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Harlem Renaissance and *Modernist: A Case for the Explicit Inclusion of Black Authors in American Literary Studies*

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The Harlem Renaissance and American modernism are concurrent literary movements occurring in the early to mid twentieth century. However, Black authors are often segregated by academic terminology. By examining the works of authors traditionally excluded from the modernist canon, one can trace the impact of Black authors on the concept of American modernism.

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The Harlem Renaissance and American modernism are concurrent literary movements occurring in the early to mid twentieth century. However, Black authors are often segregated by academic terminology, limiting them to just the Harlem Renaissance. This highlights a pervasive issue in academia of discounting Black authors' contributions, seen across the nation in syllabi that don't feature a single person of color but claim to encapsulate periods of decades and even centuries. By examining the works of authors traditionally excluded from the modernist canon, instead being classified as "Harlem Renaissance writers," one can trace the impact of Black authors on the concept of American modernism.

In his book *The African American Roots of Modernism: From Reconstruction to the Harlem Renaissance*, James Edward Smethurst argues:

> African American literature first raised many of the concerns, stances, and tropes associated with U.S. modernism and framed and made comprehensible to white (and Latina/Latino and Asian American) people a new urban territory of blackness (including music and venues for music) that came to have an intimate and formative relationship to emerging artistic bohemias (Smethurst 3).

Smethurst places African American literature at the birthplace of American modernism, elevating Black authors to a level of importance not often recognized within American literary movements as a whole. His book, published in 2011, builds on and updates an argument from Adrienne Johnson Gosselin's 1996 essay "Beyond the Harlem Renaissance: The Case for Black Modernist Writers":

> The distinction between the two movements, real or not, arises because American literary history views Modernism as largely a European movement contemporaneous with, but separate from, the Harlem Renaissance. And while American Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance both share such primary

> Modernist concerns as alienation, primitivism, and experimental form, the canon of American literature continues to record black writers of the period as 'Harlem Renaissance' writers rather than black Modernist or simply American Modernist writers (Gosselin 37).

Gosselin speaks of the disservice done to Black authors by separating them from American modernism into their own category. This furthers Smethurst's argument that Black authors were the first to utilize what are considered today to be hallmarks of American modernism, which Gosselin defines as "alienation, primitivism, and experimental form." While African American authors were writing well before the modernist movement began, they dealt with heavy restrictions on content and form.

The history of the slave narrative is essential to understanding Black authorship and the autonomy of Black authors in America. The slave narrative is a literary genre consisting of written, autobiographical accounts of slavery. Charles H. Nichols asserts, "Slave narratives constitute the largest body of literature produced by American Negroes in the early years of the nineteenth century" (Nichols 107). However, slave narratives were prevalent well into the twentieth century as well: "The importance of slave narratives as valuable records of slavery is, therefore, being increasingly recognized. During the 1930's the W.P.A. writers interviewed living ex-slaves and collected 17 volumes of data now in the Congressional library" (Nichols 111). Now an online exhibit, the collection contains more than 2,300 firsthand accounts of slavery, as well as 500 black-and-white photos of formerly enslaved people. The creation of this collection in the 1930's provides insight into the significant interest in preserving this historical period during the American modernism movement.

In "'I Was Born': Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature," James Olney dissects slave narratives as autobiographical hallmarks, as well as their role in the development of African American literature. He writes:

> [W]hat is being recounted in the narratives is nearly always the realities of the institution of slavery, almost never the intellectual, emotional, moral growth of the narrator (...) The lives of the narratives are never, or almost never, there for themselves and for their own intrinsic, unique interest but nearly always in their capacity as illustrations of what slavery is really like. Thus in one sense the narrative lives of the ex-slaves were as much possessed and used by the abolitionists as their actual lives had been by slaveholders (Olney 51).

Olney argues that the stories of Black authors were "possessed and used" by White abolitionists for the purpose of furthering their cause. He draws comparisons between this exploitation and the exploitation of active slavery. This highlights the White saviorism abundant in the abolitionist movement, or the insidious belief of White people that they are rescuing people of color from a place of superiority, thus denying them agency. Olney continues,

> This means that unlike autobiography in general the narratives are all trained on one and the same objective reality, they have a coherent and defined audience, they have behind them and guiding them an organized group of 'sponsors,' and they are possessed of very specific motives, intentions, and uses understood by narrators, sponsors, and audience alike: to reveal the truth of slavery and so to bring about its abolition (Olney 52).

