Hacettepe University Graduate School of Social Sciences

Department of American Culture and Literature

AFRICAN AMERICAN EXISTENTIALISM
IN HARLEM RENAISSANCE NOVELS

Abdülsamet KÖSEOĞLU

Master's Thesis

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Abdülsamet KÖSEOĞLU

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Abdülsamet KÖSEOĞLU

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ABSTRACT

KÖSEOĞLU, Abdülsamet. *African American Existentialism in Harlem Renaissance Novels*, Master's Thesis, Ankara, 2023.

This thesis aims to examine the emergence of African American existential thought during the Harlem Renaissance as manifested in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928), Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker The Berry* (1929), Langston Hughes's *Not Without Laughter* (1930), and George Schuyler's *Black No More* (1931). The construction of identities within the African American experience merges with existential inquiries that fundamentally question the existence of Black individuals, as racism perpetuates a struggle that prompts an existential response to nihilism. In these selected Harlem Renaissance novels, Black characters' experience takes on a proto-existentialist quality, expanding canonical existentialism with its historical and geographical associations. Adopting an existential mode of thought becomes essential in the context of Black existence. While Black people strive toward regaining their humanity in reaction to the oppressive nature of a society characterized by antiblack views, they form complex structures, systems of values, and identity constructions. By opposing oppressive systems, Black people actively pursue meaningful and "authentic" existence and assert their identities. The selected literary works in this thesis offer a variety of perspectives and personal experiences in particular contexts. Chapter 1 examines Nella Larsen's protagonist Helga Crane in *Quicksand* (1928), analyzing the complexities of racial constructions and the pursuit of meaning and identity. Chapter 2 studies the protagonist Emma Lou from Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker The Berry* (1929), who struggles with internalized racism, but ultimately finds self-acceptance and "authenticity" by embracing her Black identity and existential responsibility. Chapter 3 offers alternative responses to nihilism in Langston Hughes's *Not Without Laughter* (1930) by focusing on questions regarding traditional religious affiliations and affirmation of a Black identity through the use of music. Chapter 4 explores George Schuyler's *Black No More* (1931) with its critique of both white and Black constructions of identity. By exploring these distinct perspectives and themes, this thesis presents a deeper

understanding of African American existential thought during the Harlem Renaissance and its significance in shaping literary discourse and cultural identity.

ÖZET

KÖSEOĞLU, Abdülsamet. *Afrikalı Amerikalı Varoluşçuluğunun Harlem Rönesansı Romanlarındaki Yansıması*, Yüksek Lisans Tezi, Ankara, 2023.

Bu tez, Nella Larsen'ın *Quicksand* (1928), Wallace Thurman'ın *The Blacker The Berry* (1929), Langston Hughes'ın *Not Without Laughter* (1930) ve George Schuyler'ın *Black No More* (1931) eserlerinde kendini gösteren Harlem Rönesansı dönemindeki Afrikalı Amerikalı varoluşçu düşüncenin ortaya çıkışını incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Irkçılık nihilizme karşı varoluşsal bir tepkiyi tetiklediği için Afrikalı Amerikalı deneyiminde kimlik oluşturmanın varoluşçu sorgulamalarla iç içe geçtiği ve siyahi bireylerin benliklerini temelden sorguladıkları görülmektedir. Harlem Rönesansı döneminden seçilmiş bu romanlarda, siyahi karakterlerin deneyiminde proto-varoluşçu özellikler ortaya çıkarken tarihsel ve coğrafi anlamda geleneksel varoluşçuluğun sınırları genişlemektedir. Siyahi varoluşun bir parçası olarak varoluşçu düşünceyi benimsemek temel bir bileşene dönüşmektedir. Siyahi insanlar, ırkçılığın hakim olduğu bir toplumun baskıcı doğası karşısında insanlıklarını yeniden değerli kılma çabasıyla karmaşık yapılar, değer sistemleri ve kimlik oluşumları inşa etmektedirler. Baskıcı kurumlara karşı çıkarak, siyahi insanlar anlamlı ve "otantik" bir varoluşu ararlar ve kimliklerini oluştururlar. Bu tezde ele alınan edebi eserler, belirli bağlamlarda çeşitli bakış açıları ve kişisel deneyimler sunmaktadır. Birinci bölümde, Nella Larsen'ın *Quicksand* (1928) eserinde ırksal yapıların karmaşıklığı ana karakter Helga Crane'in anlam arayışı üzerinden incelenmektedir. İkinci bölüm, Wallace Thurman'ın *The Blacker The Berry* (1929) eserindeki ana karakter Emma Lou'nun içselleştirilmiş ırkçılıkla mücadele etmesini ve sonunda siyahi kimliğini benimseyerek varoluşsal sorumluluğunu kabul edişini ve "otantisite" bulma sürecini ele almaktadır. Üçüncü bölüm, Langston Hughes'ın *Not Without Laughter* (1930) adlı eserinde geleneksel dini bağlılıklar üzerine ve müzik aracılığıyla Siyahi kimliğinin olumlanmasına odaklanarak nihilizme verilen alternatif yanıtları sunmaktadır. Dördüncü bölüm ise George Schuyler'ın *Black No More* (1931) eserini ele alarak beyaz ve siyahi kimlik oluşumuna yönelik eleştirileri incelemektedir. Bu tez, ele aldığı romanlardaki farklı bakış açılarını ve temaları keşfederek, Harlem Rönesansı dönemindeki Afrikalı Amerikalı varoluşçu düşüncenin

daha derin bir anlayışını sunmakta ve edebi söylem ve kültürel kimliğin şekillenmesindeki önemini ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Afrikalı Amerikalı varoluşçuluğu, Siyahi varoluşçuluk, Harlem Rönesansı, Nella Larsen, Wallace Thurman, Langston Hughes, George Schuyler.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Existentialism, either as a movement or a philosophical standpoint, addresses the fundamental problems of human existence regarding the source of meaning in life. The term "existentialism" as a prescribed denotation can be obscure since its representation in a text is primarily acknowledged with a set of connotations. Unlike the unified perception of systematic schools of thought in philosophy, existentialism does not necessarily follow a mode of premise offering certain axioms or principles. Therefore, it is often described with an attribute either to diminish its implication or to clarify its position within a context. As Robert Solomon discusses the term in his extensive work, *Existentialism* (1974), he contends that existentialism cannot be simply defined as "a philosophy or a philosophical revolt," it is rather "the explicit conceptual manifestation of an existential attitude" (xi). Attempting to discover possible representations of such, Solomon relies on texts instead of concepts, and later suggests that existentialism is "a growing series of expressions of a set of attitudes which can be recognized only in a series of portraits" (xx). He also underlines that there is no fixed list of writers to rely on and thus locates certain expressions to further reveal his exposition.

Similar to Solomon's attempt, David Edward Cooper seeks to expand the dimensions of the term by asserting that existentialism cannot be identified only as a philosophy, but it has also transformed into a movement and a fashion (2). Others such as Marjorie Grene pursue the reasons why an existential attitude is necessary as she begins her analysis with the question "why existentialism?" intending to stress the ethical demand of existentialism based on authenticity (R. L. Anderson 815). In an effort to introduce a definition or indicate a purpose, several writers endeavor to designate a certain existential attitude or tradition. Arguably, this endeavor generates particular claims regarding the geography and historicity of existentialism excluding some distinctive forms of expressions. This thesis argues that a distinctive existential attitude or fashion can be found in some of the African American authors' novels written during the Harlem Renaissance. Redefining the meaning of existence, African American authors construct unique identities in a world that is filled with existential anxieties where

whiteness is privileged. By projecting an affiliation between the novel tradition and existentialism as it is expressed by Harlem Renaissance writers, Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928), Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry* (1929), Langston Hughes's *Not Without Laughter* (1930), and George Schuyler's *Black No More* (1931) are examined in this thesis.

With questions in relation to individual freedom and authenticity, existential philosophy is, to a great extent, framed by African American writers as they are naturally thrown into the state of existential crisis in a racially divided society. Most of the scholarship designating conclusive standpoints for an existential framework of African American experience analyzes the themes reflected through the works of writers such as Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Ralph Ellison locating Black existentialism after the emergence of European existentialism unfolding with World War II. However, there is a unique form of African American existential thought as part of the Harlem Renaissance writers' attempt to reshape their identities predating both European existentialism and the African American writers who are influenced by that specific tradition.

In recent debates, scholars are less willing to situate existentialism strictly as a philosophy that emerged after World War II, since they argue that it extends beyond historical, cultural and geographical markers. While it is common to refer to canonical existentialist writers such as Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre, many scholars trace it back to early writings of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. By disentangling existentialism from its historically situated position, it becomes apparent that many existentialist concepts resonate across different time periods and cultures. Therefore, it is more pertinent to explore the concept of an "existential situation" that encompasses the fundamental aspects of human existence, rather than confining it to an "existentialist moment" limited to a particular historical context and its associated challenges. As Kevin Aho remarks, the shared commonality among existentialist writers is "their concern for the human situation *as it is lived*" (13). This approach historically and geographically widens the existential attitude to be further analyzed as accounts of writers not necessarily from a monolithic tradition.

One of the prominent scholars in the field of Black existential philosophy, Lewis Gordon contends that European existentialism presents reactions from a single continent "to a set of problems that date from the moment human beings faced problems of anguish and despair" (*Existentia* 6). The questions related to existentialist philosophy can be reconceptualized in different ways as they are part of a discussion of ontology. Therefore, as Gordon declares, it is possible to discuss the African American experience as part of existential philosophy with "various dialogical encounters between twentieth-century Africana theorists and European and Euro-American theorists" (*Existentia* 7). Particularly mentioning expositions of such in the African American context, Gordon suggests that one should look beyond white America to find anxiety and dread. As Europe produces its own anxiety, Black[1] writers in America have also displayed these conditions as constituents of their self-representation (Gordon, *Existentia* 8).

Gordon traces existential qualities in what he defines as Africana philosophy, which encompasses intellectual inquiry arising from conflicts and discussions within African cultures, as well as their manifestations in Europe, North America, Central and South America, and the Caribbean. Africana philosophy also embodies inquiries stemming from the historical processes of conquest and colonization since 1492, along with ongoing struggles for liberation (Gordon, *Existentia* 1). Gordon addresses the lasting legacy of Africana philosophy, particularly its African American variant, and the influence that figures such as William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, Alain Locke and Frantz Fanon have had outside of Africana philosophy. Africana existential philosophy, in Gordon's designation, is a "branch of Africana philosophy and black philosophies of existence" (*Existentia* 5) and African American existentialism can be located within that category. In his article, "Lewis R. Gordon's Existential Cartography," Molefi Kete Asante claims that "[n]either consciousness nor existence is a matter of where African people are geographically located" (172). Gordon's work, according to Asante, firmly initiates and upholds the notion that African resistance to racism is a common

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[1] The terms "Black" and "Blackness" are capitalized in this thesis in accordance with the conventional capitalization of the term "African American" in order to maintain consistency and highlight the significance of African American identity. On the other hand, the term "white" is in lowercase since it denotes an oppressive structure of whiteness rather than an identity. It is important to note that this preference does not extend to terms and citations from other texts.

experience. As Africans in South Africa had to confront apartheid, those in the Caribbean had to transcend the antiblack mindsets of some black and white elites, and Blacks in the United States had to cope with the residual effects of slavery and segregation; "such common assaults on racist intrusions into human relations mean that the struggle is interconnected" (Asante 172).

Within the vast scope of Black existentialism, various movements and writers have shared this common experience. Among these, the Harlem Renaissance holds an exceptional significance as the pivotal historical phase that marked the first collective attempt to present a conscious endeavor to construct identity, culture, and art. Emerging in conjunction with the rise of modernism, the Harlem Renaissance movement raises specific concerns related to the lived experiences of Black individuals. Particular novels from this period predate later discussions related to the themes of identity, freedom, individual responsibility, and a distinct sense of existential angst. This thesis will explore these existentialist inquiries from selected novels that might have influenced later periods such as the Negritude movement[2] and philosophers including Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre and Frantz Fanon. The Harlem Renaissance is representative of diverse existential perspectives with the nuance of its writers' discrete and overflowing ideas. Influenced by the theoretical schema offered by thinkers such as Du Bois and Alain Locke, Harlem Renaissance writers' works bear some characteristics of existential philosophy.

African American existential philosophy, for Gordon, is concerned with the common problems that Black people confront as in other forms of African American thought. While he formulates the word "existence" in a broader context, Gordon suggests that "'[t]o exist' literally means to emerge from indistinction or insignificance or, simply, to appear" (*An Introduction* 132). As part of Black people's perception, this notion means

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[2] The Negritude movement first appeared in the 1930s in Paris, primarily in the field of poetry. Its leading figures were Léopold Sédar Senghor, a Senegalese poet who developed a definition and conceptual framework for Négritude as encompassing all cultural values and expressions within the Black world, Aimé Césaire, a Martinican who coined the term "Négritude" and wrote the movement's pivotal work, *Return to My Native Land* (1939), Léon Gontran Damas, a Guyana native who published the inaugural collection of Négritude poetry, *Pigments*, in 1937. The three poets were all studying in France at the time and were from French-colonized nations (Mazama 368).

that an individual is fully conscious of being not only alive but also important in the face of a social context that says otherwise (Hill 4). As he lists existential themes that are prominent in African American literary works, Gordon notes "the meaning of being human, the concept of freedom, and the limits of rationality" (*An Introduction* 133). These themes particularly raise the issue of individual responsibility and agency since undesired human encounters in a racist society have an impact on freedom of choice. The Black subject is in a constant effort to eliminate these encounters as a way to rationalize meaning and conceptualize their own sense of freedom. Gordon also highlights inauthenticity (or authenticity) as a recurring theme that preoccupies Black writers' thoughts in different types of works. The importance of the literary dimension of existential thought, according to Gordon, is related to its power to extend the scope of philosophical formulations with theoretical reflection (*An Introduction* 135).

While employing these existential themes in their writing, African American authors may differ from one another since various works may emphasize certain themes more than others. Yet, as Melvin Garry Hill claims with a reference to Gordon's formulation, African American existential thought attempts to reclaim humanity. The existence of Europeans as human beings was never questioned. The tradition of African American existential thinking aims to recover what was once removed (Hill 16). This endeavor highlights the common humanist culture that underpins African American existential philosophy. According to Hill, "[t]he humanist tradition provides a way of seeing African Americans as human beings" (15). This commonality results from the collective trauma of African Americans. However, although they seek to reclaim their humanity, African American writers offer alternative ways of constructing identity in confronting oppression as it is discussed in this thesis[3]. The diverse nature of the African American experience also puts an emphasis on the significance of integrating phenomenology into

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[3] Paul Gilroy's examination of the Black diaspora in his seminal work *The Black Atlantic* (1993) can be associated with Black people's efforts to establish alternative forms of identity. The Black diaspora has made significant contributions to modernity by forging distinct responses to oppressive structures such as slavery and colonialism. This resistance has generated unique identity constructions and cultural expressions among Black writers and musicians, reflecting their defiance of racist oppression. In contrast to narrow definitions of Black identity, Gilroy proposes "an infinite process of identity construction" (223). However, Gilroy's exploration of identity constructions in the Black experience does not explicitly require an existentialist interpretation.

African American existentialism, since both approaches focus on subjective experience and the analysis of lived experience.

Existentialists agree that philosophy cannot address the specific problems of human experience from a position of objectivity and detachment. Instead, it needs to start by recognizing the individual's subjective experiences and situated understanding. This requires depending on one's own personal experiences. Phenomenology shows that there is no other option than focusing on the perspective of an insider, experiencing the world through one's own unique lens and modes of perception (Aho 63-64). In the context of the discussions about African American subjectivity, existentialism through phenomenological lenses places emphasis on the embodied experiences of people who are subjected to dehumanization. By engaging an existential-phenomenological approach, concepts of identity, agency, and the search for meaning can be explored within oppressive systems. Gordon highlights themes such as "freedom, anguish, responsibility, embodied agency, sociality, and liberation" as being residual within existential-phenomenological philosophy focusing directly on the human condition (*Existentia* 7). The human condition is surrounded by some recurring inquiries, particularly "What are we?" and "What shall we do?" (*Existentia* 7). These are identity and morality-related concerns with teleological and ontological implications. Gordon emphasizes how fundamental it is to reflect on these questions' prerequisites, such as how they can even be recognized as such by the Black subject.

In the United States, Black people's existence is plagued by slavery, exploitation, dehumanization, discrimination and segregation throughout history as a result of racism that shapes their self-knowledge. Blacks are tasked with the difficult struggle to deal with these conditions in a society that aspires to logically confront injustice. Focusing on racial oppression as a condition for Blacks to explore their lived experience and to make inquiries regarding their identity and freedom, Gordon asks a question that can be located in several writers' attempts to rationalize life and to justify the struggle that they find themselves in; "Why do they go on?" as he puts it for Black people. This question bears a demand emerging from racism towards Black people that "espouses a world that

will ultimately be better off without blacks" (Gordon, *Existentia* 15). Challenging the question's validity, Gordon states:

> The first thing to bear in mind is the illegitimacy of such demands for existential justification. What could blacks offer when it is their blackness that is called into question? The demand is loaded; failure emerges from the project of providing a suitable response. Symmetry abounds in the performance of the question, since the questioner's existence is treated as prejustified. If the questioner's existence alone is sufficient, why not the existence of the questioned? (*Existentia* 15)

Gordon's way of negating antiblack racism[4] and its earliest indications manifests itself as a rather logical pronouncement instead of a rhetorical expression or an emotional response. Detached from a racist projection and its demand, however, there is an additional component to this question as Gordon remarks. One "goes on" because one wishes to and looks for reasons why one has to "go on." Even so, this desire denotes a conscious effort "that has already militated against nihilism, for self-value also emerges from valuing one's desire to bring meaning to one's existence" (Gordon, *Existentia* 15). Through their efforts to ascribe value to their own existence and seek reasons to "go on," Black people present alternative responses to nihilism. With this proposition, Gordon refers to some possible answers to the aforementioned question. He claims that it is possible to locate an existential attitude in the works of many African American writers such as Frederick Douglass, Anna Julia Cooper, W. E. B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison. This thesis aims to explore the questions of identity (What are we?), method (What shall we do?), and the reasons for struggle (Why do we go on?) in the African American experience from an existentialist perspective as put forth by Lewis Gordon. It seeks provisional answers to these questions in the novels from the Harlem Renaissance. Benefiting from Lewis Gordon's existential repositioning of the Black subject as well as other African American thinkers' theories within the scope of Africana existential philosophy, the Harlem Renaissance period can be redefined from an existential standpoint.

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[4] Lewis Gordon uses the term "antiblack racism" to specify Black people's experiences as in the case of antisemitism. It refers to the established tendencies, perspectives, cultural bias, and behaviors that dehumanize people who have historically been classified as Black, particularly those of African heritage who live across the African diaspora (Tunstall 81). As it is used by many African American theorists along with Lewis Gordon, this thesis will also apply the term to the related discussions.

AFRICAN AMERICAN EXISTENTIAL THOUGHT: KEY CONCEPTS AND FIGURES

The notion that the African American perspective is determined by its relationality to whiteness implants Black people's social and historical existence into the oppressive systems of slavery and segregation. As African Americans begin their life with a fundamental sense of existential anxiety, even if they construe a sense of individuality or a meaningful sense of existence, they live on with the condition that later haunts them in the form of alienation and detachment, a sense of inhabiting their own bodies as strangers. In relation to this experience within the African American context, W. E. B. Du Bois, as Gordon suggests, formulates "the existential phenomenological reading of the nihilistic threat of denied membership as a struggle of twoness, of two souls, of double consciousness" (*Existentia* 92). The term "double consciousness" describes the conflict that results from having two distinct perspectives—one as an American and the other as a Black person inflicted with white definition of Blackness. It raises the question of whether being Black and American are mutually exclusive. Black people are affected by the contradictions that exist in American society, such as the discrepancy between claims of equality and factual inequity and the pretense that all people experience "universal normativity" while actually experiencing "white normativity" (Gordon, *Existentia* 92). In his monumental work, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Frantz Fanon also examines this peculiar condition in order to recapture how he perceives this problem as a Black man in a broader context. He remarks that he was in search of a source in life with an interest to question objects and their meaning until he realized that he was considered only as another object among the others (109). Fanon's realization of his own condition displays the intentional attempt of the other, namely the

white gaze,[5] to make his subject visible as a corrupted or neutralized body. This intentional action, as a result, lessens his condition to invisibility.

Fanon's formulation of Blackness as a problem of white perception is best articulated as expressions unveiling his familiarity with the lived experience. While he recounts his position in relation to others, he states, "When people like me, they tell me it is in spite of my color. When they dislike me, they point out that it is not because of my color. Either way, I am locked into the infernal circle" (116). The dynamic integration of the Black body, mind, and its surroundings, in Fanon's perspective, transforms into an object inside a framework of perception shaped by the white gaze. By replacing the black body with a passive, objectified being confined by the colonial system of significance and worth, this transformation implies the theft of the black body in establishing both individual and collective reality. Therefore, for Fanon, the dominant meanings, values, ideas, concepts, and tangible structures of the world are not derived from the lived experiences of Black individuals, but rather from a perspective that is white (Haile III 495). Fanon's phenomenology of the Black body differs from traditional Western phenomenology by its insistence on the historical dimension and rejecting the assumption of a normative subject. In his *Black Bodies, White Gazes* (2008), George Yancy further expounds on Fanon's repositioning of the Black experience. Yancy explains that in a normative society that has been shaped by history, where he is instantly perceived and assessed, he makes decisions and navigates his actions while being shaped by a tradition of interpretation that has shaped his identity (22). The meaning assigned to Blackness is produced by outside forces and the Black body is perceived as a derogatory signifier within a racist social and historical framework. This design is a component of a white supremacist narrative that distorts how Black people are perceived, which may lead to a form of self-hatred (Yancy 22).

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[5] Fanon critically engages with Jean-Paul Sartre's conceptualization of the gaze and its role in restricting and fixing the identity of the Other, but he goes further by incorporating a comprehensive examination of the underlying frameworks within an antiblack racist society. In doing so, Fanon enriches Sartre's perspective by exploring how the white gaze attempts to shape Blackness, reducing it to derogatory and superficial qualities related to skin color, thereby perpetuating the confinement of Blackness within its own oppressive boundaries (Drabinski).

Lewis Gordon refers to Black people's experience and expression in a racist society within the texts of several authors as part of existential-phenomenological philosophy in their effort to offer responses to antiblack racism ("Existential Dynamics" 70). Suggesting a possible convergence in the discourses of Du Bois, Fanon, Alain Locke and Ralph Ellison, Gordon claims that each of these writers has "a passion to understand human beings and a passion to articulate a liberation project that does not lead to the estrangement of humanity from itself" ("Existential Dynamics" 70). This passion, Gordon argues, parallels Jean-Paul Sartre's discussions on the relationship between oppression and the subject. Gordon highlights these writers and their theoretical framework especially for their attempt to show the dynamics of "black invisibility," which involves problems about interpellation. "Black invisibility," as Gordon notes, "involves a form of hypervisibility" (*Existentia* 88). The Black individual is paradoxically invisible because "of being too much visible," and not acknowledged despite being seen (Gordon, *Existentia* 88). Being seen in this situation is ambiguous because it posits the presence of something that is not ontologically legitimate and reduces a certain feature of reality to ultimate reality. As a result, something is designed to appear visible by rendering something else invisible (Gordon, *Existentia* 88).

Borrowing from Jean-Paul Sartre,[6] Gordon situates the human body as the crux where three different dimensions of self are at play: "the dimension of seeing, the dimension of being seen, and the dimension of being conscious of being seen by others" ("Existential Dynamics" 71). In an antiblack world, this formulation is manifested with the precedence of the individual either as a subject or an object as exemplified by Gordon's analogy of a sadist and a masochist, which is also part of Sartre's interpretation, in their

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[6] As Sartre theorizes "the other" or "the look of others" in his pioneering work, *Being and Nothingness* (1943), he contends that human beings always have a predisposition to be affirmed through the look of others, and this search leads to such incomplete agencies when in turn they are dehumanized. Relating this situation to responsibility and bad faith, Sartre states, "I am possessed by the Other; the Other's look models my body in its nudity, gives birth to it, sculpts it, produces it as it is, sees it as I will never see it. The Other holds a secret: the secret of what I am" (*Being and Nothingness* 553). According to Sartre's projection, one can transcend this fixation by interpreting it in a specific manner. When offering this, Sartre mentions a radical freedom that necessitates an action in specific lived experiences; however, he does not reject that there are certain constraints limiting our choices. It is rather the ways in which we conceptualize our experiences and interpret them that situates our freedom. As it is subjectively construed, the lived experience of those who are invariably part of an oppressive system result in anguish (Aho 118).

relationality with others. In this analogy, both the sadist and the masochist exhibit an evasion of the human being in the flesh. The "sadist regards himself on the level of 'subject' before whom all others are 'objects'" and "[t]he masochist regards himself as an object before a subject" (Gordon, "Existential Dynamics" 72). Both the sadist and the masochist objectify human reality. Gordon extends his definition of the human being that is neither a subject nor an object. The human body, for Gordon, presents an ambiguous account rather than a direct relationality of a subject and an object. And this ambiguity is not a dilemma to be fixed, but "a way of living to be described" ("Existential Dynamics" 72). Gordon's phenomenological approach to Blacks' lived experience can be characterized by the individual's relation to the external reality emphasized by intentional recognition and actions within the realms of conscious prefiguration. Du Bois's demonstration of the ways in which African Americans seek existential freedom by acquiring a sense of identity as they are affected by "double consciousness" is of the same source with Gordon's formulation of the lived experience. As Du Bois reflects on how one might feel about being a particular "problem" in society, he endeavors to revitalize a sense of dignity among African Americans by addressing the problems directly as he formulates a sense of agency with the help of proper education.

Given the fact that Gordon discusses problems outside of the conventional liberal conceptual approach of rights and justice, Clevis R. Headley considers Gordon's work pivotal within the area of Africana philosophy. According to Headley, Gordon has adopted a new strategy that is more aligned with Black existence than other Africana philosophers who have focused on integrating Black people into the liberal framework of rights (170). Headley further claims that Gordon has drawn a link between his work and the phenomenological approach, which is concerned with people's lived reality and perceptions (170). Relating his existential phenomenological approach to the concept of power, Gordon points out the unresolved distinction between racists as individuals and racism as a concept as it reveals the difference between options and choices. Options belong to the material and social world, whereas choices refer to individuals. Racial segregation restricts opportunities for those who are racially oppressed, creating an unstable situation. While the subordinated group's agency is restricted to themselves,

the hegemonic group can continue "making choices of *acting on the world*, of relating to available options in an ever-expanding world of possibility" (Gordon, "Phenomenology and Race" 300). This approach obviously differs from a liberal framework of human rights projects. The relationship between power and the phenomenology of Black subjectivity generates the classic existential condition; anguish (Gordon, "Phenomenology and Race" 300). Power is manifested in choices, defining the materiality of circumstance. Making a decision is an action, and we can take action by contemplating, expressing, and performing them. Our actions are reflections of the choices we make through our physical bodies. The capacities of consciousness in the body serve as a tangible limit to our choices. Through the network of intersubjective links, places, and objects beyond the physical human body, language, communication, a social world, and culture facilitated our ability to reach and expand our worlds of meaning (Gordon, "Phenomenology" 300).

Culture is an entity that can provide security, longevity, and happiness. These objectives are pursued through the enactment of legislation. However, power, as an application of laws, can also be used to restrict options and lessen one's capacity to lead a meaningful life, which can result in a downward spiral that eventually crumbles (Gordon, "Phenomenology" 301). The existential phenomenological approach, Gordon notes, addresses the role of external power asserted on Black people and questions of how they interact with problems. In a world where restricted options lead to anguish, the illegitimate presence of oppressive entities emphasizes the necessity for questioning the validity of science as presently conceived and a future with more options ("Phenomenology" 301). Within this scope of the phenomenological experience, Gordon examines how Black people shape their value judgment as a consequence of the white's assumption as superior to the Black. He asserts that, as part of the power structure that justifies white discourses, "[t]o be valued means to receive value outside of blackness. It means to be valued by a white" (*Bad Faith* 100). This deduction leads to an incessant sense of anxiety which engenders a situated feeling of the possibility of making a mistake or even being guilty. Since the neutralized white look with standard norms as it is prescribed as part of an antiblack world has a projection over the Black

body, Blacks are also expected to follow certain demands excluding their own perspective.

Linking Blacks' experience with Heidegger's concept of "thrownness,"[7] Devon R. Johnson contends that Gordon's theoretical framework explores the lived experiences of Black individuals and provides specific conceptualizations that empower them to resist oppressive control over their lives ("The Radical Language" 62). This oppressive control of a prejustified authority or presupposed superiority materializes itself as racism which creates the peculiar condition of Black existential analysis. By applying an existential lens to the manifestations of antiblack racism with Gordon's formulation, Johnson claims that it is possible to "experience the absurdities inflicted upon human beings whose subjectivity is not only unreciprocated but also forced into the space of a nonbeing, an object" ("The Radical" 63). Racism as an attitude, then, circulating among the intellects of Black writers and plaguing their construction of meaning as being part of the society, will be one of the main concerns of this thesis corresponding to its interpretation in an existential configuration as it is theorized by Lewis Gordon.

Examining the philosophical rather than sociological or historical dimensions of racism, Lewis Gordon in his *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism* (1995) applies the Sartrean term "bad faith" to African American existential thought. Explaining the term "bad faith," Gordon first explains the process that involves an intentional act of deceiving ourselves in order to abstain from the responsibility of our freedom. In bad faith, one embraces a false belief in order to flee from an uncomfortable truth. To do this, one must deceive oneself by persuading oneself that the false belief is true. This differs from a standard lie, which requires both "the deceiver and the deceived" (Gordon, *Bad Faith* 8). Beginning with Sartre's notion of consciousness and bad faith, Gordon relocates the position of the individual struggling with his or her own anguish associated with racist attitudes. Racism, in Gordon's proposition, is regarded as an example of bad faith since it

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[7] Heidegger relates the condition of "thrownness" to his notable rendition of existence as "Dasein" (i.e. Being-in-the-world). Thrownness denotes the human condition pertaining to have "been thrown into a world," which results in struggling in a restricting form of existence (Heidegger 192). In Johnson's resolution, "the existence of one's blackness is not a choice, like one's sex, but rather a situation one's consciousness finds itself in" and "one is thrown into blackness" ("The Radical Language" 62).

involves having a narrow perspective to eliminate the diversity of human reality. "The racist is a figure who hides from himself by taking false or evasive attitudes towards people of other races" and the individual who maintains these views toward Black people is an antiblack racist (*Bad Faith* 94).

Gordon's analysis of white perception acting in bad faith and its deliberate self-reification can be particularly linked with George Schuyler's *Black No More* (1931) through the lens of the Black perspective. However, his portrayal of Blacks constantly questioning their own identity is also to be unraveled to properly describe African American subjectivity confronting antiblack racism in other novels. Referring to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), Gordon emphasizes "the black experience of absence" as he describes it with Fanon's conceptualization that there is "something absent whenever blacks are present" (*Bad Faith* 98). He, then, associates this formulation with Sartre's portrayal of a sadist perceiving others just as objects. However, in Ellison's case, the Black is in the position of others who are objectified by the sadist. This particular moment, according to Gordon, is an instance to remark a failure of Black's absence translation "into his human presence" (*Bad Faith* 98). Later, Gordon examines Fanon's depiction of his specific situation as a Black subject and argues that Fanon's predicament is related to his presence as opposed to his absence. Nevertheless, by describing Fanon's condition as rather ironic, Gordon maintains that "He [Fanon] is not seen in his individuality. To see him as Black is to see enough. Hence to see him as Black is not to see him at all. His presence is a form of absence" (*Bad Faith* 99). In other words, Fanon is neither viewed as his subjective construction of himself nor with his credentials as a psychiatrist or a philosopher. Thus, both Ellison's protagonist and Fanon are subsequently situated within absence.

Since the Black subject is expected to conform to the ways in which antiblack racism describes it, it is forced to disregard its own perspective. This erases the agency and subjective experience of the black subject (Gordon, *Bad Faith* 102). Gordon notes that when the Black body is recognized, it is in the confines of narrowed-down aspects of public life as in the examples of athletic or sexual capacity. The Black body is constantly compelled to justify its existence and is continuously viewed as "superfluous"

(Gordon, *Bad Faith* 102). The historically rooted process of forming their own self-knowledge in antiblack racist terms leads Black people to a type of self-negation, which Gordon conceptualizes as "black antiblackness" (*Bad Faith* 105). In Gordon's understanding, this is another form of bad faith, where consciousness mirrors its own negation, which may eventually result in self-annihilation. From a racist perspective, the Black body is seen as a deficiency and a body of unending desire that yearns to be non-black. This generates the idea that being Black in a non-black world is the antithesis of a fulfilled sense of existence. Black people, Gordon remarks, may internalize this perception and consider that their blackness signifies an ugly and repulsive body (*Bad Faith* 105). Gordon further argues, "The point of perspective becomes separated from itself; the perspective gained in the flight from the black body is the assumption of non-blackness. The black, in such instance, is able to exist as denial, is able to regard his body as not 'really' his" (*Bad Faith* 105). Initiating the elimination of differences between separate Black bodies, this position results in the emergence of a single Black body. Liberation from Blackness becomes equivalent with liberation from the single Black body as a monolithic entity (Gordon, *Bad Faith* 105).

This existential predicament explained by Gordon, which involves the erasure of Black agency as a result of antiblack racism, brings about the concept of Black nihilism. As mentioned before, an intentional configuration that resists nihilism is embodied by the desire for self-worth and meaning in the African American experience (Gordon, *Existentia* 15). Considering the relationship between nihilism and antiblack racism, Devon R. Johnson discusses "the nihilistic dimensions of the lived existential situation of black being in antiblack racist contexts" (*A Philosophical Analysis* 1). As Johnson explains, Black nihilism refers to a particular form of nihilism that develops under the context of antiblack racism. It represents both the causes and effects of this nihilism. It relates to the existential anguish experienced by people who interact with the particular challenges caused by antiblack racism. These challenges influence the manner in which Black people recognize, experience, and create value systems (*A Philosophical Analysis* 1). By reconsidering their relatedness to nihilism, Blacks, according to Johnson's analysis, demonstrate attitudes of distinctive kinds in order to confront antiblack racism. Johnson's dissection is suggestive as it provides alternative interpretations of such

attitudes. Analyzing Nietzsche's formulation of European nihilism,[8] Johnson makes a distinction between "weak black nihilism" and "strong black nihilism." As he details weak responses to the Black nihilistic situation, he particularly discusses Cornel West's acceptance of the Black American Christian tradition. According to Johnson, weak black nihilism denotes "metaphysically conceived ideals in the struggle against antiblack racism" (*A Philosophical Analysis* 136). On the other hand, strong black nihilism, for Johnson, "rejects all weak nihilistic value systems, including antiblack racism and the traditional values of black American Christian humanity" (*A Philosophical Analysis* 167). Identifying Fanon's analysis of antiblack racism as a strong nihilistic response, Johnson suggests that strong black nihilism is to be considered a rational and constructive response to oppression. African Americans' relationship with religion generates either a reaction, as white normative values are premised upon some religious justifications to further subjugate Black people, or a commitment to constitute a safe basis for identity construction with the idea of theodicy[9].

