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Norman Mailer: “The White Negro.” Cultural
and Literary Context

SUMMARY

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Summary:

As suggested in the title, the present study builds around “The White Negro,” the essay that Norman Mailer published for the first time in the fall number of the leftist magazine *Dissent*. *Dissent* is one of the many periodicals established in the postwar period by the so-called “New York intellectuals,” a group also known as “the *Partisan Review* crowd,” after the name of the prestigious publication which William Phillips and Philip Rahv founded in 1934 as an alternative to *The New Masses*, the foremost publication of the American Communist Party.

In 1959 the essay is recovered by its progenitor and integrated, along with other publications, fictional and non-fictional alike, in the omnibus collection *Advertisements for Myself*. Last but not least, in 1984, “The White Negro” is included by the editors Judith Clavir Albert and Stewart Edward Albert within the weighty anthology *The Sixties Papers: Documents of a Rebellious Decade*. Featuring “The White Negro” among other iconic texts of the period, the volume represents both an acknowledgement and a confirmation of the status of “The White Negro” as a cult-text of the Sixties counterculture. Although “The White Negro” is less known to the Romanian public, at least by comparison to other texts signed by Norman Mailer, especially the author’s novels which benefited from translations into Romanian, the essay remains, perhaps, one of the most controversial texts of American literature published in the second half of the twentieth century.

From the very first moment it was into print, the short essay, counting no longer than 9,500 words, managed to ignite the critical imagination of the intellectuals of the era, who with the passing of time and multiplication of academic disciplines were superseded by new cohorts of critics, so that today we have a generous exegesis, so abundant and yet so... unpersuasive. It is within this ellipsis that the present paper finds its legitimacy. For despite the diversity of the readings inflicted upon “The White Negro,” despite the multiple perspectives opened upon the essay, my contention is that we lack a consistent interpretation of the essay. This observation should not, however, be understood as a requirement for a consistency of the text with a certain meaning, but with itself as textual materiality,

historically and culturally inscribed. The contribution of the present paper to the exegesis of Norman Mailer thus consists in the adoption of a historical perspective upon “The White Negro.” Consequently, the first two chapters of the study aim at recreating the cultural, social, and political scenery that characterized the United States in the postwar period. At the same time, they provide a theoretical framework for discussing the essentially heterogeneous and pluralistic phenomenon, which is known to us as the American counterculture.

As concerns the periodization model herein adopted, the present approach places itself in the continuity of other studies of reference such as Doug McAdam’s *Freedom Summer* (1988), James J. Farrell’s *The Spirit of the Sixties: Making Postwar Radicalism* (1997), or *The Sixties: From Memory to History* (1994), an insightful monograph collection edited by David Farber. Delineating itself from the more general tendency of associating the beginning of “the Sixties” with such events as the founding of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in 1962 or the spontaneous emergence of the Free Speech Movement on the Berkeley campus in 1964, the present study shares with the above-mentioned studies a deep commitment to the belief that the countercultural phenomenon as well as the social and cultural transformations of the Sixties, which coincided with the emergence of American postmodernism, can only be understood in the larger context of American postwar history

The paper resists the temptation of subsuming “The White Negro” to the culture of the Cold War, and it does so for two reasons. First, because it refuses the reductionist impulse of screening the culture of an entire decade through a single lens: in this particular case the strange belligerence known as the Cold War. Secondly, because as far as this study is concerned the historical and cultural inscription of “The White Negro” regards not so much a period as a juncture of passage: the transition from the cultural conservatism of the Fifties to the cultural radicalism of the Sixties, from the antitotalitarian rhetoric of old radicals to the rhetoric of “liberation” promoted by the radicals of the counterculture, finally the transition from the political abstractions of the Old Left to the anti-disciplinary politics of the New Left. A great emphasis is placed on identifying those discursive strategies through which “The White Negro” fully participates in this transition, one which, accepting the risk of that reductionism which is inherent of any generalization, can be described in terms of a transition from the generative culture of the Cold War toward the “Sixties Culture of Rejuvenation” as Peter Braunstein suggests in his essay titled “Forever Young: Insurgent Youth and the Sixties Culture of Rejuvenation” (2002).

