Conflicting Views of Self-Representation Among African-Americans During the Harlem Renaissance

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This essay was written for African American Literature, taught by Dr. Smith. The assignment was to explore the political or cultural context of the course readings.

So 'tain't no use in me telling you somethin' unless Ah give you de understandin' to go 'long wid it.

~Zora Neale Hurston,
Their Eyes Were Watching God

Two major movements were running simultaneously during the period of the Harlem Renaissance. The black bourgeoisie writers, such as W.E.B. DuBois and Alain Locke, were at odds with the Bohemians, writers like Zora Neale Hurston, Wallace Thurman, and Langston Hughes. The bourgeoisie, or the Middle Class, felt that all African American writing should be propaganda focused solely on the positive aspect of Negro life in order to elevate the status of the population in the eyes of the country. Writers like DuBois and Locke believed that all art should be a protest, a fight for social and political equality for the African American population. Arnold Rampersad, in his article “The Book That Launched the Harlem Renaissance,” speaking of Locke’s The New Negro, points out that “[u]nitig these men and women was their growing sense of certainty that black America was on the verge of something like a second Emancipation—this time not by government mandate but by the will and accomplishments of the people, especially the artists and intellectuals” (89). Thus, Locke and other like minded people held that the African American population had continued to be in a kind of ‘slavery’ up until around 1915; a slavery from which their protest literature was now going to free them, so long as the writings of the time upheld the position and sustained only the best aspects of Negro life. Hurston and others contended that the art and literature of the time should portray every aspect of Negro life in order to represent the population in a more honest light, thereby illustrating a sense of pride in the culture and that there is no shame in being human, no matter what the color of one’s skin may be. This is a reminder to all people that there is no one “perfect race” but every man, woman, and child has their own set of demons to fight and their own angels sitting on their shoulders. No person or group is exempt from the darker side of life.

Interestingly, among the editorials found in the March 1925 issue of the Survey Graphic Harlem Number, which Locke himself designed and edited, the second paragraph states, in regards to Harlem itself, that “[o]ne of its best informed leaders remarks that the Negro in Harlem is like the poor relation who inherits a limousine: he can ill afford to keep it going… the mere pressure to win and hold shelter imposes a tax on the wage-earner that leaves little margin for self-improvement and less for cooperative social activity” (Editorials). The admission here that not all of the population has the privilege of living within the sphere of middle class seems to contradict the whole concept of what the bourgeoisie was attempting to articulate to the world. This is where Hurston and some of her contemporaries step in with the notion that it is essential to the rising feeling of racial pride to honestly portray the life of all Negroes and not just the small group of people who enjoy the luxuries of the Middle Class lifestyle. In her essay, “How It Feels To Be Colored Me,” Zora Neale Hurston states quite frankly, “I am the granddaughter of slaves…it fails to register depression with me” (1031). The Harlem Renaissance was a time when the African American people as a whole were beginning to define themselves outside of the bonds of slavery. This is not to say that they were attempting to sweep the past under the rug, however,
some merely preferred to look at the present and prepare for the future. A number of Hurston’s contemporaries, such as Langston Hughes and Wallace Thurman, also held similar beliefs, as is evident in their writings. In his novel, *Infants of the Spring*, Wallace Thurman offers up an exposé of the inner workings of the major players of the Harlem Renaissance. He takes a no holds barred approach to his truth-telling regarding his contemporaries and the notion of the movement itself. In chapter XXI of his novel, he provides his readers with a parody of the inner working of a Harlem Salon in which he portrays many of the personalities of his contemporaries, albeit with fictitious names, but whose character traits are easily enough pinned to specific artists of the time. One example of this is his portrayal of the character that he calls Sweetie Mae Carr. Sweetie Mae is intended to be a representation of Zora Neale Hurston, which is evident in Thurman’s description of his ‘fictional’ character:

Sweetie Mae was a short story writer, more noted for her ribald wit and personal effervescence than for any actual literary work. She was a great favorite among those whites who went in for Negro prodigies. Mainly because she lived up to their conception of what a typical Negro should be. It seldom occurred to any of her patrons that she did this with tongue in cheek (1272).

