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MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S., Volume 35, Number 1, Spring 2010, pp. 119-140 (Article)

Published by MELUS: The Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States

DOI: 10.1353/mel.0.0076



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Writing from the Margins of the Margins: Michael Gold's *Jews Without Money* and Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem*

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Published just two years apart, Michael Gold's *Jews Without Money* (1930) and Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1928) both depict, in colorful and often lurid detail, the underbelly of New York City's two most famous "ethnic" neighborhoods.¹ While Gold's portrayal of the gangs, prostitutes, and criminals of the Lower East Side and McKay's depiction of the saloons, sweetmen, and violence of Harlem have fascinated readers ever since they first appeared, they have also provoked controversy and scathing critique. Over the years, both novels have been accused of sensationalism, primitivism, and, most recently, of idealizing a certain type of hypermasculinity. Neither one ever really managed to enter into the mainstream of the Jewish American or African American literary canons; yet, both texts continue to be read and analyzed.

Given the very clear and public communist commitments of its author, *Jews Without Money* has most often been read as part of the proletarian fiction of the 1930s and only recently has its status as a "Jewish" text been (re)asserted.² Similarly, *Home to Harlem* has never been "accorded a major position in the lineage of African American cultural expression," having most often been categorized and then sidelined as "primitivist" fiction (Maiwald 825). As with its Jewish counterpart, however, in the last decade scholars have been returning to and offering more nuanced analyses of this novel.

In addition to the similar political leanings of their authors, these two novels have many fascinating parallels.³ The narratives share a focus on "low-class" life, a lack of an organized plot structure, and a history of ambivalent literary reception. They are both set in New York City during the early part of the twentieth century, and they both dwell on the significance of their specific urban contexts. Through their extensive descriptions of the poor, the downtrodden, and the working class, the novels paint a vivid picture of blacks and Jews who have not made it in US society. Moreover, the texts present complex male protagonists who are resistant to and often contemptuous of dominant US culture. These protagonists inhabit the marginal spaces of the already marginalized Harlem and the Lower East Side and are not portrayed as aspiring to integrate into main-

stream middle-class US society. *Home to Harlem* and *Jews Without Money* should accordingly be considered particularly useful sites for exploring questions of African American and Jewish American “subculturality” during the late Progressive Era and Jazz Age. By subculture I mean a liminal space in which a group of marginalized subjects produce and circulate a set of practices and norms that are at variance with and sometimes in active opposition to the dominant white culture that surrounds them.⁴

I juxtapose *Home to Harlem* with *Jews Without Money*, concentrating on the representation of the “physical” spaces of Harlem and the Lower East Side. These neighborhoods come to signify the make-up and boundaries of the Jewish and black subcultural worlds in the novels. Such a comparative analysis reveals that despite many similarities between McKay’s and Gold’s narratives, these city spaces are described in strikingly different ways. Whereas Harlem is construed as a positive all-black space whose very “blackness” seems to have a certain radical potential to counter dominant white society and engender political renewal, the “Jewishness” of the Lower East Side is depicted as unable to mobilize such radical potential.

Because they dramatize the different ways countercultural sections within the African American and Jewish American communities were attempting to self-fashion, create alternative norms, and inscribe themselves as oppositional subjects in the US landscape, these texts can be read as revealing something about the markedly dissimilar positionality of these two minority groups during the Jazz Age. McKay’s narrative underscores the definitional power of the black-white divide and points to the ways in which “blackness” as a signifier was sutured to relatively stable and legible signifieds; this suturing, in turn, made the strategic deployment of an essentialist “blackness” possible, while endowing such a deployment with a subversive and empowering potential. Gold’s text points toward a process by which “Jewishness”—which, it is crucial to remember, was still inscribed within a racial and racialized discourse—was already being unhinged from more stable and traditional significations during this period, making the strategic mobilization of an essentialist “Jewishness” for counter-hegemonic purposes virtually impossible.⁵

McKay’s Harlem

Home to Harlem tells the story of Jake Brown, an African American who deserts the US army during World War I after suffering intense racial discrimination in its ranks. Jake finds his way back to his native Harlem and, on his first night in the city, spends the last of his savings to procure the services of a prostitute. Felice, it turns out, has enjoyed the pleasures of the returning soldier so much that she refuses to accept Jake’s fifty

dollars—the last “fifty-dollar note . . . he had left in the world”—and leaves before Jake wakes up. Jake becomes enamored of this “little brown” and for the rest of the narrative he searches for Felice, who comes to symbolize the ideal woman (41).

As many scholars have noted, McKay’s novel appears to glorify a certain kind of African American working-class existence, where “blackness” is essentialized and repeatedly linked to “the primitive life forces in human nature” (Cooper xiii). Throughout the novel, “blackness” is indeed concatenated to “passion” and an ecstatic “love of life,” while black blood is connected to the primitive, exotic, and even the “barbaric,” as well as to a keen ardor for music and sweet rhythm (44, 58, 191). These linkages of “blackness” to certain stereotypical characteristics led many early critics to dismiss the novel as an example of black pandering to white racist stereotypes.⁶ As mentioned, however, scholars have recently reinterpreted McKay’s use of primitivism, arguing that it is not simply an appropriation of “the white cult of the primitive” (Worth 470) or a straightforward lionization of a new urban black masculinity, as Hazel V. Carby argues, but rather a way of presenting working-class black protagonists who are unfettered by middle-class white moral norms. Michael Maiwald, for example, argues that McKay’s “subversive intent” is located precisely in his form of primitivism, which is best described as oppositional (827).

I concur with Maiwald that *Home to Harlem*’s primitivism can be read as oppositional.⁷ McKay’s protagonists are fully aware that they can never and will never become part of mainstream white US society. Yet, rather than dwell on their marginality or strive for a higher status, many of the characters revel in the life available to them. This can be read as a rejection of the mores and norms of dominant white society and an attempt to carve out an alternative mode or way of being in the world. Jake, the main character and McKay’s “symbol of primitive African American decency and vitality” (Cooper xxiii), is described throughout the novel as desiring nothing more than a brown woman, honestly earned cash, and good times. He simply loves life and takes it as it is and as it comes (222). For Jake’s friend Zeddy, another former soldier, being a “sweetman” without losing his claim to masculinity is the epitome of living well. The space of Harlem, which is described as a uniquely black space filled with places of entertainment and houses of pleasure, signifies and seems to make possible—to a large degree—the good life.

