

“Nerves of a Black Brood...In Tempo”: Ellington’s Adoption of New Negro Values in “Black and Tan Fantasy” and *Black, Brown and Beige*

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It can't be true
That all you do...
Is dance and sing
And moan!
Harlem...for all her moral lurches
Has always had
LESS cabarets than churches!¹

IN EARLY 1943, Duke Ellington premiered his fifty-minute jazz symphony *Black, Brown and Beige* at Carnegie Hall. Conceived as a musical “parallel to the history of the Negro in America,” Ellington’s piece was epic in scope, aiming to recreate nothing less than the entire history of the African experience in America.² *Black, Brown and Beige*’s tri-movement form explored the colonial slave trade (“Black”), the African American experience throughout the 18th and 19th centuries (“Brown”), and the Harlem experience in the 1920s and ‘30s (“Beige”), articulating the roots, commonalities, and sensations of African American life. The significance of the piece’s symphonic structure and its performance at Carnegie Hall was not lost on black audiences. As one column in the *New York Amsterdam News* reported, “If the downtowners thought they’d be the only ones dripping in mink, silver fox, and such, take our word for it, they had another thought coming. Yessir, the ladies from uptown fell in, too.”³ Simply by being the first Ellington performance at Carnegie Hall, the premiere of *Black, Brown and Beige* represented something of a triumph of black mobility in 1940s New York, an occasion that allowed black audiences to dress in tuxedos and ermine and catch a show downtown with the cream of Manhattan society.

Yet more fundamentally, *Black, Brown and Beige* presents a fascinating synthesis of the artistic philosophy espoused by the New Negro movement and the jazz aesthetic that had developed throughout the 1920s and ‘30s.⁴ This may seem a rather unimportant point to the modern reader; jazz, the stylistic model and subject of so many of Langston Hughes’ poems, seems the *de facto* soundtrack to the Harlem Renaissance. Yet as certain scholars of this period have noted, the New Negro circles and the black popular music industry were rather isolated from each other during the

²Original Carnegie Hall program for *Black, Brown and Beige*, reprinted in Mark Tucker, ed., *The Duke Ellington Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 160-165.

³Bill Chase, “All Ears,” *New York Amsterdam News*, January 30, 1943, 10.

⁴This paper will use the “New Negro Movement” and the “Harlem Renaissance” interchangeably. Both terms describe the outburst of African American intellectual and creative expression in 1920s Harlem. This group cannot be too narrowly defined—there was a wide variety of art and writing from this movement. However, it should be noted that the term “New Negro,” defined by Alain Locke in *The New Negro* (1925), more specifically refers to an advocacy of African American dignity through the arts. While not all New Negro artists entirely agreed with Locke’s conception of the “New Negro,” it was nevertheless a philosophy that guided the movement. Locke’s philosophy will be described in greater detail later.

Harlem Renaissance's heyday in the late 1920s.⁵ This lack of interaction was largely informed by differences in artistic philosophy between the two groups; many New Negro writers clamored for a new, respectable black music that incorporated traditional folk roots to create an "authentic" black sound. Jazz's commercialization, they argued, corrupted the authenticity of its folk roots. Where certain New Negro writers looked down on jazz players, musicians responded with similar disinterest. Cab Calloway, the famous jazz orchestra leader, recollected that "we were working hard on our things and they were working hard on theirs."⁶

Much of the scholarly writing on Harlem nightlife in the 1920s has emphasized the divide between the black middle class and Harlem Renaissance thinkers on the one hand and the jazz musicians, cabaret-goers, and "slummers" on the other. The first group, many writers argue, espoused the politics of respectability, albeit in different ways, that had dominated black political discourse since Reconstruction. The latter group, in catering to vice and a racist, primitivist aesthetic, was hence irreconcilable with the black middle class, and thus there was little interaction between jazz circles and the New Negro movement in the 1920s. However, this picture is heavily qualified by the musical output of Duke Ellington, who more or less personified the Harlem jazz scene in the '20s.

Black, Brown and Beige, premiering over a decade after the twilight of both the Harlem Renaissance and Prohibition-era cabaret culture offers a curious coda to the tensions between the Harlem Renaissance and jazz communities in the 1920s. Ellington's symphony reconciled jazz with the aesthetic problems outlined by many New Negro writers in two ways. First, in its symphonic form and calculated performance at Carnegie Hall, it presents itself as a piece of Western art music while highlighting its distinctively "black," jazzy sound. Second, the typescript to the third movement, "Beige," offers a nuanced portrait of Harlem in the '20s and '30s that at once celebrates jazz as an emissary of black creative talent to the rest of the world and acknowledges the negative stigma that cabaret culture's associations with vice and primitivist aesthetics brought to Harlem's community. Ellington, in so portraying Harlem, enters into a discussion with a well of New Negro writings on music, offering his argument for how jazz can be the "new," authentic black art music that so many New Negro leaders called for in the '20s. *Black, Brown and Beige*, then, crucially demonstrates how certain jazz musicians were listening to and responding to the New Negro thinkers and complicates the narrative of insularity that cabaret scholars have ascribed to the 1920s.

I do not intend to completely invalidate this narrative. Considering the degree to which the Harlem Renaissance and the Jazz Age are conflated, it is essential that the two movements are considered distinct phenomena if 1920s Harlem is to be thoughtfully understood. However, I hope to push back against this narrative's minimization of the New Negro movement's impact on the work of some of the notable jazz artists of this period. *Black, Brown and Beige* indicates that Ellington was not simply "working hard at his thing" in the 1920s and early '30s. He was taking note of what some of the most formidable black thinkers of his time were saying about his music. A decade later, he would deliver *Black, Brown and Beige* as his carefully-crafted response to these thinkers.

