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LAWRENCE JACKSON

"The Aftermath": the reputation of the Harlem Renaissance twenty years later

In 1945 the editors of the Atlanta University journal *Phylon* wrote to a sixty-five-year-old Carl Van Vechten and asked for his comments on a Hugh Gloster essay they were publishing. Gloster's "The Van Vechten Vogue" sketched out the influence of the best-known white American – half architect, half voyeur – connected to the explosion of black writing in the 1920s. *Phylon*'s editors, the sharp-minded young sociologist Ira de a Reid and the illustrious W. E. B. Du Bois, printed Van Vechten's brief comment. According to the man who had been the leading light of the "Negrotarians," the white cultivators and supporters committed to the exploration of black life in Manhattan in the 1920s, Gloster was so "eminently fair" in his essay that nothing was left to say. The novelist, photographer, and spirited collector of African American letters could not avoid the fact that he was seeing something that he had predicted would end certain varieties of discrimination. "Negroes are kept down because they lack NERVE and initiative," Van Vechten had written to his friend Langston Hughes in 1942.[1] Gloster showed both qualities, hallmarks of a new generation of writers and critics, a cadre that would rely considerably less on the support of individual patrons like Van Vechten. He was a man whose era had passed and whose most deeply held convictions about racial equality led the way to the vastly reduced scope of his own role.

In his essay, Gloster targeted not even so much Van Vechten singly as the entire movement during which Van Vechten's most famous relationships with Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, Zora Neal Hurston, and Nella Larsen, among many others, had flourished. In an unusually ironic twist of fate, the movement for black artistic development in the United States, always hand-in-glove with the larger movement for racial justice, and the even broader shift for modernist artistic expression, seemed deliberately employing segregationist logic in its historical self-representation. A literary movement of blacks partly engineered by a bi-sexual playboy, one that left little evidence of confrontation or belligerent protest, seemed humiliating. For Gloster and his generation, Van Vechten, at least by the way of his 1926

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book *Nigger Heaven*, "dramatized the alleged animalism and exoticism of Harlem folk" and "influenced the writings of Negro Renascence authors."[2] Thus the subsequent Van Vechten School of black novelists (Claude McKay, Wallace Thurman, Arna Bontemps) stressed "jazz, sex, atavism and primitivism." Gloster, though not completely dismissive of Van Vechten's iconoclast import as the first novelist to capture the Harlem scene of the 1920s and to develop an audience, articulated all of the touchstones that would come to haunt the period. The Renaissance was "primarily a fad" and Van Vechten and his friends' "fatal mistake" was to "make a fetish of sex and the cabaret rather than to give a faithful, realistic presentation and interpretation of Harlem life" (314).

The Hampton Institute professor Hugh Gloster was, perhaps, pointing out the ambivalent effects of Van Vechten's leadership during the 1920s in order to symbolize a particularly acute problem that black progressives faced during the 1940s from their famously "liberal" white peers in the South and North. But he did not make up his critique from scratch. By the middle 1940s, there was a substantial tradition of reproach surrounding the outburst in art and letters that had had its epicenter in Harlem roughly between 1924 and 1929, known then as the Alain Locke-named "New Negro" Movement, but remembered better by posterity when combined with the geographic sobriquet that symbolized all of black America, the "Harlem Renaissance."

This phenomenon, the repudiation of a group of socially marginalized black creative writers by a subsequent and similarly marginalized generation of black critics, is doubly curious because the critics of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s were fairly conspicuous in their devotion to and appreciation of vernacular black culture. But for more than a score of years following the 1920s, these writers and critics expressed mainly the utmost impatience with the achievement of African American writers during the 1920s. It was an impatience and disregard that would not really be reversed until the success of the modern Civil Rights Movement and the creation of Black Studies academic programs in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

A particularly stinging and early reprimand of black literary talent from the late 1920s came internally from the man reported to be the group's undeniable genius, the editor (of the Renaissance journals *Fire!!* and *Harlem*) and writer Wallace Thurman. The energetic but dilettante novelist Walter White (the most regularly published black writer by large New York houses during the 1920s), the sonneteer Countee Cullen, and the reliably genteel Jessie Fauset, embodied the narrow literary abilities, and Zora Neal Hurston and Richard Bruce Nugent the outrageous personalities, that Thurman had in mind when he wrote in 1927 that white critics thought of then contemporary black

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writers as "a highly trained trick dog doing dances in the public square."[3] Five years later Thurman went further with his critique of the movement in an engaging roman à clef, *Infants of the Spring*. In the book Thurman complained of the multiple paradoxes that haunted the new generation of black writers: blacks who excelled at proving white stereotypes of blacks; prejudiced whites leading the liberal vanguard for racial justice; untalented blacks promoted as virtuosos; black artists personally disdainful of folk culture; make-believe black artists scaling the dramatic heights of bohemian burlesque to escape the label of race; and the failure of the black writer to find an audience.

