

## 2

EMILY BERNARD

# The Renaissance and the Vogue

“It was the period when the Negro was in vogue.”<sup>1</sup> These words introduce readers of *The Big Sea*, a 1940 autobiography by Langston Hughes, to the era known today as the Harlem Renaissance, which commenced in 1924, and was the first significant literary and cultural movement in African American history. This sentence by Hughes captures what was at once transcendent and dispiriting about the era. The Harlem Renaissance was a moment when blackness was celebrated; but to be in vogue is to be in fashion, and fashions always die. As an era concerned with the vitalization as well as with the demise of African American identity, the Harlem Renaissance was an era best characterized by its contradictions: every point of celebration was also a source of contention. This chapter begins with a discussion of the contradictions at the root of the ideological issues that occasioned what was both glorious and grim about Harlem in the 1920s. But before we can get to the achievements of the Harlem Renaissance, we must confront the problems inherent in the term “Harlem Renaissance” itself.

Was the Harlem Renaissance an actual renaissance? Scholarship on this period supports competing points of view. *Webster’s New World Dictionary* defines a “renaissance” as a “rebirth” or “revival.” Some historians and critics believe that what took place during the Harlem Renaissance years was not a rebirth, as such, but only another stage in the evolution of African and African American art that had begun with the inception of African presence in America. While it is true that African and African American art forms never died – new ones were created and evolved even during slavery – a particular black American identity was born after Emancipation, and that was the “New Negro.” The Harlem Renaissance is also known as the New Negro Movement.

The term “New Negro” was not invented during the Harlem Renaissance, but had, in fact, been circulating in American public discourse since the 1700s. The New Negro was more than a persona; he was an idea, an ideological construction. The New Negro was invented, in part, by blacks

attempting to correct the negative stereotypes about them that were already in play by the time they arrived in the New World. As Henry Louis Gates explains in his essay “The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black,” “Almost as soon as blacks could write, it seems, they set out to redefine – against already received racist stereotypes – who and what a black person was, and how unlike the racist stereotype the black original indeed actually could be.”<sup>2</sup> Black people created the “New Negro” as an attempt to convert popular stereotypes about blacks from those based upon absence (of morality, intelligence, and other basic features of humanity) to presence. A preoccupation with this term, and the hope of liberation it represented, became a near-obsession for Harlem Renaissance intellectuals. In fact, Gates suggests that the Harlem Renaissance was finally not much more than a vehicle created to contain the “culturally willed myth of the New Negro” (132).

What is a “New Negro,” exactly? An accurate definition of the New Negro is impossible without an appreciation of its counterpart, the Old Negro. The philosopher and Harlem Renaissance power broker Alain Locke describes the Old Negro in “The New Negro,” an introduction to his anthology, *The New Negro*, the definitive anthology of the Harlem Renaissance. “The Old Negro, we must remember,” Locke writes, “was a creature of moral debate and historical controversy. His had been a stock figure perpetuated as an historical fiction partly in innocent sentimentalism, partly in deliberate reactionism.”<sup>3</sup> If you have seen D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation*, you have seen the Old Negro. Picture the antics of the nameless black extras that populate that 1915 film, and you will comprehend immediately the kinds of associations that the phrase “Old Negro” conjured for black Americans of the early twentieth century; conversely, these same images also suggest the kind of corrective ideological labor that the “New Negro” was meant to perform.

It is important to note that Locke’s essay “The New Negro” begins with, and in some sense relies upon, a discussion of the Old Negro. In many ways, the term “New Negro” does not even make sense without its counterpart, “Old Negro.” Ultimately, in fact, the terms are hardly in opposition at all. Instead, they are in dialectical harmony and fundamentally necessary to each other. It is not implausible to say that a definition of one term is only really possible in light of the other. In other words, the New Negro is finally everything the Old Negro is not, and vice versa.

“Negro life is not only establishing new contacts and founding new centers, it is finding a new soul,” Alain Locke proclaimed in the opening pages of *The New Negro* (xxvii). The world of African American arts of the 1920s was intoxicated with the idea that it had invented itself, not only in

terms of its creative ambitions, but also as a locus of a new black identity, namely the New Negro. Black intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance invested in the ideology of the New Negro all of their ambitions to liberate black people – psychologically, socially, and even politically – from the denigration of the slave past.

