# Re-Presentation of African American Womanhood in Three Works of the New Negro Visual Arts Movement

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Abstract

*This article analyzes three works of the New Negro Visual Arts Movement in the 1920s-30s United States, in particular how each artist worked towards reinventing the visual representation of the African American womanhood. The analysis is grounded in, among other sources, the writings of Alain Locke and W.E.B. DuBois as leading African American intellectuals of the period considered. The paper focuses on one painting each by Winold Reiss and Archibald J. Motley, Jr., and a sculpture by Richmond Barthé. It examines how renditions of African American womanhood by these artists complicate the reductive, denigrating stereotypical imagery of the black woman as either the asexual Mammy, or the wanton Jezebel morally unfit to be a mother. Analyzing Motley's rendition of the black female nude, the article argues that the work restores the black female body to its purity and aesthetic integrity even as it complexly interrogates the issue of the split African American identity in the racially divided world of the period.*

Keywords

New Negro, Harlem Renaissance, Alain Locke, W.E.B. DuBois, double consciousness, the Jezebel, the Mammy, African American, womanhood, Winold Reiss, Richmond Barthé, Archibald J. Motley, Jr.

## Introduction

*Ain't jo' mama on a pancake box?*

This snap from the African American vernacular reflects one of the two prevalent historical stereotypes of an African American woman – that of a Mammy, the other being that of a Jezebel. Each was a creation of the white imagination and as such was reinforced in the decades following Emancipation to reassert the perpetuation of a social order predicated on white patriarchy. With former slaves no longer under the physical control of the slave master, this reinforcement of the stereotypical imagery was but one of the complex ways designed to prevent the black body from staining the white body politic. Just as the excessive and pathological sexual prowess that was projected upon the black male found a convenient means of containment in the white fantasy about the emasculated foolish Coon or childlike Sambo, the Mammy and the Jezebel each prescribed black womanhood in ways conducive to maintaining white patriarchal authority over both white and black women while allowing sexual access to and domination over them.

Both the Mammy and the Jezebel were defined in antithesis to idealized white womanhood, which itself was a fantasy. As Harris states, the Mammy was envisioned as very dark-skinned, older and overweight so as to make her sexually undesirable to the white male. As a faithful servant she was a harmless comfort rather than a threat to the white woman. In addition, the Mammy reinforced the relegation of the latter to the domestic sphere, thus confirming her status. The Mammy was presented as the ideal of black womanhood and as such concealed her sexualized counterpart, the wanton Jezebel who was available for sexual consumption. Like the Jezebel, the fairer-skinned

women as products of racial miscegenation were conspicuously absent from the visual imagery of white-constructed black womanhood. It was the asexual Mammy that was visually ubiquitous as a protective covering to mask the harsh realities of interracial sexuality and to provide a face-saving protected space for the white woman.[1]

The visual pollution with respect to the popular imagery of black womanhood reflected the “race thinking” that had become imbedded in American political process and had plagued the American social polity. When the New Negro Movement, or the Harlem Renaissance, emerged in the 1920s, in an ambitious agenda that intertwined the aesthetic with the political it set out to counteract the mainstream stereotypes about the African American.

Alain Locke penned the *New Negro*, a manifesto envisioning the manifestation of black artistic talent as an effective means of facilitating US social progress regarding racial issues. His essay on “The Legacy of Ancestral Arts” pointed out the breakdown of racial hierarchy in the field of aesthetics as evidenced by the recent European “discovery” of African art (and its embrace by, e.g. Cubists). According to Locke this breakthrough portended the promise of a similar shift in perceptions leading to the “revaluation” of the social standing of the African Americans in the United States. His call upon the New Negro artist to produce art that would be “consciously and respectively racial”[2] was pretexted on the notion of African American visual arts as a means for combating the racial prejudice of the U.S. mainstream by demonstrating “the Negro genius,” whereby a new racial idiom for the visual representation of the Negro subject was to be developed: “Art must discover and reveal the beauty which prejudice and caricature have overlaid.”[3] Locke thus envisioned a racial school of art (rather than an isolated talent) that would break through stereotypes of what 60 years later Henry Louis Gates termed “Sambo Art”[4] to forge a new style which employed an putatively objective social angle that could challenge the denigration of African American physiognomy, personality and experience. In Locke’s view, by manifesting the “Negro genius” the New Negro visual arts agenda was to make both whites and blacks aware of the intrinsic value of the Negro experience, a mindset expected to serve the double purpose of, on one hand, healing a damaged Negro group psychology tormented by self-depreciation and self-denial, and on the other facilitate a gradual equal social acceptance of the African American by the U.S. mainstream.