On the ship taking Jake back to America, Harlem is evoked as a physical space for the first time. Jake is “crazy” to see the streets of his neighborhood again: “It was two years since he had left Harlem. Fifth Avenue, Lenox Avenue, and One Hundred and Thirty-fifth Street, with their chocolate-brown and walnut-brown girls, were calling him.” Before he actu-

ally reexperiences his old neighborhood, Jake dreams about it. There are at least two aspects of this initial description that are worth noting. First, the streets call to him; Fifth Avenue, Lenox Avenue, and 135th Street are remembered as extremely desirable places, and Jake cannot wait to walk their lengths. Second, the streets are populated in Jake's imagination and fantasy with "brown" women and their "tantalizing brown legs" (8). There is what might be termed a sexualized racialization of these city blocks. The streets are color coded and fleshed out with brown bodies; in addition, the bodies inhabiting these streets (and thus in some sense the streets themselves) are feminized and exude sexuality as well as sexual availability.

Upon returning to his old neighborhood, Jake stops in a saloon. He then "promenades" on Seventh Avenue and "thrill[s] to Harlem. . . . His blood was hot. His eyes were alert as he sniffed the street like a hound" (10). Jake is here compared to a dog on a scent; he is described in animalistic and predatory terms, and the language used to portray the urban center of African American life also evokes the "barbaric" or "primitive": "Harlem! Harlem! Little thicker, little darker and noisier and smellier, but Harlem just the same. The niggers done plowed through Hundred and Thirtieth Street" (25). The world that Jake reenters is crowded, perhaps a little too crowded, with "dark" bodies and full of strident noises and pungent smells. Yet this world also very clearly has its own texture and richness. After he manages to pick up Felice, the prostitute, in a cabaret, the two find a place to sleep for the night. Jake is overjoyed at his luck, and he asks himself where else but "Chocolate Harlem" could he have "all this life?" (14). Harlem's charm is intimately linked to pleasure—gaiety, sex and sexuality, drink, and syncopated movement and music:

The deep-dyed color, the thickness, the closeness of it. The noises of Harlem. The sugared laughter. The honey-talk on its streets. And all night long, rag-time and "blues" playing somewhere . . . singing somewhere, dancing somewhere! Oh, the contagious fever of Harlem. Burning everywhere in dark-eyed Harlem. (15)

While some contemporary scholars have underscored McKay's portrayal of Harlem as a vibrant if sometimes seedy and masculinized urban center of working-class black life, not enough has been said about McKay's specific use of and emphasis on color to depict this racial enclave.⁸ There are very few descriptions of Harlem—its streets, its buildings, and the people inhabiting and traversing them—where the "blackness" of this space is not stressed. "Blackness," in all of its various manifestations and shades, forms the background for and frames all that pertains to Harlem; "color," perhaps more than anything else, is the defining feature of this neighborhood and the subculture it generates. Black America, the text intimates,

came to Manhattan's northern tip and created this alternative world, a world with little use for "ofays," or white folks.

In this sense, McKay's portrayal of Harlem is similar to the depictions found in the contemporaneous "genteel" novels of Nella Larsen and Jessie Redmon Fauset. The descriptions of Harlem in *Quicksand* (1928) and *Plum Bun* (1929) also emphasize the color and the racial make-up of these city streets. The difference between McKay's portrayal and these others is that the genteel novels describe black Harlem in overtly ambivalent terms. Helga Crane, the protagonist of Larsen's *Quicksand*, for instance, fluctuates dramatically between admiration and appreciation for the black neighborhood, since it seems to represent racial solidarity and pride, and a strong abhorrence to being yoked to the thousands of "despised black folks" inhabiting Harlem's streets (54-55). Similarly, Angela Murray, the protagonist of Fauset's *Plum Bun*, is described as being concurrently fascinated and repulsed by the racialized spatialization that characterizes Harlem. When contemplating the meaning of this distinctive black neighborhood, Angela comments: "Unquestionably there was something very fascinating, even terrible, about this stream of life" (97). Given that Fauset's and Larsen's protagonists are depicted as actively negotiating between minority and mainstream norms, it is perhaps not surprising that most of the depictions of this space in these genteel novels fall into a mode of ambivalence. No matter how positive the description of Harlem initially is, a qualification or conflicted affectivity almost always seeps into or follows the affirmative depictions.

By contrast, the descriptions of Harlem in McKay's text are almost always positive and when ambivalence emerges, which it occasionally does, the pattern in *Home to Harlem* is inverted. Rather than beginning with a more positive description and then falling into some qualification or negativity, the negative pole emerges first, but then the depiction usually ends with a recuperation of the positive. As we saw above, Jake describes how Harlem has changed since he last set foot on its streets: "Little thicker, little darker and noisier and smellier." This can certainly be read as an ambivalent description, but McKay has Jake finish the thought with a strikingly affirmative proclamation: "Seventh Avenue done gone high-brown. Oh Lawdy! Harlem bigger, Harlem better . . . and sweeter" (26). Even Ray, the displaced Haitian intellectual who is more critical than Jake of the black American subculture in Harlem, articulates the allure of this unique space: "Its brutality, gang rowdyism, promiscuous thickness. Its hot desires. But, ho, the rich blood-red color of it! The warm accent of its composite voice, the fruitiness of its laughter, the trailing rhythm of its 'blues' and the improvised surprises of its jazz" (267). Recognizing all of its vices, violence, and brutality, McKay still has Ray underscore the

positive while emphasizing the particular aspects that seem to define this space as uniquely black.