Presented here are several of the arguments which provide support to my belief that locating “The White Negro” within its historical context is not so much an option as a

necessity. From this point of view, at least, the present study subscribes to the core notion of the New Historicism and acknowledges the text as a product of the era in which it was produced. This is not to say that “The White Negro” should be read as an expression of some “spirit” of the era. It is no more than a claim for acknowledging the text in its own historical and cultural materiality, as a product shaped by multiple and ever so diverse forces. This way of phrasing the problem already indicates two major tendencies inherent to the approach that the study proposes. The first one was previously mentioned and it essentially consists of privileging a historical perspective, while the second tendency consists in reorienting the attention from the author towards the text as a determined act of enunciation. To the extent that it remains faithful to these two tendencies, the present approach delineates itself from both the method of *close reading* championed by the New Critics and the inevitably simplifying reading strategies that characterize monographic approaches to Mailer’s *oeuvre*, in which the programmatically-assumed connection between the “author” and his “work” gives way to an unquestioned yet questionable unity between biography and bibliography.

The particular case which Norman Mailer seems to constitute, or, rather, the particular case in which Norman Mailer seems to have been constituted by way of the critics’ restless appeal to the notoriety which surrounds the extremely colorful and public [sic!] personality of the author has encouraged critical approaches that remain tributary to the category of the “man-and-his-work.” Thus, up until the 1980s the exegesis abounds in titles representative of the genre, such as *The Structured Vision of Norman Mailer* (Barry H. Leeds, 1969), the collective volumes *Norman Mailer: the Man and His Work* (Robert F. Lucid, 1971) or *Will the Real Norman Mailer Please Stand Up* (Laura Adams, 1974), the monographs *Norman Mailer: A Critical Study* (Jean Radford, 1975), *Mailer and the Times of His Time* (Jonathan Middlebrook, 1976) or simply *Norman Mailer*, published by Richard Poirier in 1972 after Richard Foster Jackson had already published an eponymous micro-study in 1968. In all cited instances the *name* of the author shadows the critical forays into the author’s *oeuvre*. To these we can add even more recent studies such as Joseph Wenke’s *Mailer’s America* (1987) or, to a certain extent, Andrew Wilson’s *Norman Mailer: An American Aesthetic* (2008). In all selected instances, with no notable exceptions, Mailer’s essay is either read and interpreted as an expression of the author’s personality or reduced to the poetic function which it holds within the broader context constituted by the author’s *oeuvre*.

Born out of the dissatisfaction with the current situation of “The White Negro,” the present study was equally conceived as a restitutive critical gesture, restitutive not to the author or to a particular meaning, but to the essay itself as textual materiality, as a statement

(*énoncé*) generated within a particular historical and cultural context. The historicizing approach to “The White Negro” which the present study proposes is vastly indebted to Michel Foucault and his *archeology* as a method of historical investigation. As well as relocating the essay within its historical moment, the study aims at exposing the limits of the reading practices to which “The White Negro” has lent itself over the years or, by contrast, their absence. Central to this strategy is the intention to dislocate the existing critical discourse upon “The White Negro.”

The third chapter of the study argues that along with the enduring process through which “The White Negro” was transformed into an object of scientific research and hermeneutic knowledge another process took shape: the (re)construction of the essay itself within the very critical discourse which mediates our access to the meaning of “The White Negro.” From this particular standpoint, the present undertaking can be seen as an attempt to draw a framework for a political (re)reading of “The White Negro.” The study focuses on the way in which Mailer’s essay engaged in a larger cultural dialogue. The approach I propose in this chapter is thus designed as to inquire into the hypothesis that “The White Negro,” at least as regards the central aspect – the (re)conceptualization of the hipster as “white Negro,” – can be seen as an act of re-reading and, just as plausibly, an act of rewriting of previous texts, yet a rewriting seen in terms of intertextuality. The process by which Norman Mailer proceeds to the deconstruction and reconstruction of the hipster as “white Negro” relies on the constant delineation of his own theoretical construct, not only from what I herein dubbed the “historical” or “encyclopedic” hipster, but from other textual representations of the hipster. In other words, a historicizing approach to “The White Negro” prompts the disambiguation of the concept of the “hipster” as it is refashioned by Mailer.