During the heyday of the Harlem Renaissance itself and ever since, many have pointed out that at best the notion of racial advancement and improvement of social standing of the race by promoting the “Negro genius” was unrealistic and impractical on the part of the “naïve Niggerati,” especially in the face of the harsh economic realities that made many prospective African American artists financially dependent on the support of white patrons and their Jazz Age fascination with “the African primitive.”[5] Nevertheless, Locke’s call was heeded and his ambitious visual arts agenda

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1 Michael D. Harris, *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 13–148.

2 Alain Locke, “The Legacy of Ancestral Arts,” *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925), 256.

3 Locke, “The Legacy,” 264.

4 Henry Louis Gates, “The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black,” *Representations* 24 (Fall 1988): 130.

5 David C. Driskell, et al., *Harlem Renaissance: Art of Black America* (New York: Abrams, 1987), 102.

found reflection in the work of many aspiring artists who incorporated its precepts into their body of work.

Locke's aesthetic agenda differed in certain respects from that of the other leading African American intellectual of the New Negro era, W.E.B. DuBois. Locke's quest for the pursuit of beauty stemmed from his belief that aesthetic expression is a more effective vehicle for communicating the attitudes and feelings that sustain the lives of a people, andthus is in the end a more effectual political tool than propaganda. Locke perceived the latter as a limited and biased political weapon that resorted to pejorative presentations of the political, economic and social conditions of the race, and so further perpetuating the self-image of group inferiority among African Americans.[6]

DuBois, then, was concerned that Locke's quest for beauty could turn the Negro Renaissance into pursuit of decadence. DuBois purposefully oriented his pursuits toward the arenas in which he felt they would reap the greatest benefits in alleviating the racial problems in the United States. Almost a generation older than Locke, by the mid-1920s DuBois had arrived at the perception of all art as propaganda. To him, creating works with a message was a political necessity in an environment where such methods were being employed by one side (i.e. white supremacists) only: "I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent."[7]

Nevertheless, both Locke and DuBois viewed art as a crucial vehicle to make the African Americans themselves aware of their own intrinsic value, a tool of enormous psychological import in the struggle against racial self-degradation and self-denial. As such, art would eventually yield political fruit as well.

How, then, did the New Negro artists and sculptors deal with the visual reconceptualization of the African American womanhood by re/presenting it in Lockean terms? How did they go about reconstructing the skewed image of the African American woman imbedded in an American mind conditioned by the proliferation of the "mammy cookie jars" and the image of the servile kitchen domestic Aunt Jemima as a façade concealing the wanton Jezebel lurking as a threat to the established racial and social order? How did their works engage and even renegotiate the ideology of "the Talented Tenth" and "the politics of respectability"?

The New Negro Movement did not have a specific feminist agenda. With the exception of one essay on "The Task of Negro Womanhood,"[8] the themes in the New Negro Anthology edited by Locke considered cultural contributions of the African American in the arenas of literature and music. Yet the diverse group of artists who had come under the umbrella of the New Negro Visual Arts Movement seems to have implicitly embraced the theme of African American womanhood. Even though this was not a concerted programmatic effort, a fair amount of the New Negro painting and sculpture appears to have echoed the attention long accorded the "Negro womanhood" on the pages of the African American press. Ranging from portraits of elderly black women, frail but noble and dignified in their age after having devoted their lives to transforming humiliating

6 Beryl J. Wright, "The Harmon Foundation in Context: Early Exhibitions and Alain Locke's Concept of a Racial Idiom of Expression." *Against the Odds: African American Artists and the Harmon Foundation*, ed. Gary A. Reynolds, et al. (New Jersey: Newark Museum, 1989), 18–19.

7 W.E.B. DuBois, "Criteria of Negro Art," *Crisis* 32 (October 1926): 296.

8 Elise Johnson McDougald, "The Task of Negro Womanhood," *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, 381.

and frustrating labor into virtue (e.g. Edwin A. Harleston's *The Old Servant*, Archibald J. Motley's *Mending Socks* and Laura Wheeling Waring's *Anna Washington*), through genre scenes rendering the black women in urban environment (e.g. Motley's Bronzeville paintings), to the images invoking heroic historical personalities (e.g. Aaron Douglas's *Sojourner Truth*), these New Negro renditions documented a search for identity and echoed Locke's call for reinventing the African American visually in new terms.

