

Engendering the Harlem Renaissance

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The advent of the New Negro Renaissance brought a generation of black women intellectuals, artists and musicians to the forefront of American culture. Paula Giddings suggests that this progression coincided with social transformations that allowed black women to have more agency in the 1920s¹. At the turn of the century, black women were getting married later, having fewer children, and in general, demanding more autonomy within the private sphere². This movement coincided with the first migration, which brought a disproportionate amount of women than men into urban cities³. Urban landscapes presented young women with the opportunity to engage in commercial activities away from their family's watchful eye⁴. Their newfound independence was met with disapproval; as young black women were expected to model prosocial behavior dictated by the cosmopolitan elite. The politics of respectability required that black women prove they were worthy of social equality⁵. While novelists like Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen and Angelina Weld Grimké appeared to lead the Renaissance through their commitment to both respectability and cultural advancement, their literature reveals that the ideal of New Negro womanhood debilitated their own sense of self⁶. Blues performers like Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey used their space in the entertainment industry to contend with

¹ Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: Amistad Press, 2006), 137.

² Giddings, 137.

³ Giddings, 142.

⁴ Cookie Woolner, "'Woman Slain in Queer Love Brawl': African American Women, Same-Sex Desire, and Violence in the Urban North, 1920-1929," *The Journal of African American History* 100, no. 3 (2013): 413.

⁵ Woolner, 414; Giddings, 154.

⁶ Cheryl A. Wall, "On Being Young- A Woman- And Colored: When Harlem was in Vogue" in *Women of the Harlem Renaissance* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1995), 13; Cheryl A. Wall, "Passing for What?: Aspects of Identity in Nella Larsen's Novels," *Black American Literature Forum* 20, no. 1-2 (1986): 98; Brett Beemyn, "The New Negro Renaissance, A Bisexual Renaissance: The Lives and Works of Angela Weld Grimké and Richard Bruce Nugent," in *Modern American Queer History*, ed. Allida M. Black (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 41.

these issues, broaching themes of migration, urban life and sexuality⁷. Cookie Woolner explains that most of the women who lived in these urban cities were working class migrants from the South⁸. These women existed outside of the cultural spaces where the New Negro Movement was taking place, and were mostly unaccounted for in the historical record⁹. As subjects of criticism, these women used discreet social networks in order to find all-women communities where they could define their own womanhood and sexuality outside the gaze of the middle-class¹⁰. This considered, feminist frameworks introduced in the 1970s have allowed historians to reevaluate what black women living in city spaces really thought about New Negro ideals¹¹. While their contributions went undetected for decades, black women who participated in the Renaissance often disguised cultural critiques of the combined force of racism and sexism within their art, literature and life.

In her essay, “Histories and Heresies: Engendering the Harlem Renaissance”, Cheryl A. Wall discerns that the leaders of the New Negro Movement often described the avant-garde through masculine terms¹². The philosopher Alain Locke defined the “New Negro” in 1925 through the geography of Harlem, asserting that this city was “the first concentration in history of so many diverse elements of Negro life”¹³. Like others at the forefront of the movement, Locke considered men to be at the crux of this diversity. He continues to explain that everyone

⁷ Hazel V. Carby, “It Jus Be’s Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women’s Blues,” *Radical America* 20, no. 4 (1986): 14.

⁸ Woolner, 408.

⁹ Woolner, 408.

¹⁰ Woolner, 414.

¹¹ Cheryl A. Wall, “Histories and Heresies: Engendering the Harlem Renaissance,” *Meridians* 2, no. 1 (2001): 64.

¹² Wall, 63.