It is arguable that we are witness in “The White Negro” to a parodic practice strategically achieved through a postmodern (dis)play of identity and difference. Yet with a difference, as parody becomes a critical strategy which allows the author to reflect ironically upon the present at the same time that is historicizes it. Re-reading “The White Negro,” one cannot ignore the historical effect achieved through the position adopted in relation to the phenomenon it purports to describe: the emergence of the hipster as “American existentialist” from the contractions of twentieth-century history. Moreover, the study argues that the phrase the “white Negro” is stripped of all cultural and historical accretions in order to be refashioned into a radical identity at a time when one major preoccupation of the intellectuals on the Left regarded the absence of a viable opposition, an absence which some cultural observers directly connected to the disintegration of the artistic avant-garde. The present

study argues that it is precisely the manner in which Mailer “uses” and “abuses” of certain racial myths and stereotypes demands careful reconsideration.

In this respect, the study sets forth the argument that a considerable amount of revisionist readings of “The White Negro” can be rightfully incorporated into the paradoxical category of *limiting-overinterpretations*. In conceiving this oxymoronic label, the study obviously draws on Umberto Eco’s critical reflections on interpretation and overinterpretation. Indeed, we are indebted to Eco for having sensed that the notions of “excess” and “limit” are not mutually exclusive as far as interpretive practice is concerned. We argue that an interpretive excess may well rest upon an inherently limited perspective, regardless of the source of this limitation. This argument springs from the observation of a susceptibility to a particular type of reading, a susceptibility which seems to occur more frequently in criticism from within departments of Gender Studies and African American or Black Studies.

My contention is that we are witness in these particular cases to interpretive strategies that are at the same time excessive, given the distance that separates the critic from the actual text, and reductionist, as the text is read from a very specific standpoint. The study thus aims at challenging a type of reductionist reading practice that seems to be a direct product of the intention of the reader, that *intentio lectoris*, which instead of engaging in a dialectical relationship with the intention of the text (*intentio operis*) dissociates itself from it, or replaces it altogether. The exegesis of Mailer’s “The White Negro” seems to reflect, in an exaggerated manner, the shift in literary criticism since the 1960s from author centered accounts to “reader-response” criticism. This shift becomes problematic once we see it transposed into a interpretive practice which eludes all rules which could impose the necessary limits to the hermeneutic game played out between text and reader. As the study demonstrates, a close examination of the “enduring reception” of Mailer’s 1957 essay exposes the extraordinary process of hermeneutic inversion, through which, from discovering the author (and his intentions) in the *work*, literary criticism has shifted to the narcissistic mirroring of the reader (and his premises) in the text. In retrospect, the destiny of “The White Negro” seems to be played out between these extremes.

The fourth chapter of the study – whose title, “Norman Mailer: “The White Negro,” is intended to prefigure the bio-bibliographical approach characteristic of the monographs of Norman Mailer – opens a different perspective upon the essay by relocating it within the debate on mass culture which dominated the intellectual climate in the Fifties. However, the first critical readings of “The White Negro” serve as a pretext for “A Kind of Biography.”

Although “The White Negro” is the main character of this study, Norman Mailer’s reputation of “Hip” or “Pop” intellectual, a reputation stemming from his commitment to the margins, did not sever his social and cultural criticism from the grand debates which engaged the New York intellectuals in the postwar years. It is precisely to this *insider-outsider* position that “The White Negro” owes its daunting character. A careful and contextual re-reading of “The White Negro” reveals a text which, in the most popular language, participated in the “highbrow” debates of his time.

The question of whether the New York intellectuals actually emerged as a hegemonic group in postwar American society, as Andrew Ross suggests in his study *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (1989), is less important. However, the role of cultural attorneys that leading figures of the radical intelligentsia assumed in the postwar period cannot be ignored. While representatives of the nation and McCarthy-organizations practiced the policy of containment hunting for “subversives” in government and in the social body, the radical intelligentsia conducted its own crusade against the “subversive elements” of popular culture, whose forms and styles threatened to colonize the forms and styles of “high culture” and thus corrupt the national culture. The section titled “The White Negro”: Beat, Pop and “Post-” exposes how the debate on mass culture – the new intellectual vogue culminating in 1957 with the publication of *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America*, an immense monograph edited by Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning – as well as the critique of “Pop hedonism” elaborated by Daniel Bell in his *Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976) reflect, in various degrees and with the necessary accentuations, the tensions and reluctance which accompanied the transition from modernism to postmodernism and, more precisely, from the formal purist aesthetic of modernism to the formal hybridity and stylistic mosaics characteristic of postmodernism. In this respect, the study examines how Norman Mailer’s “The White Negro” lends itself to the discourse of hybridity, which characterized the debate on mass culture. Although it does not exhaust its meaning when placed within the discourse of mass culture, “The White Negro” can nonetheless be seen as one rather ironic participant to it. Embedded in a narrative of cultural miscegenation, the hybridity of Hip – the phenomenon which Mailer explores and elaborates in “The White Negro” – no longer constitutes a source of intellectual anxiety. Instead, it becomes a source of potentiality, a generating source of new forms, forms capable of undermining the stability of the system. The present study argues that the distinction between “Hip” and “hipster,” a distinction which is seldom acknowledged by critics, is, if not essential, at least important. While the hipster as “white Negro” enshrines a