While this paper analyzes *Black, Brown and Beige's* adoption of New Negro values, it also attempts to explicate that piece within the broader context of Ellington's life and career throughout the 1910s and '20s. I not only demonstrate the New Negro influence in this final piece, but also isolate certain points in Ellington's earlier life in which he demonstrates some level of interaction with the Harlem Renaissance. Ellington first intimated he was working on *Black, Brown and Beige* in 1930, and one could thus argue that his piece was more informed by the black cultural *milieu* of

⁵John Howland, *Ellington Uptown: Duke Ellington, James P. Johnson, and the Birth of Concert Jazz* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 53-56; Kathy Ogren, "From Devil's Music to Jooking: Jazz Performance and the Black Community," *Jazz Revolution: Twenties America and the Meaning of Jazz* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

⁶Cab Calloway, *Of Minnie the Moocher and Me* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1976), 105-16.

the 1930s and '40s, as the Depression effectively ended the Harlem Renaissance. I will, then, analyze two key periods in Ellington's early life in which he appears to have been influenced by a middle-class, black intellectual sensibility. First, I investigate his upbringing in middle-class Washington in the 1900s and 1910s. While this first period predates the New Negro movement, the values of middle-class respectability Washington imparted to Ellington bear resemblance to the politics of intellectual respectability espoused by the New Negro movement. It is likely, then, that this background contributed to Ellington's reception of New Negro values in the '20s. Second, I analyze Ellington's "Black and Tan Fantasy" (1927) as an example of Ellington's conversation with the New Negro movement at the height of the Harlem Renaissance in the late '20s. Finally, I analyze how Ellington developed and modified the New Negro sensibility of "Black and Tan Fantasy" over a decade later in *Black, Brown and Beige* while attempting to reconcile these values with the primitivist aesthetic in interwar jazz culture.

In addition to *Black, Brown and Beige*, "Black and Tan Fantasy," interviews, newspaper columns, and memoirs, this paper draws from three camps of secondary material. First, social histories of New York and, more specifically, Harlem nightlife in the 1920s have been incredibly helpful in providing the broader social context for the tensions between the jazz and New Negro spheres in the '20s. Of particular help has been Lewis Erenberg's survey of the evolution of dance culture in this period and Chad Heap's investigation of white "slummers" in New York in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, these histories emphasize the antagonism between the jazz and black middle-class worlds, and I seek to qualify the nature of the isolation between the two spheres that these histories outline. Mark Tucker's and Kathy Ogren's work on the connections between the New Negro and jazz worlds have been incredibly helpful, providing much of the context for Ellington's associations with the New Negro movement. Finally, David Metzger's analysis of "Black and Tan Fantasy" and Harvey Cohen's paper on *Black, Brown and Beige* have been essential for my own analyses of these pieces. This paper, then, seeks to synthesize and build on the work of the latter two camps of research so as to qualify the narrative of isolation put forth by the social histories.

Social historians of cosmopolitanism in 1920s New York have written at length about the racialized desires of white "slummers." This narrative is articulated in Erenberg's study of the black nightclub scene in the '20s. Erenberg argues that the "Negro vogue" of the '20s was fueled by white-collar downtowners' desires to escape into a highly sexualized primitivist fantasy; as he writes, "in the Harlem clubs black men and women were portrayed as primitive dancing fools, whose sensuality civilized whites could not hope to match."⁷ Whereas popular culture had been establishing African Americans' supposed excessive sexuality for decades before the nightclub craze of the '20s, this new movement was novel in its insistence that the intensity of black sexuality was a positive trait that could be adapted by whites. How white visitors broadcast their own sexuality at black clubs in this period varied considerably; sexual encounters at 1920s blackand-tans could range from suggestive dancing to intercourse.⁸

Contemporary white writing on Harlem's cabaret culture frequently connected this heightened sexuality to a primitive "blackness." Vaudeville comedian and performer Jimmy Durante remarked that "you go sort of primitive there...with the bands moaning blues like nobody's business, slim, bare-thighed brown-skinned gals tossing their torsos, and the Negro melody artists bearing down something terrible on the minor notes."⁹ Durante, invoking the wail of the blues singer and the skin color of the exotic dancer, argues here that "primitivity" is evoked by the blackness and sexuality of

⁷Lewis A. Erenberg, *Steppin' Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 256.

⁸Chad C. Heap, *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885-1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 198-201.

⁹James Durante and Jack Kofoed, *Night Clubs* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1931), 113.

the cabaret performance. Moreover, many of Harlem's largest white-owned clubs strived to create a primitive, exotic aesthetic in their advertisements and promotional material. A 1936 program (Fig. 1) for Harlem's Cotton Club is especially telling. Its cover depicts a small party of nude Africans dancing around a drum in a jungle setting. Their bodies contort, blurring the distinction between dance and sex; several of the dancers' expressions appear rather orgasmic. To many white audiences, then, "uptown" was a sexualized, primitivist fantasy world in which the visitor could lose modern conventions and explore his or her sexuality through black music and culture. Owners of some of Harlem's most successful clubs from this period, like the Cotton Club and Small's Paradise, took note of this desire and began to market their venues as exotic oases offering the visitor primal titillations impossible to experience downtown.