In “Racial Doubt and Racial Shame in the Harlem Renaissance,”<sup>4</sup> African American Studies scholar Arnold Rampersad writes: “a modern renaissance (English, Irish, American, what-have-you) seems to me to depend in a fundamental way on the presence of strong feelings of inferiority, cultural and otherwise, at the very moment – paradoxically – of the repudiation or transcendence of those feelings of inferiority in the name of progress, emancipation, and independence” (32). The paradox that Rampersad speaks of is embedded in the term “New Negro” itself. The inextricability of the terms “Old Negro” and “New Negro” presented a problem for black intellectuals of the 1920s intent upon severing the relationship between the two types, embracing the latter while turning the collective racial back on the former, thereby obliterating forever the ugly history of shame and servility that the Old Negro represented. But the progress promised by the New Negro Movement, or Harlem Renaissance, could be evident only in relation to the agonizing history that the term “New Negro” was meant to obscure. Continuous comparisons between Old Negro and New Negro were necessary to maintain distinctions between the two types. That meant that the figure of the Old Negro had to be kept alive and in the center of discussions about racial progress. So, it was finally impossible for Harlem Renaissance intellectuals to leave the Old Negro behind. They needed him; he reminded them of exactly what they were shedding as well as what precisely they were trying to become. The necessity of keeping close at hand the very image they were trying so desperately to cast off created an intellectual anxiety among Harlem Renaissance intellectuals, an anxiety that served as the primary fuel of the New Negro Movement.

The acute self-consciousness of the New Negro Movement had led scholars to question its legitimacy. But even if the Harlem Renaissance was a “culturally willed myth,” as Gates has argued, or “a forced phenomenon,” as David Levering Lewis asserts, its importance in African American cultural history is undeniable.<sup>5</sup> Even the term “New Negro,” with its contradictory assertions of inferiority and triumph, represents accurately the tug of war that lay at the root of black consciousness throughout this period. The Harlem Renaissance was the first cohesive cultural movement in African American history. Never before had African Americans had an opportunity to take on the project of national identity with such intensity. The Harlem Renaissance, then, became almost literally a way for African Americans to

write themselves into the narrative of American identity. The debates that took place during this period about how best to represent the significance of African American achievement on the national stage are debates that continue to resonate in African American intellectual circles to this day.

Ideological complexities aside, the Harlem Renaissance was also spectacular as a material phenomenon. Harlem itself was a bustle of activity; inside cabarets, buffet flats, speakeasies, and ballrooms, each dancer, singer, and musician seemed more ingenious than the one who came before her. In “Spectacles in Color,” a chapter in *The Big Sea*, Hughes captures the particular social alchemy of Harlem during the 1920s in his descriptions of a Harlem drag ball, lodge parties, funerals, weddings, and the enterprising ways of Reverend Dr. Becton, a popular Harlem preacher (273–8). “Harlem likes spectacles of one kind or another – but then so does all the world,” Hughes writes (274). For a time, the world came to see the spectacle that was Harlem, which was, for a time, like no other spectacle anywhere.

The cultural activity that has come to characterize the Harlem Renaissance was by no means limited to Harlem, whose geography, in spatial terms, consists of only two square miles at the northern tip of Manhattan. African American art, music, literature, and politics also thrived during the New Negro Movement in cities like Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC, where more than quarter of a million blacks settled after fleeing southern poverty and racial violence during the Great Migration. Importantly, there was meaningful creative interplay between African American, Caribbean, and African writers during the Harlem Renaissance years. African American artists were concerned with what was being produced in other parts of the Diaspora as much as they were with the artistic flowering within their own borders. Most recently, a 2003 study by Brent Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*, makes evident the crucial feature of black internationalism that was actually embedded within the framework of the Harlem Renaissance itself.<sup>6</sup>

