



by Mia Cecily Florin-Sefton //

George Schuyler's biting and speculative satire *Black No More* (1931) ends with the slippery swindler and medical professional, Dr Julius Crookman, looking at a family photograph and commenting: "one happy crowd of Americans . . . all of them as dusky as little Mathew Crookman Fisher" (179). It is a moment of cross-generational familial recognition that concludes a novel that, by contrast, begins by invoking the question of ancestry far more pointedly:

This book is dedicated to all Caucasians in the great republic who can trace their ancestry back ten generations and confidently assert that there are no Black leaves, twigs, limbs or branches or their family trees (1)

Written during the "great age of passing" (Smith, 69)[1], *Black No More* imagines a world in which a new "biotechnology" has enabled the eradication of the visible signs of racial difference. As the novel narrates it: thanks to one notorious Dr. Julius Crookman, and his willfully obscure process of "electrical nutrition and glandular control" (12), it is now possible to "turn black skin white. All the blacks in America turn white" (13). This often overlooked novelistic classic of the Harlem Renaissance would thus appear to pull no punches, and hide behind no allusions, in troubling the fraught relations between the medical industrial complex, scientific knowledge production, and processes of racialization. Indeed, set and written at a time when the visibility of race in the United States was under particular strain—due in no small part to the frequency of passing, high numbers of immigration, northward migration, rapid urbanization, and rampant fears concerning the growing "threat of miscegenation"—Dr Crookman's turn here represents the most serious of transgressions. Subsequently, it is through narrating the troublesome tales of his Black anti-hero, Max Disher, that Schuyler makes powerful mockery of any account that would posit the existence of race as a biological essence or category.

Max's ensuing financial capitalization on the anxiety surrounding this new technology—he "turns," and then infiltrates and comes to lead a white supremacist organization—henceforth works to secure an understanding of the conceptual hold of race, and more specifically whiteness, as a political tool, ideological construct, source of sexual freedom, and embodied form of propertied

investment. And yet—despite this plethora of transgression, there remains one fundamental “biological” mechanism that Dr Crookman, for all his charming and willful chicanery, cannot control. As the novel tells it, upon opening the sanatorium, Dr Crookman is immediately asked: “*but what happens to the offspring?*” (37). To which he replies: “I have discovered no way to accomplish anything so revolutionary” (37). Evidently, therefore, regarding the question of the labored reproduction of racial difference, this con-man remains none-the-wiser. A failure that, in turn, begs the rejoinder: why does Schuyler, despite his sardonic treatment of almost everything and everyone else insist upon the utter unassailability and inviolability of the “race/reproduction bind”? (Weinbaum, 3).[2] To put this differently: why represent hereditary, and its transmission through the maternal body, as the one and only “biological truth” that his sardonic, caustic fantasy cannot upend? Moreover, and most critically, why present it as *the* primary reason for white outrage? For, as Dr. Crookman later observes,

there would not be so much cause for alarm in this, were it not for the fact that this vitiligo is not hereditary. In other words, THE OFFSPRING OF THESE WHITENED NEGROES WILL BE NEGROES! (50)

Speaking to this issue, it is important to stress that the charged question of sexual reproduction—whilst inevitably always the belabored focal principle of racist antagonisms—was of particular interest to Schuyler at the time of writing *Black No More*. Indeed, the novel dates the opening of the Crookman’s sanatorium to 1931; an opening that almost exactly corresponds to the opening of another clinic in Harlem on November 21, 1930: the Harlem Branch Birth Control Clinic. A clinic that was, *perhaps*, by happy coincidence, backed by none other than another “Julius”: the Julius Rosenwald Fund.[3] Importantly, George Schuyler voiced his opinions on the “Black birth control debate”[4] in an editorial in *Birth Control Review* only months after its opening. Speaking directly to those suspicious of birth control and its so-called potential as a genocidal tool of “race suicide” he argues:

***there are some Negroes, mostly men who have a feeling that in some way the increase in the Negro population due to unrestricted reproduction will aid the group in its struggle to survive in an unfriendly society. This is fallacious reasoning . . . certain ingredients of a certain quality are necessary to produce a healthy child under proper conditions of rest and security* (“Quality or Quantity”, 166)**

Evidently, therefore, Schuyler understood all too well, that social, political and economic conditions play the largest role in determining the terms, outcomes, matter and meaning of reproduction.