Cornel West presents a synthesis of African American identity and Christianity in order to establish an association between Black individuals' experiences and the ways in which they try to reconstruct their sense of meaning in life with religion. While trying to explain the reasons why Black people became Christians and how they were persuaded, West states that Black people embraced Christianity for "intellectual, existential, and political reasons" as it offered a perspective from the oppressed, drew connections to their historical experiences, and provided hope for overcoming evil (*Reader* 99-100). For West, then, Christianity is a significant component of African American resistance

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[8] Nihilism, according to Nietzsche, is the lack of objective reasons for our decisions. He views it as a cause for celebration rather than hopelessness. In Nietzsche's philosophy, nihilism frees people from societal norms so that they can establish new ones that are more compatible with who they are as individuals. Nietzsche's perspective on authenticity emphasizes joy and the capacity for self-creation in the face of nihilism (Aho 142). Devon R. Johnson derives his concept of "strong black nihilism" from this understanding of nihilism.

[9] Theodicy is the attempt of justifying the righteousness of an "omnipotent and omniscient God" in the presence of evil (Gordon, *Existentia* 149). Lewis Gordon notes that in contemporary times, the idea of theodicy has been applied to a secular framework by implying that political institutions or other justification mechanisms assume the function of the once-trusted fallen god and by identifying social inequities or contradictions as the problematic or annoying features of the system (*Existentia* 67-68).

against oppression and antiblack racism. His interpretation of religious salvation rationalizes Black people's engagement with Christianity since it offers an alternative way of existence for them. By establishing a link between African Americans' condition in the slavery period and the modern world, West recognizes a nihilistic attitude, or rather the nihilistic threat that Black people live through. He further claims that "the major enemy of black survival in America has been and is neither oppression nor exploitation but rather the nihilistic threat—that is, loss of hope and absence of meaning" (*Race Matters* 33). Being concerned with the strategies to confront this threat, he considers religion as a relevant method to be prescribed. Unlike Johnson's perspective which suggests that nihilism is a useful response to antiblack racism, for West, it is a condition to overcome.

Johnson interprets West's formulation of Black Christianity as a way to reach an existential liberation by escaping from the absurdity and meaninglessness that Black people are circumscribed with (*A Philosophical Analysis* 26). Communally, Black people shape their struggles with justifications of religious doctrines. Johnson specifies that the role of Black American Christianity, in West's design, is "[p]roviding existential sustenance for black Americans struggling against antiblack racism while attempting not to succumb to despair and nihilism (*A Philosophical Analysis* 41). West's analysis assumes a theistic perspective that evaluates the condition of Black people based on God's will. However, African Americans might also seek to recreate their own meaning and value system, rejecting preordained interpretations including the realm of religion. They might strive for an authentic sense of life that aligns with their experiences rather than embracing what has been offered to them. This denial is what Johnson describes as the strong black nihilism.

Opposing West's perception of Black American Christianity as the source of resilience and the affirmation of self against nihilism, Johnson claims that values that are grounded in metaphysical conceptions cannot produce an antidote to the Black nihilism. By affiliating his assertion with Sartre's existentialism, he reiterates the importance of creating values instead of relying on a set of predetermined principles. According to Johnson, "West's response to nihilism in Black America prioritized the metaphysical

over the phenomenal when articulating the value of black life" (*A Philosophical Analysis* 129). As whiteness is considered as a metaphysical concept by white nihilism, West follows a similar mode of formulation, and "[w]hile acknowledging the fallaciousness of whiteness as a metaphysical standard for valuing human life, [he] paradoxically responds to white nihilism by also endorsing a metaphysical system for valuing black humanity" (*A Philosophical Analysis* 129).

In a similar fashion, William R. Jones tries to formulate a "black religious humanism," which questions the validity of the concept of theodicy. By posing the question, "Is God a white racist?," Jones focuses on the suffering of those who are oppressed throughout history and identifies this process as "ethnic suffering." Analyzing the historical record of Christianity, Jones concludes that it is highly questionable that God has been on the side of African Americans (Finley and Gray 446). Thus, he claims that there is a need to reformulate Black theology and proposes two viable models for it: "secular humanism" and "humanocentric theism" (172). Jones's formulation is significant since he borrows from Sartrean existentialism with its emphasis on humanism and constructs his own form of humanism which would later be treated as one of the bases of Black existential and phenomenological philosophy (Gordon, *An Introduction* 171).

Dissenting from this humanistic approach, Calvin L. Warren reconceptualizes the Black nihilistic situation in his recent work, *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation* (2018). Drawing on Heidegger's concept of *Dasein* (existence), Warren reflects on antiblack violence and suggests that Blackness is only a conception of "metaphysical nothingness," which functions as a tool to white perception that validates its own existence through Blackness. While reviewing Warren's work, Patrice D. Douglass propounds that Warren's main thesis is "that the terror of Blackness is the realization that ontological security is impossible" (394). Warren also considers nihilism as a way to respond to antiblack racism. However, he asserts that there is no solution to the problem of antiblackness as long as the world exists (3). As his projection offers an inescapable antagonistic relationship between whites and Blacks, he contends that Black freedom "would constitute a form of world destruction," and thus, he rejects humanism's resolution as "black humanism has neglected the relationship between

black(ness) and nothing in its yearning for belonging, acceptance, and freedom" (6). Warren's suggestion to resist and reinterpret this situation is a conscious endeavor projecting Black existence that repudiates certain designations in relation to humanism or "the human." Accepting Blackness as nothingness would lead one to the "spirit," which Warren relates to a path that provides endurance that Black people need. Warren's formulation, then, could also be associated with Blacks' unsettled condition which necessitates a novel way of affiliation with the world or Du Bois's attempt to redefine "the souls of Blacks" that constitutes a search for authenticity.

In his essay, "Blackness and the Quest for Authenticity," Robert Birt discusses the extent of Blackness having an existential authenticity, and why it is necessary for Blacks to affirm their Blackness to further establish existential freedom or transcendence of a human subject. Unlike Warren's radical stance that relates Blackness to nothingness, Birt suggests an affirmation of Blackness that presents both facticity and transcendence[10] since choosing to acknowledge the uncertainties of Black existence can lead to an authentic life. The value of facticity and transcendence, then, should be balanced in Birt's prescription (267). Birt also distinguishes racial essentialism from Black authenticity as the latter is a liberation project. While he relates his argument to Du Bois's effort which aims to reinvigorate diasporic Black consciousness, he states, "What is essential to what Du Bois calls 'kinship' or common identity among Blacks is a 'social heritage.' The emancipatory strivings whereby Blacks have sought to assert their transcendence as human subjects has not as its primary concern the defense of some Black 'essence' or 'Negro soul'" (269). This self-creation and self-discovery effort, for Birt, cannot be accomplished by retreating from the lived experiences as it is clearly inauthentic to ignore our own predicament from an existential perspective of authenticity (269).

Many African American theorists have attempted to examine the question of authenticity. From the perspective of a "mixed race" identity, Naomi Zack argues that

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[10] Facticity, which pertains to our innate and unalterable features and conditions, and transcendence, which is associated with our capacity to transcend our innate attributes and situation through our conscious acts and choices, are two key concepts that are utilized to describe the parameters of human existence for existentialist philosophers (Aho 91).

the authenticity of a person of mixed race may be grounded in their rejection of racial categorizations as a way of defining one's self in the context of oppression. Zack proposes that "the racial authenticity of mixed race could therefore be the racial position of anti-race" (164). Since their existence as mixed race is not acknowledged in the American biracial system, mixed race individuals, according to Zack, can embrace their racelessness, which transforms into a form of "anti-race" perspective. Victor Anderson, in a similar fashion, defines the term "ontological blackness" as the categorical and essentialist paradigm that confines Black life and experience. He argues that African Americans are shaped by opposing forces and binary oppositions, which limit their ability to transcend or mediate between these polarities, denying them the opportunity for authentic self-expression (14). Anderson seeks to transcend "ontological blackness" and embrace "postmodern blackness" instead, which emphasizes that as African Americans inhabit a variety of social contexts and participate in a range of moral frameworks within distinct communities, black identities are constantly being reconstructed (11).

Sartre's exploration of the "inauthentic Jew" provides another avenue for understanding the quest for authenticity in Black people's identity formation, in which he offers a similar approach to Robert Birt's discussion. For Sartre, Jewish authenticity is the decision to embrace one's Jewish identity and face the challenges that accompany it. The authentic Jew abstains from the ambition to fit into an all-encompassing human identity in recognition of their unique historical existence. Instead of embracing "social pluralism," they reject conventional standards. They take pride in their particular situation and fight for human rights in spite of being rejected and ridiculed. Even in the face of humiliation, they are able to find strength in who they are and assert their Jewishness in their experiences (*Anti-Semite and Jew* 98-99). The inauthentic Jew in Sartre's discussion tries to fly away from their Jewishness, despite it being a defining aspect of their existence. This situation can also be aligned with Albert Camus's concept of the absurd. In his *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), Camus uses Sisyphus's punishment as a metaphor for the human condition, emphasizing the repetitive and meaningless nature of life. Accepting this absurdity and finding purpose in the challenge become crucial for making sense of existence. In the context of authenticity

debate, confronting the absurd might entail a refusal to disregard one's facticity whether it is manifested as one's Blackness or Jewishness. Camus's reflection on the absurdity of life and the nihilistic responses to it can be further contextualized within the framework of the African American struggle, since "antiblack racism absurdly demands that one exist as a human being whose humanity is rendered non-existent, or invisible" as Devon R. Johnson remarks (*A Philosophical Analysis* 21). Confronting this meaninglessness, Black people formulate their struggles as in Camus's hero's endeavor.

Several aspects of African American subjectivity can also be linked with the field of existential psychology, exemplified by R.D. Laing's concept of "ontological insecurity." The conditions and experiences encountered within African American contexts resonate with the notion of ontological insecurity, revealing the existential challenges faced by individuals in their quest for selfhood and identity. Individuals with a strong feeling of ontological security, in Laing's analysis, perceive their existence to be authentic, vibrant, complete, and clearly distinct from the outside world (Brody 243). They remain safe from any uncertainty or doubt through this strong sense of identity and autonomy. For people who do not possess this level of security, on the other hand, daily activities turn into a continual problem that could be threatening. Lack of personal autonomy makes it difficult to maintain a consistent sense of self both in relationships with other people and in isolation (Brody 243). Laing distinguishes three types of anxiety generated by ontological insecurity. The initial type Laing refers to is "engulfment," which is characterized by a fear of interpersonal relationships or anything that might put one's autonomy in jeopardy. "Implosion" corresponds to the anxiety perceived by those who seem to be in a void. Fear comes into contact with reality because it threatens their identity, which is predicated on a sense of nothingness. The third sign of anxiety is a feeling of being imprisoned or made immobile. People are afraid of social interactions because they perceive them as being dehumanizing and depersonalizing (Brody 243). A persistent threat to one's identity and autonomy might result from the experience of being in the African American psyche that is viewed as "other" or as inferior within interpersonal relationships.

THE EXISTENTIAL DIMENSION OF ALAIN LOCKE'S AND W. E. B. DU BOIS'S IDEAS

Emerging from the impetus engendered by several factors such as migration and World War I, the Harlem Renaissance can be accurately regarded as the moment in African American history when Black artists and writers demonstrated their uniqueness in manifestations of several kinds. It was a pivotal period for all African Americans since it functioned as an artistic, cultural, and social self-discovery process (Mitchell 2). As Nathan Irvin Huggins describes, the uniqueness of the Harlem Renaissance writers lies in their conscious effort to articulate themselves as the makers of a renaissance when they "decide that they are the instruments of history-making and race-building" (3). It is not uncommon for people to consider themselves to be a part of some grand scheme or particular historical context. However, assuming a role as an actor and founder in the unique event of a movement's birth necessitates a distinct level of self-consciousness. According to Huggins, such a self-concept was shared by Black intellectuals in Harlem in the second decade of the 20th century (3).

Harlem Renaissance writers' self-conscious commitment is of philosophical and existential relevance in its effort to define itself and reposition a collective identity. Lewis Gordon asserts that it is possible to "find identity questions in ontological questions, questions of being, essence, and meaning–in short, of the existential force of the question, in the end, 'What am I?'" (*Existentia* 65). The question "What am I?" amounts to "What are we?" and "What shall we do?" in the minds of Harlem Renaissance writers. Alain Locke and W. E. B. Du Bois are initiators of such questions as they both consciously seek the recognition of the bodies that were either considered a problem or invisible. Locke made a conscious effort to influence the intellectual production of African Americans in a particular direction that promulgates cultural self-reconstruction and a "New Negro" aesthetic (Hutchinson 4). When Du Bois declared in *The Crisis* his belief in the significance of Black writers claiming sovereignty over their own experiences, he foresaw the beginning of a renaissance as early as 1920 (Hutchinson 35). These efforts are also analogous to Sartre's famous prescription that suggests "freedom is existence and existence, in it, precedes essence" (*Being* 778).

Therefore, it is possible to regard both Du Bois's and Alain Locke's perspectives as existential struggles. To understand the reasons why African Americans are in such a quest for freedom and identity during the Harlem Renaissance, a brief overview of the period's setting should be given.

The conditions that situate African American people in a struggle against antiblack racism throughout the history of the United States were still apparent at the beginning of the 20th century. African Americans continued to experience racial, economic, and political disenfranchisement notwithstanding the legal protection provided by the fourteenth and fifteenth amendments (Mitchell 2). Numerous African Americans were lynched between 1917 and 1919, and more than twenty cities in the North and South were decimated by race riots during the 1919 "Red Summer." The Ku Klux Klan ultimately resurfaced in 1921 as a result of racial tensions. The Klan entered politics during World War I and into the 1920s, expanding beyond the South and border regions to have organizations from Maine to Oregon. The 1915 movie *Birth of a Nation*, which is claimed to have encouraged riots and the lynching of African American soldiers, gave the movement a favorable portrayal (Williams-Myers 299). The Klan's operations, such as the cross burning on Stone Mountain, Georgia, in 1915 and their parade in the capital city in 1925, were fueled by their white supremacist ideology. Between 3 and 5 million people were reportedly members of the Ku Klux Klan during this period (Williams-Myers 299). As part of the Great Migration,[11] many African Americans moved to the North in pursuit of a better life because of the severe racial and economic conditions in the South. Consequently, their population in New York massively increased in a short period of time (Mitchell 3). After World War I, the reputation of "white" culture and its message of reason and advancement were questioned. With a developing Black nationalist awareness among the migrants, Black soldiers, who had experienced relative freedom while fighting to make the world "safe for democracy," came back to Jim Crow America willing to defend their rights (Hutchinson 6). The search for an identity

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[11] The Great Migration is the significant relocation of African Americans in the 20th century, when they migrated from small rural areas in the South to large cities in the North and West of the United States. A significant majority of African Americans settled in the Southern states before the 20th century. During the Great Migration, spanning from 1916 to 1970, approximately six million black people from the South moved to urban centers in the North and West ("Great Migration").

and reaffirmed sense of Blackness among African Americans is influenced by each of these circumstances during the period. Thus, as Hutchinson claims, the Harlem Renaissance became "the first cohesive cultural movement in African American history" (30) as African Americans have never before had the chance to participate so enthusiastically in the "project of national identity" (30). Yet, the form of this search changed since the political ideals in affirming an American identity as part of the "melting pot" metaphor disappointed African Americans with racial segregation established by Jim Crow laws. A cultural citizenship was created by Locke and other "New Negro" intellectuals that envisioned a new type of identity based on culture rather than politics (Hutchinson 17).

The New Negro Movement or the Negro Renaissance was another label for the Harlem Renaissance. The term "Negro Renaissance," Hutchinson states, "arose in the early to mid-1920s to signify a general cultural awakening and moment of recognition – both self-recognition (for it was a very self-conscious phenomenon) and recognition from 'without'" (2). Early in the 20th century, notably in the years following World War I, "New Negro" commonly connoted "militant self-defense against white supremacy, intellectual aspiration, and quite often political radicalism" (Hutchinson 2). After 1925, when Alain Locke's anthology *The New Negro* was published, the term "Negro" frequently carried a less explicit political connotation and denoted a cultural assertion of Negro identity as reflected in literature, drama, and the fine arts (Hutchinson 2). Locke's depiction of the New Negro is to be understood with its counterpart, the "Old Negro," who, as Locke describes, "has been more of a formula than a human being—a something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be 'kept down,' or 'in his place,' or 'helped up,' to be worried with or worried over, harassed or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden" ("The New Negro" 21). This predicament is reinforced by African Americans themselves too within the given social setting, in Locke's depiction, as they see themselves "in the distorted perspective of a social problem" ("The New" 21). While describing the New Negro, Locke centers Harlem as a place where African Americans have a sense of folk-expression and self-determination and asserts that it "has the same role to play for the New Negro as Dublin has had for the New Ireland or Prague for the New Czechoslovakia" ("The New" 24). Locke further

states, "With this renewed self-respect and self-dependence, the life of the Negro community is bound to enter a new dynamic phase, the buoyancy from within compensating for whatever pressure there may be of conditions from without" ("The New" 22). African Americans were driven by the ideas such as the liberation from former delusions and the rediscovery of their identity as they began to experience such remarkable transformations in Harlem. In order to discover who they truly were, African Americans had to discard the mask of "the mimicking minstrel" (Huggins 59). According to Locke, the African American community must reject both the inaccurate image that white culture has of them and any justifications for their oppression. They should strive for self-awareness and a fair judgment of their capacities. Then, he draws attention to the evolving dynamics of race relations and expresses his enthusiasm for the prospect of new and improved attitudes shared by various groupings ("The New" 25).

Melvin Garry Hill discusses these efforts to reject inaccurate depictions of Blackness as he relates modernism to the upsurge of the early 20th century African American writers' discourses of affirmation. Hill illustrates how Black people reject the "superimposed ideological imaging of black bodies" in both Alain Locke's and Du Bois's works (94). Defining the African American search for identity as an existential struggle, Hill first explains the relationship between "imagination" and "imago" by stating that "imago relates to an idealized depiction of a person in ways that will transform their self-image" whereas imagination can be an act of visualizing a scenario or an image, and then transferring it to a different individual (95). For African Americans, according to Hill, the process of altering and transcending the racist perceptions of Black bodies is the imago's project. As a result, imago develops into a "visionary projection of alternatives for their black bodies" (95). Similar to Calvin L. Warren's concept of Blackness as a "metaphysical nothingness," Hill equates white perception with a negative imagination that justifies its existence through Blackness.

Instead of being a response to racialized white stereotypes, the Black identity project, for Hill, sought to create a legitimate identity for African Americans built upon their humanity. Through this project, the stereotypes about Black people that had been perpetuated by racism were replaced with something vibrant and innovative that fit their

reality with the imago's function (Hill 96). In their quest for cultural self-determination in the United States, Du Bois and Alain Locke created new frameworks for reflecting Black people through the use of an existential perspective. In response to the discrimination, dehumanization, and alienation they endured, they both attempted to reframe the existence of African Americans as being equivalent in the act of cultural self-determination (Hill 96). Locke's theory of ontological value, for instance, is based on the idea that there is a phase of rebirth from the old to the new. An existential school of thought emerges from this phase according to Hill, in which the Black body is reanimated by transcending subordination and achieving social and cultural liberation (103).

Traces of existential thought can also be observed in Locke's essay titled "Values and Imperatives," (1917) as he reconsiders value systems and asserts himself as a value relativist. He claims that "values are rooted in attitudes, not in reality, and pertain to ourselves, not to the world" ("Values" 46). This perspective discloses an effort of "transvaluation" of art that aims to reframe the preordained set of values. Locke wants to utilize art to underline the value of African American artistic expression, which solidifies, in Locke's judgment, their human value (Hill 105). As Lewis Gordon interprets Locke's attempt to redefine values and his interest in community and culture from a phenomenological perspective, he states that, in Locke's projection, "[t]he human being must be understood through the community in which he or she lives, and that community is not locked in a permanent set of values but a living, dialectically evolving one" (*An Introduction* 93). This projection, as previously noted, is comparable to Sartre's existential prescription of ontology, which contends that people should actively construct meaning. As human beings cannot live in a meaningless and valueless world, for Locke then, it necessary for African Americans to recreate meaning, which corresponds to Sartrean notion of ontology. Since Locke's effort is related to the literary expression of African Americans, it can directly be correlated with Sartre's evaluation of literature's function in providing existence with meaning and value.

In his dissertation, *Literature as an Ethical Challenge: Alain Locke and the Responsibility of the Negro Artist*, Chielozona E. Eze connects Locke's ethical

demand about literature that it should validate the experience of its maker with Sartre's concept of literature that it is a catalyst for social transformation. Eze argues that Locke is concerned with the ways that literature is utilized as an artistic expression to enrich and develop life[12]. Thus, Locke believes in the moral responsibility of writers. Eze primarily identifies Locke as a pragmatist art theorist. However, he claims that the "view of art's actual power and potential benefit are characteristics shared by pragmatist and existentialist aesthetics" (45). According to Eze, "[t]his is where Alain Locke's and Jean-Paul Sartre's theories would cross roads. Art must influence values and attitudes and channel them toward the good or the flourishing of human life" (45). Therefore, regardless of motives or objectives, the artist possesses power and is responsible accordingly. Du Bois also thinks that art should be treated seriously because it holds the power to liberate African Americans from social constraints (Hutchinson 35). In his essay "Criteria of Negro Art," he asserts that "all art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy" ("Criteria" 66). Although Du Bois's radical stance is different compared to Locke, his idea of artistic production and its function is compatible with Locke's ethical concerns. Du Bois's contribution to the existential framework of the Harlem Renaissance comes not only from his ideas on art, as his effort to verbalize the lived experience of African Americans influence many scholars in the 20th century including Harlem Renaissance writers.

As Lewis Gordon analyzes Du Bois's perspective, he first claims that identity formation and liberation are two recurring themes that circulate among the intellectuals of the early 20th century. In these themes, as mentioned earlier, it is possible to find an ontological claim and an existential force. According to Gordon, Du Bois's works prominently feature these themes that exhibit an existential-phenomenological dimension (*Existentia* 65). Particularly in his essay "The Study of the Negro Problem,"

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[12] Eze's definition of enriching and developing life is based on Alasdair MacIntyre's notion that people are rational, interdependent entities. Within MacIntyre's formulation, from birth to death, people develop rational thinking and attitudes through encounters and relationships with others. In other words, rationality is a trait that forms and thrives within a social setting (Eze 8).

Du Bois tries to decenter human sciences' approach to Black people by offering certain solutions. While he refers to the "Negro problem" as he names it with the awareness that racism is the cause of this issue, rather than Black people, Du Bois asserts that it is "a plexus of social problems, some new, some old, some simple, some complex; and these problems have their one bond of unity in the act that they group themselves about those Africans whom two centuries of slave-trading brought into the land ("The Study" 3). Du Bois's social orientation already constitutes a theoretical development since phylogenic or ontogenic factors were commonly used in this period to engage in a study of a people[13] (Gordon, *Existentia* 70). This approach, in the U.S. discourse, was not familiar as Blacks were fixated as dehumanized agencies in an oxymoronic projection by white oppressors. As it proposes a reevaluation of political structure, Du Bois's vision also politicizes the Black problem on the basis of the question of freedom. This perspective, according to Gordon, reveals a nihilistic attitude among African Americans since they are not convinced that governmental institutions can address their problems. Consequently, this political nihilism, in Du Bois's words, "becomes, throughout the land, a cause and excuse for discontent, lawlessness, laziness and injustice" ("The Study" 8). Clarifying the perils of such reasoning, Du Bois insists on the struggle to define the terms and contexts in which Blacks' problems can be addressed properly.

Du Bois's concept of double consciousness, which is formulated as the "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," (*Souls* 8) is analyzed by Gordon with its familiar epistemological dimension first. African American, both as a Black and an American; "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body," (*Souls* 8) is not to be centered in any study of various disciplines since, in the majority of human studies, using white people as the norm is the predominant approach. The result is that white people become the measure for reality, and as a result,

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[13] The phylogenic perspective places special emphasis on variations within species. The ontogenic approach emphasizes on particular organisms and their capacities, but societal complexity is not adequately addressed by this focus. Between the phylogenic and ontogenic, the social world acts as a mediator and offers a realm of "agency, deliberation, and contingency" (Gordon, *Existentia* 70). Gordon argues that Du Bois has extended the discussion of Blackness in the United States to a new and uncharted ground by focusing on the social framework (*Existentia* 70).

understanding or studying exclusively white people is analogous to studying humanity. In practice, then, Gordon maintains that "whites become 'universal' and non-whites 'particular'" (*An Introduction* 79). This universal schema defies the factual position of Blacks as human beings. In return, Blacks defy this unreal perception of the universality of whites' position. As exemplified in Du Bois's claim that Blacks "can see America in a way that white Americans cannot ("Criteria" 61), African Americans have a preconditioned perspective which is phenomenological in its conscious effort to recreate and reconsider meaning and values. Reiterating this epistemology with phenomenological terms, Gordon states:

> That double consciousness is a form of consciousness already makes it rich with phenomenological significance. Phenomenology examines reality as constituted by consciousness, where consciousness is understood in its intentional or directed form as always having to be of something. The consciousnesses that manifest themselves in double consciousness are (1) consciousness of how mainstream society sees itself (dominant "reality") and (2) consciousness of its contradictions (subaltern reality). Since to see both is to see the dialectical relationship constitutive of truth, then the first by itself must manifest a form of consciousness that hides itself. (*An Introduction* 79)

As mentioned earlier, Gordon proposes a synthesis of phenomenological and existential approaches. By regarding consciousness as an embodied concept, he reshapes Husserlian phenomenology's reduction[14] with his concept of "ontological suspension," which means being "less concerned with what something is and more concerned with its thematization, its meaning" (*Existentia* 79). In the African American context, embodied consciousness is to be viewed with its relationality with other human beings. Gordon uses this formulation in discussions about race and racism and thus applies it to Du Bois's idea of double consciousness as well. Melvin Garry Hill also reframes Du Bois's perspective in an existential dimension as he asserts that since the Black body is in perpetual conflict with the consciousness, having an existential approach seems necessary if one intends to transcend (98). Hill compares Du Bois's perspective to Heidegger's concept of "thrownness" of existing in a specific time and place and its arbitrariness. For Hill, Du Bois's argument is "about the necessity for individuals to

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[14] The phenomenological reduction refers to Husserl's notion that the phenomenologist could "bracket out" worldly preconceptions in order to reach a pure, unobscured awareness (Aho 61).

commit to their arbitrary place in America if they are to create a meaningful and authentic self" (100).

As Du Bois and Alain Locke persistently propound the necessity of a self-claimed identity for African Americans, they establish the existential groundwork of the Harlem Renaissance. The existential dimension of Du Bois's and Locke's works accentuates the urgency of the ontological question of existence while indicating their quest for an authentic self against the definitions of white supremacy (Hill 108). As a result of Du Bois's and Locke's personal philosophical explorations, African American writers of the period engage in questions related to African American identity. These questions enable them to apply and critically interact with multiple ways of existence. The authors associated with the Harlem Renaissance, and even later periods, based their novels particularly on an existential approach in which their protagonists acknowledge their independence, alienation, hopelessness, and suffering as well as their obligation to construct an identity (Hill 109).

African Americans grew racially aware and affirmed their existence as soon as the transition in leadership began shortly after the turn of the century, from Booker T. Washington's accommodationist strategy to Du Bois's radical politics. In response to white racial hegemony and prejudice, African Americans were urged by Washington's perspective to be "patient and law-abiding" rather than to demand urgent social equality and political representation. Washington's philosophy did not call for reparations for slavery and segregation and was instead centered on a conservative understanding of economic and vocational development for Black people (Rabaka 2). His accommodationism minimized democratic processes and civil rights while emphasizing vocational education, capitalism, and cooperation with whites (Rabaka 1). On the other hand, in all the cultural and ideological realms, Du Bois was a committed supporter of rapid and total equality. He thought that higher education and active engagement in politics were the ideal methods for achieving this goal. In his essay, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," Langston Hughes also reconsidered the position and duty of African American artists in a system characterized by racial segregation and injustice. Liberated from the anxiety or embarrassment of their racial identity, the African

American artists of the period aimed to express themselves through their artwork. These artists created their works with the hope of enhancing their own existence, regardless of how either the white or African American audiences perceived them. They believed in themselves and their beauty. They desired independence and unrestrained artistic production ("The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" 59). Focusing heavily on the value of artistic expression in the fight for racial equality and the recovery of African Americans' identity, Hughes is in agreement with Du Bois's approach.

Similarly, Locke's interpretation of the artistic expression of Black people is reframed and reconsidered in African American writers' works throughout the Harlem Renaissance. Wallace Thurman satirizes the idea of the "New Negro" as he believes that the creation of art is a highly individual and independent mission that could not be influenced in any way by nationalism, and that theorization rarely generates genuine artistic expressions (Huggins 240-41). George Schuyler, in a similar fashion, reflects on both Locke's and Du Bois's prescription and rejects the idea that when the Black subject "attempts to portray life through the medium of art, it must of necessity be a peculiar art" ("Negro-Art Hokum" 54). African Americans, according to Schuyler, were fixated by this particularization process as fundamentally different, thus inferior ("Negro-Art" 54). Nella Larsen, who was praised by Du Bois with her novel *Quicksand* (1928), offers another perspective on the lived experience of Black people with the issues of mixed race and sexism in addition to antiblack racism. As it has been illustrated by these writers, African American thought is not homogeneous during the Harlem Renaissance. Concerning what the African American subject is, there has been and still is a remarkable diversity of perspectives (Mitchell 4). As a result, the existential dimension of the period also presented a variety of viewpoints on how African American subjectivity was to be shaped.

As Hutchinson explains, there was never a coherent Harlem Renaissance literary movement. Instead, it was the result of ever-evolving communities, in agreement or disagreement with each other at various points in time, parallel advances, and debated perspectives, all of which were mobilized "by a desire for racial self-definition and self-assertion in the face of white supremacy" (Hutchinson 1). Accordingly, each of the

authors studied in this thesis presents various conditions of existential struggles in their novels. Hughes's work is exceptionally rich in offering a wide range of nuances and subject positions in search of a meaningful and coherent sense of existence, whereas Larsen and Thurman display how Blackness is prescribed to a certain set of existential angst in relation to the particular circumstances and conditions repositioning their status. Schuyler depicts a different source of existential condition since he believes that providing African Americans with a preconceived identity as formulated by Du Bois or Locke hinders their ability to live authentically. In subsequent chapters, a close reading of these writers' novels will demonstrate the variety of their existentialist themes and attitudes.

In Chapter 1, Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928) will be analyzed in which Helga Crane, the protagonist of the novel, initiates an existential quest that problematizes her Blackness, gender and mixed race identity. Within the chapter, Helga's despair will be explained first with R. D. Laing's concept of "ontological insecurity" later to be associated with Victor Anderson's concept of "ontological blackness" and the ways in which Black people could transcend it. Helga's mixed race identity will be scrutinized by projecting an affiliation between Naomi Zack's prescription to reach a raceless subjectivity and Helga Crane's efforts to exceed her racial identity with the insistence of her heterogeneous background. The discussion will be grounded in Helga Crane's existential crisis and lack of fulfillment in life as her attempts to establish an existential authenticity over her choices do not result in a rejuvenated sense of identity. Lewis Gordon's interpretation of both Anderson's and Zack's position will be applied to further discuss the extent of Helga's existential search for authenticity.

Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker The Berry* (1929) will be examined in Chapter 2. The novel focuses on the inner struggles of a dark-skinned African American woman with the themes of self-hatred and the protagonist Emma Lou's obsession with skin color. Throughout the chapter, Emma Lou's phenomenological experience of self-hatred will be analyzed through Lewis Gordon's concept of "black antiblackness," in which the subject tries to negate its own Blackness, thus its perspective. George Yancy's reflections on Black subjectivity dependent on white definitions will also be applied to

Emma Lou's experience. Following Gordon's application of the Sartrean term "bad faith" to the Black perspective as well as that of the antiblack racist's, Sartre's prescription for the Jewish identity will also be discussed to locate the links between the concept of the "inauthentic Jew" and Emma Lou's resolution towards an authentic existence. Finally, Emma Lou's struggle will be associated with the concept of the absurd as in Albert Camus's Sisyphean acceptance of the situated reality within the context of its implications in a racist society.

Chapter 3 will explore Langston Hughes's search for an African American identity in *Not Without Laughter* (1930). Predominantly based on his own experience, Hughes's novel envisions a variety of existential possibilities for Sandy Rogers, an African American boy living with several family members in Kansas. While experiencing discrimination, Sandy tries to figure out his position in life. As different life choices are depicted with Sandy's aunts, and his mother and grandmother, Sandy tries to create a sense of a meaningful life out of what he witnesses. Although all of the characters in the novel share a notion of self-determination towards a meaningful life, they follow separate paths to realize their authentic selves. Through an examination of various characters in the novel, the concept of "strong black nihilism" proposed by Devon R. Johnson will be explored in connection with religious sentiments and responses to nihilism in the African American context. Hughes's use of the blues and jazz as inherent expressions of African American identity will also be discussed relating it to an existential attitude.

Chapter 4 will analyze George Schuyler's *Black No More* (1931), in which he addresses America's obsession with race by exposing both sides of the issue. The narrative focuses on the life of Max Disher, in which Schuyler depicts the prioritization of racialized identities to such an extent that racial markers cease to signify neither Blackness nor whiteness. Max Disher undergoes a scientific procedure to become white through a machine invented by Dr. Crookman; however, Schuyler argues that this transformation does not lead to a better life for Max. Max Disher's realization prompts him to search for new sources of purpose in life. Schuyler also highlights the existential deprivation of white individuals after Crookman's invention. The chapter will link

Schuyler's work with Frantz Fanon's arguments in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Schuyler's hypothesis of eradicating "Blackness" from the United States will later be contextualized with Calvin L. Warren's concept of "ontological terror" and "metaphysical nothingness" to expound on Schuyler's criticism of white identity construction.

CHAPTER 1
SEEKING RACELESS SUBJECTIVITY: EXISTENTIAL CRISIS IN NELLA LARSEN'S *QUICKSAND* (1928)

Known for her novels and short stories about the lives of African American women especially, Nella Larsen (1891-1964) was a figure who could easily be described as an "outsider" herself. Her career as an active writer did not last long as she started her nursing career which continued until her death in 1964. In his extensive biography of Nella Larsen, George Hutchinson describes her as a writer who had "little interest in leaving a legacy" as she neither wrote a series of important novels nor led a movement (*In Search of Nella Larsen* 1). Leaving literature behind, she started working as a nursing supervisor in lower Manhattan after relocating to a new apartment that was difficult for her friends to locate (Hutchinson, *In Search* 1). Thus, she voluntarily distanced herself from the potential literary fame she could have achieved had she desired it. As Hutchinson claims, "she seems almost to have preferred to be forgotten" (*In Search* 10). In his *Invisible Darkness*, which explores the lives of both Nella Larsen and Jean Toomer, Charles R. Larson reports that when Larsen's body was found in her apartment in 1964, she had been deceased for a week (xiv). Despite being widely considered one of the most successful African American novelists of her time, Larsen was largely overlooked in historical accounts of the Harlem Renaissance and not much was known about her until the 1990s (Hutchinson, *In Search* 2).

