Patronized?

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This essay was written for African American Literature, taught by Dr. Smith. The assignment was to write a contextual analysis regarding an aspect of the Harlem Renaissance.

The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language contains three definitions for the word “patronize,” two of which are as follows: 1. To act as a patron to: support or sponsor, 2. To treat in a condescending manner, with the latter’s etymology pre-dating the previous. The white patronage of African-American artists during the Harlem Renaissance could easily be viewed as a patronizing system of artistic control and limits on literary freedom as termed in the second definition; however, there were some circumstances where the artist refused to be utilized both personally and through their art, but did accept the assistance of patronage so that they could create and be published in a time of deep racial divide in America. The artists knew that they needed not only financial backing, but that, in order to be recognized, they needed the help that only a white upper-class person could bring. This paper will focus on the relationships between Zora Neale Hurston and Charlotte Osgood Mason and of Langston Hughes and Carl Van Vechten and the very different dynamics that those relationships contained.

The early part of the twentieth century was a very difficult time to succeed as an African-American writer; social, economic and especially racial divides made it extremely hard to be recognized. Writers needed to find the time as well as the means to write and be published; they found it necessary to go through the connections and finances of willing white patrons. A major catalyst in bringing artists together with these patrons was W.E.B. DuBois who “…probably did his most important work for the Harlem Renaissance in bringing the large white philanthropic power of the NAACP to the support of black writers by printing their work and offering prizes and criticism to them in the pages of Crisis” (Hart 612-613). However, DuBois was adamant in his beliefs that those patrons and white writers “keep their hand off Negros as subject matter to write about” (613). But it was through DuBois that one of these white patrons, Carl Van Vechten, was able to strike up a long lasting friendship with Langston Hughes.

The two men first met in 1924 at an NAACP benefit party in Harlem, but it wasn’t until Hughes returned from a stint in Washington D.C. and they met again at a formal engagement, that their friendship truly began. Van Vechten was very impressed with Hughes’ work and it was through his recommendation that Knopf chose to publish The Weary Blues in 1926 and Fine Clothes to the Jew in 1927, Hughes’ first two volumes of poetry (618). Van Vechten also submitted the writer’s work to Vanity Fair, “jump-starting the fledgling writer’s career in a way that surprised even Hughes” (Richards 132).

Van Vechten, like Hughes, had “an interest in black low life, but Hughes’ interest was not that of the dilettante and collector of exotic specimens, as was Van Vechten’s but rather, in the Negro folk, their feelings and thoughts” (Hart 618). Van Vechten, too, was a writer, penning the novel Nigger Heaven in 1926, which he based upon his own observations (and exaggerations) of the African-American communities he frequented (614). But after being threatened with law suits because of songs that he had used in the text, Hughes wrote verses to replace them (615).

The two men corresponded for thirty-nine years, evidence that their relationship fell along the lines of the first definition of “patronize:” to support and sponsor. It was through Van Vechten’s help that Hughes “was one of the first African-American writers to support himself with his own writing...until
his death in 1967, three years after Van Vechten’s demise” (Richards 132). Van Vechten seemed to have a patience, understanding and high regard for Hughes’ craft. His patronage was not about leading or influencing Hughes to write in any particular style; Robert Hart writes, “As for giving direction to Hughes’ work, something that Hughes was accused of allowing Van Vechten to do, there would seem to be little in it” (Hart 618). They did disagree over Hughes’ more “radical poetry, (Van Vechten) never understood the political implications of Hughes’ decision to create folk poetry accessible to the masses...Hughes does not seem to have cared one way or the other whether he satisfied the aesthetic tastes of the cultural intelligentsia to which Van Vechten belonged” (Richards 133). But these differences did not seem to affect the friendship of the two men; they appeared to have more in common in their love for art to let slight dissimilarities get in the way.

Another patron of black authors was Charlotte Osgood Mason, a very wealthy New Yorker who was “fascinated by the elevated spirituality she attributed to ‘primitive’ peoples like Native Americans and African Americans” (Booth 49). Her money went to help the careers of many Harlem artists, but unlike Van Vechten, she liked to obtain a certain amount of decisiveness in their writing and “frequently edited their work” (Booth 50); also, “members of her ‘collection’ were, of course, forbidden from calling her by name” (59). She insisted they call her “Godmother.” Her actions and attitude toward the artists could easily fall under the second definition of “patronize”; her condescending relationships with them had the probability of limiting their artistic imagination and constricted their point of view to fit what she believed it should be. Langston Hughes felt this restriction and asked that he be released from any obligation to her but still maintain their friendship: “she rebuffed him and in the end it all came back very near to the old impasse of white and Negro again...as do most relationships in America” (56).

Zora Neale Hurston was also supported by Mason, but not truly “patronized:” “critics - Hurston’s contemporaries - found her antagonistically contradictory and amazingly complex” (Jordan 105). Her relationship with “Godmother” seems more about humoring the wealthy matron and playing a part than actually being someone who was being taken advantage of. Wallace Thurman writes of this in Infants of the Spring when he is describing his obvious parody of Hurston, a character by the name of Sweetie Mae Carr: “She was a great favorite among those whites who went 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” (Thurman 1272).

Even in her correspondence with Mason, Hurston’s comments seem a bit on the cheeky side; she addresses her as “the immaculate conception,” “a glimpse of the holy grail” (Jordan 106) and “dearest, little mother of the Primitive World” (Booth 52). Hurston seemed to know how to appeal to Mason’s ego and work it for her own benefit. She knew that she needed the help of a benefactress to pursue her writing and anthropological work, and, by humoring Mason, she was able to do that.

However, her maneuvering did backfire in one instance. In 1927, a year after they had formed their relationship, Mason had Hurston sign a contractual agreement before she would fund a trip to the South for an anthropological research trip; the contract stated that all of Hurston’s research was Mason’s property. “Godmother owned the rights to her research and directed it from afar” (Booth 51-52). Anthropology was Hurston’s passion and the control that Mason had over this particular matter “led to dependency and bitterness” (53).

The role of the white patron was an unfortunate necessity during the Harlem Renaissance. It took not only a lot of money, but typically included a white face and the clout that the combination of the two could bring for black artists to gain the recognition they deserved. While some patron/artist relationships may have been detrimental to the artist, like in the case of Hurston and Mason, Hughes and Van Vechten managed to form a three decade long friendship. However, we cannot assume that Hurston allowed herself to be manipulated completely in her relationship with Mason; she seemed to reciprocate in kind. Although criticized by some, including Richard Wright, these relationships formed a stepping stone on which future writers could begin: “That generation (post Renaissance) did not have, as the Renaissance writers did, to start at zero and prove to a white world that blacks could put pen to paper” (Hart 628). Even though odds were against them through their struggle, Hughes and Hurston managed to stay true to their art, as well as to themselves.
Works Cited