Olney describes the White abolitionist "sponsors" of slave narratives and the limited scope of what these narratives were aiming to accomplish. Olney goes on to explain in detail the way that slave narratives follow an exact science in terms of form, even as far as repeating the same common sentences. But, as aforementioned, "experimental form" is a hallmark of modernism. Black authors were able to experiment only once White sponsors were out of the picture. Moving into the era of

American modernism, Black authors had differing opinions on the roles of Black artists, including "Harlem Renaissance writer" and poet Langston Hughes. Langston Hughes published his essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" in 1926. Hughes grapples with the responsibility of Black artists, writing,

> [T]his is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America—this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible.

Hughes remarks on the seemingly hidden desire of Black artists to wish they were White by denying their Blackness. He goes on to write: "So I am ashamed for the black poet who says, 'I want to be a poet, not a Negro poet,' as though his own racial world were not as interesting as any other world." Hughes argues that if a Black author says they want to be a "poet, not a Negro poet," they are denying a crucial part of their identity that cannot be ignored. Hughes's own poetry serves as an example of his insistence that one honor his race within his writings. His 1940 poem "Daybreak in Alabama" begins, "When I get to be a colored composer / I'm gonna write me some music about / Daybreak in Alabama / And I'm gonna put the purtiest songs in it." This poem is explicitly about race and imagining a better world for people of color in which everyone, regardless of race, can live harmoniously. The speaker identifies himself as "colored" in a reclamation of the segregation-era term that was used to differentiate Black people from White people. He also uses African American Vernacular English (AAVE) with phrases like "write me some" and "purtiest." While one could argue these are also common in Southern English dialects, in combination with the speaker's self-identification as "colored," the language throughout the poem also signals the speaker's embrace of his racial identity. Hughes does not shy away from writing explicitly Black art, upholding his values as stated in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." "Daybreak in Alabama" also explicitly deals with alienation, one of Gosselin's "primary Modernist concerns," as it imagines a world in which a "colored composer" wouldn't face alienation simply due to their race. Hughes's contemporary, Richard Wright, takes a different stance on Black artistry in his own manifesto.

Richard Wright's 1937 article "Blueprint for Negro Writing" criticizes the popular works of the Harlem Renaissance. Wright's biggest critique was that the popular African American literature of the time was pandering to White audiences, showcasing his Marxist beliefs in a call for collectivism. He writes: "Generally speaking, Negro writing in the past has been confined to humble novels, poems, and plays, prim and decorous ambassadors who went a-begging to the white America. They entered the Court of American Public Opinion dressed in the knee-pants of servility, curtsying to show that the Negro was not inferior, that he was human, and that he had a life comparable to that of other people" (Wright 97). Wright uses an exaggerated metaphor to critique the methods used by other Black authors to gain sympathy from White audiences. He argues for the importance of writing beyond "begging the question of the Negroes' humanity" (Wright 99). In other words, he believed that Black authors should focus on contributing to the lives of other Black people instead of focusing on the opinions of White people.

One of the Harlem Renaissance works implicated in Wright's critique is Nella Larsen's 1928 novel *Quicksand*. *Quicksand* follows mixed-race protagonist Helga Crane as she navigates White and Black societies, journeying from the American South, to Harlem, all the way to Denmark, and back to the United States. The novel is marked by Crane's constant discontent with everywhere she goes, never feeling satisfied in White or Black communities, and eventually ending with her becoming stuck in an unhappy marriage with children she didn't want. Deborah E. McDowell writes about the reception in her introduction to *Quicksand* and Larsen's other novel *Passing*:

> Larsen won second prize in literature in 1928 for *Quicksand* from the Harmon Foundation which

> awarded outstanding achievement in Negroes. *Quicksand* was also well received by critics. In his review of the novel W. E. B. Dubois, for example, praised it as "the best piece of fiction that Negro America has the produced since the heyday of Chestnutt" (McDowell 2).

Wright wrote in "Blueprint" that "Negro writing assumed two general aspects: (1) It became a sort of conspicuous ornamentation, the hallmark of 'achievement.' (2) It became the voice of the educated Negro pleading with white America for justice" (98). *Quicksand* and its award-winning reception certainly falls into "the hallmark of 'achievement.'" Larsen's novel was also criticized, however, for being an example of the stereotypical "tragic mulatto," a mixed-race person whose existence is marked by depression and even suicidality as a result of being unable to fit into White or Black communities. This is directly addressed in the epigraph to the novel, the final stanza of Langston Hughes's poem "Cross:"

> My old man died in a fine big house.
> My ma died in a shack.
> I wonder where I'm gonna die,
> Being neither white nor black?

