

# Black Americans' Rejection of the Bleaching Process for their Integration in the United States: An Exploration of George Schuyler's *Black No More*

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**Abstract:** A reading of George Schuyler's *Black No More* makes the reader understand that black characters do not have a total satisfaction with regard to their integration in American society through the bleaching process, for they find themselves disillusioned after their bleaching considered as a waste of time because of the value they now give to their blackness. The fact of seeing their black babies mothered by pure-white American women being burned daily for the simple reason that they are black and that their fathers are black, too, urges some of them to keep the color of their skin rather than having it whitened vainly. They realize that the bleaching of their dark skin does not have any impact on their blood which ends up betraying their racial belonging. This consciousness finally leads them to reject Doctor Crookman's bleaching treatment. Such is the case of a black male character named Mr. Walter Williams who claims openly that he is very proud of his being black on the American soil.

**Keywords:** American society, Black characters, bleaching process, Consciousness, Rejection.

## Introduction

This article deals with black American characters' refusal of the bleaching process for their integration in American society in George Schuyler's *Black No More*. Having no satisfaction by trying to bleach themselves as required by their white counterparts who consider them as foreigners in this society because of their blackness, they finally decide to give up the bleaching process and fight for their full integration with their black skin color. Published in the United States of America by the Macaulay company in 1931, Schuyler's narrative is about a young black man named Max Disher who is rejected by a racist white girl named Helen Givens. When dancing herself in the Honk Tonk Club, she refuses to dance with Max for the simple reason that he is black. This refusal urges him to consult Doctor Crookman, the inventor of "Black-off machine" and the man in charge of bleaching Blacks, to have his black skin whitened, as a way to integrate the American society with a new physical appearance.

My choice of *Black No More* for this paper is linked to Blacks' experience of racism which urges them to bleach their dark skin in order to be seen as full American citizens in the United States. The novel is based on the author's memory of Blacks' discrimination and struggle for social integration that leads many critics to find their interest in scrutinizing it. Bonnet Carson, for example, considers it as "*a novel which denounces the white American authorities' racist system against their own citizens in a so-called democratic nation*"<sup>1</sup>. In almost the same way, Anderson Marley argues that "*the fight for social integration through the bleaching process in Black No More attests not only of the white Americans' hatred for their black counterparts, but more of the latter's inferiority before all Whites in the United States*"<sup>2</sup>. As it can be seen, these quotations evidence the presence of racial conflicts in Georges Schuyler's novel. These conflicts are encouraged by white Americans who are strongly opposed to their black counterparts' conception of racial mixing in all the spheres of the United States.

My main interest in exploring *Black No More* is linked to Schuyler's reference to black characters' experience of racism on the American soil that urges me to concentrate on the answer to the following question: What makes Blacks reject the bleaching process in Georges Schuyler's *Black No More*? I hypothesize that their victimization after being bleached by Doctor Crookman pushes many of them to fight for their social integration with their black skin color. Being concerned with a literary text that shows the relationship between Whites and Blacks in the United States, I find it necessary to resort to the sociological approach to conduct the above hypothesis. For,

according to Herder, quoted by Scott Wilbur, “*literature is the consequence of the moment, the race, and the milieu*” (Wilbur: 1962, 69). Similarly, Toni Morrison argues: “*If anything I do, in the way of writing novels or whatever I write is not about the village or the community or about you (the African Americans) then it is not about anything*” (Morrison : 1984, 339). This means that the sociological approach enables me to demonstrate how Georges Schuyler recreates his community within his work of fiction.

Two main points are examined in this paper. The first is black characters’ non-acceptance of the “Black-No-More treatment” for the preservation of their racial integrity which is about to vanish because of their massive movement to the white society after having their skin whitened. The second refers to their fight against Dr. Crookman’s bleaching activities.

