

HOMOSEXUALITY AND BLACK-WHITE RELATIONS IN U.S.A.

by

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In late nineteenth and early twentieth century America according to a new book, passing the black-white color line was sometimes identified, by the person or literary character involved, with passing the heterosexual-homosexual line.¹ In developing this argument, in *Queering the Color Line*, Siobhan B. Somerville discusses the works, and sometimes the lives, of James Weldon Johnson, Jean Toomer, and Carl Van Vechten, among others.

Citing a number of historians, Ms. Somerville writes that “during the 1920s, two neighborhoods in Manhattan—Greenwich Village and Harlem—developed flourishing enclaves of gay culture.” She also calls attention to Henry Lewis Gates Jr.’s assertion that the Harlem Renaissance “was surely as gay as it was black, not that it was exclusively either of these.”

When I received an advertisement of this book, I thought immediately of the final Richard Ellsworth Savage narrative episode in John Dos Passos’ *The Big Money*. There Savage is in a Harlem dive dancing cheek to cheek “with a soft-handed brown boy in a tight-fitting suit the color of his skin” (*BM*, 516).² I sent for a review copy of Ms. Somerville’s book, advising Duke University Press that I would discuss it only in connection with an episode in Dos Passos’ *U.S.A.*

On the surface, Savage and his date, a young socialite girlfriend named Pat Doolittle, are only slumming in Harlem. While he dances with the brown boy, she dances with “a pale pretty mulatto girl.” Dick suddenly breaks away from the boy and pulls Pat away from the girl. He forcibly brings Pat back to her home, on Park Avenue, telling her that they left because it was “time to draw the line” (*BM*, 516). But then he returns alone to the very same place in Harlem, and dances with the boy. Now thoroughly drunk and where no one knows him, Savage finds release from his inhibitions.

Why in Harlem, besides for anonymity? Conceivably Dos Passos was basing the event on an incident about which he knew. But *U.S.A.* purposefully depicts much of the country, and the author may well have intended to present a small aspect of Harlem, though certainly not its literary Renaissance.

Homosexuality and black-white relations are two unsettling themes in *U.S.A.*—unsettling to Dos Passos himself in “The Camera Eye” and to characters in his narrative. These themes also find a place in the biographies and the Newsreel. In the concluding Savage episode, towards the end of the trilogy, the two themes seem to reach a finale together.

In “The Camera Eye” (2) of *The 42nd Parallel*, Dos Passos’ father (a Northerner) teases the boy’s mother (a Southerner): “What would you do Lucy if I were to invite one of them to my table? They’re very lovely people Lucy the colored people” (*FSP*, 13). The boy’s sexual desires do not respect a color line. Later, in “The Camera Eye” (19) “he wished [he] had the nerve to hug and kiss Martha the colored girl they said was half Indian old Emma’s daughter” (*FSP*, 239).

Dos Passos does not depict his desires as extending to homoeroticism. This theme appears in “The Camera Eye” (24) of *The 42nd Parallel*. On a steamboat excursion, a “baritone” from Athens, Kentucky, “is too attentive to the small boy,” warning him against bad girls, and talking of “beautiful statues of Greek boys.” But the child finally gets away from him (*FSP*, 284-85).

The themes of homoeroticism and color appear briefly, but separately, in the biographies. Rudolph Valentino is heartbroken when the *Chicago Tribune* calls him a pink powderpuff (*BM*, 191). And the people choosing a corpse to be the American Unknown Soldier of World War I are told: “Make sure he aint a dinge, boys” (*NN*, 468). The dinge remark is doubly ironic in the light of a Newsreel item which appeared previously: when towards the end of *The 42nd Parallel*, the United States entered World War I, Newsreel XIX proclaimed: “PLAN LEGISLATION TO KEEP COLORED PEOPLE FROM WHITE AREAS” (*FSP*, 362).

In the narratives, Dos Passos presents the two themes extensively. The first Janey Williams section in *The 42nd Parallel* finds the Williamses living in Georgetown, D.C., a deteriorated area. Young Janey walks from school with a “little yaller girl” who lives across the street from her. Once after she invites the girl into her house, Janey receives a lecture from her mother: “You must never associate with colored people on an equal basis. Living in this neighborhood it’s all the more important to be careful about those things.” Joe, her brother, who has already learned this lesson, yells: “Niggerlover niggerlover” in her ear (*FSP*, 135). Ironically, this prejudice, inculcated early, leads to Joe’s death in the fourth narrative section on him in *Nineteen-Nineteen*. Armistice Day finds him a merchant seaman in Saint-Nazaire, in France. When he enters a cabaret and sees a prostitute or loose woman he likes dancing with a black Senegalese officer, he attacks the black, and a fracas ensues. Somebody brings a bottle down on Joe’s head and crushes his skull.