Black social critics in Harlem were quick to notice cabaret culture's racial exploitation of black performers and communities. As early as 1922, the *New York Age* editorialized that most owners of Harlem cabarets "are white, and the immunity which they enjoy is but another example of the exploitation of the darker race." The *Age's* chief anxiety in this editorial, however, was not that the white-owned cabarets were enforcing primitivist stereotypes, but that they reflected poorly on the black community in Harlem. As the editorial continued, "The majority of the colored people of Harlem are decent and respectable citizens...opposed to the immunity allowed in places of evil resort which prey on the weaker community."¹⁰ As if in response, the following column waxed on the many opportunities Harlem offered for racial uplift, arguing that

Harlem presents the greatest opportunity opened to the race to set and attain a high standard in all those things that mark the realization of the best type of American civilization. The building of character and of business should go hand in hand.¹¹

The *Age's* editorialists, then, saw Harlem as a beacon of racial betterment, a great opportunity to create a moral, black middle-class community in America. Cabaret culture's promotion of illegal liquor sales, sexual exploitation, gambling, and a range of other vices ran in direct opposition to that vision. The *Age's* editor-in-chief in this period, notably, was a supporter of Booker T. Washington's, and the Washingtonian message of racial and moral uplift was echoed in the paper's editorials.¹² The sentiments of the *Age* are those of a markedly middle-class and Washingtonian subsection of Harlem society. Yet the *Age* was an extremely influential black paper, only rivaled by the *msterdam News*A in New York; its comments cannot be discounted as marginal.

If the *Age's* editorials showcase a black middle-class critique of the white exploitation of black culture, then a portion of Harlem's middle class was also highly critical of the cultural forms black southerners brought with them throughout the 1910s and '20s. Heap argues that this judgment was dependent on an anxiety that the "primitive" cultural modes of the black south would engender greater racial animosity in northern New York: "having experienced a relatively congenial relationship with urban whites during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they blamed the 'backward,' rural ways of these newcomers for the rising level of racial animosity" in New York.¹³ The old guard of middle-class Harlemites saw jazz and blues as musical symbols of southern backwardness. In his memoir, Willie "The Lion" Smith, a prominent club pianist throughout the '10s and '20s, noted that the average middle-class northern Negro family discouraged jazz performance in order to distance themselves from a southern image.¹⁴ A portion of the black middle class in Harlem, then, not only perceived nightclub culture but jazz music itself as a root cause of racial strife in New York.

¹⁰"Exploiting of Vice," *New York Age*, September 9, 1922, 4.

¹¹"Harlem an Opportunity," *New York Age*, September 9, 1922, 4.

¹²"Fred R. Moore," *The Journal of Negro History*, vol. 28, no. 2 (April 1943): 259-260.

¹³Heap, *Slumming*, 225-226

¹⁴Willie "The Lion" Smith, *Music on My Mind* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1965), 100-101.

The Harlem Renaissance offers a well of black writing on the viability of jazz as a distinctly black art form. Ogren notes that while much scholarship argues that New Negro writers were uniformly dismissive of jazz in the 1920s, this assumption obscures a more nuanced debate around the artistic potential of jazz in the Harlem Renaissance.¹⁵ As she describes it, one circle of the New Negro movement, led by older thinkers like W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke, lauded jazz as a distinctively black art form but worried that the authentic, folk background of jazz was being exploited by whites to enforce racial stereotypes. This line of thinking, Ogren argues, can be traced back to Du Bois' elitist "talented tenth" approach to racial uplift, which called on African Americans to perfect their arts in order to combat racist stereotypes and engender racial pride. This sentiment, Ogren argues, "formed the basis for [DuBois'] view that artists should improve on folk materials (and judge them) in order to serve as ambassadors for racial pride and understanding."¹⁶ Other New Negro critics applied DuBois' criticism of black music to jazz, arguing that it was important as a descendant of black folk music but that its commercialization actively corrupted this tradition. This line of thinking is probably best articulated by Alain Locke in *The Negro and His Music* (1936):

there is a vast difference between its first healthy and earthy expression in the original peasant paganism out of which it arose and its hectic, artificial and sometimes morally vicious counterpart which was the outcome of the vogue of artificial and commercialized jazz entertainment.¹⁷

Curiously, this comment qualifies the primitivist aesthetic of the white-owned cabarets. Locke doesn't dispute that primitivity is integral to the jazz aesthetic. To Locke, however, primitivity is manifest in jazz's ties to the folk roots of African American culture. There is nothing unhealthy or hedonistic in it. It is in its commercialization that jazz becomes sexualized and unhealthy. To Locke, then, jazz culture only became debauched once it became marketed as such. While Locke and DuBois interpreted the deficiencies of modern black music in different ways, their arguments were loosely united by a general understanding that the African American folk tradition had to be improved on if it could truly be an artistic tool of racial uplift. However, as Ogren argues, a younger generation of New Negro thinkers rebutted the notion that jazz culture needed to be improved. These thinkers, rather, "trusted their own emerging aesthetics and were delighted if it captured folk and working-class culture."¹⁸ This sentiment is eloquently articulated by Zora Neale Hurston in her "Characteristics of Negro Expression": "Butter Beans and Susie, B-Jangles and Snake Hips are the only performers of the real Negro school it has ever been my pleasure to behold in New York."¹⁹ Hurston and other contemporaries like Langston Hughes and Claude McKay embraced "low-brow" African American musical cultures as a mechanism of authentic black expression. These thinkers poked at the absurdity of looking elsewhere for an "authentic" black musical form while disregarding the actual reality of the black musical landscape in Harlem. Hurston, indeed, argued that the authenticity of African American culture was in its active modification of pre-existing cultural forms into entirely new works of art. As she notes in a passage on the Paul Whiteman orchestra, "Whiteman is giving an imitation of a Negro orchestra making use of white-invented instruments in a Negro way. Thus has arisen a new art in the civilized world."²⁰ To Hurston, then, racial authenticity is not some ever-present stylistic trait in African American expression, but rather emerges in black culture's constant interactions with other cultural modes. The "low brow" is racially authentic in its manipulation of pre-existing cultural forms.

¹⁵Ogren, *Jazz Revolution*, 117.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 119.

¹⁷Alain Locke, *The Negro and His Music* (New York: Associates in Negro Folk Education, 1936), 82-83.

¹⁸Ogren, *Jazz Revolution*, 138.

¹⁹Zora Neale Hurston, "Characteristics of Negro Expression," in *Negro Anthology*, ed. Nancy Cunard (New York: Ungar, 1934), 44-46.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 43.