According to Guy Reynolds, Larsen's works, particularly *Quicksand* (1928), "prefigured the African-American existentialist novel which is often thought of as coming-into-being with Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952)" (90). Larsen's protagonist from *Quicksand*, Helga Crane, struggles with the tension between her authentic aspirations and constructions forced upon her by society. She struggles to reconcile her own desires with the outward constraints and limitations created by cultural structures and racialized discourses, leading to her inner conflict and anxiety. As Melvin Gary Hill explains, Helga is restricted within a strict framework that casts her as "Other" and places her in an unalterable position of "Outsider" (26). She consequently suffers from a constant feeling of "despair, anxiety, and disappointment"

(Hill 26). Helga makes several choices and inhabits different locations in an effort to establish her identity and sense of self (Hill 26). As Hill notes, the social circles and places that are presented to Helga are "unable to support her in a Sartrean sense of becoming" (26). This chapter offers an analysis of Helga Crane's journey toward self-discovery and the formation of her identity with an emphasis on existential motives inherent in African American subjectivity. Helga Crane's quest is shaped both by her racial heritage, particularly her mixed race background, and her gender. Her search for an authentic mode of existence leads Helga Crane into an existential crisis. To fully grasp the narrative of Helga Crane, it is essential to briefly acknowledge Nella Larsen's own background, as the novel parallels her own life.

Nella Larsen's mother was a Danish immigrant to the United States who married a man from the Danish West Indies. When her father died, her mother married a white Danish immigrant and had another daughter. Larsen had a strained relationship with her stepfather and half-sister and was not welcomed by them (Hutchinson, *In Search* 2). She spent some time in Denmark as a child and later studied nursing in New York City. She worked as a nursing supervisor at Tuskegee University in Alabama before returning to New York, where she was a public health nurse and became a librarian at the New York Public Library. She eventually entered the literary field during the Harlem Renaissance, but had lost contact with her family due to difficulties in their relationship (Hutchinson, *In Search* 2-3). The events of Larsen's personal life are significant in understanding her novel *Quicksand*, as it is largely based on her own experiences. While it is not the primary aim to analyze the text solely with reference to the author's life, it is important to consider the connection between her personal experiences and the existential themes in the novel. Larsen's own background and perspective is evident in her writing, and can be seen as an integral part of the novel's exploration of existential questions.

In *Quicksand*, the protagonist, Helga Crane, grapples with her mixed race identity and the difficulties of finding a sense of belonging in society. Throughout the novel, Helga constantly seeks to understand her place in the world and respond to the challenges she faces. Helga is initially portrayed as a teacher at the segregated Naxos school in the Southern region. Her Danish mother and West Indian father highlight her multifaceted

ancestry and underline the complexity of her mixed race upbringing. Helga Crane's expression of disinterest and desire to leave the school suggest that she is dissatisfied with the school's educational system. Her relationship with the school's principal, Dr. Anderson, is fraught with complexity, as she experiences both attraction towards him and irritation at his comments when he attempts to persuade her to remain at the institution. It is during this exchange that Helga reaches a firm determination to leave school, as Dr. Anderson brings up her familial background and womanhood, suggesting that it is her obligation to remain in her current position. Helga Crane leaves for Chicago after ending her engagement to James Vayle, a colleague of hers. Her initial stop in the city is at her Uncle Peter's house with the expectation of obtaining financial stability. Her visit, however, presents an unpleasant result when she learns that Uncle Peter is married and his wife tends to be hostile to her. Uncle Peter's wife, Mrs. Nilssen, indicates that Helga is not their legitimate relative and justifies her claim with the lack of a legal marriage between her mother and father. Helga decides to leave and seek alternative opportunities since she is outraged by the treatment she receives. Securing employment becomes difficult for her because she does not have prior work experience other than her teaching career.

Helga is advised to work under Mrs. Hayes-Rore, a political activist and public speaker who addresses racial issues, when she visits a job agency. Hayes-Rore brings Helga alongside her on a trip to Harlem. She meets Hayes-Rore's friend Anne Grey in Harlem, and she offers her a job at an insurance company. Helga appreciates Anne Grey's support and is content in Harlem, embracing her new job. She enjoys Harlem's vibrant atmosphere, marked by parties and a thriving social environment. But as time passes, Helga grows resentful of her surroundings and aggravated by Anne Grey's pretended interest in the struggle for social justice within the Black population. She views Grey's attitude as a simple mimicry of white people, which only serves to deepen her hatred for them. Helga receives a letter from her Uncle Peter regretting their lack of communication. Uncle Peter sends her some money alongside the letter and advises her to visit her aunt in Copenhagen, Denmark. Helga decides to travel to Denmark as she begins to feel increasingly alienated in Harlem. In Denmark, she initially feels satisfied as she spends time with her relatives and an artist by the name of Herr Olsen. She also

feels, nonetheless, that she is objectified by the look of the people in the city. Helga is told by Herr Olsen that he will be painting her portrait. Her sense of being objectified through her body and viewed as an exotic entity in Denmark is exacerbated by Olsen's portrait. After some time, Herr Olsen proposes to Helga, but she declines his proposal, explaining that she cannot marry a white man since she disapproves of interracial marriages. She later feels that she needs to go back to the United States to identify with Black people because she feels engulfed in her Black identity.

Helga stays temporarily in a hotel in Harlem upon returning to the United States. She learns that Dr. Anderson is now married to Anne Grey, which compounds her despair. At a party she attends in Harlem, Helga unexpectedly encounters Dr. Anderson, and he kisses her passionately. Despite Helga's initial excitement, Dr. Anderson later reminds her of his marital status and ignores their interaction. Helga slaps Dr. Anderson in response, feeling infuriated and let down. She seeks some relief on a rainy night after becoming disheartened by her existence in Harlem once more and enters a building where a religious ritual is being held. She is recognized by Reverend Green, a pastor, and is accompanied home by him, which eventually results in their marriage. Her interest in religion is fostered by Helga's relationship with Reverend Green, and the two of them eventually move to a small Alabama town. Helga seems satisfied with her life with Reverend Green, and they have four children together. Helga's despair, however, returns as she becomes pregnant with their fifth child, and she struggles to construct a strong sense of identification with her current situation. She also expresses her developing skepticism toward religion, which makes her lose her final resolution and connection to religious sentiment. Despite her efforts to create a sense of identity and belonging, Helga is unable to fully achieve this due to her mixed race background and the difficulties it brings. She struggles with feelings of despair, anxiety, and guilt, as her "situated Blackness" follows her wherever she goes. The novel raises questions about the significance of race and gender in shaping identity and the ways in which societal expectations can impact an individual's sense of self and existence. Through Helga's unique experiences, the novel highlights the intersecting nature of identity issues and the challenges that individuals with mixed race identities may face in trying to establish their own existential authority and find a sense of belonging.

Larsen's protagonist is generally studied as a "tragic mulatto"[15] figure which was a popular stereotype in the 1920s. Yet, unlike other depictions of the time period, Helga Crane has distinctive features. These distinctive features also position Larsen's work within a narrative style that diverges from the traditional theme of "passing." In the works of African American authors including James Weldon Johnson, Jessie Fauset, Walter White and Jean Toomer, the theme of "passing" is present. Larsen's account of passing is consistent with that of earlier authors, especially in her novel *Passing* (1929), emphasizing how people are forced to take catastrophic actions as a result of systematic racism in America and the need to survive economically. However, Larsen sets herself apart by demonstrating her exceptional abilities as a novelist and her in-depth investigation of psychological complexities (Larson 81). Analyzing *Quicksand* by referring to its relationship with modernity and modernism, Charles Scruggs claims that "Larsen complicates her mulatta, Helga Crane, by giving her psychological and social depth and by making her condition modern: she is alone in a world she never made" (156). Helga struggles to fit in a world that she did not design and that does not understand or accept her. Her experiences throughout the book can be seen as being applicable to modern society. As it deftly and realistically examines issues of race, gender, and identity, this portrait of Helga gives the book depth and complexity. What Scruggs first notes in relation to the condition of this particular portrait is Larsen's depiction of Helga's situation when she mentions "the quagmire in which she had engulfed herself" (429) referring to her anger. Then, he compares Larsen's use of language with psychiatrist R. D. Laing's concept of "ontological insecurity" as a manifestation of the human condition in the modern world (157).

Laing's concept of ontological insecurity is significant since it is related to the condition that can be observed in the African American context with constructions of identities. Ontological insecurity, according to Laing, refers to an individual's uncertainty about

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[15] The figure of the tragic mulatto, often possessing a complexion light enough to potentially pass as white, holds a prominent role in many early novels within African American literature. Notable examples include Frank J. Webb's *The Garries and Their Friends* (1857), Frances E. Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1893), and Charles W. Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900) (Larson 80-81).

their own autonomous identity and the fear of losing it in relationships with others. This fear can manifest as a dread of relatedness and a desire for isolation in order to preserve one's identity. Laing suggests that a sense of autonomy is necessary for healthy relationships and that the risk of losing one's identity through "engulfment" in another person can be a barrier to such relationships. In addition to leading to a desire for isolation, rather than the balance between separation and relatedness based on individual autonomy, the fear of engulfment can be linked to a lack of self-confidence and can result in an urge to escape oneself through being absorbed by another person. However, Laing also suggests that this fear can shift and become a desire for merging with another person (44). Later, when he describes the dread of engulfment, Laing identifies it as the threat of "being buried, being drowned, being caught and dragged down into quicksand" (45) with alternative terms. In addition to the overlapping vocabulary to describe this predicament as being engulfed in a "quicksand," Helga's psychological instability and Laing's concept of ontological insecurity can be closely associated. According to Scruggs, Larsen effectively ties together the protagonist Helga's internal psychological struggles with the external social setting in which she exists. Specifically, she connects Helga's fear of "engulfment" to the constantly changing and often uncertain social environment in which she finds herself (157).

Ontological insecurity is related to Helga's concerns about her encounters as well as her environment as Scruggs mentions. In this sense, African American subject's ontological insecurity is related to the questions regarding "ontological blackness" as insecurities described in Larsen's formulation are first circumscribed with race conflicts and their denominators. Helga is portrayed as inescapably trapped in her Blackness. Her existential challenges are triggered by her experiences functioning inside a social system that is characterized by racial essentialism. Victor Anderson describes ontological blackness as "a covering term that connotes categorical, essentialist, and representational languages depicting Black life and experience" (11). According to Anderson, ontological blackness creates the racial consciousness of African Americans and the ways in which it is shaped by dialectical matrices, or opposing forces, that structure their self-perception. These dialectical matrices include binary oppositions such as "slavery and freedom, negro and citizen, insider and outsider, black and white,

and struggle and survival" (14). Under this philosophy, the lives of African Americans are constrained by these unresolved polarities, with no possibility of transcending or mediating between them. Anderson also notes that these binary polarities do not cancel each other out, but rather coexist and shape the consciousness and experiences of African Americans (14). Anderson opposes such ontologizing principles as they result in subject constructions that deny an authentic effort of the individual. The imposition of essentialized concepts regarding Helga's Blackness in the United States interferes with her existential journey toward answering fundamental questions about her selfhood, identity, and the search for a meaningful life. These notions, which reduce Helga's racial identity to fixed and predetermined characteristics, contribute significantly to her heightened state of ontological insecurity.

In Anderson's formulation, ontological blackness should be rejected because it confines African Americans to a story of essentialized suffering and places them in a permanently antagonistic relationship with white people (Gordon, *Existentia* 146). Anderson's focus is not only cultural, but also religious. As he associates ontological blackness with religion, he calls for a "black theology project" that would alter narrations of both culture and religion without boundaries of the accepted norms of religion "whose mode of existence is determined by crisis, struggle, resistance, and survival—not thriving, flourishing, or fulfillment" (87). To challenge this condition, Anderson suggests a postmodern cultural studies approach. While employing this approach, Anderson goes beyond existential hermeneutics as he attempts to replace theological perspectives of previous philosophers. According to Lewis Gordon, however, Anderson's position does not preclude other versions of existentialism.

Anderson's argument against ontological blackness is ultimately based on an existential principle, drawing on the idea that the human being does not have an essence and that any attempt to ascribe an essential feature to human existence that precedes the lived reality lead to identity crisis. This position, Gordon claims, aligns with Jean-Paul Sartre's well-known assertion that "existence precedes essence." Therefore, Anderson's argument against ontological blackness relies on an appeal to existentialism (*Existentia* 151). The term "ontological blackness" in the context of the 1920s extends to the strong

influence of racial identification and the resulting lived experiences of being black in America. It includes the social and historical influences on African Americans' sense of self and consciousness during that particular time period. In *Quicksand*, Helga Crane, endeavoring to create a meaningful sense of identification with her condition, presents a similar type of rejection of ontological blackness. As Gordon suggests while analyzing Anderson's rejection, it is possible to relate her attempt to an existentialist effort that necessitates an individual action.

Throughout the novel, Helga Crane seems to be navigating different options and life choices as she travels. These travels present her opportunities to follow a path that could be described as an intended way of life; however, she always chooses to leave and try a different alternative. She has the chance to find a sense of identity and recognition by conforming to a social role available to her in Naxos, Copenhagen, Harlem, or the rural South. However, she ultimately chooses to abandon these possibilities and falls into an existential crisis (Hutchinson, *In Search* 224-25). Larsen begins the novel by describing Helga, sitting alone in her room at an all-black school in the South where she works as a teacher. The school is based on the vocational Tuskegee Institute, and Helga is first seen as part of the school which she leaves early in the novel showing her distaste with the idea behind the institution. The institute is established on Booker T. Washington's idea of "accommodationism," which is the belief that African Americans should accept and accommodate segregation to secure economic stability (Rabaka 1). While Helga positions her role in the school in Naxos, she describes herself only as "an insignificant part" of the school (Larsen 301). She does not affiliate her identity with the community in the school, which is a reminder of racial consciousness.

Later, as Larsen presents how Helga contemplates on her decision to work in Naxos, she states, "The South. Naxos. Negro education. Suddenly she [Helga] hated them all. Strange, too, for this was the thing which she had ardently desired to share in, to be a part of this monument to one man's genius and vision" (303). Helga's rejection of the school's mindset is a deliberate refusal of subject positions available to her. The following depiction explicitly demonstrates how Helga conceptualizes her surroundings:

> This great community, she thought, was no longer a school. It had grown into a machine. It was now a showplace in the black belt, exemplification of the white man's magnanimity, refutation of the black man's inefficiency. Life had died out of it. It was, Helga decided, now only a big knife with cruelly sharp edges ruthlessly cutting all to a pattern, the white man's pattern. Teachers as well as students were subjected to the paring process, for it tolerated no innovations, no individualisms. Ideas it rejected, and looked with open hostility on one and all who had the temerity to offer a suggestion or ever so mildly express a disapproval. Enthusiasm, spontaneity, if not actually suppressed, were at least openly regretted as unladylike or ungentle-manly qualities. The place was smug and fat with self-satisfaction. (Larsen 304)

Helga's observations exhibit a strong sense of detachment and disappointment from both the school system and the larger society. The portrayal of the community as a mechanized entity emphasizes the dehumanizing effects of a system that places a higher value on conformity and homogeneity than on authenticity and personal growth. The community's mechanistic structure denotes a decline in real interpersonal relationships. It implies that life, in the sense of authentic existence, has come to an end and points to a slavish devotion to social norms. Helga perceives her surrounding as a representation of white supremacy, maintaining racial hierarchies and sustaining black people's marginalization. The machine-like community's obedience to the "white man's pattern" represents an encroachment of external values on individuals, which stifles their individuality and restricts their freedom.

Helga's discontent is not limited to the school as it is later observed in the novel that she, as in Anderson's formulation of rejecting ontological blackness, defies the traditional sense of identification with race and does not construct an identity that is preordained for her. She rejects the essence by emphasizing her conscious effort to self-making. In Helga's conversations with Mrs. Hayes-Rore, who hires Helga as her secretary, it can be seen that Helga opposes prioritization of race as a condition for African Americans. As she edits Mrs. Hayes-Rore's speeches, Helga thinks that they are largely unoriginal and repetitive of some famous African American intellectuals:

> Ideas, phrases, and even whole sentences and paragraphs were lifted bodily from previous orations and published works of Wendell Phillips, Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and other doctors of the race's ills. For variety Mrs. Hayes-Rore had seasoned hers with a peppery dash of Du Bois and a few vinegary

statements of her own. Aside from these it was, Helga reflected, the same old thing. (Larsen 336)

Helga draws attention to the challenge of discovering authentic individual expression inside a fixed social narrative with her critical tone. Hayes-Rore's attitude indicates an urge to adopt conventional opinions and a reliance on the thoughts of prominent African American figures rather than developing a unique point of view. Such homogeneity echoes existentialist concerns about the threats of conformity and how challenging it is to maintain authenticity in the face of pre-existing narratives. Helga also describes Mrs. Hayes-Rore as a "race woman" alongside some other African Americans that she meets in Harlem such as Anne Grey who is another active supporter of Black rights.

For Helga, these "race woman" figures portray the same type of racial prejudices against white people and they have their own inconsistencies. Attending their discussions, Helga even questions the reasons why race consciousness is always at the center of their discussions as she asks: "[D]idn't they find something else to talk of? Why must the race problem always creep in?" (Larsen 350). According to Hutchinson, Helga's criticism towards people who uphold Black rights may be related to her own outsider position as a "despised mulatto." Her perspective on race as an institution, however, is not color blindness. It is rather an emphasis on human differences that are frequently exaggerated or misrepresented by narrow-minded ideas on race. This idea both derives from a deeper comprehension of variety that is frequently overlooked in superficial notions of race (Hutchinson, *In Search* 241). Although it is apparent that Larsen does not portray a character critical of race itself, if there is such a concept, or Black people within the novel's context, her protest cannot be reduced to an appreciation of differences as Hutchinson suggests. It can be seen as a response to the conceptualization of race as an abstract category and a fixed identity.

Larsen's following description of Helga as she ruminates on her interaction with others during their discussions shows that her approach to the issue of race consciousness is similar to Victor Anderson's refusal of ontological blackness as an entity to govern identities of African Americans: "[S]uddenly these things irked her with a great

irksomeness and she wanted to be free of this constant prattling of the incongruities, the injustices, the stupidities, the viciousness of white people. It stirred memories, probed hidden wounds, whose poignant ache bred in her surprising oppression and corroded the fabric of her quietism" (347). Helga's objection to the constant reproduction of the same narrative as part of Black lives reifies an existential desire for transcendence from fixed identities. While Anderson relates his argument of going beyond ontological blackness to Black culture and theology, he states that since "black life is fundamentally determined by black suffering and resistance to whiteness (the power of nonbeing), black existence is without the possibility of transcendence from the blackness that whiteness created" (92). Because Blackness is essentially tied to the notion of enduring suffering and overcoming struggle, being Black is still bound by whiteness in terms of its existence and has not reached its full potential politically. Helga's incongruent sense of identity seems to be shaped by her social interactions as well as her historical position as a byproduct of highly conscious prescriptions of African American intellectual thought.

As it was previously mentioned, it is possible to link this perspective with a Sartrean notion of existence with Lewis Gordon's analysis of Anderson's sense of ontological blackness. Existential thought asserts that the process of "existence" entails deliberately creating and sculpting one's own identity rather than having it decided by one's natural traits or cultural background. The idea of existence and the idea of essence are intertwined in classical philosophy, with the former denoting the manifestation of the latter. A thing's essence can be utilized to identify its nature, and this comprehension can be used to recommend a way of living and establish the worth and significance of existence. Larsen's denial of any presupposed identities is in itself an existential project to recreate an authentic identity that goes beyond the historical or cultural roles of a time period. As the discussion about existence and essence relationship naturally leads to the concept of authenticity and its achievability as part of life, it is possible to analyze Helga's endeavor as a process towards authenticity, too.

Kevin Aho asserts that the concept of authenticity is central to existentialist philosophers as it is exemplified "in many different ways, in terms of being a 'knight of

faith' (Kierkegaard), for example, an 'overman' (Nietzsche), a 'rebel' (Camus), or an 'authentic individual' (Heidegger)" (15). Instead of constructing an identity and discovering meaning in life on their own, people commonly adhere to societal roles and identities. By adopting an authentic way of life, existentialists seek to overcome the inherent absurdity and temporality of life in order to find meaning and fulfillment in it (Aho 15). Being authentic is making conscious decisions about one's behavior and mode of being in the world, as opposed to merely playing one's part in socially designated roles. Inauthenticity, on the other hand, can be defined by a lack of commitment and a lack of independence in one's decision-making (Cromwell). In this sense, Helga Crane's effort to deny the preordained roles in her surroundings is an existential voyage of her own. However, her unresolved decisions and constant search of a new alternative to generate an authentic identity present an incomplete portrait of a character without any fulfillment. Her actions result in despair and anguish lacking a sense of existential freedom which would be constructed on the basis of authenticity.

After her decision to leave Naxos, Helga goes to Harlem where she meets Anne Grey and expresses her discontent with her. With her uncle's suggestion, she travels to Denmark to her aunt in Copenhagen feeling disillusioned with Black people in Harlem. Helga's family embraces her when she arrives in Denmark and treats her like a unique, exotic individual. She meets the artist Herr Olsen and thinks about marrying him. Yet, she ultimately decides against marriage to a person of a different race and goes back to America. Lastly, Helga marries Reverend Green and has four children with him. She finds her life as a preacher's wife to be unsatisfying and depressing after realizing that her religious commitment is also an inauthentic way of life. Larsen's depiction of Helga's sense of dissatisfaction with life shows that Helga herself is unable to identify the root of her despair and the means by which she can overcome it:

> But just what did she want? Barring a desire for material security, gracious ways of living, a profusion of lovely clothes, and a goodly share of envious admiration, Helga Crane didn't know, couldn't tell. But there was, she knew, something else. Happiness, she supposed. Whatever that might be. What, exactly, she wondered, was happiness? Very positively she wanted it. Yet her conception of it had no tangibility. She couldn't define it, isolate it, and contemplate it as she could some other abstract things. Hatred, for instance. Or kindness. (310)

Helga's initial list of aspirations, encompassing financial security, social status, attractive clothing, and admiration, reveals her desire for recognition from others. She does, however, sense a more profound yearning—a vague, elusive deprivation. Helga's reflection expresses existentialist ideals pertaining to the human yearning for fulfillment and meaning, which transcends superficial pleasures. She also highlights her uncertainties about the true nature of happiness. She reflects on her inability to define or truly grasp it, despite her awareness of her longing for it. Throughout the novel, Larsen portrays Helga as someone in search of meaning in life; yet, always failing to find a stable sense of identity and trying another alternative. Aside from her experience in Naxos, which began during a late stage of her teaching career, Helga seems to be approaching her different life decisions with a positive attitude at first. When she goes to Harlem, she appears to be enjoying her life there. She finds friends, with whom she sympathizes easily for a time period, and a job at an insurance company. She even feels a "magic sense of having come home" (Larsen 341). Helga's contentment in Harlem is spatially marked as she feels deeply attached to the people living there: "Her existence was bounded by Central Park, Fifth Avenue, St. Nicholas Park, and 145th Street. . . . Everything was there, vice and goodness, sadness and gaiety, ignorance and wisdom, ugliness and beauty, poverty and richness in Harlem" (343-44). This fulfillment developed from "a sense of freedom" and release from the experiences of inferiority and exclusion that Helga had in the past (Larsen 344). However, Helga cannot maintain her contentment, and she begins to detach herself from her surroundings again with a sense of isolation and anguish:

> Little by little the signs of spring appeared, but strangely the enchantment of the season, so enthusiastically, so lavishly greeted by the gay dwellers of Harlem, filled her only with restlessness. Somewhere, within her, in a deep recess, crouched discontent. She began to lose confidence in the fullness of her life, the glow began to fade from her conception of it. As the days multiplied, her need of something, something vaguely familiar, but which she could not put a name to and hold for definite examination, became almost intolerable. She went through moments of overwhelming anguish. She felt shut in, trapped. (Larsen 345)

Helga's inability to fully experience the spring's appeal reflects her sense of alienation from her surroundings. Her sense of alienation is in line with the existentialist notion that people may occasionally feel estranged from their surroundings believing that they do not relate to it. The fact that Helga harbors "discontent" in a "deep recess" suggests

that she still suffers from a feeling of despair and has a strong desire for something that she cannot define. She experiences an existential crisis where her prior beliefs and experiences no longer provide her with a sense of purpose. This is shown by her restlessness and sinking confidence in the fulfillment of her life. Helga's anguish and sense of imprisonment highlight her captivity within her own existence. Her efforts to belong to a sense of identity with which she feels an authentic affiliation result in failure in Harlem. Thus, she decides to go to Denmark and try a new path in a different country.

While she travels to Copenhagen, Helga's hopeful projection of her future is shown again as Larsen reflects that Helga is accompanied by "her returned feeling of happiness and freedom, that blessed sense of belonging to herself alone and not to a race" (361). After two years of experience in Denmark, she begins to feel discontent again deciding to go back to the United States. Her frustration with life in Denmark results from people's implicit objectification of her body. She is seen through her body as an exotic being to look at, thus amplifying her hypervisibility while minimizing her agency. After a time period, she feels that she has become the spectacle of other people when she walks the streets in Copenhagen: "Her dark, alien appearance was to most people an astonishment. Some stared surreptitiously, some openly, and some stopped dead in front of her" (Larsen 370). Symbolically, this feeling was also part of her rejection of Axel Olsen's marriage proposal. As Olsen makes a portrait of Helga, her body is again objectified by an idealization of another gaze. Helga rejects the marriage and what the portrait offers claiming that it is not "herself at all, but some disgusting sensual creature with her features" (Larsen 386). Failing to find what she seeks for again, Helga returns to New York feeling that she has to go back to "her people." Helga understands that her ties to the Black community are not merely superficial; rather, they are an essential element of who she is and cannot be altered or separated from. She realizes that there is a strong and spiritual bond between her identity and Black people, in contrast to her earlier belief that she could find freedom and happiness in a different nation or among other people (Larsen 392). It is not certain, however, whether Helga authentically chooses to affiliate herself with Black people or not since her thoughts do not lead her to a secure sense of existence in New York after her emotional breakdowns in relation

to Dr. Anderson, the head of Naxos, to whom she feels attracted in later stages of the novel.

Helga's final resolution to her existential crisis leads her to religion with her marriage to Reverend Pleasant Green. This last option also fails to provide Helga with a safe identity. Similar to her other experiences, Helga initially feels that she has found what she seeks: "There was a recurrence of the feeling that now, at last, she had found a place for herself, that she was really living" (414). She is relieved to assign responsibility to a higher power because she assumes that God will support her through all of the difficulties and tribulations she will face in life, including the delivery of her first child. She completely abandons her previous Sartrean existential position; she is in bad faith in her resolution with her inauthentic position "that involves a flight from freedom and responsibility" (Gordon, *Existentia* 91). Nevertheless, Larsen does not allow Helga to remain too long within the confines of this seemingly secure situation. After years of living with Reverend Green, particularly with the final scene in the novel when Helga finds herself pregnant with her fifth child, she is convinced that God does not exist:

> The white man's God. And His great love for all people regardless of race! What idiotic nonsense she had allowed herself to believe. How could she, how could anyone, have been so deluded? How could ten million black folk credit it when daily before their eyes was enacted its contradiction? Not that she at all cared about the ten million. But herself. Her sons. Her daughter. These would grow to manhood, to womanhood, in this vicious, this hypocritical land. The dark eyes filled with tears. (426)

Echoing William R. Jones's *Is God a White Racist?*, Helga resolves that God in an antiblack world is a contradiction in itself. Jones defines Helga's atheistic turn near the ending of the novel as an answer to his charged question, "Is God a white racist?": "the conviction that black suffering confirms God's nonexistence" and "black suffering implies that God is a white racist" (38). While Helga mentions one of her neighbors in Alabama, Sary Jones, who always tells her that for their suffering they will be rewarded in heaven, Jones's conclusion becomes more evident:

> And this, Helga decided, was what ailed the whole Negro race in America, this fatuous belief in the white man's God, this childlike trust in full compensation for all woes and privations in "kingdom come." Sary Jones's absolute conviction, "In de nex' worl' we's all recompense'," came back to her. And ten million souls were

> as sure of it as was Sary. How the white man's God must laugh at the great joke he
> had played on them! Bound them to slavery, then to poverty and insult, and made
> them bear it unresistingly, uncomplainingly almost, by sweet promises of mansions
> in the sky by and by. (429)

Jones asserts that Larsen's portrayal presents the mistrust of God's role as a result of black people's continued oppression and the ridiculing of efforts to explain and rationalize black people's current suffering in light of the prospect of future relief. He further explains that "[t]he concept of God as the sum of His acts is also presupposed here in so far as it is argued that blacks have reached conclusions about God that clearly contradict their own existential situation" (39). Nevertheless, Helga's new atheistic position appears to be a late resolution since Larsen ends the novel with no prospect of recovery for Helga. As Reynolds notes, the novel "concludes grimly; the heroine hates her husband, dreams of other places and faces the grinding repetition of endless childbirths" (102). Consequently, Helga is unable to create a genuine sense of self and identity since she becomes entangled in an ever-present cycle of inauthenticity. Larsen chooses not to offer a conclusion to Helga's quest, in which she achieves a sense of ontological security. A number of scholars have attempted to explain the causes that prevented Helga from establishing a fulfilling and secure identity.

In her article titled "Masks of Authenticity," Irina Anisimova defines Helga's journey as a failed quest as she claims that Helga's understanding of "authentic blackness" is significantly influenced by her outsider perspective, and her assessment of racial authenticity is shaped by ingrained prejudices and cultural preconceptions (189). However, this analysis disregards Helga's endeavor to go beyond race consciousness, at least in projection. Anisimova's focus is on folk culture and the lower class identity and Helga's approach towards them. Yet, throughout the story, Helga does not refrain from rejecting the values of elite Black circles as well as the lower class. Therefore, Anisimova's reason to identify Helga's quest as "inauthentic" cannot simply explain the causes behind such failure.

An extensive analysis of this failure, however, is presented by J. Martin Favor as part of his dissertation in which he explores alternative identity constructions in Harlem Renaissance novels. Emphasizing Larsen's depiction of her protagonist as a critic of

different life styles in African American communities, Favor also claims that "Helga can accept the cultural life of neither bourgeoisie nor folk" (134). According to him, Larsen draws attention to the relationship between race and gender, demonstrating how perspectives of Black identity can restrict the variety of identities that women can choose and impose strict standards for what constitutes an "authentic" female identity. Since it adds yet another level of constraint and invisibility that must be properly considered, feminine consciousness renders it more difficult to analyze how identities are created (126). Favor's analysis, then, relates Helga's inauthentic subject position to her gender identity which is explicitly shown in her interactions with male characters in the novel. Earlier in the novel, for instance, when Helga decides that she can no longer work in Naxos, her conversation with Dr. Anderson, shows that Helga's gender always preoccupies her mind. As Dr. Anderson tries to persuade Helga to stay in Naxos, he says, "You're a lady. You have dignity and breeding" (Larsen 320). Hearing these words, Helga loses her temper and leaves the school. Helga's reaction is related both to her mixed race heritage, which will be discussed later, and also to society's expectations from the role of a "lady" to which she does not wish to subscribe. Her refusal of Olsen's marriage proposal and portrait can also be viewed within this rejection.

In his analysis, Favor also claims that Helga tries to control her sexuality in order to "change the circumstances and situate herself differently in the discourse of race" (150). As her gender confines her to traditional roles, she uses her sexuality as a powerful tool to change her life. Due to her "marriageability," Helga, according to Favor, "can potentially assume a position within the discourse of bourgeois authenticity" (151). However, Helga's affairs with male characters end in disappointment. Even when she marries Reverend Pleasant Green towards the end of the novel, she, as Favor also notes, "becomes locked in a discourse that asserts its power in and through her body itself. Her ever-narrowing spectrum of alternatives closes out" (170). Her decision can be interpreted as a manifestation of her desire to establish a genuine connection with a mode of African American identity by means of religion. Through the African American religious community, a solution is portrayed for Helga, yet it does not involve giving women greater control over their own bodies. It instead implies that women have a duty of submission to a patriarchal deity (Favor 167). Helga must give up her

independence and subjugate herself to masculine authority in order to benefit from this opportunity (Favor 168). Nevertheless, Favor's assertion that links Helga's inauthentic ending with her gender can still be discussed as part of her existential quest. Being both Black and a woman presents Helga Crane the difficulty of navigating and reconciling two conflicting stigmatized identities. Racist and patriarchal oppression must both be persistently resisted by her since they frequently collide and determine who she is. Helga must decide which forms of oppression she will actively fight against as she strives to define herself (Favor 143).

In relation to Simone de Beauvoir's existential repositioning of women's struggle, Helga's condition can be viewed as a paradoxically unresolved case. In Beauvoir's formulation, the predicament of women is analogous to that of the Hegelian Other. The power relationship between the superior other and the subordinate subject, which is founded on Hegel's master-slave dialectic, is central to Beauvoir's conceptualization of the "other." Hegel applied this idea to any oppressed group whereas Beauvoir makes a distinction between the historical exploitation of subjects and "others" and the particular exploitation of men as subjects and women as "others." For Beauvoir, in order to affirm their subjectivity and call for recognition and equality, those who are labeled as "others" may benefit from their shared history of oppression and experiences of abuse. Yet, women do not have that appeal (Bergoffen, Debra and Megan Burke). Beauvoir claims that the denial of that position as the "other" as part of woman's identity is possible as this condition is historical. To liberate themselves, women should establish a sense of community, refute misconceptions about happiness, and embrace freedom. Considering that Helga does not wish to benefit from any shared history of oppression to create an existentially authentic identity, her being a woman accentuates her inability to forge an identity and find freedom even more than Beauvoir's "other." As part of her existential struggle, both patriarchal and racist oppression, as Favor claims, can be viewed as the reasons for Helga's failure to define herself.

In her article "The New Negro Fláneuse in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*," Jeanne Scheper also engages in the issue of gender by linking Helga Crane's journey from a modernist perspective. However, she defines Helga's quest not as a failure, but as a strategy to

confront stratifications in society. According to Scheper, Larsen argues how identity can be constrained by certain groups, racial beliefs, and class backgrounds and contrasts these limitations with the opportunity for "the expansion of identity" that mobility and social encounters provide. She also suggests that instead of simply presenting a straightforward dichotomy between the limitations of rural towns and the possibilities of major cities, Larsen contrasts the opportunity for expansion through travel and relocation with the confines of any specific area or social position (679). Hence, for Scheper, "Larsen's positioning of her protagonist Helga Crane as 'leaving,' only to 'have to come back' signals neither failure nor resignation to the inevitable return home, but a strategy of resistance that many modernist women adopted—mobility" (679). Scheper's argument refutes the critique of Helga's actions designating her identity as inauthentic since she claims that mobility does not necessarily lead to liberation, "particularly not for black women, for whom movement becomes a staple of existence and survival" (682). Thus, in Scheper's analysis, Larsen depicts a modernist survival mechanism for African American women which necessitates existence in its most basic sense. Scheper does not, however, deny that Helga's journey leads her to dread and anguish in its existential parameters.

Helga's mobility plays a key part in the creation of her subjectivity formation. Mobility, which includes both psychological and physical aspects, has a crucial role in determining subjectivity and the development of the self. It especially enables people to actively engage with the world and broaden their range of experiential opportunities. Helga's interactions stimulate her self-reflection. In this way, her mobility turns into a tool by which she actively participates in forming her own subjectivity. In the existentialist outlook, phenomenology also contributes to the comprehension of how subjectivity is formed with mobility, since mobility necessitates direct interaction with lived experiences, confrontations with the complexity of existence, and the creation of individualized realities. Helga physically moves from one location to another, trying to adjust to various settings and cultures. Her travels disclose various social dynamics, racial conflicts, and cultural norms. She encounters a variety of individuals and phenomena as a result of these physical movements, requiring her to reconsider the meaning of her existence and her preconceptions. Her journey highlights

the dynamic structure of her subjectivity, demonstrating the value of mobility in developing her sense of self and comprehension of the external environment. However, Helga's existential angst cannot be alleviated by her travels, since she is constantly plagued with a sense of alienation and despair.