Hurston was known for her outgoing personality and sense of self that was very energetic and uncompromising. Thurman also gives a description of Langston Hughes in the guise of his character Tony Crews. When speaking of the two volumes of work that Crews had already published at the time of the salon, Thurman’s character Raymond explains “[b]oth had been excessively praised by whites and universally damned by Negroes. Considering the nature of his work this was to be expected” (1273). Hughes was another writer of the period who felt unashamed of the many facets of the African American population and was unafraid to delve into even the darkest aspects of life in Harlem. For his open and unassuming representation of the ‘real life’ of the Negro artists in the Harlem Renaissance, the members of the community who desired to only show the ‘lighter’ side of life recriminated against Thurman.

As with Thurman, Langston Hughes is also not hindered in his writing by the cult of expectations produced by the Negro Middle Class and Hughes pulls off the remarkable accomplishment of accepting and acknowledging the history of slavery while, at the same time, refusing to allow that same history to hold him back from expressing himself, and the culture that surrounds him. He expresses his remembrance of slavery in one of his earlier poems, “American Heartbreak:”

I am the American heartbreak—
Rock on which Freedom
Stumps its toe—
The great mistake
That Jamestown
Made long ago (9).

With these six short lines Hughes sums up the feelings shared by a number of African Americans alive during that time. The understanding that the very existence of slavery is the “heartbreak” that America trips over when its citizens cry “Freedom” is what many of the protest writers during the Harlem Renaissance wished for the people of the country to possess. Thus, when this poem was first released to the public it met with acclaim from both the white and black communities. And yet, he evokes Jamestown where slavery first began in 1619 when a Dutch slave trader brought a cargo of Africans and traded them to the townspeople in exchange for food (Slavery). These first African slaves, however, were not originally looked upon with the same eyes that the United States used in the years immediately preceding President Lincoln’s “Emancipation Proclamation.” When the Dutch sailor traded his cargo of flesh in order to fill his own belly, those people who came out of his hold were looked upon more as indentured servants than as slaves. An indentured servant is one who must only work for another until a debt has been repaid, after which time the servant is given back his or her freedom. Thus, the fact that Hughes refers to this arrangement that took place in Jamestown as “[t]he great mistake... [m]ade long ago” (my italics) leaves the reader with the feeling that the narrator of this particular poem is of the mindset that slavery was something that happened in the past and it was a lapse in judgment, a gravely serious lapse, but mistakes are things that have the potential for forgiveness. This notion of forgiving “those who have sinned against us,” a common tenant of the
Christian ‘Our Father’ prayer, is not one that all of the members of the Harlem Renaissance freely embraced.

Langston Hughes gives a more overt condemnation of those who belong to the Black Middle Class and who only wish for the Negro art and literature to spotlight the positive aspects of Harlem life. In his pair of poems “Low to High” and “High to Low,” the narrators are each presumably members of the lower class and of the black bourgeoisie, respectively. Each one is commenting on the gripes of the other. The member of the black masses who voices his opinion in the poem “Low to High” questions:

How can you forget me?
But you do!
You said you was gonna take me
Up with you——
Now you’ve got your Cadillac,
you done forgot that you are black.
How can you forget me
When I’m you? (Ins. 1-8, 249).

In response, the elite or “high” end voice smacks openly of the bourgeoisie beliefs:

God knows
We have had our troubles, too——
One trouble is you:
you talk too loud,
cuss too loud,
look too black,
don’t get anywhere,
as sometimes it seems
you don’t even care.
The way you send your kids to school
stockings down,
(not Ethical Culture)
the way you shout out loud in church,
(not St. Phillips)
and the way you lounge on doorsteps
just as if you were down South,
(not at 409)
the way you clown——
the way, in other words,
you let me down——
me, trying to uphold the race
and you——

well, you can see,
we have our problems,
too, with you. (250-251).

There is so much packed into these two short poems that an entire thesis could be spent explicating it, so, for the purposes of this essay it will be sufficient to address the fact that Hughes is, not very discreetly, admonishing those of the higher classes for so inhumanly dismissing those members of the black masses; a group of people who also deserve to have their hardships and honors spoken of with truth and feeling.

