Bucklin Moon and Thomas Sancton in the 1940s: Crusaders for the Racial Left

by Lawrence Jackson

In 1943, Edwin Embree, the head of the Julius Rosenwald Foundation, wrote to *Atlantic Monthly* editor Edward Weeks praising a young Georgian as one of "a small but increasing number of younger white Southerners who represent a point of view which to a great many of us seems much keener than that of the older writers" (Embree to Weeks, 11 Feb. 1943). Embree was talking about Lillian Smith, whose books *Strange Fruit, Killers of the Dream,* and *Now Is the Time* would become the best known and widely read works by an American white advancing the cause of racial integration during the 1940s and early 1950s. But he could have been talking about two other writers, men who, in the circles of the Rosenwald Foundation, the trust fund that nearly created the vanguard of race-liberal writers of the 1940s, were expected to make significant contributions to the disintegration of racial prejudice. Their names were Bucklin Moon and Thomas Sancton.

Bucklin Moon was born in 1911 in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, but after a short time he moved to the South. By 1944 when he was applying for the Rosenwald creative writing fellowship, a grant made to either blacks or southern whites, he would make a successful case for the award by telling director Embree, "I have spent most of my life in that region" (Moon to Embree, 24 Nov. 1944). Moon gained deep personal feelings

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toward African Americans and an ability to depict the American South as a youth and as a student at Rollins College in Florida in the early 1930s. At Rollins, Moon was exposed to Zora Neale Hurston (who was associated part-time with the College) and to professor John Andrew Rice, who even then was something of a crusader for black rights (Boyd 241–43). Rice left Rollins in 1933 and founded Black Mountain College near Asheville, North Carolina, an experimental school with shockingly unorthodox racial policies. Moon graduated from Rollins at twenty-four and won some early recognition for a 1938 *Harper's* magazine short story called "Boats for Hire." Set in the Gulf Coast, the narrative advanced Moon's concern with the tangled emotional connections of race that concluded with base acts of prejudice. By the early 1940s he had taken a job as an editor at the firm Doubleday and Doran, a post he held until 1951. During the era of Moon's tenure at Doubleday, the firm became the national leader in publishing fiction and non-fiction revealing the unfair treatment of African Americans, books written by some black and many white authors. At Doubleday, under the name "George L. Hack," Moon anonymously submitted his first book for publication.

Doubleday published Moon's novel *The Darker Brother* in 1943. The book established Moon's credentials as a leading liberal in race relations and, by extension, an expert in social and economic policy. In the book Moon showed the trademark of a devoted social realist; he was a politically inspired novelist interested almost exclusively in a sympathetic portrait of black working-class life. *The Darker Brother* offered an interior viewpoint of racial segregation and showed black discontent as a general and not an isolated feature. In particular, Moon offered one of the earliest portraits of the recalcitrance and venom of economic race prejudice in the urban North. Like Carson McCullers through her portraits of African Americans in *The Heart is the Lonely Hunter*, Moon used black dialect exclusively as a means to create characters, not to reinforce humorously ideas of racial difference. Beyond that, his tale was a black love story that occurred in the face of northern discrimination.

The Darker Brother was the narrative of a Florida family moving to Harlem. Widow Essie Mae takes her children Ben and Josie to live with her husband's brother Rafe. Soon enough, race prejudice begins to destroy them. Ben is beaten by whites at his interracial school and thus befriends neighborhood homeboy Slick, a youth whose ambition has already been crushed by poverty and discrimination. The conditions in Harlem are unjust and the family survives due to the protection of Uncle Rafe, the numbers king of the ghetto. When white gangsters decide to take over

Rafe's territory, he eludes them for five years, until he is betrayed and murdered. After the death of his uncle, Ben wanders the streets and tries to earn an honest living at seventeen, but the tight job market is closed to him because of his race. Responding to the religious escapism instilled in her as a child in the South, matriarch Essie Mae becomes a devout follower of Father Gabriel, an approximation of the historical figure Father Divine. After turning over to Gabriel's Peace Movement the insurance money that Rafe has left the family, she and her daughter are crushed to death by their fellow Peace Movement followers in a boating accident. The novel then turns to Ben and his girlfriend Birdie, a domestic who dreams of becoming a nurse. Frustrated and unable to find work, and nearly participating with Slick in an auto theft that leads to his death, Ben decides to join the army. In the military Ben finds himself at a southern training camp and his best friend, unable to cope with the racial pressure, commits suicide. In Harlem, Birdie is accused of theft at her job as an au pair and turns to prostitution to survive. The novel ends with the couple's improbable reunion and Ben's determination to defend the country after Pearl Harbor has been attacked. Ben finally responds with the Frederick Douglass-style credo of agitation and fidelity to the United States, a conclusion that connotes the winning spirit of a new generation of black Americans.

> "We got tuh fight for what we got comin to us over here. We been waitin uh long time. We liable tuh get knots beat all over top uh our heads. We goin to get shoved around. But we got tuh keep fightin." (*Darker* 245)

Although the decision to use heavy dialect prevented the novel from aging gracefully, Moon faithfully exposed the environmental severity of the urban ghetto and the triumphant spirit of those who could survive it. He reproduced the spectrum of black ideological investment, from militancy to escapist religion, and emphasized great optimism in the black American's future.

