

Introduction

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“How Black Sees Green and Red”

Renaissance Eclecticism

Tim Murphy's gon' walkin' wid Maggie O'Neill, / O chone!
Paul Laurence Dunbar, African-American poet

O! George, you may, without a blush, confess your
love for the Octoroon.
Dion Boucicault, Irish playwright

The Abbey Theatre's 1911 tour of the United States caused unrest in several cities over John Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*: many Irish Americans felt that the play inaccurately represented rural Irish people, especially women. Their counterparts in Ireland had already condemned Synge's work along with other works of the Irish Renaissance: in 1907 the *Freeman's Journal* described *The Playboy* as “unmitigated, protracted libel on Irish peasant men and, worse still upon Irish peasant girlhood” (qtd. in Greene and Stephens 257). However, even as eggs and potatoes were hurled at the actors (Dalsimer 77), the Abbey's representations of Irish life caught the imagination of those Americans interested in exploring the various facets of their own national identity, including several people, black and white, who went on to participate in the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. They noted the many similarities between Irish culture and history and those of African Americans, and they advocated following the Irish model for literary renaissance and social change.

In 1911, borrowing ideas from and comparing one's movement to other ethnic groups struggling for political freedom and cultural identity had been common in Europe and in the Americas for more than a hundred years, indeed since the rise of nationalism in the late eighteenth century. As Benedict Anderson writes in *Imagined Communities*, "when history made it possible, in 1811, for Venezuelan revolutionaries to draw up a constitution for the First Venezuelan Republic, they saw nothing slavish in borrowing verbatim from the Constitution of the United States of America. For what the men in Philadelphia had written was in the Venezuelans' eyes not something North American, but rather something of universal truth and value" (192). Thus, the influence of the Irish Renaissance on African-American writers and intellectuals was not unusual, despite the fact that black people and Irish Americans were not on the best of terms in America's cities. As Thomas Sowell relates, "perhaps the worst relations between any two groups in American history have been between the Irish and the Negroes" (38). Because African Americans and Irish Americans often coexisted at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they tended to clash as they tried to move up. Lerone Bennett states that "[t]he struggle between the Irish immigrants and black workers was particularly acrimonious. At that point [the mid-nineteenth century] and for several decades thereafter, the Irish were considered 'white niggers' and were subjected to the same indignities as blacks" (179).¹ Despite the generally poor relations between their communities, a number of black and Irish intellectuals found common ground.

Because of the popularity of the Abbey Theatre tours and the similarities between African-American and Irish experiences, the Irish Renaissance became an important influence on black writers; however, many other comparisons were available to and eagerly used by both peoples, and, not surprisingly, some degree of overlap occurred. Both movements found similarities between themselves and Russian, Hungarian, Scottish, and Italian political and/or literary revivals, but one of the most popular and detailed common comparisons was to Jewish people. Like others before them—for example, the Puritans—members of both renaissances compared their movements to various aspects of Jewish politics, culture, and history. A detailed examination of these relationships will shed light on the phenomenon of nationalist eclecticism.

The Jews: A Model for Black-Irish Comparisons

During slavery, many African Americans identified with the biblical Jews, specifically with the Hebrew slaves who won their freedom and built a nation after much suffering in the land of Egypt. The culture of black resistance was constructed largely around the people and places of the Hebrew Bible: the songs urged “Go down, Moses” and spoke of “Crossing over Jordan.” However, like many Christians then and today, the slaves saw the Hebrews not so much as Jews than as proto-Christians. This helps explain why, despite the black slave/Hebrew slave identification, a number of spirituals also blamed the Jews for the death of Jesus (Lester 68–69).

This partial identification was generally unidirectional. Like most white Americans, American Jews tended to be antislavery if they lived in the North and proslavery if they lived in the South. Even northern Jews were not usually involved in the abolitionist movement because history had taught the Jewish people that “[r]apid political change often meant new perils. Mass, uncontrolled political movements could always turn into an attack against the Jews” (Kaufman 20). However, with the advent of the second wave of Jewish immigration in the 1880s, this largely changed. The new immigrants were more open to advocating social change because of their own experiences with reform and their exposure to socialism in Eastern Europe, not to mention the increasing anti-Semitism of the United States (Kaufman 23).

Jewish philanthropists and African-American intellectuals built strong ties in the early twentieth century. Many of the white members of the NAACP and the Urban League were Jewish, including Amy and Joel Spingarn and Julius Rosenwald. To Jewish people confronting institutional anti-Semitism, helping the fledgling civil rights movement seemed both a means of and a corollary to carrying out their own agenda. As David Lewis puts it, “Being of use to the Negro was becoming virtually a specialty of the second most abused Americans of the early twentieth century” (102–3, 100). Although they were likely to be more sympathetic than other white Americans, Jewish people were not exempt from racist attitudes and practices. Blumstein’s, the largest department store in Harlem, originally refused to hire African Americans even as elevator operators and later balked at hiring black sales and clerical staff, claiming that the owner’s support of African-American charities and hiring of black menial labor were sufficient.

Despite these problems, many black Americans made the transition from identifying with biblical Jews to admiring contemporary ones. Beginning with Frederick Douglass, African-American intellectuals lobbied for black emulation of Jewish practices and for stronger ties between the black and Jewish communities (Lester 70–72). In the 1910s, James Weldon Johnson used his editorial position at the *New York Age* to propound his belief that African Americans should emulate Jewish political, financial, and organizational achievements. “There is a parallel between the condition of the Jewish race and of the Negro race,” he wrote, “which is often remarkably striking” (“Difference”). Similar to the common Jewish belief, Johnson saw the Jewish civil rights struggle as potentially beneficial to African Americans, writing that “[t]he wise thing for the Negro to do is to form as close an alliance with the Jew as is possible, so that the latter in fighting for his own rights will, in some degree, fight for ours also” (“National Guard”). Johnson perceived the Jewish presence in American politics and business to be so strong that anti-Semitic Americans kept their sentiments to themselves and did not openly discriminate against Jewish people. He believed that in the few instances in which discrimination occurred, it was immediately and successfully challenged by a powerful Jewish lobby. He hoped that African Americans could emulate Jewish people and reach “the place in this country where people dare not discriminate against them no matter what feelings of prejudice they may have” (“Prejudice”). Jewish people did have more success than did African Americans at ending discriminatory practices in the early twentieth century, but they by no means enjoyed the overwhelming rate of success Johnson envisioned. His misperception of the strength of American Jews seems the result of wishful thinking about the future of his own race as well as of stereotypes about Jewish financial and political power.