Harlem's Oppositional Force

Alain Locke, the “dean” of the Harlem Renaissance, famously stated that Harlem initially emerged as a black enclave through proscription and prejudice. Blacks from dissimilar backgrounds and with dissimilar aspirations were thrown together into a common area of contact and interaction. However, Locke continues, “what began in terms of segregation becomes more and more, as its elements mix and react, the laboratory of a great race-welding” (7). In a sense, McKay’s descriptions of Harlem can be seen to parallel this assertion, but with a crucial twist. In *Home to Harlem*, the positive aspects of this distinctively black world do not emanate from the intellectual, the “talented tenth,” or the middle class, all of which are seen as complicit with mainstream white society, but rather from the “common working man” who shuns as completely as possible the racist and capitalist norms of the dominant society. The largest all-black community and a common meeting ground for African Americans from all over the country as well as from the West Indies, Harlem is portrayed as having created its own vibrant, positive *black* culture. The negative aspects of Harlem, while undeniably present, tend to fade in comparison—at least for most of the narrative—or are depicted as having helped to make possible the welding of a rich urban subculture that endeavors to produce, circulate, and live by counter-hegemonic norms.

This is one plausible way of reading Jake Brown’s odyssey. The text traces Jake’s movements as he leaves the US military, where he and the rest of his “happy chocolate company” were stuck “toting planks” for their white counterparts rather than fighting, and returns to Harlem from an “outside” world where racism is rampant (4). Harlem, for all of its thickness, closeness, noise, and smelliness, seems to represent the possibility of shedding many of the norms and values of the dominant society, which, as Jake reminds his fellow Harlemites, is always already implicated in racism (45). Even though a lingering ambivalence is expressed in descriptions of black Manhattan in the novel, there is also a very pronounced attempt to explore the possibility of creating a subculture full of race pride, pleasure, and value not based on the standard of white imperialism, exploitative capitalism, or the compromised (because complicit) ideals of the black middle class. I suggest that as a member of Harlem’s subculture, Jake best represents this possibility, especially given his unwillingness to buy into the work ethic imposed by capitalist modes of production, his ultimate rejection of violence, and his tolerance of otherness, which is best illus-

trated in his relationships with the non-US national Ray and Billy Biasse, his “queer” friend.⁹ Moreover, he constantly expresses a deep craving to reside in a space in which black and “blackness” are (re)constituted as desirable.

The most important alternative norm emphasized in McKay’s novel is the one that reevaluates blackness as worthy in and of itself. As the early critics of *Home to Harlem* decried, the traits that were historically linked to blackness in the US, such as primitive or violent passion, and love of pleasure, music, and movement, remain linked to blackness; moreover, in the novel these traits are linked to a general blackness and not merely to black masculinity or to the black working class. However, the valence of these traits is turned on its head and affirmed as positive. These characteristics, the novel intimates, can be used to oppose and even undermine racist and capitalist oppression in the US. McKay’s early version of “black is beautiful” is a move meant to challenge white Americans and empower African Americans. In this sense, the space he depicts through the tropes of primitivism is oppositional, since it serves as a site where standards of industrial capitalism are criticized through the elevation of alternative norms such as bodily pleasure and *occasional* work.¹⁰ McKay’s emphasis of blackness in all of its various manifestations and its particular presentation therefore should be understood as a strategic move that aims to both uncover and advance a possible counter-hegemonic option. The Harlem sections in McKay’s novel, then, can be read as an experiment—but not an uncritical or completely successful one—in creating an alternative and desirable black world. Consequently, this world becomes a positive alternative both to the white mainstream and to the ideals of the black middle class.

As we have seen, the genteel novels describe their aspiring middle-class protagonists’ relationship to this black enclave as more ambivalent. This ambivalence is a product of the characters’ aspirations, ambitions, and desires that are revealed to be deeply implicated in and informed by the dominant society’s norms.¹¹ These protagonists are depicted as split or even schizophrenic, since they constantly negotiate between their double consciousness. On the one hand, their identification as black subjects is simultaneously forced upon them by the one-drop rule and—paradoxically—embraced as part of their own self-fashioning, thus making Harlem, as a racialized space, desirable as an expression of race solidarity. On the other hand, their desire to carve out a “respectable” middle-class existence, which is defined by and through the norms of dominant white US society, simultaneously compels them to see black Manhattan through the eyes of white racism. This space, then, comes to represent circumscription and entrapment. McKay’s protagonists, by sharp contrast, are not interested

in carving out a niche for themselves in mainstream middle-class society; rather there seems to be an attempt—through their characterization and portrayal as well as through the spatial description of Harlem—to reassert, reevaluate, and lionize racial difference.

Gold's Lower East Side

Michael Gold's *Jews Without Money* is a meandering pseudo-autobiographical novel, narrated in the first person, that strings together a variety of impressionistic vignettes from the fictional Mikey's childhood and adolescence. In many ways, it is the story of Mikey's survival in the "jungle" of the Lower East Side and his ultimate conversion to communism (60). The text describes Mikey's impoverished childhood on the Lower East Side, his involvement with a delinquent "gang of little Yids" (16), and his family's struggle to maintain a modicum of decency and self-respect amidst the neighborhood's violence and poverty. The novel is strewn with images of prostitution, gangsterism, and corruption.

The majority of literary critics who have attempted to reclaim *Jews Without Money* as part of the Jewish American literary tradition praise its passion and sincerity, but ultimately judge the novel as devoid of literary merit or a relatively transparent vehicle for communist propaganda. Alfred Kazin's 1996 introduction to the text is exemplary in this respect; the essay deems the novel powerful but also a "succession of uncomplicated words, uncomplicated feelings, and rudimentary behavior that reach for what is most basic in life." Gold, Kazin continues, "details everything filthy . . . sordid, vulgar, violently cruel . . . and superstitious" and reduces the cause of all social ills to economics and class exploitation. Kazin concludes that Gold, in his one novel, is "as primitive as his material" (2-4).

In recent years, scholars have begun offering increasingly complex and interesting analyses of *Jews Without Money*. Rachel Rubin, for instance, examines the use of the Jewish gangster, contending that Gold invokes this image as a way of dispensing with "rigid or reductive positions of Jewish ethnicity" (14) as well as of inscribing himself—as a literary gangster of sorts—into the new "landscape of revolutionary poetics." Rubin goes on to maintain that Gold is an "ethnic modernist of merit" (9). Lee Bernstein underscores a different aspect of the novel, asserting that Gold mobilizes black and Native American racial stereotypes as a kind of racial masquerade. Problematic as they are, these masquerades serve as the conduit for a *white* Jewish working-class "performance" of opposition.

