assume colorist ideas regarding their identity if they came in direct contact with these ideas. Instead, they need to make a deliberate effort to ignore them, thus covering their ears both in a literal and a figurative sense. This underlines the power of colorist ideas can exercise over the black individual that was also seen in Thurman’s *The Blacker the Berry*. However, what makes the difference in the case of “Complexion” is the self-aware speaker. The imagined black listener is asked to cover her ears and is asked to do so by a black male speaker. “Let the Willie Lynch theory reverse a million times” (30), we hear towards the end of the song. Even though colorism is recognized as devastating force, the sense of community is not lost.

Yetunde Mercy Olumide provides an in-depth analysis of skin bleaching. She refers to ad campaigns that were prominent in the 1950s which “stated that women who lightened their skin would be...attractive to men” (Olumide 751). Misogynistic and heteronormative connotations aside, colorism also aimed at corrupting the sense of unity between black men and black women specifically. This makes the warning of the song even more significant; the black man asks the black woman to disregard colorist ideas that come from the ‘master’. Consequently, colorist ideas not destroyed neither the black subject’s self-love nor the love of their community and romantic love standards. As opposed to Schuyler’s Max Discher, who upholds white beauty, the speaker of the song celebrates black love, without however shying away from the real threat of internalized racial prejudice.

In Kendrick Lamar’s song “The Blacker the Berry”, perhaps a reference to Thurman’s novel, the hopefulness overshadows the internalization of racist beliefs.

The opening lines masterfully capture the inner turmoil experienced by African Americans in a discriminatory society:

Everything black, I don't want black (*They want us to bow*)

I want everything black, I ain't need black (*Down to our knees*)

Some white, some Black, I ain't mean black (*And pray to the God*)

I want everything black (*We don't believe*) (1-4)

In these lines, Lamar depicts the constant conflict that black people have to face; they are torn between acceptance and rejection of their black identity, between wanting and not wanting “black”. The lines given in parentheses are ironic. The lines “And pray to the God/ We don't believe” (3-4) is an indirect sarcastic reference to racial stereotypes, with God in this context being a staple of white supremacy. Similarly to the description of Hazel in Thurman's novel, Lamar appropriates racist imagery: “Came from the bottom of mankind/ My hair is nappy, my dick is big, my nose is round and wide” (24-25). However, in his case, this appropriation subverts internalized racialized self-perceptions:

You hate me, don't you?

You hate my people, your plan is to terminate my culture

You're fuckin' evil

I want you to recognize that I'm a proud monkey

You vandalize my perception but can't take style from me (26-30)

In these lines, racial slurs and imagery are reclaimed as a means to expose harmful stereotypes. As opposed to the novel, where the stereotypes used to describe Hazel's character appear to be fully internalized by the speaker, here they are merely used as a device to mock the oppressor. However, the final lines of the song problematize the potentiality for emancipation: “So why did I weep when Trayvon Martin was in the street/ When gang - banging make me kill a nigga blacker than me? / Hypocrite!” (99-101). As documented by Jon Sterngass, these lines “...drew criticism from people who thought Lamar was blaming African Americans for their actions while ignoring the racism that created the conditions for urban crime in the first place” (Sterngass

34). Lamar responded to these claims, emphasizing that he did not aim at generalizing the black condition. He said: “It’s not me pointing at my community; it’s me pointing at myself” (qtd. in Sterngass 34). Evidently, this portrayal of a personal experience is at the same time connected to a larger, collective African American experience and complicates the sense of community. In that context, the song does echo both Emma Lou’s symbolic violence towards Hazel.

Internalized racial prejudice, colorist ideas, and the Black struggles that confront institutionalized racism are evident in both the works of the Harlem Renaissance and in contemporary hip-hop. However, in the case of hip-hop, while these themes do exist, they do manage to not fully dominate the work. In the literary works of the Harlem Renaissance, on the other hand, the black subjects are represented as having internalized ideas of inferiority to such a degree that they are unable to understand and recognize the roots of these ideas – in white supremacy – , in the case of conscious hip-hop music there is a clear understanding of the systems of oppression and a real determination to transcend and challenge these systems.

## 2. WHITENESS FROM HARLEM TO HIP-HOP: INVISIBLE, VIOLENT, OMNIPRESENT

Whiteness as a metaphor is instrumental in shaping both the worldview of the characters of the Harlem Renaissance literature that is explored in this dissertation as well as the psyche of the hip-hop artists in today's America. Eric Klinenberg points to the "inherent definitional slipperiness and instability to whiteness" (Klinenberg et al 8), stressing the fact that whiteness "does not exist as a credible biological property. But it is a social construction with real effects that has become a powerful organizing principle around the world" (8). The constructiveness of whiteness is precisely what should be explored and analyzed, since its multiple functions create divisions between black and white people. These divisions can manifest themselves in a variety of ways; through the institutionalization – and by extension, legalization and legitimization – of racist practices, through the systemic indoctrination of racist ideas, and through the act of whitewashing society by putting whiteness on the forefront as not only the default, but rather the ideal that everyone should aspire to, thus subsequently erasing and concealing blackness and the black experience. Whiteness will be explored both in the novels of the Harlem Renaissance as well as hip-hop music, as an 'invisible' and unmarked identity, and as normalized and institutionalized violence. This chapter explores how whiteness exercises its power over black individuals and examines how hip-hop music is ultimately more effective in fighting against the oppressiveness of whiteness, by essentially exposing its hypocrisy through a truthful portrayal of both its long-term effects on black communities as well as its apathetic reaction towards the reality of black life that it itself has made possible.

In Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, the operations of the system of whiteness are mainly presented through the eyes of the unnamed protagonist and its ability to 'pass' as white. According to Kathleen Pfeiffer, "an individual's ability to 'pass for white' challenges the applicability of racial categories, yet those same racial categories are precisely what constitute the passing scene" (Pfeiffer 12 ). The paradox of passing complicates whiteness as an institution since it simultaneously reaffirms and subverts systemic inequality. In Johnson's novel, this paradox becomes evident when the narrator describes in a detached manner the different struggles faced by both white and black people of the South. He recognizes the value of black resistance, or, as he calls it, "passive resistance" (Johnson 72) and acknowledges its efficiency. At

the same time, he also underlines how the South systematically oppresses black people. Interestingly enough, he describes oppression in a way that is unclear whether this line is ironic or sincere. He writes: “[the white man] is devoting to it the greater part of his thought and much of his endeavor” (73). Words such as “devotion” and “endeavor” could carry rather positive connotations, but at the same time they could function as a mockery of white society. Either way, the unique position of the narrator as someone from the outside looking in, provides the readers with valuable insight regarding both the oppressive whiteness as well as the resistance that confronts that unjust system. That very ability of someone to be able to not only have access to both of these seemingly opposing groups of people, but to also have the capability to understand their contrasting perceptions and fundamentally divergent experiences and places in society, points to the inherent fragility of whiteness as a concept and construct. The narrator’s exclamation that “the scene of the struggle has shifted!” (Johnson 73) – in reference to race relations – becomes a metaphor for his skin color and place in society. As he later notes, “the battle was first waged over the right of the Negro to be classed as a human being with a soul” (73), a line filled with a profound sense of surprise and wonder at the progress. Is this surprise related to a disbelief that such powerful structures could ever be questioned or is it related to his potential questioning of the humanity of black people? It is rather unclear.