Why, then, does the Julius Crookman in *Black No More* immediately reveal, to the inquiring journalist, his failure to control the means of reproduction? A clue—I hasten to suggest—might lie in another line from Schuyler’s commentary on birth control. Namely his blunt insight that: “*after all, a woman is, biologically speaking, a child factory*” (6). This being a crass and reductive portrait that, through its very crudeness, assumes that all things “biological” are defined according to economic

principles. In other words, it is a phrasing that implies the total and absolute subsumption of ‘biological’ properties towards forms of labor under capital. Crucially, here it is the “biological” perspective that casts a woman’s body as a production line, and the bearer of a never ending genealogical and racial signature. The question, thus, then becomes: how, to read this against the novel’s conceit that exposes sexual reproduction to be that which births the true evidence of racial difference? In other words: what factory line—“biologically speaking”—has the Crook-man of the novel instantiated?

To think of the sanatorium in *Black No More* as *both* a substitute birth clinic and a factory significantly shifts the nature of our inquiry. For, returning to the question of Julius Crookman’s chicanery, it thus becomes possible to see that his failure to challenge the “race/reproduction bind” as, likewise, one in a series of business moves. And—no less—his shrewdest move yet. By this I mean that, through revealing that newborns cannot inherit their parent’s “whiteness” Crookman proves himself to be the savviest capitalist of all. For in so doing, he has created and monopolized a technology that, through its manufacture and consumption, actively produces an entirely new generation of consumers: younger generation whose desire for the product will likely be even greater.

Relatedly, we might then read this narrative conceit less as evidence of an unwavering biological essentialism on Schuyler’s part, but, instead, as an open invitation to investigate the evolving significance of genealogical inheritance. All be it: genetic, legal and/or social. The point being, of course, that the perception and manufacture of racism and racial difference is exposed, in the novel, to always be in the service of an economic and political order. A hegemonic order that is, nevertheless, characterized by an unwavering anxiety over its own birthright, and legacy. The novel thus also manages to capture the fact that even so-called “science” that would seem to threaten and undermine the viability of “race” — one might think here of much more recent developments in genetics — can nevertheless bolster its commodification. And subsequently, it becomes possible to see that the novel does not so much underscore the significance of hereditary logics to a racist order, but rather forces into view the fact that processes of racialization demand, and depend upon, generational sequences of accumulation. Indeed, it is this fact of reproduction and its inheritance that provides the ripest opportunity for new forms of expropriation; just as it, to borrow Jack Goody’s phrase, insures the “reproduction of the social order” (57). Moreover, such a reading asks how evolving theories of biological inheritance— i.e. questions of genealogy—might articulate within economic strictures, as a means to ensure the privileged transfer of that property known as whiteness (Harris, 1709)

As mentioned previously, debates surrounding the biological basis of race had reached a particularly acute pitch at the time of *Black No More*’s publication. This was in large part prompted by the fact that the 1920’s bore witness to some of the first concerted efforts to challenge prevailing scientific paradigms. For example, the work of anthropologist Franz Boas, which famously “sought to modify the biologicistic paradigm that had evolved since the publication of Charles Darwin’s *Origin of the Species* in 1859” (Williams Jr, 1).[5] And yet, it is critical to note that just as the tenets of

biological essentialism were facing down their deconstruction. the question of hereditary—and, more specifically, hereditary degeneracy—began to enjoy some serious time in the limelight.

In *Killing the Black Body* Dorothy Roberts masterfully outlines how the late 1920's not only saw the publication of Boas' *Anthropology and Modern Life*, amidst raging debates concerning the uses of birth control, but it also witnessed the sudden legalization of compulsory sterilization across 30 states; all on the grounds of preventing the spread of: feeble-mindedness, hemophilia, otosclerosis, chorea, insanity, alcoholism, eroticism, pauperism, and criminality, among others (Roberts, 62). Each of these traits that, even if not explicitly named, fixed a vision of racial degeneracy and bolstered racial prejudice. Indeed, as Vernon Williams Jr diagnoses, even Boas' "anti-racist" theories only further fixed the primacy of genealogical inheritance; for, even as "he discredited the Euro-American myth that the racial inferiority of Negroes was attributable to their African ancestry," in so doing he nevertheless "unwittingly, nurtured their belief in distinct hierarchical attributes" (2). Evidently, therefore, just as certain "biological" conceptions of race were facing unprecedented scrutiny, new theories of hereditary and genetic transmission were blossoming into new life, and planting new roots.