### 1. Black characters’ non-acceptance of the “Black-No-More treatment”

A reading of *Black No More* makes the reader understand that black characters do not have a total satisfaction with regard to their integration in American society. They find themselves disillusioned after their bleaching process which is considered as a waste of time. The fact of seeing their babies tortured daily by Whites because of their blackness urges many black characters to keep their original color of the skin. They now realize that the bleaching of their dark skin does not have any impact on their blood which ends up betraying their racial belonging. This consciousness is certainly what urges a black character named Mr. Walter Williams to reject the “Black-No-More treatment”. He attracts the attention of his black sisters and brothers when he voices it out that he is very proud of his being black on the American soil:

I am very proud to be a Negro and always have been (his great-grandfather, it seemed, had been a mulatto), and I’m willing to sacrifice for the uplift of my race. I cannot understand what has come over our people that they have so quickly forgotten the ancient glories of Ethiopia. Songhay and Dahomey, and their marvelous record of achievement since emancipation (BNM, pp. 68-69).

As it can be seen, this black male character’s utterance “I am very proud to be a Negro” attests of the value he gives to his race, for it shows that he is not ready to bleach his dark skin to integrate the American society. By so saying, he encourages all his black fellows to object the idea of bleaching so as to keep their blackness which he sees as a heritage left by their ancestors. He invites them to understand that if they fore parents were born black, grew up black, died black in American society, they should not be excluded to this divine fate. When he, for example, argues that “I’m willing to sacrifice for the uplift of my race”, he demonstrates not only his will, but also that of all his black fellows who are determined to die for the defense of their race which is likely to collapse. This determination is reinforced by the consideration they all give to the color of their skin which goes with their fate on earth. His reference to “emancipation”, for instance, is a way to remind his black fellows that they do not need to have their skin bleached so as to integrate the American society, because President Abraham Lincoln who emancipated them in 1865 did not oblige them to do so. What they really want to have is not whiteness but freedom and power denied to them for years because of their blackness, as stated by the historian Draper in these terms: “*We want freedom; we want power to determine the destiny of our black community*” Draper: 1970, 100).

The author’s efforts to account for black characters’ non-acceptance of the “Black-No-More treatment” are excessive that he continues to show how black business men are reluctant to have this imposed treatment. They find it useless to turn their dark skin into white, because they already live a better life as famous citizens thanks to their financial activities in the black community. They are afraid of the treatment they may endure in the white community if only they migrate there with their whiteness which is the result of the “Black-No-More treatment”. What they raise here is the question of the value of their race and that of their financial interests which finally lead them to reject the bleaching process, as evidenced in this passage:

Like all American Negroes she had desired to be white when she was young and before she entered business for herself and became a person of consequence in the community. Now she had lived long enough to have no illusions about the magic of a white skin. She liked her business and she liked her social position in Harlem (BNM, p. 39).

One understands that some black characters' acceptance to have their skin whitened does not mean that they dislike their blackness. It only means that they do so to integrate the American society with a skin color accepted by the white man so as to enjoy the full fruition of the American democracy. For, one sees how this black business woman refuses to have her skin whitened, because she already has a good social position in Harlem, the black community. This refusal although linked to her social position shows, to some extent, how she is proud of her being black in a country where whiteness is viewed as a symbol of consideration and acceptance. This means that if only all black Americans were rich or well-treated in the South of the United States, they would not accept to have their skin whitened in order to move to the white community viewed as a paradise.

The novel also reads that black characters' non-acceptance of the "Black-No-More treatment" is reinforced by the fear they have to lose their jobs in Harlem where some of them already have their famousness. They are aware of the fact that if only they dare accept the idea of having their skin transformed into white and leave Harlem for the white community, they will run the risk to lose the properties that they already have in their community. This awareness urges a black female character named Madame Blandish to keep her blackness, as a way not only to show her attachment to the black race, but more to avoid the risk of losing her famousness as a great business woman in Harlem:

As a white woman she would have to start all over again, and she wasn't so sure of herself. Here at least she was somebody. In the great Caucasian world, she would be just another white woman, and they were becoming a drug on the market, what with the simultaneous decline of chivalry, the marriage rate and professional prostitution (BNM, p. 39).

The sentences "she would have to start all over again" and "she wasn't so sure of herself" evidence the black female character's reluctance to have her skin bleached. What she fears here is how to start a new life in the white community and live comfortably with a good social position if only she accepts to have her skin bleached. Seeing the way white American women are prostituting in the streets of the white society because of the lack of jobs, she finds it better to stay in her community with her black skin color. This means that one of the main reasons which makes her refuse to have her skin bleached is the fear she has to become a prostitute like some of her white counterparts.