new anthropology, “Hip,” just as “Beat,” “Pop,” and “Post-” translates a new cultural sensibility.

The fifth chapter advances from the premise that at the same time that this new sensibility is articulated in “The White Negro,” the essay articulates itself against the cultural conservatism and coercive “normality” of American postwar society. Once it locates “The White Negro” within this context, the chapter looks into at Mailer’s essay as an active participant in the war on censorship as anxiety about assaults on the First Amendment was growing among radical intellectuals of the Fifties. Despite the liberalizing trends in American postwar society, the need for censorship found its ideological support in the Anticommunist hysteria fueled by McCarthy’s “witch hunts.” In this respect, the study draws attention to the fact that shortly after “The White Negro” first appeared in the fall number of *Dissent*, an independent edition of the essay was published by City Lights Books, the now famous publishing house which following the *Howl* obscenity trial had managed to establish the Beats as a landmark not only on the legal map of the state of California, but also in American popular consciousness. Although “The White Negro” entailed no legal consequences, the essay managed to create a huge stir among the *Dissenters*, while African American intellectuals lamented over what they perceived as a stereotypical display of black sexuality. Yet, the present study argues that Mailer’s choice to redefine the hipster as “white Negro” can be seen as an attempt to expose the biological underpinnings of Southern racial segregation, including the sexual segregation maintained at both social and cultural level by the censors of the Establishment.

The contribution of the German émigrés of the Frankfurt School to the reconceptualization of American society as “mass society” or to the postwar discussions of totalitarianism cannot be overestimated. In the case of C. Wright Mills, these particular concerns culminated in the intellectual trilogy consisting of *The New Men of Power* (1948), *White Collar* (1951) and *The Power Elite* (1956). The present study advances from the argument that the critique of mass society that became such a prevalent strand of intellectual discourse in the 1950s entailed, more than a biting critique of conformity, the renegotiation of power relations between the centre and the margins. The study thus analyzes how Norman Mailer, arguably closer to the new cultural ethos emerging in Greenwich Village than to that of Manhattan, put forth in “The White Negro” his own contribution to the power struggle played out between the radical intelligentsia and the centralized State, confronting the lethargy and cultural conformism of American postwar “Square” society with a new existential formula embedded in the concept of “Hip.” A challenging critique of the Centre

and of all forms of centrism – political (liberal), social (*middleclass/ square*), or intellectual (consensual) – is articulated in “The White Negro” in proportion as the essay becomes a prescription for a marginal opposition and as the hipster, resemantized as “American existentialist” is (re)fashioned into a radical identity, capable of opposing the totalitarian forces working in American society. In this respect, the study examines Mailer’s “white Negro” within in a broader cultural dialogue and exposes it as a prospect for a creative, non-repressive culture. As argued in the penultimate chapter titled “The White Negro”: Intellectuals and Power,” once re-read in the context of Mailer’s *Advertisements for Myself*, it becomes evident that “The White Negro” is intended less as a racial thesis and more as a *cri de coeur* against the haunting decade of the 1950s, a cry comparable to Allen Ginsberg’s dithyrambic *Howl* against the materialism, militarism and deadening conformity of American culture under the rule of corporate capitalism.