Out of the myriad of different approaches the individual artists took in re/presenting African American womanhood, I am selecting a few works for analysis here. While by no means exhaustive, these renditions illustrate the complexity with which New Negro artists endowed their self-assumed task of re-presenting African American womanhood anew. I have been guided in my selection by several criteria. First, corresponding to the quest to endow the African American with a strong sense of identity, subjectivity and soul, all of the works selected but one are portraits. Second, in order to illustrate the diversity of the group that comprised the Movement, one artist selected here as being of considerable influence within the Harlem Renaissance circles is a German immigrant (Winold Reiss). Two male African American artists, sculptor Richmond Barthé and painter Archibald J. Motley, Jr., have also been chosen – Given that the New Negro Renaissance has recently come under reconsideration within the larger framework of the Black diaspora (the Black Atlantic), including Motley as a Chicago artist corresponds to this extension of the Movement beyond the topos of Harlem as the black mecca. Thematically, the selected works by Reiss and Barthé engage the afore mentioned stereotypical fixations on the black woman as supposedly morally unfit for motherhood. The painting by Motley is original and complex in its addressing the stereotype of the Jezebel, exploring at the same time issues of class and identity as related to "shades of difference," i.e. varying degrees of dark skin pigmentation within the larger African American community. In contemplating the selected works as re/presentations of African American womanhood, the analysis will consider them in the broader context of the political agenda of the New Negro Renaissance as espoused by the two intellectual leaders of African America in the 1920s, Alain Locke and W.E.B. DuBois.

## Black Mother as the Madonna

"Lowly," "fallen," "raving amazons" "promiscuous" in their "animality," "Hagars who have been thrust out into the desert of their own superstition and ignorance and sin, they will raise up Ishmaels whose hands shall be against our sons forever."[9] Such were the accounts of a black woman considered on the pages of Southern periodicals at turn of the 19$^{th}$-century. Compared even to Frankenstein and Herod,[10] black women were implicated in moral degeneracy and as such considered unfit to be mothers. Occasionally, writers cited in Beverly Guy-Sheftall's study *Daughters of Sorrow* lamented the passage of slavery as an institution whereby the slave had been provided with an example in his masters to emulate in terms of home life. Even though some accounts of the period's black

9 Quoted in Beverly Guy-Sheftall, *Daughters of Sorrow: Attitudes Toward Black Women, 1880–1920* (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1990), 44–52.

10 Guy-Sheftall, *Daughters of Sorrow*, 44–52.

womanhood discussed by Guy-Sheftall were more sympathetic, even to the extent of pointing out white males' sexual depravity rather than the immorality of black women, the devilish image of black womanhood was widespread enough to warrant considerable attention on the part of African American artists to counteract this figure by re/presenting the African American woman as a mother.

In fact, even prior to the onset of the New Negro Movement, DuBois himself as an editor of the African American monthly magazine *The Crisis* devoted considerable attention to black womanhood, specifically black motherhood. In response to the Southern quest to erect a statue in tribute to the black Mammy in Washington, D.C., his article in the December 1912 issue of *The Crisis* charged that "the black mammy existed under a false social system that deprived her of husband and child." The black woman as "the foster mammy" caring for the children of the "master class" rather than devoting herself fully to caring for her own children was, according to DuBois, "a perversion of motherhood." Hoping that this trope "has disappeared from American life," DuBois called for "the present-day mammies [to] suckle their own children [...] In the midst of immense difficulties, surrounded by caste, and hemmed in by restricted economic opportunity, let the colored mother of today build her own status, and let it be the four walls of her own unsullied home."[11] Responding to idealizations of the antebellum period, DuBois lamented slavery as responsible for the corruption of "the African habit of chastity." Contemplating "The Damnation of Women," DuBois bowed in tribute to black women as "daughters of sorrow" and asserted: "No other women on earth could have emerged from the hell of force and temptation which once engulfed and still surrounds black women in America with half the modesty and womanliness they still retain."[12] Rejecting the charge that "out of slavery came nothing decent in womanhood" but "adultery and uncleanness," he posited that the hopes of black race lay more in the quality of its women than its men: "Despite the noisier and more spectacular advance of my brothers [...] it is the women of my race who really count."[13] "To no modern race do its women mean so much as to the Negro nor come so near to the fulfillment of its meaning."[14] He quoted a now well-known passage from Anna Julia Cooper's *A Voice from the South* (1892): "Only the black woman can say, 'When and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me.'"[15] According to DuBois, the rise of the "Negro race" was predicated on the rise of African American womanhood, motherhood in particular being crucial for the future of the race. Each year one issue of *The Crisis* was dedicated to children, a fact which also indicates the importance that the role of the black woman as mother was accorded in the community in its quest for social respectability. .