The New Negro movement, then, offers an intellectual and aesthetic counterpart to the politics of respectability espoused by the black middle class in Harlem in the '20s. While there is no single unified New Negro stance on jazz, the discourse surrounding jazz can be largely broken into two categories: that of the older set of New Negro thinkers like W.E.B. DuBois and Alain Locke and that of a newer set of voices led by Hurston and Hughes. The former worried about the commercialization of jazz and its corrupting influence on black authenticity, whereas the latter celebrated the jazz brewing in cabarets across Harlem as an authentic expression of black creativity. Commercialization, these writers argued, had nothing to do with it. What mattered was that black popular music was twisting the past into something distinctively new. While the latter voice would become increasingly vocal as the '20s wore on, Ellington would comment on both points of view in his work.

As Tucker has pointed out, it is necessary to examine Ellington's upbringing in Washington if one wishes to understand the middle-class, New Negro sensibilities that pervade his work.²¹ Around the turn of the century, Washington was the center of middle-class black life in America, and it was not until the Wilson and Harding administrations introduced segregationist reforms to the D.C. area in the 1910s that Harlem replaced Washington in this role.²² Washington's hub of affluence provided various institutions that fostered the sense of optimism, dignity, and racial pride that informed Black, Brown and Beige and so many of Ellington's other compositions. As Tucker notes, Ellington's trademark ambition and optimism were certainly influenced by the host of successful black individuals in his environment. His father was a well-to-do butler, while his grandfather was one of Washington's only black police officers.²³

Washington also touted several centers of formal black music education, the most notable being the Washington Conservatory and the Columbia Conservatory. While Ellington picked up most of his technique by playing in informal bars and teen dances as a young man, he was surrounded by musicians who had received a formal musical education in these venues. One notable influence was Henry Lee Grant, a professional black pianist who taught at Dunbar High in Washington and had received a degree in piano from the Washington Conservatory. As Ellington recounts, Grant took the then-teenage Ellington under his wing and gave him some basic formal training: "We moved along very quickly, until I was learning the difference between G-flat and F-sharp."²⁴ In addition to informing Ellington's creative outlook, then, Washington's affluence gave Ellington access, albeit indirectly, to a formal musical education unavailable to most black musicians at this time.

Washington was also home to a circle of black composer-bandleaders in the late 1910s and early 1920s whose creative philosophy informed Ellington's own. Tucker argues that these bandleaders, led by Will Marion Cook, James Reese Europe, and Ford Dabney, were "champions of black musical traditions—syncopated jazz, ragtime, show tunes, Negro folk songs, arrangements of spirituals—and drew upon black vernacular idioms for their original compositions."²⁵ Incorporating a spread of black folk elements into their compositions, they articulated an aesthetic philosophy that resembles that of DuBois' and Locke's. Crucially, they believed their music to be art on a par with that of the European masters; responding to a critic who had referred to him as the "world's greatest Negro violinist," Cook proclaimed that he was "not the greatest Negro violinist...I am the greatest violinist in the world!"²⁶ Cook's point may have been willfully hyperbolic, but it nevertheless underscores a very real frustration that these bandleaders shared over mainstream musical journalism's refusal

²¹Mark Tucker, "The Renaissance Education of Duke Ellington," in Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., ed., *Black Music in the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Greenway Press, 1990), 111-127.

²²See Eric Yellin, *Racism in the Nation's Service* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), for a comprehensive history of this decline.

²³Tucker, "Renaissance Education," 113.

²⁴Duke Ellington, *Music Is My Mistress* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Press, 1973), 33.

²⁵Tucker, "Renaissance Education," 119.

²⁶Ellington, *Music Is My Mistress*, 97.

to canonize black music.

Ellington became personally acquainted with Cook after moving to New York, later recollecting that Cook gave him advice as he was getting started in the city. Curiously, he explicitly tied Cook to *Black, Brown and Beige*'s composition, mentioning that "some of the things he used to tell me I never got a chance to use until...I wrote the tone poem *Black, Brown and Beige*."²⁷ Ellington, then, ties *Black, Brown and Beige* into a broader black orchestral tradition that he was likely quite familiar with in Washington and New York. Not only would these early orchestra leaders' musical innovations influence Ellington's symphonic compositions, but their determination to have their music received as art laid the foundations for *Black, Brown and Beige*'s artistic posturing several decades later.

Ellington's connections to the Harlem Renaissance throughout the 1920s are somewhat murkier than his Washington associations. In a 1931 interview in the British magazine *Rhythm*, he argued that "what is being done by Countee Cullen [a New Negro poet] and others in literature is overdue in our music," then mentioned that he intended to write a piece that would "portray the experience of the coloured races in America in the syncopated idiom."²⁸ This piece would eventually become *Black, Brown and Beige*, and it is important to note that he mentions that the New Negro movement played some role in spurring him to begin work on this piece. Yet it is unclear exactly how Ellington was experiencing the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s. Did he read much New Negro writing or have any contacts within the movement? Unfortunately, he does not say.

However, his popular "Black and Tan Fantasy" reveals a curious dialogue with New Negro writings about jazz, musical authenticity, and primitivism. The piece, notably, is introduced by a variation on Stephen Adams' sacred song "The Holy City." Whereas "The Holy City," however, is an ethereal choral piece in a major key, Ellington distorts it into an angry, growling melodic line that plays over a twelve-bar minor blues form. Metzger explicates Ellington's transformation of Adams' "City" within a greater black spiritual tradition defined by Hurston in her "Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals."²⁹ In this essay, she describes spirituals as "Negro religious songs, sung by a group, and a group bent on expression of feelings and not on sound effects."³⁰ Since African American parishioners didn't have any hymns of their own, Hurston argues, they experimented with the hymns so as to express their own, unique statement of black spirituality. Ellington, then, continues this spiritual tradition into the realm of popular music in "Black and Tan Fantasy," not only changing Adams' "City," but also juxtaposing the spiritual in this melody against the secular in the distinctly jazzy blues form of the piece.