The upbeat narrative that forecast the gradual assimilation of Bigger Thomases filling up American cities found immediate support from the *New York Times*. "The book is important . . . because it is the first of its kind, combining a good story with authentic portraits of the Negro people," wrote Rackham Holt (Holt 5). Moon had managed something that distinguished him from black writers, a modulated tone ("not too strong and not too bitter") that was without pretension ("almost colloquial and

always simple"). On the left, Thomas Sancton, managing editor of *The New Republic*, offered another point of view. In Moon's book, Sancton saw the new terms for depictions across the color line:

> [T]he Negro is going to take a new status in American fiction, as he has in life. Serious white writers in increasing numbers will enter Richard Wright's field of protest. The Negro's own fight for political and social equality is forcing this change in literature. In white men's books he is going to stop being a "nigger"—no matter how subtly this stereotype has been established heretofore—and become a person. . . . Negroes are people. They suffer just as intensely as white people; they get just as hungry. What has happened to them is a vast cruel story. The South was built by their toil and suffering. So were Northern fortunes. So were English cotton-textile cities like Liverpool and Manchester. The Southerners must start to tell it right. ("Novels and Negroes" 464)

Only the Communists, (whom Sancton had not joined,) put the situation of black Americans so candidly. Hoping for a second European front in 1943, they were not arguing hotly for black equality. Sancton spoke out like a young John Brown.

In spite of the success, Moon's Wisconsin origins were of course a weakness; he was not a "native" southerner, and could thus be dismissed as an outside radical. But *The New Republic's* Sancton brought to these public debates over the "Negro problem" the impeccable credentials of a white southerner native to New Orleans. Twenty-seven-year-old Thomas Sancton left the second half of a Harvard Nieman fellowship and moved to New York to become the journal's managing editor in 1942. Founded in 1914 by Herbert Croly, *The New Republic* hoped "to start little insurrections in the realm of its [their readers'] convictions" (Lissner 21). The liberal journal endorsed New Deal policies, among them the support of federal laws that banned any form of racial discrimination, and they advocated for labor. Louis Lyons and professor Paul Buck of Harvard had given Sancton high recommendation when Bruce Bliven, *The New Republic's* president and editor, started looking for young blood to run the journal. Sancton's southern origins helped the journal recover from what many writers and influential intellectuals thought of as more than a Stalinist flirtation in the 1930s. Two years before Sancton came aboard, the Trotsky-leaning James T. Farrell had described portions of the journal as in full "renegade[s] from liberalism" (Farrell "Seven" 31). As *The*

New Republic managing editor, Sancton combined an unshakeable patriotism within a defiant voice for liberalism, energetic commitments that seemed fueled by his passion for racial equality.

Sancton emphasized his origins to rip the façade of a congenial white Southland, beneficent and united in its attitude toward "the Negro." *The New Republic*'s young editor had ridden in the van of the liberal cohort for more than five years. After college at Tulane Sancton had begun writing for a national audience with short stories in *Harper's* about his early years in the South, using his fiction to intercede against race prejudice. Sancton's short story "The Dirty Way" of April 1938 presented police reporters and detectives in New Orleans to show the moral inadequacy that led to racist violence. In 1941 he published "The Parting," a short story about a white boy's fond memory of a black servant, dismissed from her job because of racial prejudice. The only thing stopping Sancton was his ambition. He worked at *The New Republic* through the fall of 1943, when he successfully applied for a Julius Rosenwald Fellowship to begin a novel about southern life; he also claimed to be nearing the end of a non-fiction book for Harper's, also on the South.

Sancton's efforts at *The New Republic* helped make possible a significant transition by the second half of the 1940s, when even a moderately perceptive novelist like Fannie Cook understood that "Jim Crow is Public Enemy No. 1" (Cook 10). In the 1920s white writers had made careers writing about "the Negro," but even the more generous of them, like Julia Peterkin and T.S. Stribling, had resorted to comic stereotypes and heavy regional folklore; making black uplift the center of a serious writer's career was unheard of. Richard Wright's success showed for the first time the commercial viability of a black author. A few years later the deep interest in Gunnar Myrdal's long study *An American Dilemma* suggested the public's willingness to look beyond the old stereotypes and clichés about the "Negro problem."

Sancton's gift was not only to attack the reactionaries but the assumptions of liberals as well. He showcased in his journalism the difficult stories of racial injustice with which whites were completely unfamiliar unless reading the Negro press. One of the early reports Sancton brought to the journal's readers presented the case of Odell Waller, a black farmer electrocuted for killing a white man in Virginia. Sancton showed a rural Bigger Thomas to the nation because, though Waller may have been technically guilty as charged, the overriding circumstances of the debt-peonage system in Pittsylvania County and the inability of black farmers to seek redress under law were among the "profound though subtle val-

ues" mitigating the case and requiring "no compromise and no apology in the conscience of a real liberal" ("Waller" 46).

