

## The Harlem Renaissance: A Revisionist Approach

In the decade following the Great War, there emerged a group of writers, musicians, dramatists, and visual artists who gathered in the exciting and burgeoning Harlem section of Manhattan. These young black intellectuals took as one of their major themes the development of a new type of Negro, one who stood in strong contrast to the one portrayed in eighteenth and nineteenth century literature. Such a polemic is presented in the various essays and pieces of fiction found in the seminal text of the period, Alain Locke's anthology, *The New Negro*, published in 1925.

One extremely interesting aspect of Locke's text is that of the thirty-six contributors to the collection of essays, poems, short stories, and novel excerpts, only eight contributors were women. And what is troubling about these contributions is that, with one exception, he only included women writers whose works supported his notion of the development of a "New Negro" in early twentieth century America. Only two of the critical pieces included in the anthology are by women, and one of those two essays articulates an idea of female negritude which stands in sharp contrast to Locke's polemic.

Not only did Locke's anthology exclude many of his black female contemporaries, so did many of the major anthologies of the period. In 1922, James Weldon Johnson edited *The Book of American Negro Poetry*. He included seven women in his collection of a total of forty contributors. Three years later, Locke published his collection; and in 1927, Countee Cullen published *Caroling Dusk: An Anthology of Verse by Negro Poets*. Cullen's text contains the works of thirteen women poets. In 1929, a white man, Victor Francis Calverton, edited *Anthology of American Negro Literature* and included six major women poets, a novelist, and a playwright.

A close examination of Alain Locke's *The New Negro* provides an interesting description of exactly who this "new" Negro is. Locke defines him one way in his essay, "The New Negro," while Elise Johnson McDougald characterizes him quite differently in "The Task of Negro Womanhood."

The Negro today is inevitably moving forward under the control largely of his own objectives. What are these objectives? Those of his outer life are happily already well and finally formulated, for they are none other than the ideals of American institutions and democracy. Those of his inner life are yet in process of formation, for the new psychology at present is more of a consensus of feeling than of opinion, of attitude rather than of program. (*New Negro* 10)

According to Locke's definition of the "new Negro," the persona is male, forward-moving, integrationist, and in possession of a new sense of spirituality and creativity. He is acutely aware of his divided self, one side Negro, one side American, and is determined that if the "more intelligent and representative elements of the two race groups" get in "vital touch with one another," (9) surely the group in power will concede that the historically oppressed group is worthy of tasting American democracy. Moreover, the "new" Negro stands in contrast with the "old" Negro who was a savage member of a dark, segregated ghetto; he was, in effect, a naive child.

The "new" Negro woman, on the other hand, looks very different. In her essay, Elise Johnson McDougald outlines this "new" Negro woman's arduous difficulties. (369) She curiously begins her essay by encouraging the reader to look to the Harlem woman because she is supposedly free from sex and race discrimination and unencumbered with the hardships of household duties. However, her argument that follows fails to convince the reader adequately that such glowing conditions exist, even in Harlem. The "new" Negro woman is first concerned with black and white society's failure to recognize her multiplicity of problems in America; since the problems are varied in nature, they cannot be treated en masse. Secondly, she is portrayed in society as having low morals, values, and standards, and her beauty is typified by "Aunt Jemima." (370) Finally, she faces terrible hardships in industry where she is doubly discriminated against for her race and sex. The "new" Negro woman is vastly different from the self-satisfied "new" Negro man described by Locke. She is no less assertive, competent, or visionary than he, but she is forced to grapple with the twofold quandary of sexual and racial discrimination as it is manifested in social, familial, and economic oppression.

It is perhaps here that answers might be gleaned as to why so few women are included in the male-edited anthologies of the time. Since in reality such a great discrepancy exists between the "new" Negro man and woman, it becomes difficult to show fairly the plight of the black woman while effectively arguing for the "in control" black man. As such, it is beneficial to support such a polemic using narrowly interpreted non-fiction and fiction. Secondly, since the close group of male and female writers centered in Harlem created an intimate inner circle for creativity and publication, women (and perhaps some men) not directly involved could not hope to have their work recognized. Moreover, there is the issue of sexism with which the ponderer of post-war literature must reckon. It is interesting to observe how someone like Charles S. Johnson, editor of *Opportunity Magazine* during the 1920's, notes his contributors. He provides brief personal and professional sketches for each of his male contributors but groups all the female artists together with a "thanks." When observed from this perspective, it is no wonder that the "new" Negro is depicted as having a particular character with particular interests.