According to Scheper, resembling main characters of many modernist works, Helga Crane has an existential crisis and reflects on the purpose of her life and the ephemeral qualities of modernity. This reflection evolves into a challenging, philosophical process. Helga is depressed and resigned to her recurring sense of dread about the environment and people around her. Her mixed race identity can also be associated with this disillusionment and social unease (Scheper 685). Although Scheper tries to demonstrate that Helga's existential crisis is not directly related to her mixed race heritage, she does this to prove that Larsen's novel does not offer a "tragic mulatto" portrayal. However, it is possible to attempt to explain Helga's inauthenticity in relation to her mixed race background by not necessarily defining Larsen's work as a tragic mulatto narrative. In her *Race and Mixed Race*, Naomi Zack investigates mixed race people's situation in the United States from an existential perspective. Zack first explains that it is considered unacceptable to refer an individual as being of mixed race in the third person inside the American biracial system. As a result of this, people cannot assert a mixed race identity for themselves in the first person since they cannot be recognized as such (Zack 4). Because cases of mixed race, in which people have both black and white ancestry, are naturally categorized as cases of Black race, the categorical schema in the United States logically excludes the concept of mixed race (Zack 5). Zack's prescription to eliminate an existential crisis in the case of mixed race perspective is to reject any racial categories to challenge racist oppression.

In Zack's formulation, since the established racial classifications do not permit mixed race identification, those who identify as mixed race can assume an "anti-race" role in the American racial system. Due to their unrecognized condition, they have the option of rejecting all racial categories and therefore establishing an anti-race viewpoint. A person of mixed race may express their authenticity as being anti-race because of their opposition to multiracial categorization (Zack 164). It is possible to claim that Helga's

effort to reject racial categorizations is not only related to transcending her Blackness, as exemplified with Victor Anderson's concept of going beyond ontological blackness, but also a subject position that is anti-race as a mixed race figure. Throughout the novel, Helga seems to be suffering from her heritage since she thinks that it affects her life and preferences throughout her travels. As a reaction to Dr. Anderson when she decides to leave Naxos, for instance, Helga states, "My father was a gambler who deserted my mother, a white immigrant. It is even uncertain that they were married. As I said at first, I don't belong here. I shall be leaving at once" (Larsen 320). Helga's insecurity about belonging to a community might be associated to her insecure identification with her ancestry. This predicament also reveals the distinction between racial identities and racial identifications according to Zack's construction of their significance as part of the phenomenological experience.

As mentioned before, Zack asserts that self-constructed racial identities rely on other people's external racial identifications. An individual must either be reassured that they are mixed race by another person or identify with others who have previously been designated as mixed race in order to feel mixed race. "This is another way of saying that racial identities are subjective whereas racial identifications are objective" (143). Racial identities are subjective since they are formed based on the external racial identifications made by others. Racial identities are therefore contingent upon racial identifications, and if those identifications are incorrect and unjust, so are the ensuing racial identities (Zack 143). With this perspective, Zack questions the validity of insisting on a mixed race identity under this logic:

> But the situation for people of mixed race is even more difficult. Their existence as mixed-race individuals is not recognized in the American biracial system. They are not identified as mixed race, they have no past family members who have been so identified and with whom they can identify, and there is no impersonal history of individuals of mixed race—all of the mixed-race people are black in the United States. It is therefore virtually impossible for individuals of mixed race, who should be acknowledged to exist, if races exist, but who are not so acknowledged, to have mixed-race identities. (143)

Consistent with Zack's prescription above, Helga rejects all the racialized prescriptions in search of an existential and non-racialized category of the human being. For instance, in response to Mrs. Hayes-Rore's questions related to her past affiliations, Helga says,

"Well, you see, Mrs. Hayes-Rore, I haven't any people. There's only me, so I can do as I please" (Larsen 336). This assertion suggests that Helga's family background leads her to a subject position outside racial terms. However, this approach does not necessarily form an authentic identification in Helga's condition. As it was previously discussed, her sense of insecurity and despair accompanies her throughout her journey. When, for example, she is about to return to New York from Denmark, she questions, "Why couldn't she have two lives, or why couldn't she be satisfied in one place?" (Larsen 390) feeling dissatisfied with her decision yet again. This recurrent feeling of dismay in Helga's existential quest might therefore be associated with her mixed race origin as well as her African American and gender identities.

Jeffrey Gray, in his article, focuses on Helga's travel to Europe functioning "as a way of altering positionality" (260) to comment on Helga's inauthentic resolution throughout the novel. In Gray's analysis, traveling to Europe, especially for African Americans, might offer identities free from any essentialization since both sides of the Atlantic may uncover how identities are produced due to the geographical and cultural mobility itself (260). Yet, he asserts, "If Helga's travel is doomed to failure, it is not because she fails to 'find herself,' but because she is looking for herself, for her 'essence.' In particular, she accepts the body as given and fails to see its constructedness at every stage" (260). With this assertion, Gray problematizes Helga's intention from the beginning of her quest and emphasizes her effort to find her "essence." Although Gray's analysis might suggest an answer to Helga's inauthenticity, it disregards the racial setting of African American subjectivity which cannot escape prejudices regardless of geographical markers. Also, prescribing the sense of "looking for oneself" as a form of essentialization oversimplifies Helga's struggle to transcend multiple preordained identities offered to her throughout her journey.

Helga's search is characterized by a persistent evasion of self rather than "looking for herself." Instead of seeking a deeper understanding of her own identity, Helga's primary objective is to distance herself from her situated existence. Her continual relocations throughout the novel suggest a desire to detach herself from her Blackness and the challenges it presents. Paradoxically, in times when Helga feels a sense of belonging to

the black community, she hides behind her mixed race identity as a way to evade completely associating herself with Blackness. In denying her situated reality, Helga inadvertently undermines the potential for her own transcendence and the actualization of her authentic self. As Robert Birt explains, "Transcendence is also situated, or is realizable, only within a given situation" (270). Helga's effort to transcend the limitations imposed by her Blackness through an awareness of her mixed race identity introduces additional complexities into her situation. Her predicament can be more comprehensively analyzed by examining Lewis Gordon's interpretation of Naomi Zack's proposed framework.

If it is to be assumed that Helga does follow Naomi Zack's type of prescription as a mixed race herself, it is also possible to link her failure to find a secure identity construction with Lewis Gordon's criticism of Zack's position. Gordon first challenges Zack's assertion that "black and white racial designations are themselves racist because the concept of race does not have an adequate scientific foundation" (3-4). According to Gordon, the hypothesis that race should not be accepted since it is not validated by science generates some complications with the notion that "'existents' should have precedence over concepts" (*Existentia* 101). The scientific stance contends that existential reality should not surpass scientific validity. However, given that there will always be individuals who do not fit into conceptual frameworks, the contradiction between conceptual and existential dimensions of race tends to raise concerns about why race should be disregarded for those who do not embody their racialization satisfactorily when there are people who are pleased with such categories (Gordon, *Existentia* 101). Gordon prioritizes lived situation as opposed to scientific ramifications as in Robert Birt's suggestion, "It is possible (if not essential) to choose authenticity precisely through the creation and affirmation of a radical black subjectivity and peoplehood" (267). A confrontational claim of "black transcendence" does not call for a strict devotion to "natural" or inborn traits as the unchangeable essence of black existence. Instead, it implies "the common praxis of a people's self-discovery and self-creation as existing individuals and as a transcendent sociohistorical community" (Birt 269). With an emphasis on the ongoing process of individual and community

transformation within a sociohistorical framework, this strategy acknowledges the dynamic nature of black identity.

In relation to Zack's concept of racelessness as an option, Gordon refers to how whiteness as a concept is regarded as the normative dimension of humanity and that the idea of being anti-race only perpetuates this notion of normativity. Although white people typically do not assume themselves as a racial group, they became racialized during the legal struggle for equal treatment in the middle of the 20th century since they were asked to be treated as an equal to Black people, which was perceived as a devaluation of their position rather than an elevation of Black people (Gordon, *Existentia* 114). Gordon's confrontation with mixed race alternative identity constructions prescribed by Naomi Zack reveals a conundrum in repudiating Black identity as an inherent derivation of being mixed race. In Gordon's proposition, affirming Blackness in the circumstances of mixed race denotes confirming racial affiliation, whereas confirming whiteness entails confirming the accepted norm. An incentive here prevails to completely deny Blackness. Whiteness faces the possibility of being racialized and losing its normative framework if a person of mixed race attempts to embrace both Blackness and whiteness as equals. "The solution cannot, therefore, be to reject racialization, since that would only affirm whiteness (which continues to be normative). Instead, perhaps a more direct liberatory scheme of overthrowing the normativity of whiteness is needed" (*Existentia* 114-15). For Gordon, then, to alter the conditions of African Americans, it is a necessity for mixed race people to identify as Blacks.

Gordon further elaborates on how to challenge oppression in the United States as individuals within society with the practice of racialization of whiteness as a way to retreat normative constructions. He suggests that it could possibly be beneficial to further racialize people at the top of the racial hierarchy and persuade them to accept the racialization they most detest in order to overcome racism. This can entail making claims of Black heritage, "coloring" or "blackening" a significant portion of the United States, or changing birth certificates to establish a Black nation. Gordon also asserts that in the past, some leaders of mixed races acknowledged that "no justice was to be

attained in any contemporary society through the affirmation of a white identity" and that direct action and the quest of social change necessitate addressing factors that can contribute to progress (*Existentia* 116). Through Gordon's critical approach, one could argue that Larsen's portrayal of a mixed race woman illustrates how Helga is unable to reconcile her white and Black identities. She aspires to establish a self that acknowledges both her whiteness and her Blackness while struggling with her racial consciousness. Helga's attempts are unproductive because the normative conditions of any racial encounter cause African American subjectivity to become alienated.

In relation to Helga's aspiration with reference to her mixed race identity, Sika Dagbovie-Mullins claims that "Helga wants to create physical and cultural spaces that will allow for such freedom without breaking from a racial awareness" and "thus asserts not just a biracial identity but a black-sentient mixed-race identity, one that refuses to abide by racial scripts but still acknowledges and honors a black connection" (28). According to Dagbovie-Mullins, despite not having power at the end of the story, Helga possesses "agency and self-awareness" (50). She is depicted as being oppressed and devoid of freedom, but she actually has the ability to choose how to define herself. She has the freedom to choose her own identities, despite attempts by other characters to impose their perspectives on her (Dagbovie-Mullins 50). Although it is true that Helga attempts to choose her own identities, it can easily be realized that her attempts result in alienating herself more from the identities that she chooses to accept. Therefore, her phenomenological position always confirms that she cannot reconcile herself with her experiences and thoughts. Thus, as Dagbovie-Mullins encapsulates as part of her analysis, "the conclusion of the novel also suggests the futility of Helga's dream of ultimate happiness and freedom as a 'raceless' subject" (49). Living raceless means living as white, or, in Gordon's formulation, pertaining to a normative paradigm that negates Blackness. Helga's contrasting connection to her African American heritage is apparent in her description of Black people, "How absurd she had been to think that another country, other people, could liberate her from the ties which bound her forever to these mysterious, these terrible, these fascinating, these lovable, dark hordes" (Larsen 392). Although she wants to free herself from racial bondage, it is clear that Helga's priority is to distance herself from Blackness. Since she feels that she has an

unavoidable attachment to Black people, her efforts to equalize Blackness and whiteness as a mixed race individual results in despair and insecurity throughout her life.

Larsen's portrayal ultimately posits that an existential quest of an African American woman offers a variety of possibilities to discover meaning through one's life. Helga Crane's search for her identity can be depicted as alternative versions of "existence" to answer questions that Lewis Gordon relates to the philosophy of existence of Black subjectivity, the "questions of identity and moral action" (*Existentia* 7). As Gordon centralizes the human condition within the framework of existential philosophy, he puts forth two recurring questions: "What are we?" and "What shall we do?" (*Existentia* 7). Larsen enables such questions by depicting the existential crisis of her protagonist suffering from the condition that situates her to pursue an authentic self within the confines of her surroundings. The novel illustrates how African American subjectivity potentiates an existential urge to construct a self unaffiliated to presuppositions pertaining to race and gender.

CHAPTER 2

CONFRONTING SELF-HATRED: BLACK ANTIBLACKNESS IN WALLACE THURMAN'S *THE BLACKER THE BERRY* (1929)

An important representative of the literary scene of the Harlem Renaissance, Wallace Thurman (1902-1934) provides unconventional perspectives related to African American subjectivity with his highly critical approach to the concept of race. Despite his early death at the age of 31, he wrote several essays and poems as well as three novels that can be studied as his reflections on African American life during the Harlem Renaissance. In his introduction to *The Collected Writings of Wallace Thurman: A Harlem Renaissance Reader*, Amritjit Singh states, "Wallace Thurman's Harlem Renaissance is one of the most radical and uncompromising responses from a Black writer in the 1920s to the denials of African American personhood and individuality through racialization" (9). He was a well-known intellectual who participated in discussions on racial representation in art and was widely recognized for being independent, rebellious, and prepared to question conventional notions. He strongly affected terms of the debate on the issues of race, gender, and class as a literary critic and thinker (Singh 9). Benefiting from his intellectual thought, Thurman's fiction, thus, offers valuable insight into the identity struggle and existential crisis of an African American individual.

While producing literary works of his own, similar to Langston Hughes's and Alain Locke's propositions, Thurman also offers suggestions to Black writers with the aim of improving African American artistic manifestation. According to Wallace Thurman, Black writers should not merely satisfy the preferences and fancies of their readers or denounce the constraints of race in their works of art. Instead, they should initiate a radical self-examination to strengthen their expressive abilities and transform the environment around them. With this approach, it is possible to observe how African American literature responds to the denial of agency and everyday encounters with society while also expressing complete individuality and identity (Singh 9). Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry* (1929) explores the difficulties African Americans confront in developing full existence in the face of diverse racial problems that have an impact on

everyday life and artistic creativity. Thurman usually employs a caustic or introspective tone in his essays and reviews to affirm the demands of Black individuality and to assert the need for the freedom of African Americans. He discusses the historical negations and denials of the African American experience in his writing and concentrates on the quest for individuality and agency for Black people. In this regard, Thurman's contributions to the Harlem Renaissance can be interpreted as a consistent attempt to promote African Americans' value and dignity (Singh 13). Although Thurman recognizes that the Harlem Renaissance assisted African Americans in their struggle for more substantial gains and a stable sense of identity, he does not necessarily celebrate an "artistic renaissance" since he is critical of the merits of literary production. In one of his literary essays, he states:

> [S]peaking purely of the arts, the results of the renaissance have been sad rather than satisfactory, in that critical standards have been ignored, and the measure of achievement had been racial rather than literary. This is supposed to be valuable in a social way, for it is now current that the works produced by Negro artists will form the clauses in a second emancipation proclamation, and that because of the Negro artists and their works, the Afro-American will reap new fruits of freedom. But this will be true only inasmuch as the Negro artist produces dignified and worth-while work. Quick, tricky, atmospheric bits will be as ephemeral as they are sensational, and sentimental propaganda, unless presented in a style both vigorous and new, will have the effect of bird shot rather than that of shrapnel. ("Nephews of Uncle Remus" 201)

Thurman's apprehension results from his perspective of African American identity and how it is to be utilized by Black people being part of a larger spectrum, namely American literature. For Thurman, the controversy is on the existence of a unique Black literature in America. While one group contends that there are essential distinctions between white and Black people that will generate unique artistic works, the opposing group maintains that the sole distinction between white and Black Americans is their skin tone and that both entities will subscribe to similar standards and traditions when it comes to writing. Given that African Americans have embraced white culture and lack traditions to obtain from their own separate literature, the second group, according to Thurman, appears to have a strong argument ("Nephews" 202). It should be emphasized that, however, Thurman's critique is linked with the ways in which African Americans express themselves. Therefore, he does not suggest that African Americans should subscribe to a type of whiteness normalized in literary expression; his concerns are

directly related to the artistic production and its characteristics. He also asserts that while keeping their own identities, African Americans can and should depict life with all of its possibilities. They should not limit themselves with race related content. He elaborates this by stating that African Americans, "being human beings, have all the natural emotional and psychological reactions of other human beings. They live, die, hate, love, and procreate. They dance and sing, play and fight" ("Nephews" 202). Thus, their expression pertaining to literature should follow a similar attitude to that of everyday life, enabling Black writers to embody a genuine and profound literary representation. Within this framework, Thurman praises Jean Toomer and Langston Hughes by describing them as "sincere Negro writers." Neither of these writers is, for Thurman, plagued by an "inferiority complex" that causes them avoid writing about their race while also making them feel that they are strongly connected to the difficulties and problems of belonging to that race ("Nephews" 203).

Amritjit Singh summarizes Thurman's approach as "staunch and revolutionary in its commitment to individuality and critical objectivity: the Black writer need not pander to the aesthetic preferences of the black middle class, nor should he or she write for an easy and patronizing white approval" (19). With his highly idealized views as a critic, Thurman intends to produce works of fiction that follow his prescription of how to represent African American subjectivity. Published in 1929, *The Blacker the Berry* is the first of his three novels in which he depicts urban African American life while also employing a human condition in its own setting to be seen with its situated problems. The novel is often viewed as a personal investigation of discrimination within the Black community while functioning as a study of the particular difficulties and restrictions that Black women confront in that society. Emma Lou, the protagonist of the novel, encounters a variety of forms of prejudice and oppression as a result of her dark skin (Walker 155). Thurman's representation of his protagonist can be analyzed within several existential parameters of the self as part of a process of resistance against oppression and identity construction.

The Blacker the Berry focuses on the internal struggles of a dark-skinned African American woman, Emma Lou. Born in Boise, Idaho, Emma Lou first experiences the

process of constructing her identity and sense of self within the framework of her family. Her mother, who has light skin due to her European ancestry, constantly warns Emma Lou that her dark skin will pose challenges for her in the future. Color becomes a fixation within her family, as they believe that having a lighter skin color offers advantages for African Americans. Consequently, Emma Lou attempts to lighten her skin through various bleaching techniques and lotions. However, her Uncle Joe holds a different perspective, encouraging her to overcome her mother's comments about her skin color. He suggests that she should attend a university in California, where she can be among black students and escape the feeling of being an outsider. Uncle Joe believes that a larger city with fewer obsessions on skin color would provide better opportunities for Emma Lou. Following his advice, Emma Lou goes to California but finds it difficult to integrate into the social circles she aspires to join. She consciously avoids associating with lower-class black students and later discovers that she cannot gain entry into the desired circles due to her dark skin. Grace Giles, a sorority girl, informs Emma Lou that only light-skinned African Americans can become members of their sorority.

As Emma Lou observes that college people are not significantly different from those in Idaho, she falls into an existential crisis, feeling trapped within her own body. She perceives her body as an insurmountable barrier preventing her from attaining the life she desires. During a summer in Boise, she begins an affair with a boy named Weldon Taylor that lasts until he leaves the city. Emma Lou believes that her skin color is the reason for his departure and begins to link her skin color with every person and problem she encounters. She convinces herself that Weldon would not have abandoned her if her skin were lighter. After graduating from the University of Southern California, she decides to move to Harlem, New York, with hopes of a brighter future. However, she soon discovers that employers in Harlem also prioritize light-skinned workers, and her college degree fails to provide the advantages she anticipated. She later finds a job as an assistant to actress Arline Strange and meets Alva during one of Arline's cabaret shows. She develops an affection for Alva and engages in a romantic relationship with him. However, Alva seems to ignore her when he goes out with friends. When Emma Lou confronts him about his behavior, Alva takes her to a party where guests engage in discussions about colorism and race. Listening to the conversation, Emma Lou becomes

consumed by the belief that they are actually discussing her skin color. Sharing her concerns with Alva only results in his anger and accusation that she is overly obsessed with her color. Later, Emma Lou discovers that Alva is in another relationship with a lighter-skinned girl named Geraldine, who is pregnant.

The narrative then jumps forward two years, depicting Emma Lou working for another actress named Clere Sloane. Her husband, Campbell Kitchen, seems interested in Emma Lou and suggests that education could potentially improve her current circumstances. However, Emma Lou remains in despair, feeling disconnected from any community. She ends her relationship with Alva and avoids seeing him for an extended period. During a particular visit to his residence, she comes across Geraldine, which prompts her to depart without displaying any reaction. Contemplating a career as a teacher, Emma Lou pursues studies in teaching. She enters a romantic relationship with a man named Benson Brown. However, her plans are disrupted when she learns that Benson is now dating one of her friends, Gwendolyn, and they are soon to be married. Faced with this situation, Emma Lou resolves to take responsibility for her life and confront the issues she has been avoiding. In the final moments of the novel, she embraces her skin color, recognizing the need to come to terms with herself in order to find meaning in her life. As Thurman explores the issue of colorism within the Black community, he projects a peculiar sense of salvation through Emma Lou's search for authenticity. Involving in the racist justifications against some members of the Black community, even if she is being subjected to discrimination, Emma Lou associates her Blackness with negative constructions in society. However, unlike Nella Larsen's protagonist, Helga Crane, she eventually recognizes that she must face her Blackness as a result of her interactions with other Black people in her environment. She discovers ways to explore authenticity while operating within the constraints of societal expectations as she chooses a peculiar way of existence that employs an identity formation process. Her self-hatred becomes her worse enemy unveiling an existential crisis. With the projection of a future in which she accepts her own value, she acknowledges an authentic type of identity to the point that her self-recognition and self-determination exceed the essential identity constructions of her family that she believes to be true from her childhood.

Daniel M. Scott III suggests that Thurman's critical view of Harlem is not adequately reflected by popular interpretations of the novel that emphasize the similarities between the protagonist, Emma Lou Morgan, and Thurman himself, as stated in his letters and articles (324). For Scott, to address how identities are created and performed in Harlem, the novel functions as a piece that purposefully evaluates various forms of identity, including conceptions of race and other identities (324). This interpretation of the novel, for Scott, views it as a novel that participates in a wider investigation of identity rather than a reflection of Thurman's own worries about his dark complexion (324). Scott focuses on Thurman's insistence on non-essentialized sense of being as a consequence of an identity search. He also asserts that *The Blacker the Berry* "goes further than to explore the construction of self; it interrogates, through the many performances Emma Lou and other characters negotiate, the construction of race" (329). Hence, instead of analyzing the text with its existential impetus discussing identity constructions, he alludes to Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity by claiming that Emma Lou's efforts to accentuate her identity can be correlated with Butler's theoretical framework. This unorthodox interpretation not only expands potential readings of the novel but also catalogues its position within the parameters of an existential scheme. The emphasis on the notion that the subject is continually changing and never entirely aligns with itself makes Butler's argument compatible with existentialism. Therefore, attempting to reposition Emma Lou within Butler's theory of performativity, Scott also enables an existential reading of the novel.

In her article "Tracing the Influence of Simone de Beauvoir in Judith Butler's Work," Deniz Durmuş, for instance, pursues the possible connections between Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist ethics and Judith Butler's theory of performativity. Although she raises issues of gender in her analysis, Durmuş does not merely focus on this common concern between these writers. She asserts that Butler's and Beauvoir's "main concern ultimately is the human and the question of the ethical and political conditions in which a human can flourish" (9). According to Durmuş, as both thinkers place a strong emphasis on ethics and maintain that certain restrictions can limit choices and freedom, they are both interested in the ways that historical, social, political, and cultural issues influence the formation and manifestation of identity (9). However,

Durmuş problematizes Butler's position in relation to the responsibility of the subject. Butler's subject construction which is non-transparent may fail to address the individual's responsibility against a form of oppression. Beauvoir's and Sartre's concepts of bad faith and authenticity, for Durmuş, on the other hand, enable people to accept accountability for their actions (15). Considering that Thurman's protagonist, Emma Lou, also accepts her responsibility after being viewed in bad faith throughout the novel rather than subscribing to a postmodern sense of fluidity, her condition seems to be closer to an existential effort towards authenticity instead of performativity. Therefore, the novel offers an existential struggle similar to Helga Crane's quest; yet, Thurman challenges Larsen's portrayal with an insistence on transcending inauthentic subject positions in bad faith by critically engaging in a self-hatred portrait. Emma's self-hatred signifies her inauthenticity which leads her to an overwhelming sense of anguish and dread.

George Yancy, in his *Black Bodies, White Gazes*, offers an elucidatory portrayal of Black subjectivity as a subordination of the body imprisoned in white normative discourse which is comparable to Emma Lou's lived experience throughout the novel. In Yancy's projection, Black people must engage in a struggle that is both symbolic and existential since Blackness is regarded by white people as an essence that exists before Black people's existence. Black bodies have historically been the target of multiple forms of oppression and manipulation in an effort to preserve white supremacy and the false notion that the white subject is a superior being. As a result, the inherited history and the experiences of Black people as individuals define their "sense of agency" (21). Encountering whiteness as a structure of negation of their own body, black people are subjected to "a form of self-alienation, where the integrity of one's Black body is shaken, though not shattered. Self-alienation can assume various forms, from self-doubt to self-hatred" (Yancy 21). The white society creates and defines Black identity and existence while exerting control and influence over the Black body. Black people in this situation feel outside of their own bodies and are frequently compared to and evaluated against white standards. They have to maneuver and negotiate their behavior within this normative framework, which has also influenced their identities and perspectives, which is particularly relevant in the context of the United States (Yancy 22). In Emma Lou's

case, her Blackness is not her only concern for she is depicted as being plagued by being "too black" (Thurman, *The Blacker* 694). Thurman portrays Emma Lou's sense of identification with her Blackness by describing her surroundings:

> Emma Lou had been born in a semi-white world, totally surrounded by an all-white one, and those few dark elements that had forced their way in had either been shooed away or else greeted with derisive laughter. It was the custom always of those with whom she came into most frequent contact to ridicule or revile any black person or object. A black cat was a harbinger of bad luck, black crepe was the insignia of mourning, and black people were either evil niggers with poisonous blue gums or else typical vaudeville darkies. It seemed as if the people in her world never went halfway in their recognition or reception of things black, for these things seemed always to call forth only the most extreme emotional reactions. They never provoked mere smiles or mere melancholy; rather they were the signal either for boisterous guffaws or pain-induced and tear attended grief. (*The Blacker* 695)

In this depiction, Thurman shows that Emma Lou's internalized sense of hatred results not only from bodily expressions but also symbols of values in her environment which necessitates a negative construction of her identity with the presupposed notions of her Blackness. Emma Lou's existence is portrayed as remaining inside a particular racial framework, where she is enclosed by a largely white environment that excludes and denigrates anything pertaining to Blackness. As Emma Lou struggles with her own sense of racial identity, this context leads to an intense feeling of alienation and existential angst. Emma Lou's environment deepens the socially pervasive binary paradigm in which Blackness is either undervalued or connected to negative stereotypes. The existential struggle Emma Lou experiences as she tries to explore her own self-worth and identity in this racially charged environment is exacerbated by this dichotomy.

Yancy asserts that the negative connotations attached to being Black are not a result of the physical attribute of having dark skin; rather, they are a reflection of the racist social and historical context in which Black people exist. Blackness is used as a pretext for making negative generalizations about Black people since it is assumed to be inherent and is unaffected by a range of indicators, including historical and cultural background. This condition is a part of a white racist discourse that offers a framework for comprehending and interpreting the Black body. Yancy describes this condition as a "stipulatory axiom from which conclusions can be drawn: 'Blackness is evil, not to be

trusted, and guilty as such'" (22). Emma Lou cannot escape from this framework offered by white normativity since her family internalized whiteness as a positive entity. Therefore, by demonstrating Emma Lou's struggle in his novel, Thurman shows that the white normative discourse is also prevalent in Black communities which results in self-hatred and a sentiment of "black antiblackness."

Borrowed from Lewis Gordon's *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism*, black antiblackness is a term that can be applied to Emma Lou's predicament with a phenomenological repositioning of her subject. As Gordon formulates Blackness in its relationality with whiteness, he asserts that it is possible to draw the conclusion that whiteness is perceived as naturally legitimate in a society where Black people are subjected to discrimination based on the presupposition that whiteness is superior to Blackness. As a result, being Black is thought to be fundamentally illegitimate (*Bad Faith* 104). Emma Lou's family members seek to transcend this perceived sense of illegitimacy by becoming "[w]hiter and whiter every generation . . . so that problems of race would plague them no more" (Thurman, *The Blacker* 698). Being "too black," as Thurman describes, Emma Lou is seen as an alien within the family threatening their projection for later generations. As part of her family's discourse throughout her childhood, Emma Lou has problematized her skin color by viewing it as something to annihilate. Her very own existence is thus negated by her sense of being trapped in a Black body. In close connection with such predicament, Gordon attempts to explain Black people's endeavor to reflect upon themselves in terms of Sartre's concept of bad faith.

Gordon's association is related to consciousness and its possibility to negate itself which is comparable to Blackness seen as something to be annihilated with a conscious effort. To elucidate this correlation, Gordon explains that it is possible that consciousness could attempt to negate or neutralize itself if it is capable of negating or neutralizing objects. Similarly, when Black people think on their own Blackness within a setting in which their Blackness is viewed as an absence or deficiency, the same condition might emerge as a problem of bad faith reified in their consciousness (*Bad Faith* 104). In this formulation, the Black body is viewed as a source of unrestrained desire from a racist perspective. Because Blackness is viewed as deficient

or incomplete, this desire is channeled toward non-Blackness. Black people can internalize this negative perception of their own identity as a result and consider themselves to be ugly, evil, or loathsome. By doing this, they might start to see their own Black bodies as things outside of themselves instead of an integral part of who they are. This construction of a non-black identity can serve as an escape from one's own perspective and body. In this case, Black people can deny Blackness and fail to achieve self-possession (*Bad Faith* 105). However, this escape only reifies the body and denies any attempt to authentically create an identity without applying to a form of bad faith.

In her attitude towards other Blacks, Emma Lou displays a similar escape that fails to construct a secure identity for herself. In the first part of the novel, Emma Lou is sent to the University of Southern California with her uncle's support who thinks that she can be a successful student there without her mother's constant reminder of her Blackness as a sign of failure. Her uncle also believes that Emma Lou's surroundings in Boise, Idaho, where she was born, do not benefit her upbringing as "people in Boise are fifty years behind the times" and that she can be happier in a big city (Thurman, *The Blacker* 703). However, when she starts her new life in Los Angeles, Thurman shows that Emma Lou cannot associate herself with others as she is always looking for the "right sort of people." What Emma Lou looks for when she is in search of "the right sort of people" is light-skinned people, those who can be invited to higher social circles. Therefore, she refuses to be friends with Hazel Mason, another Black student, whom she describes "as a barbarian who had most certainly not come from a family of best people" (Thurman, *The Blacker* 708). Emma Lou's word choice in her depiction also reflects her "whitened" perception of Blackness. By avoiding other Black people, Emma Lou tries to avoid her own Blackness in bad faith. She loses her perspective as an individual trying to construct a meaningful sense of existence. Her reflections on other Black characters are expressed as a negation of her own body and Blackness. As she spends more time at the university, she begins to understand that she will not be accepted to the sororities that she wishes to be part of and she relates her situation to her Blackness.

Not being able to find what she sought in Los Angeles and Boise, Emma Lou starts to consider going to another city thinking that she can escape her condition by moving away. She grows more determined than ever to leave her village and look for contentment elsewhere, particularly in the East where she thinks life is more cosmopolitan and the people are more refined. Despite being a larger city, she thinks that Los Angeles is still populated by southern African Americans who are narrow-minded. She ultimately goes to Harlem in order "to escape the haunting chimera of intraracial color prejudice" (*Thurman, The Blacker* 728). Although Emma Lou moves to Harlem with the hopes of finding greater possibilities and acceptance, she soon finds out that living in Harlem is not as simple or pleasant as she had anticipated. First, she tries her luck at working in a real estate firm. She is rejected as there is another candidate for the job; however, she suspects that it is related to her skin color again. Realizing that she cannot find a job as an office worker, she becomes a maid to Arline Strange, who is an actress in Harlem. Emma Lou feels the need to move to a new home that will provide her more room, air, and freedom because she feels alone and isolated in her current residence. After six weeks of employment, she accumulates a hundred dollars in savings, which she believes will be sufficient to pay for a new room. She makes the decision that moving into a new room will be the beginning of fixing her circumstances and getting out of the loop she has fallen into (Thurman, *The Blacker* 760). However, as she remembers her experiences in Harlem again, she concludes that she cannot eliminate her problems by simply moving into a new room.

Emma Lou also believes that her condition is related to her gender. She constantly reminds herself that her mother "had often wished that she had been a boy" since "[b]lack boys can make a go of it" (Thurman, *The Blacker* 763). This belief precipitates, as Carol A. Bunch suggests, the assumption for Emma Lou and her mother that marriage can be a means of achieving recognition and belonging within the high Black community in which she might not be able to participate on her own (51). This assumption manifests itself through Emma Lou's relationship with Black men. Since she connects her love-affairs with her Blackness and believes that marriage can be a possible escape from her condition, Emma Lou's involvement in relationships does not lead her to a healthy resolution either. After having a short-lived affair with Weldon

Taylor, for instance, Emma Lou is left with her skin color concerns to such an extent that she does not assess Weldon's actions as part of his features as a human being. She does not consider the possibility that Weldon's selfishness served as his motivation to leave her rather than prejudice toward people's race. She also concludes that because of prejudice and discrimination in society, it is difficult for a Black woman to find pleasure in life. This tragic conviction deepens her feeling of despair and anguish (727-28). As she contemplates on her relationship with Weldon Taylor, Thurman also indicates that, alongside her own skin color, Emma Lou is concerned with Weldon's skin color more than her feelings toward him: "Only she did wish that his skin had been colored light brown instead of dark brown. It was better if she was to marry that she did not get a dark skin mate. Her children must not suffer as she had and would suffer" (723). This preoccupation later leads to her acceptance of her partners' mistreatment and abuse, especially when she feels that she is in love with Alva, another Harlemite whose skin is described as "neither yellow nor brown but something in between, something warm" (749). Shirley Haynes Wright claims that the majority of Emma Lou's romantic relationships are characterized by "exploitation," as the men she is involved with only want her body, yet they do not wish to be seen with her in public because of her dark skin (33). Emma Lou's consent to this exploitation is escalated by the financial exploitation she suffers by allowing her body and money to be used against her will. The turning point in Emma Lou's degradation takes place when she decides to take Alva back despite his illness and the fact that he has a disfigured child after he had deserted her and insulted her. She puts forth a great deal of effort to take care of Alva and his son, furthering her entrapment in a cycle of exploitation and humiliation (Wright 33). Thus, Emma Lou's gender exacerbates her sense of insecurity and compels her to live inauthentically and in bad faith.