A "real liberal," Sancton was leading a war against the people he called the "arrogant malefactors," despots whom he believed had viciously corrupted the poor whites of the South. He argued regularly that it was far less the working class white who would become violent at hearing the argument of racial equality, but rather the remnants of the Bourbon plantocracy trying to hold onto power. His career as a thinker had begun by reading the manifesto *I'll Take My Stand*, a kind of intellectual totem for some young southerners of his generation. But when Sancton closed the book he repudiated it. "It is the kind of book to read once, understand for its unintended exposure of the weakness of regional culture, and then to dismiss, while passing on to books of genuine importance" ("Curator"). He hoped to expose the demagogues who stirred up racial hate and to use his personal experiences among southern whites to reverse the trend that suggested it was the working class who most greatly resisted integration and that southern elites protected Negroes out of genteel obligation.

Sancton was sincere but not without his pretensions. He believed by April 1943 that his unwritten books on race would constitute "a new approach to the South; I should hope one of the first of a new tradition of Southern treatment in fiction, based on real science, instead of murky mumbo-jumbo about Negroes, which passes for realism in the Southern realists; and based also on the Christian ethic" (Sancton to Embree, 11 Apr. 1943). Other liberal whites like Carey McWilliams and Lillian Smith applauded rewriting cultural histories, but Sancton also believed in the radical historian's perspective, that racism was a technique devised to aid economic exploitation. This was the code of Atlanta University sociologists W.E.B. Du Bois and Ira Reid (who wrote him a Rosenwald recommendation), and Trinidadian Eric Williams, still conceiving *Capitalism and Slavery*. Sancton regularly blamed, by name, the southern aristocracy of large scale growers, industrialists, and elected officials for steadily fomenting and exploiting racial hatred to control whites.

Sancton considered himself one of a small group of genuine southern liberals, leagues different from the better-known editors Virginius Dabney and Mark Etheridge, who believed that segregation was wrong but that only prudence and forbearance could conquer it without another Civil War. Sancton tried to bend to the true path liberals who didn't go far enough, like newspaper editor Hodding Carter of Greenville, Mississippi. When Carter published his 1944 novel *The Winds of Fear,* Sancton let it be known that, despite the bravery of the author and the prom-

ise of the work, the characters and situations presented a dream world. Carter believed that racial violence originated with the rumor-mongering of the fearful. But he refused to accept the idea that innocent blacks felt the weight of white malice. Further, he wrote that black militants were impetuous scamps. When the only black doctor, a militant, leaves the ghetto of Kirby's Quarters, it is only his radicalism that is noted as missed, not the fact that the blacks no longer have access to medical services. White liberals lead the social transformation, in the person of a heroic newspaper editor and his son, who has been educated in the North and maimed in the Pacific. The wounded veteran represents the possibilities of a fructifying liberalism, though one that must always deal with its loss. For the black community, the accommodationist teacher Professor Monroe is the hero. Not even a third of the way through the book, he espouses the bedrock wisdom of the "southern liberal." "We didn't stop them from lynching us," the professor thinks to himself after a black soldier has been killed by a cruel police officer. "They did themselves" (Carter 77). The implication was clear; the South could solve its own problem.

Sancton did not let his partial admiration for the author prevent him from exposing the dangerous myth of southern class relationships perpetuated by *The Winds of Fear*.

> It [*The Winds of Fear*] subscribed, among other things, to the traditional view of Southern liberals that lynchers are to be found chiefly among a margin of malevolent poor whites, while many high-minded main-streeters and planters oppose mob action through an innate zeal for justice. Southern life is not really like this . . . behind every lynch mob stalks the spirit of the Southern main streets and plantations, whose owners have the deepest investment in caste and economic serfdom. ("Southern Liberal" 292)

Sancton resisted the mirage that southern elites of good will would transform centuries of injustice.

Instead, he proposed salvation by way of the celebration of the southern yeoman. During the same year as Carter's book, Sancton had fired off several chapters from his non-fiction study to *Harper's* magazine and, for the first three out of four months of 1944, *Harper's* published a near chapter-length excerpt. In January they ran "Race Clash," a short recounting of a young Sancton and his college pals using their white privilege to instigate and then win a fight with young Negroes who are fed up with the humiliation of caste. If he had been immoderate in his youth, he was now

contrite and thoughtful. "The experience drove home to me the utter immorality of the Southern caste system" ("Race Clash" 136). In February, "Silver Horn" was a reminiscing idyll of Boy Scout camp summers on the bayou for the sons of the upper working-class. In his panorama of adolescence, Sancton included a memorable portrait of a Paul Bunyan-sized black man named Joe who "got to be one of the people I liked best of all—not only in the camp but in my whole circumscribed world" ("Silver Horn" 266). April's "The Tall Man" revealed a courageous but broken white laborer, relying upon his reserves of dignity to cheat death. This was the strength of the approach that Sancton brought to bear, insightful and deeply thoughtful reportage, squeezing the lumps of quotidian coal to glean the sparkling gems inside. He had crafted a sensibility that enabled him to perceive and grapple with the varieties of Americans, a fine achievement. Sancton's journalism and his criticism used the clinical method of naturalism, especially its concentration on the deficiencies in environment and the personal shortcomings of whites in power, to explore the exceptional will and goodness of ordinary Americans operating in less-than-perfect circumstances.