Heeding DuBois's call for respectability, images of black motherhood proliferated among the New Negro artists. As had DuBois, many artists paid respect to elderly women who had

11 W.E.B. DuBois, "The Black Mother," *W.E.B. DuBois: A Reader*, ed. Meyer Weinberg (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 101.

12 W.E.B. DuBois, "The Damnation of Women," *W.E.B. DuBois: Writings*, ed. Nathan Huggins (New York: Viking Press, 1989), 968.

13 DuBois, "The Damnation of Women," 963.

14 DuBois, "The Damnation of Women," 959.

15 DuBois, "The Damnation of Women," 959.

devoted their lives to humble and dignified work, with images occasionally giving way to the visual representation of the black mother as the Madonna.

Winold Reiss's *The Brown Madonna* (1925) was among the earliest of these images and as such was accorded a prominent position facing the title page of Locke's seminal 1925 anthology *The New Negro: An Interpretation*. As Jeffrey C. Stewart points out, Reiss as a German immigrant artist had stumbled onto a black community simmering with desire for dignified self-representation.[16] Reiss had been interested in documenting racial types as a means to illuminate the distinctions and integrity of different ethnic groups. His restrained, objective renderings reflected both the individuals and the culture they embodied.[17]

Reiss's *The Brown Madonna* manifests the artist's concern for a detailed and accurate, objective rendering of his subject, revealing the psychology behind the physiognomy. Dignified in her pious humility, Reiss's incarnation of the black woman as the Madonna captures the solemn deep spirituality of the mother of the race. With her gaze piously lowered and turned to the side in utter denial of self-importance, the neutral shades of her attire deemphasized and her simple hairstyle enhancing the gracefulness of her head, the viewer's eye rests on the child, whose eyes are directed back at the beholder. The stark whiteness of the youth's shirt is set against the soft, warm darkness of the skin of both mother and child. Redeeming the blackness and its negative connotations as "the diabolic dye," Reiss harmonizes the contrastive black and white in an image of solemn spiritual nourishment. Emphasized against the whiteness of the shirt, the dark hand holding the child is gentle, supportive and, above all, graceful with its prolonged fingers. The child is cradled peacefully and comfortably in the gentle yet safely firm embrace of the pious spirituality emanating from the mother's presence. The round cut of her sweater seems to be a modest suggestion of the halo of a saint, yet eschewing empty pathos. The contours of her head seem to be echoed in the gray background, in further suggestion of the celestial. In addition, the suggested curls of the baby, rather than merely reflecting probable reality, may perhaps be viewed as a reference to the angelic in yet another gesture ridding the blackness or darkness of the associations with the devilish. Reiss's image of the brown Madonna is captivating in its stark overpowering spirituality. The brown Madonna is soul and piety incarnate.

The obvious Christian references of Reiss's portrait elevated the black woman and pointed out her readiness for the mission of racial uplift in spiritual terms. This invocation of Biblical references specifically parallels notions developed by W.E.B. DuBois in his *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and further elaborated on in *The Darkwater: The Voices from Behind the Veil* (1920) and other essays. Here DuBois embraces the concept of the Negro race (that is, both African American and Africans in general, in line with his Pan-Africanism) as having a specific mission to perform in terms of world history and humanity in general. According to DuBois, the tragic historical experience of past enslavement and present cultural dependency has endowed the African American

16 Jeffrey C. Stewart, *To Color America: Portraits by Winold Reiss* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), 9.

17 Richard J. Powell, "Enter the 'New Negro'", *Black Art: A Cultural History* (London, Thames and Hudson, 2002), 29–30.

(and the African in general) with moral superiority and made him a seer. His writings repeatedly invoke a vision of Black Christ.[18]

Richmond Barthé's *The Mother* (1939, also known under the title *Supplication*) also uses Biblical terms, reverberating with the theme of black martyrdom. Combining the Lockean quest for Beauty in Truth and DuBois's caution about propaganda, Barthé's sculpture echoes Michelangelo's *Pieta*, which depicts Mary mourning the body of Christ after the Deposition.[19] In Barthé's rendition, the Biblical Mary is transformed into a black mother holding the dead body of a son who has traces of a lynching rope around his neck. Stricken by deep pangs of grief, the mother is nevertheless dignified and solemn in her utmost sorrow. Barthé endowed his variation on the Lamentation scene with considerable emotional weight, rendering the mother humble yet heroic in her stoicism. Barthé's sculpture was perhaps a visual complement to the then legal and political campaign of black organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to make lynching a crime to be prosecuted under federal law in order to take the implementation of justice in these cases out of the hands of Southern state courts, which in almost all cases granted no redress to victims and left perpetrators unpunished.