It is also noticed that after having their dark skin turned into white, many whitened Americans become homeless for the simple reason that they no longer have an exact society in the United States. Many of them find themselves rejected in the white and black societies because of their status of bleached individuals. This rejection reinforces the reluctance of many black characters to such an extent that they decide to keep their blackness and continue to live in their society where they already have their habitations. Schuyler illustrates this sorrowful experience of bleached characters through Max Disher, a whitened American called Matthew Fisher who is no longer needed by his black fellows because of his bleaching. As a result, he decides to move to the white society to enjoy life with people of the same color as him:

But no one down there wanted him around. He was a white man and thus suspect. Only the black women who ran the "Call Houses" on the hill wanted his company. There was nothing left for him except the hard, materialistic, grasping, inbred society of the whites. Sometimes a slight feeling of regret that he had left his people cross his mind (BNM, p. 42).

As it can be noticed, the rejection experienced by Max Disher in the black community urges him to leave Harlem for the white society where he expects to live a better life with Whites. But being used to living with Blacks, he sometimes finds his bleaching as a drawback to his life. When the narrator, for example, argues that "no one there wanted him around", he shows how whitened Americans find themselves deprived of society. Seeing the situation in which Max Disher is, many Blacks find it better to grow up and die black in their community rather than having their skin whitened and feel rejected afterwards.

Another reason for which some black characters do not accept the Black-No-More treatment is linked to the difficulties encountered by whitened Americans in the white society. In fact, after noticing that Max Disher has serious problems to find money or have a job because no job application is validated for those who are strangers in this society, many black characters finally decide to reject the idea of bleaching. This sad experience of life even pushes the bleached male character to realize that being white physically is not a byword for living a better life on

the American soil:

For a week, now, he had been thinking seriously of going to work. His thousand dollars had dwindled to less than a hundred. He would have to find some source of income and yet the young white men with whom he talked about work all complained that it was very scarce. Being white, he finally concluded, was no Open Sesame to employment for he sought work in banks and insurance offices without success (BNM, p. 42).

As it can be noticed, the sentence “being white, he finally concluded, was no Open Sesame to employment” demonstrates whitened Americans’ disillusionment after having their skin bleached for integration in American society. This disillusionment which pushes a black male character in John Oliver Killens’s *And Then We Heard the Thunder* to consider the United States as “*the United snakes of America*” (Killens: 1963, 87), is therefore what reinforces some black Americans’ non-acceptance of the “Black-No-More treatment”. It is exactly with regard to this disillusionment that they later on decide to fight alongside with some white peers to stop “Black-No-More activities”.

## 2. Black characters’ fight against Dr. Crookman’s bleaching activities

Being disillusioned after the bleaching of their dark skin for their full integration in the white man’s world, black American characters decide then to fight against all “Black-No-More activities” in all the spheres of the United States in order to preserve the integrity of their race which is about to collapse. This decision urges many black politicians alongside with their black sisters and brothers to challenge Dr. Crookman who is in charge of bleaching people in his various sanitariums. The author’s account for this challenge is evident in the novel when he shows how these black politicians call all Blacks to join them in the fight against Blacks’ movements to the white society with their new physical appearance. They persuade them to do so by asking them to be proud of their blackness viewed as a gift given to them by God, the Almighty:

The Negro politicians in the various Black Belts, grown fat and sleek “protecting” vice with the aid of Negro votes which they were able to control by virtue of housing segregation, lectured in vain about black solidarity, race pride and political emancipation; but nothing stopped the exodus to the white race (BNM, p. 62).