Still, despite its inherent limitations, Harlem, New York, was unique as a city that spoke to black hopes and dreams. “I was in love with Harlem long before I got there,” Langston Hughes wrote in a 1963 retrospective essay, “My Early Days in Harlem.”<sup>7</sup> During the Harlem Renaissance years, Hughes spent more time away from Harlem than in it. In his autobiography, *The Big Sea*, and his correspondence to friends like Arna Bontemps, Carl Van Vechten, and others, Hughes keeps a faithful catalog of the numerous journeys he took within and without the borders of the United States during the years Harlem was in vogue. And yet when he writes of Harlem itself, he describes the singular romantic spell the neighborhood cast over him. As a

teenager in Mexico with his father, Hughes “had an overwhelming desire to see Harlem,” he wrote in *The Big Sea*. “More than Paris, or the Shakespeare country, or Berlin, or the Alps, I wanted to see Harlem, the greatest Negro city in the world” (62). He describes his first subway trip to Harlem: “I went up the steps and out into the bright September sunlight. Harlem! I stood there, dropped my bags, took a deep breath and felt happy again” (81).

Hughes was not alone. “I’d rather be a lamppost in Harlem than Governor of Georgia,” went a popular saying of the day. No city in the North captured the imagination of the black migrant more fiercely than Harlem, which was first a Dutch settlement before it became German, then Irish, then Jewish, then black, after a considerable real estate war and subsequent white flight out of Harlem neighborhoods. The neighborhoods that comprised Harlem, known as the “black mecca,” were not only famously elegant, they became home to some of the most diverse black populations in the country. Laborers fresh from the South rubbed elbows with African Americans who had know wealth, independence, and social prestige for generations. Immigrants from the West Indies and Africa encountered black people with entirely different sensibilities and customs. Some of these subcultures blended harmoniously while others did so grudgingly, but all of this mixing provided excellent fodder for African American artists determined to translate the cultural upheaval they saw around them into their art. In 1928, Harlem alone claimed 200,000 black residents.

Black migrants mingled with African American natives of New York across culture and class lines, both outdoors – along the elegant avenues and broad sidewalks that characterized Harlem – and indoors – inside cabarets, buffet flats, speakeasies and ballrooms that dominated nightlife in the city. The Harlem Renaissance flourished alongside the Jazz Age, an era that recalls the institutions that made it famous, nightclubs like the Cotton Club, Connie’s Inn, and Small’s Paradise. It was nightlife that brought Langston Hughes to Harlem. There were plenty of practical reasons for Hughes, as an aspiring young writer, to set his sights on Harlem in the 1920s. Most prominently, New York had recently supplanted Boston as the center of American publishing. But the spectacle of Harlem nightlife was what enchanted Hughes and got him to Manhattan. “To see *Shuffle Along* was the main reason I wanted to go to Columbia,” Hughes confesses in *The Big Sea* about his college choice. Hughes lasted at Columbia only a year, but he would have a relationship to Harlem and its culture for the rest of his life. In the portion of *The Big Sea* devoted to the Harlem Renaissance, Hughes credits shows like *Shuffle Along* (1921) and *Runnin’ Wild* (1923), and the Charleston, with launching the Harlem Renaissance: “But certainly it was the musical revue, *Shuffle Along*, that gave a scintillating send-off to

that Negro vogue in Manhattan, which reached its peak just before the crash of 1929, the crash that sent Negroes, white folks, and all rolling down the hill toward the Works Progress Administration” (223). Hughes saw other shows that year, he writes, “but I remember *Shuffle Along* best of all. It gave just the proper push – a pre-Charleston kick – to that Negro vogue of the 20’s, that spread to books, African sculpture, music, and dancing” (224).

Shows like *Shuffle Along* lent dimension to the vogue of the Negro, bringing white people to Harlem “in droves,” Hughes recalls. White interest in Harlem created the central paradox of the New Negro Movement. White financial support was essential to the success of the Harlem Renaissance, but it also forced restraints on black creative expression. In the case of Harlem nightlife, for instance, while white interest meant increased revenue in Harlem neighborhoods, it also meant that black patrons had to sit in segregated, “Jim Crow,” sections in order to accommodate its downtown clientele, who came to Harlem to look at black people but not experience them as equals. Hughes describes the phenomenon in *The Big Sea*: “So Harlem Negroes did not like the Cotton Club and never appreciated its Jim Crow policy in the very heart of their dark community. Nor did ordinary Negroes like the growing influx of whites toward Harlem after sundown, flooding the little cabarets and bars where formerly only colored people laughed and sang, and where now the strangers were given the best ringside tables to sit and stare at the Negro customers – like amusing animals in a zoo” (224–5). There was a substantial and meaningful disharmony between white and black experiences in Harlem. Hughes explains it well: “So thousands of whites came to Harlem night after night, thinking the Negroes loved to have them there, and firmly believing that all Harlemites left their homes at sundown to sing and dance in cabarets, because most of the whites saw nothing but the cabarets, not the houses” (225). The thrill of Harlem nightlife brought to the fore the intractable nature of American racism that made real black progress – the kind hoped for in *The New Negro* – impossible.