His ability to navigate through these opposing worlds would, in theory, make the narrator realize the irrationality of racial hierarchies, but it has the opposite effect; he becomes even more hostile towards blackness, as is evident in his interactions with a black porter in Atlanta. When the narrator expresses the need to go eat at a restaurant and the porter wants to accompany him, the narrator immediately sees him as a burden. He writes: “for the instant his friendship bored and *embarrassed* me” (Johnson 56), as his presence would prevent him from eating at the luxurious whites-only restaurant of his choice. He is not disgusted by segregation in the slightest; he instead appears to embrace and accept it as the norm. If he recognized the dehumanizing and nonsensical nature of segregation, he would not have been embarrassed by the porter. Despite his initial negative response to the restaurant, his subsequent enjoyment of the food is clear: “when I had finished I felt I felt that I had experienced the realization of, at least, one of my dreams of Southern life” (57), he writes as a reaction to the restaurant’s Southern fried chicken. His satisfaction, though

superficial, goes against his initial instinctive reaction which was clearly unfavorable and hints at a connection he could potentially establish with his black community. However, it should be noted that when he was first introduced to segregation at a previous outing in another restaurant, he did not question the morality of the system of segregation in the slightest. Instead, he made suggestions regarding its improvement, expressing his few objections against the system as superficial and classist; “I then wanted to know why somebody didn’t open a place where *respectable* colored people *who had money* could be accommodated” (55 emphasis mine). In the narrator’s view, black people’s worth lies solely on their social and economic status. Although ‘passing’ has given him the opportunity to get a glimpse of both the oppressor and the oppressed, he ultimately identifies with the oppressor, an identification that did not happen out of need, but rather as a deliberate choice. His mixed identity could have been a liminal space for him to explore the ambiguities of existence and question the borders, limitations and margins of race, a way to reject his perceived inferiority or even a means to discard the concept of race altogether. Instead, his identity functions as a metaphorical vehicle for whiteness. By consciously choosing to live as white, he ultimately embraces whiteness.

Whiteness is paradoxically invisible. As Klinenberg argues, “whiteness operates as the unmarked norm against which other identities are marked and racialized, the seemingly un-raced center of a racialized world” (Klinenberg et al 10). As a result, the invisibility of whiteness dictates assimilation for the racialized other, since they feel an overwhelming need and pressure to not be seen by adopting the default that is a faux white identity. The power of the invisibility of whiteness as a structure and the subsequent need of the black subject to alter their identity to fit in that structure is of course being seen in Schuyler’s *Black No More*, through a literal race-altering of black people as a means to emancipation through assimilation. However, it is also seen in a more subtle fashion in Thurman’s *The Blacker the Berry*, where Emma Lou sees herself as the sole racialized other in a sea of white students in her high school graduation. When she wonders why she was asked to wear white, she vividly paints a picture of a black subject standing out amongst her fellow white – and by extension racially invisible – classmates. She connects that picture with a comic picture that her uncle had, namely “the black, kinky head of a little red-lipped pickaninny lay like a fly in a pan of milk amid a white expanse of bedclothes” (Thurman 22); yet again this

signifies the contrast between a blackness that stands out and a whiteness that remains in the background, fully unaffected and ignorant of its privilege.

However, a radical perception of whiteness is presented through the character of Hazel. In many ways Emma Lou's foil, Hazel had a different high school experience. As opposed to Emma Lou, who grew up in an all-white environment and got gradually used to standing out due to her skin color, Hazel went to an all-black school and interacted exclusively with other black people. She confessed to Emma Lou that "she couldn't get used to all these white folks" (Thurman 42), thus subverting the concept of whiteness as the invisible unmarked identity. In Hazel's experience, it is *blackness* that is unmarked, since that was her personal 'default' identity. Thurman in this way exposes race as an arbitrary construct. Community here is the prevailing force that overpowers systems of oppression. Hazel receives her sense of self-worth and self-love through coming in contact with her black community. Although all-black communities are a product of a social system that keeps marginalized groups at a lower level of living, for Hazel, they have a strong empowering component that allows her to replace blackness with whiteness as the marked, racialized identity. The dismissal of Hazel on the part of Emma Lou, analyzed earlier on, might potentially have some connection to Hazel's subversive nature, which further complicates the influence of whiteness on the black psyche while simultaneously exposing systems of oppression as utterly nonsensical. As in the case with internalized racism in the novel, even though there are acts of rebellion and resistance, a sense of hopelessness and passive acceptance of what has been deemed as the norm is always present, and compromises the possibility for freedom.

Whiteness as invisible and unmarked is not only consolidated as the antithesis of the racialized but also through the apathetic white individual that is unaware of their racial privilege. The un-markedness of whiteness is not just connected to white privilege, but also to racial divisions as societal constructs. According to E. Wayne Ross "race is a sociopolitical construct that has been created by humans to stigmatize, distance, and elevate themselves from those they see as others" (Ross 119). This idea of race as a construct is of course presented in Schuyler's *Black No More*. As Susan Gubar argues:

This tongue-in-cheek fantasy about a scientific method of triggering a ‘racial metamorphosis’ (14) takes supremacist ideology to its logical conclusion by asking its readers to understand that freedom in America is predicated not only on whiteness, but on the eradication of blacks (Gubar 18).

This intrinsic un-markedness of the white body becomes even more extreme when there is no ‘marked’ other to compare it/contrast it to. Even though the absence of race could be falsely perceived as the absence or slow eradication of racism, this is not the case since this absence is practically a form of genocide. Despite the fact that *Black No More* takes place in a dystopian world and transparently constitutes a lampooning of race thinking, its theme really is the “logical conclusion” (18) of white supremacist ideals. According to Gubar, if we are to thoroughly explore passing narratives – such as Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* – it becomes apparent that they “conflate whiteness with life, blackness with life-in-death” (18). In that mode of thinking, it is safe to assume that “*Black No More* views the demise of blackness as the only viable solution for African Americans” (18). The delightfully comedic ending of the novel highlights the concept of whiteness as ‘un-markedness’, with Dr. Crookman’s final discovery:

In the last days of the Goosie administration, the Surgeon-General of the United States, Dr. Junius Crookman, published a monograph on the differences in skin pigmentation of the real whites and those he had made white by the Black-No-More process. In it he declared, to the consternation of many Americans, that in practically every instance the new Caucasians were from two to three shades lighter than the old Caucasians, and that approximately one-sixth of the population were in the first group. The old Caucasians had never been really white but rather were a pale pink shading down to a sand color and a red. (Schuyler 176-77)

This passage foregrounds the absurdity of race divisions. It deconstructs whiteness both as a symbol of power and as the ‘default’ identity. The “new Caucasians” (Schuyler 176) – meaning the black people that turned white through Crookman’s invention – became lighter than actual white people or, as Schuyler puts it, “old Caucasians” (177). Even though light skin pigmentation would have positive connotations in a fundamentally racist society as the one described in the novel and as

it was also seen through the analysis of colorism in the previous chapter, here it becomes negative since it is arbitrarily connected to blackness. Blackness and whiteness in the world of Schuyler's novel have at that point become non-existent as far as physical racial characteristics are concerned, but bigotry and prejudice have outlived the physicality of race. This establishes whiteness as a construct and as a means to consolidate power. It is a concept rather than a skin tone, which is comedically showed as the novel progresses, where the beauty industry and social standards in general are altered to cater blackness, which becomes a symbol of 'pure' whiteness.

Whiteness *is* invisibility, it *is* the default, and its racist practices are very often subtle and so instilled in people's minds that they can be hard to be even recognized as racist. However, the history of whiteness as a practice is a rather violent one and this fact, though it could be perceived as redundant by some, must be acknowledged. "Understanding whiteness primarily as violence and terror is associated with the view...that whiteness is properly understood as the historical legacy of colonialism and imperialism" (Klinenberg 12). This idea of whiteness as violence is demonstrated in Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred*, through the various experiences of Dana, the black woman that time travels in slavery-era America to save the life of one of her white ancestors, and consequently, her own life. Even though she is an educated woman with an extensive knowledge of black history, she is still shaken by the realities of slavery. Marisa Parham, highlights the importance of the relationship between history and the black individual in the novel. According to her, "it's as if Butler puts Dana in a historically mimetic space, and forces her to encounter the schism between a sense of reality and its representation, between social history and mimesis" (Parham 1327). This does not only force Dana to come in direct contact with the atrocities of slavery that are oftentimes minimized by history, but to also become a part of that history herself. This creates a lineage of suffering and merges contemporary black struggle and past black trauma. She experiences horrific abuse in the hands of other white slaveowners, but Rufus, the boy she had been sent to protect and save, grows up to be just as cruel as them and, towards the end of the novel, attempts to sexually assault her. This turn of events is instrumental in both foregrounding the innate violence of whiteness as a system of power as well as portraying white supremacy as an acquired idea. It also presents the idea that as long as such an oppressive system is in power, it

is almost improbable for people that directly benefit from it – namely, white people – to take an active stand against it rather than perpetuating the same harm.