Despite the slight orbit of Thurman's own career, his objections were received as more than petty caviling. Two of his contemporaries both called into question the organic connection to black folk and the aesthetic value of the writing after 1925. (Consider as well that the best-known works of the 1920s – Claude McKay's "If We Must Die" (1919), James Weldon Johnson's "The Creation" (1920), Langston Hughes' "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (1921) and "Mother to Son" (1922), and Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923) – were always and remain to this day recognized as nearly constituting a tradition within a tradition.) One of the two was Howard University philosophy professor Alain Locke. In yearly book reviews for the Urban League's *Opportunity* journal, beginning in 1929 and ending in 1942 (and excepting 1930), the moneyless patron of the Renaissance fired on the group of writers whom he had helped to launch, many of whom he thought petulant, bohemian, and ungrateful. As black writers began to shift away from sentimentalized "beauty" into the field of realistic "truth," Locke admitted that the group had been guilty of "spiritual bondage" and that "much exploitation has had to be admitted."[4] That was in 1929. Two years later, Locke decided that the entire movement had suffered from "inflation and overproduction."[5] Langston Hughes, no special admirer of Locke's, concurred in some respects to the estimate, if for different reasons. In the early 1930s he was, like Du Bois, appreciative of a strenuous form of Marxism, and when in 1940 he published his memoir *The Big Sea*, he contributed the most frequently cited passages that proposed a truncated chronology for the artistic movement as well as the chief source of its demise. According to Hughes, at the end of "the generous 1920s," black artists were "no longer in vogue," at least in the minds of white customers of black culture.[6]

The emerging critique from the 1930s emphasized the political and sociological, not the artistic, an understandable tendency during the financial collapse of the American economy. It praised naturalist realism in literature and the wielding of liberal progressive social science in the public sphere. James Weldon Johnson, who had believed that "nothing will do more

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to change that mental attitude [white American racial prejudice] and raise his status than a demonstration of intellectual parity by the Negro through the production of literature and art," was laid to rest not merely in body in 1938, but principally in spirit, in so far as black writers continued to subscribe to his belief in the power of art as a proof of civilization.[7] Armed with widely accepted scientific advances regarding racial parity in biology and anthropology and insight into sociology and political economy by way of the analytical techniques of Marxism, Hugh Gloster's generation withheld patience for less than full racial equality. The ground was shifting from a celebration of black life to the exposure of the pathology behind the black condition. Increasingly, black writers who had developed their craft in an integrated environment produced the fiction and poetry that supported, extended, and sometimes initiated these analyses. Their voices of dissent and rounding criticism emerged after the deaths of Thurman and Rudolph Fisher in 1934, and were especially engaged following the development of the Federal Writers Project between 1935 and 1939, the National Negro Congress between 1937 and 1945, and the League of American Writers, which held writers' congresses beginning in 1935 and into the early 1940s. While Locke and Hughes both limited the scope and heft of the movement, it fell to the writers who became known in the 1930s and 1940s to trim sharply the value of 1920s renaissance.

The same year as the deaths of Thurman and Fisher, fitting epitaphs to the renaissance in David Levering Lewis's commanding account *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, Malcolm Cowley offered a portrait of the decadent and "lost" generation of American writers called *Exile's Return*. Although he ignored the black writers in his midst in Manhattan, he had at least noticed the changing environment of the modern world by taking note of educated upper-class blacks in Paris. Cowley proposed that the American writers who had fled the commercialism and shallow traditions of America for Europe now had been exiled, uprooted from regional tradition, and confusedly embittered by the breakdown of traditional values that accompanied the slaughter of World War I. If these factors had caused the exile, his advice to the returning artist was straightforward and prescriptive. Cowley believed that white artists must in the 1930s choose the side of the "worker" in the class struggle, and, more or less, he charged the new generation to eradicate boundaries of social class as well as race and ethnicity. The pampered writers who had left the United States to work in the ambulance corps during World War I must now suture themselves to "people without manners or distinction, Negroes, hill billies, poor whites, Jews, Wops and Hunkies."[8] The radical nature of Cowley's invitation emerges when considering that, by the end of the 1920s, major public liberal intellectuals like John Dewey,