“Rent parties,” thrown ostensibly to raise rent money for the host, became important avenues for African Americans to congregate privately, away from the curious gazes of white people. However successful these parties were at giving blacks in Harlem sanctuary from inquiring white eyes, they could not resolve the larger conundrum of white influence on the Harlem Renaissance, a conundrum to which this chapter will return.

If at night New York and Harlem roared, then during the day it thrived, too, as home to the most important social and political institutions of the Harlem Renaissance period: the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the National Urban League, and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Each of these institutions had

distinct personalities embodied by the individuals most closely associated with them as well as by the magazines and newspapers they produced. The NAACP had its most visible spokesperson in the scholar, activist, and novelist W. E. B. Du Bois, who edited *The Crisis*, the house organ of the NAACP. The National Urban League had educator and writer Charles S. Johnson, who edited its magazine, *Opportunity*. The UNIA was founded and led by Marcus Garvey, who also edited the organization's weekly newspaper, *Negro World*. These organizations and magazines were among several that were crucial during the Harlem Renaissance because of their dedication to social and political progress for black people. In addition, *The Crisis* and *Opportunity* in particular were critical because of their commitment to the identification and development of African American literature and art. For most African American writers, getting a book published may have been the ultimate goal, but newspapers and magazines reached the broadest audiences, and, because of this, constituted significant vehicles for cultural expression during the Harlem Renaissance.

The question of which years mark the Harlem Renaissance generates as much debate as many other aspects of the cultural movement, but this chapter identifies 1924 as the initial year of the Harlem Renaissance period because of a party given in March of this year by *Opportunity* editor Charles S. Johnson. Johnson originally intended to throw this party as a way of honoring Jessie Fauset, literary editor of *The Crisis*, on the publication of her first novel, *There Is Confusion* (1924). In the end, 110 members of the New York literati, black and white, attended the dinner, which was held at the Civic Club, the only elite club in Manhattan that welcomed both black people and white women. Black and white editors, writers, and publishers addressed the crowd and referred to their common belief that a new era had begun for black creativity.

After the dinner, Paul Kellogg, editor of the sociological periodical *Survey Graphic*, suggested to Charles S. Johnson that his magazine devote an entire issue to African American culture, and that Johnson serve as editor of the volume. Johnson enlisted the philosopher Alain Locke to help him assemble the issue. In March 1925, a special edition of *Survey Graphic*, entitled "Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro," was released. It was the most widely read issue in the magazine's history, selling 42,000 copies – more than twice its regular circulation. Months later, Alain Locke expanded this special edition into an arts anthology, *The New Negro* (1925), widely recognized as the first manifesto produced by the Harlem Renaissance. *The New Negro*, which featured portrait drawings as well as essays, poetry, and fiction, includes the work of most of the key figures of this movement.

Inspired by the success of his 1924 dinner, Charles S. Johnson decided that *Opportunity* would host a literary contest; prizes would be awarded in

May 1925. The first announcement for the contest appeared in the August 1924 issue of *Opportunity*. Johnson titillated his readers by adding new names of influential whites who would serve as judges for each issue. Ultimately, twenty-four respected white and black editors, publishers and artists served as contest judges in five categories: essays, short stories, poetry, drama, and personal experiences. The wife of Henry Goddard Leach, editor of *Forum* magazine, contributed the prize money, which totaled \$470.

The awards ceremony, held in May 1925, was a resounding success: 316 people attended to witness future luminaries like Sterling Brown, Roland Hayes, E. Franklin Frazier, Zora Neale Hurston, Eric Walrond, Countee Cullen, and Langston Hughes accept their awards. Cullen and Hughes, who would always be rivals for the hearts of Harlem Renaissance poetry lovers, dominated the poetry category. One of Hughes' signature poems, "The Weary Blues" (1925), took the first prize. At the end of the evening, Johnson announced that Casper Holstein, king of the Harlem numbers racket, would fund the second annual *Opportunity* contest.

