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"What is Modernism to me?" Individual Selves and Collective Identities in African-American Women's Writing, 1920-1935

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The brick wall that is any attempt to define "modernism" sent me running to the *Oxford Companion to English Literature*. Here I found that in an effort to break thoroughly with the past, modernist writing is characterised in part by an awareness of the unconscious and an interest in the presentation of personality. At the very least, it can be assumed that popular conceptions of modernist writing concern the "inner" self, its relationship or interaction with the "outer" self, and, more generally, the presentation of the individual [\[1\]](#). Moreover, *popular* definitions of modernism – in the USA as well as in Britain – continue to prioritise the avant-garde and experimentation with form. Perhaps the most famous examples are Molly Bloom and Alice B. Toklas. Bloom's "stream-of-consciousness" account which concludes James Joyce's *Ulysses* is taken as emblematic of modernist expression, and is cited as such by the *Oxford Companion* [\[2\]](#).

It is easy to see how, within such paradigms, the cultural production of the Harlem Renaissance has been neglected in the historical consideration of modernism. Nathan Huggins, in his important 1971 work, *Harlem Renaissance*, exemplifies this attitude in his discussion of the poetry of the period. Countee Cullen and Claude McKay, he argues, were hamstrung by their adherence to forms such as the sonnet. Such formalism, he argues, reflects a basic conservatism. Cullen, was, a "perfect example of a twentieth-century poet marching to a nineteenth-century drummer ... [he] liked form, he liked words, and he liked rhyme, but he never experimented with any of them" [\[3\]](#).

Recent work has certainly challenged historical accounts which dismissed African-American work in discussions of modernism. In focusing on the realism espoused by modernist writers in particular, Ann Douglas recontextualises a discussion of modernist aesthetics in relation to African-American cultural production in her book *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* [\[4\]](#). Another example is George Hutchinson's *Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*, in which he investigates the period as a native movement derived from Deweyan pragmatism and Boasian anthropology [\[5\]](#). Each of these approaches – and there are others too – allows for the inclusion of African-Americans in what is essentially a tale of American exceptionalism, or a local American modernist aesthetic. What I am interested in charting is how popular and enduring literary concepts of modernism – like formal experimentation – operate to exclude African-American work, both in the 1920s and in historical analyses since. And yet, work by African-Americans in the 1920s was thoroughly concerned with presenting the self, and with strategies for negotiating the difficult terrain of racial representativeness, particularly for black women.

The position articulated by Nathan Huggins in the 1970s, which has dominated since, goes something like this: poets and novelists of the Harlem Renaissance, in their concern to master the forms of the nineteenth-century (for instance, the sonnet) did not participate in the modernist rejection of these so-called "traditional" modes. The single exception, according to this line of argument, is Jean Toomer's *Cane*, a novel with a

fragmented narrative which is lyrical in style.

This model of criticism is challenged by new approaches such as Douglas and Hutchinson, however the dismissal of African-American writing in relation to modernism lingers. This is particularly true in the case of black women writers from the 1920s. The literary conservatism which is attributed to Cullen and other male poets is assumed to apply to the literature *and* politics of the female writers simply because they were middle-class. While it is true that many women writers, and in particular poets (for instance, Georgia Douglas Johnson), favoured nineteenth-century sentimental modes, they are not accorded anywhere near the same importance as their male counterparts. David Levering Lewis, for example, mentions Georgia Douglas Johnson only five times in the wide-ranging book, *When Harlem was In Vogue*: three are passing references to her Salon, called the "Saturday Night Club," one of her "mothering" of a younger male poet's "neuroses" [6]; and one longer description of her Salon opens with a quick dismissal of her "overly sentimental poetry" [7]. Although Lewis claims in the preface to a new edition (1997) that, if the book were written now, he would address "the inadequacies of my attention to the gender dimensions of the Renaissance" [8], in the *Harlem Renaissance Reader* (1994), his introductory remarks about female poets demonstrate the endurance of such gender stereotypes. Georgia Johnson and Anne Spencer, for instance, are described primarily in terms of the "sheltering role" which their respective homes offered younger male writers [9]. The position of these women as literary hostesses is accorded far more attention than their artistic endeavour and production.