Earlier, in the second narrative section on Joe Williams in the same volume, a wealthy white American lured Joe into a Trinidad hotel and propositioned him for homosexual favors. Joe pushed the man away and escaped, but his reaction was not the kind of visceral fury he would feel at finding a black dancing with a white woman he wants. Dos Passos ascribes such violent behavior on race to white southern males. Doc, the Floridian who sails from New Orleans to New York with Charley Anderson in the Anderson narrative section of *The 42nd Parallel* exhibits

the same visceral fury towards blacks as does Joe. Twice after imbibing liquor he raves about wanting to kill them.

The Margo Dowling narrative sections, all in *The Big Money*, bring the color and homoerotic themes together. Margo at age sixteen, wishing to escape her wretched circumstances in New York City, entices Tony Garrido, a twenty-one year old Cuban guitar player, to marry her and take her to his country. She is of Irish descent and blond, and observes that Tony's face is "a very light coffeecolor." In Cuba Margo finds his family "yellow or coffeecolored" (she notes a "niggerwoman" among them) and Tony turns out to be a homosexual, weak both in body and character (*BM*, 243). Margo escapes from Cuba, but Tony remains an unwanted part of her life, continually demanding money, living with male lovers, and interfering with her fortunes. Finally a German homosexual lover murders him.

Several other homosexuals appear in the narrative sections of *U.S.A.* Thus Eric Egstrom, whom Eleanor Stoddard knows from the Chicago Art Institute, and Maurice Millet, her French teacher at the Berlitz School, are always together and sleep in the same bed. Dos Passos treats as droll the relationship among Eveline Hutchins, who loves Maurice; Eleanor, who is sexually frigid but has a "beautiful" mutual friendship with Eveline; and the two homosexual men:

Eleanor used to wonder about them sometimes but it was so nice to know boys who weren't horrid about women (*FSP*, 221).

In what sense do the homoerotic and color themes in *U.S.A.* reach a finale in the last Richard Ellsworth section of *The Big Money*? We see even more clearly than before that Savage is dangerously deceptive towards women: first, Daughter, for whose death he was responsible in *Nineteen-Nineteen*; now Pat Doolittle, to whom he proposes during the Harlem escapade; in the future, perhaps, one of Doc Bingham's daughters.

As for the racial theme in the trilogy—for once in *U.S.A.*, blacks have ceased to be servants or victims. After the Harlem place closes, Savage gets into a taxicab with the brown boy and "a strapping black buck he [the boy] said was his girlfriend Florence" (*BM*, 517). He is taking them to his home for breakfast. As he enters his apartment, he is struck on the head and robbed of his watch and money. Morally, Savage's fright on recovering consciousness in the morning seems thoroughly deserved as we read the apprehensions and language that run through his mind:

Now they knew his name his address his phonenumber. Blackmail, oh Christ. How would it be when Mother came home from Florida to find her son earning twentyfive thousand a year, junior partner of J. Ward Moorehouse being blackmailed by two nigger whores,

male prostitutes receiving males? Christ. And Pat Doolittle and the Bingham girls. It would ruin his life (*BM*, 518).

Dos Passos' presentations of black-white relations and homoeroticism in *U.S.A.* cannot be schematized, though certain conclusions are obvious. Among southern white males, violence towards blacks is at or just beneath the surface; and the country in general is race conscious and discriminatory. In the trilogy Dos Passos finds both black-white relations and homosexuality disturbing to society, and he is antipathetic or unsympathetic towards homosexuality.

Incidents in *U.S.A.* do not reflect the thesis in *Queering the Color Line*, except for one telling detail: the brown boy in the Harlem dive says he is Gloria Swanson. Though Savage under the influence of liquor is democratic towards the black homosexuals, he never thinks of himself as black. Tony Garrido, in the Margo Dowling story, is a secondary character from a society with its own racial situation, and Dos Passos' narrative tells us little about his thought processes. But despite the very limited applicability of Ms. Somerville's book to *U.S.A.*, it will probably have uses in sociology and literature; and it has served serendipitously to occasion the musings in this essay.

Notes

1. Siobhan B. Somerville, *Queering the Color Line*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2000. The quotations from it are on p. 129.

2. All citations to Dos Passos' work are to the trilogy *U.S.A.* New York: The Modern Library, 1937. *FSP* refers to *The 42nd Parallel*, *NN* to *Nineteen-Nineteen*, and *BM* to *The Big Money*. Ms. Somerville's book makes no mention of Dos Passos or any of his works.