Charles S. Johnson and *Opportunity* provided an impetus for the literary flowering of the Harlem Renaissance, but no magazine and no single figure meant more to this period than *The Crisis* and its editor, W. E. B. Du Bois. *The Crisis* also held literary contests, and Du Bois presided over the first, which was held in November 1925. *The Crisis* had an enormous circulation – 95,000 at its peak in 1919 – so to be published there was a sign of success, at least among the black middle class. Nothing was published in *The Crisis* that did not meet Du Bois' exacting standards. Between 1919 and 1924, when he became deeply involved in the Pan-African Congress movement, Du Bois relied upon his literary editor at *The Crisis*, Jessie Redmon Fauset, to uphold his standards. These years were rich for African American writing, and Jessie Fauset's understanding of the literary contours of the Harlem Renaissance was reflected in the foresight she demonstrated by publishing writers like Langston Hughes and Jean Toomer before other gatekeepers did so. Fauset left *The Crisis* in 1926. By that time she had made a substantial impact on the magazine and, by extension, the Harlem Renaissance. She would go on to write three more novels of her own.

Du Bois had seen the coming of a Negro renaissance as early as 1920, when he had announced in the pages of *The Crisis* his belief in the importance of black writers asserting authority over their own experience. For too long, he believed, blacks had endured the ridicule of white artists who had risen to success by reducing African Americans to their most debased elements (here, think again of *Birth of a Nation*). Because art had the potential to liberate black people from social bondage, Du Bois believed, it should be approached with gravity. In 1926, he wrote, famously, in *The Crisis* that he did not "care



a damn” for any art that did not do the work of racial uplift. As editor of *The Crisis*, his words carried weight.

The passion in Du Bois’ words signals a larger tension that was at work in the Harlem Renaissance literary community by 1926. On one side were intellectuals like Du Bois, who believed that black art should always serve as good propaganda for the race. On the other side were writers like Langston Hughes and Wallace Thurman, who defended their right to represent the Negro as they pleased, in both positive and negative lights. Hughes wrote a 1926 essay for *The Nation*, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” which represented not only his personal philosophies about artistic freedom, but also the philosophies of the “younger generation of Negro Artists,” as Hughes christened them. Explicitly, “The Negro Artist” was a response to “The Negro-Art Hokum,” a caustic essay by satirist George S. Schuyler, also published in *The Nation* in 1926, who used his essay to lampoon the idea that an authentic black art actually existed. In “The Negro Artist,” Hughes staked his own position in the continuous debate about the meaning and purpose of Negro art.

These disparate aesthetic philosophies found concrete purpose in the scandal surrounding a single book, *Nigger Heaven*, and its singular author, Carl Van Vechten. When *Nigger Heaven* was published in 1926, Van Vechten, a novelist, cultural critic, and Negro arts enthusiast, had been a presence in the Harlem Renaissance since its inception. At the 1925 *Opportunity* awards dinner, he made a point of introducing himself to the evening’s brightest star, Langston Hughes. Within three weeks of this meeting, Van Vechten had secured for Hughes a contract with Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. for his first book of poetry, *The Weary Blues* (1926), and suggested the title for the volume, as well. Van Vechten would serve as a mentor to Hughes for the rest of his life. He would also come to serve as a champion of the work of Nella Larsen, whom he would also guide to publication at Knopf, as well as Zora Neale Hurston, who deemed him a “Negrotarian.” Van Vechten also rescued from obscurity the anonymously published *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), and reissued it in 1927 as a novel by James Weldon Johnson, the well-known African American political and cultural figure, and his close friend. Van Vechten was far from the only white person who championed the cause of black arts during the Harlem Renaissance. Charlotte Mason, for instance, patron to Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, exercised power over the movement, albeit in her private, individual relationships with Hughes, Hurston, and Alain Locke, who introduced Mason to Hughes and Hurston, among others. There were other powerful white figures in the New Negro Movement, but none outdistanced Carl Van Vechten in his commitment to and impact on black arts and letters.