George Yancy, as part of his *Black Bodies, White Gazes*, also offers an analysis of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* which presents a comparable dynamic to Emma Lou's in *The Blacker the Berry*. Yancy demonstrates how internalizing the perception of white people undermines the Black body, which is portrayed by the main character Pecola Breedlove. He asserts that Pecola can be seen as representing the ideas of "flux and anticipation" from an existentialist perspective. She exists as a "being-toward-the-

future," constantly going beyond any given moment. She is another option that is possible. Her Blackness, on the other hand, is forced on her as a static and abominable state of being, signifying negation and nihilism (189-90). Emma Lou's condition can also be considered as a possibility rather than a reality, or an authentic type of existence. While she tries to find a place of security in different locations throughout the novel, Emma Lou never acknowledges the life that she has as an option to inaugurate. She always seeks a meaningful and fulfilling future. As she denies her own Blackness, she involuntarily constructs a pseudo-existence in which she can be happier. Therefore, she submits to various forms of exploitation in her relationships with the hope of finding a promising future. However, Thurman implies that Emma Lou slowly understands her condition even in earlier parts of the novel. For instance, when Emma Lou reflects on her decisions, she is seen as thinking about her situation pertaining to time and distance:

> It did seem strange, this being in Harlem when only a few weeks before she had been over three thousand miles away. Time and distance—strange things, immutable, yet conquerable. But was time conquerable? Hadn't she read or heard somewhere that all things were subject to time, even God? Yet, once she was there and now she was here. But even at that she hadn't conquered time. What was that line in Cullen's verse, "I run, but Time's abreast with me"? She had only traversed space and defied distance. (Thurman, *The Blacker* 730-31)

This passage shows that Emma Lou ruminates on her obsession with being a possibility as part of a future that she wishes to substantiate in different locations. Although she moves from one place to another, she seems to be concerned with why she still feels the same as she did before in Boise or Los Angeles. Her decisions leading her to defy distance and space do not necessarily produce what she projects to be a meaningful future since she cannot escape from being a possibility. As long as she defies her own body, Emma Lou continues to exist as a "being-toward-the-future," as in Yancy's formulation. With her stipulated condition in her Black body, Emma Lou tries even to bleach her skin to materialize her possible future. She believes that she could see some differences in her skin color after consuming some bleaching products for nearly a month. However, as Thurman notes, "in reality the only effects were an increase in blackheads, irritating rashes, and a burning skin" (*The Blacker* 764). Thus, her effort to bleach her skin becomes another symbolic act of black antiblackness.

Although Emma Lou cannot resolve her sense of despair by trying to escape from it rather than realizing her condition to further establish a sense of authenticity for herself until the end of the novel, it should also be noted that her predicament does not reveal much about her African American identity. Concluding his discussion related to "black antiblackness," Lewis Gordon reminds that the studies of Black people living in a racist environment tend to reflect the perspectives of the predominant white culture rather than offering much understanding of the experiences and perceptions of Black people. By internalizing negative preconceptions about their identity, Black people could be considered to be embracing pseudo-white perspectives rather than developing their own identities. In a racist society, as opposed to being shaped by their own unique experiences, Black people's identities are determined by how others see them (*Bad Faith* 116). However, Wallace Thurman seems to depict Emma Lou in bad faith to demonstrate that her condition entails an existential quest to construct a perspective of her own within her own body. Thurman thus offers a setting that generates African American existence within the constraints of the social norms that locate African American subjectivity with descriptive and conclusive perceptions.

Emma Lou's quest can also be analyzed through Jean-Paul Sartre's analysis of the "inauthentic Jew" from his *Anti-Semite and Jew* (1946)[16]. Sartre's reflection on Jewish subjectivity offers an experience similar to African Americans' struggle for freedom and authenticity. Throughout the text, Sartre's primary purpose is to scrutinize anti-Semitism as an example of bad faith. According to Sartre, the anti-Semite constructs the concept that the Jew personifies evil; however, this belief is not grounded on any empirical truth but instead on the anti-Semite's sentiments of incompetence and hatred. Later, Sartre focuses on the concept of inauthenticity in relation to being a Jew in an

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[16] It should be noted that Sartre's work is contextually situated and open to critical examination, particularly concerning its treatment of the concept of the "inauthentic Jew." However, as it will be justified in the forthcoming analysis pertaining to African Americans, Sartre's stance does not necessarily need to align with contemporary progressive ideals of present-day discourse. Sartre specifically focuses on "the lived experience" within a specific historical framework and period. Consequently, this discussion must be comprehended within its inherent historical limitations. Sartre utilizes his philosophical vocabulary to explore the distinct condition of Jewishness during the mid-1940s, post-World War II, employing concepts such as bad faith, authenticity, inauthenticity, and existential responsibility. Given the potential applicability of this framework to the experiences of Black individuals, particularly during the Harlem Renaissance, Sartre's argument concerning the "inauthentic Jew" can provide valuable insights in examining Thurman's work.

anti-Semitic world. Although some may oppose the comparison of African Americans and Jews, it should be specified that this association is particularly pertinent to the response of both communities towards racism and dehumanization. Their experience of oppression is, of course, different in relation to how they are perceived within their physical boundaries. However, as Sartre prescribes the primacy of authenticity for Jewish people with an acceptance of their own identity, he eventually posits the same type of resolution for Black people, too. It is also possible to find the links between these identities in Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*. Although Fanon first mentions how "the Jew can be unknown in his Jewishness" since "[h]e is a white man, and, apart from some rather debatable characteristics, he can sometimes go unnoticed" (115), he later acknowledges that it is inevitable that an anti-Semite will also hold racist attitudes towards Black people (122). Fanon realizes this propinquity with one of his professors' suggestion: "Whenever you hear anyone abuse the Jews, pay attention, because he is talking about you" (122). This association initiates an analysis of responses to such attitudes with Sartre's concept of inauthenticity.

Jean-Paul Sartre, in his "Black Orpheus," also engages in the condition of Black people within the context of class and race. Sartre first promotes the notion that workers of all races are oppressed by capitalism and that this oppression unites them despite their differences in skin color. Then, he reminds that Black people's specific situation of oppression is distinct and is a result of their past as colonized and enslaved people. According to Sartre, the first step for Black people is to recognize their racial identity and fight for their humanity in the presence of those who have attempted to dehumanize them. As he claims that "a Jew—a white man among white men—can deny that he is a Jew, can declare himself a man among men," Sartre differentiates the Jewish experience from that of Black people's struggle ("Black Orpheus" 18). However, as it is exemplified with Emma Lou's case with the concept of self-hatred and self-denial, trying to negate Blackness is a common predicament in African American psyche. Thus, Black people, disregarding their physical reality, can also create an inauthentic identity as in the case of inauthentic Jew. Therefore, consistent with Sartre's assertion related to "the inauthentic Jew," Black people might also reject their situated reality. It is the effect of such denial that traps both Black people, and white Jews in a similar

inauthentic sense of identity. As a consequence of this predicament with regard to inauthenticity, Sartre seems to prescribe the same type of resolution for both Blacks and Jews. A correlation can easily be located when he suggests that "since he[the Black individual] is oppressed within the confines of his race and because of it, he must first of all become conscious of his race," ("Black Orpheus" 18) and the Jew "is to live to the full his condition as Jew" (*Anti-Semite* 65) as "the authentic Jew is the one who asserts his claim in the face of the disdain shown toward him" (*Anti-Semite* 66). The only difference in Sartre's argumentation, however, is that Black people's struggle is more likely to evolve into an existential resolution since it is impossible for them to continue existing by ignoring their Blackness. Inescapably, they are obligated to engage in an existential struggle seeking authenticity. As Sartre puts it, the Black individual "has his back up against the wall of authenticity" ("Black Orpheus" 18). Nevertheless, this does not negate the fact that the Black individual's response to oppression shares a common purpose with the Jewish struggle towards authenticity. Thus, in Thurman's novel, Emma Lou also chooses to acknowledge herself within the confines of her physical reality while also trying to construe her existence in a meaningful form.

To elucidate the inauthentic responses to anti-Semitism, Sartre first states, "Authenticity, it is almost needless to say, consists in having a true and lucid consciousness of the situation, in assuming the responsibilities and risks that it involves, in accepting it in pride or humiliation, sometimes in horror and hate" (*Anti-Semite and Jew* 65). By relating this condition to Jewish identity, Sartre claims that authenticity, for Jews, means accepting and fully asserting their Jewish identity, while inauthenticity is attempting to conceal or deny it (*Anti-Semite* 65). Later he illustrates that inauthenticity manifests itself within a condition that he calls the "Jewish irony." Jewish irony, which is frequently directed against Jewish themselves, can be characterized by the fact that Jews are perpetually observing themselves as a consequence of being constantly observed by others. They take the initiative to see themselves from the perspective of others, which leads in a detachment from their own perspective and makes them an outsider instead of remaining authentic to their own identity (Sartre, *Anti-Semite* 70). Nevertheless, the inauthentic Jew, for Sartre, is simultaneously conscious of their Jewish identity, which influences their actions and demeanor. Despite their detachment

from other Jews, they nonetheless feel a sense of community. They may make an effort to deny their Jewish background, but it remains embedded in their hearts, and they endure the same hostility and degradation as other Jews. This results in a perpetual conflict between suppressing and embracing their Jewish identity as well as an "oscillation between feelings of pride and inferiority" (*Anti-Semite* 70). Sartre's descriptive analysis of Jewish identity in a struggle against anti-Semitism suggests a correlation between Lewis Gordon's rendition of "black antiblackness" and its possible traces on Thurman's Emma Lou's self-hatred.

Similar to the condition of the inauthentic Jew, Emma Lou problematizes her own identity by viewing it through an antiblack perspective. Her Blackness is not only related to her skin color but reified as a constant marker of a larger part of identity construction. In Sartre's analysis, many Jews may develop masochistic tendencies as a brief escape from their catastrophic and unavoidable situation. They feel in charge of themselves, yet society perpetually sees them through the filter of their Jewish identity. As a result, they experience a sense of ongoing struggle and a sense that they are at conflict with themselves. Some Jews may feel the need to be treated like objects, hated, loathed, or neglected as a way to alleviate the guilt they feel about their Jewish identity (*Anti-Semite* 77-78). It is also possible to associate Emma Lou's predisposition to exploitation in her relationships with a sense of masochistic compromise. Although she realizes that she has become the object of others' desires, she continues to tolerate them to reject her responsibility. Her desire to be white also manifests itself as an intentional flight from her responsibility as in turn it obliges her to negate her Blackness. To oppose this condition of self-hatred, Sartre prescribes an authentic rebellion in the Jews' case:

> Jewish authenticity consists in choosing oneself as Jew—that is, in realizing one's Jewish condition. The authentic Jew abandons the myth of the universal man; he knows himself and wills himself into history as a historic and damned creature; he ceases to run away from himself and to be ashamed of his own kind. He understands that society is bad; for the naïve monism of the inauthentic Jew he substitutes a social pluralism. He knows that he is one who stands apart, untouchable, scorned, proscribed — and it is as such that he asserts his being. . . . He stakes everything on human grandeur, for he accepts the obligation to live in a situation that is defined precisely by the fact that it is unliveable; he derives his pride from his humiliation. (*Anti-Semite* 98-99)

Although not as rebellious and determined as Sartre suggests in his prescription to Jewish authenticity, Emma Lou also realizes her condition embodying a Black subjectivity near the end of the novel. After placing her protagonist in a struggle with her identity, Thurman eventually shows that Emma Lou accepts her Blackness and her responsibility in her obsession with skin color. This climactic point in the novel indicates that Emma Lou's previous efforts to accomplish a sense of fulfillment only generates further conflicts in her identity construction. When Thurman describes her thinking about returning back home, she is seen in realization of her decisions' futility. Going home would just mean that she would have to start her life over again, "flying from one degree of unhappiness into another probably much more intense and tragic than the present one" (*The Blacker* 827). Her prior relocation attempts to other places like Los Angeles and Harlem in an effort to escape her problems had never been successful. Even if it is easy to do, going back is not a viable solution since it would not solve her problems (Thurman, *The Blacker* 827-28). Thurman further concludes that Emma Lou discerns the necessity to accept her situated reality, her Blackness:

> For the first time in her life she felt that she must definitely come to some conclusion about her life and govern herself accordingly. After all, she wasn't the only black girl alive. There were thousands on thousands who, like her, were plain, untalented, ordinary, and who, unlike herself, seemed to live in some degree of comfort. Was she alone to blame for her unhappiness? Although this had been suggested to her by others, she had been too obtuse to accept it. She had ever been eager to shift the entire blame on others when no doubt she herself was the major criminal. But having arrived at this—what did it solve or promise for the future? After all, it was not the abstractions of her case which at the present moment most needed elucidation. She could strive for a change of mental attitudes later. What she needed to do now was to accept her black skin as being real and unchangeable, to realize that certain things were, had been, and would be, and with this in mind begin life anew, always fighting, not so much for acceptance by other people, but for acceptance of herself by herself. (*The Blacker* 828)

Thus, Emma Lou confronts her self-hatred to designate an authentic identity for herself. She has become conscious of the extent to which she has diverted responsibility away from herself. She realizes that evading her responsibility does not offer a solution or ensure a healthier life. She recognizes the significance of accepting her black skin as a given facticity, an unchangeable aspect of who she is. Her attention transitions from looking for approval from others to accepting herself for who she really is. Her new attitude on life, one that is marked by constant struggle for recognition of her situated

Blackness, is built on this self-acceptance. She strives to develop an internal sense of authenticity and discover her own journey to fulfillment by accepting herself completely in her Blackness as in Sartre's prescription for the inauthentic Jew. Emma Lou's self-reflection reveals that she was in bad faith by holding others responsible for her predicament. By acknowledging the necessity for individual responsibility and a move toward authenticity, she initiates her existential venture.

In her attempt to accept her own identity, Emma Lou resembles Frantz Fanon's realization when he states, "I resolved, since it was impossible for me to get away from an inborn complex, to assert myself as a BLACK MAN. Since the other hesitated to recognize me, there remained only one solution: to make myself known" (115). However, Thurman seems to complicate Emma Lou's resolution with her final chapter's title, "Pyrrhic Victory." Although she seems to manage to secure an authentic existence, Emma Lou knows that her efforts do not necessarily lead to a complete sense of existence in her life. In this chapter, Emma Lou starts dating Benson Brown; however, her former boyfriend Alva convinces her into caring for his son after his mother abandons them. Through her employment as a teacher in Harlem, Emma Lou achieves financial independence, but she is not completely content and wishes to leave Alva. When she tries to tell that to Benson, she learns that he is planning to get married to her friend Gwendolyn, which disappoints her again. After this, she feels that "it was necessary that she do something about herself and her life and do it immediately" while also questioning whether "she exhausted all possibilities" after all the things she had to endure (Thurman, *The Blacker* 828). "Hadn't she explored every province of life and everywhere met the same problem?" (Thurman, *The Blacker* 828). Emma Lou closely associates her struggle with ending her relationship with Alva, and her fight seems to be conditioned by her effort to leave him. She finally leaves Alva to begin her new life, although finding it difficult to deny her love for him.

This conclusion, in Thurman's portrayal, presents a pyrrhic victory to Emma Lou as she is described in a fight that may end in failure. This portrayal is similar to another existentialist attitude that needs to be discussed. If Emma Lou acknowledges that she should fight even if she knows that she might fail, it can be questioned whether she can

also be characterized as an "absurd heroine" in her struggle from an existential lens. Emma Lou does emerge as part of the absurdities in her life with Thurman's paradoxical conclusion to his work, despite how untimely it may appear at the time period that he wrote his novel. In his *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), Albert Camus offers a perspective on the absurdity of life and the human predicament by relating his philosophy to Sisyphus's struggle. In the story, the gods punishes Sisyphus by making him carry a rock up a mountain, only for it to roll back down. They think that this is the worst punishment possible since it has no purpose and has no possibility of triumph. Sisyphus's story is employed by Camus as a metaphor for the human condition, in which humans are destined to carry out the same meaningless tasks repeatedly. Like Sisyphus, humans are doomed to a vicious cycle of struggle without prospective achievement. Accepting this absurdity and finding a way to appreciate the challenge is the only way to make sense of existence (Camus 75). This framework can be associated with how Emma Lou tries to act toward the experiences that she has and comes to her final resolution to continue fighting although she knows that it may not reach to a desired outcome.

Thurman seems to extend Emma Lou's existential crisis by repositioning her ultimate subjectivity within an acceptance of what she cannot comprehend before. When, for instance, she ruminates on her condition, Emma Lou asks: "What did the color of one's skin have to do with one's mentality or native ability?" (Thurman, *The Blacker* 716). As she compares herself with another student from the university, she "could not understand why there should be this difference in their social acceptance" (Thurman, *The Blacker* 717). The fact that her life has only offered irrationality to her does not, however, negate her attempts to construct a meaningful sense of existence. She, in a sense, as Camus puts it, "admits the irrational" (25) in the end of the novel by acknowledging her struggle and condition. Near the ending of the novel, Thurman depicts Emma Lou determined to "fight even though she lost, for she reasoned that even in losing she would win a pyrrhic victory" (*The Blacker* 829). Emma Lou's resolution to fight even if she is aware that she might lose corresponds to the absurdist disposition. She continues to fight even if the outcome is unresolved, which is analogous to Sisyphus who persists in rolling the rock up the hill. This shows Emma

Lou's recognition of the absurdity of her situation and a refusal to succumb to despair or abandonment.

As Friday Romanus Okpo explains, Camus's "version of the hero finds fulfillment in his experience even though this might be tragic" (2). Thurman's depiction both demonstrates how absurd it is for Emma Lou to be valued on the basis of skin color and initiates a reaction similar to Camus's absurd hero's response to the absurdity of life as he involves "in a struggle and knows he might not win" (Okpo 5). As she grapples with the restrictions and limitations placed on her by her social and racial setting, Emma Lou's existential predicament manifests a feeling of absurdity. Instead of trying to escape or transcend her given situation, she responds to it directly, acknowledging the materiality of her situated reality. Her perspective has changed radically as a result of accepting her facticity. She chooses to accept her condition instead of two other choices Camus offers: the nihilistic inclination toward suicide or the deceptive comfort of religious belief. Emma Lou admits the absurdity of her existence as a necessary component of her identity. Her final resolution serves as her pyrrhic victory that allows the way for her transcendence. Through her acceptance, she discovers the possibility of self-discovery and the creation of her own unique path in the face of absurdity.

This result, as it was previously suggested, can be considered as a step toward a Sartrean sense of authenticity against oppression while it is also possible to assume a Sisyphean acceptance as a consequence of Emma Lou's experiences perceived as absurdities. Thurman offers an extensive portrait that enables several readings of his protagonist's struggle while trying to depict an African American individual's attempt to construct an identity that can initiate the ways in which one can find meaning and fulfillment. Emma Lou's obsession with skin color necessitates her to negate her own Blackness which precipitates her anguish and dread since she cannot generate an authentic self in denial of her Blackness. After convincing herself to accept her condition, she seems to conclude that she is also responsible with what she experienced before. While trying to prescribe an identity construction path for African Americans, Thurman also successfully narrates a realistic account of a Black woman in the United

States during the Harlem Renaissance to allow reconsiderations for alternative ways of existence for Black people.

CHAPTER 3

RESPONSES TO NIHILISM IN LANGSTON HUGHES'S

NOT WITHOUT LAUGHTER (1930)

As a poet, the influence of Langston Hughes (1901-1967) transcends the realm of African American literature, since he is regarded as an integral part of the larger American literary canon. However, this influence does not take precedence over Hughes's leading role inside the African American literary tradition as his primary endeavor was to redefine African American identity. Similar to other Harlem Renaissance writers, Hughes made significant contributions towards the creation of alternative conceptions of Black subjectivity through his literary output. Scholars have predominantly focused on Hughes's poems in order to highlight his search for identity that is embodied in his writing. In line with previous chapters, the present chapter seeks to explore the link between Hughes's search for identity and existentialism by analyzing his novel, *Not Without Laughter* (1930). While Langston Hughes's poetry certainly provides valuable ground for an existentialist reading, the chapter will focus on how *Not Without Laughter* offers unique perspectives on African American identity within an existential framework reflecting Hughes's philosophical and political standpoint. Through the use of multiple characters that embody distinct existential attitudes, *Not Without Laughter* raises several questions that are closely aligned with existentialist philosophy regarding religion and the ways in which individuals define themselves.

Drawing connections between Hughes's personal life and his literary works is a pertinent effort as his essays and life experiences disclose clues about how he formed and contextualized his prose and poetry. In his autobiographical work, *The Big Sea* (1940), Hughes expounds upon his perspective on Harlem and his personal encounters. Arnold Rampersad praises Hughes's autobiography for its honest and straightforward prose, which rejects the more bitter and cynical modes of Black expression. He also compares Hughes's writing style favorably to that of other celebrated American authors, such as Ernest Hemingway and Mark Twain (20). In a chapter dedicated to his initial trip to Africa, Hughes shares a noteworthy dialogue with people of African descent with his plain style and frank expression. Upon his arrival, Hughes tries to explain to the

Africans that their problems are actually very similar to those of African Americans. However, their response to his statement was rather startling for Hughes: "But they only laughed at me and shook their heads and said: 'You, white man! You, white man!'" (*The Big Sea* 118). Hughes reflects on this experience stating that "It was the only place in the world where I've ever been called a white man" (*The Big Sea* 118). This unexpected encounter can be juxtaposed with what Fanon calls "the fact of blackness." A contrasting example to Hughes's astonishment at being called a white man is an incident in which Fanon was called out with the words "Look, a Negro!" (109). This hypervisible sensation undoubtedly stands in stark contrast to Hughes's experience. However, since Hughes strongly identifies with his Blackness and commonality with other Blacks, this moment also functions as a negating activity for Hughes as in Fanon's formulation of bodily schema.

Referring to his own experience, Fanon states, "In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third-person consciousness" (110). This dissonance between the body and the self is a condition that forms "an atmosphere of certain uncertainty" (Fanon 110-111). In Hughes's case, this uncertainty is twofold: being perceived as a white, unfamiliar body by Africans, and as a Black inferior body in the United States evoking Du Bois's concept of "double consciousness." To demonstrate these two divergent perceptions of his body, Hughes reports the time when in Texas returning from his trip to Mexico, how he was treated by a white southerner: "I noticed him staring at me intently, as if trying to puzzle out something. He stared at me a long time. Then, suddenly, with a loud cry, the white man jumped up and shouted: 'You're a nigger, ain't you?' And rushed out of the car as if pursued by a plague" (*The Big Sea* 66). Hughes also shares an incident where he was denied an ice cream soda at a St. Louis train station because of his color. When he was asked by the clerk whether he was colored or Mexican, and upon acknowledging his Blackness, Hughes was refused service. These instances, which more closely align with Fanon's encounter, show that Hughes openly shares his own experiences to demonstrate the lived realities of Black people in his particular position. Hughes's sense of self and conceptualization of his own identity are affected by his personal encounters. Commenting on his experience

after these incidents, Hughes states, "I knew I was home in the U.S.A." (*The Big Sea* 67). Thus, it could be argued that Hughes's presence in the United States as an African American is accentuated by exclusion. However, he is conscious of his efforts to express himself and construct his own identity through his literary works, which are driven by his phenomenological experiences. Regardless of several "others" shaping his existence, as described in Sartre's formulation, he attempts to establish a self-affirming and authentic perspective by using his artistic talent.

In his introduction to *A Historical Guide to Langston Hughes*, Steven C. Tracy primarily addresses the fact that Hughes "recognized the need for his art to take a sociopolitical stand, to make an art for life that affirmed the dignity and humanity of human beings" (Introduction 9). This recognition is correlated with the conceptualization of the African American existential position, which centers on the reclaiming and reaffirming of the humanity of Black people. In Hughes's attempt to use his literary expression representing African American identity, it is possible to observe the influences of several factors and specific writers. Tracy particularizes these influences by maintaining that Hughes's work may have been unconsciously affected by African ancestral history that includes the idea of art as a social and practical component of daily life. Additionally, the legacy of slavery alongside the necessity for a powerful moral and artistic presence to promote the sociopolitical and spiritual independence of Black people may have also had a significant impact. Among African American thinkers, W. E. B. Du Bois, Tracy remarks, stimulates "Hughes in his quest for personal, racial, and human fulfillment and dignity" (Introduction 10). Tracy also reminds that folk culture has a significant influence on Langston Hughes's artistic aesthetic, from which he drew "wisdom, passion, directness, energy, and creativity" (Introduction 10).

Langston Hughes himself expresses his appreciation for W. E. B. Du Bois by emphasizing how *Souls of Black Folk* had a significant influence on him during his youth, and the mere idea of meeting W. E. B. Du Bois left him astonished (*The Big Sea* 110). Reciprocally, as Donna Akiba Sullivan Harper states in her article, Du Bois also showed his admiration for Hughes by publishing his work in *The Crisis*. He ensured that only the poetry that he approved of was published since he considered the magazine to

be an exceptional project. His frequent inclusion of Hughes's works in the publication indicated the extent to which he regarded them (Harper 31). Hughes and Du Bois agreed on the crucial role of literature and art in defining the existence of African Americans through self-expression. They highlighted the significance of this process due to their belief that art had the ability to influence the perception of the African American identity. According to Du Bois, the white audience demands racial prejudice from artists, which distorts truth and accountability as it pertains to Black people. He argues that the young and growing Black public also imposes constraints on Black artists, stemming from traditions inherited from white patrons, such as shame around sex and superstition in religion ("Criteria" 67). He contends that in order to produce art that is authentic to their own experiences, Black artists have to transcend the limitations defined for them by the white public. Furthermore, they need to establish themselves as the ones who can truly appraise their own work and cultivate a receptive perspective ("Criteria" 67).

In his well-known essay, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," which was a response to George Schuyler's "The Negro Art-Hokum," Langston Hughes also stresses the value of African American artists forming a distinct and confident voice that is defined by themselves. Hughes initially raises a cautionary remark regarding the endeavors of certain writers who seek to distance themselves from their Blackness in an attempt to be regarded solely as artists. Hughes identifies a problematic aspect in this approach, since it raises concerns about the authenticity of the Black artist's expression and experiences:

> One of the most promising of the young Negro poets said to me once, "I want to be a poet-not a Negro poet," meaning, I believe, "I want to write like a white poet"; meaning, subconsciously, "I would like to be a white poet"; meaning behind that, "I would like to be white." And I was sorry the young man said that, for no great poet has ever been afraid of being himself. And I doubted then that, with his desire to run away spiritually from his race, this boy would ever be a great poet. But this is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America-this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible. ("The Negro Artists" 55)

In Hughes's proposition, the young Black poet's attempt to adhere to the predominant white standards, which in turn reveals a deeper desire to be acknowledged as white,

indicates an urge to be a poet without a form of Black identity. Hughes contends that the growth of authentic black art is restricted by this desire. As Micheal Antonio Callaway states, "This is an articulation of Black subjectivity and a particular kind of identity. It is an argument about life, culture and language and urges Blacks to be true to a version of an authentic self" (46). Having an inauthentic perspective, the poet Hughes depicts ignores their own situated reality and experiences.

Hughes later states that the "artist must be free to choose what he does, certainly, but he must also never be afraid to do what he might choose" ("The Negro Artist" 59). Black artists, Hughes suggests, have a variety of resources within their own cultural and racial context, including the nuanced relationships between Black and white people in America. He contends that Black people's distinctive cultural practices and experiences, such as their use of rhythm, warmth, and humor, can be included in their artistic expressions. Ultimately, Black artists have unlimited potential to produce significant and influential works that represent their identity and experiences ("The Negro Artist" 56-57). This potential, for Hughes, stems from lower classes to which he attaches great importance. The ordinary lives of African Americans who reside in areas such as Chicago's State Street and Washington's Seventh Street are celebrated by Langston Hughes. He argues that their profound sense of individuality and lack of concern for adhering to white culture and standards serve as a rich source of inspiration for artists. Hughes contrasts them with the more well-educated and wealthy Black people who could try to instruct artists on what to create. He claims that the ideal Black artist, one who is not reluctant to be authentic to himself and his culture, may be found among the common people ("The Negro Artist" 56). Although both Du Bois and Hughes share a similar perspective on the importance of artistic self-expression free from constraints, their disagreement stems from their differing views on how to depict Black art. As Emily Bernard specifies, while Langston Hughes and others such as Wallace Thurman argued for the autonomy of Black artists to represent Black people with both positive and negative sides, Du Bois subscribed to the view that Black art should constantly promote a positive image of them (36).

Hughes's perspective can also be linked to Alain Locke's prescription of Black novelists in which he urges them to demonstrate the limitless range of options available to humans and to make them accessible and meaningful in the world of the African American subject (Eze 70). By attempting to restore their sense of existence as human beings, Harlem Renaissance writers reconceptualize the human condition upon which their identity is constructed with a sense of authenticity. This reconceptualization, especially focusing on the ideas deriving from freedom and self-determination against despair and anguish, particularly emerges in Langston Hughes's works. Linking literature with existentialism, Jean-Paul Sartre also discusses the role of the writer while producing literary works. He maintains that regardless of one's opinions, literature has the power to initiate a battle which is "a certain way of wanting freedom" (*"What is Literature"* 69). Later, he particularly mentions Richard Wright and claims that "in trying to become clear about his own personal situation, he [Wright] clarifies theirs [African American readers] for them. He mediates, names, and shows them the life they lead from day to day in its immediacy, the life they suffer without finding words to formulate their sufferings" (*"What is Literature"* 79). With this function, literature does not only present possibilities for African Americans as Alain Locke would favor but also offers a demonstration of the lived experience of Black people. In Sartre's projection, Wright reflects the condition of African Americans in a specific cultural and historical context often in an existential mode. This self-conscious effort was also employed by Hughes's writing with his emphasis on folk culture.

Alain Locke highlights the value of self-expression in art, which derives from both an individual's personal and collective experience. For Locke, there are various advantages to drawing on "the riches of folk experience." In its initial effect, it recognizes and legitimizes the significance of that heritage. Secondly, it presents to those who are constituents of that heritage a sense of agency, reaffirming the importance of their past and urging them to speak out. Furthermore, it pushes individuals who are not necessarily a part of that collective experience to listen more closely (Eze 53). According to Mark A. Sanders, "Hughes's approach to folk culture, most often in an urban context, validated under-class blacks as legitimate poetic subject matter, and more generally celebrated a fuller range of black representation, one that would include the

uglier or seamier sides of black life" (107). Hughes's attitude derives from his own lived experiences and his conscious attempt to render folk culture visible in his writing.

Hughes's emphasis on the blues and jazz in relation to folk expression is a defining feature of his writing. He defines jazz as "one of the inherent expressions" of African American culture ("Negro Artist" 58). Tracy specifies the role of African American vernacular music in Hughes's works as "a reclamation of heritage, a construction of identity, an assertion of voice, and a seizure of freedom" ("Langston Hughes" 113). In his dissertation, which focuses on the function of the blues and jazz on several novels by African American writers, Wilfred Raussert suggests that Hughes's works exemplify a groundbreaking use of African American music as a cultural foundation. Raussert claims that Hughes uses music to raise awareness of the complexities of African American culture, particularly among white audiences with his *Not Without Laughter*. He devotes a considerable amount of the novel to depictions of music and dance performances, which serve both a descriptive and expressive purpose (42). Raussert's analysis suggests that music, particularly the blues and jazz, plays a significant role in Hughes's writing while he aims to depict folk culture. However, the function of music in *Not Without Laughter* appears to have a broader purpose in expressing a distinct identity construction, as seen through the various characters that contribute to the narrative. While explaining why he wrote the novel, Hughes states, "I wanted to write about a typical Negro family in the Middle West, about people like those I had known in Kansas" (*The Big Sea* 305). Hughes's simple exposition of the novel aligns with the previous discussion related to Hughes's objective of portraying ordinary African American life. This simplicity in explanation, however, is complicated with various perspectives demonstrated in the novel. With this function, *Not Without Laughter* offers alternative ways of identity formation for an African American young male. Music as part of a cultural formation process is one of the ways in which Sandy, the young protagonist of the novel, could identify with his culture and potentially find a more fulfilling sense of self.

Not Without Laughter is set in a small town in Kansas and centers around Sandy Rogers, a young African American boy, who has intimate relationships with his family members.

As the story begins, Sandy's father, Jimboy is absent, and his mother, Annjee works as a domestic servant for a white family. Sandy's grandmother, Aunt Hager Williams, takes care of the family and guides Sandy. Aunt Hager has two other daughters besides Sandy's mother, Annjee. Harriett is the youngest daughter who rebels against Aunt Hager's ideas regarding religion and tolerance towards racism while she aspires to become a blues singer. Tempy, who is the oldest daughter, is portrayed as a Black person defending her race by adapting to a white, middle class culture. Hughes initially focuses on the differences between Harriett and Aunt Hager, which creates one of the main conflicts in the novel until Jimboy's return. When Jimboy returns, this conflict intensifies as Aunt Hager does not appreciate Jimboy's bohemian lifestyle and his musical talent in the blues. With a carnival coming to their town, Harriett decides to leave to find the joy and fulfillment that she seeks. After a short time, Jimboy moves away from home again, leaving Sandy with other members of the family. Annjee falls ill, and Sandy recognizes their financial struggles while his mother cannot work. Harriett's request for money to return home later exacerbates the family's financial situation.

When she recovers and saves enough money, with the aim of meeting Jimboy, Annjee leaves home as well. After Annjee's departure, Sandy obtains his first job at a barbershop where he observes customers exchanging stories and experiences. He later finds another job as a bellhop's assistant in a hotel where he experiences racism and discrimination. It is also revealed to Aunt Hager that Harriett has worked as a prostitute for a time period. Aunt Hager becomes sick and many people visit their home for support including Sandy's aunt Tempy. Annjee, who is away with Jimboy, cannot visit Aunt Hager before her death. Angry at both Annjee and Harriet, Tempy takes Sandy with her, attempting to educate him further beside her. She tries to encourage Sandy to read more and become a member of middle class with proper education. Sandy seems to be enjoying reading writers such as W. E. B. Du Bois while staying with Tempy and her husband Arkins. However, he cannot completely associate himself with their middle class values. While reading news from an article, one day, he sees that Harriet has actually become a famous blues singer. Later, Sandy's mother calls him to the city, Chicago, to help her and work as an elevator attendant because Jimboy has left her

again. Although Sandy goes to the city, he does not derive pleasure from his experience there and decides to continue his education. Harriett, who has gained her economic independence and understood the importance of education for Sandy, offers to help him financially in achieving his goal.

Hughes does not necessarily present a conclusive outcome for Sandy, which might ensure a stable future for him. Instead, he focuses on the process of Sandy's development while he observes his family members, each portraying an alternative way of pursuing a meaningful life for an African American individual. While experiencing several encounters of discrimination, Sandy tries to figure out his position in life. It is apparent that Hughes applies Du Bois's ideas about Black individuals and personal dilemmas. As diverse life paths are depicted with his family, Sandy attempts to create his own sense of meaning from what he observes. Although all of the characters within the novel share ways of self-determination in life to follow a meaningful life, they reveal separate paths to achieve this goal. As George Philbert Cunningham explains in his dissertation focusing on biographical elements in some of Hughes's works, the narrative of *Not Without Laughter* bears a resemblance to Hughes's life in Kansas and Chicago. According to Cunningham, Hughes employs the perspective he established in the 1920s to translate a variety of memories from his own youth into his novel (252). Cunningham also emphasizes that the central premise of the novel is a "spiritual quest" that closely parallels Hughes's own, and it not only derives inspiration from many important episodes in Hughes's life but also revolves around this quest (253). Similar to Hughes, Sandy discovers that his family's traditions were not relevant to his life, and he must "find his way amid a variety of options in a changing world" (Cunningham 253). Thus, echoing the works of Larsen and Thurman, Hughes's novel also initiates a quest for self-discovery that can be seen through an existential lens, since Sandy experiences an existential crisis that jeopardizes his sense of self and identity. Sandy initiates a conscious choice to forge an authentic way of existence. However, unlike Larsen and Thurman, Hughes uses a narrative method that entails utilizing other characters to highlight potential paths to self-discovery rather than focusing entirely on the protagonist.