Larsen's choice of epigraph cues the reader into the main issue at the heart of the novel: the inherent bifurcation of being mixed-race. This foreshadows the end of the novel, in which Helga is trapped: "For in some way she was determined to get herself out of this bog into which she had strayed. Or–she would have to die. She couldn't endure it. Her suffocation and shrinking loathing were too great" (Larsen 135). This fulfills the second criteria of Wright's as "pleading with white America for justice" by showing how dire her situation is as a result of rejection from American society due to her mixed-race identity. *Quicksand* revolves around the concept of alienation of mixed-race people from both White and Black societies, making it a modernist work in addition to Larsen's categorization as part of the Harlem Renaissance. While Wright criticized these two categories of "achievement" and "pleading," he did not always evade these categories himself.

In 1928, one year after Wright's "Blueprint" was published, his collection of short stories, *Uncle Tom's Children*, was published. Each story reflects the violent reality of living in the Jim Crow era for Black southerners. Upon its first publication, there were four novellas in the collection, including "Big Boy Leaves Home" and "Long Black Song." "Big Boy Leaves Home" follows the titular character Big Boy as he is forced to flee home after killing a White man in self-defense leads to him being hunted by a lynch mob. "Long Black Song" follows Sarah, a Black mother who faces sexual violence at the hands of a White traveling salesman, leading to retaliation from her husband that ends in his death when he purposefully goads on a lynch mob. Both stories are marked by stark examples of violence. In "Big Boy Leaves Home," Big Boy is forced to watch as his friend Bobo is burned alive: "[H]e saw a writhing white mass cradled in yellow flame, and heard screams, one on top of the other, each shriller and shorter than the last" (Wright 57). Wright depicts the lynching of an innocent child with unflinching detail. Additionally, both short stories directly quote the members of the lynch mobs, with horrifying exclamations such as "LES GIT SOURVINEERS!" in "Big Boy Leaves Home" (Wright 56). There is also extensive use of the n-word by the mobs, exemplified on page 155 of "Long Black Song," when it is used four times on one page. Wright's use of violence in *Uncle Tom's Children* contradicts his stance in "Blueprint for Negro Writing." He uses shock value as a means to gain sympathy from White audiences, while "Blueprint" argues for the importance of writing for other Black authors instead of trying to prove Black people's humanity. This exemplifies how difficult it was for Black authors to let go of the expectations placed upon them by the literary precedence of exploitation of Black trauma in slave narratives.

Published as an introduction in the 1993 restored version of his 1940 protest novel *Native Son*,

Wright went on to criticize his own work in the essay "How 'Bigger' was Born." He writes of *Uncle Tom's Children*:

> I found that I had written a book which even bankers' daughters could read and weep over and feel good about. I swore to myself that if I wrote another book, no one would weep over it; that it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears. It was this that made me get to work in dead earnest (Wright 23).

He recognizes the contradictory nature of his work in *Uncle Tom's Children* and his actual beliefs about the goal of Black authors with his distaste of the reception by "bankers' daughters." He reflects on his goal to write a book that "no one would weep over," but rather one that will "[lift] the level of consciousness higher," as he says "[e]very first-rate novel, poem, or play" does in "Blueprint" (Wright 106). While Wright's work in *Uncle Tom's Children* contradicted what he claimed to believe by using violence to build empathy from White audiences, it still progresses past the slave narrative with the usage of experimental form, another of Gosselin's three "primary Modernist concerns." While most traditional narratives use a combination of dialogue and narrative, the first several pages of "Big Boy Leaves Home" are almost entirely told through dialogue without any narrative interjections. This cements Wright's work as modernist. His rhetorical agenda, however, deals explicitly with race and racism, as solidified by his goals articulated in "Blueprint for Negro Writing." This has led to its exclusion from the modernist canon.

Despite the general consensus of academia to segregate Black authors into the "Harlem Renaissance," teaching them separately from American modernism, the works of Langston Hughes, Nella Larsen, and Richard Wright make a compelling case for the inclusion of Black authors in both movements. By looking at the goals of the authors as articulated in their own words via "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" and "Blueprint for Negro Writing," one can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the difficulties that Black authors faced as they tried to find their place in the broader literary scene. Including Black authors in the modernist canon is essential to combatting years of erasure on the behalf of the White academy and gives credence to the significant contributions of their works to the overall understanding of what "American modernism" is.

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