Closer to the present day, Dr. Dre’s song “Animals” is a critique of institutionalized racist practices. In the song, the chorus describes the ways in which the negative portrayal of black subjects by a white society shapes the public opinion:

And please don’t come around these parts  
 And tell me that we all a bunch of animals  
 The only time they wanna turn the cameras on  
 Is when we’re fuckin’ shit up, come on (9-12).

These lines are referring to the way right-wing media and politicians portray black protestors. The last two lines “the only time they wanna turn the cameras on/Is when we’re fuckin’ shit up, come on” (11-12) are alluding to the fact that the black experience is largely concealed unless it is presented in an unfavorable manner. Acts of systemic violence, police brutality, mass incarceration, microaggressions, housing problems, are all black issues that have been either rarely or falsely documented, since mainstream society does not want to “turn the cameras on” (11) the realities of black lives in America. However, in the case of protesting – or “fuckin’ shit up” (12) – they enthusiastically “turn the cameras on” (11), because rioting fits the view of blackness that they want to foreground. While protest should have raised awareness about inequality and systemic racism, it is instead weaponized and used against the resisting black subjects. As the song progresses, the fundamental violence of whiteness becomes clearer with the following lines: “Just a young black man from Compton, wonderin’ ‘who could save us?’/And could barely read the sentences the justice system gave us” (29-30). The double meaning of the word ‘sentences’ – meaning both a set of words and the verdict of a court – highlights both the issue of mass incarceration in the black community *and* the poor educational system of the projects, which is again a result of institutionalized racism and a form of modern-day racial segregation.

The song also introduces a generational shift in terms of how black people perceive that violence, which becomes evident in the pre-chorus of the song, performed by Anderson Paak: “And the old folks tell me it’s been goin’ on since back in the

day/But that don't make it okay/And them white folks tell me all the lootin' and the shootin's insane/But you don't know our pain" (38-41). Class divisions and brutality are presented as largely accepted by "the old folks" (38) – in this case, older black people – as the norm. The phrase "back in the day" carries a sense of vagueness and abstraction, since it could be a reference to more contemporary manifestations of brutality against the black community or an allusion to a long history of violence since the years of slavery. Clever and rather ambiguous, these lines point to the all-pervading and omnipresent nature of white violence. It has been happening "since back in the day" (38), there is no clear start or finish, and this elusiveness is subtly presenting how white supremacy has been such a daunting force that it is difficult to point out exactly when it started taking its current form, and at the same time it is challenging for the oppressed person not to accept it as fact. With the line "And them white folks tell me all the lootin' and shootin's insane/But you don't know our pain" (40-41), the rebellious black subject does not solely reject older black people's passive acceptance of their supposed inferiority, but also rejects white people's condemnation of protesting. As opposed to Johnson's and Thurman's novels, whiteness is initially recognized and subsequently disregarded by the black subject. Whereas in the novels the characters suffer from being marginalized by the violence of an "invisible" whiteness, here whiteness itself becomes marginalized. The indirect dialogue between "old folks" and the speaker echoes the opposing points of view of Emma Lou and Hazel in Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry*. As opposed to Thurman's novel, the story in the song is being told from the perspective of the person who accepts blackness as their invisible identity, a significant shift from the cultural politics of the Harlem Renaissance.

The public's desensitization to the systemic violence against black people is also presented in the following verse:

Bullets still ringin', blood on the cement  
 Black folks grievin', headlines readin'  
 Tryna pay it no mind, you just livin' your life  
 Everyone is a witness, everyone got options (13-16)

The intense imagery of “bullets still ringin’” (13) and “blood on the cement” (13), followed by “black folks grievin’” (13) is juxtaposed with the mundane and calm act of reading a headline. This juxtaposition illustrates the stark divergence between living as a member of the black underclass and living as a white person. It paints the picture of two opposing worlds that exist at the same time; the violence-ridden and despair-filled black world, and the white world which acts as a mere spectator, simply observing the horrors without taking a stance. The line “You just livin’ your life” (15) speaks of indifference to a black predicament. Their ‘life’ is perceived as something separate from the injustice that is taking place in that very society that they live in. Here, the invisibility and the violence of whiteness merge, as violence gets mediatized. Consequently, black people are in situations when it is required and expected of them to take action, whereas the white observers adopt the passive stance of reading about the tragedies. The last lines of the song “Everyone is a witness, everyone got options” (16) could be perceived as ironic, since not everyone is a witness; those that are affected have to act and not everyone has options, since black people do not have the luxury to choose whether or not to pay attention to events that directly affect them and their community. Therefore, these lines denounce white hypocrisy and its cruelty.

Even though it is evident that the ways in which whiteness exercises its power over black individuals are being acknowledged, “Animals” also expresses ambiguity regarding the future fate of black people, with the lines “Got a son of my own, look him right in his eyes/I ain’t livin’ in fear, but I’m holdin’ him tight” (17-18). These lines simultaneously provide a sense of hope and determination to face the future, with the line “I ain’t livin’ in fear” (18) and a real concern regarding that future which is demonstrated in the phrase “but I’m holdin’ him tight” (18). This vagueness once again highlights the complexities of the black experience, by underlining the omnipresence of fear while at the same time expressing a need to resist that violence of lynchings in the post-emancipation era. If we were to make the case that lynching has taken the form of police brutality – as is witnessed by the speaker of the song – then it is safe to say that hip-hop music is more effective than the Harlem Renaissance in displaying an aspirational reaction to white supremacy.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Wu-Tang Clan’s “A Better Tomorrow” manages to subvert ideas of internalized racism while portraying life in the projects in

a brutally honest manner. In addition to that, the song portrays the harm that has been *systematically* afflicted on black people and exposes whiteness. Masta Killa’s verse captures an image of anguish and hopelessness:

A voice cries from the wilderness of the North

A representation of the families that lost one

All victims of incarceration

Or other divisions of the family structure (28-31).

The use of one, singular voice for all the black families that have been victimized by systemic racism speaks of an underlying sense of community that perseveres. According to Miyakawa, the “wilderness” (28) ) that is in reference here is “the wilderness of North America as described in Student Enrollment Lessons nos. 3-4” (Miyakawa 53) and points to the history of enslavement, thus exposing white hypocrisy that presented Africa as a wild land. All members of Wu-Tang Clan grew up “North” (28), in New York, one of the states in which mass incarceration was more a concerning issue in the 1990s when the song was written – and unfortunately remains to this day.

Paul Wright and Tara Herivel, while discussing the issue of mass incarceration in New York at that time, write:

In New York, where the relevant phrase is “going upstate”, the Justice Police Institute reports that in the 1990s more blacks entered prison just for drug offenses than graduated from the state’s massive university system with undergraduate, masters, and doctoral degrees combined. In some inner-city neighborhoods, researchers and advocates report a preponderant majority of black males now possess criminal records (Herivel & Wright 32).

Therefore, taking all three potential meanings of “North” into consideration: North as a reference to North America, New York, or even being incarcerated – with “going upstate” (Herivel & Wright 32) being synonymous with going to jail, America ultimately functions as a symbol of white supremacy, while its long history of subjugation is being evoked through these lines.