Metzger notes that this ironic juxtaposition hints at a satire of W.E.B. DuBois' definition of the spiritual as a "sorrow song," a black reworking of the white hymn that emphasizes the sorrow DuBois understands to rest at the core of the black experience in America.³¹ While DuBois argues that African Americans created the sorrow song by modifying European musical idioms, he emphasizes the purity of the sorrow song. If the African American created an authentic expression of his plight in the Antebellum period, that authenticity had only been eroded by modern tinkering: "With the growth has gone the debasements and imitations—the Negro 'minstrel' songs, many of the 'gospel' hymns, and some of the contemporary 'coon' songs—a mass of music in which the novice may easily lose himself and find the real Negro melodies."³² DuBois' definition of spirituals was later upheld by Locke, who railed against the "crude and refined secularization" of the spiritual in the

²⁷In Peter Gammond ed., *Duke Ellington: His Life and Music* (New York: Da Capo [1958] 1977), 54.

²⁸Duke Ellington, "The Duke Steps Out," *Rhythm*, March 20-22, 1931, 22.

²⁹David Metzger, "Shadow Play: The Spiritual in Duke Ellington's 'Black and Tan Fantasy,'" *Black Music Research Journal*, vol. 17, no. 2 (Autumn, 1997): 137-158.

³⁰Zora Neale Hurston, "Spirituals and 'Neo-Spirituals,'" in Nancy Cunard ed., *Negro: An Anthology* (New York: Frederick Ungar, [1934] 1970), 223.

³¹Metzger, "Shadow Play," 144.

³²W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, [1903] 2018), 247.

1920s.³³ Ellington, then, in setting the spiritual core of his piece against the secular jazz form, offers a subtle criticism of the purity of the spiritual in DuBois' and Locke's writing. Moreover, he implicitly supports Hurston's assertion that the spiritual's authenticity derives from its signifying on pre-existing cultural forms.

Admittedly, one could argue that Ellington's use of the spiritual in "Black and Tan Fantasy" is more cynical than idealistic; his reworking of "The Holy City" within a jazz song may be more a novelty than a religious and artistic statement. However, this interpretation is significantly undercut by Dudley Murphy's film companion to the song from 1929, which pointedly positions Ellington's piece against a traditional spiritual song.³⁴ The short, only around twenty minutes long, tells a rather simple story. Ellington gets a job at a local cabaret through his girlfriend and leading dancer, played by Fredi Washington. She was recently diagnosed with a heart condition, however, and can't perform with him. At the date, lured out by the announcer, she dances for Ellington's band until she collapses on stage. The band quickly leaves, and the film cuts to her deathbed, framed by a chorus and Ellington's band. The chorus sings a funeral song in a more formal spiritual mode, but Washington indicates that she wants Ellington to play "Black and Tan Fantasy" instead. Ellington reluctantly agrees, and the band picks up the tune as the chorus joins in on the melody. As the band finishes the song with the quotation of the Chopin funeral theme, Washington dies, and the camera rests on Ellington's grief-stricken face as it fades to black.

This final scene is an interesting addition to the New Negro discussion surrounding the spiritual. It provides a solemn context in which Ellington's song adopts a completely new air, morphing from the lighthearted tinkering of the first act into a grave, funereal dirge fit for a wake. More importantly, Washington's dismissal of the formal spiritual at the start of the third act offers a subtle rebuke of the formality and purity supposedly offered by the sorrow song. The film doesn't argue here that "Black and Tan Fantasy" works better than the sorrow song in this context because it is an objectively better song for a funeral. Rather, it is in its personal significance to Washington that it gains its spiritual potency. Not only, then, does the "Black and Tan" film make a case for "Black and Tan Fantasy" as a worthy spiritual, but it crucially argues that the spiritual's power comes from its subjective associations for the listeners, not a specific element of the song itself.

Notably, the "Black and Tan Fantasy" movie revels in the blurred lines between the spiritual and the secular. This hazy distinction is, of course, prevalent in the song itself: the fine line Ellington rides between folk spiritual and pop song. Murphy continues to develop this distinction in the film. One of the more satisfying ironies comes in the second act, as Washington, woozy from her sickness, watches Ellington's band play. The camera, supposedly portraying her perspective, refracts the shot of Ellington's band into a kaleidoscopic panoply of smaller images. Metzger notes that this curious effect may hint at "the delirium and ecstasy produced by the overflowing sensuality of the club, a site where bodies and music take on new shapes and sounds."³⁵ This purposeful distortion, he argues, is continued and modified in the third act, in which the silhouettes of the players and chorus at Washington's funeral are thrust onto the wall, transforming the environment into something abstract and fantastical. This theme of distortion, then, curiously links the cabaret to the funeral and blurs the evaluative line between the secular and the sacred. The experience of clubbing, the film suggests, produces an altered state of mind that bears rather close resemblance to that of the spiritual encounter in the third act. The film cleverly steps back here, refusing to tell the viewer what this surreal association between club and funeral really means. Rather, it subtly develops an association between the two and leaves it at that. This subtle connection relates the cabaret experience to "higher" modes of black experience, an idea that Ellington would explore

³³Alain Locke, "The Negro Spirituals," in *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (New York: A. and C. Boni, 1925), 201.

³⁴Dudley Murphey, *Black and Tan Fantasy* (1929; New York: RKO Pictures), web video.

³⁵Metzger, "Shadow Play," 154.

much further in *Black, Brown and Beige*.