While Johnson’s articles evince positive if overly optimistic ideas about blacks and Jews, the Jamaican-born writer Claude McKay’s 1938 article in the *Amsterdam News* suggests the ambivalence prevalent in the relations between the African-American and Jewish communities. Responding to an editorial in the Zionist journal *Jewish Frontier* that called for African Americans and Jewish people to “purge their ranks of all prejudice and intolerance” and unite, McKay wrote that Jewish people needed to stop their discrimination against African Americans first. He felt that Jewish racism was a much larger problem than black anti-Semitism; in fact, McKay called “anti-Semitism” a misnomer for the “friction” his

people had with individual Jews. He believed that the term “anti-Semitism” was most properly applied to “an organized political and social movement of gentiles against Jews . . . identifiable with extreme nationalism or extreme fanaticism” such as that found in Nazi Germany (“M’Kay Tells of Jews” 17). McKay wanted an alliance between the African-American and Jewish communities, but he was not willing to admit the existence of black anti-Semitism. Like many African Americans, Johnson and McKay accepted spurious notions about Jewish power and Black-Jewish relations that, along with Jewish racism, hampered the formation of even stronger ties between the two communities.

A somewhat similar situation existed in Ireland, where many nationalists drew parallels between Jewish and Irish history, but anti-Semitism plagued those Jews (3,769 in 1901, according to Hyman) who walked the streets of Ireland rather than the pages of the Bible (160). Irish nationalists pointed to their common desire for a homeland, their ancient languages, their proud pasts, their prophets Charles Stewart Parnell and Moses, and their similar claims to the protection of God during oppressive times (Kenner, *Colder Eye* 194). Meanwhile, events like the 1904 Limerick boycott of Jewish merchants, which lasted for a year and drove out two-thirds of the city’s Jewish population, served as a reminder that whatever salient parallels “the chosen people” offered “the island of saints and scholars,” anti-Semitism was practiced by many Irish people (Ellmann 373).²

Despite the ambivalences Ireland offered its Jewish inhabitants, life there was better than in the shtetl and the ghetto. Jewish people sometimes received special considerations; for example, women in need of the mikvah, a ritual immersion, were the only Dubliners allowed to use the Tara Street Baths during a water shortage in 1914 (J. O’Brien 102). Most anti-Semitic acts were petty and not physically violent, unlike those in Eastern Europe, from which much of Ireland’s Jewish population had recently emigrated. When Irish leaders such as Arthur Griffith and Father Creagh of Limerick waxed anti-Semitic, other prominent Irish people like Michael Davitt denounced them, stating their pride in Ireland’s reputation for harmonious relations with Jewish people and pointing out the hypocrisy of one oppressed group attacking another (Hyman 213). As in the relationship between African Americans and Jewish people, some of the more sympathetic Irish people were writers and intellectuals. While living in Paris, James Joyce used his connections to help sixteen Jewish refugees to safety after the Austrian Anschluss of 1938 (Ellmann 709).

An important difference between African-American and Irish attitudes toward Jewish people grew from the fact that, because of their small numbers and relative obscurity, Irish Jews were in no way as politically useful to other Irish people as American Jews were to black people. Very few of the Jews in Ireland became involved in politics, partly because many Irish Catholics did not consider them Irish (Hyman 176) and partly because history had taught them, as it had taught their American counterparts, that large grassroots political movements could easily become pogroms. With the notable exception of Jacob Elyan, advisor to various factions in the nationalist movement, most Irish Jews concerned themselves with their families and their religious community, not their nation. Thus, no reasons existed for either an alliance or the tensions that accompanied similar alliances in the United States (Hyman 200–2). In general, by the times of the renaissances, Irish people seem more likely to have referred to a Jewish educational or religious tradition and African-American commentators more likely to have noted contemporary political similarities, because different aspects of Jewish life were more manifest in the one milieu than in the another.

Regardless of the ambivalence in African-American and Irish attitudes toward Jewish people, intellectuals in both renaissances drew parallels to their own causes in Jewish history and culture. In *The New Negro*, Alain Locke compared growing pan-African sentiments in the African diaspora to the Zionist movement: “Harlem,” he said, “is the home of the Negro’s ‘Zionism,’” suggesting that it was a center for the diverse elements of African-descended people’s lives and a place of potential unity (14). Just as Jews from many countries were united by their longing for a homeland and a refuge from persecution, many people of African descent came together in Harlem and discussed their relation to their ancestral home. Locke phrased it thus: “As with the Jew, persecution is making the Negro international” (14).

Douglas Hyde used a similar technique in “The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland” to draw the attention of lecture-goers to the sorry state of the Irish language. He outlined several reforms necessary to “bring about a tone of thought which would make it disgraceful for an educated Irishman . . . to be ignorant of his own language—would make it at least as disgraceful as for an educated Jew to be quite ignorant of Hebrew” (*Language* 161). Hyde wished to change Irish attitudes about the Irish language from scorn to reverence, a feeling similar to that found in Judaism for Hebrew.