Similarly to “Animals”, “A Better Tomorrow” also reveals the duplicitous nature of white society, as is evident in the following lines:

Screams of terror are hidden by the passing trains

This can't be little Hussein

His uncle cries as he drops to his nephew's side, holdin' his cane

Just give me a name

Of who has inflicted this bitter sickness, and left us to witness (39-43)

Just like in the case of “Animals”, the mundane overshadows the tragedy. The passing train, signifier of the fact that life goes on, silences the screams of black subjects reacting to the injustices committed against them. The imagery of the uncle holding the body of his dead nephew points to trauma and violence that transgress generations and the cycle of life. The line “Just give me a name” (42) is a transparent recognition of the fact that there is a perpetrator of these crimes and is perhaps not a reference to a mere person or figure, but rather an allusion to the oppressiveness of whiteness as a whole. Interestingly enough, the final line, “...and left us to witness” (43) comes in contrast with “Animals”. Here, the spectators and/or witnesses of the tragedies are not just the unaffected members of white society. Instead, black people are portrayed as also being ‘witnesses’ to the atrocities committed against them. Black subjects are being put in a predicament that is widely out of their control and are, by extension, hopeless in the hands of those that inflict that pain on them. Although that is evidently a pessimistic viewpoint, it could be argued that it is also empowering since it protests against internalized inferiority. While discussing the notion of afro-pessimism in hip-hop music, Eubanks suggests that “...achieving this proximity to blackness begins with achieving a radical proximity to the structural negation that makes blackness what it is and then turning upon the negation in such a way that returns body and voice to the sovereign black subject” (Eubanks 7). Paradoxically enough, the notion of afro-pessimism is one of a radical reclaiming of a systemically misrepresented black identity. It acknowledges the oppressor as the burden that prohibits the black subject from moving forward. Therefore, this recognition that there is an outside

force behind all of this suffering is instrumental in identifying and exposing the oppressor. It is quite a radical stance, in comparison to the one taken by Harlem Renaissance authors. In the case of Johnson's unnamed narrator, for example, the perpetrator of the suffering is not brought to question. Instead, what the narrator is concerned about is how to fix and improve an already broken and bigoted system into one that would accommodate the needs of a chosen few – or, as the narrator puts it, of “respectable colored people who had money” (Johnson 55) – at the expense of the black community as a whole. “A Better Tomorrow” does not solely recognize the oppressor, but also illustrates their wrongdoings in such a way that unity and community are put in the forefront.

The oppressiveness of whiteness has taken multiple forms; it is ‘invisible’, it is all-encompassing, and it is cruel and unapologetic about exercising its cruelty. Consequently, through its various manifestations and the various ways in which it penetrates society and, by extension, the psyche, life, and self-esteem of the black subjects that it dominates, it manages to be normalized as the default, to create arbitrary rules and regulations, and to not only perpetuate violence but decriminalize it. Black subjects are seemingly left with no option but to adhere to it; Johnson's unnamed narrator becomes white, and so does the vast majority of the characters in Schuyler's *Black No More*. Emma Lou fully experiences the feeling of standing out as the sole non-invisible other, and the initially kind white boy that we as readers are introduced to in Butler's *Kindred* grows up to be a sadistic and abusive slaveowner. Most of the characters realize that they have no choice but to adhere to whiteness because they have unconsciously accepted it as the norm. Of course, there are exceptions, as seen in Thurman's Hazel's radical subversion of the ‘invisibility’ of whiteness. For the most part however, the black subject is unable to escape the oppressiveness of whiteness. That is not the case in hip-hop however, where there are deliberate attempts to expose the hypocrisy of white society and create a community of blackness.

### 3. TRUST, IN NO ONE BUT US”: THINKING EMPOWERMENT FROM HARLEM TO HIP-HOP

As it was established in the previous chapters of this dissertation, systemic racism persists from the Jim Crow era of the Harlem Renaissance all the way to the projects of today’s America that are being presented in hip-hop music. However, what has also been persisted is the movement of black liberation. The need that the black oppressed subject had to liberate themselves from the shackles of the oppressive white society has been present since the years of slavery. Karen Cook Bell, in her analysis of enslaved people’s fight against oppression, points to the significance of their resistance, by stating that, even though it “was one of institutional invisibility in that there was no formal organization, no leaders, no manifestos, and no name” (4), it was still instrumental in helping enslaved people assert themselves in a hostile society and make a crucial political statement. Similarly, the artists of both the Harlem Renaissance and the hip-hop movement have performed institutionally invisible acts of resistance that essentially evoked strong messages of empowerment regarding blackness. As I suggested in my first chapter, even though internalized racist notions are evident in both the literature of the Harlem Renaissance and the music of contemporary hip-hop artists, in the case of hip-hop there is a stronger sense of hopefulness and self-awareness regarding institutionalized racism. In this chapter, I will be focusing on how both art forms tackle the issue of black empowerment, with hip-hop artists again exhibiting a greater sense of social consciousness than their Harlem Renaissance counterparts.

Black empowerment is mainly illustrated in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* through the character of Shiny, the narrators dark skin classmate. As W. Lawrence Hogue points out, Shiny is celebrated by the narrator, mainly because the speech fits in with what white society deems as respectable. Hogue writes: “it is important to note that the ex-colored man feels pride in being ‘colored’ because Shiny has performed at a ‘high standard of excellence’ as defined by the white audience” (Hogue 73). Shiny stood out academically among his predominantly white classmates: according to the narrator, he was “the best speller, the best reader, the best penman, in a word, the best scholar, in the class” (Johnson 12). The presentation of such a character is quite rare and potentially inspirational for young black readers at the time, since Shiny manages to not only survive, but also thrive in a widely racist and hostile

environment. Due to his distinction as a student, he is honored with being the principal speaker at the grammar school graduation, giving a passionate speech that manages to inspire the narrator. As it was analyzed in the previous chapter, the unnamed mixed race narrator has internalized ideas of inferiority regarding his being. However, upon hearing Shiny's speech, he is mesmerized. He writes: "I felt leap within me pride that I was colored; And I began to form wild dreams of bringing glory and honor to the Negro race" (43). This is a quite significant sentiment, since Shiny succeeds in subverting racist notions in two ways: he functions as a role model for a light skin person – which is rather radical, since it destroys colorist notions – and he also manages to make a self-hating black individual as the narrator not only take pride in his identity but also express the need to represent his race in the future.

As Evelyn Glenn points out in her analysis of systems of representation in the black community, light skin was "associated with...social privilege" (84), often being the default black body that was supposed to denote blackness. In the case of Shiny, the dark skinned character is the one that inspires awe and represents blackness. His excellence as a student as well as his devotion to his schoolwork contrast with the narrator's portrayal of the other black children that he looks down on and refers to them using slurs. Therefore, in the eyes of an already bigoted narrator, Shiny manages to rise above pre-conceived notions and become a positive role model for his fellow black students. Shiny's very presence subverts the stereotype of the self-hating dark skinned black subject and instead foregrounds the possibility for a black subject to thrive. He is not merely a hardworking student, but he eventually becomes a professor that helped his community move forward. However, even though this portrayal is undeniably empowering, it is also rather problematic, since Shiny is portrayed as an exception to the rule. Black subjects' individual success has been consistently weaponized by those in power and used to blame marginalized subjects for their own economic and social predicament. His portrayal as the only gifted black student, though inspiring since it proves the possibility for black subjects to rise above their circumstances, it also perpetuates the idea that black subjects need to constantly prove their worth. Shiny's black peers that perhaps do not share the same intellectual abilities or ambition as him are treated poorly, whereas Shiny, having fought to assert his position in society, is being celebrated. This highlights the fact that black subjects have to strive to have their humanity acknowledged, and even then, it is not

guaranteed that they will be fully accepted by their white peers. As the narrator mentions, Shiny “in spite of his standing as a scholar, he was in some way looked down upon” (12), which further complicates the situation and suggests that full acceptance by white society is not a realistic outcome for a black subject, even if that black subject manages to succeed in that same society. Even the narrator’s strong emotional reaction that followed Shiny’s speech stems from racist ideas.