¹³ Alain Locke, “Philosopher, Defines the “New Negro”, 1925” in *Major Problems in African American History* 2, ed. Thomas C. Holt and Elsa Barkley Brown (Boston: Wadsworth, 2000), 192.

from “the peasant” to the “professional man” will convene in Harlem to pursue complete social equality¹⁴. Although they were not validated in Locke’s philosophy, black women were expected to fulfill a crucial role in this process. Racial equality required that black women were to become respectable companions to the New Negro man. Women living in urban cities were so bound by expectations of them as “race women”, that the failure to be respectable was considered to be the cause of persistent inequality¹⁵. Despite this responsibility, Locke ultimately considered men’s written work to be more valuable to the movement¹⁶. Wall recognizes the need to engender the New Negro Renaissance, meaning that gender analysis must be applied to reconsider how women and men experienced this time period differently¹⁷.

The life of Angelina Weld Grimké is a prominent example of how critical re-evaluation of women’s work from the 1920’s will expand the scope of the movement. Throughout her short career, Grimké’s writing introduced themes that challenged conventional notions of what defined the New Negro Woman¹⁸. Particularly, Grimké’s writing spoke about her love for both men and women, while she felt intense pressure from her family and the Black Bourgeoisie to conform to heterosexuality in her art and daily life¹⁹. Cookie Woolner explains that while there were gay men who spoke about same-sex love in their writing during the 1920s, women who loved women were under surveillance²⁰. The pressure to conform to her family’s expectations caused Grimké to abandon her career and public life²¹. Despite her public image, Grimké provided early

¹⁴ Locke, 193; Giddings, 154.

¹⁵ Woolner, 413; Wall, 61.

¹⁶ Wall, 63.

¹⁷ Wall, 68.

¹⁸ Beemyn, 37.

¹⁹ Beemyn, 37.

²⁰ Beemyn, 36; Woolner, 410.

²¹ Beemyn, 37.

contributions to a Black literary canon which included depictions of bisexuality²². Engendering the Harlem Renaissance allows for new narratives to be considered, specifically ones that enlighten the ways that black women renegotiated gender and sexuality throughout 1920s.

Brett Beemyn reaffirms the need to introduce critical gender analysis to histories of the Harlem Renaissance through his work on both Grimké and Richard Bruce Nugent. Like Grimké, Nugent's work was considerably undervalued until scholars in the fields of feminist and queer studies recognized its importance²³. While Grimké was more conservative, Nugent's work outwardly rejected black middle-class heteronormativity through writing literature that depicted predominantly same-sex relationships²⁴. Furthermore, his personal connections to Alain Locke suggest the existence of queer networks within the movement itself²⁵. Beemyn used communication between the two men as proof that they not only had a friendship, but they often confided in each other about their sexual identity²⁶. Although Nugent was more transparent about his identity in his written work, his disillusionment also brought him to stop writing towards the end of the Renaissance²⁷. Their absence from the historical record shows that while there was a growing representation of queer identities in urban cities, it was exceedingly difficult to affirm same-sex feelings. However, Beemyn argues that these writers contributed to an emerging visibility of same-sex relationships within the New Negro Renaissance²⁸. The list of writers who grappled with these complicated themes is not limited to Grimké and Nugent. Cookie Woolner contributes Nella Larsen's *Passing* as a well-circulated novel that embedded queer themes under

²² Beemyn, 36.

²³ Beemyn, 37.

²⁴ Beemyn, 37.

²⁵ Beemyn, 42.

²⁶ Beemyn, 42.

²⁷ Beemyn, 37.

²⁸ Beemyn, 44.

more obvious plots about heterosexual marriage²⁹. Considering Cheryl A. Wall's essay, "Passing for What? Aspects of Identity in Nella Larsen's Novels", it becomes clear that black women writers were skilled at confronting their agitation surrounding New Negro Womanhood under the guise of approved subject matter. Sexuality was often reclaimed in black women's literature throughout the 1920s, as their desire was equated with their political responsibility³⁰. Novelists like Larsen communicated through their characters that the expectations of women to model respectful desire suppressed their own sense of self.

