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Reconstructing Identities: Black American Poets of Harlem Renaissance

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Abstract: American literature's 400-year history has been shaped by the rise of black writers who have often written rich and vibrant literary forms to complement American literature and culture. The goal of this paper is to present how African American literature attempted to rebuild their identities, during the Harlem Renaissance, primarily to end the negative stereotypes of black people. This was an era of unparalleled artistic achievement focused on the Harlem section of New York City by black American writers, musicians and artists. Poets such as Langston Hughes, Claude Mc Kay, and Countee Cullen have been the most influential poets of Harlem Renaissance period and their poetry has tried to articulate authentically the African American experience. The key purpose is to discuss how these new groups of black writers have taken a step forward to shift the deeply prejudicial image of blacks that has touched every heart.

Keywords: Harlem Renaissance, Prejudice, Articulate, Stereotype, American literature's, ancient heritage.

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Introduction

The blacks in America has been articulating their black identity through poetry for ages, as poetry is considered to be the most condensed, and compact form of literature. African American poetry was basically born during Harlem Renaissance. After the 1865 civil war, thousands of newly freed African Americans in the south began to dream of greater integration, including political empowerment, and economic and cultural self-determination in American society. The 1920s Harlem Renaissance was a movement aimed at re-creating a distinctive African American identity and exploring black voices in the arts. To alter racial assumptions in the culture, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Claude Mc Kay and other writers developed a new identity. They shared common experiences of slavery, liberation and ethnic inequality in their poetry. Among other things, the Harlem Renaissance instils in African Americans around the world a new sense of self-determination and pride, a new social consciousness, and a new dedication to political militancy that would serve as the foundation for the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s.

Black poetry draws extensively from the Afrocentric cultural roots and the poetic form incorporates the techniques and associated with black folklore. One of the most steadfast voices in African American literary criticism, Houston A. Baker, traces a particular lineage in black literature that is founded in the blues, slave narratives, spirituals, and black

vernacular. Baker provides the framework for a more comprehensive investigation of American culture at the “vernacular” level by connecting the blues to American social and literary history as well as to Afro-American expressive culture. Black poetry thus was almost always produced spontaneously and was handed down in oral tradition.

The songs of unknown origin are usually classified as work songs and spirituals. The work songs usually belonged to laborers who expressed their pain, sadness, loneliness and nostalgia even as they toiled on their various tasks. It was through folk songs and rhythms that they expressed their anger, resentment and sufferings and their yearning for their native land. In the book *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois aptly says that it was, “... the music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment; they tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways” (179-80). Although these songs provided a much-needed emotional release, they also served as a means of preserving tales of cruelty and horror as well as of resistance, resiliency, and survival. Black slaves were able to maintain their sense of identity and make a lasting contribution to American society through their folklore. As Lauri Ramey in the book *Slave Songs and The Birth of African American Poetry* aptly states “Slave songs are a record of the slave poets’ ability to overcome adversity and illuminate the strength of slave society in achieving unprecedented cultural production under circumstances of dire repression.” (2008: xviii). These songs serve as a testament to the perseverance of black people who stood against tremendous brutality and inhumanity. Poets of later periods have been greatly influenced by these songs.

The beginning of the twentieth century was a pivotal period in African-American history. Segregation and discrimination were on the rise even as a number of voices began agitation for justice and respect. African Americans were still subjected to abuse and violence, as well as being treated with contempt. During this time, African American struggle was influenced by the ideologies of two seminal figures: Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois. Both ideologues developed different strategies of resistance to combat racial problems. Washington’s ideology as an accommodation was based upon ‘separate but equal’ doctrine. For him economic independence was most important to gain racial equality. In his Atlanta speech held in September 18, 1895 he declared, “In all things that are purely social we can be separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress”. On the other hand, W.E.B. DuBois believed that there had to be economic as well as social and political equality. Though seemingly different both the ideologues were aiming at similar objectives.

W.E.B Du Bois, the great pioneer of the Harlem Renaissance movement was one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored people (NAACP). As Clift and Low in *Encyclopedia of Black America* state, “throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the major thrust of the NAACP program was directed toward securing a federal antilynching law” (1981:15). In 1903, DuBois published

The Souls of Black Folk, one of the most influential and prophetic works in American literature. This collection of fourteen essays is a thoughtful, articulate exploration of the several moral and intellectual issues surrounding the blacks within American society. "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line," wrote DuBois thus exposes the magnitude of racism in American society. However, W.E.B. Du Bois continued his efforts to strengthen the black community in a variety of ways to attain social justice and status. In the 1920s and 1930s, under his direction, a cultural movement that came to be known as the Harlem Renaissance. This was an era of unprecedented creative achievement by black American writers, musicians and artists centered in the Harlem section of New York City.

The Harlem Renaissance was a movement primarily to end the negative stereotypes of black people by creating their authentic images. The work done during the Renaissance had a long lasting impact upon the psyche of African Americans especially writers and artists. Henry Louis Gates in the article "The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black" aptly remarks about the Harlem Renaissance as, "... the trope of Reconstruction that I wish to trace is the trope of the New Negro in Afro-American discourse between 1895 and 1925" (1988:131). A number of circumstances, including the Great Depression, artists relocating to other states, or a lack of funding to encourage other artists, contributed to the movement's demise. These elements contributed to the Harlem Renaissance's artistic output deteriorating, but the movement's spirit persisted. After simmering for another thirty years, it finally burst to the surface in the 1960s and 1970s as the "Black Arts Movement."