Thurman’s Emma Lou is an interesting contrast to Johnson’s Shiny. Paradoxically enough, as stated by Daniel M. Scott III, upon its first publishing, *The Blacker the Berry* received negative critiques among Thurman’s contemporaries, some of which precisely focused on the dichotomy between self-loathing and empowerment that is present in the novel. Du Bois criticized the novel for “hovering between depictions of low-down life and racial uplift” (Scott 325-326). Emma Lou has been established as a young woman who has utterly assumed a position of inferiority due to her strong feelings of self-hatred. It is nearly impossible to view her character as an empowered black figure, but there are in fact instances in the novel where she appears to resist, despite her intense self-hatred. However, she expresses the need to escape her small-minded hometown in the Pacific Northwest and move to a more progressive area, where she would feel accepted. This need signifies that she both possesses an understanding of systems of oppression and unconsciously connects racial bigotry to small-mindedness, which is a major breakthrough for an individual who has been taught from several prominent institutions – family, school, and the media – that she is required to either accept her position as the other and live in self-loathing or attempt to assimilate herself into the society that has continually victimized her. Self-acceptance has never been presented as a viable alternative to Emma Lou, which is why it is particularly inspiring that she has expressed the need to free herself, or, as Thurman puts it, “to escape the haunting chimera of intra-racial color prejudice” (Thurman 70). After her disillusionment with the black community of Los Angeles, she flees to Harlem, emulating the artists of the Harlem Renaissance that viewed the city as a new vehicle for self-definition and escape from the institutionalized racist practices that were prominent in their respective hometowns.

Zora Neale Hurston’s biographer Robert E. Hemenway points to the general notion of Harlem as a city of emancipation during the Harlem Renaissance era. He writes: “...over one hundred thousand black people has made Harlem a city within a city,

designated it the cultural capital of black America, and endowed it with youthful exuberance and *promise*” (Hemenway 29, emphasis mine). Therefore, it was not simply a refuge for black people who left the South, but a place of great *promise* for the future. Naturally, Emma Lou’s moving to Harlem can be perceived as a radical act of resistance, especially if one takes into consideration her general disdain regarding her identity. However, her most radical act of resistance comes at the end of the novel in the form of inner acceptance. Instead of attempting to find solace and acceptance externally by moving to another place and drastically changing the course of her life, at the very end she finds that acceptance she was longing for internally. She realizes that she should accept herself and her skin color and should not aim at gaining approval from other people – and by, extension, white society – by emulating her oppressor. This is an extremely significant epiphany for a victimized black subject and is presented in a powerful way:

What she needed to do now was to accept her black skin as being real and unchangeable, to realize that certain things were, had been, and would be, and with this in mind begin life anew, always fighting, not so much for acceptance by other people, but for acceptance of herself by herself. In the future, she would be eminently selfish. If people came into her life – well and good. If they didn’t – she would live anyway, seeking to find herself and achieving meanwhile economic and mental independence (Thurman 217).

In a sense, it could be argued that Emma Lou is an even more emancipated character than Johnson’s Shiny, because she embraced her blackness after being conditioned to accept her supposed inferiority. Her character foregrounds the complexity of the black experience and provides a realistic view of the inner struggles and turmoil experienced by the black subject, thus establishing her eventual act of resistance as an even more significant moment of triumph. However, upon studying the above passage closely, it is evident that Emma Lou has not wholeheartedly embraced her blackness. This ambivalence, paradox, ambiguity points to the complexity of the process of emancipation. The fact that she characterizes her skin as “unchangeable” (217), and as being one of these aspects of one’s life that “were, had been, and would be” (217), indirectly expresses a quite jaded and cynical viewpoint regarding her black identity and suggests that her eventual emancipation did not stem from genuine feelings of self-love – which is a necessary step towards eventual empowerment - but rather a

general pessimism closely connected to the factual unchangeability of her blackness. Moreover, her self-acceptance is described as a lifelong journey, a constant process of “*always fighting*” (217 emphasis mine). As it was stated, acknowledging black empowerment as an everlasting fight does provide an insight in the psyche of the systemically oppressed black subject, but, in the case of Emma Lou, it also constitutes an additional indirect message: that this is a fight she might not win, given her susceptibility to adhering to the white society. This points to a general uncertainty regarding her fate and complicates the representation of Emma Lou as an emancipated black subject.

It is challenging to attempt to analyze instances of black empowerment in a novel such as *Black No More*, whose main premise is a race altering that stem from internalized self-hatred. However, there are still instances where black characters manage to go against racist notions and assert their position. Madame Blandish is the character that truly embodies the notion of resistance against whiteness, since she is the only black person that refuses to become white. She has fallen victim to white supremacy in the past, but “now she had lived long enough to have no illusions about the magic of a white skin” (Schuyler 40). This is quite a rebellious act and a seemingly refreshing contrast to the mostly self-hating characters of the novel. According to the narrator, her refusal stems from the fact that she has already established herself as a respected member of society and does not have the desire to risk her social standing. As stated, “as a white woman she would have to start all over again” (40), thus losing all her years of hard work. This is an empowered view of blackness, since it presents a black woman that appears to have transcended the obstacles posed to her by society and is now in a position that allows her to reject being literally assimilated by the oppressor. In her analysis of the systemic victimization imposed on black women across the centuries, starting from slavery, Nishaun T. Battle writes:

White male privilege allowed white men and women alike to ignore the abuse of black women as they focused on economic growth, for which they depended on the womanhood of black women, most notably their forced physical and sexual labor. Grounded in intersectionality, the abuse of black women highlights the ways in which oppression of women varied based on

their race, class, and gender, which is used as an analytical tool to explain social inequality grounded in structural domains of power (Battle 113).

It is evident that black women embody a position of ‘double-otherness’ in white society, due to both their racial background and their gender, which has continually denied them to advance professionally or economically. Madame Blandish however, has managed to not only advance but prosper in her field to such an extent that a potential race altering would hinder instead of helping her. Similarly to Shiny, Madame Blandish is an empowered black subject that has managed to triumph over her predicament and flourished on an individual level. However, much like Shiny, her triumph, though inspirational, continues to have some problematic components. Even though she is successful, her business is a hair straightening salon. She directly profits of off colorist practices and contributes to the exploitation of her community. Although she does not physically alter herself to fit in white society’s standards, she has intellectually and psychologically modified her being in order to gain profit from discriminatory practices that promote self-hatred and uphold white supremacy. At the end of the novel it is revealed – in a darkly comedic fashion - that she did eventually alter her physical appearance as well, and even started a skin stain business after it became known that actual white people turned out to be a bit darker than black people that had undergone race altering. She continues to fall victim to arbitrary regulations regarding race.

Paradoxically, a sense of empowerment can be detected in the character of Max, who, after becoming white, visits an all-white “dinner-dance place” (Schuyler 22) and is gradually disillusioned from living as a white man, finding it to be significantly more joyless than his black experience:

The joy and abandon here was obviously forced. People went to extremes to show each other they were having a wonderful time. It was all so strained and quite unlike anything to which he had been accustomed. The Negroes, it seemed to him, were much gayer, enjoyed themselves more deeply and yet they were more restrained, actually more refined. Even their dancing was different (22)

For someone who has literally rejected his racial identity by abandoning it completely and morphing, both physically and socially, into a white man, Max’s disillusionment

with whiteness could be regarded as an act of liberation. Even though he has become assimilated in white society on a surface level, he does not feel any form of kinship and finds it challenging to relate socially, proving that he has not been fully subjugated. At the same time, he does feel a connection to African American festivities and reminisces about them. However, this connection is questionable, since it both reduces his black community to entertainment – echoing Johnson’s narrator’s views on the black arts that were analyzed in the previous chapter – and it is still presented in a detached manner by referring to “*their* dancing” (22) instead of ‘our’. He also speaks from a position of privilege, even if that privilege is newly acquired. Brenda Gottschild, in her analysis of the black dancing body, points to the connection between racial thinking and the binary of ‘black’ and ‘white’ dance. She writes:

At the end, beyond our hierarchies and hegemonies, there is no “black race” or “white race”, “black dance” or “white dance”. It’s simply that the habit of racism has rendered us unable to put the fusion of American cultural creations into words from the vocabulary at our disposal. Our traditions and cultures are so thoroughly mixed (and have been for ages, beginning with the intimacy and depth of contact between blacks and whites during the centuries of American slavery) that our language reflects old assumptions and categorical errors (Gottschild 6).