Diverging from Woolner's assessment of *Passing*, Cheryl A. Wall argues that Larsen's most important contribution was her portrayal of the psychological dilemmas that plagued middle-class black women during this time period³¹. Larsen's characters often took the form of the "tragic mulatto", through which she reimagined the convention to uncover her internal struggles³². This is most evident through the mask that she projected onto her characters, which allowed them to present as socially acceptable in black middle-class settings. On the contrary, her characters often felt suffocated by the militancy of her peers in approaching the race problem³³. Larsen's characters become jaded as they arrive in Harlem, where they realize that they felt isolated in communities where they thought they might encounter like-minded friends. The role of Harlem in her novels is significant, as it was recognized as a cultural center of the New Negro Movement. While Harlem appears to be a place where Larsen's characters will feel emboldened, they begin to resent other Harlemites for being "superficial, proud and

²⁹ Woolner, 408.

³⁰ Carby, 12.

³¹ Wall, 98.

³² Wall, 110.

³³ Wall, 100

ineffectual”³⁴. Larsen’s criticism was shared by Zora Neale Hurston, who often spoke out against the black-middle class for their intolerant attitudes toward southern migrants. In “Migration, Fragmentation, and Identity: Zora Neale Hurston’s “Color Struck” and the Geography of the Harlem Renaissance”, David Krasner considers Hurston’s work within the historical theme of migration. Krasner identifies that the New Negro Movement was closely connected to the First Great Migration, as this process brought black Americans to urban areas in mass numbers. Specifically, the northern black population increased by 300 percent in between 1910 and 1930³⁵. Hurston’s literary work presents an alternative representation of the Great Migration, as she thought that the New Negro Movement was erasing the history of Southern culture³⁶. In places like Harlem, the urban middle-class often looked down upon Southern migrants who lived in working class neighborhoods. Migrants were often not as refined, or driven towards the movement. This is clarified by Hurston, as she explains that people from her hometown were not impressed by her connections to the urban North³⁷. This is presumably what Larsen meant when she criticized the urban elite for ignoring the plight of masses³⁸. Both Hurston and Larsen perceived their treatment of the working class as problematic, and caused them to remain distant from the movement in their work and daily life.

Nella Larsen’s work is particularly interesting for the way that it dealt with complicated interpretations of black womanhood throughout the 1920s. In navigating social settings like

³⁴ Wall, 100.

³⁵ David Krasner, “Migration, Fragmentation, and Identity: Zora Neale Hurston’s “Color Struck” and the Geography of the Harlem Renaissance,” *Theatre Journal* 53, no. 4 (2001): 534.

³⁶ Krasner, 534.

³⁷ Zora Neale Hurston, “Writer and Anthropologist, Takes Her University Training Home, 1927” in *Major Problems in African American History* 2, ed. Thomas C. Holt and Elsa Barkley Brown (Boston: Wadsworth, 2000), 198.

³⁸ Wall, 100.

Harlem, Larsen's protagonists struggle to define their own womanhood while overburdened by other's expectations of them. Wall describes this dilemma as symbolic of the identity crisis faced by some black middle-class women during the 1920s. Although her character's work against ideals of black womanhood, they also have trouble articulating their own definitions of self³⁹. Hazel V. Carby clarifies that the resistance of black women writers to asserting themselves completely is a result of their limited political agency during this time⁴⁰. In "It Just Be's Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues", Carby explains that writers like Larsen and Hurston contributed to empowered discourse about sexuality and womanhood in urban cities throughout the New Negro Renaissance. Carby also suggests that focusing on these women exclusively would discount the ways that women who worked in commercial entertainment went even further⁴¹. Black middle-class women were sometimes restricted by their public responsibility to the New Negro Movement. However, Carby explores how blues women like Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey used their art form to "reclaim women's bodies as the sexual and sensuous objects of women's song"⁴². Like Larsen, these artists recognized that women's desire was defined by men and controlled by the black woman's duty to uplift the race. Their music placed themselves as the subjects of empowered discourse about female sexuality, and worked to decenter the ideal of respectability. As they positioned their work outside of the politics of respectability, blues women were able to assert their own sense of self in connection to gender identity and sexuality⁴³.