Bernstein stresses the significance of Jewish opposition (albeit channeled through racial masquerade) in Gold's text as well as the protagonist's resistance to "middle-class respectability" (125). Indeed, unlike the

protagonists of more canonical Jewish novels, Mikey is portrayed not as desiring to become part of dominant culture but rather as constantly searching for an alternative.¹² In contrast to Bernstein, I propose that the novel is concerned first and foremost with the question of whether “Jewishness” itself can serve as oppositional, and the text registers and traces a certain equivocation in relation to this question. This ambivalence is articulated in the narrative trajectory and in the contradictory ways the Lower East Side is described as a place that is both desirable and objectionable, potentially subversive yet sordid and complicit. The novel begins with an ethnically neutral description of the Lower East Side. The text then goes on to mark the neighborhood as Jewish, while exploring three Jewish subcultural spaces as possible oppositional sites to the American Dream—the working-class Jewish world of Mikey’s father, the Jewish gangster, and finally the Jewish religious faction of Chassidism. Ultimately, all of these spaces reveal themselves to be wanting, and their lack is related to their perceived imbrication in and willingness to negotiate with the dominant norms of US society. None of these subcultural spaces is truly oppositional in the narrator’s eyes. The text then comes full circle with a final description that envisions the Lower East Side stripped of its Jewish character, offering international communism as the ultimate solution to the ills of the US as a capitalist and oppressive society.

Jews Without Money’s relationship to the Lower East Side’s subculture and the space that generates it is thus very different from *Home to Harlem*. Whereas McKay consistently affirms Harlem as a unique black space, Gold’s depiction of the Lower East Side is more conflicted. This ambivalence is related to the neighborhood’s Jewishness, which does not lend itself to the same kind of radical reevaluation that blackness does. Indeed, Gold’s portrayal of the Jewish subculture(s) of the Lower East Side grapples with the question and shifting meaning of Jewish difference in the US.

On the first page of *Jews Without Money*, Gold describes the East Side street where Mikey, the narrator, “lived as a boy.” The street is “an immense excitement. It never slept. It roared like a sea. . . . People pushed and wrangled in the street. There were armies of howling pushcart peddlers. Women screamed, dogs barked and copulated. Babies cried” (13). Similar to McKay’s Harlem, the Lower East Side is depicted as vibrating with life: “Ragged kids played under truck-horses. Fat housewives fought from stoop to stoop. A beggar sang. . . . Pimps, gamblers and red-nosed bums; peanut politicians, pugilists in sweaters; tinhorn sports and tall longshoremen in overalls. . . . Excitement, dirt, fighting, chaos!” (13-14). While it would be difficult to read these descriptions as an attempt to paint a glowing picture of the neighborhood, the portrayal evinces a pulsating

expectation and contagious energy. Yet the race or ethnicity of the people inhabiting the streets is not immediately noted.

As the novel progresses, however, and as the narrator begins to recount his early years on the East Side, the Jewishness of the city streets becomes more pronounced. The initial, ethnically neutral picture of Mikey's streets is soon followed by a description of how, with the advent of spring weather, the "parades of Jews" suddenly emerge from their winter seclusion to sniff at the crisp but fragrant air (16). In subsequent descriptions, Mikey reminds the reader that the space he describes is Jewish by inserting reference to the "race" of its inhabitants or pedestrians: "Each [East Side block] was the same theosophist's fantasy of tenements, demons, old hats, *Jews*, pushcarts, angels, urine smells, shadows, featherbeds and bananas" (43, emphasis added). Also, Mikey's local grade school is located in his "Jewish neighborhood" (37), while, later, when portraying some of the racial diversity existing on the East Side, Mikey emphasizes the Jewishness of the space by describing how it has been "invaded" by foreigners: "Germans, Poles, Russians, Armenians, Irish, Chinese; there were always a *few* of these *aliens* living among our Jews" (174, emphasis added).¹³ Thus, not unlike his African American counterpart, Gold marks the ethnic character of the space while commenting on its animation and vibrancy.

Although Jewishness is not foregrounded to the same degree as Harlem's blackness is in McKay's novel, *Jews Without Money* nonetheless limns the Lower East Side as an ethnically specific space to a greater degree than the canonical Jewish texts of this period. This in and of itself is interesting, since in the canonical descriptions of the urban "ethnic" enclave the "Jewishness" of the space is not stressed. In novels such as Anzia Yezierska's *Arrogant Beggar* (1927) and *Salome of the Tenements* (1923), the protagonists describe and emphasize the dirt, sordidness, and poverty of the Lower East Side but not its Jewishness. Moreover, these novels depict their characters' ambivalence toward the neighborhood through class-inflected rather than ethnically inflected language, and the positive pole of the ambivalence is rarely evidenced in the physical descriptions of the space. For these Jewish protagonists negotiating their position in relation to mainstream middle-class society, the most pressing problem is poverty and not being defined or defining oneself as Jewish. This, in turn, points to the more canonical novels' concern with inscribing a positive Jewish American identity, one in which there is little tension between Jewishness and Americanness.¹⁴ *Jews Without Money*, by contrast, raises and thematizes the "problem" of Jewish difference in a more overt and sophisticated way.

Gold's descriptions of the streets, buildings, and people of the Lower East Side are an odd and inconsistent mixture of the positive and the nega-

tive. They alternate between vivid, animated portrayals, which seem to derive from the neighborhood's poor but vibrant working-class culture, and descriptions that dwell on the sordidness, filth, and poverty. Furthermore, in many of the ambivalent spatial descriptions interlaced with references to the ethnic make-up of the neighborhood, it is difficult to pinpoint the exact source of the ambivalence. For instance, when giving an account of the oppressiveness of his street during the hot summer months, Mikey recalls, "[a]n old . . . Jew limped by, with six derby hats stacked one over the other on his head, and a burlap sack on his shoulder . . . lonely old Jews without money" (56). As might be expected, the account dwells on the poverty and pathos of an old man who has been reduced to such a state. And yet, not only is the sordidness of the scene portrayed with compassion, but the picture Mikey paints here of the Jew also registers empathy and identification mixed with repulsion, as if there were something vaguely grotesque about a limping, old Jew. Later in the narrative, when winter comes, Mikey describes how the "snow fell, too, on a *little Jew* and his wife and three children" who had been evicted from their home. "They huddled in a mournful group by their possessions" (241, emphasis added). Again we see this mixture of both identification and repulsion vis-à-vis the Jew in addition to a critique of the neighborhood's economic conditions. Thus, while the problem with the Lower East Side in *Jews Without Money* is still primarily poverty, as in Yeziarska's novels, in Gold's text the ethnic specificity also seems to provoke an affective conflict. But the ambivalence regarding the Jewishness of the space does not seem to emerge due to a perception that Jewishness represents an obstacle to entering mainstream society, since the US is portrayed as being relatively good to the Jews but not to poor people; or, as Mikey's mother puts it, "It is a good land, but not for the poor" (159).