In this respect Sancton differed from Moon, who could be rosy about the prospects of race relations, in spite of the riotous years of 1943 and 1946. Though he wrote either about black southerners in the North, or the South, Moon was nearly a Carl Van Vechten of the bebop era, bringing together white editors and agents with black literary talent. He acquired Chester Himes' controversial novel *If He Hollers Let Him Go* for Doubleday in 1945, and worked with the young ex-convict on the project. He talked up Ann Petry before her novel *The Street* appeared, and leading literary agent Henry Volkening pursued her as a result (Volkening to Petry, 17 and 21 Jan. 1946). As editor at the firm that most regularly published books about American racial issues during the 1940s, Moon gloriously declared the new dawn at hand for black writers. "The unknown Negro writer has a better chance of book publication today than ever before, including the so-called Negro Renaissance of the twenties. Not only that, once his book is published the chances of it being successful are also better" (Moon, "Book Boom" 79). To back up this kind of statement, Moon rattled off the names of the best black writers he knew of, and several of them were his personal friends: Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, Ann Petry, Chester Himes, James Baldwin, Owen Dodson, and Langston Hughes. Moon was one of the literary hep cats.

In fact, when he applied for a fellowship to the writers' colony at Yaddo, "to portray a side of Negro life that has thus far been badly

neglected—the middle class," his application was treated with special care. Despite the fact that Moon worked in the "lily-white" publishing industry (the whiteness of which was a sharp source of resentment for poet and critic Sterling Brown),[1] the Yaddo steering committee—Newton Arvin, Malcolm Cowley, Louis Kronenberger and Granville Hicks—assumed that Moon was black. Luckily for Moon, the board tended to agree with Arvin's judgment of the application. "Like so many Negro writers, he sounds more interesting as a man than as a creative person, but Negroes must be given every chance and Moon is clearly up toward the top of his group" (Arvin "Evaluation"). There was room in 1947, and not just for blackened whites like Moon. Novelist Arna Bontemps, sociologist Horace Cayton, and poet Owen Dodson all worked on projects at Yaddo that summer. Moon was reputable enough to write a recommendation for Cayton. The next year J. Saunders Redding and Chester Himes attended.

It all seemed too good to be true. Moon's pal Horace Cayton, the well-known black Chicago sociologist and public policy wonk, turned over a July 26, 1947 column in the African American newspaper *Pittsburgh Courier*, in which Moon breezily pronounced a post World-War II era "Renaissance" in African American art and letters. Though he acknowledged the ongoing necessity of a struggle—"books in their own way are like bullets"— Moon was certain that the new material and writers were sensational. "Readers of race books aren't going to be disappointed" (Moon, "New Books" 7). Speaking of black authors with significant work, Moon believed that "there are almost too many to mention." But Moon could not know that during the summer of 1947 there was probably more activity by black writers at Yaddo than at any other time in the writers' colony's history. Not during the 1950s, 1960s or 1970s would the colony see the likes of several noted black writers working together in Saratoga Springs, New York.

In addition to the problem of assuming the high rates of participation of black authors in elite circles, Moon tended to accept their confident talk of possibility, even as it did not hold true to the often traumatic circumstances of their racially segregated lives. Horace Cayton, for one, talked an excellent game. He told Moon that he had three books in the works: a play, a photographic essay, and a long novel. Cayton did publish an autobiography in 1964, but none of the other books materialized. Nor would Arna Bontemps publish the novel he hoped to write about a white woman adopting a black boy. Owen Dodson did go on to release his novel *Boy at the Window* (1951), but it stirred little interest.

Thomas Sancton, never a guest of Yaddo and who lived in the North for only brief periods of time, was less confident than Moon that resounding change had taken place in the mid-1940s and that black voices were able to be heard. He counseled blacks to keep a healthy suspicion of the helping hands lent to them. "I believe that the Negro, in the long run, is the Negro's most trustworthy friend, and I believe he will never win any benefit he does not win by his own ability, independence, courage, and political organization." "[T]he only way that the Negro is going to get Democracy at home is through his own strength and organization" ("Race Question" 199–200). This was bitter medicine, an unpleasant departure from the optimism and, at times, exceptionalism of the American liberal creed.

Sancton dutifully brought to his *New Republic* audience his tart prescription with a special race issue for October 18, 1943. The left-wing and liberal magazines like *New Masses* and *Survey Graphic* had both carried "race" issues within the previous eighteen months, and *The New Republic*'s contribution was a deluxe two-part special issue called "The Negro: His Future in America." Sancton tried to bring aboard a new audience, the "large, passive group of white Americans . . . uneasy about the mounting race conflict" ("Negro: His Future" 535–36). But what he had in store for them was guilt, a heavy duty to change the country, and a condensed form of psychological rationale that had appeared only in sketched-out form in the work of William Faulkner.

> The reason for the historic white faintheartedness grows out of the omni-present, insistent anti-Negro propaganda inherent in every facet of our culture . . . it grew out of a deep psychological fear of a "strange" race, a race with superficial markings dramatically differing from the white norm; and deeply involved in this fear was a case of bad conscience. The white soul is saturated with fear; white culture embedded within itself, and perpetuated at all cost, every educational device that was possible to teach this fear of the stranger and buttress it through customs, myths, and old wives' tales. And white America as well as black was victimized in the process. (536)

The connection between racism and fear, while obvious to modern readers, was new when still near the dawn of American psychoanalysis and around the time of the migration of the European expatriates trained in psychological theory. Rarely had white America looked at itself in the mirror with such courage and without sentiment. Shortly after the arti-

cle, Sancton officially left his duties as *The New Republic*'s managing editor, though he was not removed from the masthead as contributing editor until 1946. Also in the fall of 1943, Sancton published a short essay, "The South Needs Help" in the Interracial Commission's journal *Common Ground*. The article stated plainly that the problem of the region was the moral problem of slavery. "Stealing these people from their own continent was a violation of a profound natural law and we are paying for it" ("South Needs Help" 12). Among white southern writers actively publishing who were critical of racism and slavery during the early 1940s, Sancton really had no peer, not excluding Lillian Smith.