In early parts of the novel, Hughes focuses on the conflict between Aunt Hager and Harriett by exploring the discourse of religion in African American culture. This conflict is noteworthy, since one of the ways existential philosophy is manifested in the novel is through the discussion of religion and the concept of theodicy. Aunt Hager represents a traditional perspective, placing great importance on Christianity and encouraging religious adherence within her family. For Aunt Hager, forgiveness is necessary for Black people, even in the face of mistreatment by white people. In her essay, Angela Flournoy argues that in Aunt Hager's opinion, forgiving others, especially those who may not deserve it as a result of their ignorance or lack of understanding, is an appropriate way to take action. Forgiveness provides her with comfort and peace (1). Flournoy also suggests that Aunt Hager's "benevolence is her own existential armor" (1). Harriett, on the other hand, represents a direct rebellion against Aunt Hager's portrayal of traditional Christian values and the notion of responding to injustice with benevolence. She does not subscribe to the traditional African American perspective on religion and resists her mother's attempt in counseling her "to be good" and "follow Jesus" (Hughes, *Not Without Laughter* 35). Harriett responds to her mother's counseling with a direct, vulgar statement: "You old Christian fool!" (Hughes, *NWL* 35).

This intense conflict between Aunt Hager and Harriett can be contextualized and analyzed through a broader discussion in the field of Black theological studies. William R. Jones's *Is God a White Racist?* is considered to be one of the earliest works related to the question of theodicy in an antiblack world. Theodicy seeks to affirm the righteousness of an all-knowing, all-powerful God in the face of the presence of evil in the universe. Jones poses an unsettling question in his book, "Is God a White Racist?," in an attempt to stimulate readers and Black theologians to reevaluate their conclusions and beliefs (xix). Jones contends that the concept of "divine racism" is prevalent in Western religious discourse since the idea of a white, Eurocentric God has been used to legitimize racism. African Americans have been adversely impacted by this as they have been oppressed and subjugated by white people who adhere to operating in the name of God. Jones argues that theology requires an entirely new paradigm that is more inclusive and takes excluded people's experiences and perspectives into account. As a

form of theology that emphasizes liberation, Black theology should have theodicy as its primary field of study. It should strive to explain how God responds to people's pain while acknowledging that oppression and suffering are a part of human existence (xxv). According to Jones, oppression is a form of negative suffering that is undesirable. However, when pain is given a positive connotation, as in masochism, it is embraced and endured voluntarily. The liberation theologian must offer an explanation that considers pain as unfavorable and unjustified by God or nature in order to end oppression, which is the primary cause of all suffering. In essence, the theologian must engage in the theodicy question in order to desanctify suffering and empower the oppressed to confront it (xxv).

Jones's suggestion for Black theologians is a "secular humanist" approach. According to his resolution, "Man must act as if he were the ultimate valuator or the ultimate agent in human history or both" (xxviii). This lessens, Jones suggests, if not entirely eradicates God's responsibility for the errors and atrocities of human history. Lewis Gordon asserts that this approach presents an existential perspective with "a form of authenticity" (*Bad Faith* 144). However, the "concept of God in itself is a paradigm case of bad faith from the standpoint of Sartrean ontology" (Gordon, *Bad Faith* 156). Gordon explains that Black people must reflect on themselves in order to prevent the image of God as white, which poses an ontological problem. "Pre-reflecting" is a path that leads away from entities and towards nothingness, and pure pre-reflection is an ontological awareness based on this path. The reflective act is required to question pre-reflective decisions, such as the desire for a white God in a system that is antiblack (*Bad Faith* 149). Whiteness has replaced God as the ultimate object of desire in an antiblack world. This ideal is embodied by the white man, who stands for both the desired subject and object. For Gordon, the path to finding true humanity is to denounce this oppressive ideal (*Bad Faith* 150). By applying a Sartrean perspective with existential parameters, Gordon offers a more atheistic turn in response to Jones's resolution:

> Authenticity in this world therefore becomes a peculiar demand: that the white man abandons being God and the black man rejects not being a man; the former must step down to humanity, which amounts to stepping up to authenticity, and the latter should step up to humanity, which amounts to stepping up to authenticity as well. The result is an egalitarian goal of human reality. Authenticity in an antiblack

world is therefore the realization that human reality is itself a project. (*Bad Faith* 150)

In Gordon's formulation, it is necessary to conceptualize an "Impossible God" in order to eliminate racism and construct a world in which people are able to embrace the distinctive features of their identity. If everyone committed themselves to overcoming antiblackness, Gordon notes, this God would be rejected by all rather than being an ideal deity that is unattainable (*Bad Faith* 157).

In the context of the discussion between Aunt Hager and Harriett, Hughes problematizes God's position in Black suffering and offers potential responses to "God's being a white racist." It is evident that Harriett favors a complete rejection of the concept of God in an antiblack world as in Gordon's formulation. Hughes depicts Harriett as acting in an especially confident and assertive attitude when she confronts her mother in discussions regarding religion: "[T]he church has made a lot of you old Negroes act like Salvation Army people, . . . Afraid to even laugh on Sundays, afraid for a girl and boy to look at one another, or for people to go to dances. Your old Jesus is white, I guess, that's why! He's white and stiff and don't like niggers!" (*NWL* 32). This angry tone is contrasted by Aunt Hager's approach which is characterized by a highly religious perspective. For instance, after a cyclone that opens the novel, Aunt Hager tries to adapt a positive attitude when talking to one of her neighbors by saying, "Let's move on down de block, Sister, an' see what mo' de Lawd has 'stroyed or spared this evenin'. He's gin us plenty moonlight after de storm so we po' humans can see this lesson o' His'n to a sinful world" (Hughes, *NWL* 8). This initial depiction of Aunt Hager illustrates her ability to find meaning even in a disaster by referring to God.

Harriett does not only reject the Black community's association with the church and God, but also remarks on how white people are not actually religious themselves: "Darkies do like the church too much, but white folks don't care nothing about it at all. They're too busy getting theirs out of this world, not from God. And I don't blame 'em, except that they're so mean to niggers" (Hughes, *NWL* 53). She also adds, "They're right, though, looking out for themselves . . . and yet I hate 'em for it. They don't have to mistreat us besides, do they? (Hughes, *NWL* 53). In response to this, Aunt Hager

states, "It ain't Christian, chile. If you don't like 'em, pray for 'em, but don't feel evil against 'em. I was in slavery, Harrie, an' I been knowin' white folks all ma life, an' they's good as far as they can see—but when it comes to po' niggers, they just can't see far, that's all" (Hughes, *NWL* 53). Aunt Hager's response broadens the scope of the discussion by referring to the issue of class. Class discrimination along with racism is also raised by Hughes as he contextualizes his book with several characters having different backgrounds. Tempy, as a representative of a middle-class Black woman, for instance, is portrayed as a member of the family who is subject to criticism by others, especially Harriett. However, Tempy is also preoccupied with her Black identity having a race-conscious perspective. Thus, Hughes does not necessarily exclude other classes from the discussion of racism, but rather demonstrates how racial identity may shape people in different social circles.

While she agrees with the effect of class as part of the religious discourse, Harriett reaches the conclusion that every white person is prejudiced against Black people based on her own experiences especially in school. She believes that religion is simply another tool to manipulate and control Black people and make them comply with the current unjust conditions.

> They wouldn't have a single one of us around if they could help it. It don't matter to them if we're shut out of a job. It don't matter to them if niggers have only the back row at the movies. It don't matter to them when they hurt our feelings without caring and treat us like slaves down South and like beggars up North. No, it don't matter to them. . . . White folks run the world, and the only thing colored folks are expected to do is work and grin and take off their hats as though it don't matter. . . . O, I hate 'em! (Hughes, *NWL* 59)

As opposed to Harriett's approach, Aunt Hager's strategy for overcoming the difficulties that Black people confront is to draw strength and relief from her Christian religion, which enables her to forgive those who did damage to her and radiate hope for a more promising future. While counseling Sandy, Aunt Hager states:

> White peoples maybe mistreats you an' hates you, but when you hates 'em back, you's de one what's hurted, 'cause hate makes yo' heart ugly—that's all it does. It closes up de sweet door to life an' makes ever'thing small an' mean an' dirty. Honey, there ain't no room in de world fo' hate, white folks hatin' niggers, an'

> niggers hatin' white folks. There ain't no room in this world fo' nothin' but love,
> Sandy chile. That's all they's room fo'— nothin' but love. (Hughes, *NWL* 132)

Aunt Hager's insistence on love instead of hate results from her religious belief which offers her a sense of ontological security. Christianity, for Aunt Hager, is an existential response to nihilism which she may face in the absence of any reasoning for her suffering. Both Aunt Hager's and Harriett's positions are variations of responses to nihilism. While discussing the impact of nihilism on the experiences of African Americans, Lewis Gordon proposes an existential categorization of the struggles of Black people against oppression, "for self-value also emerges from valuing one's desire to bring meaning to one's existence" (*Existentia* 15). Cornel West's argument related to nihilism and how Black people respond to it is of significance as he also emphasizes the importance of "love" for the affirmation of one's own value. For West, nihilism has always been the major threat for African Americans' existence in the United States. The struggle that they engage in against oppression and dehumanization is a struggle against nihilism. Instead of focusing on oppression and exploitation, West addresses "the nihilistic threat—that is, loss of hope and absence of meaning" (*Race Matters* 33). He claims that "as long as hope remains and meaning is preserved, the possibility of overcoming oppression stays alive" (*Race Matters* 33).

West claims that Black foremothers and forefathers were able to build cultural structures that served as powerful barriers of protection in the face of this nihilistic threat. They established ways of life "that embodied values of service and sacrifice, love and care, discipline and excellence," (*Race Matters* 34) which were essential to the creation and sustenance of communities. Religious and civic institutions were the fundamental cultural pillars that supported and upheld familial and social networks in the black community (*Race Matters* 34). West's resolution to the nihilistic threat is similar to Aunt Hager's proposition that promotes "nothin' but love." West states, "Nihilism is not overcome by arguments or analyses; it is tamed by love and care. Any disease of the soul must be conquered by a turning of one's soul. This turning is done through one's own affirmation of one's worth—an affirmation fueled by the concern of others" (*Race Matters* 37). By relying on religious and cultural traditions to preserve her

values and beliefs, Aunt Hager seems to adopt a similar response to the nihilistic threat that Black people have.

Devon R. Johnson, with his detailed analysis of nihilism and its implications on the lived experience of Black people, proposes an opposite response to nihilism, which he defines as "strong black nihilism." From the outset, similar to West's premise, Johnson also maintains that the threat of nihilism triggered by racism can be opposed by facilitating the creation of alternative value systems. Nevertheless, he argues that individuals who can acknowledge the intrinsic nihilistic nature of their predicament without sinking into nihilism themselves could transcend merely tolerating it and they could actively attempt to ameliorate their existential situation (*A Philosophical Analysis* 10). Johnson claims that West follows a similar method to Kierkegaard when he approaches the existential condition of Black people. For Kierkegaard, nihilism is both a disease that causes despair and a sin negating God's presence. The only way to prevail over nihilism and suspend sin, according to Kierkegaard and West, is to redefine oneself in the framework of God's perpetual existence. To defeat the nihilistic threat, the existential being must be dependent on God (*A Philosophical* 31). Johnson asserts that antiblack racism, "for West, conditions black despair and nihilism. Thus, West suggested an appropriation of Kierkegaard's response to existential despair and nihilism" (*A Philosophical* 31). Black nihilism needs an authentic sense of self, which can only be obtained by joining "the black American Christian church tradition," according to the Kierkegaardian component of West's investigation of the situation of Black people (Johnson, *A Philosophical* 32).

Johnson does not necessarily identify nihilism as a threat; therefore, he offers an alternative evaluation of the existential condition of Black people. To do that, he subscribes to Nietzsche's concept of "active nihilism." He conceptualizes Nietzsche's claim that the weak nihilism of modern European philosophy seeks to provide a metaphysical foundation for the value of human life. Strong or active nihilism, in contrast, is capable of valuing without depending on metaphysical meaning (*A Philosophical* 94). According to Johnson, "Nietzsche's valuation of human existence does not invoke the moralistic logic of goodness or badness, as did Schopenhauer and

Kant, but rather it invokes the languages of strength and weakness" (*A Philosophical* 96). Claiming that West's analysis oversimplifies the complexity and dynamism of black nihilism, Johnson applies what he calls "strong black nihilism" to the phenomenological condition of Blackness to further discuss alternative responses to antiblack racism. For Johnson, Frantz Fanon is the representative of a strong black nihilist response. According to Johnson, Fanon employs a strategy that exposes the unfiltered realities of antiblack racism and seeks to destroy unhealthy beliefs while erecting healthier ones. He enables the "existential truth" to surface and seeks the commitments to freedom and humanity to be shifted into action by exposing the root causes of attitudes that promote racism. As a result of this process, "strong nihilistic universal human values" arise (Johnson, *A Philosophical* 157).

Analyzing Aunt Hager's attitude in the context of West's conceptualization of religion as a source of meaning for African Americans also enables an examination of Harriett's case with Johnson's interpretation of strong black nihilism. Harriett does not refrain from understanding her conditions as a Black woman in an antiblack society. She acknowledges her condition and tries to shape it in accordance with what she wishes for in life. She does not depend on any metaphysical source to do that as in Johnson's conception of strong black nihilist response to the situated reality of Black people. Regarding her personal decisions about her religious belief, she remarks, "Seems like all the good-time people are bad, and all the old Uncle Toms and mean, dried-up, long-faced niggers fill the churches. I don't never intend to join a church if I can help it" (Hughes, *NWL* 33). Harriett does not subscribe to the notion that religion could make her triumph over her problems. She seeks meaning in other pursuits instead, namely music and dance.

Influenced by this conflict between his aunt and grandmother, Sandy also contemplates on the question of God. He even questions the nature of God, for instance, after he could not receive the sled he wanted for the Christmas: "God didn't care if people were black, did He? . . . What was God? Was He a man or a lamb or what? . . . Did God love people who told fairy-stories and lied to kids about storks and Santa Claus? . . . Santa Claus was no good, anyhow! God damn Santa Claus for not bringing him the sled he

wanted Christmas! It was all a lie about Santa Claus!” (Hughes, *NWL* 126). Throughout the novel, Sandy seems to develop his understanding of religion by being a keen observer of other people’s beliefs and actions. Later, when his aunt Tempy gave him a book called “The Doors of Life,” which is a Christian book for teenagers, Hughes depicts Sandy becoming more certain about his doubts in God and Christianity:

> He understood then why many old Negroes said: “Take all this world and give me Jesus!” It was because they couldn’t get this world anyway—it belonged to the white folks. They alone had the power to give or withhold at their back doors. . . . And no door at all for Negroes if they wanted to attend the Rialto Theatre, or join the Stanton Y.M.C.A., or work behind the grilling at the National Bank. The Doors of Life. . . . God damn that simple-minded book that Tempy had given him! What did an old white minister know about the doors of life for him and . . . all the black and brown and yellow youngsters standing on the threshold of the great beginning in a Western town called Stanton? What did an old white minister know about the doors of life anywhere? And, least of all, the doors to a Negro’s life? (*NWL* 189)

Sandy’s doubts even instigate his existential declaration: “I don’t want heaven! I want to live first!” (Hughes, *NWL* 189). This declaration is Sandy’s resolution to the question of God and his rejection of the traditional African American perspective that upholds religion. Hughes shows Sandy’s growing inclination towards Harriett’s position, in contrast to Aunt Hager’s passive response to the reality of their struggle. Throughout the final stages of the novel, when Sandy starts to work as an elevator attendant, he shows a clear preference for his aunt Harriett’s stance. He openly states, “I’m more like Harriett—not wanting to be a servant at the mercies of white people for ever. . . . I want to do something for myself, by myself. . . . Free” (Hughes, *NWL* 210). Sandy’s statement can be seen as an intentional attempt to reject the conventional African American subjectivity towards religion and embrace alternative value structures in an antiblack world. His quest is an attempt to his existential freedom and responsibility. This form of “strong nihilism” as formulated by Johnson, offers Sandy the option to be active rather than passive. The passive or weak form of nihilism, as exemplified by Aunt Hager’s views, presents the affirmation of values set by a religious worldview.

Although Sandy does not affiliate himself with Aunt Hager’s understanding of the condition of Blackness in the United States, he does not completely ignore his grandmother’s position. He empathizes with his grandmother’s suggestions to make him

a successful individual. Aunt Hager idealizes Booker T. Washington for Sandy's future. While she prepares Sandy for school, she remarks, "If de Lawd lets me live, I's gwine make a edicated man out o' him. He's gwine be another Booker T. Washington" (Hughes, *NWL* 99). As Asselin Charles suggests in his thesis, which offers an analysis of Hughes's works as the precursor of the Negritude movement, "Sandy understands the nature and extent of oppression better than his grandmother, and so rejects her assessment of the situation of the race. On the other hand, he agrees with her on the necessity to transcend the situation and do one's individual best for a better future" (112). Even Harriett, near the end of the novel after Aunt Hager dies, indicates that she agrees with Aunt Hager's emphasis on the importance of education when she explains to Annjee that Sandy should continue his education: "You and me was foolish all right, breaking mama's heart, leaving school, but Sandy can't do like us. He's gotta be what his grandma Hager wanted him to be—able to help the black race, Annjee! You hear me? Help the whole race!" (Hughes, *NWL* 217). Sandy himself wishes to continue his education by reminding himself that he will not disappoint Aunt Hager.

After Aunt Hager's death, Sandy lives with his aunt Tempy for a time period. It is obvious that Sandy does not favor Tempy's or her husband Arkins Siles's conception of Blackness either. Hughes depicts Tempy and Arkins as successful examples of assimilation. While describing Tempy, Hughes writes, "Colored people certainly needed to come up in the world, Tempy thought, up to the level of white people—dress like white people, talk like white people, think like white people—and then they would no longer be called 'niggers'" (*NWL* 173). Sandy also feels the pressure from his aunt to adopt his behaviors according to white norms when he lives with the Siles family. For instance, when Sandy says "I ain't" to respond to his aunt, Tempy corrects him by warning, "I certainly don't want my white neighbors to hear you saying 'ain't' . . . You've come to live with me now and you must talk like a gentleman" (Hughes, *NWL* 174). Sandy's rejection of Tempy's model of identity construction is portrayed even before he begins to live with the Siles family. When Tempy gives a volume of *Anderson's Fairy Tales* as a Christmas present to Sandy, he does not accept the present and throws it under the stove. This rejection symbolizes Sandy's denial of the values that Tempy represents. When Aunt Hager wants him to pick the book from the stove,

Sandy says, "I won't! I like my sled what you-all gave me, but I don't want no old book from Tempy! I won't pick it up!" (Hughes, *NWL* 113). Although he knows that his grandmother will whip him for that, he accepts the conditions firmly and rejects to accept the gift from Tempy.

Hughes also shows Tempy's and her husband's approach to music: "Blues and spirituals Tempy and her husband hated because they were too Negro" (*NWL* 173). Sandy's rejection of Tempy's path for his future can also be linked to her lack of interest in African American folk culture and music particularly, since Sandy's father, Jimboy is a talented blues singer himself. He is another example of an authentic portrayal that Hughes distinguishes. As a guitarist and blues singer, he always travels and performs in different parts of the country. Although it is not as obvious as his affinity for Harriett, Sandy also seems to appreciate Jimboy's confidence and musical talent. Hughes describes Jimboy's effect on others within the family by reminding, "When Jimboy was home, you couldn't get lonesome or blue" (*NWL* 25). Harriett and Jimboy have a special relationship in which Jimboy supports and stimulates her artistic ability and encourages her to discover new ways to express and appreciate African American art and culture. She thus develops an improved awareness of the oppression that exists in society and acquires a self-assured association with the culture (Charles 114). Sandy's mother, Annjee, is probably the least influential character in Sandy's quest for his identity. She seems to be aware of her conditions; however, she does not try to change her conditions. Despite Jimboy's lack of responsibility and disregard for her, she has an obsession with him and appears to love him. With all these characters, Hughes offers alternative identity constructions for an African American boy growing up in a family with generational and class differences. Although Sandy tries to benefit from all of the family members, Hughes places emphasis on the strong responses to oppression within the family. Harriett, in the end, becomes a successful blues singer. As Asselin Charles indicates, for Hughes, "rebellion of any sort is a positive act, no matter the cost" (115).

Apart from his characters' portrayal suggesting a strong nihilist response to antiblack racism, Hughes's novel, in its entirety, highlights the importance of "laughter" as a

means of sustenance for Black people's existence. The novel's title, "not without laughter," does not simply refer to the memories Hughes remembers, it also signifies a further strategy to confront nihilism. As part of the chapter in which Sandy goes to a pool hall to socialize, Hughes depicts a crowd of men singing and telling stories to each other in a chaotic atmosphere. While describing them, Hughes mentions his novel's title for the first time, to simply reveal the importance of "laughter" for African Americans:

> Then, often, arguments would begin—boastings, proving and fending; or telling of exploits with guns, knives, and razors, with cops and detectives, with evil women and wicked men; out-bragging and outlying one another, all talking at once. Sometimes they would create a racket that could be heard for blocks. To the uninitiated it would seem that a fight was imminent. But underneath, all was good-natured and friendly—and through and above everything went laughter. No matter how belligerent or lewd their talk was, or how sordid the tales they told—of dangerous pleasures and strange perversities—these black men laughed. That must be the reason, thought Sandy, why poverty-stricken old Negroes like Uncle Dan Givens lived so long—because to them, no matter how hard life might be, it was not without laughter. (*NWL* 180)

This emphasis on the importance of laughter may seem similar to the concept of the "mask" that Paul Laurence Dunbar attributed to Black people's strategy to conceal their despair and sorrow. However, in Hughes's formulation, laughter is an active response to nihilism for Black people. It does not simply suggest a coping mechanism with oppression. It is part of Hughes's identity construction which is necessitated by the power of music. Hughes's use of music and laughter might be explained in the context of Johnson's analysis of nihilism through the application of Nietzsche's concept of "active nihilism." Devon R. Johnson explains that European philosophy, from Socrates to Kant, can be seen as a desperate attempt to flee from "the pessimistic truths of human existence," reflecting a sense of insecurity and weakness (*A Philosophical* 83). Nietzsche, as Johnson informs, espouses "the value of human valuing in spite of pessimistic knowledge, and not as a way of coping with it" (*A Philosophical* 83). In his *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche proposes that "you should first learn the art of comfort in this world, you should learn to laugh, my young friends, if you are really determined to remain pessimists. Perhaps then, as men who laugh, you will some day send all attempts at metaphysical solace to Hell" (12). Nietzsche relates the concept of "laughter" to characteristics of "Dionysiac music" later, which he prescribes as an antidote to what he calls "metaphysical solace." When one realizes that there are no absolute truths,

nihilism emerges. The state of one's existential well-being is determined by how they respond to this absence. This absence, in the Black experience, results from the sense of despair in an antiblack world. Despite the fact that life is inherently meaningless, people are required to create meaning. Failure to achieve this without holding onto metaphysical beliefs is a sign of weakness. Nietzsche claims that it requires a strong will to value human life without such metaphysical foundations (Johnson, *A Philosophical* 86). Hughes promotes his own model of strong black nihilism to counter nihilism with the combination of the concept of music and laughter as discussed by Nietzsche both with the practices of music and tragedy.

Hughes sees "laughter" as an integral component of African American life and music tradition. When talking about Harlem in his autobiography, for instance, he states, "I can still hear their laughter in my ears, hear the soft slow music, and feel the floor shaking as the dancers danced" (*The Big Sea* 239). He combines laughter with the long tradition of the blues and jazz in an Apollonian-Dionysian synthesis, in agreement with Nietzsche's argument that "having acquired pessimistic knowledge, one must not only learn to laugh, but also how to philosophize" (Johnson, A Philosophical 88). In his dissertation, Thomas Hintze discusses the concept of laughter as part of African American modernism with its political function to confront white supremacy. According to Hintze, Nietzsche presents a formulation of laughter wherein the individual, faced with unfavorable circumstances, initiates a journey to ease the discomfort caused by such predicament by means of a laughter that embodies what he terms as "joyful wisdom" (27). Hughes's use of laughter in *NWL*, for Hintze, is "a laughter of the body, a laughter that affirmed life in its sadness and disarray" (178). Thus, laughter and music synthesis in Hughes, does not only represent a sense of passion and ecstasy in a Dionysian sense of expression, but also a conscious effort with an Apollonian approach to create "a construction of identity, an assertion of voice, and a seizure of freedom" (Tracy, "Langston Hughes" 113). Laughter, in this fusion, is utilized to confront the sense of meaninglessness in an antiblack world. It does not ignore the "meaningless," which can be considered what Albert Camus defines as the "absurd," but it recognizes the given condition and presents an alternative path enabling Black individuals to lead a life with a fulfilled sense of identification with their own self.

By decentering the importance of religious sentiment in *NWL*, Hughes replaces metaphysical basis with the reality of Blackness. He offers a form of strong black nihilism to antiblack racism, with which Black people can express themselves in an authentic manner. While depicting a strong black nihilist response within Harriett's strong rejection of religious sentiment, Hughes presents music, more specifically, the blues and jazz, as a viable alternative to nihilism, which he believes to be the most congruous forms of identity construction for Black people. From the beginning of the novel, the blues and jazz, as if representing "the laughter" in the novel's title, permeate the narrative as a recurring motif, displaying an inherent and authentic expression of Black people.

As discussed by Wilfred Raussert, "African-American music represents a sign of both existential and aesthetic survival, a source of cultural pride and expansion, and, perhaps most important, an alternative value-system" (7). For Lewis Gordon, "[t]he first, most influential wave of Black existentialism was in music and then literature" ("Black Existentialism" 123-124). He continues by relating Black existential expression particularly to the blues:

> The quintessential black existential response in music is the blues. The blues focus on life's difficulties and brings reality to the world of feeling or black suffering and joy. As an art form, the blues defy predictability and human closure. The blues welcome improvisation, which makes blues songs and their offspring—jazz, rhythm and blues, soul, funk, reggae, samba, salsa, and some forms of hip-hop— exemplars of the existential credo of existence preceding essence and its connection to the question of freedom. What is more, the unique way in which the blues bring to life the reality of and paradoxically joyful insight into suffering—by facing it instead of avoiding it—points to an anthropology of black adulthood as a struggle against despair. This makes the blues an important adversary of antiblack racism. Racism attempts to force black people to the developmental level of children, freeze them there, and denigrate black self-value. Blues songs, by contrast, encourage maturation and growth and are life affirming. ("Black" 124)

Gordon's emphasis on facing the suffering is important because it aligns with Hughes's conceptualization of the role of music as a self-affirming confrontation against despair. Hughes's formulation of the joyful expression of the blues and jazz do not ignore the situated condition of Black people or the nihilistic threat. Instead, it self-consciously recognizes the problem and tries to offer a healthy response without resorting to bad faith or metaphysical values.

Although there are some differences between the two genres, Hughes uses the terms "blues" and "jazz" interchangeably in his essays to explain his narrative style and passion. It can be said that the development and emergence of jazz throughout history have been rooted in the blues (Simmons 170). Paul Rinzler, in his extensive work, *The Contradictions of Jazz,* links the blues with jazz through existentialism as "[t]he blues are fundamentally connected with existentialism" (173). According to Rinzler, the blues' central role in jazz and all of its historical variations makes both genres existential expressions (173). Later, he relates jazz with key existential themes such as self-definition, authenticity, freedom and responsibility. These concepts, Rinzler argues, can be identified as essential parts of jazz improvisation. He states, "Jazz improvisers, as individuals, similarly make their own choices, are thrown into an improvisation, and are responsible for their choices" (172). While Rinzler's definition of jazz performance is technical and thematic, Hughes exceeds these observable qualities of the blues and jazz. Similar to Gordon's description, by contextualizing their expressive quality, he associates them with a type of expression inherent to African Americans. Thus, they become a strong response to antiblack racism in Hughes's works. In his "The Negro Artist and The Racial Mountain," Hughes explicitly defines jazz as an ideal response to the existential conditions in African American life:

> But jazz to me is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America: the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul-the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world, a world of subway trains and work, work, work; the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile. Yet the Philadelphia clubwoman is ashamed to say that her race created it and she does not like me to write about it. The old subconscious "white is best" runs through her mind. Years of study under white teachers, a lifetime of white books, pictures, and papers, and white manners, morals, and Puritan standards made her dislike the spirituals. ("The Negro Artist" 58)

As it can be seen in this quotation, Hughes does not only relate jazz to a coping mechanism against racism, but also depicts it as a way of confronting the many conditions that make life unbearable "in a white world." For Black individuals who might unconsciously assume that white values are superior to their own, Hughes sees music as an effective tool for transcending these conditions and providing an authentic way of existence. In *NWL*, as Raussert argues, Black folk culture, notably the blues and

jazz, is used to depict the historical transition "from assimilation to black affirmation in the black community during the early twentieth century" (45).

The conflict between Aunt Hager and Harriett, which is based on the conceptualization of their religious understanding, is also reflected in the representation of music in the novel. Hughes replaces the metaphysical framework of spirituals with more assertive and empowering elements in the blues and jazz. He draws attention to the conflict between the secular and metaphysical by comparing blues and jazz music with the traditional spirituals. Blues and jazz promote modern and progressive principles, whereas the spirituals are representative of traditional values. The Protestant work ethic and Christianization of slavery are related with the ideals of sacrifice and mutual assistance, which are preserved in the church through the singing of spirituals. Assimilationist elements of the church might strengthen familial bonds; however, it also appeases "the white power structure." These beliefs are embodied by Aunt Hager who sings spirituals and hymns with Jimboy (Raussert 46). Hughes shows that Aunt Hager does not approve of Jimboy's talent when it is in the progressive form of the blues or jazz; however, she joins Jimboy when they sing spirituals together: "The devil's musicianer, she called him, straight from hell, teaching Harriett buck-and-winging! But when he took his soft-playing guitar and picked out spirituals and old-time Christian hymns on its sweet strings, Hager forgot she was his enemy, and sang and rocked with the rest of them" (*NWL* 25).

Harriett's strong response to her mother's passive acceptance of Christian ethics is symbolized in her constant search for a more fulfilling answer to her struggle to forge a secure identity. While she seeks pleasure and inspiration in the colorful setting of the dance hall, Aunt Hager finds refuge and guidance in the spiritual and religious environment of the church (Raussert 67). Harriett's success as a blues performer after Aunt Hager's death seems to suggest Hughes's preference of the progressive expression of music in the blues and jazz. As a strong response to the nihilistic situation of Blacks in America, Hughes favors Harriett as a symbol of shaping the African American identity towards a more freedom-seeking path within an authentic quest. In many descriptive scenes from the novel, Hughes praises the energy of the blues and jazz and

their empowering structure on dance. He does not only present the function of music, but also philosophizes by speaking through the narrator of the novel directly. While describing Harriett in a club dancing with her boyfriend, Mingo, to the blues and jazz songs, for instance, Hughes describes the strength of music by relating it to nature: "The earth rolls relentlessly, and the sun blazes for ever on the earth, breeding, breeding. But why do you insist like the earth, music? Rolling and breeding, earth and sun for ever relentlessly. But why do you insist like the sun? Like the lips of women? Like the bodies of men, relentlessly?" (*NWL* 67). He later, taking the voice of the narrator, poses questions that extend the discourse of music towards a more existential uncertainty of the universe and the limits of understanding it: "Who understands the earth? Do you, Mingo? Who understands the sun? Do you, Harriett? Does anybody know—among you high yallers, you jelly-beans, you pinks and pretty daddies, among you sealskin browns, smooth blacks, and chocolates to-the-bone—does anybody know the answer?" (*NWL* 67). Through the narrator, Hughes demonstrates the power of the blues and jazz that initiates an existential understanding of the world.

Hughes also highlights the possibility of freedom in the blues and jazz. While describing the crowd of people in a club, he states that "people danced their own individual movements to the scream and moan of the music" (*NWL* 66). According to Raussert, the word "movement" refers to both the individual migration of African Americans from the South to the North and the Black arts movement in Harlem. Both movements are manifestations of the desire for social and economic improvement. Throughout the novel, Hughes uses the concept of "motion" to allude to a revolutionary change in both the artistic and economic spheres (52). This symbolized form of movement does not, however, negate Hughes's simple emphasis on the potentiality of finding individual freedom within the blues. African American music enables people to raise and form their own perspective. Shelby Steely, in his article "Ralph Ellison's Blues," explains this concept with an example:

> [I]t seems hopeless for an old man trapped in an endless cycle of poverty in an inner city to relive his lonely despair by believing in the possibility of a life without such despair. As outsiders we can see that it is very unlikely that his material circumstances will improve. But the blues say there is an inner freedom, based on an internal sense of possibility, that provides this man with enough space in which

to existentially redefine himself and thereby gain some control over his despair. (163)

African Americans had access to the blues and jazz as a means of expression where they could be authentic. They articulate their feelings, and embrace their culture without being constrained by the rules of white society. In this way, music evolves into a representation of resistance to oppression as well as a tool for obtaining freedom and self-determination. As in Steely's explanation, it might evoke the sense of freedom demonstrated in the case of Albert Camus's concept of the absurd offering a subjective rebellion against meaninglessness. In Hughes's formulation, music becomes the symbol for a strong nihilistic response to despair which replaces the metaphysical with a "revolt against weariness in a white world." By offering alternative subject positions in his novel, Hughes demonstrates multiple ways of identification with the self in African American experience. Reestablishing the values in African American culture with the progressive voice in the blues and jazz, he suggests a strong and authentic resolution to nihilism as an existential path for African American people.

CHAPTER 4

BEYOND RACIAL MARKERS: THE QUEST FOR AUTHENTIC EXISTENCE IN GEORGE SCHUYLER'S *BLACK NO MORE* (1931)

The legacy of George Schuyler (1895-1977) for Black studies has been a controversial one. Since Schuyler's conservative stance, especially after the 1940s, has become more of an issue rather than his literary talent, he has been a figure that many critics and scholars have sought to distance themselves from. Jeffrey Ferguson, in his extensive dissertation examining Schuyler's life and works, claims that Schuyler's controversial stance throughout his life has led scholars to adopt a position that denies any claim of objective analysis. Positive interpretations of Schuyler's work run the risk of being misunderstood as apologies, whereas his more antagonistic critics tend to see his early artistic work as a prelude to his later problematic ideologies. Therefore, Schuyler's supporters frequently concentrate on his literary accomplishments or a less controversial period of his career while his opponents tend to link his early work with his later ideas (*The Newest Negro* 14-15). This chapter will do neither since its primary concern will be tracing the possible textual and contextual references to existentialism in Schuyler's *Black No More* (1931). While some of Schuyler's ideas, particularly those from the 1920s, may be referenced to further associate them with the philosophical implications in his novel, the main focus of this chapter is to analyze Schuyler's *Black No More* as an alternative mode of existence for African Americans during the Harlem Renaissance.