Shortly after the “Black and Tan Fantasy” film’s premiere, Ellington intimated he was interested in working on a longer work that explored African history. He remarked in an interview in late 1930 that it was a “tragedy...that so few records have been kept of the Negro music of the past” and that it “pleases me to have a chance to work at it.”³⁶ A couple weeks later, the *New York Evening Graphic* specified the parameters of his project: “At present [Ellington] is at work on a tremendous task, the writing, in music, of ‘The History of the Negro,’ taking the Negro from Egypt, going with him to savage Africa, and from there to the sorrow and slavery of Dixie, and finally ‘home to Harlem.’”³⁷ Ellington later suggested he had written *Black, Brown and Beige* rather quickly, over the span of the month preceding the piece’s premiere in January 1943.³⁸ However, Tucker’s analysis of Ellington’s work in the ‘30s has demonstrated that he had been developing *Black, Brown and Beige*’s story for over a decade.³⁹ It is important to bear this in mind when analyzing the piece’s connection to the New Negro movement for two reasons. Ellington had begun to think about the piece’s narrative in the early ‘30s, very shortly after the flowering of the Harlem Renaissance. As such, the piece cannot be dismissed as arriving too late to be reasonably connected to the New Negro movement. Second, Tucker’s research reveals that one must distinguish between the music and narrative of the piece when analyzing New Negro influences; Ellington had been mulling over the latter since 1930, whereas he quickly wrote the former over a month. For this reason, this paper will focus its analysis on the program notes for *Black, Brown and Beige*.

In contrast to the “Black and Tan Fantasy,” *Black, Brown and Beige* appears at first glance to validate DuBois’ and Locke’s comments on black music. The piece’s status as a work of symphonic music written and conducted by a black artist certainly seems to answer Locke’s and DuBois’ call for “serious” black music. Moreover, the piece’s performance at Carnegie Hall, away from the commercial cabarets and jazz clubs Locke despised so much, is rather significant.⁴⁰ Ellington appears to decry the detrimental effect of jazz’s commercialization on black community in a rhetorical question he poses in the program notes for “Beige”:

Did [your song] say to [foreign listeners] / “The joy I’m giving / Is the foil I use to lose
my blues / And make myself an honest living?”⁴¹

In this passage, Ellington argues that “joyful” cabaret jazz was invented as an escape from the “blues” wrought by the black experience following Emancipation, an idea he developed at the end of the previous movement. There is something rather unhealthy, then, about having to constantly express this “joy” to make a living; it misrepresents the black experience.

While these aspects of *Black, Brown and Beige* are certainly aligned with DuBois’ and Locke’s writing, it would be a mistake to assume that this, then, represents a dramatic shift in Ellington’s relationship to the New Negro movement. Ellington writes at length about spirituals in the first movement, “Black,” continuing the Hurstonist reading of the spiritual he had outlined in “Black and Tan Fantasy.” As Ellington depicts it, the spiritual was created when slaves began to modify the snippets of the hymnals that they could hear emanating from churches they couldn’t enter:

³⁶Janet Mabie, “Ellington’s ‘Mood in indigo,’” *Christian Science Monitor*, December 13, 1930

³⁷Florence Zunsner, “‘Opera must die,’ says Galli-Curci! Long live the blues!,” *New York Evening Graphic Magazine*, December 27, 1930.

³⁸Ellington, *Music Is My Mistress*, 181.

³⁹Mark Tucker, “The Genesis of ‘Black, Brown and Beige,’” *Black Music Research Journal*, vol. 22, Supplement: Best of BMRJ (2002), 131-150.

⁴⁰Locke, notably, was in attendance at *Black, Brown and Beige*’s premiere. See Harvey G. Cohen, “Duke Ellington and *Black, Brown and Beige*: The Composer as Historian at Carnegie Hall,” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 56, No. 4 (December 2004), 1011.

⁴¹Ellington, “Beige,” 3.

When the whites inside lifted voices in joyous song... / The blacks outside would hum along, / Adding their own touches...weaving melodic, / Harmonic, rhythmic patterns.⁴²

Ellington once again sets the definition of the spiritual as a black modification of white religious songs in his origin story. Crucially, he again rejects DuBois' definition of spirituals as innately sorrowful, remarking that "it is not true...that all [the slave's] songs / Were songs of sorrow."⁴³ Rather, Ellington casts early spirituals as expressions of restorative joy, writing that the slaves

listened and were lifted up. / Those golden tones were lulling tones. / Their consciences were glad. Glad the slaves / Had found the Bible...Singing to their God... / Reassuring...Calming...Healing...⁴⁴

One also shouldn't read too far into Ellington's use of concert form in *Black, Brown and Beige* as a reaction to DuBois' and Locke's demands for a black classical music. Tucker notes that Ellington was heavily influenced by Paul Whiteman's and James P. Johnson's jazz symphonies of the '20s.⁴⁵ A far more direct line can be drawn between Ellington's desire to compose a symphony and these composers' works than to DuBois' and Locke's writings. A more rewarding and, indeed, interesting vein to explore, then, would be the degree to which the jazz symphonists of the '20s were influenced by their contemporaries in the Harlem Renaissance.⁴⁶

Whereas "Black and Tan Fantasy" and its film offered a subtle critique of the primitivist aesthetic in its growling melodies and visual delirium, Ellington offers a rather thoughtful analysis of the advantages and drawbacks of a primitivist aesthetic in the racial history he outlines in *Black, Brown and Beige*. The heady booming of the jungle drums is a recurring motif that Ellington sets as the ever-pounding beat of the black experience. He begins the piece and his history in the jungle:

A message is shot through the jungle by drums. / BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!
/ Like a tomtom in steady precision. / Like the slapping of bare black feet across the desert wastes...Like lash after lash as they crash and they curl and they cut. DEEP! / Like kidneys that thump. / Like heartbeats that bump...out of tempo...This BOOMing is echoing in the brain. Nerves of a black brood...in tempo.⁴⁷