Leslie Catherine Sanders suggests that an interesting nexus of African-American, Jewish, and Irish ways came in the theater, as black dramatists perceived Irish and Jewish models for their own movement. The Irish model addressed a mainstream audience, while the Jewish theater in New York “remained insistently discrete” from mainstream America in the early twentieth century, producing plays, often in Yiddish, on themes largely of interest to Jewish people (10). Both approaches appealed to African Americans: the former because it allowed playwrights to correct misrepresentations of their people found on the American stage, and the latter because it allowed them to address more clearly and deeply the concerns of African-American audiences. Alain Locke and Montgomery Gregory’s 1927 anthology, *Plays of Negro Life*, followed the Irish mainstreaming model: at least eight of the twenty plays were written by white dramatists, and Gregory’s introduction situated black drama within American theater. On the other hand, Willis Richardson’s two anthologies published in the 1930s, *Plays and Pageants from the Life of the Negro* and *Negro History in Thirteen Plays*, were directed toward African-American communities. His anthologies consisted largely of historical pageants and plays, and Carter G. Woodson’s introduction to the second one argued for more black-authored plays, stating that white dramatists could not “think black” (qtd. in Sanders 11). Whether or not whites could “think black,” African Americans and Irish people showed that they could think Jewish, drawing inspiration from Jewish people for a variety of political and cultural projects.

Going beyond seeing parallels or gaining inspiration, during both the Harlem and the Irish renaissances writers sometimes used Jewish characters to address issues that concerned them and their communities. For example, James Joyce believed that Jewish and Irish people had a number of characteristics in common, including impulsiveness, a tendency toward fantasy, and associative rather than rational thought (Ellmann 395). In addition to these rather standard primitivist notions (which he also applied to women), Joyce considered certain more realistic aspects of early-twentieth-century Jewish life to be similar to his own: the isolation from society that creates close family ties and the interest in textuality and writing (Nadel 16, 5). He created Leopold Bloom, a deracinated Jewish Dubliner, to explore some of his personal and political concerns in *Ulysses*. Like the self-exiled Joyce, Bloom cannot go home in any sense of the word: his house is occupied by his adulterous wife Molly, he is scorned as a Jew although he has been baptized, and there is no Jewish

homeland in 1904. Bloom says of Zionism, “Nothing doing. Still an idea behind it” (60). Perhaps Joyce would say the same of Irish nationalism.

Although Irish Jews rarely participated in politics, Joyce inserted Bloom into the nationalist milieu: “as a matter of strict history,” he makes him return Parnell’s hat after it is knocked off in a crowd, and he also creates one of the few anachronisms in the novel by having Bloom coin the term “Sinn Fein” for Arthur Griffith, who did not actually use the term publicly until later that year (664, 335; Thornton 138). Joyce’s use of anachronism and his claim that fiction is “strict history” in order to create a space for Bloom in Irish politics parallels his satirical litany of Irish-Jewish similarities in the “Ithaca” chapter, which reads in part as follows: “their archeological, genealogical, hagiographical, exegetical, homilectic, toponomastic, historical and religious literatures comprising the work of rabbis and culdees, Torah, Talmud . . . Book of the Dun Cow . . . Book of Kells” (688). Although Joyce believed that certain parallels existed, he felt that some nationalists took them to a foolish extreme. *Ulysses* both suggests the similarities and rejects their overuse. Unlike the image of Jews held by many Irish people, Bloom is a modern, not a biblical, character, and his Jewish identity is often tenuous.

Just as Joyce used a Jewish character to explore his personal concerns and criticize the excesses of his people, in her 1939 work *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, Zora Neale Hurston borrowed Moses from the Jewish tradition in order to study the problems facing African Americans. Hurston stated in her introduction that, in addition to his image as a Hebrew lawgiver, “Africa has her mouth on Moses . . . all across Africa, America, the West Indies, there are tales of the powers of Moses and great worship of him and his powers.”³ Hurston wanted to give a post-bellum spin to the story of the liberation of the Israelites from bondage in Egypt which had played such a powerful role in antebellum African-American life. To depict an African-American Moses, Hurston altered the diction of the biblical narrative; for example, Miriam sends her baby brother onto the Nile with the following prayer: “Nile, youse such a great big river and he is such a little bitty thing. Show him some mercy, please” (39). Her Africanization of the Hebrews allowed Hurston to suggest parallels between the condition of the newly freed Israelites and that of post-emancipation black people. In addition, it allowed her to raise questions of import to African Americans: What are the burdens of freedom? Can one be truly free while following a charismatic leader? What are the implications of an emphasis on racial purity? (McDowell x-xi, xiii-xvi).

While Hurston used a biblical figure to comment on modern times, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, the widow of Paul Laurence Dunbar, created a contemporary Jewish character in her play *Mine Eyes Have Seen*. Chris, a young African-American whose father was shot defending his home from arsonists, is drafted to serve in World War I. Reluctant to fight for a country that has denied his family equal protection under the law and equal participation in society, he must be convinced by his siblings and friends, one of whom is a young Jewish man named Jake. Jake claims that although the Jews have been persecuted in many lands, “we’re loyal always to the country where we live and serve” (274). He urges Chris to consider the future, to set aside present and past injustices in the hope of a better tomorrow. At the end of the play, Chris seems to have come around to this point of view, which was shared by many—though not all—prominent African Americans.

Joyce’s Bloom, Hurston’s Moses, and Dunbar-Nelson’s Jake, Jewish figures created by Irish and African-American artists, symbolize the ability of Harlem and Irish renaissance artists and intellectuals to fruitfully compare themselves to other peoples who faced discrimination. Although these comparisons were sometimes rooted in stereotypes and other types of misinformation and African Americans and Irish people did not always coexist peacefully with their Jewish neighbors, the inspiration these comparisons gave to the renaissance writers suggests their continuing usefulness.

Early Black-Irish Comparisons

In addition to comparing themselves to the Jews, African Americans and Irish people drew parallels between and gained literary and political inspiration from their common experiences, stereotypes and street brawls notwithstanding. In Ireland, these comparisons date back to at least the late eighteenth century. The *Northern Star*, the newspaper of the United Irishmen in Belfast, frequently referred to the condition of Ireland as “slavery” and published poems such as “The Negroe’s Complaint,” which appeared in 1792:

Slaves of gold, whose sordid dealings
 Tarnish all your boasted pow’rs,
 Prove that you have human feelings,
 Ere you proudly question ours! (qtd. in Thuente 91)

The poem suggests that white people, who often claimed that blacks were subhuman, as the English often did the Irish, ought to be careful that their actions do not reflect their own shortcomings.