J. Martin Favor claims that labels such as "iconoclast," "assimilationist," or "conservative" do not adequately describe Schuyler's complex personality. Despite the fact that he may have possessed some of each of these qualities, the main point of his works, particularly *Black No More*, for Favor, is to show how such a simplistic classification only serves to maintain injustice and inequality in the United States (179). Schuyler's proposition on African American identity can be regarded as an existentialist claim due to his emphasis on an individual response to the condition of Blackness. Schuyler does not only suggest exceeding the established notions of white supremacy on Black existence, he further resists a collective response as a prescription for African American identity. As Ferguson simply puts it, Schuyler "resisted the resisters" (*The*

Newest Negro 15). This resistance is particularly seen in Schuyler's constant criticism of Black leaders. For Schuyler, the leadership cult in the Black community "was the inevitable result of the black inferiority complex" (Ferguson, *The Newest Negro* 122). Ferguson further expounds on Schuyler's criticism on Black leadership:

> Schuyler saw in the black condition an assemblage of many different social and cultural conditions whose interrelations could not always be adequately conceived from the top down. One might say that because of this he thought that no large plan for the betterment of black people's condition could succeed without many partial solutions and micro-adjustments to specific local circumstances. These partial solutions, he thought, would primarily involve the work of determined and intelligent black individuals who were willing to employ independence of action and protean creativity in solving their problems. This is why, above all else, he encouraged his audience to "think." Slavish adherence to tradition, ideology, religion, or charismatic leadership were all anathema. He insisted that it was iconoclasm, experimentalism, and realism that offered to blacks their best and greatest hope to achieve the most that their circumstances would allow. (*The Newest Negro* 123)

Ferguson's emphasis on the independence of action and thought is a claim that necessitates an effort to authenticity instead of an identity predicated upon a constructed sense of self. Schuyler's prescription constitutes a framework for the concept of authentic existence, which offers people a unique form of freedom. He attempts to disentangle individuals from any fixed or preconceived existence through his critique of leadership and the enactment of a collective identity creation process. By rejecting the propensity to rely on grand narratives about Blackness that have the potential to limit Black people's experience, he offers a new approach for Black people to identify with their lived reality.

Schuyler's solution to the existential question of African American identity presents "his readers a re-invented America one step beyond race consciousness and two steps beyond race hatred" (Favor 219). However, his satirical tone and cynical approach towards African American expression in arts and literature seem to undermine his effort offering a path towards authenticity. For instance, in his best-known article, "The Negro-Art Hokum," Schuyler puts a strong emphasis on the idea that there is, in fact, no authentic Black expression:

> [T]he Aframerican is merely a lampblacked Anglo-Saxon. If the European immigrant after two or three generations of exposure to our schools, politics,

advertising, moral crusades, and restaurants becomes indistinguishable from the mass of Americans of the older stock (despite the influence of the foreign language press), how much truer must it be of the sons of Ham who have been subjected to what the uplifters call Americanism for the last three hundred years. Aside from his color, which ranges from very dark brown to pink, your American Negro is just plain American. Negroes and whites from the same localities in this country talk, think, and act about the same. ("The Negro-Art" 52)

It is possible to read Schuyler's criticism as a move to question and disrupt existing modes of authentic expression in Black culture. In turn, this might be seen as subscribing to the dominant norms of expression within the predominantly white American culture. However, Schuyler's suspicion is that those who lynched, mistreated, and ignored Black people without hesitation were motivated by racist myths rather than their apparent sincere intentions when attempting to find a distinctive Black art. He thinks that the search for a distinctive Black art is closely followed by the urge to confirm purported "racial" characteristics (Ferguson, *The Newest Negro* 448). Therefore, Schuyler does not only naively reject the preordained sense of identities found in Black artistic expressions, he also believes that these presupposed authentic claims are used by white normative discourse to further reinforce the racist projections on Black people:

On this baseless premise, so flattering to the white mob, that the blackamoor is inferior and fundamentally different, is erected the postulate that he must needs be peculiar; and when he attempts to portray life through the medium of art, it must of necessity be a peculiar art. While such reasoning may seem conclusive to the majority of Americans, it must be rejected with a loud guffaw by intelligent people. ("The Negro-Art" 54).

Schuyler is aware that identifying a distinctive Black art may result in racial categorization and essentialization of the self. He, therefore, urges abandoning the widely accepted trend of valuing Black art, which is equally valued by whites. In order to convey the "black soul" of the 1920s, according to Schuyler, the "New Negro artist" needs to diverge from conventional Black artistic expressions including "Spirituals and black Southern folkways" (Ferguson, *The Newest Negro* 447) He believes that despite still being regarded as American, the new forms of art would be fundamentally antagonistic to the past and possess their own unique identity. With the aim of minimizing the damaging impact of white patrons, Schuyler also argues for the preservation of Black artistic institutions. In contrast to concepts of group identity based on the idea of a Black essence, he thinks that this new type of art would encourage

Black adjustment to the requirements of a modern society (Ferguson, *The Newest Negro* 447). Although Langston Hughes is said to have written his article "The Negro Artist and The Racial Mountain" as a response to Schuyler's notions, such reconsideration of Schuyler's perspective opens up the likelihood that he essentially shared Hughes's opinion of the need to develop novel frameworks for depicting Black identity in literature and art. However, Schuyler did not seem to favor any expressions yet by the 1920s, whereas Hughes openly identified jazz as an integral component of African American artistic production.

Schuyler's concern is ultimately related to individual possibilities in life as part of human existence and its meaning. He endeavors to explain "that a solution to the race question— if such a thing were possible— would not end the fundamental tragedy of human existence" (Ferguson, *The Newest Negro* 122). Ferguson summarizes this endeavor with Schuyler's commitment "to augment the 'sentiment of being' both for himself and for his audience, especially his black audience, whose fundamental sense of strength, solidity, and efficacy required in his view a sophisticated cultivation of alienation against racist conventionality" (*The Sage of Sugar Hill* 259). This attempt, Ferguson argues, demonstrates "the centrality of authenticity to Schuyler's aims" (*The Sage* 259). *Black No More* also follows this attempt in a series of events uncovering fundamental questions of existence for Black people in America. By criticizing America's obsession with race, Schuyler experiments with theoretical concepts throughout his novel. His depiction of the Black body, which is marked by its lack of freedom and constrained existence, challenges the whole concept of race as part of his fictional experimentation. While he denies any prescriptions for existence in African American experience, Schuyler also shows how whiteness is constructed upon the concept of Blackness in the United States. Thus, in addition to initiating a critical analysis of the phenomenology of the Black body, he also reveals an inauthentic form of existence in the construction of whiteness as an identity.

In the opening scene of *Black No More*, Max Disher, the protagonist of the novel, is at a club with his friend Bunny Brown. Max asks a blonde girl to dance with him and he is rejected. This scene becomes the first marker of Max's insecure identity as he is refused

because he is black. The following day, his friend, Bunny Brown, tells Max that one of their older acquaintances named Dr. Junius Crookman has invented a machine called "Black-No-More" that can turn Blacks white. Contemplating on his experiences as a Black person, particularly the recent one with the blonde girl, Max decides to be the first person to undergo the treatment. After the operation, Max feels renewed in his new body expressing that he can now taste freedom. After the machine is introduced, numerous Black people also have the operation to become white. Harlem seems to be losing its significance as an increasing number of people migrate to other places where they are no longer discriminated against because of their skin color. Max also decides to go to Atlanta, still thinking about the blonde girl from the club and hoping that he can be with her after his transformation. He also changes his name to Matthew Fisher in his white body. As Black-No-More seems to be taking over the whole nation, both Black and white elites are concerned. Black leaders and activists realize that they are losing support and money for their movement. White people, on the other hand, preach about white supremacy and how this new machine erases their identity which is built on the continuation of Blackness as a negative counterpart to their own existence.

Max/Matt cannot find the blonde girl he looks for in Atlanta. However, he realizes that he can exploit white people's hatred towards Blacks after the invention of Black-No-More. With this purpose, he joins the Knights of Nordica, which parodies the Ku Klux Klan in the novel. Max/Matt convinces the group's leader, Reverend Henry Givens, introducing himself as an anthropologist in order to be an important member of the group having certain amount of power to earn money. He later learns that the blonde girl from the club is actually Givens's daughter, Helen. By gaining Givens's trust easily and becoming powerful within the Knights of Nordica, he marries Helen in a short time period. Max/Matt's friend Bunny also becomes white and starts working as Max/Matt's assistant. They plan to polarize supporters and opponents of Black-No-More to recruit more members in the Knights of Nordica. Since Crookman's invention cannot change newborn babies' skin color if they have parents who used to be Black before, Crookman opens a center which can be used for turning babies into white right after their birth. This causes further tension among the members of the Knights of Nordica who wish to maintain the purity of their race.

In later parts of the novel, the Knights of Nordica join forces with the Anglo-Saxon Association for political gain, and Arthur Snobbcraft, as the president, and Rev. Givens, as the vice-president, become the candidates for the Democratic National Convention. To discredit their opponents and claim that they are the "pure white side," they employ a statistician named Samuel Buggerie to investigate the genealogy of American citizens and label them as "black." When Helen becomes pregnant, Max/Matt decides to leave the nation with their unborn child to avoid being exposed as being Black in the past because their child, he assumes, will be black. However, his plan is disrupted when the genealogy project reveals that many Americans, including Helen and the political leaders who are backed by the Knights of Nordica, such as Snobbcraft and Givens, have African ancestry. Helen feels guilty and is ashamed about her African ancestry after her Black child is born. However, Matthew also reveals that he was a Black person before Black-No-More by relieving himself from the burden of his lie. In the aftermath of the genealogy project, Snobbcraft and Buggerie attempt to flee to Mexico, but they are ultimately discovered since their plane crashes in Mississippi. In a racist town infamous for its record of lynching, they are recognized from the newspapers as the politicians having Black heritage and the angry mob of the town kill them brutally. The novel then fast-forwards to the future where the majority of Americans use skin-staining products to appear darker because, as Crookman explains, his machine actually turned people too white. With its ending, the novel offers a complete reversal of the conventional narrative of racial identity and essentialist claims. With this premise, it predates later conceptualizations of race as a social construct.

Black No More can be contextualized as an example of the science fiction genre. Some scholars have even highlighted the novel as the first example of Afrofuturist narratives presenting an intersection of elements both from science fiction and Black culture. Such interpretation, however, still has the risk of limiting Schuyler's narrative positioning of the self and how it can be studied in the African American experience in order to reach a mode of individual freedom. The novel's primary concern is to precede any essentialist claims to reach a novel sense of existential perspective on life. Schuyler appears to be benefiting from the creative opportunities of the science fiction genre to

illustrate theoretical forms of discourse in relation to the lived experiences of Black people. With this perspective, Schuyler's approach corresponds with Frantz Fanon's phenomenological analysis of the Black experience. In her analysis of the novel, Sharon DeGraw claims that Schuyler creates "an actual scientific process physically embodying Fanon's abstract phenomenon" (143). As DeGraw notes, "Fanon describes the process and implications involved in the metaphoric 'white masks' developed by colonized blacks. With Max Disher, Schuyler takes Fanon's black man, his body and his psyche, and actualizes the psychological process which Fanon analyzes" (143). According to DeGraw, Schuyler employs science fiction characteristics to generate "estrangement,"[17] a concept that makes the construction of racial identity for the reader both more alien and genuine in a paradoxical manner. As a result, the science fiction setting makes race formation and the creation of identities more apparent in *BNM* (DeGraw 144). Even for those who are familiar with the concept of "double consciousness," the physical metamorphosis of African American characters is bizarre and unsettling. When examined through the lens of "cognitive estrangement,"[18] the novel is provocative and extremely dynamic on the problem of racial identity due to the vibrancy and assertiveness of Schuyler's perspective (DeGraw 145).

The theoretical framework of phenomenology, which is frequently associated with Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, has been further discussed by philosophers such as Fanon and Sartre. By underlining the limitations imposed on the racialized body, which cannot be a fully independent agent capable of actively engaging in the process of forming its own identity, Fanon and Sartre have attempted to add the condition of the lived reality to the universalist notions of their predecessors (Logan 149). As James B. Haile III explains, in Fanon's phenomenology, "to understand the black body within an antiblack world system, one cannot rely on traditional Western phenomenology, for traditional Western phenomenology cannot address the mind-body-world at the level of

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[17] Based on Brecht's theory of "estrangement," this concept enables familiar subjects to be easier to understand in an unfamiliar context (DeGraw 144).

[18] Sharon DeGraw uses the term "cognitive estrangement" as theorized by Darko Suvin who contends that science fiction is "a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment" (7-8).

alienation" (495). Haile further argues that Black phenomenology of the body and traditional Western phenomenology of the body are fundamentally different in two ways. Black phenomenology initially acknowledges the historical body, which is formed by past events and located within specific historical circumstances. In addition, it disavows the idea of a normative subject, which presupposes that a person may develop their own "mind-body-world" connection through traditional means. Thus, it addresses the particular difficulties that come with having a racialized body and aims to comprehend how this influences the formation of identity (469). In *BNM*, Schuyler positions the subjectivity of Black lived experience in a critical lens and experiments with it in order to show that identities are not inherently coded with racial categorizations. Throughout the novel, Schuyler argues that identity formations based on race are socially and historically constructed.

Schuyler's purpose is to confront racial categorization because it leaves racialized bodies invisible and, as Schuyler emphasizes, "fundamentally different." This position restricts Black people's options and possibilities as a result of their historical and social environment. While trying to demystify the discourse of race and peculiarity of the "black subject," Schuyler does not, however, ignore the historical and social situation of the Black body. He rather focuses on the obsession with race held by both Black and white individuals. Therefore, he starts the novel with a scene demonstrating how racial denominators affect people's preferences in the United States, even in a nightclub where Black and white people spend time together. Trapped in his desire to be with a white woman, Max asks a woman to dance with him. As a response to his offer, the white woman says, "I never dance with niggers!" (Schuyler, *BNM* 227). By starting the novel with this scene, Schuyler emphasizes that the construct of race affects both the Black body and the white body in their interactions. However, in Max's case, his body is locked in a desire to identify himself with whiteness. The white woman, on the other hand, wants to dissociate her body with anything black to preserve her whiteness. In Schuyler's disposition, while Max wants to construe his identity on a false premise, the white woman's effort is to perpetuate her justified existence. Max's desire can be found in Fanon's analysis of the relationship between the white woman and the Black man. To show the Black man's insecure identity construction in relation to the white woman,

Fanon shares an anecdote: "I wish to be acknowledged not as black but as white. Now—and this is a form of recognition that Hegel had not envisaged—who but a white woman can do this for me. By loving me she proves that I am worthy of white: love. I am loved like a white man. I am a white man" (63). Since Max cannot succeed in acquiring the sense of whiteness in his Black body through a white woman's love, he finds what he seeks in Dr. Crookman's treatment which can make him white physically. Before his transformation, Max's obsession with the white woman from the club is shown as it occupies his thoughts later that day:

> As the cab whirled up Seventh Avenue, he settled back and thought of the girl from Atlanta. He couldn't get her out of his mind and didn't want to. At his rooming house, he paid the driver, unlocked the door, ascended to his room and undressed, mechanically. His mind was a kaleidoscope: Atlanta, sea-green eyes, slender figure, titian hair, frigid manner. "I never dance with niggers." Then he fell asleep about five o'clock and promptly dreamed of her. Dreamed of dancing with her, dining with her, motoring with her, sitting beside her on a golden throne while millions of manacled white slaves prostrated themselves before him. Then there was a nightmare of grim, gray men with shotguns, baying hounds, a heap of gasoline-soaked faggots and a screeching, fanatical mob. (Schuyler, *BNM* 228)

While showing Max's obsession with the white woman from the club, Schuyler highlights how Max's self is contingent upon whiteness. Schuyler also mentions Max's dream, in which he imagines "manacled white slaves" kneeling before him. This dream suggests that Max's moral sense is distorted by the historical and social influences of his environment, leading him to envision a future where white people are subjugated to slavery. Notably, this future is only made possible in his dream because he is accompanied by the white girl, who serves as a catalyst for his feelings of empowerment. However, Schuyler interrupts Max's dream with a nightmare, in which he seems to be chased by a group of white supremacists. With this interruption, Schuyler reminds Max's realities in his present environment.

When he is told about Dr. Crookman's invention, the machine that can turn Black people white, Max becomes fixated on the possibility of having the treatment. He is infatuated with this unlikely dream and an urge to rid himself of his Black body. As in Fanon's words, he feels the "desire to be suddenly white" (63). Still occupied with the white woman from the club, Max is portrayed as fancying his possibilities in life as a white man:

> Then a sudden resolution seized him. He looked at the newspaper account again. Yes, Crookman was staying at the Phyllis Wheatley Hotel. Why not go and see what there was to this? Why not be the first Negro to try it out? Sure, it was taking a chance, but think of getting white in three days! No more jim crow. No more insults. As a white man he could go anywhere, be anything he wanted to be, do most anything he wanted to do, be a free man at last . . . and probably be able to meet the girl from Atlanta. What a vision! (Schuyler, *BNM* 229).

Although Max contemplates on his potential freedom with a white body, he still thinks about "the girl from Atlanta" as a reminder of his marker as a free man. By explicating his potentialities as a white and a "free man at last," Schuyler draws attention to Max's limitations in a Black body as well. Max continues to be preoccupied with the idea of transitioning towards whiteness through a marriage with a white woman although he is convinced to take the treatment: "Then he envisioned his future as a white man, probably as the husband of the tall blonde from Atlanta" (Schuyler, *BNM* 235). Max's transformation is thus problematized by Schuyler in order to emphasize the inauthentic subject positioning of his obsession with whiteness, as in Fanon's anecdote: "Her love takes me onto the noble road that leads to total realization. . . . I marry white culture, white beauty, white whiteness" (63). As a result, Max's desire to receive the treatment transcends simply wishing to be physically white. He advances one step further by expressing a desire for marriage with a mode of "white whiteness," an embodiment of whiteness that exceeds bodily features.

Schuyler also portrays Max's transformation through the treatment as a dehumanizing operation, which raises questions about the entire process. Although Max views the procedure as a means of achieving the freedom and humanity that he seeks, the detailed description of the room and its devices suggests that the process is objectifying Max's body rather than liberating it with a subjective vision in a white body:

> He quailed as he saw the formidable apparatus of sparkling nickel. It resembled a cross between a dentist's chair and an electric chair. Wires and straps, bars and levers protruded from it and a great nickel headpiece, like the helmet of a knight, hung over it. The room had only a skylight and no sound entered it from the outside. Around the walls were cases of instruments and shelves of bottles filled with strangely colored fluids. He gasped with fright and would have made for the door but the two husky attendants held him firmly, stripped off his robe and bound him in the chair. There was no retreat. It was either the beginning or the end (Schuyler, *BNM* 235).

An ironic situation arises as Max attempts to become white. Schuyler's depiction of the equipment and the setting preceding Max's transformation emphasizes how the Black body is again reduced to an object while Max comes closer to his freedom. This representation resonates with Fanon's description of the Black body as "an object in the midst of other objects," (109) underlining the dehumanizing impacts of existence in an antiblack world.

Following his transformation, Max Disher changes his name to Matthew Fisher in his white body. He appears to experience a range of issues, beginning with the attention he receives from the press: "He had undergone the tortures of Doc Crookman's devilish machine in order to escape the conspicuousness of a dark skin and now he was being made conspicuous because he had once had a dark skin! Could one never escape the plagued race problem?" (Schuyler, *BNM* 239). Trying to escape from his hypervisibility, Max/Matt frees himself from media's attention after earning some money by selling his story to newspapers. Initially, Schuyler depicts Max/Matt's satisfaction in his white body as he walks the streets with "a feeling of absolute freedom and sureness" (*BNM* 239). However, Max/Matt's discontentment with his acquired whiteness is portrayed by Schuyler through his interactions with others after a short time period. Max/Matt feels separated from his prior self and alienated from Black society and culture. His attempts to integrate into his new white persona are ineffective, since he still struggles with insecurities and a sense of alienation. Schuyler highlights Max/Matt's lack of authenticity and genuine connection with others as he spends time with a newspaper reporter:

> They dined and they danced. Then they went to a cabaret, where, amid smoke, noise and body smells, they drank what was purported to be whiskey and watched a seminude chorus do its stuff. Despite his happiness Max found it pretty dull. There was something lacking in these ofay places of amusement or else there was something present that one didn't find in the black-and-tan resorts in Harlem. The joy and abandon here was obviously forced. Patrons went to extremes to show each other they were having a wonderful time. It was all so strained and quite unlike anything to which he had been accustomed. The Negroes, it seemed to him, were much gayer, enjoyed themselves more deeply and yet they were more restrained, actually more refined. Even their dancing was different. They followed the rhythm accurately, effortlessly and with easy grace; these lumbering couples, out of step half the time and working as strenuously as stevedores emptying the bowels of a

freighter, were noisy, awkward, inelegant. At their best they were gymnastic where the Negroes were sensuous. (*BNM* 239-240)

It is unclear whether Schuyler intends to reinforce the racialized sentiment of being Black in comparison to whiteness through Max/Matt's observations, since Max/Matt appears to be describing Black people with some essential traits. According to J. Martin Favor, while introducing constructivist perspectives, Schuyler uses Max/Matt's initially essentialist beliefs as a contrasting element. These perspectives allow for discussions of the fluidity, ambiguity, and complexity that undermine the idea that racial identity is essential. Schuyler, for Favor, develops a framework that enables many discourses and perceptions of race. With this strategy, it is possible to explore the various ways that race is construed and negotiated in society (184-185). In light of this interpretation, Max/Matt's insecure identity and sense of inauthenticity in his white body can also be seen as a result of his inauthentic identification with Blackness. To highlight this, Schuyler further explains that Max/Matt is disappointed with life after his transformation: "He was not finding life as a white man the rosy existence he had anticipated. He was forced to conclude that it was pretty dull and that he was bored. As a boy he had been taught to look up to white folks as just a little less than gods; now he found them little different from the Negroes" (*BNM* 256). Schuyler uses Max/Matt's realization to show how being plagued by the essentialized forms of discourse of race can reduce existence to a mode of meaninglessness. Max/Matt comes to the realization that race does not provide him with the freedom he desires and that he needs to construct a life that is not bound by the constraints of racial identity. Max/Matt's situation of being unable to respond to the meaning of existence in his life, as neither Black nor white, can be viewed as a physical representation of Du Bois's double consciousness. His individuality is reduced to a mere manifestation of social constructs. However, despite Max/Matt's inauthentic construction of Blackness in his Black body, his existence was not one of aimlessness before his transformation, for his ultimate goal was to attain the freedom that he believed could be achieved through valuing himself with whiteness. After materializing his desire to be white, Max/Matt is left with a sense of purposelessness, since his conception of meaning was built on racial consciousness as an inauthentic configuration of existence. His inauthenticity is further compounded by this feeling of aimlessness. Schuyler thus presents that the quest for authentic

freedom requires the rejection of racial categories and the construction of a life that transcends the limitations imposed by these categories.

Schuyler's critical approach extends beyond Max/Matt's realization of a necessity to disassociate his life from his previous race-based identity construction. He also emphasizes Black leaders' reaction to Crookman's invention to illustrate his point. Schuyler depicts their apprehension towards Black-No-More as evidence that in a world where race is no longer a factor, Black individuals are left with a sense of purposelessness. These political leaders have constructed their narratives based on a collective identity formed around Blackness. Therefore, Black-No-More dismantles their very notion of existence as an African American in the United States. Schuyler summarizes these leaders' sense of hopelessness and resentment as "they saw the work of a lifetime being rapidly destroyed" (Schuyler, *BNM* 275). To elucidate this further, Schuyler depicts African American organizations' panic after Black-No-More's trend among Blacks: "Meanwhile, Negro society was in turmoil and chaos. The colored folk, in straining every nerve to get the Black-No-More treatment, had forgotten all loyalties, affiliations and responsibilities" (*BNM* 273). The "National Social Equality League," which profited from white people's charity, is a particular organization that Schuyler exposes for its power dynamics and financial benefits: "[T]hey were never so happy and excited as when a Negro was barred from a theater or fried to a crisp. Then they would leap for telephones, grab telegraph pads and yell for stenographers; smiling through their simulated indignation at the spectacle of another reason for their continued existence and appeals for funds" (*BNM* 275). The uncertain nature of Black organizations' existence and their inability to offer an independent basis for Black people pursuing a secure sense of identity are illustrated by Schuyler's critique. Their reliance on white construction of racial categorizations is perpetuated by their financial gain.

Schuyler's satire in *BNM* becomes evident in his portrayal of the National Social Equality League's founder, Shakespeare Agamemnon Beard, who represents W. E. B. Du Bois. Through this type of characterizations with African American intellectuals and leaders including W. E. B. Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson, Schuyler directs his

criticism towards organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Schuyler depicts Du Bois as a fake poet, Shakespeare in the guise of Agamemnon, who stands for a false sense of nobility. By reducing his name to a "beard," he portrays Du Bois as a pretentious aristocrat. James Weldon Johnson is portrayed as Napoleon Wellington Jackson in Schuyler's satire. Napoleon and Wellington correspond to two well-known contrasting historical figures, suggesting that the character has unstable and contradictory traits. In contrast to the more famous names Napoleon and Wellington, the last name Jackson denotes a person of lower status and the southern background of James Weldon Johnson himself.

In order to emphasize the failure of these organizations' leaders in their attempt to construct an identity for African Americans, Schuyler presents an emergency meeting at the National Social Equality League's center. The leaders convene to discuss the threat created by Dr. Crookman's growing business. This portrayal is comparable to the real "Garvey Must Go Campaign," which was an attempt by Black leaders to lessen Marcus Garvey's influence on the Black community (Ferguson, *The Newest Negro* 547). In order to detail the leaders' inauthenticity in their address to the issue of race, Schuyler draws attention to Napoleon Wellington Jackson who regularly stutters and pauses as he speaks, which indicates his contradictory and uncertain perspective as his name suggests:

> [A]s you know, the Negro race is face to face with a grave crisis. I-ah-presume it is er-ah unnecessary for me to go into any details concerning the-ah activities of Black-No-More, Incorporated. Suffice er-ah umph! ummmmh! to sayah that it has thrown our society into rather a-ah bally turmoil. Our people are forgetting shamelessly their-ah duty to the-ah organizations that have fought valiantly for them these-ah many years and are now busily engaged chasing a bally-ah will-o-the-wisp. . . . "You-ah probably all fully realize that-ah a continuation of the aforementioned activities will prove disastrous to ourah organizations. You-ah, like us, must feel-uh that something drastic must be done to preserve the integrity of Negro society. (*BNM* 278)

Through this speech, Schuyler questions the authenticity of Black intellectuals' essentialist interpretations of identity, which emphasize the value of Blackness in terms of racial background. He contends that antiblack projections could potentially exploit this essentialization, thereby highlighting the necessity to reject all essentialization efforts. According to Schuyler, individuals ought to explore meaning in

all aspects of their existence rather than building their sense of self on assumptions regarding fundamental racial characteristics that do not accurately reflect their potential authenticity. In such a form of identity construction, the struggle against antiblackness becomes a rationale for existence, and when it disappears, the constructed identity falls into crisis. Jackson's stutters also imply his lack of self-assurance and confidence in expressing these prejustified notions. Schuyler also mentions white figures in the meeting such as Walter Williams, whose great-grandfather was a mixed race. Williams states, "I cannot understand what has come over our people that they have so quickly forgotten the ancient glories of Ethiopia, Songhay and Dahomey, and their marvelous record of achievement since emancipation" (*BNM* 279). Williams's remark that relates African Americans to a historical conception of universal Blackness with his questionable African background reiterates Schuyler's claim that racial classifications are social constructs. This also emphasizes the possibility that it could be used against Black people or for personal gain.

As previously noted, Schuyler does not only examine Black identity with a critical approach. He also problematizes whiteness as an identity construction in the United States based on a superficial essentialization of racial categories. Schuyler's proposition aligns with Fanon's assertion that "[t]he white man is sealed in his whiteness" and "[t]he black man in his blackness" (11). However, Schuyler's criticism on whiteness highlights an ontological problem, which is even more complex than that of Black identity. While Black individuals' inauthenticity leads to an essentialization of their collective identity to attain freedom, white people's conceptualization of their existence is contingent on the continuation of Blackness as a form of absence offering them ontological difference in an antiblack world. This phenomenon can be seen in Calvin L. Warren's recent work, *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation* (2018). Drawing on Heidegger's phenomenology of "Being," Warren offers a detailed analysis of Black people's situation in an antiblack projection. Warren argues that "the function of black(ness) is to give form to a terrifying formlessness (nothing)" (5) in an antiblack world. He historically situates and suspends "black ~~being~~" [19] as it is

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[19] In Warren's work, the word "being" is marked with a strikethrough as a typographical symbol to indicate its unattainability within an antiblack world when discussing the concept of "nothingness."

"introduced into the metaphysical world as available equipment in human form" (6).
Warren also investigates how the phrase "free Black," employed in the post-slavery era
and in relation to the invented "Negro Question," highlighted the fact that African
Americans lacked "both freedom and ontological Being," which ultimately rendered
"Black freedom" unachievable. This lack of freedom and "ontological being" is
perceived as a form of horror that perpetuates the cycle of Black people's subjugation
(Corrigan 181). Warren's point of departure could be regarded as following the pattern
of Fanon's "zone of non-being" in the Black experience. Linking his argument with
Heidegger's conceptualization of Being as "*Dasein*," Warren states:

> If, as we learn in *Being and Time*, Dasein uses tools to experience its thrownness in
> the world (establishing its facticity) and to develop its unique project oriented
> toward the future (projectionality), the Negro—as commodity, object, slave,
> putative backdrop, prisoner, refugee, and corpse—is the *quintessential* tool Dasein
> uses. The *use* of the Negro metaphysically and ontologically, as a tool, is what
> black thinking is tasked with pursuing. (8)

What Warren refers to as "ontological terror," which he argues is a key aspect of the
antiblack world, defines his view of the relationship between Blackness and whiteness
in *Dasein*'s path to existence in Heideggerian phenomenology. According to Warren,
"antiblackness" refers to a number of behaviors, cognitive frameworks, and institutional
structures that impose "nothingness" onto Blackness and ultimately result in the total
eradication of Black presence. Warren contends that the "nothingness" or "ontological
terror" that Black people represent for the metaphysical world is what makes them
hated, and that every act of violence committed against Black people is an effort to
control this "nothingness." Contrary to Heidegger, who views "nothing" as a source of
both anxiety and freedom, Warren argues that in this context "nothing" is the cause of
panic, violence, and dominance for Blacks. The world, Warren notes, needs Black
people even if it strives to eradicate them, creating a conflict between "necessity and
hatred" (8-9). *BNM* epitomizes Warren's concept of "black ~~being~~" by offering a
hypothetical scenario in which Black people are eradicated from the physical world, no
longer identified as phenomenological entities. While showing Black people's condition
inside this scenario, Schuyler also portrays white people's reaction to the invention of
Black-No-More and demonstrates how they are faced with a lack of ontological security
as they rely on the objectification of Blackness as the absence in order to secure their

own presence. What Warren defines as "black ~~being~~" can be contextualized as "Black-No-More" in Schuyler's work. *BNM* embodies Warren's argument in various ways. While Dr. Crookman reads newspaper stories related to his invention, for instance, Schuyler depicts editorial texts expressing white people's concern. In one of these editorials, the author warns white people about Black-No-More's increasing popularity:

> There are times when the welfare of our race must take precedence over law. Opposed as we always have been to mob violence as the worst enemy of democratic government, we cannot help but feel that the intelligent white men and women of New York City who are interested in the purity and preservation of their race should not permit the challenge of Crookmanism to go unanswered, even though these black scoundrels may be within the law. There are too many criminals in this country already hiding behind the skirts of the law. (Schuyler, *BNM* 247)

The emphasis on violence and law is significant in Schuyler's text, since Warren claims that ontological terror is initially manifested through law. According to Warren, "[l]aw is a fundamental instrument of terror, rendering black ~~being~~ unprotected, undefined, not seen, and reified. It exists to not exist" (108). The quote from the editorial highlights that even though Crookman's treatment is sanctioned by law, the fear of losing the ontological security that whiteness derives from Blackness as an entity of nothingness permits violence against Blackness. In an antiblack world, as Warren states, "[t]he physical black body is a distortion and an ontic illusion. This black body, as equipment, cannot appeal to Being for grounding, freedom, or futurity, since it emerges as a thing for the human to understand ontological difference" (65). This ontological difference in Schuyler's proposition is marked by "the intelligent white men and women" who have to be aware of their existence in relation to "the purity and preservation of their race." This provides them with a sense of ontological security by enabling their own presence. Schuyler further exemplifies this in another editorial text:

> While it is the right of every citizen to do what he wants to do with his money, the white people of the United States cannot remain indifferent to this discovery and its horrible potentialities. Hundreds of Negroes with newly-acquired white skins have already entered white society and thousands will follow them. The black race from one end of the country to the other has in two short weeks gone completely crazy over the prospect of getting white. Day by day we see the color line which we have so laboriously established being rapidly destroyed. (*BNM* 247)

In the face of the terror of losing the ontological difference embodied in Blackness, white individuals express their fear of losing their constructed sense of "being" in the

world within certain hierarchical boundaries. Schuyler juxtaposes Black people's anxiety of losing their identity with white people's concern of losing their ontological difference. With this comparison, the emphasis on ontological difference in Schuyler's work highlights that white people's reaction is not merely about preserving power structures, but rather an integral aspect of *Dasein*'s existential path. The power dynamics as more of a class problem may be considered to have fostered this ontological resistance. However, Schuyler's argument transcends pragmatic ideals and speaks to the very nature of white existence in the United States, reducing it to an antagonistic relationship, which in turn reveals inauthentic identity constructions. While acknowledging the economic benefits that white people obtain from their racial identity, Schuyler's hypothesis accentuates how whiteness is constructed upon artificial racial categories. This intersectional approach challenges the idea that racial dynamics are exclusively influenced by economic tensions and offers an expanded perspective of the multifaceted problems in question.

To illustrate this further and avoid oversimplifying the issue as solely a matter of class, Schuyler depicts white working-class people from the Southern region: "The South had always been identified with the Negro, and vice versa, and its most pleasant memories treasured in song and story were built around this pariah class" (Schuyler, *BNM* 307). Schuyler draws attention to the South's construction as an antiblack category with its identification with Blackness. His use of the word "pariah" highlights the sense of exclusion as a form of metaphysical entity that Black people face which is based on "song and story" as narratives that establish an ontological difference between Black and white people. Schuyler further problematizes this construction:

> The deep concern of the Southern Caucasians with chivalry, the protection of white womanhood, the exaggerated development of race pride and the studied arrogance of even the poorest half-starved white peon were all due to the presence of the black man. Booted and starved by their industrial and agricultural feudal lords, the white masses derived their only consolation and happiness from the fact that they were the same color as their oppressors and consequently better than the mudsill blacks. (*BNM* 307)

While Schuyler shows that white working class people are exploited with this artificial value of their racialized identity, he depicts how their very existence is contingent on

this relationship with "the presence of the black man." Schuyler also portrays Max/Matt's observations on these people: "It did not matter that they had to send their children into the mills to augment the family wave; that they were always sickly and that their death rate was high. What mattered such little things when the very foundation of civilization, white supremacy, was threatened?" (*BNM* 305). With Max/Matt's observations, Schuyler highlights the fact that many white people place greater value on preserving their racial differences in society and politics than resolving the social and economic issues that the working class experiences. Black-No-More's campaign to eradicate Blackness jeopardizes their sense of self and the basis of their identity, leading to an existential crisis. The potential loss of their identity and ontological difference surpasses all previous difficulties.

