

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide

a journal of nineteenth-century visual culture

Naurice Frank Woods and George Dimock

Affirming Blackness: A Rebuttal to Will South's "A Missing Question Mark: The Unknown Henry Ossawa Tanner"

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide 9, no. 2 (Autumn 2010)

Citation: Naurice Frank Woods and George Dimock, "Affirming Blackness: A Rebuttal to Will South's 'A Missing Question Mark: The Unknown Henry Ossawa Tanner,'" *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 9, no. 2 (Autumn 2010), <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/autumn10/a-rebuttal-to-will-souths-qa-missing-question-mark-the-unknown-henry-ossawa-tannerq>.

Published by: [Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art](#)

Notes:

This PDF is provided for reference purposes only and may not contain all the functionality or features of the original, online publication.

License:

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#) [Creative Commons License](#).

Affirming Blackness: A Rebuttal to Will South's "A Missing Question Mark: The Unknown Henry Ossawa Tanner"

by Naurice Frank Woods and George Dimock

Will South's recent article^[1] proposing a heretofore "unknown" Henry Ossawa Tanner who was conflicted about his African American identity and who, while in France, sought to pass as white demonstrates an impressive mastery of archival sources and a flair for persuasive re-interpretation. It is all the more problematic therefore that he misinterprets the available evidence and thereby diminishes the cultural significance of Tanner's work. Most ingeniously, South builds an elaborate yet spurious argument by restoring a question mark to Tanner's declaration "Now am I a Negro?" in a famous epistolary exchange with art critic Eunice Tietjens in 1914. In so doing he refashions the foremost African American artist of the nineteenth century as a tragic mulatto—a man who saw himself "as mostly white," who worked while in France to "systematically...remove race from the equation of his life," and was willing "to conceal the African American component of his extraction."^[2] South concludes with a critical appraisal that undermines the integrity of Tanner's art by claiming that "his achievements, ultimately, were grounded in a life of complex compromise lived in between his blackness and his whiteness."^[3]

With or without the missing punctuation, Tanner's response to Tietjens resounds as his most important statement on race. It reflects his utter frustration with America's practice of applying a rule of hypodescent (the "one-drop rule") that defined him as an innately inferior being and constricted his opportunities as artist and citizen. What Tanner was rejecting in his response to Tietjens was not his race but the American art establishment's continual labeling of him as "Negro" whenever his talent was evaluated. By way of contrast, the Paris art world showed "steadily increasing interest" in his work, linking him with his fellow countrymen, James McNeill Whistler and John Singer Sargent, without "slight[ing] his art in the exploitation of his race" as was the custom in the U.S. press.^[4] Tanner considered himself principally an American artist and he affirmed his right to join the ranks of the cultural elite based on artistic merit and racial equality.^[5] Tanner's life and art challenged his nation's disingenuous notions of race. When taken in context, his question to Tietjens, "Now am I a Negro?" is far from being a renunciation of his black ancestry and heritage as South would have it. Rather it functions rhetorically as sardonic irony in response to the cruelties and stupidities of white racism.

South's analysis founders on the misapprehension that Tanner based his own identity on the deracinated logic of blood fractions deployed against him by the dominant social order by virtue of his mixed Anglo-Saxon and African heritage, a logic he rehearses in his letter to Tietjens with rueful contempt rather than conviction. In context, Tanner is suggesting that his three-quarters white blood, according to racist ideology, explained the nature of superiority when it flowed "untainted" in those of European ancestry, but that same blood, diluted by one-fourth, or one-eighth, or even one drop of "black blood," unalterably changed the balance of his humanity for the worse. Thus, according to Tanner, if there were any validity to those beliefs he could not have risen to the highest level of art during that era. And while Tanner stated unmistakably that his "black blood" had worked to his advantage (implying that he embraced that part of his racial identity), he steadfastly refused to acknowledge that either his whiteness or his blackness had any bearing on his ability to create great paintings.