The Lower East Side's Oppositional Force

Gold's ambivalence toward the Jewishness of the neighborhood is informed by Mikey's search for an oppositional space. While the narrator initially attempts to find a truly countercultural and oppositional *Jewish* subculture, he ends up disappointed with the Jewish subcultural spaces on the Lower East Side because he finds that most of the people who occupy these spaces are willing to negotiate with mainstream society and therefore unwilling to challenge the status quo. There are three places in which the possibility of an alternative and positive Jewish subculture arises in Gold's text. One such space emerges in the informal get-togethers of Mikey's father and his working-class friends. The novel describes how every night at Mikey's house "there was a convention of . . . Jews

struggling in the promised land” (82); these Jews are Mikey’s father’s friends: housepainters, peddlers, and clothing workers, who gather to play poker and pinochle while philosophizing, singing, and telling stories. These “conventions” constitute a world unto themselves—a Jewish world on the Lower East Side in which these men (and occasionally women) congregate to tell stories, debate, and drink tea or wine. While the narrator is captivated by this all-Jewish working-class space filled with “Jewish talk,” which is at great odds with the demand for efficiency in the work place, Mikey concludes that this is an alternative but not oppositional world.¹⁵ It is a place where “magic mountains and wishing lamps . . . were as real as the sweatshops and garbage cans” (84). From the point of view of the retrospective narrative, there is also another critical problem with this all-Jewish subculture: it does not shun the values of the dominant white society.

This is best represented in the scene in which Mikey’s father and his usual group of friends decide to convene their nightly meeting in one of the Jewish wine cellars. On the wall of this popular Jewish joint there is a “big American flag [and] a chromo showing Roosevelt charging up San Juan Hill. At the other end hung a Jewish Zionist flag . . . and star of David” (115). The juxtaposition of Roosevelt on an imperialist mission and the Zionist flag gestures toward the increasing compatibility of these two “nationalisms.” Even in this cavernous and literally subterranean alternative Jewish space, where “people talked, laughed, drank wine, listened to music” in a Jewish rather than a “Christian manner” (114), the novel underscores how Jewishness—even subcultural Jewishness—was already enmeshed in dominant images of Americanness. To punctuate this imbrication, Mikey, who has been invited to join the men, is asked by his father to stand on the table and recite a poem he learned at school. Mikey dutifully complies, declaiming the lines: “I love the name of Washington, / I love my country, too, / I love the flag, the dear old flag, / the red, white and blue” (120). It is the red, white, and blue flag and not the white and blue flag that is being saluted here. The wine cellar scene culminates with Mikey’s father encountering a cousin who defrauded him many years before; his father threatens his relative with violence but is ultimately held back by his friends. Walking home that evening, Mikey’s father tells his son, “I am a man in a trap. All is lost unless I can borrow three hundred dollars somewhere” (122). Mikey’s father believes these three hundred dollars will compensate him for his cousin’s betrayal and allow him to open his own business and make good on the American Dream. Unlike Jake and his fellow working-class black Harlemites, Mikey’s father and the other Jewish working-class men on the Lower East Side do not revel in the world available to them; rather, they dwell on and rail against their marginality, which points to their desire to move out of the margins and

into the mainstream.

The second possible Jewish subcultural alternative to dominant society is the Jewish gangster, whose reign is both enabled and circumscribed by the Lower East Side. Mikey's "gang of little Yids" provides a haven for its members, since forming a gang is part of the boys' survival strategy. It is through the gang's creative agency that the violence inflicted on them—by other boys, by their teachers, and by perverse adults—is transformed into war *games*. The child gang flirts with criminality, stealing and fighting, thus challenging the mores of both the Jewish and gentile adult worlds. Mikey's father and mother implore him to stop hanging out on the street and learning "all those bad, nasty things" (19). They find Nigger, the leader of Mikey's gang—who eventually becomes a professional gangster—particularly repugnant.¹⁶ Yet the narrator represents Nigger with sentimental admiration. He is brave, defends Mikey and the other Jewish children when they are threatened with anti-Semitic taunts and violence, and he fearlessly defies the law of dominant society: "Nigger was bravest of the brave, the chieftain of our brave savage tribe. . . . Nigger would fight boys twice his age, he would fight men and cops" (43). Nigger, the son of a "meek sick little tailor" is ready to die for "justice," and this justice has to do with defending his "nation"—a subcultural Jewish world (45), which, as his nickname suggests, is also associated with African American "criminality."

Rubin argues that for Gold, the "virile gangster, Nigger, embodies the creatively defiant Jew" (95). However, as Rubin also notes, the text is conflicted about the precise role of the Jewish gangster. While Nigger is the positive embodiment of Jewish gangsterism, Louis One Eye, the other prominent gangster, is a brutal despot. Louis One Eye defies society's norms and even defends old, frightened Jews who are harassed by neighboring gentiles, yet he is also ruthless and cruel. Mikey eventually comes to hate Louis after the gangster attempts to rape his beloved aunt Lena. Following this traumatic incident, Mikey realizes that the Jewish gangster is actually a "mercenary," one of the "bad eggs, hatched by the bad world hen" (125). In other words, not only does the narrator understand that there is nothing essentially Jewish about the gangster, but also that the Lower East Side gangsters are complicit in the structures of domination they are supposed to counter as outlaws. The Jewish gangster is a creation of the state, "useful to bosses in strikes, and to politicians on election day" (140).

The third and last Jewish space Mikey explores as a possible haven and alternative to both oppressive mainstream US culture and the violence of his own working-class environment is the strain of traditional Judaism embodied in the "tall, frail, austere" Chassidic Reb Samuel (191).