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Horace Kallen, and Robert Park were effectively abandoning the struggle against racial discrimination and the messy field of cultural politics in favor of working to ameliorate economic differences.[9] It took a long time for more typical members of the literary establishment, like Harold Rosenberg, to admit to black Americans having a cultural tradition. They believed that "lowercase Americans have been and remain 'aliens,'" and held that for this group "culture exists in the future not in the past."[10] Black writers attributed their racial erasure to the sad fact that there was no single author of unequivocal genius to emerge from the 1920s, one too noteworthy to be ignored by the "Lost Generation." Where was the black writer with blockbuster appeal and whose magnificence trod over the crass borders of racial prejudice?

The absence of this kind of successful writer could be understood by agreeing with J. Saunders Redding who said that "Negro mothers, too, bore children into the 'lost generation.'"[11] Even if their flight to Europe had not taken place under precisely the same conditions, even if the Sacco-Vanzetti case had not been the brook of fire for their political radicalism, it made sense to connect those of the Harlem Renaissance to their white peers. Black writers had experienced exile too – in their own native land. They had been estranged from the rural past and moved into the swift urban and black international current that was Harlem. Many had traveled to Europe, but they had also traveled back to the rural South, to the Caribbean, and, for that matter, to Chicago. They could trace their political radicalism, not just to personal slights, but to the riots in 1919. They had wrestled with and been a bit disfigured by expectations of their "primitive" vitality. Their position in the art-for-art's-sake struggle was compounded by their political liability; they were a visible ethnic minority in a vigorously chauvinist white country. The overriding pressures of racial integrity often tempered the art-for-art's-sake creed.

One writer who verged on fulfilling dramatically that role of broadly appealing Negro writer was the gifted vernacular poet Sterling Brown. While Brown might be counted as an "official" member of the Harlem Renaissance – he won an *Opportunity* prize in 1925 and published "When De Saint's Go Marching Home" in Countee Cullen's *Caroling Dusk* in 1927 – during those years he had been teaching at Virginia Seminary in Lynchburg, Virginia, at Lincoln in Jefferson City, Missouri, and at Fisk in Nashville, Tennessee. The experiences he soaked up in these diverse and earthy teaching posts caused Brown always to assert that though the bell cow may have been in Harlem, the renaissance had "spatial roots elsewhere in America."[12] Brown started teaching at Howard in 1929, but for the rest of his life always possessed an animus toward the idea of black writing as an urban and northern phenomenon. In an influential essay called "The Negro Character as Seen by White Authors" published in 1933, Brown identified seven

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"stereotypes" or leitmotifs that governed the creation of African American characters in American literature and culture. The essay captured not only the new defiance of black intellectuals and their rejection of patronage, but also showed the immense libraries now open to the intellectual avant-garde who had earned advanced degrees at exclusive American universities. Brown had also taken seriously Walter Lippman's warning that "stereotypes," a printing term referring to metal plates made from type, would create permanent and narrow mental images. In the essay Brown rejected an entire geological strata of American literature as being completely false to black life. He dismissed as especially harmful writers who ground the accuracy of their depictions of black Americans in their early lives on plantations worked by slaves and their being nursed and potty-trained by black mammies. Speaking of the popular writer Roark Bradford, Brown was succinct. "All this, he believes, gives him license to step forth as their interpreter and to repeat stereotypes in the time-hallowed South. It doesn't."[13] This was a tone of learned defiance, even anger.