While it is certainly true that Georgia Johnson employed mainly traditional forms of poetry, the themes with which she was engaged are those associated with modernism. From behind the veil of "the lady poet," Johnson articulated particular problems of black female selfhood at the beginning of this century. She was forced to negotiate, as were all the protagonists of the Harlem Renaissance, the presentation of a self in a society in which any work by African-Americans was taken as ineluctably, racially representative. On the one hand,

whites assumed that any public act by a black person was typical and explicable in terms of race. Most visibly, crimes committed by African-Americans were "black crimes," while crimes committed by whites were unraced. The flipside of this was the demand, by W. E. B. Du Bois and other prominent spokespeople for "the race" that art be used to lift up the African-American population generally. The idea that the so-called "Talented Tenth" could effect the "uplift" of the race was most famously formulated by James Weldon Johnson in 1922:

A people may become great through many means, but there is only one measure by which its greatness is recognized and acknowledged. The final measure of the greatness of all people is the amount and standard of the literature and art they have produced No people that has produced great literature and art has ever been looked upon by the world as distinctly inferior [10].

It was from within this matrix of racial representativeness that Countee Cullen made his famous complaint: "Yet do I marvel at this curious thing: / To make a poet black, and bid him sing!" (13-14) [11]. The requirement to represent blackness positively was, in Cullen's opinion, at odds with the poetic endeavour of the presentation of the self, which he perceived to be individualist.

One particular quotation from Georgia Johnson's poem, "A Song of Courage," published in the *Liberator* in 1924, illustrates the peculiarity of this problem for African-American women:

Braver than lions must I be
To-give to child of mine
A heritage of certain scorn,
A place amid the swine (7-10)[12]

Here, Johnson refers to the difficulties of African-American life and the more particular

problems of African-American motherhood. In this poem she also alludes to the problematics of racial representativeness in poetry. The "child" in "A Song of Courage" is analogous to the poem itself, and each is delivered to what Johnson calls "a heritage of certain scorn." Johnson recognises here that her poetry is not valued by her contemporaries. She fears that she will forever be relegated to the status of "lady poet;" that her creative poetic imagination will always be interpreted as an expression of her "woman's heart." However, the poem ends optimistically, again referring to the children/poems that she will "bear," she argues that:

The future years have need of them
I sense it tho my sight is dim (17-18).

Johnson did prepare a "Catalogue of Writings" which she deposited in the archive at Atlanta University during the mid 1960s, but unfortunately the unpublished work was either thrown on the rubbish heap at the front of her house soon after her funeral by her son, or left rotting in the cellar of her house [13].

Evident in this poem in particular, are the tensions between individual representation, or presentation of the self, and racial representativeness. As the poetic persona is ostensibly a mother, it is a pertinent example of how one specific female experience of poetic subjectivity was constituted. And it is a particularly good example of the feminine persona that Johnson deployed – a mother – in order to negotiate expectations of black middle-class womanhood, while she explored other concerns of poetic representation and creative imagination.

Ideas about the gentility and respectability of black middle-class women shaped and continue to influence criticism of many female writers in this period. Cheryl Wall made this point in a footnote in *Women of the Harlem Renaissance* when she argued that Sterling Brown's retrospective comments about Jessie Redmon Fauset set the tone for her later reception. His words are typical of much critical reaction to black women who wrote during the early twentieth century. In 1937, he labelled Fauset "an apologist. She records a class in order to praise a race" [14]. This goes to the heart of the problems faced by black women writing in the 1920s. Their depictions of middle-class life arguably fell into the category of realistic portrayal that Ann Douglas isolates as the key to the American modernist aesthetic. That is, to paraphrase Hemingway, the demand to write only about that which one knew, and to write it in the truest way. Nella Larsen's first novel, *Quicksand*, for instance, traces the life of Helga Crane, born of a Danish-American mother and an African-American father, who teaches in the South, moves to Harlem, and travels to Europe as a single woman. Larsen herself had many similar experiences. While I am not trying here to suggest any transparent correlative between Larsen's life and her fiction, she was writing about a milieu with which she was familiar [15]. And yet she, like other black women writers of the Harlem Renaissance, has been dismissed as being "unrepresentative." Focusing on middle-class experiences has cost them a place in critical history; instead their work has been appraised alongside their evening parties. Writing which employed the so-called folk aesthetic has been considered superior. Hazel Carby has argued that this is the reason for the reification of Zora Neale Hurston - that somehow this "folk" writing represented the more "real" life experience of African-Americans [16]. What this point of view neglects, however, is the ways in which middle-class women writers pushed boundaries in the presentation of subjectivity.

Paradoxically, the same literature considered to be so "unrepresentative" was also acclaimed by Du Bois as essential for "racial uplift." The "great literature" that he hoped would lift the race was that which demonstrated not only artistic talent, but also refuted stereotypical notions of black life. *Fire!!*, a one-issue journal published in 1926, outraged many – like Du Bois – with its tales of gambling, prostitution, cakewalking and scathing attacks on the intelligentsia [17].