In the early to mid-nineteenth century, Daniel O'Connell continued the black-Irish comparison when he suggested similarities between the struggle for Catholic emancipation and repeal of the Act of Union between England and Ireland and the abolitionists' fight against the slave trade. O'Connell spoke out so strongly against slavery that he drew criticism in Ireland and America for not making the repeal movement his paramount concern, and he lost much of his American support when he would not compromise his humanitarian principles. In a March 1845 speech to the Repeal Association, O'Connell thundered, "I want no American aid if it comes across the Atlantic stained in Negro blood" (O'Ferrall 44–45). O'Connell once introduced Frederick Douglass at a Repeal meeting as "the Black O'Connell of the United States" (Allen 178). However, not all Irish politicians were comfortable with even occasional comparisons between their people and African-descended slaves: Arthur Griffith spent more than a quarter of his 1913 preface to John Mitchel's 1854 *Jail Journal* defending Mitchel's proslavery views and indignantly added, "as if excuse were needed for an Irish Nationalist declining to hold the negro his peer in right" (xiv). Mitchel belonged to the Young Ireland movement, which argued that American support of Irish freedom would be compromised by an abolitionist stance. Although Irish people did not always agree about the similarity of their situation to that of American slaves or find it politic to compare them publicly, the subject was hotly debated for decades.

Early comparisons of a sort also occurred in Irish literature. Four days after the hanging of John Brown in 1859, a play by the prolific and popular Irish playwright Dion Boucicault entitled *The Octoroon; Or, Life in Louisiana* opened in New York. *The Octoroon* was a melodrama that aimed to please pro- and antislavery factions: the author presented both bucolic plantation scenes and the horrors of slavery. Although Boucicault straddled the fence on the slavery question, the play differed enough from standard nineteenth-century depictions of African Americans for Montgomery Gregory to praise it in *Plays of Negro Life*. Gregory wrote that *The Octoroon* represented a welcome respite from the flood of minstrel shows popular in the second half of the nineteenth century, as it "accustomed the theatre-going public to the experience of seeing a number of Negro characters in other than the conventional

'darkey' rôles" (409–10). Gregory exaggerated: the title character, Zoe, is the only non-"darkey" character, although one was enough to infuriate a New York theater critic who pronounced the play abolitionist propaganda and Zoe an impossible creation ("The Octoroon" 1).⁴

Since Gregory's comments in 1927, other critics have also distorted Boucicault's attitudes and accomplishments, overstating the degree to which he perceived a connection between Irish and African-American oppressions. For example, biographer Richard Fawkes stated that "[a]n Irishman, a member of a subjugated nation, Boucicault felt keenly the indignity of slavery, of one race being beholden to another" (109). Fawkes does not successfully substantiate this claim with Boucicault's writings. In fact, in an 1861 letter to the *London Times*, Boucicault claimed that his years of residence in Louisiana had shown him that slavery was not as terrible as the abolitionists asserted: "I found the slaves, as a race, a happy, gentle, kindly-treated population, and the restraints upon their liberty so slight as to be rarely perceptible" (5). Fawkes only quotes part of this letter, making Boucicault appear more opposed to slavery than he was. It may not be a coincidence that Boucicault's plays written in the decade or so after the production of *The Octoroon* included his most famous Irish comic political melodramas, *The Colleen Bawn*, *Arrah-na-Pogue*, and *The Shaughraun*; however, the assertion that Boucicault explicitly connected African-American and Irish oppressions remains conjectural.

When black Americans began to speak out for their people's freedom in the mid-nineteenth century, for many the Irish connection came readily to mind. During his 1845 lecture tour of Ireland, Frederick Douglass drew strong parallels between the struggles of the two peoples. In a letter published in the American abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator*, Douglass wrote, "I see much here to remind me of my former condition, and I confess I should be ashamed to lift my voice against American slavery, but that I know the cause of humanity is one the world over. He who really and truly feels for the American slave cannot steel his heart to the woes of others" (qtd. in Bornstein 174). The early black nationalist Martin R. Delany wrote in 1852 that black Americans had in common with the Irish, among others, their status as "a nation within a nation" (12). As with Irish people, however, African Americans did not always see these comparisons similarly. Like Douglass, Harriet Jacobs drew a comparison between black slaves and Irish paupers, but her conclusion was different. In a letter written about 1852 to the abolitionist Amy Post

she said that it is “far better to have been one of the starving poor of Ireland . . . than to have been a slave with the curse of slavery stamped upon yourself and Children” (232).