Sancton left the helm of *The New Republic* in late 1943 because his wife became ill and the couple returned to Mississippi. He took a well-paying job at *Life* magazine for a few months, and abandoned it after receiving a Rosenwald Fellowship, which gave him time to work on a novel about southern life. By 1945, Sancton had moved his non-fiction project from Harper's to Doubleday and was calling his book *The Southern People.*

The Doubleday editor and writer Bucklin Moon did a better job of turning liberal rhetoric into reality and published his second book, one which Sancton approved of, called *Primer for White Folks,* an invaluable anthology on race relations. Moon had collected short stories from some of America's best known writers, published in places like *Atlantic Monthly, Harper*'s, *Collier's, New Republic, Opportunity,* and *The New Yorker* to produce the cumulative weight of what the country had said sporadically over a roughly ten-year period, with a couple of exceptions. The book drove home the punishing mores and social customs addling black life and self-confidence. He relied upon black and white writers, but chiefly white ones, and he reprinted Sancton's "The South Needs Help" and an editorial from *The New Republic* special issue "The Negro: His Future in America." Several of the short stories described life on segregated buses or, worse, in the bus station waiting room. Readers encountered the banal malice regularly meted out to African Americans. The idea was to use the weight of social realism as documentary evidence in the fight against segregation, even though Moon himself was growing weary of the "race novel."[2] As reviewer R.L. Duffus commented, "The literary value of these pieces is not at stake in this discussion. It is the moral that counts, and the moral that runs through every story is that for the Negro this is not yet a free country" ("Negro Problems" 23). Moon's project captured the importance—and the limitations—of whites working as agents for black advance and social change. Moon knew the perspective of the white audience and its deepest concerns. When African American

writers, for example, chanced to break into print, they wanted to show the lynching, the ultimate in racial horrors, during their brief moment of holding an audience. For whites, the minor and mundane, the everyday slights and racial humiliations were what they most frequently imagined themselves having to deal with if they suddenly turned black. It was not the ultimate but the ordinary that intrigued them. In addition, the view also shielded them from the idea that a terrifying racial ultimatum awaited them.

Ralph Ellison made *The New Republic* for the first time in October of 1945 with his review of *Primer for White Folks*, launching his work before a larger audience. In the unheard of example of white editor turning to an African American as a referent for literary criticism, Thomas Sancton effusively praised Ellison's review-essay "Beating That Boy." Ellison had hinted that whites often had images of blacks trapped in the dense layers of their subconscious and Sancton was ecstatic. "In a single page he makes some essential observations about American writers and writing that one fails to find in most full-length critical books, which, whatever their other merits, lack an understanding of the withering influence of the race dilemma on so much American art and thinking" (Sancton, "Unfinished Business" 770). And in one of the early important moments in the reversal of the intellectual ethnic ghettoes, Sancton observed that Ellison had shown him something about Hemingway. "His observations make clear to me, for instance, why I dislike Hemingway [due to] his quality of turning away from the difficult, or his failure to master it, and for faking along under the force of his undoubted narrative power" (770).

The native southerner's recognition of an African American literary critic to explain Hemingway offers no better example of the radical nature of Sancton's liberalism. But others on the American liberal frontier were moving to bridge the gap between the political radicals of the 1930s and the racially conservative southern Agrarian and formalist critics. No one was more earnest in this activity than Lionel Trilling. Looking into the face of a world "dark and dubious," Trilling proposed to exercise the "critical intellect," one that was "apt to study and praise elements that for the fullness of spiritual perfection are wanted, even though they belong to a power which in the practical sphere may be maleficent" ("Elements" 368–369). The flagship journal for this stream of American liberalism was *Partisan Review*, which in 1945 published a Trilling short story designed to broach specifically the conundrum of racially liberal attitudes in modern America. Trilling's "The Other Margaret" points out the weakness of racial liberalism in a New York family comprised of professor Stephen

Elwin, his wife, his thirteen-year-old daughter Margaret, and the family maid who holds the same name. Paired by name, the young upper-middle-class girl strives for a grossly empathetic relationship with the servant, in the face of her mother's empirical observations that "the other Margaret" is destroying, systematically, the family heirlooms. The young teenager relies upon her liberal and progressive education to explain to her father the reason for the servant's poor behavior.

> "It's because—because society didn't give her a chance," she said slowly. "She has a handicap. Because she's colored. She has to struggle so hard—against prejudice. It's so *hard* for her." (498)

Young Margaret Elwin's education in the idea of social responsibility runs counter to the value of individual responsibility important in the Elwin home. Trilling's protagonist Stephen Elwin believes that everyone "bore their own blame. Exemption was not given by age or youth, or sex, or color, or condition of life" (498). The child responds to her father's questions with the mantra of unspecific "liberal" clichés. When the Elwins compare the "other Margaret" to their loyal servant Millie, a woman who returned to the South to nurse a sick relative, their daughter describes the former maid's loyalty to her employer as evidence of "slave-psychology." Her father's response indicates the shifting definition of liberalism in the 1940s and the growing impatience with the social critique that corresponded to literary naturalism. Stephen Elwin believes that the school's teachings have "corrupted" his daughter. The reader is to understand that Margaret Elwin has been misshapen by liberal clichés.