Searching for Jewish religious answers to existential questions, Mikey finds refuge in his friendship with the older man. Simultaneously mesmerized and disturbed by the notion of the Messiah, Mikey asks his spiritual mentor whether the Messiah will look like Buffalo Bill—a very American, hypermasculine incarnation; Reb Samuel rejoins by insisting that he would be more like the ideal *Jewish* yeshiva buchor, “pale, young and peaceful” (190). While the answer initially disappoints young Mikey, it also seems to soothe him, for he continues to prompt Reb Samuel to talk about the Messiah, even though Reb Samuel gives Mikey a similar response every time. This speaks to and underscores the young protagonist’s desire to find a Jewish solution to his existential angst. The early characterizations of Reb Samuel are full of admiration and approbation: “Reb Samuel never hurried; he was never angry. He walked through the filth and chaos of our streets leaning on his staff, a stately Prince of Zion in exile” (191). With their insistence on and practice of spiritual abandon and ecstasy, Reb Samuel and his Chassidic community seem at first to symbolize something completely at odds with the land of “hurry up” and “allrightniks.”¹⁷ For a while, Mikey is captivated by this world: “Often [the Chassidim] would come to [Reb Samuel’s] home and talk and sing, and I would sit quietly and listen. . . . They fascinated me. . . . Something deep inside of me responded to it” (193-94).

Ultimately, Mikey recounts how “America” manages to infiltrate even the alternative religious Jewish world that Reb Samuel has created. Reb Samuel has slowly built up a pious Chassidic congregation, leaving his umbrella business in the hands of his wife in order to devote his time to religious matters. But this is precisely when things start to go wrong and the seeds of Americanization begin to be felt within the congregation. First, a member of his sect shaves his beard because in the US “beards are laughed at” (196). Soon after, other members of the congregation appear shorn of facial hair. The situation deteriorates to such a degree that Reb Samuel and the “other ultra-orthodox factionalists” (197) decide that they need a synagogue and a rabbi, something they had not thought necessary before. The newly acquired rabbi—ordered and delivered from eastern Europe—turns out to be a glutton and a fraud, and a year following the rabbi’s arrival in America, and after Reb Samuel has spent all of his time raising funds to keep the congregation head in relative luxury, the rabbi deserts the Lower East Side Chassidic community. When Reb Samuel hears the news of the rabbi’s abandonment, he suffers a stroke from which he never recovers. Mikey realizes, “It finally defeated him, this America” (191).

Mikey’s youthful odyssey on the Lower East Side takes him through various Jewish Lower East Side subcultural spaces, and yet none of these

provide him with a strong enough foundation for countering US structures of domination. The marking of the Lower East Side as Jewish alongside the ambivalence evinced in the portrayal of this space can thus be linked to the narrative's ideological trajectory. In other words, Gold traces Mikey's attempt to find a "solution" to the structures of oppression and domination in his world. Initially, Mikey believes that Jewish subcultural space can provide an oppositional space. However, as the narrative progresses, it becomes more clear to him that Jewishness—at least as it manifests itself on the Lower East Side—cannot serve as a basis for opposing hegemonic norms. The text intimates that the American Dream discourse and Americanness have penetrated too deeply into the consciousness and the practices of the Lower East Side's Jews—so deep in fact that there can be no true reassertion, reevaluation, and lionization of a Jewish difference. Unlike blackness in McKay's text, which serves as a relatively stable signifier that can be deployed to empower African Americans, Jewishness in Gold's narrative becomes a floating signifier whose meaning is constantly renegotiated. For the narrator, who is looking for absolutes, the shifting signification of Jewishness presents an obstacle to political action and renewal. Thus, until Mikey encounters the possibility of communism, he cannot see the possibility of a truly oppositional position.

Leaving the Urban Spaces Behind

Both protagonists of *Home to Harlem* and *Jews Without Money* ultimately leave their racially or ethnically specific subcultural spaces behind at the end of the novels. Mikey aligns himself with a movement and worldview that eschew the particularity of ethnicity, and thus, in a sense, abandons what he perceives to be the already compromised Jewishness of the Lower East Side. By contrast, Jake's abandonment is literal, since he actually leaves Harlem for Chicago. While the ending of *Jews Without Money* is predictable given the narrative trajectory, Jake's departure from Harlem complicates the argument above.

The fact that *Home to Harlem* ends with Jake's decision to leave New York suggests that McKay's glorification of blackness is indeed strategic and not without internal criticism. What is so interesting about this narrative twist is that Jake's decision to leave New York for Chicago is not, as might be expected, ascribed to Harlem's spatialized racialization but rather due to black Manhattan's sexual politics.¹⁸ Jake departs in order to avoid a conflict with his friend Zeddy. Jake and Felice end up together, but a triangulation and a threat of violence compel Jake to start anew in the Midwest instead of fighting Zeddy for Felice. He is fed up with "[t]hese miserable cock-fights, beastly, tigerish, bloody. They had always sickened,

saddened, unmanned him. . . . Love should be joy lifting man out of the humdrum ways of life” (328). Jake’s odyssey that began with the feminized sexualization of Harlem’s streets and a predatory pursuit ends with a celebration of mutual love (masculinist as it still might be) and a rejection of the sexualized violence that characterizes most heterosexual unions in McKay’s Harlem. While it would be difficult to read the novel as feminist, there is, as Maiwald and Stephen Knadler argue, a thematized and critical reassessment of normative black urban masculinity.¹⁹

Such an internal critique problematizes or at least unsettles the text’s celebratory essentialist racial tendencies. The novel reveals that while the lionization of certain racial traits can lead to a unique and rich black sub-cultural space, such a glorification can also generate destructive effects such as black-on-black and sexualized violence. McKay’s text can be read as strategically complex—attempting to empower African American readers through a reevaluation and lionization of racial difference and to challenge white racist capitalism while destabilizing some of its own essentialist and masculinist tendencies by creating narrative contradictions and tensions.