Ellington sets the jungle drum as the soundtrack to his unfolding history. The tom-tom, he argues, is the origin point of African civilization even as it develops new significance as the African comes to America. Its unyielding beats signify the oppression the African has faced in America, the persistence of his determination to better himself, and the arrhythmic lifeblood of his culture. Ellington's primitivism also unifies pan-African communities. In a curious anecdote, Ellington sets a musical primitivism as the point of commonality between African American and Haitian soldiers in the Revolutionary War. As he writes,

Haiti resounding the echo of Africa was loud here. / Tropical drums...sexual drums... / Savage drums...religious drums...Sensuous...weird...flavored with Latin...Boola / Absorbed them into his being. / He was enriched altho' he did not know / His own rich blood and music had flavored / This new and startling sound / Which stirred his being.⁴⁸

⁴²Duke Ellington, "Black," 16, *Black, Brown and Beige*, undated typescript, Duke Ellington Collection, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.

⁴³Ellington, "Black," 18.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 17.

⁴⁵Tucker, "Genesis of 'Black, Brown and Beige'," 147-148

⁴⁶Howland, *Ellington Uptown* does just this, providing an excellent discussion on the evolution of the black jazz symphony throughout the interwar period.

⁴⁷Ellington, "Black," 1.

⁴⁸Duke Ellington, "Brown," 6, *Black, Brown and Beige*, undated typescript, Duke Ellington Collection, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.

Indeed, it bears considering how primitive Ellington's "primitivity" really is. The above quotation undoubtedly incorporates hallmarks of cabaret primitivism, emphasizing the "savagery" and sexuality of the African sound. Yet Ellington writes at length in the program notes about pre-colonial African civilization's high state of development in comparison with prehistoric Europe, noting that Africa was

first to smelt the iron and use the forge... / Masters of the art of basketry, pottery, cutlery, / Sculpture! Whence came the art of Greece? / ...out of black Africa!⁴⁹

This heroic portrayal of black cultural heritage, Cohen notes, has literary precedence in the writings of Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, Franz Boas, and, notably, DuBois.⁵⁰ Ellington's "savage drums" in the Haitian quotation, then, seem rather out of place considering this portrayal of African civilization and the piece's use of a primitivist aesthetic to express this idealistic past.

One way to reconcile this idiosyncrasy is to consider how Ellington wrote about white America's desire for African music. Ellington makes clear that music was one mechanism by which slaves could project a pleasing image to their masters and thus ward off persecution:

A silent slave was a brooding slave... / A brooding slave was a dangerous slave... / Too many masters found dead... / Or not at all... / So! SING, you black bastards...SING!⁵¹

This passage finds a modern parallel in "Beige," in which Ellington explores jazz's role in obfuscating the reality of the black experience. "How then," he asks, "this picture they have drawn? / It can't be true / That all you do... / Is dance and sing / And moan!"⁵² Ellington draws some distinction in these passages between "authentic" musical primitivism—the jungle beat he uses to represent the black experience—and a sinister, commercialized primitivism. The latter, Ellington suggests, is precipitated by a white demand for the ecstasy and unbridled sexuality of the jazz club. Crucially, he doesn't dismiss that facet of the black experience as untrue or problematic; he takes issue, however, with the notion that jazz culture is the only side of black America that the outside world sees. Ellington wants to erase the notion that African American life is as carefree and joyful as the jazz clubs would suggest. One can read the primitivism of *Black, Brown and Beige*, then, as an attempt to take back those primitivist tropes and refashion them within a narrative of black history that acknowledges the sorrows integral to the black experience. The jungle drums of the cabaret transform into the pounding beat of the African diaspora into which Ellington pours the entire emotional breadth of African American experience. In doing so, he attempts to reconcile the rather sinister commercial primitivism of cabaret jazz—a primitivism that, indeed, he had helped establish in his own performances at the Cotton Club throughout the '20s and '30s—with a racially nuanced history of black America heavily steeped in the writings of the New Negro movement.

While *Black, Brown and Beige* is received as one of Ellington's greatest works today, critical reception to the piece was markedly mixed in 1943. Douglas Watt, reviewing the piece for the *Daily News*, wrote that "it hardly ever succeeds...because such a form of composition is entirely out of Ellington's ken."⁵³ The composer Paul Bowles, who ran a column in the *New York Herald-Tribune*, panned the symphony as "formless and meaningless. In spite of Mr. Ellington's ideological comments before each 'movement,' nothing emerged but a gaudy pot-pourri of tutti dance passages and solo virtuoso work."⁵⁴ Evidently Ellington took note of the criticism; he never again performed

⁴⁹Ellington, "Black," 6

⁵⁰Cohen, "Ellington and *Black, Brown and Beige*," 1012-1013.

⁵¹Ellington, "Black," 9.

⁵²Ellington, "Black," 3.

⁵³Douglas Watt, "The Duke has hot concert at Carnegie," *DAILY NEWS*, January 25, 1943, 30.

⁵⁴Paul Bowles, "Duke Ellington in recital for Russian Relief," *New York Herald-Tribune*, January 25, 1943, 7

the piece in its entirety.⁵⁵ It was only in 1977, three years after Ellington's death, that the original recording of the 1943 Carnegie Hall performance was released by Prestige Records.⁵⁶

One may wonder, then, why *Black, Brown and Beige* should even be investigated at all if it left such a muted impact at the time. For one, as Howland notes, Ellington's symphonic legacy was instrumental in shaping orchestral jazz in the postwar period, contributing to the Hollywood vogue for "classical" jazz scoring in the '40s and '50s and the third-stream and progressive jazz movements in the late '50s and early '60s.⁵⁷ Much less, however, has been written about the legacy of *Black, Brown and Beige*'s social message. This other side to the piece shouldn't be discounted. In 1943, Ellington was one of the most famous jazz performers in the world, touted by many musicians and critics as America's greatest living composer. His engagement with the New Negro movement, then, shouldn't be regarded as an interesting but isolated incident. It bears investigating whether his exploration of New Negro theory in *Black, Brown and Beige* had any role in later jazz aesthetics. The 1940s, of course, saw the birth of bebop markedly race-conscious and artistically-minded new movement in jazz. Could bebop musicians have been at all informed by the New Negro movement, and if so, through what avenues? Moreover, as this paper has demonstrated, Ellington was rather exceptional in his relation to the Harlem Renaissance, but he was by no means the only black musician in this time period to come from a middle-class background or explore black politics of respectability in his work. Future scholarship, then, should not only further explore the legacy of Ellington's foray into the New Negro movement but should also continue to critically investigate the degrees of separation between the worlds of the Harlem Renaissance and the black entertainment industry in the 1920s.