## Behold the Jezebel – Contesting the Truth in the Eye of the Beholder

Archibald J. Motley's *Brown Girl After the Bath* (1931) engaged the political by means of the aesthetic in less conspicuous ways. Contesting the primitive as an issue that was gracefully eschewed by the black middle class and the intelligentsia of the DuBois's circles, Motley's painting is one of his many renditions of racially mixed women. Following his credo to render "the full gamut, the race as a whole, not only, being terribly black but those that were very light and those that were in between,"[20] *Brown Girl After the Bath* is one of many of Motley's explorations of skin tones within the race. By portraying the nude figure of a brown girl he engages a complex confluence of discourses on gender, race and sexuality in a way that may have been potentially disturbing in the early 1930s when this was painted. Motley's aesthetics here not only taps unabashedly into the politics of race and identity but literally unveils corporeal evidence of "economies of the flesh, "[21] which invokes the problematic legacy of the sexual abuse of enslaved African American women.[22] In addition, Motley's very own voyeurism raises questions that even further problematize the complexity of the messages potentially conveyed by the painting.

18 The image of a Black Christ appears, e.g., in DuBois's poem "The Riddle of the Sphinx" as well as in his short story "Jesus Christ in Texas," both published in *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil*, originally published in 1920. 2 May 2016 <credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums312–b161–i368>.

19 Margaret Rose Vendryes, "Vindicating Black Masculinity: Barthé's James Weldon Johnson Memorial," *The International Review of African American Art* 18.2 (2001): 19.

20 Archibald J. Motley, Jr., quoted in Amy J. Mooney, "Representing Race: Disjunctures in the Work of Archibald J. Motley, Jr." *Museum Studies* 24 (Spring 1999): 168.

21 Lisa Collins, "Economies of the Flesh: Representing the Black Female Body in Art," *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture*, ed. Kimberly Wallace-Sanders (Ann Harbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 105.

22 Catherine Clinton, "'With a Whip in His Hand': Rape, Memory, and African American Women," *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, eds. Genevieve Fabre and Robert O'Meally (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 213.

Motley's decision to render an African American female nude was a bold, even groundbreaking step in the context of U.S. art history. Judith Wilson states that the adult black female nude as a subject of high art had been completely eschewed by U.S. (both African American and other) artists throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[23] According to Lisa Collins, the only known nineteenth-century representation of an unclothed African American woman created in the U.S. was an image by a Swiss artist.[24] Evidently, the unclothed adult black female body was too highly charged with a racialized, sexualized and exploitative history invoking slavery and connoting exotica and erotica. The complexity of associations potentially connected with a naked black female body thus effectively rendered the black nude inconceivable as a subject of high art. As Collins asserts, "[s]he was too entangled in her abused flesh."[25]

Motley, then, set to explore the potentially explosive cultural residue in which the unclothed adult black female body, the incarnation of the mental image of the Jezebel, had become steeped. Does Motley, by daring to render a black female nude, compromise "the politics of respectability" so ardently pursued by the black club women and promoted on the pages of the African American *Crisis* and *Opportunity* magazines? According to Darlene Clark Hine, black women created "a culture of dissemblance," i.e., a politics of silence and evasiveness in an attempt to challenge derogatory images of black female sexuality. By shunning outward expressions of erotica, they hoped to build a space where black women could wield more control over their bodies and gain dignity and respect within the dominant culture.[26] Does Motley's employment of black female nudity run counter to these carefully guarded attempts of black women to reclaim their bodies?

According to Wilson, Motley borrows a theme from a 1663 Dutch painting of a prostitute performing her toilet.[27] He thus engages the discourse of illicit sexuality and wantonness projected upon the black female by the voyeuristic fantasy of the (white) male. Even without the specific knowledge of the connection of Motley's image to that of a harlot, the red color of the drapery or blanket on which the girl's naked body is positioned is sexually evocative and thus further clarifies the allusion. Motley seems to be titillating the beholder as if catering to the viewer's fetishization of the black female body. However, the painting also sets out to deconstruct the stereotype of the black female as Jezebel and rather implicates the beholder in his own voyeuristic prurience and lewdness. Intruding on a private moment, the viewer finds himself in a peculiarly intimate encounter with a brown girl who is not flouting her shapely feminine body so much as reflecting on her identity and sense of self. Even though Motley does not completely subvert the stereotypical sexually evocative image of a black female, his rendition nevertheless complicates this stereotype as too simplistic, challenges the reductionism inherent in it and thus expands the range of potential racial representations.