The fact that the metaphysical concept of whiteness is constructed upon dehumanized sense of Blackness is even more satirically dramatized as the novel closes. The discovery of widespread Black heritage among the population, as revealed by Buggerie's report, leads to politicians' attempt to escape from the country since they propagated for the election with their supposed pure white heritage. However, when Snobbcraft and Buggerie's plane crashes in a racist Christian town in Mississippi, Happy Hill, Schuyler introduces a pastor named Alex McPhule, who functions as another example of white's existence built upon "black ~~being~~." McPhule convinces the residents of Happy Hill that God will send them a sign on Election Day. In McPhule's projection, the sign will encourage other Christians from different sects such as Methodists and Baptists to join his own church. The sign, McPhule concludes, is a Black person to be lynched: "If the Lord would only send him a nigger for his congregation to lynch! That would, indeed, be marked evidence of the power of Rev. Alex McPhule" (Schuyler, *BNM* 362). The town's residents are adaptable to the hysteria since they were already looking for a Black person to lynch: "Quite naturally the news that all Negroes had disappeared, not only from their state but from the entire country, had been received with sincere regret by the inhabitants of Happy Hill" (Schuyler, *BNM* 359). In such a case, the absence of Blackness deprives the townspeople of metaphysical nothingness since it reveals a desire for "black ~~being~~" to reappear and be used as a tool for white people's ontological security. Alex McPhule and the Happy Hill

residents consider the appearance of Blackness as an instrument to respond to the void of metaphysical nothingness they had before. They wish to neutralize it with violence to surpass the function of nothing in the form of formlessness. In relation to violence and metaphysical construction of Blackness, Warren states:

> [B]lack ~~being~~ is the target of gratuitous violence within an antiblack world, a violence that is essential to the world itself. Thus, the violence that we register as unjust or inhumane—the laceration of the whip, the canine patrol, exclusionary procedures, disenfranchisement, anti-literacy laws, and routinized humiliation and invasion, for example—are ways a metaphysical organization of existence (antebellum politics) contends with black as nothing. (49)

Schuyler offers a similar axiom with Happy Hill and its residents. After their plane crashed near the town, Snobbcraft and Buggerie resort to changing their skin color to black using shoe polish in order to avoid being recognized as traitor politicians with their Black heritage. When the mob of the town, organized by McPhule's prophesy, sees them in blackface, they rush to lynch them fervently. However, when they strip their clothes, they see that Snobbcraft and Buggerie are in fact white, and stop beating them. But as soon as villagers figure out that they are descended from Black people, events become violent. With scrupulous attention to every phase of the brutal assault, Schuyler delivers an especially vivid depiction of the violence that took place:

> The two men, vociferously protesting, were stripped naked, held down by husky and willing farm hands and their ears and genitals cut off with jack knives amid the fiendish cries of men and women. When this crude surgery was completed, some wag sewed their ears to their backs and they were released and told to run. Eagerly, in spite of their pain, both men tried to avail themselves of the opportunity. Anything was better than this. Staggering forward through an opening made in the crowd, they attempted to run down the dusty road, blood streaming down their bodies. . . . The preliminaries ended, the two victims, not yet dead, were picked up, dragged to the stake and bound to it, back to back. Little boys and girls gaily gathered excelsior, scrap paper, twigs and small branches while their proud parents fetched logs, boxes, kerosene and the staves from a cider barrel. The fuel was piled up around the groaning men until only their heads were visible. When all was in readiness, the people fell back and the Rev. McPhule, as master of ceremonies, ignited the pyre. As the flames shot upward, the dazed men, roused by the flames, strained vainly at the chains that held them. Buggerie found his voice and let out yelp after yelp as flames licked at his fat flesh. The crowd whooped with glee and Rev. McPhule beamed with satisfaction. The flames rose higher and completely hid the victims from view. The fire crackled merrily and the intense heat drove the spectators back. The odor of cooking meat permeated the clear, country air and many a nostril was guiltily distended. (*BNM* 367-368)

In this particular scene, Schuyler emphasizes the meaning of the townspeople's recognition of Snobbcraft and Buggerie's true racial identities. This revelation is significant since it grants the villagers a tool for their violent tendencies—a physical manifestation of Blackness that symbolizes an "ontological nothingness" that they yearn to subjugate. As in Warren's exposition, "[p]erpetuating a metaphysical violence translates into forms of physical brutality" (127). For Warren, "Without this violence, the precarious ground of human ontology is exposed as fraudulent" (127). In *BNM*, this ontology is encapsulated by the construction of white identity in the United States. It is indicated that the mob's violence can only occur once their victims' Blackness is approved of and acknowledged by the newspaper's disclosure of their Black ancestry. Thus, despite the ostensible targeting of white, racist, hypocritical politicians, the violence ultimately ends up being inflicted upon Blackness. Schuyler highlights the fragility of white identity as it establishes itself through an assumed racial hierarchy that holds up Blackness as a metaphysical source of nothingness to be dominated. The violence employed by the townspeople reinforces their desire to dominate the lack in their ontological self-configuration as Warren frames in his philosophical disclosure:

> Antiblack violence is violence against nothing, the nothing that unsettles the human because it can never be captured and dominated. Blacks, then, allow the human to engage in a fantasy—the domination of nothing. By projecting this nothing as terror onto blacks, the human seeks to dominate nothing by dominating black ~~being~~, to eradicate nothing by eradicating black ~~being~~. (21)

In his *Ontological Terror*, Warren also problematizes the role of science and scientific experiments in relation to Black people throughout history. He claims that "[t]he free black's relation to science and mathematics has been one of utter terror and ontological insecurity" (141). In Warren's proposition, "the free black" offers "a conceptual frame for applying scientific procedures to work through an ontological crisis" (112). To expound on his argument about the connection between science and "black ~~being~~," Warren references Benjamin Rush, a prominent figure in the American Revolution known for his stance against slavery. Benjamin Rush is a notable figure in relation to the analysis of Schuyler's work, since Rush might have influenced Schuyler's *BNM*. Rush was one of the first people to claim that Blackness could actually be cured with a scientific process. With the purpose of turning Black people into white, Rush suggested a solution by delineating Blackness as a disease caused by leprosy: "Is the color of the

negroes a disease? Then let science and humanity combine their efforts, and endeavor to discover a remedy for it" (295). As Warren puts, "Dr. Benjamin Rush . . . provides an absolute solution to the problem of black ~~being~~: eliminate it" (120). In *BNM*, Dr. Crookman presents a very similar approach to the issue. While he does not identify Blackness as a disease, Crookman problematizes Blackness as the main concern to be resolved: "He saw in his great discovery the solution to the most annoying problem in American life. Obviously, he reasoned, if there were no Negroes, there could be no Negro problem. Without a Negro problem, Americans could concentrate their attention on something constructive" (Schuyler, *BNM* 250).

While explaining his invention, Dr. Crookman highlights that he had studied skin diseases similar to Benjamin Rush's attempt: "[D]uring my first year at college I noticed a black girl on the street one day who had several irregular white patches on her face and hands. That intrigued me. I began to study up on skin diseases and found out that the girl was evidently suffering from a nervous disease known as vitiligo. It is a very rare disease" (Schuyler, *BNM* 230). He later suggests that by stimulating this disease in a Black body, one would "solve the American race problem" (Schuyler, *BNM* 230). In Rush's case, "black ~~being~~ could be cured if the leprosy were treated" (Warren 121). However, after witnessing the case of Henry Moss, a Black man who had vitiligo and started showing his white skin, Dr. Benjamin Rush became convinced that Blackness could be eradicated. Rush proposed means of "depletion" such as "bleeding, purging, or abstinence" to lessen blackness in Black people (296). In Warren's words, "[t]he desire to rub away blackness, to deplete it from the world, became Rush's occupation" (121). Warren argues that Benjamin Rush's solution—trying to transform Black people into white—displays his "philosophical desperation" and illustrates his inability to picture a world where political activity works effectively and Black people are respected as human "beings." Rush's inability to think of any alternative approach to the issue of antiblackness, according to Warren, serves as an obvious indication of the futility of "emancipation/freedom" ideals and the permanence of the "metaphysical holocaust" (121).

In Schuyler's *BNM*, the proposed scientific process to "cure" Blackness is recognized as futile, and instead serves as an indication of a larger problem as in Warren's philosophical formulation. Schuyler hypothesizes that antiblackness can only be resolved by eradicating Blackness. The scientific process in the novel offers a form of ontological terror to Black existence. As Ferguson argues, "[i]n order to save his people, Crookman chooses symbolically to destroy them, and in the bargain to play on their most self-negating desires. . . . He confuses surface with depth, toys with genocide, and regards people as mere instruments of his well-meaning but highly destructive aims" (*The Sage* 239). Black people are objectified to transition towards a potential freedom having a subjective vision. They integrate into American society by becoming "black no more." Schuyler problematizes the result of this solution for both Blacks and whites. As it is primarily based on racial discourse, it does not solve problems for Blacks. For Schuyler, it is crucial to end the racialized discourse that perpetuates the "cultural schizophrenia" if African Americans are to overcome the existential burden of double consciousness (Favor 218). On the other hand, white people's reaction to the absence of Blackness emerges as an ontological problem to be resolved. Solving the problem is perceived as a threat to the existence of whiteness. Warren's analysis of Benjamin Rush's failure to address antiblackness provides a useful framework for understanding Schuyler's argument in *BNM*:

> All solutions fail to eradicate antiblackness, since solution-oriented thinking depends on antiblackness. But the *success within the failure* is precisely the exposure of this double bind. Rush's compassionate solution to the problem of antiblackness *must* rely on antiblack strategies to realize the solution—and this solution is just another antiblack formation. Antiblackness is both the problem and the solution. (121-122)

This exposition clarifies why Dr. Crookman's invention, which can physically transform Blacks into white, fails to eradicate antiblackness. Schuyler's argument, although not explicitly connected to any particular philosophical framework, rejects the idea that race-conscious solutions can effectively address the issue of antiblackness. Instead, he argues that focusing on race essentialism and race-related solutions only serves to reinforce existing oppression prevalent in American society. By perpetuating the notion of Black people as inherently "peculiar" or "different," such solutions ultimately contribute to the ongoing categorization of Blackness as a form of

"nothingness" within white people's existential scheme. Ferguson states, "taking Crookman's formula is the act of a fool—not just because it involves an overinvestment in the value of skin color, but also for its implicit rejection of an alternative style of American life rich in the flexible enhancement of human potential" (*The Sage* 227-228). Crookman's invention becomes another marker of ontological difference in white people's inauthentic construction of their identity. Thus, *BNM* can be seen as a precedent that hypothesizes Warren's philosophical exposition in a narrative. Schuyler's fictional experiment results in a lack of authenticity for both Black and white individuals in their search for meaning and identity.

Schuyler and Warren may differ in their ultimate conclusions; however, they both take a similar approach in identifying the problem. Warren's conclusion suggests a departure from the "human" and humanistic ideals as they are part of the projection of the world of Being as *Dasein*. He does not specify, however, the ways in which one can confront antiblackness. Warren posits that "spiritual endurance" is the sole method for Blacks to confront the ongoing nihilistic threat to their existence after years of oppression and continuing problems in the world. His primary emphasis is that Black people "are still on the path to developing a phenomenology of black spirit" (171). With its central discussion formulated on eradicating Blackness from the United States and its hypothetical ramifications, *BNM* serves as an example of Warren's philosophical excavation. Schuyler contends that antiblackness will endure as long as racialized discourses and essentialist views in relation to identity constructions permeate Black people's lives. He transcends narratives that victimize Black people and promote humanistic principles, as Warren theorizes. Instead, he emphasizes individuality and allows for multiple responses to the question of Black identity, by revealing the inauthenticity of both Black and white people through his novel.

Discussing the concepts of race and authenticity, however, can pose difficulties with its possible repercussions regarding the Black experience. As George Yancy argues, "the reality of race is indexed to the fabric of our historicity, which makes its reality historically specific" (49). In this framework, racial categories need not to depend on essentialism, since "race is 'out there' in a socially ontologically substantive way"

(Yancy 49). Robert Birt remarks that the concept of existential freedom is frequently misconstrued as pure transcendence without taking one's circumstances into account. Correspondingly, bad faith can be misinterpreted as a flight from this transcendence. However, freedom, for Sartre, is both the unavoidable circumstance and transcendence. Denying either dimension, including one's facticity, is bad faith. Such a concept has social repercussions in addition to ontological ones (Birt 266). Birt further argues, "Insofar as blackness is the identity and consciousness of an oppressed people desirous of liberation, and expressive of their striving for the emancipation of their denied or *thwarted transcendence*, it can coincide with existential authenticity" (266). In this schema, Black people in their situated reality accept their given facticity in their quest for authenticity by intentionally seeking a construction of their identity on Blackness. Schuyler's argument does not seem to present a simple dismissal of the lived reality in relation to racialized discourses. Instead, he focuses on ways that African Americans can overcome racism and what is considered to be its existential consequences. Given that authenticity in the African American experience is often viewed as a way of self-affirmation, some would argue that Schuyler rushes to this conclusion hastily. Despite the fact that Schuyler does not explicitly promote a mode of self-validation, his work can be seen as a symbolic and nuanced affirmation of Black identity that is unconstrained by mainstream conventions.

Max/Matt's acceptance of his Black identity and his sense of freedom embodies this symbolic affirmation near the ending of the novel. However, it can only be reduced to a small part of Schuler's narrative throughout the novel, since the satirical tone of the novel does not provide a safe or unambiguous interpretation of the characters' actions. In Max/Matt's confession of his Blackness, it is possible to find a symbolic resolution in the end of the novel. Max/Matt's wife, Helen, turns out to be of African descent as Buggerie's genealogy project uncovers that many Americans, even political figures, have African lineage. Helen is ashamed of her ancestry after the birth of their Black child. Later, Max/Matt acknowledges that he was also Black before Black-No-More stating, "You're not responsible for the color of our baby, my dear. I'm the guilty one" (Schuyler, *BNM* 350). Mawuena K. Logan, in his article linking *BNM* with phenomenology, identifies Max/Matt's affirmation of his identity as significant moment

as "it reflects, metaphorically, an acceptance of a self that he's left behind for 'legitimate' reasons" (158). Max/Matt experiences a moment of inner freedom as a result of acknowledging his own Blackness, in which he is liberated from the burden of a lie that he possessed after his transformation. His emotional state is characterized by a relief with a sense of "great load lifting from his soul" (Schuyler, *BNM* 350). Ferguson describes Max/Matt's ultimate position as a "family man content in his blackness for his hard-won ability to see humanity in what he once regarded as the most remote, superior, and desirable otherness" (*The Sage* 239). The novel's conclusion still emphasizes the arbitrary nature of race and its cultural effects. It becomes clear through Max/Matt's path that achieving freedom cannot be restricted to acceptance of his Black identity and the difficulties that come with it. Instead, he must be aware of many other factors that form his existence apart from racial discourse if he is to live authentically. While he accepts his Black ancestry, it does not mean that Max/Matt is to be locked in a historically situated body.

Within this closure, Schuyler's position can be aligned with Fanon's perspective: "[T]he black man should no longer be confronted by the dilemma to turn white or disappear; but he should be able to take cognizance of a possibility of existence" (100). In Fanon's view, acknowledging the possibility of existence should not be equated with having a constrained grasp of racialized discourse. Fanon states, "The discovery of the existence of a Negro civilization in the fifteenth century confers no patent of humanity on me. Like it or not, the past can in no way guide me in the present moment" (225). For DeGraw, the resemblances within the discussions regarding race in Schuyler's *BNM* and Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* point to a "common subjective ideal" between these writers (158). Both Schuyler and Fanon are aware of the problem with Black subjectivity driven by racism and oppression. In order to visualize a future when the concept of race is meaningless, they examine how race is constructed. They agree on the transcendence of race consciousness because they think it is destructive and hinders individual freedom (DeGraw 159). Schuyler challenges readers in their quest for an authentic path by reversing the accepted conceptions of both Black and white subjectivity. He draws attention to these conceptions' fragility and limitations in the context of racialized discourses. Fanon, on the other hand, adopts a descriptive and

analytical approach, emphasizing how Black subjectivity must overcome the limitations posed by racialized identities. He addresses the necessity to transcend these identities in order to reclaim agency and pave the way for novel paths of individual and group empowerment. To emphasize this, Fanon states, "The body of history does not determine a single one of my actions. I am my own foundation" (231). Fanon's readiness to go beyond conventional assumptions of the past and adopt a more broad perspective shows that he has moved away from a constrained understanding of history and existence. He proclaims, "[I]t is by going beyond the historical, instrumental hypothesis that I will initiate the cycle of my freedom" (231). Individuals are thus encouraged, in Fanon's prescription, to escape the limitations imposed by historical narratives and take part in a transformative process leading to emancipation and freedom.

Invoking an analogous framework to Fanon's perspective, Schuyler promotes the idea that people should initiate the process of developing their own identities by overcoming the limitations imposed by antiblack constructions and inauthentic narratives that permeate the Black struggle. The contextualized character of African Americans' identity constructions, which are deeply entwined within the ontological constraints of historical forces that shape their lived experiences, is extensively explored by Schuyler in *BNM*. Additionally, Schuyler questions how white people use the Black body as a binary component of the construction of their own identities as a manifestation filled with self-deception. Moreover, he evaluates critically the constrained conception of identity promoted by African American groups and leaders, whose perspectives frequently center on fixed racial parameters as the only foundation for authentic self-construction. In line with Fanon's beliefs, Schuyler promotes a paradigm-shifting approach that puts closure to the systems that perpetuate to support these harmful assumptions, empowering Black people to overcome them and achieve self-realization. Therefore, Schuyler's prescription stipulates a conscious effort to actively create meaning within Black subjectivity. He acknowledges the substantial challenges faced by Black people while also outlining a more individualistic strategy for achieving freedom in the United States, which is similar to Fanon's assertion: "In the world through which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself" (230).

CONCLUSION

The historical struggle of Black people necessitates the recognition of the existential urgency. Within the African American experience, identity formation is intertwined with existential inquiries that challenge the very existence of Black individuals. Racism situates Black people in a struggle that stimulates an existential response to nihilism. The unique condition of Black consciousness initiates a proto-existentialist perspective. This thesis argues that the works of Harlem Renaissance writers provide an early manifestation of African American existential thought, as they engage in fundamental questions of identity (What are we?), method (What shall we do?), and purpose (Why do we go on?) through the experiences depicted in novels. The selected novels are, respectively, *Quicksand* by Nella Larsen, *The Blacker the Berry* by Wallace Thurman *Not Without Laughter* by Langston Hughes and *Black No More* by George Schuyler.

While some scholars have acknowledged the existentialist influences in the writings of Du Bois and Alain Locke during the Harlem Renaissance, a comprehensive analysis of existential themes in the literary works of the period is lacking. This thesis aims to bridge this gap by examining the early manifestations of existential themes within the selected novels. By focusing particularly on novels, the argument presented in the thesis gains a stronger foundation, since each novel explores the inner conflicts of the characters and their conceptualizations of lived experiences. Phenomenology serves as a framework to contextualize Black subjectivity within a specific social setting, and the novel becomes an ideal medium to analyze how Black individuals' quest for identity and meaning in life unfolds. In this context, the selected novels from the Harlem Renaissance offer valuable insights, predating later philosophical conceptualizations of existentialism. Lewis Gordon's existential-phenomenological repositioning of the Black experience holds particular significance in understanding the lived experiences represented in these novels, with themes such as authenticity, freedom, responsibility, embodied agency, and anguish.

As there is a distinctive mode of existentialism in African American literary tradition, writers from different time periods engender several perspectives framing their

existential struggles in relation to racism and discrimination. The existing body of scholarly work pertaining to the existential elements found in African American fiction tends to focus on novels that emerged following the Second World War, aligning with the rise of French existentialism. When examining the fiction of the Harlem Renaissance, the scholarship primarily delves into the political, historical, and cultural implications surrounding the theme of race. As a result, the philosophical dimension of the period is often overlooked or underrepresented in academic discourse. The selected Harlem Renaissance novels discussed in this thesis display alternative versions of existential strands with diverse perspectives and individual experiences within particular conditions. By using the narrative strength of the novel, Wallace Thurman and Nella Larsen encapsulate individuals' struggles within the Black community in their works. Langston Hughes designates certain aspects of an identity constructed within a consistent way of reproducing cultural embodiment in the blues and jazz in *Not Without Laughter*. Schuyler juxtaposes the conception of race by suggesting an ideal sense of authentic existence as opposed to the prescribed ideals of a larger community.

Existentialism, although typically associated with canonical writers and a specific historical context, transcends time and place. Phenomenological perspective of black people demonstrate that in a world already challenging their existence, adopting an existential mode of thinking becomes a necessity rather than a choice. Significantly at the beginning of the 20th century concentrated in the urban setting of Harlem, New York City, the oppressive nature of the antiblack world has witnessed a collective response from Black individuals to reclaim their humanity, leading to complex structures, value systems, and identity constructions within their experience. By challenging oppressive institutions, Black individuals established novel ways of engaging with the world, seeking authentic meaning and asserting their individuality. This quest for authenticity and meaning has influenced subsequent movements such as Negritude in African countries, and Negrismo in Latin American countries, and theories exploring the relationship between oppression and subjectivity, exemplified by figures including Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Frantz Fanon. The intellectual foundation for this connection can be traced back to the Harlem Renaissance.

Sartre's phenomenological approach and Fanon's schematization of "the fact of Blackness" are valuable for analyzing early identity constructions and their relational nature within the African American context. The Harlem Renaissance serves as a significant movement in constructing African American identities, and the literary works of this period contain existential elements. However, it is important to note that these novels should not be solely labeled as existentialist works, as such a categorization would limit their influence. While the authors draw on existential attitudes in their writings, they do not aim to formulate comprehensive philosophical concepts alongside their literary endeavors. Therefore, it is rather their condition that situates their writing in an existential context. Hence, it might be suggested that African Americans are situated within the specific measures of their existential position that designates a distinctive sense of existentialism.

The philosophical framework of each novel presented in this thesis can be contextualized within the broader ideas articulated by W. E. B. Du Bois and Alain Locke, both of whom laid the theoretical groundwork for the Harlem Renaissance. Their influence resonates in the literary creations of the period. Du Bois, through his vivid portrayal of the unique experiences of African Americans and the concept of double consciousness, provided writers with insights into the shaping of Black consciousness. He also advocated for art to serve as a form of propaganda, depicting a positive image of Black individuals. Locke developed the notion of the "New Negro" as a means to challenge prevailing stereotypes and redefine the representation of African American identity. He asserted that Black artists and writers carried the responsibility of transforming fixed narratives about Blackness. Although Nella Larsen did not directly engage in these discussions through non-fiction works, Thurman, Hughes, and Schuyler actively contributed to the dialogue on how to depict Black art and expression.

Thurman asserted that African Americans should perceive themselves as independent agents creating literature intended for an American audience. He emphasized the importance of unique self-expression and rejected the idea of a unified voice representing Black experiences. However, he also sought to distance himself from adopting a normative white perspective. Instead, his aim was to depict Black life in a

realistic manner while avoiding essentialist claims. In a similar vein, Hughes advocated for an authentic representation of African American life, embracing Black culture and traditions, particularly the distinct forms of expression found in music. Hughes encouraged Black individuals to embrace their own voices and assert their agency as African Americans. In this regard, Hughes went a step further in portraying the reality of Black experiences. He urged Black individuals not to fear affirming their identity in the face of oppression, to embrace a Black consciousness, and to celebrate their unique modes of expression.

George Schuyler's critique can be extended to encompass all the writers discussed, as he posited that the pursuit of an authentic Black voice, which is inherently distinctive, inadvertently perpetuates racist stereotypes about African Americans. In his quest to challenge the negative portrayals of Blackness in the United States, he advocated for individual expressions that transcend the historical confines of race consciousness. Schuyler urged the creation of art that offers new avenues for African Americans to identify with life beyond the limitations of racial categorization. His critique not only encompassed the Harlem Renaissance writers but also extended to Black leaders' attempts to construct a collective response to antiblack racism. Schuyler's quest for authenticity surpasses the mere affirmation of an African American identity. Although Nella Larsen's stance in these discussions remains relatively unclear, her works indicate that she also questions the validity of celebrating a collective African American identity. However, she complicates her narratives by delving into issues of mixed race and gender, highlighting the challenges of subscribing to a unified narrative for African Americans in the presence of additional identity formations such as being a woman and having a mixed race background.

Larsen's *Quicksand* depicts Helga Crane's pursuit of meaning and identity, transcending the imposed narratives of Blackness and white perceptions. However, Helga's search remains unresolved, as she grapples with the limitations of racialized identity constructions. Her existential crisis leads her to make several choices and seek various locations. Although her mobility offers her a place of escape from her situated anguish, she never achieves the ontological security she desires. Helga's fragmented

identity stems from her mixed race background and gender, both of which are interrogated in the novel. However, her mixed race identity poses the most complex challenge within Helga's existential quest. In her rejection of both her whiteness and Blackness, Helga Crane consciously denies her position as a Black individual, viewing Blackness as an obstacle to transcendence. The act of negating her Blackness reflects a state of bad faith, as she chooses to ignore her facticity as a form of lived reality of her racial identity. By rejecting racial identifiers altogether, Helga seeks a raceless subjectivity as a means of achieving transcendence. However, this raceless subjectivity can only be attained through the negation of her Blackness, as whiteness is not subject to racial categorization. As a result, she resigns her Blackness, yet experiences an unequal sense of existence as a raceless individual. This analysis sheds light on Helga's incomplete quest to discover an authentic way of existing.

Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker The Berry* focuses on a dark-skinned African American woman, who is obsessed with her skin color. As Emma Lou grows up, her family forges an identity for her in which she conceptualizes her Blackness as evil. While Thurman explores the issue of colorism within the Black community, the novel shows how Emma Lou becomes a part of the racist normative discourse even if she is subjected to discrimination. However, through acceptance of her own value, Emma Lou reaches a point of self-recognition and self-determination that transcends the essential identity constructions imposed by her family during childhood, leading to an authentic sense of self. Emma Lou's initial attempts to make sense of her existence can be contextualized as a form of "black antiblackness" through which she negates her own identity with white perceptions on her body. Emma Lou's denial of her Blackness creates a persistent sense of incompleteness in her lived experiences. However, when she realizes the need to affirm herself as a Black subject, she embraces her existential responsibility and confronts the challenges that come with it. This acceptance allows her to find a greater sense of fulfillment and authenticity in her journey. Emma Lou's struggle echoes both Sartre's discussion of the "inauthentic Jew" and Camus's concept of the "absurd hero."

In *Not Without Laughter*, Langston Hughes initiates several existential possibilities for Sandy, an African American boy, as he seeks to find meaning in his life. Through the depiction of different life choices among Sandy's family members such as his grandmother Hager and his aunt Harriett, Hughes draws upon the dilemmas faced by Black individuals. The novel offers several characters and their distinct approaches to self-determination in order to reinvigorate their lives in authentic ways, reflecting generational differences and the integration of rural and urban experiences. Hughes aims to celebrate African American life and reaffirm an identity incorporating music as an inherent feature of the African American existence. He also focuses on religion and its declining significance in African American life. Hughes's reflections on religion can be particularly contextualized with discussions related to nihilism and alternative responses to that. By celebrating certain characteristics of African American culture, Hughes questions accepted norms of white perception through traditional religious affiliations in the African American community.

George Schuyler's *Black No More* challenges African American writers' privileging collective identity which, in his view, is an essentialist concept. *Black No More* follows Max Disher's life, who changes his skin color from black to white through a machine called Black-No-More. He also changes his name to Matthew Fisher after the procedure. Following Max/Matt's transformation, the novel satirizes the whole concept of racial identity and challenges both white and Black constructions of identity. Due to his opposition to associating oneself with a fixed sense of identity, Schuyler debates ideas offered by Du Bois, Hughes, or Locke in his work. He protests against a preordained sense of identification with Blackness and Black art designated by certain writers. He demonstrates a sense of incongruence within the confines of a coherent and prioritized construction of identity imposed upon the African American subject as a representative of a larger community. Although he does not oppose recognition and affirmation of Blackness as part of African American existence, Schuyler questions the relevance of a collective Black identity with certain racial characteristics and historical positioning, which is discussed by Fanon later. His critique of white identity construction poses a greater threat as he shows that how whiteness is predicated upon the concept of race and

the ways in which it functions as an entity depending on a form of negative construction of its identity structure.

Multiple profiles from various writers display diverse perspectives and experiences within the Harlem Renaissance. The deliberate selection of profiles in this thesis, including a mixed race woman, a Black woman, a Black boy, and a mature Black man, aims to highlight and examine their distinctive differences. In each novel, there is a unique phenomenological experience and each presents a different and incompatible approach to racial identification. Helga Crane engages in an existential crisis due to her mixed race background, while Emma Lou struggles with an obsession over her Blackness but ultimately achieves self-recognition. *Not Without Laughter* emphasizes the importance of self-acceptance and African American identity, and Schuyler critiques the construction of essentialist identity by both white and Black individuals, offering alternative ways of identification.

Each of these discussions can be related to the question of authenticity resulting from characters' phenomenological experiences. Their ways of identity formation prompt them to interrogate the societal roles imposed upon them. In their quest for authenticity, they seek to challenge both the white-imposed expectations of their roles and the preconceived notions regarding their Blackness. This pursuit shapes the characters' choices as they strive to find meaning in their lives. Their search also serves as a response to black nihilism, exploring how to confront the inherent sense of meaninglessness in an antiblack world. In their efforts to imbue their lives with value, they seek alternative value systems that may not necessarily rely on religious foundations. Hughes's work, in particular, offers an avenue to escape from traditional value frameworks rooted in Christianity. He replaces metaphysical sources with novel modes of expression within African American culture, particularly through the medium of music, to confront and challenge black nihilism. Although existential themes are present in all the novels, it is important to note the variation in their narration styles. Larsen and Thurman employs a descriptive approach centered on their protagonists' inner thoughts, while Hughes and Schuyler adopt a broader perspective incorporating multiple characters and situations to reflect their ideas. Schuyler's novel, in particular,

stands out as it serves as a satire and one of the early examples of African American science fiction. By introducing a hypothetical scenario, Schuyler expands the scope of his discussion.

The Harlem Renaissance movement holds the potential for further exploration of identity constructions and existentialism, extending beyond the novels analyzed in this thesis. Poems and plays during this period can also offer existential insights. Novels are particularly suited for delving into existential inquiries through characters, which is why they are the primary focus of this thesis. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that other forms of literary works in the Harlem Renaissance can also be examined through an existential lens.

Black existentialism as a philosophical category is not limited to a historical context, and traces of it can be found retrospectively. While the discussions presented in this thesis may be seen as pertaining to the past, it is obvious that discourses surrounding the issue of racialization continue to dominate American culture. Along with the pervasive problems related to systemic racism, this is evident in recent "Black Lives Matter" protests, and the reactions to "Critical Race Theory." The issues of African American identity and the struggle against oppression indicate an ongoing discussion. Given that African American existential thought aims to challenge misrepresentations of Blackness, it remains relevant to examine how Black individuals shape their struggle and identity. The existential conceptions of identity and personal responses to it can still inform the depiction of African American life in the United States. Therefore, in the contemporary context, there is more pertinence to explore the realm of existentialism as a means of conceptualizing and broadening the scope of discussions on identity, politics and culture.

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APPENDIX 1. Ethics Board Waiver Form

HACETTEPE ÜNİVERSİTESİ
SOSYAL BİLİMLER ENSTİTÜSÜ
TEZ ÇALIŞMASI ETİK KOMİSYON MUAFİYETİ FORMU

HACETTEPE ÜNİVERSİTESİ
SOSYAL BİLİMLER ENSTİTÜSÜ
AMERİKAN KÜLTÜRÜ VE EDEBİYATI ANABİLİM DALI BAŞKANLIĞI'NA

Tarih: __/__/__

Tez Başlığı: Afrikalı Amerikalı Varoluşçuluğunun Harlem Rönesansı Romanlarındaki Yansıması

Yukarıda başlığı gösterilen tez çalışmam:

1. İnsan ve hayvan üzerinde deney niteliği taşımamaktadır,
2. Biyolojik materyal (kan, idrar vb. biyolojik sıvılar ve numuneler) kullanılmasını gerektirmemektedir.
3. Beden bütünlüğüne müdahale içermemektedir.
4. Gözlemsel ve betimsel araştırma (anket, mülakat, ölçek/skala çalışmaları, dosya taramaları, veri kaynakları taraması, sistem-model geliştirme çalışmaları) niteliğinde değildir.

Hacettepe Üniversitesi Etik Kurullar ve Komisyonlarının Yönergelerini inceledim ve bunlara göre tez çalışmamın yürütülebilmesi için herhangi bir Etik Kurul/Komisyon'dan izin alınmasına gerek olmadığını; aksi durumda doğabilecek her türlü hukuki sorumluluğu kabul ettiğimi ve yukarıda vermiş olduğum bilgilerin doğru olduğunu beyan ederim.

Gereğini saygılarımla arz ederim.

Tarih ve İmza

Adı Soyadı:	Abdülsamet Köseoğlu
Öğrenci No:	N18130792
Anabilim Dalı:	Amerikan Kültürü ve Edebiyatı
Programı:	Amerikan Kültürü ve Edebiyatı
Statüsü:	☐ Yüksek Lisans ☐ Doktora ☐ Bütünleşik Doktora

DANIŞMAN GÖRÜŞÜ VE ONAYI

_____
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HACETTEPE UNIVERSITY
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
ETHICS COMMISSION FORM FOR THESIS

Date: __/__/____

Thesis Title: African American Existentialism in Harlem Renaissance Novels

My thesis work related to the title above:

1. Does not perform experimentation on animals or people.
2. Does not necessitate the use of biological material (blood, urine, biological fluids and samples, etc.).
3. Does not involve any interference of the body's integrity.
4. Is not based on observational and descriptive research (survey, interview, measures/scales, data scanning, system-model development).

I declare, I have carefully read Hacettepe University's Ethics Regulations and the Commission's Guidelines, and in order to proceed with my thesis according to these regulations I do not have to get permission from the Ethics Board/Commission for anything; in any infringement of the regulations I accept all legal responsibility and I declare that all the information I have provided is true.

I respectfully submit this for approval.

Date and Signature

Name Surname:	Abdülsamet Köseoğlu
Student No:	N18130792
Department:	American Culture and Literature
Program:	American Culture and Literature
Status:	☐ MA ☐ Ph.D. ☐ Combined MA/ Ph.D.

ADVISER COMMENTS AND APPROVAL

_____
(Title, Name Surname, Signature)

APPENDIX 2. Originality Report

HACETTEPE ÜNİVERSİTESİ
SOSYAL BİLİMLER ENSTİTÜSÜ
YÜKSEK LİSANS TEZ ÇALIŞMASI ORİJİNALLİK RAPORU

HACETTEPE ÜNİVERSİTESİ
SOSYAL BİLİMLER ENSTİTÜSÜ
AMERİKAN KÜLTÜRÜ VE EDEBİYATI ANABİLİM DALI BAŞKANLIĞI'NA

Tarih: _ /_./___

Tez Başlığı : Afrikalı Amerikalı Varoluşçuluğunun Harlem Rönansı Romanlarındaki Yansıması

Yukarıda başlığı gösterilen tez çalışmamın a) Kapak sayfası, b) Giriş, c) Ana bölümler ve d) Sonuç kısımlarından oluşan toplam .... sayfalık kısmına ilişkin, .../....../....... tarihinde şahsım/tez danışmanım tarafından Tumitin adlı intihal tespit programından aşağıda işaretlenmiş filtrelemeler uygulanarak alınmış olan orijinallik raporuna göre, tezimin benzerlik oranı % ..... 'tür.

Uygulanan filtrelemeler:
1- ☐ Kabul/Onay ve Bildirim sayfaları hariç
2- ☐ Kaynakça hariç
3- ☐ Alıntılar hariç
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