The young Howard professor went on to identify seven recurring stereotypes: contented slave, wretched freeman, comedian or buffoon, brute, tragic mulatto, "local color" negro, and "exotic primitive." Unafraid to offend whites or burn bridges, Brown also evinced shades of dialectical materialism. Slavery expanded in the nineteenth century owing to the cotton gin and the profit margin, and the result in relation to the development of American fiction was a stereotype of black contentedness under bondage. But Brown showed his real ire toward the conclusion of the essay and the final example, the falsely championed "exotic primitive." For this violation he pointed to Carl Van Vechten, easily recognized as a visible supporter of African American writing and culture, especially during the 1920s, as among the culprits. Instead of an original exploration of the vitality of black life and the spirited and modern embrace of sexuality and rejection of Victorian gentility, Brown saw "cabarets supplanting cabins, and Harlemized 'blues,' instead of the spirituals and slave reels" (176). Van Vechten, author of *Nigger Heaven*, was certainly not sacrosanct, in spite of the devotion he received from Langston Hughes, Zora Neal Hurston, and James Weldon Johnson was not incidental (which Van Vechten did not let go unrepaid). In the name of advancing American black literary images, Brown's readiness to reject Van Vechten (whom, forty years later, he called a "rascal," a "voyeur" who had "corrupted the Harlem Renaissance and was a terrible influence") and, by extension, whites of "good will," staked a claim of independence and fitness that was a shocking break.[14] A year-and-a-half later, it was unsurprising to see Brown in print sparring over the film *Imitation of Life* with another popular white liberal "friend" of the Negro, Miss Fannie Hurst.

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The legendary environment on the Howard campus in the 1930s and 1940s nourished sharp critiques of society. Alongside Abram Harris in economics, Ralph Bunche in political science, Rayford Logan in history, librarian Dorothy Porter, and E. Franklin Frazier in sociology, Brown expressed an artistic vision decidedly in concert with the political left wing. By the second half of the 1930s, Brown was working as the head of Negro Affairs for the Federal Writers Project, and employing as his research assistant Eugene Clay Holmes, a young instructor in the philosophy department. Holmes was actively involved in the Communist Party, that small, vocal, beleaguered, paranoid, and tightly disciplined group that recognized the cachet of providing a forum for black writers to discuss their views on their literary tradition and their relationship to the white mainstream. The two men vigorously participated in the League of American Writers, a "Popular Front" organization created by the communists to unite writers and artists across the political spectrum in order to resist the growing fascist menace. Not everyone supported these institutions. The most influential groups to emerge from the 1930s, the so-called New York Intellectuals massed around the journal *Partisan Review*, had gravitated toward Trotsky's brand of Marxism and strove to expose any of the communist-organized efforts as evidence of Stalinist brutality. However, the specter of communist insincerity or exploitation was greatly balanced by a fair degree of racially exclusive elitism practiced by the New York Intellectuals, the southern Agrarian and New Critics, and the Ivy League literary academics. In the comparatively discrimination-free communist milieu appeared some of the steadiest condemnations of the Harlem Renaissance writers, who were seen as lacking a political agenda, acquiescent to prejudiced whites, unconcerned with urban black masses struggling for economic survival, and unable to write literature aesthetically competitive with elite writers of the modern art movement.

Speaking before the League of American Writers conference in 1935 as Eugene Clay, Professor Holmes maligned the inevitable result of poor cultural stewardship that was the "Harlem tradition" of "amusements and new thrills" for the white American bourgeoisie.[15] Seeking to dismantle the celebrated détente between black writers and white publishers in favor of the interracial comity of the communists, whose American party had in 1932 run a black candidate for vice president, Clay described the Renaissance as ersatz, the "pseudo-rapprochement of Negro and white in their artistic relations" (152). In the essay Clay went on to herald the work of Sterling Brown, Langston Hughes, and Richard Wright, all writers whose work then and for the next several years emphasized politics and the working class.

Even further indicative of the effect of the left-wing line of the 1930s was the spreading of the "nation-within-a nation thesis." Howard University

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philosophy instructor Eugene Gordon presented portions of the thesis on the same panel with Clay. Though the idea had at least some of its origins with black nationalists and black socialists from the 1910s, by 1928 when the communists began using their organizational apparatus to promote the idea of "self-determination" in the "black belt" of the USA, they would remarkably reshape black critical appraisals of the 1920s. Instead of pointing to the interracial character of the Harlem Renaissance as the final recognition of the dawn ahead (which, it seems by all accounts, was perhaps the key feature of the movement), the communist critics avowed that blacks had weakened their cultural stewardship by excessive racial compromise. The movement had been wrongly seeking assimilation. The result of this striving had been fawning writers "with their ears, however, attuned to the voice of bourgeois authority."[16] No longer content to shock the bourgeois, newer black writers challenged the idea of a middle class at all.