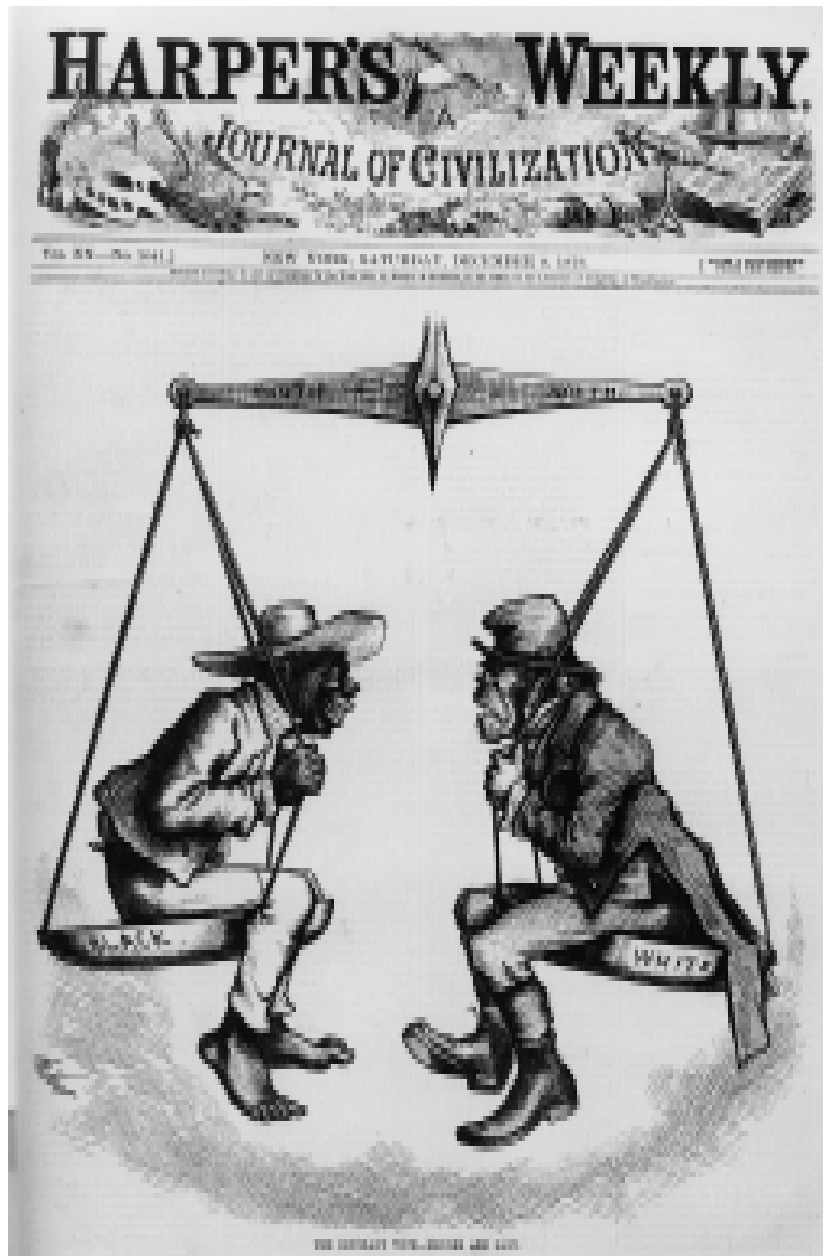
Cultural outsiders also compared the two peoples, but they often posited inferiority as the terms of comparison. For example, the late-nineteenth-century English ethnologist John Beddoe claimed that his Index of Nigrescence showed that as one moved from east to west in the British Isles, the people became more and more Negroid, sporting dark complexions, large jaws, and long nostrils. Although his Index was scientifically specious, Beddoe’s mass of data, the result of more than thirty years of fieldwork, was highly convincing to his audience (L. Curtis 19–20). On the other hand, Gustave de Beaumont, a French traveler, wrote in 1839: “I have seen the Indian in his forests, and the negro in his chains, and thought, as I contemplated their pitiable condition, that I saw the very extreme of human wretchedness; but I did not then know the condition of unfortunate Ireland” (268).⁵

Many white American comparisons followed Beddoe rather than de Beaumont. In 1876, for example, *Harper’s Weekly* published a cover illustration by Thomas Nast entitled “The Ignorant Vote: Honors Are Easy,” which depicts an African-American man and an Irish-American man sitting on a balanced scale. The cartoon asserts that African Americans as new Republicans and Irish Americans as new Democrats will have an equally deleterious effect on the country’s electoral process. Both of these people are drawn with facial features more reminiscent of apes than of human beings, a common device for nineteenth-century illustrators wishing to represent Irish (or Irish-American) and black people as subhuman.⁶

Americans Make Use of Ireland

In the early twentieth century, American representations began to change as black people began writing in increasing numbers and as news of the Irish Renaissance spread. In addition to derogatory or pitying comparisons, artistic and political ones emerged, with both white and black Americans noting the potential usefulness of the Irish Renaissance for those interested in portraying African-American lives.

Although their depictions of Irish life had come under fire at home as well as abroad, the Abbey’s use of folk culture and of Irish dialects was intended to create more accurate portrayals of Irish people than those found on the British stage. As the theater’s co-founders W. B. Yeats and



Cover of *Harper's Weekly*, December 9, 1876. By permission of the William Clements Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Augusta Gregory wrote in an 1898 manifesto, “We will show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment, as it has been represented” (Gregory, *Theatre* 9). The Irish Renaissance inspired Americans to attempt a similar type of literature using black culture as a base. In 1926, W. E. B. Du Bois marked the founding of the Krigwa Players Little Negro Theatre by publishing an essay that put forth a definition of a black theater movement. It stated, in part, that “[t]he plays of a real Negro theatre must be [about us]. That is, they must have plots which reveal Negro life as it is” (“Krigwa” 134). Du Bois did not mention the Abbey Theatre in his article, but the Krigwa Players were part of the Little Theatre movement that was engendered by the Abbey’s American tours.

Unfortunately for both the Harlem and Irish renaissances, many community leaders were interested not in realistic representations but in idealized portraits because they wanted to enlist literature to fight prejudice. This clashed with the writers’ desire for artistic freedom, which did not necessarily favor realism either. For these reasons, the dreams of Yeats, Gregory, and Du Bois were not easily fulfilled. The Harlem Renaissance’s depictions of the folk proved to be as controversial as those of the Irish movement.

Ridgely Torrence, a versatile white author not well known today, provides an early example of a writer being inspired by the Irish Renaissance to produce literature on African-American subjects. Torrence had seen the Abbey Theatre’s 1911 productions in New York City, and, as he explained in 1917, “The parallel . . . with the Irish race and its national drama, made a deep impression on me. I wanted to make the experiment, and try to contribute something, if I could, to a possible Negro drama, as vital and as charming as the Irish” (“The New Negro Theatre” 80). His play *Granny Maumee* was written and first produced in 1914, and, in 1917, two of Torrence’s other “Negro plays,” *The Rider of Dreams* and *Simon the Cyrenian*, joined it on the New York stage at the Garden Theatre. The latter production was notable for its use of African-American actors, at that time still a rarity outside of amateur black theater. Despite his reference to Irish drama as “charming,” Torrence’s plays were often quite serious. In *Granny Maumee*, for example, he explored the issue of racial purity from a black perspective, an unusual approach for a white author and one that made his audiences uncomfortable (Gale 140).

