Marlon B. Ross: ***Manning the Race: Reforming Black Men in the Jim Crow Era.*** **New York: New York UP, 2004**

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1 Despite the "mild trendiness" (398) that the topic of African American masculinity has acquired over the last decade, it remains a site in which much ground is still uncovered. Marlon B. Ross's comprehensive study *Manning the Race*, with its focus on the Jim Crow era, is an ambitious attempt to address this lack by charting in amazing detail the diverse and often competing discourses that laid out and shaped notions of a reformed African American masculinity in post-reconstruction America. Thus *Manning the Race* "explores how men of African descent were marketed, embodied, socialized, and imaged for the purpose of political, professional, and cultural advancement during the early decades of the twentieth century," and how these men "have attempted to formulate and re-form their experiences, roles, and self-concepts as men in a variety of genres, media, and social practices" (1). By pitting these discourses and practices against those of the Jim Crow regime, with its insistence on an ideal of normalized (i.e. white patriarchal) masculinity impossible for black men to live up to due to the restrictions placed on them, Ross on the one hand makes apparent how this regime was itself primarily "a sexual system of oppression" (2; Ross's emphasis). On the other hand he illustrates how black men challenged and often managed to displace the "gender and sexual norms" (3) on which this system operated in their attempts to reform the race through a reformation of black men in various (discursive) fields. As Ross not only draws on race theory and masculinity studies but ties his analysis of African American masculinity closely to the concerns of black feminist theory as well as sexuality and queer studies, he is at the same time able to show how African American men have often based their effort of manhood reform on the exclusion of or triangulation with others - American Indians, African American Women, Jews, criminal or "sexually deviant" men - and thereby adhered to and strengthened rather than subverted the sexual and gender norms of Jim Crow.

2 The focus of *Manning the Race* is on three different but interacting discourses: Part 1 of the study investigates "New Negro ideology" (18) as it was formulated by race leaders at the turn of the century in three "authoritative modes of expression: new-century race treatises and anthologies (race tracts and albums), New Negro personal narratives (autobiographical and fictional), and professional sociological studies" (16). Part 2 critically considers the field of race patronage in biracial political organizations such as the NAACP and in the cultural context of the "so-called New Negro Renaissance" (139) by examining a number of

institutional and personal patronage relationships involving both black and white, male and female, patrons and protégés. Part 3 centers on the genre of the black urban folk novel, analyzing works of male and female authors that stage the lives and development of both male and female protagonists and in doing so present reconceptualized versions of "black manhood, womanhood, and gender relations […] under the conditions of modern urbanity as a site of racial oppression" (306). The primary concern of each part is to examine in which manner these discourses attempt to construct African American masculinity against the powerful, violent and often literally life-threatening limitations of Jim Crow. Although Ross is anxious to point out the importance "of moving beyond an exclusive attention to the black body […] as the sole stigmatized object of racial and sexual subordination" (4), Manning the Race nonetheless does not leave the black body unconsidered but demonstrates convincingly how in each of the discursive fields that it investigates the notion of the trespassing body - the (black male) body in motion across color, class, and gender lines - becomes a highly important and contested site. Thus the study is not only organized around three different kinds of discourse but also

> around three kinds of racial/sexual movement: (1) the individual and collective migratory body […]; (2) the black male person in social circulation within biracial institutions and patronage networks; and (3) the "footloose" mass migrant restlessly seeking community amid the changing racial and class affiliations and sexual boundaries of the northern city. (12)

3 When Part 1 of *Manning the Race* therefore engages with the above-mentioned "three New Negro expressive modes" (17) of African American race leaders at the turn of the century, one of its primary interests is to show to what extent the respective versions of New Negro ideology hinge upon notions of and "insistence on the manly freedom of mobility" (17) and to illustrate how in all the considered genres mobility is put to different uses in order to "reconceptualize radically the worth, status, and iconography of the race" (22). It is made obvious that often the individual leader's attitude to mobility also depends on his answer to the question of "the race's sexual identification and gender-role performance" (24). On the one hand, "sexually assertive" race tracts such as Charles Chesnutt's 1900 "The Future American"-trilogy and William Pickens's *The New Negro* (1916) hail the mobility of the Great Migration as a sign of progress promising "a more sexually competitive and competent, and thus a more modern, racial identity" (26). With their reliance on "the cool cowboy pose," New Negro personal narratives such as Pickens's autobiography *Bursting Bonds* (1923), or, curiously, Ida B. Wells's autobiography *Crusade for Justice* (1970), tend to posit a strong link between mobility and "sexual independence […], rugged individualism, and compulsory masculinity"

(93). On the other hand, African American sociologists', for example W.E.B. Du Bois's, George Edmund Haynes's, or E. Franklin Frazier's, linking of mobility and mass migration with dangerous sexual deviance/license enabled them "to construct their own masculinity as normal, their sexuality as self-disciplined, and their social status as professional" through positing themselves as static and hence stable counterweights to the footloose masses (147).

4 Ross's discussion demonstrates, however, that despite their contrary evaluations of mobility and their varying attitudes to whether one should attempt to "resex" or "un-"/"desex" the race (24), nearly all the "expressive modes" treated in Part 1 - including central works of the New Negro movement from Booker T. Washington's *A New Negro for a New Century* (1900) to Alain Locke's anthology *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (1925) - "scrip[t] racial progress in masculine terms" (86) and revert to various forms of conventional (white) patriarchal "gender typing" (87). The latter is expressed, for example, in "Washington's patriarchal household, Du Bois's gentle but manly Talented Tenth patronage, Adam's chivalric sketching, and Pickens's conquering race-tribes," or in Locke's placing of the "Brown Madonna" on the frontispiece of his anthology, whose "iconoclastic break with the predominant disrespectful racial image of the black woman […] is *not* a break with the more general sexualized/spiritualized dichotomy familiar in European traditions" (87-88; Ross's emphasis).