The mounting disparagement of realist techniques and the heavy duties connected with the fight against racism and social class oppression contributed to the problems Thomas Sancton faced when he tried to complete his novel. In 1946 he agreed to edit a special *Survey Graphic* issue called "Segregation," an installment in the "Calling America" series. This was his most impressive attempt to marshal the forces of the public intelligentsia against American racism. Rosenwald fund Vice President Will W. Alexander instigated the special issue through a meeting of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America, then he chaired the group of editors. It was unsurprising that Sancton was selected to handle the issue, since between 1943 and the Rosenwald fund's closing in 1948 he was awarded a fellowship an unprecedented three times, joining the ranks of repeat awardees such as W. E. B. Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson. Sancton chose to include chiefly social scientists and setters of public policy, men like Alexander, Louis Wirth, Carey McWil-

liams, Ira Reid, Robert Weaver, Loren Miller, and E. Franklin Frazier. A goodly number were black, but, outside of a brief inclusion by Alain Locke, Sancton was the only one with literary credentials. Initially, Sancton asked Ralph Ellison to contribute, but Ellison ultimately took offense at the editorial recommendations and withdrew his piece.[3]

Sancton's life at the Pascagoula, Mississippi shipyards collecting material for his book did not bring him the peace of mind or confidence to write. National events depressed him and the race problem was not progressing to a just solution. By 1948 Sancton feared the quick turn to the "Cold War" and military build-up would serve as an escape hatch to justify the maintenance of racial divisions ("Slowly Crumbling Levees" 21). He spent that year writing nearly every other week for *Nation*, charting the minute changes in Truman's domestic and international policies. He continued to tell everyone that he was on the verge of submitting to Doubleday his groundbreaking "big book" on race relations, begun in 1943 (Sancton to Elvidge, 25 March 1948). But although he believed that he carried special qualities of perspective, after 1948 Sancton ended his work as the front man for the radical journalists advancing the cause of racial justice and the transformation of racial ideology in the South. He resumed his job as a reporter at the *New Orleans Times-Picayune,* where he spent the next thirty years. And despite his regular success winning fellowships from the Rosenwald Foundation and the National Arts Foundation, and securing book publishing contracts, Sancton never published either of his monumental studies of the South.

Instead, in 1956 he published with Doubleday the picaresque novel *Count Roller Skates,* which touched the race issue not at all. The book neglected the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* and the Birmingham bus boycott to describe an entertaining sham-aristocrat journeyman machinist in turn-of-the-century New Orleans. Sancton manufactured the character Count Casimir Polliatofsky, a lovable charlatan endowed with great appetites who strives to live up to his anti-Darwinist belief that the central idea of mankind is the pursuit of mutual understanding. The Count marries Hilda Moreau, belle of a lower-middle-class neighborhood and invariably precipitates her ruin. The narrative ranges through five or six years in a ragtime era New Orleans of docks and rooming houses, while the picaresque hero strives to become the successful proprietor of a roller-skating rink at a lakeshore carnival.

Probably because he had abandoned his high purpose as priest of racial transformation, the tale never finds an authentic plot. Sancton's recourse to the quixotic epic of the tragically misunderstood self-taught hero, a

man who tries everything with earnestness and passion but fails to deal with gripping realities, resounded loudly for its author. Here was the cry of Sancton's own misspent liberal fire in the cause of racial betterment, which arguably hadn't improved greatly since the 1940s, and could be compared to a plotless novel filled with black bystanders. The novel included as a genuine black character only the syphilitic piano player Few Clothes Stagney to remind the reader of Sancton's formidable passion from the 1940s. Thus, it made perfect sense to read about a hero who was a failed man, hopelessly striving for distinction and who concludes the novel by jettisoning all responsibility and social obligation. When Polliatofsky flees his family at the novel's end, despite a wrenching confrontation with his young son, he abandons the responsibility for the burden of life. The Count's failure with his roller-skating show in Natchez, his betrayal by a friend, and his subsequent teetering on the edge of madness, scribbling engineering plans on the walls of his hotel room, seem metaphors for the kinds of demons that Sancton himself encountered, trying to overturn the southern way of life and raise a family while his father-in-law sat on the Mississippi Supreme Court.

The most obvious sign in the novel of Sancton's enormous fatigue as a southern voice of radical racial liberalism is the cut-and-paste scene between Polliatofsky's son Brad and the old black woman Pearl, the only other substantive depiction of an African American. Sancton transplanted the slightly touching routine word-for-word from his 1941 short story "The Parting," where the black domestic Pearl awaits young Craig Magruder's mother. In 1941, the initial introduction of a black woman and a young white boy was designed to develop with richness, warmth, and humor the undeniable bond between the races. When the scene was revisited in *Count Roller Skates*, the young boy, now called Brad, again welcomes to his house a giggling Pearl who repeats all of her lines verbatim. "Lawd dass a rain!" and "I is a funnly lookin' somethin' at dat" (239). By 1956, Sancton had lost his stomach and energy for the demands of new imaginative representations. His earlier devotion to racial justice in fiction had become merely a hastily pasted episode of local color, one deliberately subordinate to the epic of a flawed, meandering, escape-artist.