So, black women writing in the 1920s were in something of a bind. On the one hand, were the congratulations of Du Bois and others for their "uplifting" fiction and poetry. This praise was based on an assumption of racial collectivity, that is, any good work by a black person would lead the rest out of the wilderness. At the same time, they were

damned, often by younger male artists, like those represented in *Fire!!!*, for their unrepresentativeness. Either way, these arguments about art-versus-propaganda framed African-American discussion of realistic portrayal in the 1920s, and consideration of the experimentation by African-American women has since been lost in the criticism. Assumptions that bourgeois sensibilities, including "uplift," have dominated their work, and led to neglect of other areas of discussion.

One stereotype in particular which black women writers negotiated during this period was that of promiscuous sexuality. Their critics read only sexless lives lacking passion in their novels and poetry. Assuming that such work was produced in the grip of a so-called "genteel tradition," most criticism has, until recently, overlooked the erotic aspects of Harlem Renaissance women's writing. One significant attempt to redress this is Deborah McDowell's introduction to Larsen's second novel, *Passing*. McDowell makes a thoroughly convincing reading of a plot centred on Irene Redfield's sexual attraction to Clare Kendry, as well as the more easily recognisable theme of racial passing [18]. Larsen's novel embodies a rejection of the alleged lasciviousness of black women, while simultaneously presenting a sexually desiring black female subject. One who desires not only her attractively drawn husband, but also an old female schoolfriend.

Irene's desire is never realised, or admitted even to herself. Her sexual attraction to Clare is circumscribed by social constraints, and is not even made conscious. Narrative closure is achieved only by killing off the object of Irene's inarticulate desire, and there is more than a hint that Irene in fact murders Clare Kendry. Larsen's *Passing*, is an excellent example of the negotiation African-American women undertook in artistically portraying any sort of transgressive character. Here, taking on the literary tradition of the "tragic mulatto," Larsen manages to subvert the more familiar theme of racial passing with one of sexual passing.

This notion of sexual passing is useful for thinking about the presentation of the black female self more generally in the works of these women. Georgia Johnson, for instance, published much of her work under pseudonyms. She was, variously, Paul or John Tremaine, M. Strong, Mary V. Strong, John Temple and Nina Temple and maybe more [19]. Publishing under a different name allowed Johnson to publish in a variety of journals and magazines, and to write much less covertly about sexuality. Under the name Paul Tremaine, she published a short story entitled "Tramp Love" in which the narrator is a white drifter. He describes a brief encounter with a young woman who has been travelling and hitchhiking for three years:

She had to pay for many a ride. Not with money, but in the only way a poor girl could pay. Especially a nice-looking young girl. She was not bitter about it. It was the only practical way... she held no ill feeling toward the majority of them. It was that or starve or walk[...] [20].

The independence of this young woman is starkly contrasted to those of Johnson's poems:

'[The] one thing I refuse to do,' she says, 'is work at waiting table or something, and then sleep with the boss to hold the job. I'm willing to do one or the other to get by, but both! Nuheugh, not this little gal!' [21]

The blunt portrayal of sexuality, and the implicit critique of sexual exploitation, was possible for Johnson only when she published under an alias. In the three volumes of poetry published during this period, her much more subtle eroticism was negotiated from within the more acceptable position of motherhood and maternal devotion.

A final example of sexual passing is evident in another short story, which was not published during Johnson's lifetime. In this story, after the funeral of Dr. Paul Ryan, his wife Martha and his mistress who have shared a house with the doctor for twenty-five years, discover he has left them an equal share in his estate. Rose, the younger mistress, nonetheless prepares to leave the house. It suddenly strikes Martha that Rose is now an old woman like herself, and "There was something sweet and comforting in

the thought." Just as Rose is leaving, Martha Ryan thinks that the house is

still and empty ... there would be no one to do little things for her ... nurse her ... comfort her ... decide for her ... no one to lean upon ... With a start she awoke to the moment Rose was going, her hand was turning the knob....Martha watched with growing panic Rose paused a moment on the threshold, she looked back! and then Mrs. Ryan flung open her arms and cried brokenly, "Rose!" [22]

Johnson depicts an intimacy between the two women above and beyond their jealousy over the dead husband/lover. The story, after all, is called "Free." The ambiguity of the ending, however, reflects the social and perhaps textual parameters within which African-American women negotiated the presentation of sexual subjects. There is no resolution; it is not clear whether Martha will invite Rose to stay in the house, defying her neighbours and convention, or whether her broken cry and their embrace is just a manifestation of regret at their unavoidable parting.