5 While Part 2, "Negotiating Racial Uplift: Gender Rivalry and Erotic Longing in the Making of New Negro Patronage," certainly presents one of the most intriguing ideas of *Manning the Race*, namely that "patronage desire gets structured along libidinal lines as though it were a mode of sexual desire" (195), it does, unfortunately, not succeed in making its claim fully convincing. Even though the two chapters comprising Part 2 present various (readings of) instances to corroborate its central claim - Ross discusses, for example, Du Bois's relations to various NAACP patrons and protégés, NAACP co-founder Mary White Ovington's study *Half a Man* (1911) and her memoirs *Black and White Sat Down Together* (published posthumously in 1995), McKay's attacks on Locke as a black patron, Langston Hughes's relation to the white patron Charlotte Osgood Mason, or Carl Van Vechten's patronage efforts - these instances seem not enough to warrant the general nature of Ross's claim concerning the libidinal nature of patronage relations. Although Ross's arguments are often convincing, the straightforward sexual nature of the implications that he detects in the discussed relationships is not always manifest. Nevertheless, Ross's lucid discussion of tropes employed in the discourse of patronage is immensely fruitful and illustrates that, even if race patronage should not in all cases be actually structured like sexual desire, it is certainly

frequently conceptualized as such in personal and critical accounts of patronage relations to various rhetorical purposes. Thus Ross's discussion of the implications of the designation of a white woman as patron rather than matron, or of a black male patron as midwife (see esp. 225, 264-265), and particularly his detailed analysis of the "sexual logic" of the "two complementary, contrary paradigms" through which Negro Renaissance cultural patronage was rhetorically rendered, namely "prostitution (usually heterosexual and interracial) and affiliation (usually patriarchal and familial)" (255) demonstrate how such patronage was shaped as a "conflictingly gendered racial institution" that often worked to strengthen rather than undermine the white patriarchal norms on which the Jim Crow regime was built (253).

6 Part 3, "'A City Jungle This': Footloose Desire and the Sexual Underworlds of Harlem Renaissance Fiction," offers a detailed reading of the (re)constructions of black masculinity and femininity in male- and female-authored black urban folk novels published from the late 1920s to the mid-1930s. Against the backdrop of Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* (1926) as well as three of its African American precursors - James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), Jessie Fauset's *There is Confusion* (1924), and Walter White's *Flight* (1926) - Ross explores how the discussed novelists challenge and revise the "Van Vechten trend" (306) of representing black urban sexuality as sensational spectacle and thus offer reconceptualized versions of urban African American masculinity and femininity. Ross shows how novels such as Rudolph Fisher's *Walls of Jericho* and McKay's *Home to Harlem* (both 1928) "see[k] reciprocity and consolidation within the race by binding the hero to best pals who are erotically 'queer'" without, however, "making such sexual variance a spectacle to be eyed pruriently by middle-class white readers excited by Carl Vechten's depictions of black exotic erotica in *Nigger Heaven*" (308). At the same time, by pitting these two novels against narratives with female protagonists (in addition to Fauset's and White's above-mentioned ones, Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* [1928] and Wallace Thurman's *Blacker the Berry* [1929]), *Manning the Race* succeeds in illustrating not only how novels such as Fisher's and McKay's can achieve their versions of "moderated manhood" (357) only by "leav[ing] intact conventional femininity" (363), but also that the utopian notion that "alternative sexual arrangements" such as same-sex relationships "offer some relief from racial and sexual domination" should not go unquestioned (393). Thus particularly Thurman's *Blacker the Berry* points to the dangers that the enacting of same-sexuality - still generally perceived as deviant although works such as Fisher's and McKay's suggest otherwise - could pose.

7 In presenting its readers with a broad range of the multiple, often competing conceptualizations of black masculinity circulating during the Jim Crow era, *Manning the*

Race successfully challenges the notion "that we know 'the black man' in […] the facile epithets projecting clichés such as 'emasculation' and 'hypermasculinity' onto lives and histories denied the most rudimentary assumptions of human conflictedness, intricacy, and richness" (398). Ross's analyses offer abundant proof that the concept of black masculinity - even within the limits of a single historical period such as Jim Crow - cannot be reduced to such grand narratives. The particular strength of *Manning the Race* thus stems from Ross's ability to cover a vast amount of ground by presenting an immensely broad range of various concepts and discourses, while at the same time discussing each of the sites opened up in astonishing detail. If there is one drawback to Ross's work, it consists in this close attention to detail which sometimes, as for example in Part 2, causes the reader to get lost momentarily in the intricacies of the argument. Generally, however, *Manning the Race* is strongly coherent - an effect it particularly achieves through the central concept of mobility, which recurs throughout all parts, and the fact that the study often allows us to trace one and the same author's efforts of reconceptualizing and reforming black masculinity through various genres and discourses. Thus, Ross's *Manning the Race* is highly recommended to anyone interested in the history of African American masculinity and, together with bell hooks's *We Real Cool* (2004), certainly ranges among the most important recent publications in the field.