This passage evidences black Americans’ fight for the preservation of the integrity of their race which is likely to disappear. The expression “black solidarity” is indicative here, for it shows how black American leaders call all black Americans to stand together in their fight for the purity of the black race and the integrity of the black society. When the narrator, for instance, says that “race pride” he shows the degree of black Americans’ proudness for their racial belonging in a country which, they think, is also theirs, but ends up rejecting them for the simple reason that they are black. This blackness, however, no longer prevents them from fighting against their massive movement to the white society in spite of the fact that some of them still migrate there, as the narrator voices it out: “Nothing stopped the exodus to the white race”. The continuation of their exodus to the white race here is justified by the fact that there are some Blacks who continue to have their skin bleached by Dr. Crookman for their integration in American society. This means that some Blacks still consider the bleaching treatment as “*an emergency exit to claim their American citizenship*” (N’zambi-Mikoulou: 2020, 55).

Schuyler’s endeavors to account for the Blacks’ fight against Black-No-More activities become very evident in the passage wherein he shows how a conference of all the outstanding black leaders of the United States is organized on December 1, 1933 at the League’s Headquarters in order to adopt the common strategies of fighting for the integrity of their society and the purity of their race:

Single-handed they felt incapable of organizing an effective opposition to Black-No-More, Incorporated, so they had called a conference of all the outstanding Negro leaders of the country to assemble at the league’s headquarters on December 1, 1933. Getting the Negro leaders together... (BNM, pp. 64-65).

In this passage, one understands that the author deals with black American leaders’ fight against the disappearance of their race and society, for he tells of these leaders who, after being challenged by Dr. Crookman, end up

organizing a conference in order to see how they can easily put an end to the activities of this black Doctor who refuses to hear them because of his financial interests. This conference is a way to get all black leaders together regardless of their differences within the society. What counts for them now is to save the place and value of their race which is a heritage left by their ancestors. They find it as a must to be united and share the same main idea and strategy in order to reach their common objective which is the preservation of the black race in all the spheres of the United States:

As you know, the Negro race is face to face with a grave crisis. I-ah presume it is er-ah unnecessary for me to go into any details concerning the-ah activities of Black-No-More, Incorporated. Suffice er-ah umph! Ummmmh! To say-ah that it has thrown our society into rather-a-ah bally turmoil. Our people are forgetting shamelessly their-ah duty to the-ah organizations that have fought valiantly for them these-ah many years and are now busily engaged chasing a bally-ah will-o-the-wisp (BNM, pp. 67-68).

One understands that while some Blacks consider Dr. Crookman as a Moses, because he enables them to go to the white society after their bleaching, others, however, find him as a troublesome person who brings about the disappearance of the black race in the white man's world. This second view that they have for this black Doctor is exactly what urges them to challenge him in diverse ways. They are not maybe against him, but against his bleaching activities which do not give credit to their race and society. Such a lack of credit is what the narrator qualifies as "grave crisis" within the black community. When he, for example, argues that "it has thrown our society into rather-a-ah bally turmoil", he means that Dr. Crookman's Black-No-More treatment is the main cause of the disappearance of the black skin color on the American soil. Consequently, they decide to oppose to all his activities in order to restore the presence of their race and find back their organizations which are collapsing, as the narrator puts it in these terms:

You-ah probably all fully realize that-ah a continuation of the aforementioned activities will prove disastrous to our-ah organizations. You-ah, like us, must feel-uh that something drastic must be done to preserve the integrity of Negro society. Think, gentlemen, what the future will mean to-uh all those who-uh have toiled so hard for Negro society (BNM, p. 68).

In this passage, the author's efforts to account for Blacks' fight against Dr. Crookman's bleaching activities are obvious, for he shows how Dr. Jackson extolls young Blacks to partake in the fight so as to preserve the future of their race and community which may disappear if only they continue to accept the "Black-No-More treatment". What he really means here is that all black Americans stop going to Dr. Crookman's sanitariums to have their skin bleached. He invites them to understand that since they were born black, they should grow up and die black as did their ancestors. The bleaching of their dark skin is, for him, an abomination to their customs and beliefs. When he, for instance, argues that "what the future will mean", he means that if Dr. Crookman's "Black-No-More activities" continue to progress, the black society will no longer exist and their fore parents' efforts to build the United States will be in vain. This means that what urges Dr. Jackson to advise his black peers to participate in the fight is the fear he has to see the black society and its inhabitants disappear in the United States one day.