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23 Judith Wilson, "Getting Down to Get Over: Romare Bearden's Use of Pornography and the Problem of the Female Body in Afro-U.S. Art," *Black Popular Culture*, ed. Gena Dent (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 117.

24 Collins, "Economies of the Flesh," 105–107. Collins states how in West Virginia in the late 1860s Frank Buchser depicted a young black woman, possibly his mistress, with her gaze conveniently directed sideways and otherwise clearly positioning her as an object of both beauty and desire.

25 Collins, "Economies of the Flesh," 105–107.

26 Darlene Clark Hine, quoted in Collins, "Economies of the Flesh," 110.

27 Wilson, "Getting Down to Get Over," 115–116.

Indeed, Motley's painting sets to challenge, if not completely deconstruct, the stereotype of the black female as the wanton Jezebel. Rather than merely stripping her of her clothes and exposing her as the essentialized Other, reduced to the supposedly lustful flesh, Motley seems to be engaging in a complex unveiling: the lamp "shedding light" along with the curtain swept back so as not to obstruct the view both contribute to Motley's visual metaphor, an effect which can be compared with DuBois's notion of a veil as separating the Negro from the mainstream as the Other, inculcating him with a "double consciousness."[28]

Motley's positioning of the brown girl in front of the mirror charges the painting with a myriad of aesthetic, psychological, social and political significations and further complicates its complexity. In terms of aesthetics, the mirror was frequently employed by modernists as a device interrogating the nature of art as a reflection of reality. Thus Motley as an African American artist asserts himself as an integral part of the historical tradition of modernism and its philosophical intellectual quests. Thus he inserts himself into the venerable and respected art historical canon, desegregating himself as an artist in the process. This gesture echoed Locke's hope that the demonstration of "Negro genius" in the arts would prove the Negro aesthetically and intellectually endowed. Locke thus hoped to prove that what had accounted for a relative lack of Negro achievement in literature and visual arts up to then was the historical denial of opportunities rather than the supposedly inherent inferiority of the African American,[29] as the racist argument of the time went.

Employing the mirror as a modernist device problematizing the issue of art as a reflection of reality, Motley contemplates the nature of that reflection while further manifesting his knowledge of the intricate semiotics of visual representation, namely with respect to the duality of the frontal vs. the profile rendition of the sitter. As discussed by Meyer Schapiro, Western medieval art traditionally associated the asymmetry of the profile with the demonic or the profane (as, e.g., attributed conventionally to Judas in the Last Supper), whereas the full or 3/4 frontal view in its ideal closure and roundness signified the heavenly and the sacred (i.e. as attributed to Christ and the Apostles).[30] Motley engages the semiotics of this polarity in a range somewhere between the prostitute and the Madonna. While the girl herself is in profile position to the viewer with her head turned away so as to completely conceal her face, the mirror reflection is a manipulation of the image as it is rendered from an almost frontal view.

Motley seems to invoke the demonic signified by the profile. The body is cast in shadow as if suggesting the mythical or potentially sinister sexuality of the primitive clouded in mystery, nevertheless titillating, perhaps even more so. The sexual evocativeness of the profile image is further indicated by the slightly parted legs and the suggested traces of pubic hair. In addition, the sitter's buttocks, that most fetishized part of a black female body upon which the stereotypical image of an oversexed Jezebel was often predicated,[31] is shaded as it rests on the red drapery which

28 This figure was put forth in DuBois'1903 work, *The Souls of Black Folk*. See below for further discussion.

29 Locke, "The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts," 55–56.

30 Meyer Schapiro, "Frontal and Profile as Symbolic Forms," *Words and Pictures: On the Literal and Symbolic in the Illustration of a Text*, ed. T. Sebeok (Paris: Mouton, 1973), 48–50.

31 Stuart Hall, "The Spectacle of the Other," *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage Publications, 1997), 245–249; Andrea B. Barnwell, "Like the Gypsy's Daughter or Beyond the Potency of Josephine Baker's Eroticism," *Rhapsodies in Black: Art of the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. David A. Bailey (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 82–89.

symbolically enhances the sexual evocativeness of that part of the body. Moreover, the profile image of the sitter forgoes any opportunity for the subject to be endowed with a sense of subjectivity, as her face is coyly turned away from the beholder completely.