³⁹ Wall, 99.

⁴⁰ Carby, 10.

⁴¹ Carby, 12.

⁴² Carby, 12.

⁴³ Carby, 18.

Depictions of the Great Migration in women's blues are considerably different from that in Larsen and Hurston's literature. While their written work focuses on the urban elite's shallow perception of Southern migrants, Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey consider the specific implications of migration for both rural and urban womanhood. Their songs speak to working class women through exploring the conflict between wanting to move to urban cities for independence while also missing home⁴⁴. Carby explains that these lyrics resonated with women who felt like urban spaces weren't necessarily the "promised land" they had thought⁴⁵. Again, the majority of women who migrated to larger cities during the first great migration existed outside of the cultural Renaissance. Regardless, they were still subjected to social regulation by the black urban elite who saw their presence in the city as counterproductive to the movement. Blues themes also dealt with migration as it caused women to feel abandoned by their male companions. For many women, migration to the North did not mean the convergence of "diverse elements of Negro life" as it did for Locke⁴⁶. Working class women felt disconnected from the movement, and equated the migration with feelings of loss and longing⁴⁷. These themes are especially present in Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey's music, as they were able to divulge subjects that exceeded the language of respectability and racial consciousness. This considered, an exploration into women's blues music from the 1920s reveals that some women had complicated experiences with both urban living and the New Negro Movement.

The experience of working class women in Harlem is thoroughly considered by Cookie Woolner in their essay, "'Woman Slain in a Queer Love Brawl': African American Women,

⁴⁴ Carby, 16.

⁴⁵ Carby, 16.

⁴⁶ Locke, 192.

⁴⁷ Carby, 16.

Same-Sex Desire and Violence in the Urban North- 1920-1929". Instead of exploring this period from within the movement, Woolner provides a history of those who were on the geographical and ideological periphery of Harlem during the 1920s. Woolner uses articles from black owned newspapers in order to trace the social networks of women who loved women amongst Harlem's working class. While most historical analysis on queer subcultures during this time have focused on commercial spaces, Woolner reveals that there was a community of women in residential areas that have been left out of the narrative⁴⁸. The newspapers which are used as evidence in this work typically referred to women who loved women as dangerous and criminal⁴⁹. For women specifically, homosexuality subverted the politics of respectability and was seen as destructive to racial progress⁵⁰. Despite harassment from newspapers, women continued to enjoy the company of other women throughout the 1920s, often forming social groups with others who had the same way of being. The existence of queer networks in residential spaces proves the increasing visibility of multiple definitions of female sexuality throughout the 1920's. While most historians have centered those at the forefront of the New Negro Renaissance, Woolner's work confirms that the 1920's brought forth new understandings of womanhood and sexuality in all social groups.

A critical reconstruction of black women's creative movements throughout the 1920's has shown that the New Negro Renaissance was a difficult terrain for women who were leading the charge. While Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, and Angelina Weld Grimké contributed striking literature that advocated for New Negro ideals, their work also revealed their apprehension towards their inherited role as black women of the new generation. This struggle

⁴⁸ Woolner, 408

⁴⁹ Woolner, 408.

⁵⁰ Woolner, 414.

was visible in women's blues music, as performers like Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey vocalized their frustration surrounding imposed standards of womanhood and sexuality in urban cities. The effort to engender the Harlem Renaissance has revealed that the New Negro Movement introduced nuanced discourse about what it meant to be black women in the modern era. Through examining works of different historians in the field of gender and queer studies, it is evident that there were multiple definitions of black womanhood throughout the 1920s. A continuation of this work will allow for a more accountable history of women's contributions to the New Negro Renaissance.

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