Sancton's peer Bucklin Moon was more successful in staying the course of the "Negro problem," at least in terms of a publishing record. He published in 1947 the combined social science and journalistic *High Cost of Prejudice*, a book that argued the economic infeasibility of a segregated America. Moon also manned the critical barricades during the second half of the 1940s, keeping white writers alert when they had "mis-

taken the Negro for the role the Negro must play in order to keep free of the white South's violence" ("Deep South" 650). At the end of the 1940s and the high point of Lillian Smith's national influence, she published her autobiographical *Killers of the Dream*. In his *New York Times* review, Moon emphasized the value of Smith's leadership and her proven contributions in the field, but he did not ignore the grandstanding and navel-gazing that was part of the makeup of an American literary star. The work had flaws: Smith had not broken new ground ("all of this has been said before"); she made a habit of an "almost religious fervor"; and she implied "somehow that she herself discovered the *problem*, and alone knows best how to deal with it" ("Passionate Outcry"). The great Pearl Buck rushed to Smith's defense (Buck, "Letter").

Neither Moon nor Sancton would leave the 1940s with their racial zeal intact. Moon's final novel *Without Magnolias*, another foray onto "social message" terrain, appeared in 1949, the year of his spat with Lillian Smith. For the book, he won Doubleday's George Washington Carver Award for excellence in the field of race relations. (The award never went to an African American for fiction.) *Without Magnolias* revealed the circumstances perpetuating racial segregation and identified a well-worn formula for a solution: higher education, labor unions, and the nuclear family. Set in Florida, the novel describes the interrelated circumstances necessary for an entire community to awaken its social conscience and to reprove public racial discrimination. The main characters are industrial worker Luther Mathews, his college-educated sisters Bessie and Alberta, his wife Eulia and his mother Esther. Moon created a diverse group of blacks benefiting from wartime prosperity and the industrialization of the South.

In his efforts to stress the resilience of black southern culture and its ability to nurture black people, Moon understood himself to be writing deliberate anti-"propaganda." He refused to appoint the southern environment as merely a nest of social backwardness and psychological malaise. Reviewers liked Moon's "effective sympathy" as well as his "unobtrusively smooth narrative style"; unlike the majority of "problem" novels, Moon's told a "good story" (Weaver, "Southern Negroes" 4). Similar to *The Darker Brother*, Moon stressed the black romance theme and featured three marriages: Luther and Eulia, Luther's mother Esther and Eulia's father Jeff, and Bessie and black University of Chicago-trained sociologist Eric Gardner. The main dramatic effort of the book was to show, chiefly through Luther and Eric, an increasingly bolder black American who rejects the paths of gradual progress taken by their elders.

At the conclusion of the novel, the president of the local black college is asked by his white supporters—the newspaper editor and the wealthy philanthropist—to control his young sociology professor, who has written a national editorial citing the use of the Hiroshima atomic bomb as a sign of race war. This climactic moment enables Moon's ultimate revelation: the black college president Rogers has compromised his integrity in his dealings with whites.

> But he thought most of that good and true white man whom he had always looked upon as even more of a father than the black man from whose loins he had really sprung. And it seemed to him at that moment, in a revelation that was so crystal clear as to be almost as dazzling as a blinding light, that for the first time he saw him for what he was. He was only another white man.
>
> . . . No one, surely, had ever bought another human being so cheaply—bought him wholly; not, as in slavery, his strong black back alone, but his all—his mind, his loyalty, but most of all his personal integrity, so that forever he could be nothing but his owner's creature. (371)

Moon was firmly convinced of the improbability of the black leadership from the first half of the twentieth century evolving into a vigorous leadership group for equality.

Moon's handling of the second half of the book then was a bit curious. He proposed that the future of black America lay decidedly with the middle-class characters, who dominated *Without Magnolias*. George Rogers, the wounded veteran and son of the college president, the radical professor Eric Gardner, and Bessie, the one character who through marriage and ability shows the possibility of upward class mobility, represent the vibrant hope. But these characters leave the South to their working class relatives and to the black compromisers with white racism. While Moon's book avoided dramatic violence between the races and coasted along with a smoothly optimistic tone, its underlying plot structure could only emphasize that not much had changed.

Moon had edited a young black writer whose works in the 1940s were unsparing naturalistic depictions of the frustrations of educated, attractive black Americans. In books like *If He Hollers Let Him Go* and *Lonely Crusade*, and even later in 1953's *The Third Generation*, Chester Himes showed the crown of thorns awaiting even blacks who had achieved the brass ring of the middle class. For black intellectuals like Richard Wright

and Horace Cayton, Himes had revealed a hidden and imperative element behind black failure. Moon may have been devoted to the "problem," but his upbeat books served as a counterpoint; his black friends were alert to the distinction. When Cayton reviewed *Without Magnolias* at the end of the decade, he admitted his disappointment because the book lacked fury. He made his regular column for the *Pittsburgh Courier* an open letter to Moon.