Critically, this is a shift that maps almost perfectly on to Schuyler's imaginative narrative: just as the new "science" threatens to deconstruct the means through which "race" is known, hereditary and the question of "ancestry" emerges as the unshakeable basis and ground of racial difference; the source of its physical *and* ideological reproduction. Subsequently, it comes as no surprise when Rev. Givens, head of the Knights of Nordica, lectures on "the laws of hereditary and the growing danger of black babies" (81). Likewise, it is no wonder that the sanatorium is forced to double up as a birth clinic, and Crookman begins "establishing lying-in hospitals in the principal cities where all prospective mothers could come to have their babies" (89). And as such, it is almost entirely predictable that, by the end of the novel, everyone is obsessed with "gathering data and investigating... uncertain or unknown ancestry" (141).

It is my contention, furthermore, that this insidious and repetitious correlation, as mapped by Schuyler in 1931, might carry particular resonance now. A contemporary moment that has, alternately, been characterized as both "post-genomic" and "post-racial". Where "Post-genomic" refers to those developments following the completion of the Human Genome Project in 2000: a truly monumental undertaking which revealed, yet again, that there are no human populations with such a high degree of genetic differentiation that they objectively fall into races (Roberts, 36). And "post-racial" referring to the spread of sentiments that would deny the continued existence of racism; such as those voiced by Orlando Patterson in the *New Republic*:

the decline of race as a factor in American life will result not only from immigration... but also biotechnology... the foundations of genetic engineering are already in place. Once dramatically manipulable by human action "race" will lose its social significance (6)

Of course, as Roberts outlines masterfully in *Fatal Invention: How Science, Politics and Big Business Re-create Race in the Twenty-First Century*, if the Human Genome Project initially promised to dispel all

myths regarding the genetic basis of race, these genetic discoveries did less to challenge prevailing assumptions, then to further divide the “human species into “natural groupings” (14). Groupings that, through employing statistical probability and geographic ancestry, have instead given birth to “an increasingly prominent trend to redefine race as genetic ancestry” (36). Indeed, as Alondra Nelson details in *The Social Life of DNA*, the hold of this new conceptualization is seen no better than in the growing communities of genealogists, and the new commercial markets for genetic ancestry kits, such as African Ancestry Inc. Nelson and Roberts thus share observations that—in true circuitous fashion—cannot help but recall Schuyler’s opening dedication: “to all Caucasians.” Moreover, such insights cast new sunlight on a novel that, following the contemporaneous advance of reproductive technologies, actively reconceptualizes what happens when race becomes “manipulable by human action.” Or, to put it in Schuyler’s words: now “we can trace [our] ancestry back ten generations and confidently assert.” And as such, one might do well to ponder: how are we to understand his inheritance now?

[1] Of course, as Mark Smith in *How Race is Made* outlines, the fact of racial passing was not new – slaves had managed to fool white eyes for years. But the scale of the “problem” combined with the increased stakes of maintaining the color line under segregations gave passing unparalleled urgency and emotional intensity: “passing focused segregationist minds in powerful ways, making them jittery even as they claimed utter confidence in their ability to sense race” (69).

[2] In *Wayward Reproductions* Alys Eve Weinbaum define this “inchoate, ideological constellation” as “the complex of discourses that characterize the modern historical epoch . . . the word “bind” expresses the inextricability of the connection between race and reproduction—the fact that these phenomena ought not to be thought of as distinct, though they have all too often been analytically separated” (5).

[3] A “philanthropic” foundation renowned for its involvement the infamous Tuskegee syphilis study, that also noticeably shares a namesake with a certain Dr Julius Crookman. In *Killing the Black Body* Dorothy Roberts outlines in detail, the myriad controversies and suspicions that attended the opening of the Harlem Branch Birth Control clinic (65-71).

[4] For an excellent summary of these debates see: Jamie Hart’s “Who should have the children? Discussions of birth control among African-American intellectuals, 1920-1939.” *The Journal of Negro History* 79.1 (1994): 71-84.

[5] It can be no coincidence, therefore, that Max Disher impersonates an anthropologist of race when he infiltrates the white supremacist “Knights of Nordica: (67).

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