Although Tanner would have passionately wished it otherwise, race is a crucial component of the scholarship concerning his paintings and his place in American art. Tanner's career was comparable in many respects to those of numerous other American painters who dreamed of Salon success, took the necessary steps to achieve their ambitions, and reaped the rewards of their labors and their talent. What makes him central to American art history has less to do with his accomplishments in aesthetic terms, however impressive they may be, than with the multiple and complex ways in which Tanner surmounted American racism in the process of achieving international acclaim. Tanner's character and temperament were forged in the crucible of his identity as an African American who, against all precedent and expectation, successfully devoted his life to becoming an important American painter.

Tanner proudly achieved his place in American art by excelling in the language of academic painting. With strength of purpose, talent, courage, and resiliency of spirit, he insisted, against the lynch mob and Jim Crow, that the western tradition was capable of expressing a Christian humanism that transcended the bounds of race. It was essential to the success of his career, despite whatever contradictions and racial double binds were entailed, that he court and win the patronage of powerful white people and that his paintings win favor with the dominant cultural order. Yet his accomplishments also relied upon and affirmed the strengths of his African American family, community, and history. If there is an "unknown" Henry Ossawa Tanner, he arises from the fact of how few people realize just how black he was. However light-complexioned, he championed his black heritage through his civil rights activism, his dignified portrayals of African Americans, and his unyielding refusal to allow the limitations of race to break him in an era of extreme racial oppression. Booker T. Washington wrote of him, "He is proud of his race and has faith in its possibilities, and is deeply conscious of the fact that he, as one of its representatives, is on trial to prove its right to be seriously considered in the world of art."^[6] In winning a reputation as a one of the foremost American painters of his generation, Tanner brilliantly negotiated race and art as no one had done before. Given his national and international status, it makes no personal or strategic sense that he could or would have wanted to pass as white.

South fails to distinguish between passing—a practice he never quite names as the sociological and historical term for what he claims was Tanner's intentional practice while in France—and the propensity of privileged white people to remain oblivious to race when it suits their purposes. If passing is understood as that highly complex and contingent decision available to light-skinned persons of African heritage to evade by means of deliberate concealment of racial identity and family history the social constrictions imposed by segregation, then the evidence for such an action on Tanner's part simply does not exist. South makes much of an incident in which a fellow expatriate artist, James Taylor Harwood, included the young Tanner as a *plein-air* figure in his 1892 painting *Untitled (Luncheon at Pont-Aven)*.^[7] (Tanner is shown reclining at his ease beside Harwood's newly wedded wife.) Based on the epistolary evidence of Harwood's racism and his retrospective confession of ignorance concerning Tanner's heritage, South misconstrues Harwood's inattentiveness as "incontrovertible evidence of Tanner's willingness to conceal the African American component of his extraction."^[8] Harwood's misrecognition of Tanner as white, thereby granting him equal social status "by mistake," speaks volumes about white blindness but reveals nothing about Tanner's own agency and motivations.

South contests Tanner's passionately affirmative identification as an African American, as most poignantly and famously embodied in *The Banjo Lesson*. He does so by emphasizing one interesting, if hardly determining, source for that painting in white plantation literature at the expense of a fuller context. To take but one counterexample, at the same time that Tanner was painting *The Banjo Lesson* he enlisted in Albion Tourgée's National Citizen's Rights Association (NCRA)—a grass-roots organization and precursor to the NAACP devoted to organized resistance against Jim Crow—in order to protest the lynching of C. J. Miller on July 7, 1893.^[9]

South's discussion of Tanner's marriage to Jessie Macauley Olssen, a white American woman whom he met, married, and fathered a son with while living mostly abroad, illustrates the pitfalls of his method. South confuses the power of white racism to constrain the lives of African Americans, with the resilient agency of those who would persevere notwithstanding its devastating effects. South would have it that Tanner's marriage to a white woman was "because...he had refashioned his racial identity" and that his purported "problematic racial strategy" of "presenting himself as not necessarily black," and seeing himself "as mostly white" were part of a plan to "elicit different, more egalitarian treatment from other Americans in Europe as well as from European colleagues."^[10] On what evidence does South presume to project such a reductive, instrumental, and racialized narrative onto Tanner's private emotional and family life?