Van Vechten called *Nigger Heaven* his most serious novel, and it was the only novel he would publish about African American life and culture. When the book came out, he was already the author of four novels that had, collectively, made him a bestseller and a celebrity. In addition, he had published numerous articles in popular, mainstream publications, like *Vanity Fair*, extolling the virtues of spirituals and the blues, arguing for their recognition as authentic American art forms. Still, Van Vechten had concerns about how African Americans, not his primary readership heretofore, would react to his representation of Harlem life. In order to address these concerns, he anonymously composed a questionnaire for *The Crisis*, “The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed?” in 1926. Answers to this questionnaire were solicited from a racially diverse group of literary figures from all corners of the American literary world, and then published in *The Crisis* over a period of several months. Six months later, *Nigger Heaven* was published.

Du Bois hated *Nigger Heaven*, and published a scathing review of it in *The Crisis*, advising readers to “drop the book gently into the grate.” Hughes defended the book in newspaper articles and even in his 1940 autobiography, *The Big Sea*. The opposing viewpoints held by these two were matched by reviews by others that were equally extreme. Both loved and hated, *Nigger Heaven* went through nine printings in its first four months, selling more copies than any other Harlem Renaissance novel.

In 1926, Carl Van Vechten and his novel *Nigger Heaven* had become handy symbolic means for some black writers to announce their desire to break away from literary conventions that had, according to these writers, traditionally constrained the black writer. A 1926 journal *Fire!!* became the clearest articulation of the aesthetic goals of this younger generation, which included Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Bruce Nugent, and Wallace Thurman. In *Fire!!*, conceived and edited by Wallace Thurman, these writers and their peers wrote about sex and Carl Van Vechten, among other topics, as a way of critiquing censorship and racial parochialism in literature. As much as the editors of *Fire!!* dreamt that their magazine would operate free of white support, such a goal proved unrealistic. An actual fire put an end to the journal, which lasted for only one issue.

The threat that Van Vechten seemed to pose to black culture was bigger than his novel. Van Vechten was unambivalent and unapologetic about his own feelings about the “vogue” of the Negro: he was all for it. He felt black people should be for it, too. He described his beliefs in his own response to *The Crisis* questionnaire he had anonymously composed: “The squalor of Negro life, the vice of Negro life, offer a wealth of novel, exotic, picturesque material to the artist,” he wrote. “Are Negro writers going to write about

this exotic material while it is still fresh,” he questioned, “or will they continue to make a free gift of it to white authors who will exploit it until not a drop of vitality remains?” Six months after he published these statements in *The Crisis*, *Nigger Heaven* was released.

Like W. E. B. Du Bois, many black readers felt betrayed by *Nigger Heaven*. “Anyone who would call a book *Nigger Heaven* would call a Negro a Nigger,” a *New York News* reviewer put it succinctly. Van Vechten would always claim the title was meant to be ironic. He explained that “nigger heaven” was a common term used in Harlem to refer to the balcony section in segregated theaters usually reserved for black patrons. He insisted that he had employed it as a metaphor to comment more generally upon the cruelties and absurdities of segregation and racism. But Van Vechten also believed that his status as an “honorary Negro” somehow absolved him of racism; or at least, it lent him an authority to use “nigger,” a term sometimes used privately between blacks but traditionally forbidden whites. Finally, a combination of naïveté and arrogance led him to believe he was unique, a white man who had transcended his whiteness.

The book had its black defenders, however. Among them was Langston Hughes. “No book could possibly be as bad as *Nigger Heaven* has been painted,” Hughes wrote in the *Pittsburgh Courier* in 1927; in his review, he sidestepped the question of whether the novel had literary merit. Even when he returned to the controversy nearly fifteen years later in *The Big Sea*, he never claimed that the book should be appreciated as an exceptional work of literature. Instead he sympathized with those who felt alienated by the racial epithet that was the title, but insisted that readers put the issue in perspective. “The critics of the left, like the Negroes of the right, proceeded to light on Mr. Van Vechten, and he was accused of ruining, distorting, polluting, and corrupting every Negro writer from then on,” Hughes recounted.