Torrence's works were well received by both white and black audiences. Several white critics called them significant and compared them to the plays of the Irish Renaissance. After the 1914 production, Carl Van Vechten, future Harlem Renaissance promoter, wrote that he hoped *Granny Maumee* would not be "a flash in the pan," calling it "as important an event in our [American] theater as the production of the first play of Synge was to the Irish movement" ("Beginnings of a Negro Drama" 1114). In 1917 Zona Gale, a novelist and journalist, stated in a review in *Theatre Arts Magazine* of Torrence's plays that "[t]o do for the negro theatrically what has been done for the Irish by the Irish Theatre movement is magnificently worthwhile. This is to interpret to the public—and perhaps to itself—a race never yet understood, in a land which is not of its own choosing" (139). Journalist Heywood Broun echoed Gale's comments in a *New York Tribune* article, stating that until the production of Torrence's work, "negro life ha[d] meant little to the stage but burnt cork, lumbago, and the word 'massa'" (11).

White reviewers like Van Vechten, Gale, and Broun hoped that Torrence's plays would usher in a new and important form of American drama and improve the extant dramatic representations of African Americans, and they often drew explicit connections to the Irish theater movement to make their points. African Americans also reviewed Torrence's plays, but the Irish theater connection received less attention than Torrence's respectful presentation of black lives. For example, James Weldon Johnson wrote in the *New York Age*, an African-American newspaper, that "[i]t is almost amazing to think how Mr. Torrence . . . could write plays of Negro life with such intimate knowledge, with such deep insight and sympathy" ("The Negro and the Drama"). On the other hand, Lester Walton, the *Age's* drama critic, concluded a largely favorable review by taking Torrence to task for using dialect for all of his characters, because he felt that it was "hardly probable that *Dr. Williams*, with a college education, would employ Negro dialect in conversation" ("Negro Actors").

Reviewers of the 1910s, black and white alike, generally found Torrence's work realistic and sincere. Few expressed a concern that he might have experienced difficulty depicting African-American lives. One anonymous essayist did say that because he or she had only seen reviews by white people, "it was too early to conclude whether, like Synge, Torrence [had] penetrated the real psychology of a race" ("Beginnings of

a Negro Drama” 1114). As time passed, more African Americans preferred black depictions of black characters—Du Bois’s 1926 article says a Negro theater must have Negro authors—but in 1917, serious dramatic representation of African Americans was so new that merely using a black cast met most critics’ desires for realistic representation.⁷

Although by the 1920s black representations of black lives were more in demand, African-American intellectuals were comfortable with borrowing ideas from other cultures. In the decade after Torrence’s second production of “Negro plays,” they not only took up the comparison to the Irish dramatic movement but also expanded it to include other genres and extra-literary phenomena. In 1925, Alain Locke wrote in the introduction to the *New Negro* anthology that “[w]ithout pretense to [its] political significance, Harlem has the same rôle to play for the New Negro as Dublin has had for the New Ireland” (7). Locke suggested a largely cultural connection, but both political and cultural comparisons were made by other African-American writers, intellectuals, and politicians.

Dramatist Willis Richardson initiated the literary comparisons in his 1919 article “The Hope of a Negro Drama.” After explaining his definition of “Negro plays,” that is, those that surpass mere “plays with Negro characters” and propaganda plays and, instead, show “the soul of the people,” he called the Irish theater movement “an excellent model, and one by which we ought to profit” (338). Richardson exhorted African Americans to build a “Negro Drama,” stating that Ireland had built a respected national drama with a much smaller population as a resource. He looked forward to the day when “a company of Negro Players with Negro Plays” would tour America and Europe, much as the Abbey Theatre had toured Ireland and the United States (339). However, Richardson does not discuss the controversies over the Abbey Theatre’s representations of Irish people. He was either not aware of them, which seems unlikely, given the reception of the Abbey tours, or the company’s accomplishments were more important to him than the fact that “the soul of the people” was highly contested.

In the early 1920s, James Weldon Johnson began to apply Irish ideas to black poetry. In the preface to his 1922 anthology, *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, he wrote of his desire for African-American poets to set aside dialect poetry in favor of less restrictive forms:

What the colored poet in the United States needs to do is something like what Synge did for the Irish; he needs to find a form that will

express the racial spirit by symbols from within rather than by symbols from without, such as the mere mutilation of English spelling and pronunciation. He needs a form that is freer and larger than dialect, but which will still hold the racial flavor; a form expressing the imagery, the idioms, the peculiar turns of thought, and the distinctive humor and pathos, too, of the Negro, but which will also be capable of voicing the deepest and highest emotions and aspirations, and allow of the widest range of subjects and the widest scope of treatment. (xl-xli)

Johnson found dialect poetry a limited form, allowing only the expression of “humor and pathos.” He was not opposed to the use of African-American dialects per se, but to the “limitations on Negro dialect [poetry] imposed by the fixing effects of long convention,” that is, the association with “’possums . . . [and] watermelons” (xxxix–xl). Johnson felt that the problems with dialect could be resolved by an approach similar to Synge’s that would accent standard English with the idioms of African-American speech. In 1927 he published *God’s Trombones*, a collection of African-American sermons rendered as poetry, in which he attempted to follow his own advice to black writers. In the introduction to this volume, Johnson went so far as to reprint his comments about Synge from his earlier book, declaring, “because I cannot say it better, I quote” (8). Like Richardson, Johnson focussed on accomplishments rather than controversies. Synge was, however, often at the center of the storms surrounding the Abbey, as his dialect and characters were literary inventions in a country hungry for and expecting realistic representations of speech and person, and his irreverence and biting social commentary ruffled not a few feathers. His work remains controversial today.