However, it is to the reflection in the mirror that the beholder's gaze is directed. Exposed in the lamplight is the reflection of the sitter's belly, breasts and face in an almost frontal view suggesting the heavenly pole of the whore – the Madonna dialectic. While the breasts may potentially be considered as a signifier essentializing and thus sexualizing the girl in her black femininity, it also needs to be borne in mind that there are scores of female nudes in Western art whose frontal image liberates them from associations with the lowly sexual and elevates them into a higher realm of aesthetic contemplation.[32] When compared to the image of the sitter herself, the associations of the sacred invoked by the reflection in the mirror are enhanced by the fact that the parts of the body or the poses that relegate the image of the sitter more towards the profane are not reflected in the mirror at all. Next to the brown girl's unclothed body the mirror reflects flowers, some of them white, which further enhances the image of purity and innocence instead of the sexually evocative.

Most specifically, however, the mirror reflects and the lamplight exposes her face with her eyes engaging the beholder. Thus the polarity of the prostitute vs. the Madonna acquires further dimension in juxtaposing the subjectivity of the girl as a person against the body as a potential commodity. The reflection in the mirror reveals a countenance that is far from that of a vulgar harlot. In her shyness she appears to be rather startled by the intrusion upon her moment of private intimacy. Rather than a lewd morally reprehensible woman, the viewer beholds a vulnerable girl in all her fragile innocence.

Thus, in rendering his black female nude Motley strips the body not in order to expose its sexual profanity but rather to liberate it from the ideological constructs and fixations about the nature of black (female) sexuality, i.e. in order to reveal the beauty and delicacy of her female body. He thus aestheticizes the black female form, deconstructing it as the marker of the primitive naked Other and re/presenting it as worthy of aesthetic and philosophical contemplation in the realm of high art. The title of the painting, *Brown Girl After the Bath*, can thus be understood metaphorically in broader terms. By elevating the unclothed black female body onto the pedestal of aesthetics, Motley symbolically "bathes" it, restoring it to its cleanliness and purity, its aesthetic integrity and wholeness.

Nevertheless, considered from the perspective of feminist art criticism, Motley's reconceptualization of the black woman(hood) by aestheticizing the black nude can be problematized. As discussed by a feminist art historian Lynda Nead, the female nude in general symbolizes the transformation of the base matter of nature (i.e. the female body) into the elevated forms of culture and spirit. The female nude can thus be understood as a means of containing femininity and female sexuality. Thus, through the procedures of art, woman (nature) can become culture. Deployed through the transformative powers of the intellect, woman becomes an image framed by the male artist transmuting his sexual drives into artistic creation. The one danger in terms of art conventions that the artist faces is the risk that too much sexuality of the nude will be preserved in the work. Therefore, the triumph of a successful representation of the nude on the artist's part

32 Works by U.S. sculptor Hiram Powers can be mentioned as an example, such as *Eve Tempted* (1842) or *The Greek Slave* (1851).

is the control of the potential risk.[33] Thus, an argument can be made that Motley himself engages in an act of male voyeurism by containing the black female body within a frame. The process of containing the unruly flesh, while assuming control over the identity of the black female, reinstalls his own male identity as an artist and creator. The very decision to render the black nude implicates him in the position of authority and power. Idealizing the beauty of the black female nude, Motley essentializes her femininity.

Taking this position into consideration, in the particular case of Motley's nude it is these very implications that feminist art criticism finds problematic with respect to the female nude that Motley strives to engage. To deprive the black female body of the associations with the unruly flesh, it *has to* be framed and contained. Thus in this particular case Nead's argument must be reversed: perhaps it is precisely *because* the nude implies containment of the unruly flesh that Motley decided to render it.

Finally Motley's aestheticization of the black female body serves even more complex purposes in this particular painting. By employing the device of the mirror, Motley raises the issue of the girl's identity. Her frontal reflection presents her to the beholder as a subject, yet her sense of self is problematized by the artist. Rather than looking at herself in the mirror as acknowledging her subjectivity and identity, her eyes engage the beholder as if asking a question, looking for an answer from the one under whose gaze she finds herself. The girl as reflected in the mirror seems to be looking for her sense of self in the eyes of the beholder – inside and outside the world of the painting. Motley thus applies the modernist problematization of the role of art as a reflection of reality to contemplate the nature of the mind's reflection of reality. The modernist device of rendering a "reflection" of an image not in accordance with the laws of physics is echoed in Motley's painting in his manipulation of the image – the frontal view the beholder has of the girl's mirror reflection is not the "real" physical reflection of the figure sitting on the bed. The real brown girl, the one sitting on the bed as rendered by Motley seems to be the incarnation of the sexually titillating Jezebel. She is the image reflected in the beholder's mind. Motley seems to be pointing out the parallel between, on the one hand, the "skewed" reflection of the girl in the mirror as not corresponding to the reality of what is in front of the mirror in the painting and, on the other, the reflection of the black female in the beholder's mind – as Jezebel and the primitive Other – as being just as skewed and not corresponding to reality. Motley's painting thus reverberates with the echoes of "twoness and double consciousness plaguing the African American as originally theorized by W.E.B. DuBois in 1903:

> The Negro is sort of the seventh son, born with the veil [….] in this American world, – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.[34]

33 Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 21–48.