Of all his black associates, Van Vechten was most often accused of corrupting Langston Hughes, particularly when *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, Hughes’ second book of poetry, was published in 1927. *Fine Clothes* drew as much fire for its title and sensual content as did *Nigger Heaven*. Critics who associated *Fine Clothes* with Van Vechten’s influence on Hughes either did not know or did not care that Hughes had composed most of the poems before he met Van Vechten. When Hughes defended Van Vechten, then, he was essentially defending his own artistic decisions.

Hughes was also motivated to defend *Nigger Heaven* because he shared a similar aesthetic sensibility with its author. In his 1926 essay, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” Hughes proclaimed: “Let the blare of Negro jazz bands and the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith singing Blues penetrate the closed ears of the colored near-intellectual until they listen

and perhaps understand.” Hughes found the social anxieties of the “smug Negro middle class,” as he called them, boring. He was inspired by the way the black majority lived: “These common people are not afraid of spirituals, as for a long time their more intellectual brethren were, and jazz is their child.”

Langston Hughes loved the “low-down folks,” which is how he referred to the black working class. His passion was matched in intensity by that of Carl Van Vechten. When in the March 1926 issue of *The Crisis*, Van Vechten champions “the squalor of Negro life, the vice of Negro life,” he sounds unmistakably like Langston Hughes when he celebrates “the so-called common element” who are fond of “their nip of gin on Saturday nights” in “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.” Both Hughes and Van Vechten defended the black artist’s right to paint the world and its citizens as he saw them, but Van Vechten’s position contained a decidedly pragmatic element, as is evident in this excerpt from “Moanin’ Wid a Sword in Mah Han,” a 1926 essay by Van Vechten about Negro spirituals:

It is a foregone conclusion that with the craving to hear these songs that is known to exist on the part of the public, it will not be long before white singers have taken them over and made them enough their own so that the public will be surfeited sooner or later with opportunities to enjoy them, and – when the Negro tardily offers to sing them in public – it will perhaps be too late to stir the interest which now lies latent in the breast of every music lover.<sup>8</sup>

In other words, African Americans should heed the call of the market – and fast. Van Vechten’s argument is premised upon the inevitability of white fascination with the fiction of black primitivism. If the white gaze is here to stay, then black people should manipulate it in their own interests. We may bristle at Van Vechten’s brutal cynicism and essentialist language, but the outcome he describes above is a veritable cliché in the annals of African American culture. White spectatorship – and appropriation – is, finally, a central facet of African American cultural history.

The urgency in Van Vechten’s language foreshadows, unhappily, the outcome of the Harlem Renaissance. A black movement that was necessarily dependent on white support, the New Negro Movement was diminished by the Wall Street Crash of 1929, and then effectively terminated by the Great Depression. Just as dramatically as the Negro found himself in vogue in 1924, he found himself out of fashion a few years later. Economic realities notwithstanding, “How could a large and enthusiastic number of people be crazy about Negroes forever?” Hughes asks rhetorically in *The Big Sea* (228). But even though vogues die, they are reborn, and with that rebirth are often transformed into something greater. Black communities were devastated by

the Crash, and yet African American art thrived and evolved to negotiate the realities of new economic, social, and political conditions, including new forms of white institutional support. Some scholars continue to isolate the Harlem Renaissance as having been uniquely tied to white influence for its existence. But the inextricability of white investment in black culture has been a constant feature of African American life. If the New Negro Movement is unique, it is so because it remains unmatched as the most serious collective attempt on the part of black writers and artists to grapple with the complexity of African American identity in the modern world.

## NOTES

1. Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1940), p. 228.
2. Henry Louis Gates Jr., "The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black," *Representations* 24 (Fall 1988), 131.
3. Alain Locke, ed., *The New Negro* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), p. 5.
4. Arnold Rampersad, "Racial Doubt and Racial Shame in the Harlem Renaissance," in Genevieve Fabre and Michel Feith, eds., *Temples for Tomorrow: Looking Back at the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).
5. David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).
6. Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).
7. Langston Hughes, "My Early Days in Harlem," *Freedomways* 3 (1963), 312-14.
8. Carl Van Vechten, "Moanin' Wid a Sword in Mah Han'," *Vanity Fair* 1926. Reprinted in Bruce Kellner, ed., "Keep A-Inchin' Along": *Selected Writings of Carl Van Vechten about Black Art and Letters* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979), p. 55.