> You see, Buck, I'm very indignant about the way Negroes are being kicked around in this country and I want to do something about it, right now, in a big hurry—day before tomorrow. I want to get up on a housetop and scream. So when I first read "Without Magnolias," I said to myself, why is this guy who's supposed to be such a great white liberal pulling his punches? (Cayton 14)

Cayton ultimately decided that the book's value lay in the fact that a white man had written it: "White people should read your book because they can't laugh it off. They can't say, this is just some Negro-lover trying to make money out of the current fad of books about 'the brother.' "

Moon's work at the end of the 1940s contained the same undercurrent of fatigue that affected Thomas Sancton. In three years he had gone from seeing a renaissance of black writers to seeing a group of defeated malcontents. "[W]hat usually defeats the Negro writer, I think, is the fact that under the existing American mores he is always, in essence, telling the same story," he wrote ("Literature of Protest" 36). The worn tale was one of racial protest. Although racial conditions did not show signs of dramatic improvement, the tradition of protest needed relief. "There will always be a place for the Negro protest novel, but until it becomes the exception, rather than the rule, American literature will suffer along with the Negro artist" (37). Suffering black writers, like Chester Himes, who for some reason chose to remove his editor Bucklin Moon from *The Quality of Hurt*, his classic memoir of the period, were too bitter. Moon was coming in line with mainstream American liberals, but not quite soon enough. He would lose his job at *Collier's* in 1953 as a victim of the Communist purges. The evidence against him, really, was his work for racial equality ("Editor Loses Job").

In their careers Bucklin Moon and Thomas Sancton reflected the mixture of necessity, tenuousness, and chagrin that accompanied their roles. In the field of literary and social representation, it was impossible for their black contemporaries to dismiss the importance of these men who

stood for a position far more liberal than, say, the American Committee of Cultural Freedom.[4] Moon and Sancton were unusually principled white men who sometimes had the blessing of even radical blacks, and access to two crucial posts in the media industry: a book publishing company and a highly regarded journal. Yet, their singular prominence as writers on the topic of American racial issues in the 1940s complimented the erasure of a competent and hungry black intelligentsia. Why not the astute black journalist Henry Lee Moon managing *The New Republic* instead of Sancton, and why not have extended multiple Rosenwald fellowships to the destitute Chester Himes over Sancton, who failed to publish the books he promised? What if Sterling Brown or Arthur P. Davis had become editor of a major New York publishing firm that offered a well-regarded literary prize for works in the field of race relations, instead of Bucklin Moon? What if the opinions of these two first-rate Howard University English professors and critics had been sought to develop the literary talent pool? Was it really impossible for racial integration to have taken place among the ranks of the liberal intelligentsia, especially considering the dramatic shift in U. S. public life that occurred during the World War II era, from the desegregation of war services industries to the appearance of Jackie Robinson?

Unforeseen change was to remain the nature of things anyway. *The New Republic* transformed itself into a journal of the political right; the Rosenwald Fund spent its money and effectively disappeared from public memory; Yaddo either stopped inviting or stopped being popular among black writers; and New York publishers, insofar as their attitude toward the absence of non-white writers and editorial staff, could point to the 1920s as the pivotal era for racial integration. Did Moon and Sancton's love affair with the black working class prevent them from seeing the crucial social changes that would have been advanced had they worked single-mindedly to land black elites in positions of glimmering visibility, the same writers and thinkers who had personally enabled their own understanding of the racial situation and legitimated their professional careers? Radically liberal whites were radical enough to propose that other black writers deserved attention, but their most eloquent and persuasive work in literature and public affairs had the unintended consequence of silencing black voices. In the middle 1960s when black artists again surged forward to produce alternative representations of black American life, a key difference stood out between them and their peers from the 1940s: the relative absence of liberal white spokespeople. Perhaps this dynamic explains at least Thomas Sancton's curious loss of devotion to the theme

of race in literature. Instead of contributing another novel or study of race relations from out the mind of a white man, he apparently fulfilled his own prescription from 1942: "the Negro . . . will never win any benefit he does not win by his own ability."

NOTES

1. Sterling Brown, "The Negro Author and His Publisher," *Negro Quarterly* (Spring 1942): 15. Brown noted that during the 1930s blacks were shut out from the network of connections that came naturally to novice whites working in "editorial offices, on publishers' staffs, in publicity firms, in radio, or in motion pictures."

2. Bucklin Moon, "The Race Novel," *The New Republic* 16 Dec. 1946: 829–832. Moon believed by 1946 that most of the works being published by black and white authors ignored most of black life, the tragedy and comedy of the experience in general and the middle-class and the intelligentsia specifically.

3. See Lawrence Jackson, *Ralph Ellison: Emergence of Genius* (New York: John Wiley, 2002) 343–348. He published the essay in 1953 in *Confluence* as "Twentieth Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity."

4. *We Put Freedom First* (New York: American Committee for Cultural Freedom, 1950); in Geraldine Murphy, "Baldwin and the Politics of Cold War Liberalism," *ELH* 63 (1996): 1021–1046. Believing it "madness" to jeopardize "the total enslavement of Europe because in the Southern states of American Negroes still have to travel in separate railway compartments," the famous group of *Partisan Review* writers and intellectuals subordinated the problem of desegregation to the global struggle against Stalin-led communism (1034).

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