In South's revisionist view, Tanner's special appointment in 1917 to the American Red Cross, a whites-only institution, constitutes "the most dramatic demonstration that Tanner did not 'consider himself particularly black.'"^[11] Here South is repeating and endorsing a 1969 *Washington Post* article by Paul Richard, quoted at length earlier in his article, which claimed that Tanner "came to exaggerate the whiteness of his ancestors and he did it without shame, for he never considered himself particularly black."^[12] South proceeds to interpret the artist's recollection of a particularly nasty bit of white racism directed at him by a white Red Cross officer from Mississippi as evidence that Tanner was hiding his racial identity. South infers that the artist's silence in the face of "a tirade against the Negro" should be taken as evidence of his desire to be seen and to identify as something other than African American.

A far more plausible interpretation, one supported by the fact that it is Tanner himself who is narrating the incident, is that when Tanner's dinner companion at Neufchateau in 1918 says "but we will have to kill several of those niggers down home before we will be able to get them back to their place," he is, in all likelihood, seeking to put the "uppity" Tanner in his place, an experience that would have been familiar to every African American in the era of Jim Crow.^[13] South's version fails to take adequate account of the ways in which France is not Mississippi, and the fact that an internationally renowned artist of African American descent, with the support of Walter Hines Page, Ambassador to England, could bend the rules enough to serve his country abroad in time of war. Such episodes, however, must have provided Tanner with further evidence that, after all his years away, nothing had changed with regard to the insurmountable difficulties of making a career in his native land.

Missing from South's article is any explicit reference to the phenomenon of passing. Yet it hovers evasively throughout in such awkward and euphemistic phrases as "not necessarily black," "mostly white" and "because he did not look African American" as if passing were a shameful act that dare not speak its name in exposing and betraying the stark binaries of

American racism.[14] The omission suggests a profound confusion about race in America, the unconscious presumption, perhaps, that it really *was* better to be born white than black. South's construction of an "unknown" and "tragic" Tanner who is confused and ambivalent about claiming his African American identity is not supported by the primary documents. It insidiously short changes his personal and cultural achievements as the one black artist of the nineteenth century who succeeded against the odds in making important, widely circulated paintings in the dominant style of his era that affirmed the abiding centrality and heroism of the African American presence in American life and art.

Notes

[1] Will South, "A Missing Question Mark: The Unknown Henry Ossawa Tanner," *Nineteenth Century Art Worldwide* 8, no. 2 (Autumn 2009), <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/autumn09/a-missing-question-mark>. To view the references below, click on any passage or citation. The article will load in a new browser window at the point in the page where the citation occurs; any subsequent links will load in the same window.

[2] *Ibid.*, "[as mostly white](#)"; "[systematically...remove race from the equation of his life](#)"; "[to conceal the African American component of his extraction](#)"

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] Marcia M. Mathews, *Henry Ossawa Tanner: American Artist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 131–32.

[5] *Ibid.*, xi.

[6] Booker T. Washington, "Henry O. Tanner, Artist," *The Interior* 32, October 31, 1901, 1371.

[7] See Figure 6 in South, "Missing Question Mark": [Fig. 6. James Taylor Harwood \(1860-1940\), Untitled \(Luncheon at Pont-Aven\), 1892. Oil on canvas. Collection of Ramon and Patsy Johnson, Salt Lake City, Utah.](#)

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] Henry Ossawa Tanner to Albion Tourgée, July 14, 1893. Albion W. Tourgée Papers, Chautauqua County Historical Society, Westfield, NY (AWTP) #7614. The full correspondence consists of nine letters between July 14, 1893 and March 20, 1894, one of them written by Henry's younger brother, Carlton on July 15, 1893 (AWTP #7614). Tanner was actively engaged in increasing membership in the NCRA principally by arranging a public lecture for Tourgée in Philadelphia that was held some time between December 1893 and early February 1894. See also AWTP #'s 7532, 7542, 7623, and #7614 (Henry O. Tanner to Albion Tourgée, July 31, 1893, August 3, 1893, August 30, 1893, and October 10, 1893).

[10] South, "[A Missing Question Mark](#)".

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] *Ibid.*

[13] *Ibid.*

[14] *Ibid.*, "[not necessarily black](#)" and "[mostly white](#)"; "[because he did not look African American.](#)"