Therefore, Max’s supposed favoring of blackness over whiteness is rooted in the racist ideas that he has internalized. Additionally, he compares and contrasts black and white people from a safe distance; it is true that he appears to still be longing for connection with his black community – even if that longing stems from problematic notions regarding the black body - which would suggest a natural detachment from whiteness, but at the same time he continues to consciously choose to live his life as a white man. At some point in the novel, it is explicitly stated that this sense of wistfulness experienced by Max was fleeting: “He felt a momentary pang of mingled disgust, disillusionment and nostalgia. But it was only momentary” (22).

Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* is not a part of the literature of the Harlem Renaissance, but it is worth analyzing as a continuation of the Harlem Renaissance legacy – much like hip-hop music – for its treatment of the general theme of black empowerment. Described by Melvin G. Hill as a “neo-slave narrative” (Hill 72), *Kindred* tells the

story of Dana, a black woman of the 1970s that is transported back to slavery-era America. Butler has stated in an interview that she prefers the term “fantasy” rather than science fiction to describe the novel. In her view, “time travel is just a device for getting the character back to confront where she came from” (qtd. in Kenan 496). The reasons of this ability to defy time that the protagonist suddenly appears to possess are unknown to her at the beginning of the novel, but as the story progresses it becomes evident that she is there to ensure the survival of her ancestors, and by extension, herself. She is asked to save Rufus, a young white boy whose father is the owner of a large plantation. In doing so, she subverts the trope of the white savior, a popular trope in both film and literature. In analyzing the white savior trope in film, Salvador Jimenez Murguia writes:

Whites are portrayed as being more socially powerful and independent than the people of color whom they are saving; people of color are often depicted as desperately in need of the help they are receiving. The desperation forces people of color to rely on whites for progress and deliverance from suffering, as opposed to allowing people of color to use their own skills and knowledge to solve their problems... (Murguia 704)

In the case of *Kindred*, the white person is the one desperately in need of the help of the black woman, who is a more knowledgeable and capable agent than him. In addition, Dana does not excuse Rufus’ casual use of racial slurs as merely a common practice of his time; on the contrary, she demands his respect, by telling him “I am a black woman, Rufus. If you have to call me something other than my name, that’s it” (Butler 25). Consequently, she does not automatically assume the role of the victimized black subject simply because she is transported in an era of constant systematic victimization. She ‘changes’ the era, instead of allowing the era to change her, and in doing so, she becomes an active agent of her destiny and manages to assert her position at a time when it was impossible to do so. At the same time, her familial bond with Rufus further complicates her agency as well as her empowerment. She is supposed to keep him alive because he is the man that would eventually rape her great-great-great grandmother, Alice. The life of a long line of black women is directly tied with an act of sexual violence that Dana is indirectly called to facilitate. In making sure that Rufus is not harmed and in being called to save him multiple times, Dana saves both the women of her family and at the same time, makes it

possible for them to be victimized. In that sense, the figurative death that manifests itself in the form of rape is presented as being closely connected to life itself, and most importantly, to life of a black subject. As Linh U. Hua argues, enabling white sexual violence in order to preserve black life becomes the center of Dana's mission; "she names her great-great\_grandfather, Alice's owner Rufus Weylin, as the source and focus of her mysterious travels to the detriment of a black feminist politics" (Hua 396). It is impossible for Dana to envision a different black future. Even though, as a modern black woman, she could have identified her ability to time travel as an opportunity to revise history, her instinctive response is to protect it. According to Hua, Dana misinterprets the identity of the individual that calls for her help: "she misnames her caller 'Rufus', rendering Alice's call unheard" (393). This instinctive misidentification ultimately leads her to relate to the oppressor, thus failing to create an emotional bond with her black suffering ancestor and complicating her portrayal as a liberated black subject. She eventually performs the symbolic act of murdering Rufus, but she loses her arm in the process. As Robertson examines, "the loss of this arm, torn off as Rufus clings to Dana when she mortally stabs him and is subsequently flung back to her present in 1976, is the biopolitical interaction of history and Dana's body" (Robertson 372). Even though, at last, Dana manages to defeat the oppressor, the literal and metaphorical scars that were created after years of systematic victimization are still present. The loss of the arm was also a deliberate choice on the part of Butler, since as she stated: "I couldn't really let her come all the way back...Antebellum slavery didn't leave people quite whole" (qtd. in Kenan 498).

On the other hand, hip-hop music presents a more optimistic approach regarding black life. Since its inception, it has aimed at illustrating the possibility of resisting figurative expropriation and liberating black subjects of their metaphorical shackles. As Raphael Travis Jr argues, the goals of the hip-hop genre include "authenticity, individuality, autonomy, creativity, survival, utilitarianism, being active, participation, mobilization, resistance, protest, and action" (Travis Jr 18), all of which are inextricably connected to the more general notion of black empowerment. In the case of internalized racism that was analyzed in the previous chapter of this dissertation, I argued that conscious hip-hop music, despite its occasional direct or indirect depictions of internalized racism or internalization of colorist practices, provided a far more empowering view of black subjects than the literary artists of the Harlem

Renaissance. Similarly, when there are direct and explicit depictions of emancipated black subjects in both the Harlem Renaissance and hip-hop music, the latter appears to offer a more promising and hopeful view of emancipation, as opposed to the Harlem Renaissance that tends to present allusions of eventual submission. Tabib Kweli's and Jean Grae's 2004 song entitled "Black Girl Pain" is a prime example of an honest and hopeful depiction of black liberation. The opening hook of the song masterfully manages to illustrate both the challenges that black women have to face as well as an overwhelming sense of hope for the future:

My pretty black princess smell sweet like that incense

That you buy at the bookstore supporting black business

Teach her what black is; the fact is her parents are thorough

She four reading Cornrows by Camille Yarbrough

I keep her hair braided, bought her a black Barbie

I keep her mind free; she ain't no black zombie

This is for Aisha, this is for Kasherah

This is for Khadijah, scared to look up in the mirror

I see the picture clearer through the stain on the frame (23-31)

As opposed to Emma Lou in Thurman's novel, whose self-empowerment entailed a view of blackness as something that she is supposed to accept simply because it is "unchangeable" (Thurman 217), Tabib Kweli presents a sincere and passionate sense of emancipation. The black girl of the song does not simply embrace her own blackness, but she supports the black community in a more collective manner, by supporting black businesses and reading inspiring books such as *Cornrows* by Camille Yarbrough, described by Angelyn Mitchell and Danille K. Taylor as a children's book which "poetically connects black Americans' ways of caring for and styling their hair with their African ancestry, and their history across continents" (Mitchell & Taylor 213). The individual blackness here is connected to a larger, collective identity and there is a strong need for black pride and (re)connection with one's community and history, which greatly contrast with Emma Lou's individualistic approach towards her blackness and her personal goals of "economic and mental independence" (Thurman

217). The girl's "braided hair" (Kweli 27), and "black Barbie" (27) signify a concrete rejection of Eurocentric beauty standards and a consequent absolute love of blackness, without a hint of hesitation. The use of traditionally black names such as Aisha and Kasherah foreground both a powerful sense of pride, while simultaneously once again pointing to a shared black identity.