But when the darkened definition of the "new" Negro is viewed in the light of the sensible inclusion of the "new" Negro woman, the "who" of the Harlem Renaissance must then be redefined as an early twentieth century American man and woman who

are painfully aware of historical oppression, inaccurate representation, and unjust exclusion from American institutions. They must also deal with the present society's inability to welcome them graciously as competent, deserving members. Finally, he and she possess an enlightened understanding of their race and seek to educate their counterparts as to the evolution of a new black aesthetic and political ideal in America.

There were, without doubt, more women publishing during the 1920's in Harlem who, for various reasons, were not being included in male-edited anthologies. Because of their exclusion from the black mainstream vehicles, their works were relegated to even more marginalized journals and poorly distributed publications. In light of that fact, their works have not been consistently included in courses in American literature. Subsequently, the exclusion of many early twentieth century Black women's works from the existing canon of American literature facilitates the further truncation of an Afro-American literary ancestry.

Such an understanding leads to a threefold project of recovering and collecting these forgotten women's works and then rewriting them into the existing canon of American literature. The first stage of reevaluation of the Harlem Renaissance with respect to gender is attempted above. When the period is reinterpreted in terms of the women who were contributing to the outpouring of literary creativity, notions of when the Renaissance took place begin to change as well (*Gender and the Politics of History*).

Thus the second phase of reevaluating the Renaissance with respect to gender centers around the determination of when the period begins and ends. Many scholars arbitrarily outline the immediate decade following the First World War as the official Renaissance period, with the end being the stock market crash of 1929. Such an arbitrary depiction only affords scholars the ability to examine the height of creativity during this time. Yet, one can argue that a better understanding of these works, particularly the works of the female artists, can be gained through an examination of the work leading up to and away from the Renaissance apex. As such, the period delineation must continue into the second post-war decade.

Given this expansive time period, one can gauge the progress and quality of artists' works by reading through the period's beginning, middle, and end. Moreover, it is clear from the above discussion of Locke's text that the editor and contributors were vividly aware of the development of a black American characterized by "twoness." However, since Locke's anthology, as Johnson's, was published in the early part of the decade, while Cullen's was toward its end, it would seem that the beginning of the decade serves as a point of reference to examine the developmental stages of such a renaissance with its height in the 1920's.

To continue, 1937 marks the publication year of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Hurston is often seen by critics as the writer whose works close this period of a recognizable harvesting of black artistry. A 1929 closing date excludes all of Hurston's novels, autobiography, and folklore, and specifically *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a text which in many ways exemplifies the Harlem Renaissance ideal

of assertion of independence. Furthermore, most of the artists included in the Renaissance continued to publish well after 1929. In many cases, their best and more significant works were published afterward. Such an expansion also aids in fair evaluation of the development of the artists' careers.

The task of redefining the "when" of the Harlem Renaissance with respect to gender must be seen from its proper view point. It is not that the period must be extended to include women who were publishing in the 1930's, and thereby expand the pool of eligible artists. On the contrary, rightful admission and full examination of the female artists' contributions necessarily expand the period. The artists influence the period, as opposed to the period being artificially extended to include the artists.

Finally, in terms of the redefinition of the "where" of the Renaissance, recovery, collection, and inclusion of the works of black women publishing in Harlem during the 1920's and 1930's exclude many women who may not have been publishing in Harlem at that time but were nonetheless making great contributions to an exciting outpouring of aesthetic creativity which had its base in Harlem (*New Negro* 301-11). It might be that the Harlem group was influencing the rest of the country's artistic production, but it might be equally interesting to evaluate the reverse influence of the influx of outsiders on the Harlem group.

A closer examination of the creative works of blacks throughout the United States during that time would yield evidence that the country was experiencing more than a "Harlem" Renaissance but a black American Renaissance with a very visible concentration in Harlem. The omission of mid-western black females, for example, would exclude an artist like Marita O. Bonner, publishing in Chicago, Illinois. Zora Neale Hurston, whose wealthy white patrons made their homes in New York City, was doing her collecting and writing of folklore in Florida. Artists like Dorothy West and Helene Johnson had their beginnings in Boston, Massachusetts, and subsequently were contributors to the Boston-based *Saturday Evening Quill*. Furthermore, the Washington, D.C. group of artists, which at critical points in the period's development included Georgia Douglas Johnson, Alain Locke, Zora Neale Hurston, and Beatrice Murphy, offered significant and essential contributions to the creation of a new aesthetic. Further research would favorably prove that exciting artistic production was occurring in areas immediately north, south, and further west of New York City. A discussion of this nature might logically lead to a greater understanding of literary canon formation as it functions in American literature.

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