> These works reflect the sentiment of that section of the Negro upper class which, having hoped to be accepted, with its cultivation and polish, open-armed in to the white upper class, shows its anger and despair in acrimonious condemnation of all whites ...
>
> Having been rebuffed by the white ruling class continually ... The Negro upper class thereupon turned in upon themselves, resolved to cultivate a polite middle-class racial chauvinism within the protective folds of the capitalist system. The works of George S. Schuyler, James Weldon Johnson, Du Bois, Nella Larsen, and Jessie Fauset reflect this resolve. (Gordon, "Problems" 144)

Gordon split the Renaissance in half. Because they sought ways of conforming to the American socio-economic model of success and to diminish the more extreme elements of ethnic difference, the educated upper class of blacks had done nothing beyond assimilation. If their counterparts, the bohemians, had exploited (and been exploited by) ethnic primitivism, the bourgeois strove to become, in Schuyler's memorable argot, "lampblacked anglo-saxons." Neither tradition held the esteem of the left, which was vigorously promoting black nationalism.

Elements of the "nation-within-a-nation" thesis were promoted by communists before and after (but not during) the Second World War, as well as used by black nationalists like Hubert Harrison, Marcus Garvey, Carlos Cook, Sufi Abdul Hamid, conveners of the "Negro Youth" movement of the 1940s, and Elijah Muhammad. The popularity of the credo need not be overstated. For the active African American literati during the middle thirties, Gordon's rationale may have been even a bit suspect. Langston Hughes, a faithful Marxist at least during the 1930s and early 1940s, claimed, when under questioning of Senator McCarthy's committee in 1953, that he had

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been unable to join the Communist Party precisely because he thought the "nation-within-a-nation" thesis flawed.[17]

Of course, the confident certainty of the communists, combined with prime examples of racial unrest – from the Scottsboro and Angelo Herndon trials to the Harlem Riot of 1935 – impressed a devoted core of young literary strivers. Eighteen months after the LAW congress, Richard Wright published the now famous essay "Blueprint for Negro Writing" in an obscure little magazine called *New Challenge* that he was co-editing alongside Dorothy West and Marian Minus. The magazine had changed its name from *Challenge*, which had operated for five years. Between the two titles, the West-headed group introduced the writers who would take the place of Harlem Renaissance heads: Frank Yerby, Margaret Walker, Wright, William Attaway, and Ralph Ellison. The Wright essay's most frequently quoted line was nearly a copy of Wallace Thurman's ten years earlier. Wright thought the Harlem Renaissance had produced nothing but manicured poodles "dressed in the knee pants of servility curtsying to show that the Negro was not inferior, that he was human."[18] Since he was a communist at the time, Wright, like Gordon, believed that the greatest defect of the literary movement had been its inability to focus on the travail of working-class black life, and that the writers either emphasized the cozy lives of the few black elites or gave themselves up to recording the sensuality of a Harlem Saturday night. These two diverse groups of Negroes were not seen in contact with one another, and young pundits like Wright prescribed to reconcile them through black nationalism, symbolized by the popular National Negro Congress of the late 1930s and early 1940s. Later, the political formation itself could be transcended.

After Wright's blockbuster *Native Son*, his left-wing colleague and friend Ralph Ellison continued to express a condescending attitude toward the writing of the 1920s. For a young person who had few ties himself to the movement, Ellison's near contempt toward established writers seems indicative of more than the growing pains of a new literary tribe. Although his talent had been "discovered" by Langston Hughes, Ellison felt little allegiance to the scattered group who had made their names in the 1920s. Ellison's entire career was conspicuously racially integrated and he started publishing reviews in the left-wing journals and those that had been created for members of the WPA. But another source of his strident criticisms came about partly because the conditions of his writing in the early 1940s were fundamentally different than even a decade earlier. Katherine Anne Porter, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, and Lionel Trilling all registered a growth in the "serious" reading audience between 1929 and 1939, but the change in literary audience was most startlingly true for black Americans.[19] The expanding US economy and

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the beginnings of an exodus of black Americans away from the rural South after the First World War helped to create, between 1936 and 1942, some 24,000 black college graduates, more black Americans with a college education than had been graduated from colleges in the United States, ever.[20] By 1942, 46,000 blacks would be enrolled in college, and 2,500 black teachers were their instructors, and among them more than 200 holders of the doctorate in philosophy. Spasmodically and unintentionally perhaps, segregated America was turning out a genuine black intelligentsia.