⁵⁵He did, however, release a partial re-recording of the suite with Mahalia Jackson in 1958. See Duke Ellington, *Black, Brown and Beige*, with Mahalia Jackson, recorded February 4-5 and 11-12, 1958, Columbia CS 8015, 1958, 33 1/3 rpm.

⁵⁶Duke Ellington And His Orchestra, *The Duke Ellington Carnegie Hall Concerts: January 1943*, recorded January 23, 1943, Prestige P-34004, 1977, 33 1/3 rpm.

⁵⁷Howland, *Ellington Uptown*, 301-302.

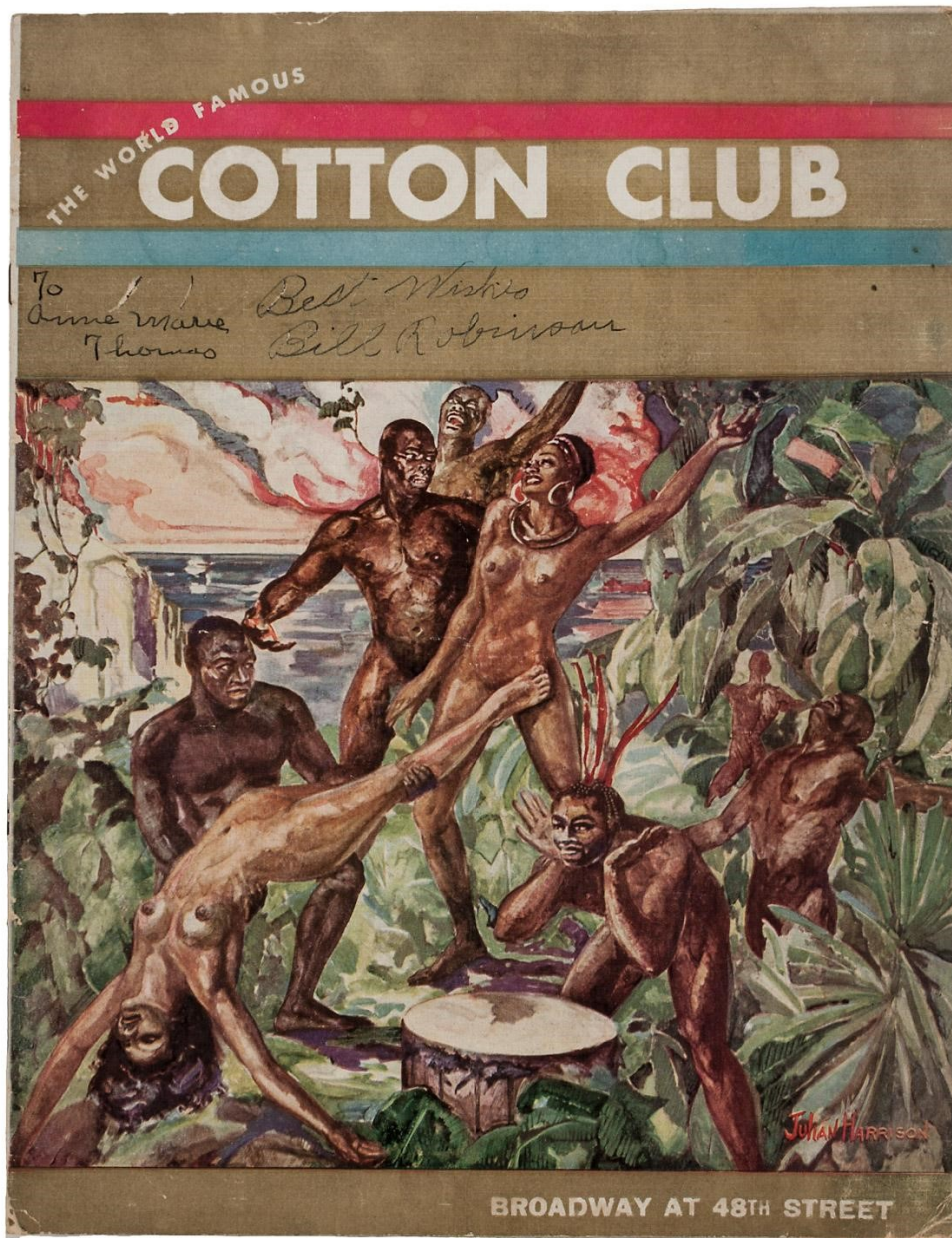


Figure 1: Cotton Club program from 1936—this program comes after the end of Prohibition and the Cotton Club’s move to a second location in downtown Manhattan, but the primitivist design is faithful to the club’s ‘20s aesthetic.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Bill Robinson-signed program for The Cotton Club, 1936, 1936, program, 33x26 cm, PBA Galleries, San Francisco, <https://www.pbagalleries.com/view-auctions/catalog/id/12/lot/6997/The-World-Famous-Cotton-Club-program-and-dinner-menu-signed-by-Bill-Robinson>.

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