Alain Locke was among the most frequent commentators on the Harlem and Irish Renaissances, discussing such similarities between the two movements as their urban bases, their use of folk cultures, and the responses of their audiences. Although in the introduction to *The New Negro* Locke discounted any political comparison between the two movements, his dismissal of politics did not extend to a dismissal of controversy. In fact, he seems more aware than Johnson or Richardson of the problems the Irish Renaissance had faced. Later in the same work, in an essay entitled “Negro Youth Speaks,” he explained why the fledgling Harlem Renaissance was garnering mixed reviews in African-American communities: “Just as with the Irish Renaissance, there were the riots and controversies over Synge’s folk plays and other frank realisms of the

younger school, so we are having and will have turbulent discussions and dissatisfaction with the stories, plays and poems of the younger Negro group” (50). Locke noted that, just as in Ireland, those who wanted literature primarily to fight prejudice were uncomfortable with the “frank realisms” of writers such as Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston, Willis Richardson, and Langston Hughes because they feared their work would cast all African Americans in a negative light. Writers in both movements wanted the freedom to choose their own subject matter, but whether that meant Synge’s peasants or Hurston’s, many Irish people and African Americans were angered by them.

The Irish Renaissance served as both exhortation and explanation for African-American writers and intellectuals: the Abbey Theatre’s work suggested the use of folk plays and mediated dialect to Richardson and Johnson, and the Irish movement’s negative experiences helped Locke explain similar occurrences to African Americans. However, the examples given here seem to suggest that their knowledge of Irish literature was limited to drama, and their knowledge of drama to John Synge’s work. Synge was certainly well known, but other less famous Irish writers inspired black authors as well: Countee Cullen, for example, felt poetically revitalized after attending a Parisian party at which he met several Irish poets (Ferguson 119–20). In a poem entitled “After a Visit,” he wrote:

I had walked two seasons through, and moved among
Strange ways and folk, and all the while no line was wrung
In praise or balm of aught from my frost-bitten tongue

.

Then I walked in a room where Irish poets were. . . .

(*On These* 141)

After spending time with the Irish poets, the speaker falls into a regenerative slumber.

While Locke had spoken “[w]ithout pretense to [its] political significance,” others such as Marcus Garvey, A. Philip Randolph, and Claude McKay found a great deal of “political significance” in a comparison of African-American and Irish people. Before twenty-five thousand delegates at the 1920 Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) convention in Madison Square Garden, Marcus Garvey began his keynote address by reading a telegram he was sending—not to a famous

person of African descent, but to Eamon de Valera, president of the year-old Dáil Éireann, the Irish Parliament. Referring to the ongoing Irish war for independence from England, Garvey read, “We believe Ireland should be free even as Africa shall be free for the Negroes of the world. Keep up the fight for a free Ireland” (Hill 499). The Irish struggle for cultural and political autonomy had inspired the leader of the Back to Africa movement, and Garvey, who had built his movement largely on pageantry, knew a good symbol when he saw one.⁸

Throughout his long life, Garvey’s rival W. E. B. Du Bois also frequently compared the black and Irish situations. As he wrote to Arthur P. Kelly in 1953, “[your father] and I were classmates in the class of 1890 at Harvard, and we had certain peculiar interests in common, he being an Irishman, and I a Negro” (qtd. in Weinberg 246). Years earlier, Du Bois had discussed some of these commonalities in a series of articles in the *Crisis*. In January 1920 he wrote that “England has sinned against dependent and backward people to an unbelievable extent” and urged independence for Ireland and England’s African colonies, lest the “up-striving and embittered darker races of the whole earth” rise up against their oppressor (108). When readers remonstrated with Du Bois for criticizing England, noted for its early abolition of slavery and suppression of the slave trade, and allying himself with Ireland, ancestral home of the many racist Irish Americans, he replied in the March issue, “we who suffer in slavery and degradation,—shall we hesitate to extend a hand of sympathy to the Irish, simply because their descendants in America are so largely the followers of American snobbery?” (238).

A. Philip Randolph, editor of the radical black journal *The Messenger*, also compared the Irish political situation to that of his own people, though his goal was to convert African Americans to socialism. In the summer of 1919, as racial violence flared in America and many blacks took up the banner of the New Negro, Randolph exhorted them to follow the revolutionary activities occurring worldwide. In an article entitled “A New Crowd—A New Negro,” he stated, “The Seine Feiners [*sic*] are the New Crowd in Ireland fighting for self-determination” (19). Old Crowds around the world he likened to appendixes, useless and potentially harmful. Garvey, Du Bois, and Randolph all made use of the Irish struggle for independence, but, though it succeeded where they did not, its outcome was not entirely positive. The Irish Free State had a repressive and isolationist government that practiced extreme forms of

ensorship and chose not to side with the Allies in World War II because it did not wish to help England. Though inspirational, Ireland for the Irish became as problematic as Africa for the Africans.

The writer and socialist Claude McKay seems to have had a special affinity for the Irish Renaissance and Irish politics, although he knew of and was sympathetic to many cultural and political movements. During the summer of 1920, he wore a green necktie to a Sinn Fein demonstration in London and was addressed with camaraderie as “Black Murphy” and “Black Irish.” Back in America a year later, McKay wrote an article entitled “How Black Sees Green and Red” for the radical journal *Liberator*. In this piece he described the demonstration in London and stated that “[f]or that day at least I was filled with the spirit of Irish nationalism—although I am black!” (58). McKay felt that his position as a colonial subject and his peasant roots helped him understand Irish people better than the English government, the English socialists, or those whom he termed the “anglicized Irish” like George Bernard Shaw (60). He described his empathy for the Irish people as one based in their common “peasant’s passion for the soil” (59).⁹

McKay’s relation to Irish people and the cause of Irish independence illustrates not only the possibilities but also the dangers of this type of ethnic comparison. His reference to the “peasant’s passion for the soil” is a vague and troublesome notion of similarity. The primitivist mindset of the times, which affected both whites and blacks, played a role in making ethnic comparisons available, often creating spurious similarities between disempowered groups. Many believed, for example, that nonwhite peoples and certain white ethnic groups like the Irish were emotional, sensual, and childlike. One might think of Torrence’s reference to Irish drama as “vital . . . and charming” (“The New Negro Theatre” 80). Despite the problematic aspects of these comparisons, it is good, in this age of self-segregation, to see marginalized groups reaching out to each other.