Ellison, a college freshman in 1933, ranked highly among this new group who had received extensive college training. He also took leadership positions in the League of American Writers and at the left-wing radical magazines like *New Masses*. At the publication of *Native Son*, Ellison had the opportunity to become a regular interpreter of black American life. Ellison received further literary exposure from literary critic and philosopher Kenneth Burke (Malcolm Cowley's best friend), and throughout his life he remained sharply suspicious of the work of the "lost generation," black and white. Burke also schooled Ellison in a version of the "New Criticism," the formalist method of literary interpretation linked to T. S. Eliot that was flourishing in the academy. Combining his growing interests in the symbolist criticism with his Cowley-style passion for social justice, Ellison considered much of the 1920s decadent and flabby aestheticism, with the exceptions of Hemingway and Faulkner. However, even when he examined those writers, he found their portraits of black Americans shabby enough as to challenge the entire moral and ethical enterprise of their novels. In Ellison's version of literary history, the black writers of the 1920s were politically and aesthetically unsophisticated. They had been taken advantage of in the 1920s. He heralded the dawn of naturalism and the work of Wright because, "[U]nlike the fiction growing out of the New Negro Movement, it has avoided exoticism and evolved out of an inner compulsion rather than a shallow imitativeness; it has been more full of the stuff of America."[21] Ellison then launched into the fullest and most vivid assessment of the Harlem Renaissance that he ever wrote.

> The fiction which appeared during the post-war period was timid and narrow of theme, except in few instances. Here appeared such writers as Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Rudolph Fisher, Zora Neil [*sic*] Hurston, Wallace Thurman and Jessie Fauset; all expressing certain general ideas and tendencies which grew out of the post-war prosperity and the rise of a conscious Negro middle class. Usually the work was apologetic and an expression of middle class ideology rather than the point of view of Negro workers and farmers. Except for the work of Langston Hughes, it ignored the existence of Negro folklore and perceived no connection between its efforts and the symbols and images of Negro folk forms; it avoided psychology; was unconscious of politics;

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> and most of the deeper problems arising out of the relationship of the Negro group to the American whole, were avoided. Not that it contained no protest, it did. But its protest was racial and narrowly nationalistic. (Ellison, "Wright" 12)

The twenty-eight-year-old critic was green enough to forget Nella Larsen, and, probably because Hurston had dismissed Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children*, he eliminated her folk novels. Ellison still traveled in communist circles and his scoffing at the "narrowly nationalistic" element of the Renaissance anticipated the Party's four-year repudiation of black nationalism.

But more valuable than applying hindsight to Ellison's sense of literary history is the simpler observation of palpable embarrassment that young, soon-to-be-famous black writers of the late 1930s and early 1940s held toward writing of the 1920s. A year later, when Ellison was editing the important black magazine of art and politics *Negro Quarterly*, he introduced Chicago critic Edward Bland, who more openly sneered at the 1920s writers. Bland, who died in combat in Europe in 1945, began his most important piece of work, "Social Forces Shaping the Negro Novel," with what was by then a ritual spilling of Harlem's blood: "One of the outstanding features of the Negro novels that appeared during the twenties was their literary incompetence."[22]

The second half of the 1940s scored the Harlem or New Negro Renaissance over and again, and it is not difficult to understand the reason why. Of the five black literary giants of the 1940s – Richard Wright, Frank Yerby, Ann Petry, Willard Motley, and Gwendolyn Brooks – Wright, Yerby and Motley wrote best-sellers and Petry and Brooks won major prizes. Financial success and widespread artistic recognition were accolades unknown to blacks during the 1920s and 1930s. And since Yerby and Motley wrote books without black protagonists, the Renaissance crew fell in for yet another critical flaw. The problem was no longer that the movement had failed to find its true racial spirit and to resist white control. The black writers of the 1920s were now – in the era of Motley (who withheld information regarding his race so that he wouldn't receive literary favoritism), Yerby's post-bellum romans, Petry's *The Country Place*, and William Gardner Smith's *Anger at Innocence* – too racial, overly obsessed with race.[23] Waters Turpin, a novelist, dramatist, critic, and English professor at Lincoln and Morgan State College, called the movement an "exotic on American culture" that did mainly the work of allowing the next generation of black writers "to emerge as literary craftsmen unshackled by race or nationality."[24]

And always the Renaissance writers were blamed and blamed themselves for failing to erect permanent institutions. Arna Bontemps, a key Harlem Renaissance figure who became librarian of Fisk University, believed that the limitations of the Renaissance had everything to do with the flaws of its

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human descendants. He contrasted the Harlem of the 1940s with what he'd recalled from two decades earlier and decided that "The children born during the beautiful years of the middle 'twenties had grown up to be muggers and cultist."[25] Devastated by riots in 1935 and 1943, the Harlem dream of a racial mecca had turned into "a black ghetto and a slum, a clot in the American bloodstream." The body of writing associated with the place seemed quite frail when compared to the human tragedy of two decades.