"Black Girl Pain" does not shy away from depicting the struggles that black women have to face regarding their identity, struggles which are evident in the last three lines of Jean Grae's verse: "For surviving through every lie they put into us now/The world's yours, and I swear I will stand focused/Black girls, raise up your hands; the world should clap for us" (58-60). The choice of words in this song provides another interesting contrast with Thurman's novel; the speaker of this song prides herself in "*surviving* through every lie" (58 emphasis mine), as opposed to Emma Lou "*always fighting*" (Thurman 217 emphasis mine) to accept her identity. In the song, black empowerment is presented as finality. Even though there is a clear recognition and genuine depiction of the realities of suffering as a black woman in the song – which is true in the cases of all the songs that have been analyzed in this dissertation – at the end, black liberation is portrayed as an eventual victory instead of a never-ending struggle. This idea of progress and its connection to black empowerment is foregrounded in the hook of the song: "Mama said life would be this hard/Growing up days as a black girl scarred/In every way, still, we've come so far" (Jean Grae 61-63). These lines are optimistic for both of the generations of black women presented in the song: in reference to the younger generation, the speaker directly states that "we've come so far" (63), a development over women of her mother's generation who had warned that "life would be this hard" (61). At the same time, the mother's warning is also an act of resistance and a proof of progress of her own generation, since it is an active choice to point out the absurdities of white society. It is not a fatalistic warning, but a way to acknowledge the injustice of the system and alert the younger generation. It is also an interesting contrast with Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, in terms of the savior-from-another-generation trope that is employed in both of these works.

Inspectah Deck's 2003 song "City High" presents a realistic view of the struggle for liberation from the projects and institutionalized racism:

Lost so many I don't fear death, no tears left

Numbers of my years left, blessed to be here left  
 When they said “At fifteen he’d be already dead”  
 I’m here heavy head steady sipping Remy Red  
 Wild fellow tryin’ to keep my mind settled  
 Child of the ghetto, survived where nines echo (16-21)

Through this verse, Inspectah Deck pays tribute to those who had lost their lives while simultaneously recognizing himself as someone that went above people’s preconceived notions that “at fifteen he’d be already dead” (18) and followed his own path. At the same time, his success is not presented with any vanity or detachment but is viewed as pure luck, describing himself as “blessed to be here left” (17) and earlier in the song, pointing to his personal struggles by abandoning life in the streets despite his accomplishments, with the lines “Our chance grows, traveled the globe, fans applauded/But my heart still roaming the streets, they still calling” (12-13). This realistic depiction of a success story creates an intriguing contrast with the literature of Harlem Renaissance, and more specifically with Shiny’s success in Johnson’s novel. As opposed to Johnson that presented Shiny as the exception to the rule, the only black gifted student among his peers, and by extension the only one that could possibly escape his predicament, “City High” compellingly portrays all black men as having both the potential to transcend their circumstances and the vulnerability to fall victim to these circumstances, despite their level of status and success. This paradoxically creates a more hopeful view of liberation, since it is presented in a more pragmatic and more inclusive manner. It destroys the idea that absolute liberation equates complete disconnection with the ugly parts of the system, thus humanizing the successful black subject and making them relatable and genuine to the black audience. Towards the end of the song, the struggles of escaping life in the streets is placed alongside a sense of hope for liberation: “Teasing me, I lust badly, she said/”You a professional with records sold, let it go/And I replied “This is the only life I’ll ever know” (40-43) is followed by “I trust, in no one but us/Trust, in no one but us/Trust in no one but us” (44-46), pointing to the idea that escape is a real possibility. “Trust, in no one but us” (46) could both refer to the unlimited possibilities for black people to have success as well as a distrust of forms of institutionalized oppression that prevent black people from prospering in society. As

opposed to “Black Girl Pain”, in which liberation is a finality, rather than a process, in the case of “City High”, it is indirectly depicted as an ongoing process. The honesty and integrity with which it is described is a considerable remove from Thurman’s earlier pessimism and instead provides the potentially misguided black youth with the empowering message that, since it is possible for every black person to embrace their predicament, it is more than possible for every black person to transcend that predicament as well.

Another empowering hip-hop song is Nas’ 2003 “I Can”. In it, he evokes important parts of black history: “Be, be-fore we came to this country/We were kings and queens, never porch monkeys/There were empires in Africa called Kush/Timbuktu, where every race came to get books” (57-60). The conjuring of the old African civilizations destroys the notion that black history begins with slavery and presents a liberating image of black people as kings instead of enslaved beings. It also alludes to a potentiality for future emancipation from current forms of oppression, that is stated explicitly later on in the song:

Still goes on today, you see?

If the truth is told, the youth can grow

They learn to survive until they gain control

Nobody says you have to be gangstas, hoes

Read more, learn more, change the globe (72-76)

This portrayal of the black subject as initially empowered, soon after enslaved with the potential to be empowered once again, encourages black youth to demystify demeaning predetermined notions regarding their identity. Hardship is presented as a process of “[learning] to survive” (74), instead of an unchangeable reality, which indirectly provides black children with infinite options regarding their future, as is stated in the chorus of the song: “I know I can (I know I can)/Be what I wanna be (Be what I wanna be)/If I work hard at it (If I work hard at it)/I’ll be where I wanna be (I’ll be where I wanna be)” (26-29). Here, Nas subverts the notion of the American Dream that essentially does not include people of marginalized communities and uses its core idea of potentiality to empower members of a community that it has systemically victimized. As stated previously, the American Dream is often

weaponized by white society in order to justify, rationalize, and preserve institutionalized racism, such as the inhumane living conditions at the projects. In this song, this very idea is cleverly employed to do the exact opposite, which is to inspire black people to have higher expectations of themselves and have faith in their abilities. Even though it is executed in a different manner, the main goal of “I Can” is the same as “Black Girl Pain” and “City High”, that is, to evoke a hopeful message of emancipation for the black youth, without at the same time shying away from the struggles to achieve this emancipation.

The notion of black empowerment is presented in a radically different manner in the literature of the Harlem Renaissance and in hip-hop music, and the historical distance is a ground for reflection. In Harlem, *traces* of empowerment can be seen under multiple layers of self-loathing and internalized racialized thinking. Even though at a first glance, the black subjects of the Harlem Renaissance appear to have made significant progress regarding their idea of self-worth, they are yet to be fully emancipated; Shiny’s success is an ‘exception’ to the rule, Emma Lou has an individualistic approach towards what is referred to as a process of “*always fighting*” (Thurman 217), Madame Blandish and Max Disher experience merely a fleeting sense of camaraderie towards their black community, whereas Dana is asked to mediate for acts of victimization in order to survive. Consequently, the Harlem Renaissance writers eventually fail to create fully emancipated black characters that truly celebrate their blackness and point to a black collectivity rather to an individualistic approach. As argued, it is not possible to aim for an unambiguous interpretation of the characters of Harlem Renaissance literature, and their ambivalence points to both the complexity of them as characters and the complexity of black empowerment in general. However, the fact that they are not presented as fully emancipated problematizes their ability to be perceived as radical subjects. On the contrary, hip-hop artists masterfully manage to not only personally embrace their blackness and succeed on an individual level – by leaving the projects and, by extension, their oppressive surroundings – but to also become a source of inspiration for their black listeners that might struggle to transcend their circumstances.

## CONCLUSION

The writers of the Harlem Renaissance and the hip-hop artists of contemporary America showcase the complexities and ambiguities of the black experience, to equally represent both the challenges and the victories. Even though the black subjects of the Harlem Renaissance could in many regards be perceived as liberated, as it is evidenced in my analysis, they are also constantly experiencing an inner struggle between adhering and actively resisting oppressive social structures. The protagonists of the novels constantly experiencing what has been referred to by Dubois as ‘double consciousness’, “always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (qtd. in Franklin & Scott 51) and mostly live in self-alienation with only glimpses of revolt seen in their thoughts and actions. The most subversive and rebellious acts come from *secondary* characters such as Shiny in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and Hazel in *The Blacker the Berry*. Paradoxically enough, the fact that these rare cases of emancipation are not put in the forefront results in a marginalization of black subjects that actively refuse to be marginalized, thus complicating the concept of black liberation. On the contrary, hip-hop artists - without shying away from the harsh realities of black life in America - openly challenge racist beliefs, reject individualism by putting black community on the forefront, and illustrate an image of a modern, emancipated black individual that understands how the oppressive system operates and expresses a need to rebel against that system. This radical view of a liberated black subject, coupled with the historical distance between the Harlem Renaissance and the rise of conscious hip-hop music ultimately generates a hope and a promise for the black community.