What also makes Dr. Jackson and other black politicians convince their black fellows to forget about the practice of bleaching is the collapse of their associations. In fact, the novel reads that after having their skin bleached, whitened Americans no longer find themselves interested in these associations, because with their new physical appearance, they no more need these associations to defend their rights as human beings in the white man's world. Schuyler demonstrates this collapse of Blacks' associations through the National Social Equality League (N.S.E.L.) which sees its revenues decrease after losing all its faithful members who, after bleaching their dark skin, join the white society immediately. This association also finds out that some whitened Americans who remain in the black society refuse to pay their fees of participation as full members because of their new complexion which, they think, enables them to go wherever they want without being rejected:

Ever since the first sanitarium of Black-No-More, Incorporated started turning Negroes into Caucasians, the National Social Equality League's income had been decreasing. No dues have been collected in months and subscriptions to the national mouthpiece, *The Dilemma*, had dwindled to almost nothing. Officials, long since ensconced in palatial apartments, began to grow panic-

stricken as pay days got farther apart (BNM, p. 64).

One notices here the collapse not only of the Blacks' National Social Equality League (NSEL), but of all their associations which lose their faithful members due to Dr. Crookman's bleaching activities. This association is used here as a sample by the author to let the reader know that all Blacks' associations are about to collapse because of some of their members' lack of interests in being members and paying their fees of participation. The fear to see these associations collapse in American society urges some black leaders to persuade their black sisters and brothers who think that "*the white color symbolizes not only beauty, but also perfection and acceptance*" (N'zambi-Mikoulou & Massala: 2019, 195) to challenge Dr. Crookman by any means necessary in order to preserve the integrity of their society and keep the famousness of their associations. They, for example, remind them of their important role in their society and prohibit them to behave like selfish individuals with regard to the well-being of their race and society which are likely to disappear if only they do not stand as strong opponents to Dr. Crookman's bleaching activities viewed as a break to their loyalties, affiliations and responsibilities:

Meantime, Negro society was in turmoil and chaos. The colored folk, in straining every nerve to get the Black-No-More treatment, had forgotten all loyalties, affiliations and responsibilities. No longer did they flock to the churches on Sundays or pay dues in their numerous fraternal organizations. They had stopped giving anything to the Anti-lynching campaign (BNM, p. 61).

Through this passage, one sees how the black society is in trouble because of its inhabitants' massive movements to the white society after the bleaching of their dark skin by Dr. Crookman. These movements show how whitened Americans are ready to reject their race for their integration in the United States. This readiness even pushes one of Toni Morrison's characters in *The Bluest Eye* to think that "*colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud*" (Morrison: 1970, 87). What is worth knowing is that such a consideration does not give credit to their race, customs and beliefs. They show their efforts in saving the purity of their race by calling their black fellows to fight alongside with them while they still have time, otherwise the destiny of all Blacks will disappear and this will be a shame for all whitened Americans who prefer the white skin to the black one on behalf of their social integration:

I want to tell you that our destiny lies in the stars. Ethiopia's fate is in the balance. The Goddess of the Nile weeps bitter tears at the feet of the Great Sphinx. The lowering clouds gather over the Congo and the lightning flashes o'er Togo-land. To your tents, O Israel! The hour is at hand (BNM, p. 67).

As it can be seen, this passage attests of black American leaders' determination to preserve the integrity of their society, for the sentences "our destiny lies in the stars" and "Ethiopian's fate is in the balance" stand for the future of all Blacks which is threatened by Dr. Crookman's bleaching activities. For these leaders, if they do not fight for the preservation of their race, all black people on earth will disappear, because many of Blacks from other countries even those of Africa will come to Dr. Crookman's sanitariums to have their skin bleached in order to appear white and live after a fashion of white people. They have the impression that if nothing is done to prevent Dr. Crookman from bleaching his black counterparts, they will end up seeing him opening his bleaching sanitariums in all African countries, and this will bring about the disappearance of the black race on earth. The sentence "the hour is at hand" shows how these leaders, for the sake of the black race, call all Blacks to be careful and wise with regard to their future. This sentence suggests that it is high time for them to fight for the preservation of their race by using any means necessary, for spending too much time on talking and considering Dr. Crookman as a Moses is a byword for giving value to their white peers who refuse to see them because of their blackness, as confessed by an anonymous character in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*: "*I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids. I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible simply because people refuse to see me*" (Ellison : 1952, 3).