The Harlem lava had cooled into a bedrock symbol of black literature. But black writers publishing in the 1940s saw mainly a plate on which to crack, with violence, their identity. The Hampton College professor and *Afro-American* newspaper reviewer J. Saunders Redding was that rare black to have published in 1930 a story of dissolute cabaret life called "Delaware Coon" in the Paris magazine *transition* – bona fide renaissance and "lost generation" credentials. But the Brown University-educated Redding, whose literary estimates were well regarded by both blacks and whites, sounded the steady note of discontent that by then marred the period. The renaissance was too greatly overvalued. "Almost every writer or would be writer who so much as lived in or around New York in the middle or late Twenties, or who had any contact with the literary figures and enterprises of that period, have gotten some sort of critical attention or another, and some of those who got attention simply were not worth it."[26] The orthodoxy of disparagement was intense enough that by 1951, when Richard Gibson was attending a Kenyon College dominated by the New Criticism of John Crowe Ransom, Gibson felt compelled to free himself from the entire tradition of black writing. At bottom, he could hold only "disgust for all ... the incompetence, the sentimentality, the hypocrisy, the intellectual irresponsibility, in sum the entire minstrel psychology."[27] "[T]here is not as yet a single work by an American Negro which, when judged without bias, stands out as a masterpiece" (255). Gibson believed that the liberal press in his day was ruining the black writer, and Redding too blamed the conjunction of publishers and patrons for misshaping black writing. When he recorded an obituary for Countee Cullen in 1946, he recounted the period with no small dose of bitters. The black artists constituted an "indominitable band," but they were plagued by "some white observers" "saying that primitivism was the essential attribute of colored writers and artists." The most sensitive of the artists, Cullen had been psychologically "bothered" by the fact that the requests for him to produce work showing the pure black racial essence barely hid the cruel assumption "that the colored man was not quite civilized."[28] Twenty years later, with few exceptions, the concentration was on the tragedy and not the triumph of the movement.

It took close to fifty years for major reconsiderations of the Harlem Renaissance to catch hold. The black social and political consciousness

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movement in the 1960s and 1970s stimulated scholarship in all periods of African American literature and history, and the writing that took place during the 1920s benefited enormously. The judgments in totality tended to remain harsh, partly because of the optimism of scholars in the 1970s concerning the potential for full black integration into American society. In the book that began the sweeping reconsideration of the black writers of the 1920s called *Harlem Renaissance*, Nathan Huggins proffered an explanation of the phenomenon that had punished Cullen and the rest. He held that white voyeurs pursued black life to find an "alter ego," and "blacks – sensing this psychic dependency – have been all too willing to join in the charade, hiding behind the minstrel mask, appearing to be what white men wanted them to be, and finding pleasure in the deception which all too often was a trick on themselves."[29] But Huggins implicitly forecast an era when "deception" was impossible. This was also the broad view held by the writers who followed the 1920s. The next generation of black writers decided that even the elegant sonnets, the cultivated learning, the joyful exploration of ordinary black pleasures, and even the seats on platforms in halls of radicalism had become merely another version of a minstrel mask, ultimately painful and distorting. However, they were unable to predict the kind of resolution that would address the American dilemma of racial injustice, of slavery and segregation, a resolution incomplete and still engaging formidable problems after the chief legal barriers had fallen.

Meanwhile, the mounting succession of political setbacks to the Civil Rights Movement during the 1980s and 1990s and the resulting reconstitution of de facto racial segregation had an ironically beneficial effect for studies of the Renaissance. The writers' movement no longer suffered the crippling criticism of being an inadequate mover of social historical change. In addition, the emergence of feminist, post-structuralist, and historicist analytical techniques displaced the formalist literary hierarchies that had been more generally embraced by American and British elites. Harlem Renaissance textual contributions now receive credit for their transgressive, fragmentary, referential, occlusive capacities and are no longer dismissed for lacking density, high seriousness, complexity, or even widespread popularity, necessary features for critical attention during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s.

NOTES

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