Unlike McKay’s Harlem, Gold’s Lower East Side does not come to signify or make possible “the good life.” The description of this Jewish space is more overtly ambivalent. On the one hand, the narrative maintains appreciation of and even admiration for the Jewish Lower East Side—the text’s descriptions of the neighborhood are laced with adjectives connoting excitement and vibrancy. Moreover, it is on an “East Side soap box” that Mikey first hears about “the Revolution,” and it seems as if his experiences in the neighborhood help render Mikey’s conversion possible (309). On the other hand, though, the economically depressed yet specifically Jewish space must be eradicated in order to provide an alternative to the structures of domination. The book ends with the famous lines, “O workers’ Revolution, you brought hope to me. . . . You are the true Messiah. You will destroy the East Side when you come, and build there a garden for the human spirit” (309). The Lower East Side must become a garden—stripped of its urban element—for the *human* spirit without a trace of ethnic difference. While the novel is unequivocal with respect to the Jewish Lower East Side’s lack of countercultural potential, a lingering ambivalence remains, evidenced in the invocation of the messiah to describe the revolution, registering Gold’s inability to completely erase or settle the question of what exactly constitutes Jewish difference.

By way of conclusion I would like to look more closely at the double comparison that I have outlined above. I have tried to show that McKay’s novel describes a very different relationship to Harlem from much of the canonical fiction from this period. Whereas novels such as Larsen’s

Quicksand and Fauset's *Plum Bun* emphasize the protagonists' affective conflict with respect to Harlem's racialized spatialization, Jake's relationship to this black enclave is less conflicted and the positive aspects are played up. Inversely, Gold emphasizes the protagonist's affective conflict with respect to the ethnic particularity of the Lower East Side, while more canonical Jewish texts describe a less conflicted relationship to this neighborhood. In other words, the depiction of this space is overwhelmingly negative and its problems are ascribed to economic rather than racial or ethnic conditions. These differences within the respective literary traditions stem, in large part, from *Home to Harlem*'s and *Jews Without Money*'s concerns with protagonists whose odysseys represent an attempt to find ethnic or racial spaces that counter the repressive norms of mainstream society.

Yet another fascinating inversion occurs when one compares the African American subcultural text with its Jewish counterpart. McKay glorifies racial identity in his novel, mobilizing blackness to imagine an alternative space and to critique US society. Gold's protagonist becomes disillusioned with the various manifestations of Jewishness on the Lower East Side and therefore can neither exult in a Jewish identity nor mobilize Jewishness for radical political purposes. This last inversion begs the crucial question: Why might these authors have developed such different relationships to their racialized identities? Why could McKay conceive of a fictional Harlem that not only embodies the "good life" but also functions as oppositional and countercultural, while Gold's Jewish Lower East Side neither signifies the good life nor serves as truly alternative space?

Following scholars such as Karen Brodtkin and Matthew Frye Jacobson, I have argued elsewhere that Jews, while positioned on the white side of the black-white divide, were still considered "probational" or "not-quite" whites during the early part of the twentieth century, the period in which Gold wrote.²⁰ Yet, despite the still in-between racial status of the Jews, the 1920s were pivotal for the process of deracializing Jewishness and the morphing of Jewishness from a racial category into something that would later be articulated as ethnicity. This "whitening" of Jewish Americans was crucial for the eventual Jewish integration into mainstream society after World War II.

Gold's narrative gestures toward the way many Jews attempted to inscribe themselves as normative American subjects and thus "whiten" themselves (not always very successfully), as well as the more particular ways Jewishness as a category of identification was being refashioned. Even though Jewishness continues to be understood in racial terms (and there are various places in the narrative where Jewishness remains linked to historical characteristics such as intelligence), this racialization is actually destabilized in the text. While the narrator speaks about Jewish "under-

standing” and “smartness” (50, 53), he also goes on to say that there is no Jewish racial type (81). Even the conceived “bookishness” of the Jews is ultimately attributed to social conditions rather than an inherent tendency (87). Moreover, as we have seen, Gold identifies and links Jewishness more to a set of diverse *practices*—stylized talk, religious rituals, and *performances* of loyalty and defense. Mikey’s father, for example, “Like many Jews loved to eat, sleep, laugh, and weep in the midst of a crowd” (82). What defines his father as Jewish is a set of practices performed in front of a group (presumably other Jews).

Other narratives from this period, such as Yeziarska’s *Arrogant Beggar, Bread Givers* (1925), and *Salome of the Tenements*, also enact and (re)produce a refashioning of Jewishness, but Gold’s text differs from the canonical novels both as a result of the author’s sustained look at the various and *disparate* practices that come to constitute Jewishness on the Lower East Side and as a result of the valence attached to such a rearticulation. Yeziarska’s protagonists actively attempt to mobilize this rearticulation in order to forge a positive Jewish American identity. By contrast, for Mikey the disaggregation of the signifier “Jewishness” from a series of relatively stable signifieds seems to present a problem rather than a solution for Jewish Americans. In other words, Mikey’s odyssey on the Lower East Side not only discloses that Jewishness was beginning to be reconfigured (which the canonical Jewish texts do as well), but also suggests that this reconfiguration actually constituted an obstacle for mobilizing Jewishness for oppositional purposes. “Jewish is beautiful” never appeared on the US scene as a political stance, and this has to do with how a racialized perception of Jewishness was already being unsettled during this period. There was no need for Jews to create an oppositional identity politics, since—despite the fact that there were still many Jews without money—this minority group was already moving from margin to mainstream.²¹ Gold dramatizes that the clear expression of a Jewish difference became increasingly difficult, thus making the strategic deployment of Jewishness for counter-hegemonic purposes untenable.

By contrast, as a category of identity, blackness was still very much defined and conceived of in terms of racial traits in the popular US imagination during this period.²² Henry Louis Gates, Jr., discusses how the “New Negro” attempted self-definition against the popular racist understanding of blackness. The fact that the New Negro movement tried to “rewrite the black term” (148) underscores just how firmly blackness was fixed to certain racial characteristics. This is one of the main reasons Harlem could be imagined as a racialized space with a rich alternative culture. The stubbornness with which blackness remained linked to a series of identifiable characteristics produced a set of powerful effects. One effect was,

of course, the reinscription and reinforcement of the black-white divide, which, in turn, enabled Jews—who had been interpellated as off-white subjects—to jockey for position as normative, white Americans.