Schuyler also shows how the churches located in the black society are disappearing, because they no longer receive their faithful members who, being in the quest of having their skin bleached, have no more time to devote to God. This disappearance makes black leaders and pastors worry about the future of the black race which is in danger. As a result, they find it important to express a reverberating cry for their racial integrity by getting

themselves out as opponents not only to Dr. Crookman who is in charge of bleaching his black fellows, but also to all black Americans who may dare to have their skin whitened, as evidenced in this passage: “Our loyal and devoted clergy”, he boomed, “are being forced into manual labor and the Negro church is rapidly dying” and then he launched into a violent tirade against Black-No-More and favored any means to put the corporation out of business” (BNM, p. 71).

The sentence “the Negro church is rapidly dying” attests of the collapse of Blacks’ churches due to their eagerness to transform their dark skin into white and move to the white society where they hope to enjoy the full fruition of the American democracy. This collapse finally urges some Blacks who are still proud of their blackness to call and persuade all their black fellows to put some strategies into practice in order to prevent Dr. Crookman from bleaching his black counterparts. They remind them of the disappearance of their society and race because of their eagerness to become white so as to integrate the American society. What they really mean here is that all black Americans join them in a violent fight against Dr. Crookman’s bleaching activities. It is only by so doing that they may find back the integrity of their race. Consequently, all black American delegates agree on two possible points which are the immediate arrest of Dr. Crookman and the closing of his sanitariums in all the spheres of the United States. This agreement urges them to address a letter to the Attorney General of this great nation in which they explain the different problems that the black and white societies face daily because of Dr. Crookman’s bleaching activities. They ask the Attorney General to take all possible decisions in order to find back the integrity of both societies and the existence of the black race on the American soil:

“Let’s get down to earth now,” he commanded “we’ve had enough of this nonsense. We have a resolution here addressed to the Attorney General of the United States demanding that Dr. Crookman and his associates be arrested and their activities stopped at once for the good of both races. All those in favor of this resolution say aye (BNM, p. 72).

This passage evidences black characters’ endeavors in fighting for the preservation of their racial integrity in the United States, for one sees how they demand the immediate arrest of Dr. Crookman for the good not only of the black race which is about to vanish, but also of the white one crammed with a lot of whitened individuals. For these black characters, turning a black skin into white is a byword for correcting God and violating the natural order of things on earth. Consequently, the black American Doctor gives up all his bleaching activities in all his sanitariums after being arrested. One keeps in mind that black characters’ refusal of the Black-No-More treatment and their fight against it, added to some Whites’ eagerness to stop it in all the sphere of the United States so as to restore the value and the integrity of both races, are some of the main aspects developed by Schuyler in *Black-No-More*. Although this fight contributes to the restoration of Blacks’ hope for the future of their race and the integrity of both races in the United States, their full integration, however, does not come true with the bleaching process which appears as a waste of time, for they are still “victim of social abuses such as euthanasia and discrimination which are viewed as the obstacles to the achievement of the American Dream” (Massala & Mitati: 2019, 17).

## Conclusion

At the term of this exploration, I have discovered that the disappearance of the black skin color on the American soil, racial confusion between pure-white characters and whitened ones, added to the latter’s disillusionment about the issue of their social integration after being bleached, are the main causes of their fight against Doctor Crookman’s bleaching activities. This fight viewed as a form of consciousness has finally urged them to express their proudness for the black race by challenging this black Doctor in diverse ways in order to find back the integrity of their race in the United States. Their hope for the existence of their race has come with the arrest of Dr. Crookman who, being frightened, has found no alternative than giving up all his bleaching activities so as to give a chance to his black sisters and brothers to integrate the American society with their black skin color. Seeing this portrayal, I dare confess that George Schuyler has really succeeded in fulfilling one of the novelist’s tasks which consists in incorporating social facts into a work of fiction.

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