Black America in Irish Minds

Although black on Irish literary influence was nearly nonexistent at the turn of the century, references to African Americans appear occasionally in the writings of Irish Renaissance leaders W. B. Yeats and Lady Gregory. In the 1905 edition of the Abbey publication *Samhain*, Yeats complained about the harsh reception of the company’s plays in Ireland. Searching for a way to explain this phenomenon, he suggested that the

Irish people's loss of self-confidence, which he connected to the decline of the Irish language, caused their reluctance to accept humorous, imaginative, or critical presentations of Irish life. "If Ireland had not lost the Gaelic," he wrote, "she never would have had this sensitiveness as of a *parvenu* when presented at Court for the first time, or of a negro newspaper" (*Explorations* 192). Yeats's correlation of the "sensitiveness" of Irish nationalists and African-American journalists was accurate: apparently the latter's outspoken condemnation of negative coverage in the mainstream press was known across the Atlantic as well as in America.

Lady Gregory experienced several connections between black and Irish culture while touring America with the Abbey Theatre in 1911. For instance, when the company arrived in Providence, Rhode Island, in October of that year, they found a petition against *The Playboy of the Western World* waiting for them at the Police Commissioners' office. Lady Gregory recorded in *Our Irish Theatre* that after she had successfully responded to accusations of obscenity and misrepresentation and ensured that the play would be produced, "[t]he police people said that they had had the same trouble about a negro play said to misrepresent people of colour" (185). The officers may have been thinking of *The Clansman*, an adaptation of Thomas Dixon's popular 1905 novel which asserted white superiority. *New York Age* drama critic Lester Walton noted that the play was protested by African Americans in Camden, New Jersey, late in 1909, and since black characters figured in so few plays at the time, *The Clansman* may well have been the one protested in Providence two years later ("Theatrical Comment").

Lady Gregory continued her train of thought from Lowell, Massachusetts, remarking the "sensitiveness" of the various ethnic groups who had managed to require police reports not to disclose the nation of origin of those charged with crimes (186). Her attitude parallels Yeats's on "negro newspapers"—interested, but not altogether sympathetic since she felt excess "sensitiveness" produced the mobs who disrupted plays at the Abbey. Because they encountered African Americans reacting to prejudice rather than as fellow artists, Yeats and Lady Gregory understandably associated them with the overzealous nationalists of their own country.

When black writers came in contact with people of Irish descent, the results were quite different. Claude McKay appears to have been quite successful at gaining Irish and Irish-American sympathy. In addition to

the warm reception at the 1920 Sinn Fein rally described in his essay "How Black Sees Green and Red," he recorded two incidents in his autobiography, *A Long Way from Home*, in which Irish Americans made a connection between his racial situation and Ireland's (post)colonial status. In the winter of 1921, shortly after returning from London, he visited his old mentor Frank Harris, editor of *Pearson's Magazine*. McKay brought along a copy of his first publication outside Jamaica, *Spring in New Hampshire*. Harris congratulated him on publishing in London but then grew angry when he realized that McKay had left his militant poem "If We Must Die" out of the book on the advice of his publishers. McKay described Harris's reaction as follows: "'You are a bloody traitor to your race, sir!' Frank Harris shouted. 'A damned traitor to your own integrity. That's what the English and civilization have done to your people. . . . The English make obscene sycophants of their subject peoples. I am Irish and I know. But we Irish have guts the English cannot rip out of us. I'm ashamed of you, sir'" (98). Harris's harsh words sparked a change of mind in McKay about omitting "If We Must Die" and several other powerful poems, and McKay resolved to include them in his forthcoming American publication, *Harlem Shadows*. Harris had been able to give him this advice, McKay believed, because he was also a member of one of England's "subject peoples" and therefore understood McKay's situation.

Several years later, McKay was once again helped by an Irish American who he felt made a connection between racial and colonial oppression. During the spring and summer of 1926, McKay worked for the Irish-American movie director Rex Ingram in France. Ingram wrote poetry, shared many of McKay's radical opinions, and was an informed conversationalist on "the life and thought and achievements of minority groups" (274). His friendliness with McKay, which extended to inviting him to dine at his private table, incurred the wrath of many of the American film crew and of one Italian who had lived in America and acquired its prejudices. The Italian man goaded McKay until he pulled a knife and chased him around a bus. When his anger faded, McKay realized that he had just enacted the stereotype of the knife-wielding Negro, and he was certain that he had lost his job. Although another employee played up the stereotype to Ingram in an attempt to get McKay fired, Ingram refused even to chastise McKay, and, when the movie season was over, he gave him a train ticket and 600 francs. McKay did not record Ingram's explanation for his open-minded and generous ac-

tions, writing simply, “Rex Ingram’s face revealed that he possessed an intuitive understanding of poets. He is Irish” (276). For the primitivist McKay, who believed in the poetic nature of the Irish people, that was all that needed to be said. However, Ingram’s motivation is, at bottom, unknown, despite McKay’s assertions. McKay recorded more black-Irish connections than anyone, but it is unclear how many of them were real.

Because Yeats and Lady Gregory did not meet African-American writers like McKay and they knew little of American racial politics, they were less sympathetic to black people than the Irish Americans McKay encountered. Indeed, it would have been difficult for Irish people to have made black-Irish comparisons equally often, for not only did the Irish Renaissance predate the movement in Harlem, but while America enjoyed the Abbey Theatre’s tours, the corresponding black entertainment in Ireland consisted of “funny nigger comics” in the 1880s and “nine real American negroes” a generation later—that is, minstrel shows (J. O’Brien 47). A deeper understanding of African-American culture and its relevance to the situation in Ireland would have to wait for the struggle for Catholic civil rights in Northern Ireland in the 1960s and 70s. However, despite the frequent lack of information and interaction, Irish and Irish-American people in the early twentieth century often made explicit connections to their own experiences when assessing African-American actions. Although, like the others discussed in this chapter, these comparisons were sometimes rooted in stereotypes, the inspiration they gave to the writers suggests the usefulness of cross-cultural study and the limitations of investigating only intraracial literary interaction.