So where are African-American women positioned in relation to modernism in the 1920s? I have been fighting the urge, while writing this paper, to seek out and celebrate obvious attempts at experimentation with form, as if a demonstrated engagement with the sort of "modernism" that the [British] *Oxford Companion* defines, was valid in and of itself. African-American women's use of nineteenth-century poetic forms and novels, while dealing with issues revolving around the presentation of the self – issues which were quintessentially modernist – calls into question the continuing assumption that formal experimentation is somehow necessary for modernist expression. The experience of these women in attempting to negotiate various literary forms can be used to critique definitions of modernism which assume that the only constraint was the artist's imagination. Because, of course, black women in the 1920s were resisting notions of the exotic, primitive "other;" ideas that had serious impact on their lives in the commonplace belief that black women were sexually licentious. The popular conception of modernism is in part what historians such as Ann Douglas and George Hutchinson attempt to redress, by locating a specific American experience of modernism and highlighting the intersections between white and black cultural production. As argued earlier, though, the specific relegation of African-American women writers to the status of literary mothers, godmothers and hostesses, partly on the basis that they failed to engage in literary experimentation, is worth exposing. The examples given here demonstrate various attempts at the presentation of subjects who were raced, sexual individuals working within collective modes of identity. Georgia Douglas Johnson's attempt at locating her creative poetic impulse in the mothering body, and both her and Larsen's negotiation of the presentation of sexual selves, show a significant concurrency with the themes of a traditionally defined 'modernism,' especially the presentation of the self, at the same time as challenging 'modernism' as formal experimentation.

Endnotes

[1] Drabble, Margaret, ed. *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*. Revised 5th ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995). p.668. [Return to endnote reference](#)

[2] Drabble, p.1024. [Return to endnote reference](#)

[3] Huggins, Nathan Irvin, *Harlem Renaissance*. (New York: Oxford UP, 1971). p.208. [Return to endnote reference](#)

[4] Douglas, Ann, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s*. (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1995). [Return to endnote reference](#)

[5] Hutchinson, George, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1995). [Return to endnote reference](#)

[6] Lewis, David Levering, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*. 2nd ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1997). p.196. [Return to endnote reference](#)

- [7] Lewis, p.127. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [8] Lewis, p.xxii. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [9] Lewis, p.273, 299. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [10] Johnson, James Weldon, Introduction. *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, 1922 Ed. Johnson, (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1959). p.9. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [11] Cullen, Countee, "Yet Do I Marvel." *Color*. (New York: Harper & Bros, 1925). Rpt. in Lewis, David Levering ed, *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1994). p.244. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [12] Johnson, Georgia Douglas, "A Song of Courage," *Liberator*, September 1924. Rpt. in Tate, Claudia, ed, *The Selected Works of Georgia Douglas Johnson*. (New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1997). p.441. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [13] Tate, p.xxxix. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [14] Wall, Cheryl A., *Women of the Harlem Renaissance*. (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995). p.212. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [15] Davis argues that there is little evidence that Larsen ever travelled to Europe. Davis, Thadious M., Nella Larsen, *Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance: A Woman's Life Unveiled*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1994). pp.67-69, 140-141. Rooney suggests that Larsen's self-fashioning of her past is in itself a 'writerly construction of self [which] is a kind of passing as it aims to define the body through a disavowal of the self. Yet, like passing, Larsen's claim of Danish background is based on actual experience: even if that did not involve a trip to Denmark it did involve a Danish mother' Rooney, Monique, "Surfacing Skin: Nella Larsen and the Art of Passing." *Masochism: Disciplines of Desire / Aesthetics of Cruelty / Politics of Danger*. Ed. N. Lusty and R. Walker. (Sydney: PG ARC Publications, 1998). pp.54-55. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [16] Carby, Hazel, "The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology and the Folk: Zora Neale Hurston." *History and Memory in African-American Culture*. Ed. G. Fabre and R. O'Meally. (New York: Oxford UP, 1994). p. 28-44. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [17] Thurman, Wallace, ed. *Fire!! Devoted to Younger Negro Artists 1* (1926). Kraus, Nendeln, 1968. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [18] McDowell, Deborah, Introduction. *Quicksand and Passing, by Nella Larsen*. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 1986). p.xxiii-xxxi. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [19] Tate, p. ixii. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [20] Tremaine, Paul, (Georgia Douglas Johnson), "Tramp Love." in Tate, p.420. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [21] Tremaine, p.420. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [22] Johnson, "Free" in Tate, p.433. [Return to endnote reference](#)

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