The challenges to postwar “normality” become all the more evident once the psychopathic element is built into Hip identity. The reconceptualization of the hipster as “psychopath” in “The White Negro” draws on the distinction between the *psychotic* and the *psychopath*, which Robert Lindner elaborated in his famous *Rebel Without a Cause: The Hypnoanalysis of a Criminal Psychopath* (1944). Named explicitly in “The White Negro,” Lindner was just one advocate of “healthy” nonconformism in postwar years. Traditional psychoanalytical theory, or orthodox freudianism, gradually gave way to a humanist psychology emerging from the contributions of the major figures in the development of “third force psychology” – Gordon Allport, Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, Rollo May and James Bugental, – as well as from contributions of such social critics like Erich Fromm or Paul Goodman. All these critics shared a strong belief in the socially useful function of rebellion, nonconformity and dissidence. In this respect, the study examines how by depicting the hipster as “psychic outlaw” Mailer’s essay, along with iconic texts of the Beat generation, participated in the discourse of *deviance* or *ex-centricity* promoted by the countercultural intellectuals of the era.

Under the title “Rethinking “The White Negro,” the concluding chapter of the present study aims at an inventory of the flamboyant re-readings which Mailer’s essay managed to provoke especially among critics working in the areas of feminist, African American, and Jewish studies. Considered together, these re-readings constitute what I herein called the second critical discourse on “The White Negro,” a discourse that has managed to solidify the content and meaning of Mailer’s essay into the dead-end zone of the “transgressive,” the “racist,” and the “sexist.” Whether Mailer’s writing fits or not into the problematic, if not

undefinable, category of American Jewish literature was not an objective of the present study. However, the status of “outsider” which Mailer assumed in relation to the New York (Jewish) intellectuals divides critical opinions, so that he is seen either as one of the great Jewish writers of his generation, along with Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud and Philip Roth, or as the least Jewish writer of the American Jewish writers. The present study contends that there is at least one important aspect which deserves consideration as far as ethnicized readings of “The White Negro” go: the paradoxical image of the “white Negro” which Mailer places at the heart of his essay is no longer viewed through the lens of political correctness, but seen, instead, as an attempt to remasculinize the male Jewish body, as a strategy aimed at dislodging the long history of associations between the feminine, impotent and weak body of the Holocaust with the Jew.

Even at a superficial examination, it becomes clear that “The White Negro” tends today to be ritually invoked as a textbook example of interracial identification, as just another case of racial fetishism or negrophilia. The main discomfort of the critics is triggered by the aesthetic idealization and erotic investment of the African American body. It is the very same discomfort which James Baldwin had formulated in “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy,” his 1961 counter-rebuttal to Mailer’s essay. By contrast, the final chapter of the study argues that the oversexualization of the African American body in “The White Negro” is not intended to perpetuate racial stereotypes, but to challenge them through their own mechanisms. A historicizing approach to Mailer’s essay provides arguments in support of the notion that we are witness in “The White Negro” to a parodic treatment of racial myths and stereotypes. In its anatomical nonconformity, the hipster as “white Negro” embodies the total refusal of identification. Mailer’s hipster as “white Negro” is not so much a representative of a minority group as a marginal. Neither-white-nor-black, the hipster as “white Negro” presents an identity impossible to represent through any conventional social and racial categories. To the extent that it views the “white Negro” as an act of parodic appropriation of race, the final chapter argues that Mailer’s concept of the hipster represents a destruction of the binary of black and white. Moreover, the very metaphor of the “white Negro” is purged of any historical accretions. As we see it refashioned in Mailer’s essay, the “white Negro” metaphor loses both its original significance – that of name given to Leopard Children, namely African children suffering from albinism and whose skin depigmentation was linked to biological degeneration caused by interracial unions – as well as the “Uncle Tom” significance it had in the 1950s.

The study reaches the conclusion that the duplicity of Mailer's essay – a text more ironical and more carefully constructed than it would first appear, – is one of the aspects which made "The White Negro" so vulnerable and so attractive to the critics of political correctness. However, as the present study argues, in the dynamics of political correctness important lessons were forgotten; lessons like that of making the necessary distinction between the author and the subject of enunciation, that of reading before labeling, and, most important, that cultural constructs such as race and gender can only be challenged within the disciplinary systems of the culture in which they are produced and normalized. Finally, a major contribution of the present study consists in that it tries, if not to withdraw "The White Negro" from its current state of "normality," then at least to provoke it by relocating and re-reading the essay in its larger social, cultural and historical context of production.