34 W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Penguin, 1995), 45.

Motley's brown girl is thus the DuBoisean African American who lacks a true sense of self; a subjectivity whose identity is predicated upon a skewed reflection in the mainstream mind.

The fact that Motley's sitter is a brown, i.e. a racially mixed, girl adds further complexity to the perplexing issue of identity. She might be interpreted as an invocation of the tragic mulatto, a figure that by the 1920s had become a staple in American literature both by African American and white authors. The literary production of the Harlem Renaissance was marked by different variations on the theme of passing, e.g. by efforts to whiten the skin and straighten the hair in an attempt to suppress the visible physical markers of one's African ancestry. As markers of Otherness, kinky hair and darker skin often stigmatized the tragic mulatto and precluded her from class mobility within African American community and / or from social acceptance by the mainstream.

Motley's *Brown Girl* engages in this discourse on identity politics. While the sitter's hair is straight and tightly bound at the back of her head – possibly in the very process of being straightened – she is holding a cosmetic jar and a puff as she is about to engage in a beautification procedure. The sitter on the bed and the mirror reflection may potentially be interpreted as two different components of her conflicted self. Within the dialectic of the civilized vs. the primitive Other in tension within her due to her mixed blood, the skin whitener and the hair straightener allowed for her movement along the axis toward putative civilization, cleanliness and culture. She is cradling rather than merely holding the cosmetic jar, almost as a treasure, a panacea for the pangs of her conflicted self. Motley's invocation of the girl's "hope in a jar" potentially implicates her even further in DuBoisean double consciousness.

Motley thus engages not only the Lockean call for a re/presentation of the African American in new terms of liberation from a subject of caricature in "Sambo art." Motley's painting is also a response to DuBois's notion of art as propaganda, as the beholder is faced with having to confront the issue of split identity in the racially divided world of the early 1930s. Whether regarded by an African American or someone else, Motley's painting speaks to the viewer across racial boundaries without compromising the politics of respectability pursued by African American womanhood. His image of the brown girl is a sophisticated transcoding of the stereotype.

## Conclusion

In summary, the New Negro Visual Arts Movement reflected both the Lockean agenda of achieving political and social ends by manifesting the "Negro genius" as well as a respectful DuBoisean stance toward African American womanhood as an agent upon which the progress of the race was predicated. The artists' re/presentation of the African American woman emerged in the context of the quest for racial uplift rather than based on a feminist agenda. A reconstruction of the public image of African American womanhood was an integral part of a concerted effort to redeem African American physiognomy, personality and experience in general from distortions. Pursuing the Lockean Beauty in Truth, the artists themselves engaged in aesthetic "propaganda" which combatted the visual stereotypes. The archetypes offered in their place were attempts to restore African American womanhood to moral integrity and social respectability. Reiss's portrait reverses the stereotype of the black woman as a Jezebel morally unfit to be a mother. Barthé's sculpture further enhances the image of the black mother as the Madonna by pointing out her

lamentation of her lynched son as a DuBoisean "crucified" black Christ. Motley's work explores internal divisions within the African American community along the lines of "shades of difference." Instead of simply subverting the stereotypes of a black female, he interrogates them, complexly challenging their reductionism and thus expanding the range of racial representations. Motley's complex re-appropriation of the Jezebel as a skewed reflection of reality in the racial mind echoes DuBoisean double consciousness.

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Images (available online):

Winold Rise, *The Brown Madonna* (1925)
https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/236x/18/f3/f4/18f3f4f02c546f0151c82cad633fb0be.jpg

Richmond Barthé *The Mother* (*Supplication*) (1939)
https://www.courses.psu.edu/arth/arth497c_jhr11/497images/harlemren2/supplication.jpg

Archibald J. Motley, Jr. *Brown Girl After the Bath* (1931)
https://americangallery.files.wordpress.com/2009/07/brown-girl-after-the-bath.jpg?w=652&h=900

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