The other crucial effect was the growth of an oppositional *black* subculture, which, while dovetailing with the “New Negro” movement was also a separate strain within it. The strain McKay represents in *Home to Harlem* rejects the elevation of the talented tenth and the idealization of the folk and focuses on reinscribing blackness—in its urban and masculinist manifestation and as it was understood in the popular imagination—as positive, oppositional, and radical. McKay’s novel, one of the first African American bestsellers, is also one of the first aesthetic and narrative articulations of “black is beautiful” and “black power” and is therefore an important precursor to the Black Arts Movement.

Given their almost total exclusion from the corridors of power during the early twentieth century and the “unvarying background of demeaning visual portraits of African American bodies” (White and White 218), there was a real need to reevaluate blackness in positive terms. More importantly, the positioning of African Americans as the definitional (racial) other in US society rendered blackness—unlike Jewishness—a possible vehicle for radical opposition, an opposition that could potentially not only unsettle the dominant racial landscape, but also, as McKay’s text intimates, shake up the economic, gender, and sexual hierarchies.

Jews Without Money raises the question of Jewish difference in a complex if provocative way, while *Home to Harlem* mobilizes blackness to imagine an alternative to dominant US society and to critique existing norms as well as its own strategic and narrative maneuvers. In their representations of rich, multifaceted subcultural spaces, both texts meditate on questions of otherness and opposition in the US—questions that are gaining urgency in the twenty-first century. Consequently, these texts need to be moved from the margins and accorded a central place in their respective literary traditions.

Notes

I would like to thank the fellows of the 2007-2008 University of Michigan Frankel Institute. I am also grateful to the anonymous *MELUS* readers for their challenging, insightful comments.

1. While I occasionally use “race” and “ethnicity” interchangeably at the beginning of this article when discussing the Lower East Side and Harlem, in later sections I distinguish between these two categories. Although Jewish Americans were still considered a “race” in the early twentieth century, today they are clearly “white ethnics.” I discuss the process of Jewish “ethnicization” in the concluding

section. For more on the distinction between race and ethnicity, and how ethnicity emerged out of the black-white divide, see my essay “Race and Ethnicity.”

2. See, for example, Rachel Rubin (70-118) and Lee Bernstein.

3. Michael Gold was a lifelong communist, while Claude McKay supported communism for a large part of his life. Gold and McKay even worked together briefly, when they coedited the Marxist literary journal *The Liberator*. Later, McKay became disillusioned with both communism and the New Negro Movement and in the last years of his life converted to Catholicism. See Michael Folsom and Gene Andrew Jarrett.

4. In fact, unlike more canonical and contemporaneous protagonists from the two traditions, Gold’s and McKay’s characters are depicted as unwilling to negotiate with the norms of mainstream white society. As a consequence, Jake and Mikey also reject the “compromised” position of the aspiring black and Jewish middle class, since these groups were conceived to be in a complicitous negotiation with dominant society.

5. See Matthew Frye Jacobson, Karen Brodtkin, and my essay “Race and Ethnicity.”

6. See, for instance, Wayne F. Cooper’s foreword to *Home to Harlem*, which discusses early critical responses.

7. Michael Maiwald concentrates on McKay’s depiction of sexuality and gender as sites of opposition. While my argument is indebted to his insights, I focus on the way in which Harlem comes to represent an alternative to white America and how the more general category of blackness is deployed as countercultural in McKay’s text.

8. Sidney H. Bremer, for example, claims that McKay is typical in his use of “sensory images to present Harlem as home place. . . . It is fleshy—embodied in lively colors, tastes, and sounds” (49).

9. For a fascinating queer reading of *Home to Harlem* and a discussion of the way in which the open secret of the “pansy” operated to diffuse the homoerotics of urban masculinity, see Stephen Knadler.

10. The railroad sections of the novel—and especially Jake’s stint as “third cook”—best represent the “occasional” work ethic. Jake describes the railroad as work that could be chosen for a time and then abandoned (125-26).

11. For an in-depth discussion of how “genteel” novels underscore the power of dominant norms, see my *Performing Americanness* (1-15).

12. Toward the end of the novel, for example, Mikey refuses to go to high school like the other “smart” boys and chooses instead to go to work, even though he knows that high school and college are perhaps his only ticket to upward mobility.

13. Even the title, *Jews Without Money*, frames the way in which the reader understands the space.

14. See my *Performing Americanness* (92-105).

15. In the novel, “talk” is intimately linked to “Jewishness: “Talk has ever been the joy of the Jewish race, great torrents of boundless exalted talk. Talk is the baseball, the golf, the poker, the love and the war of the Jewish race. . . . Talk. Jewish talk” (113).

16. See Bernstein for an analysis of the nickname Nigger and the novel's relationship to African Americans.
17. The somewhat derogatory term "allrightniks" referred to immigrants (usually first-generation) who had "made it" in the US.
18. Interestingly, this is also why Jake leaves Harlem for the railroad earlier in the narrative. Congo Rose, the woman with whom he lives for a time, expects Jake to "live in the usual sweet way, to be brutal and beat her up a little" (113). However, Jake does not perform in "the usual sweet way." In fact, Rose is disappointed in Jake's behavior and at one point provokes her lover to hit her. Jake ends up being violent but then becomes completely disgusted with the situation and consequently leaves Rose and Harlem for the railroad.
19. Knadler argues that McKay's ambivalent representation of the "sweetback" undermines the masculinist tendencies of the novel. In addition, Maiwald suggests that McKay was influenced by Edward Carpenter's notion of the "third sex" and introduces the "Uranian male," who is possessed of feminine attributes within a male body, to advance a more progressive masculinity (847); thus McKay unsettles the dominant conceptions of black masculinity.
20. See my "Race and Ethnicity."
21. Although Gold's text attempts to look at those Jews who have not made it, most of the protagonists express a desire to move out of the margins, and, at various points, the text underscores how many Jews managed to carve out a middle-class existence. Even from within the "gang of little Yids," quite a few of the Jewish boys become success stories. Some make it in Hollywood, while others become real estate speculators (38).
22. Shane White and Graham White argue that in the 1920s the features that historically had been linked to blackness in the US were being reevaluated by African Americans themselves. This was the period when attributes long associated with black bodies—sensuality, movement, and rhythm—were coming to be seen as "valued attributes" (191). Thus, McKay's text can be seen as representative (and mouthpiece) of this larger subcultural move.

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