One of the most well known authors from the Harlem Renaissance who also gives voice to the black masses is Zora Neale Hurston. In the article “The Queen of the Harlem Renaissance: Her Works Were Lost, but Not Forever” briefly discusses the contentions toward her work that ran rampant throughout her lifetime. It states, “black intellectuals … declared that she was furthering the stereotypical notions held by whites that blacks were simple-minded, comical, and superstitious” though “her main focus in compiling black folk-lore was to document and preserve for history a culture that she believed was quickly becoming a thing of the past” (53). Hurston was not a member of the school of thought that chose to dictate to its artists who shall create what and on whose terms. She believed that the African American people should possess a sense of pride in themselves, their histories, and their cultures. Therefore, she could not sit back and write impressionistic literature that would lead all of the members of the black masses to believe that because they did not fit into the interracially defined Middle Class stereotype they were, therefore, unacceptable as people. This would have had the potential to create feelings of inhumaness more severe than slavery itself had done, due to the fact that it would be trickling down from the upper echelons of their own racial community and not being forced upon them by an outside “other.”

“John Redding Goes to Sea” is a story that can be found in the book Zora Neale Hurston: The Complete Stories. The story opens with a couple arguing over whether or not their son has “got a spell on ‘im.” John Redding’s mother believes that her son has had some sort of spell cast over him because he does not behave in ways that herself or the people of the village think to be ‘normal,’ while John’s father dismisses her accusations
as complete and utter nonsense. “Ah keep on telling yuh, woman, tain’s so. Believe it all you wants tuh, but dontcha tell mah son none of it” (1). Hurston’s use of dialect and her character’s belief in the supernatural as an explanation for behavior are prime examples of why the members of the Black Middle Class argued against her fiction for “furthering the stereotypical notions of whites” (Queen 53). What they fail to notice is the glaring fact that there is more to Hurston’s fiction than what can be skimmed from the surface. If a reader were to quickly read through stories such as “John Redding Goes to Sea,” he/she may overlook the complex beauty that Zora Neale Hurston so eloquently weaves throughout her fiction. While her opposition may focus merely on the unacceptable nature of dialect in the world of intelligent and successful people, they neglect to see both the need for the acceptance of all people, and not just those who fit into neat little population packages, and Hurston’s critiques buried within her seemingly simple words. For example, after the narrator tells us of the discussion between John’s mother and father, the reader is given a description of John’s personality and an explanation of why he was thought to be such an odd boy.

Perhaps ten-year-old John was puzzling to the simple folk there in the Florida woods for he was an imaginative child and fond of day-dreams. The St. John River flowed a scarce three hundred feet from his back door...On the bosom of the stream float millions of delicately colored hyacinths. The little brown boy loved to wander down to the water’s edge, and, casting in dry twigs, watch them sail away down stream to Jacksonville, the sea, the wide world and John Redding wanted to follow them (1).

Hurston juxtaposes the adult explanation of conjuration with the child idea of freedom. To the adults, he was a “queer” child because he sat all day by the side of a stream “day-dreaming.” One point to make is that this image of the child dreaming of floating off into worlds that he has never seen comes alongside Wallace Thurman’s equating of the artists of the Harlem Renaissance with the “Infants of the Spring.” It is possible to see the parental figures in this story as the first generation of African American writers who held fast to the notion of all art as propaganda and the only way to portray the ‘New Negro’ is through his achievements and never through his failures. While, the child, John, can be viewed as this second generation of artists who are looking down the stream of a culture’s creativity and wanting to hitch a ride on the first boat that comes through.

The Harlem Renaissance was a tidal wave of contradictory tenets that jumped from one end of the spectrum to the other. One group of people, which mainly consisted of the black bourgeoisie such as W.E.B. DuBois and Alain Locke took to the belief that art should never exist just for art’s sake. To these people, art was a means to an end; it was a propaganda tool used for the representation of the African American culture in a constant and unrealistically positive light. Whereas, the group referred to as the Bohemians, with followers like Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, and Wallace Thurman, believed that art could exist simply for the sake of art; it was a vehicle through which a pride of race as well as a pride of self could be fostered.
Works Cited