## Works Cited

- Battle, Nishaun T. "From Slavery to Jane Crow to Say Her Name: An Intersectional Examination of Black Women and Punishment". *Meridians*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2016, pp. 109-36. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2979/meridians.15.1.07>.
- Bell, Karen Cook. *Running from Bondage: Enslaved Women and their Remarkable Fight for Freedom in Revolutionary America*. Cambridge University Press, 2021.
- Butler, Octavia. *Kindred*. Beacon Press, 1979.
- Desmarais, Jane, and David Weir. *The Oxford Handbook of Decadence*. Oxford University Press, 2022.
- Dr. Dre, "Animals". *Compton, Aftermath/Interscope*, 2015. CD.
- Durr, Marlese, and Shirley Ann Hill. *Race, Work, and Family in the Lives of African Americans*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006.
- Eubanks, Kevin. "After Blackness, Then Blackness: Afro-Pessimism, Black Life, and Classical Hip-Hop as Counter-Performance". *Journal of Hip-Hop Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2017, pp. 5-22.
- Gladney, Marvin J. "The Black Arts Movement and Hip-Hop". *African American Review*, vol. 29, no. 2, 1995, pp. 291-301. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3042308>.
- Glenn, Evelyn. *Shades of Difference: Why Skin Color Matters*. Stanford University Press, 2009.
- Gottschild, Brenda. *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
- Grenway, Bernard. *Random Musings: Reflections of a Black Intellectual*. Hamilton Books, 2011.
- Gubar, Susan. *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture*. Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Harris Combs, Barbara. *Bodies out of Place: Theorizing Anti-blackness in U.S. Society*. University of Georgia Press, 2022.

Hemenway, Robert E. *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*. University of Illinois Press, 1980.

Herivel, Tara, and Paul Wright. *Prison Nation: The Warehousing of America's Poor*. Routledge, 2003.

Hill, Melvin G. *Black Bodies and Transhuman Realities: Scientifically Modifying the Black Body in Posthuman Literature and Culture*. Lexington Books, 2019.

Hogue, Lawrence W. *The African American Male, Writing, and Difference: A Polycentric Approach to African American Literature, Criticism, and History*. State University of New York Press, 2003.

Hua, Linh U. "Reproducing Time, Reproducing History: Love and Black Feminist Sentimentality in Octavia Butlers 'Kindred'". *African American Review*, vol. 44, no. 3, 2011, pp. 391-407. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23316193>

Inspectah Deck. "City High". *The Movement*, Koch Records, 2003. CD.

Jenkins, Tammie. *The Haitian Revolution, the Harlem Renaissance, and Caribbean Negritude : Overlapping Discourses of Freedom and Identity*. Lexington Books, 2021.

Johnson, James Weldon. *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. Sherman, French & Company, 1912.

Joseph, Ralina L. *Transcending Blackness: From the New Millennium Mulatta to the Exceptional Multiracial*. Duke University Press, 2013.

Kenan, Randall. "An Interview with Octavia E. Butler". *Callaloo*, vol. 14, no. 2., 1991, pp. 495-504. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2931654>

Klinenberg, Eric, et al. editors. *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness*. Duke University Press, 2001.

Kweli, Tabib, and Jean Grae. "Black Girl Pain". *The Beautiful Struggle*, Rawkus Records/Geffen Records, 2004. CD.

Lamar, Kendrick, and Rapsody. "Complexion". *To Pimp a Butterfly*, TDE/Aftermath/Interscope, 2015. CD.

---. "The Blacker the Berry". *To Pimp a Butterfly*, TDE/Aftermath/Interscope, 2015. CD.

Mitchell, Angelyn, and Danille K. Taylor. *The Cambridge Companion to African American Women's Literature*. Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Miyakawa, Felicia M. *Five Percenter Rap: God Hop's Music, Message, and Black Muslim Mission*. Indiana University Press, 2005.

Murguia, Salvador Jimenez. *The Encyclopedia of Racism in American Films*. The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, 2018.

Nas. "I Can". *God's Son*, Ill Will/Columbia Records, 2002. CD.

Nelson, Cary. *The Oxford Handbook of Modern and Contemporary American Poetry*. Oxford University Press, 2012.

Olumide, Yetunde Mercy. *The Vanishing Black African Woman: A Compendium of the Global Skin-Lightening Practice*. Langaa Research & Publishing CIG, 2016.

Orr, Tamra B. *The Harlem Renaissance: An African American Cultural Movement*. Lucent Press, 2019.

Ortiz, Pedro Lebron. "A Different Type of Time": Hip Hop, Fugitivity, and Fractured Temporality. *Journal of Hip Hop Studies*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2021, pp. 63-88. <https://doi.org/10.34718/paq2-ka84>.

Pardini, Samuele F.S. *In the Name of the Mother: Italian Americans, African Americans, and Modernity from Booker T. Washington to Bruce Springsteen*. Dartmouth College Press, 2017.

Parham, Marisa. "Yes: Textual Traumas in Octavia Butler's 'Kindred'". *Callaloo*, vol. 32, no. 4, 2009, pp. 1315-1331. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27743151>

Pfeiffer, Kathleen. *Race Passing and American Individualism*. University of Massachusetts Press, 2009.

Pyke, Karen D. "What is Internalized Racial Oppression and Why Don't We Study It? Acknowledging Racism's Hidden Injuries". *Sociological Perspectives*, vol. 53, no. 4, 2010, pp. 551-72. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.1525/sop.2010.53.4.551>.

Rabaka, Reiland. *Hip Hop's Amnesia: From the Blues and the Black Women's Club Movement to Rap and the Hip Hop Movement*. Lexington Books, 2012.

---. *Hip Hop's Inheritance: From the Harlem Renaissance to the Hip Hop Feminist Movement*. Lexington Books, 2011.

Robertson, Benjamin. "‘Some Matching Strangeness’: Biology, Politics and the Embrace of History in Octavia Butler's ‘Kindred’". *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 37, no. 3, 2010, pp. 362-381. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25746439>

Ross, E. Wayne. *The Social Studies Curriculum: Purposes, Problems, and Possibilities*. State University of New York Press, 2012.

Schuyler, S. George. *Black No More*. Random House, 1999.

Scott, Daniel M. "Harlem Shadows: Re-Evaluating Wallace Thurman's ‘The Blacker the Berry’". *MELUS*, vol. 29, no. 3/4, 2004, pp. 323-39. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4141858>.

Sterngass, Jon. *Kendrick Lamar: Rapper and Pulitzer Prize Winner*. Chelsea House Publishers, 2019.

Thurman, Wallace. *The Blacker the Berry*. Scribner Paperback Fiction, 1996.

Travis Jr, Raphael. *The Healing Power of Hip-Hop*. ABC-CLIO, 2015.

Wandler, Steven. "‘A Negro's Chance: Ontological Luck in ‘The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man’". *African American Review*, vol. 42, no. 3/4, 2008, pp. 579-594. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40301255>

Webster, Colin. *Understanding Race and Crime*. Open University Press, 2007.

Womack, Autumn. *The Matter of Black Living: The Aesthetic Experiment of Racial Data, 1880-1930*. The University of Chicago Press, 2022.

Wu-Tang Clan. "A Better Tomorrow". *Wu-Tang Forever*, Loud/RCA Records, 1997. CD.