The 1920s was a great period of the African American artistic production. As Carroll and Noble in his book *The Free and the Unfree – A New History of the United States* puts it, "Young poets, novelists, playwrights, composers flowered in an environment of black pride..." (1984:326). African American poetry essentially came into being during 1920s. Poets such as Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen were the most influential poets of this period and their poetry attempted to authentically express the African American experience. As Marc Maufort in his book *Staging Difference: Cultural Pluralism in American Theatre and Drama* states, "Based upon a more critical degree of self-awareness and more systematic exploration of the varied identities and social levels of blacks in both urban and rural settings, the literary expression of this new image, embodied in the concept of 'soul'... gathered force in all genres as many young black writers joined the chorus of voices inspired by the Harlem Renaissance" (1996:505). As a result, these new black author groups made a further effort to alter the skewed perception that existed at the time of African American literature, particularly poetry.

The poetry of 1920s was an expression of inner most experiences of poets, their desires, yearnings, fears and anxieties. The poetry of Harlem Renaissance dealt with several themes such as racism, imperialism, hypocrisy and other forms of social injustice. Stephan Henderson aptly

describes 1920s poetry as, “The process of self-definition made clearer and sharper as the self-reliance and racial consciousness of an early period are revived and raised to the level of revolutionary thought”(16). Poets before the Harlem Renaissance wrote dialect poems, but avoided overt racial considerations. Poetry was for them only to show their talent and to portray the lives of black folk as such. The poets of the Harlem Renaissance wrote about injustice of racism and the prejudice against them in such a beautiful and soulful renditions which touched every heart. The poetry of black poets of this era laid the foundation for the militant and resistance black poetry of 1960s.

Langston Hughes (1901-1967), the most accomplished poets of Harlem Renaissance made an indelible contribution to African American literature. His works include essays, short stories, plays, poetry, fiction and autobiography. He expresses the anger, resentment, loneliness, and disappointment of black people via his poetry. As Joanne V. Gabbin rightly says, “he never tired of exploring the color, vibrancy, and texture of black culture and “his” beloved people who created it” (1999: 8). Hughes started to write poetry at the early age of nineteen with his signature poem, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.” In the poem the poet attempts to establish links with the African heritage. The reference to the rivers in the Africa, namely- the Euphrates, the Congo, and the Nile- become a symbol of ever flowing cultural, social and emotional life of black people.

Through the poems Hughes asserts the continuity of ancient heritage which cannot be destroyed or supported by their forcible abduction and displacement to an alien land. Jean Wagner rightly points out that Hughes #poetry recognizes and defines an Afro-American on account of “his African origins, his history and his particular contribution to the civilizations in which he had been, involved.” (1973:395). The most remarkable feature of Hughes’ poetry is its vernacular nature, blues and jazz rhythms, syntax and diction. His poetry is free from rigid implication and more restricted verse as he uses free verse in his poems. Langston Hughes poems belong to the situations common to working class people. Hughes speaks in a voice familiar to all blacks to share his experiences with his own community.

In one of his most famous poem “As I Grew Older” published in 1925, Hughes speaks eloquently for the oppressed and marginalized who had to suffer indignities in the United States on account of their being black and poor. His writings, Eric J. Sundquist in “Who was Langston Hughes”, opines, are “filled with an evidence of a life long struggle against racial bigotry.”(1996:41). The speaker in the poem says that he had dreams, aspirations in his life just as any other child. But as he grew older, all his dreams were shattered singly because he was a black child. He encountered racism everywhere and could not fulfil his dreams. The color of his skin would always come in his way like a great wall. The poem, however does not become a personal lament alone as Hughes goes on to condemn all forms of oppression based on race, gender, nationality or religion. The poet also wants the black people to rise above all sorts of discrimination. The poem ends on a rebellious note as the poet says that

if the black people stand together and fight against racial discrimination, they can fulfil their dreams. The need of the hour, he proclaims is to unite together and fight for their rights.

Another poem “I, Too, Sing America” initially titled “Epilogue” when it appeared in *The Weary Blues*, the 1926 volume of Langston Hughes's poetry. It has been anthologized repeatedly and scholars have written about it many times. It is written in free verse and features short lines and simple language. In the poem the poet writes about the experience of a common black man—either a slave, a free man or even a domestic servant. He describes the way how black servants are treated when guests arrive at the owner's home. Langston Hughes finds a positive twist in this life full of suffering and manages to create inspiring lines at the end. He, like Walt Whitman, believes in the democratic America in the future where each person is treated on an equal level irrespective of their race and color. Thus the poet in the poem envisions a great future for blacks without any discrimination and injustice. Thus Hughes poetry was a way to boost his peoples pride and argue against racial injustice in the United States.

Countee Cullen (1903–1966), is another notable member of the Harlem Renaissance who was born in New York City. Mixed form is a specialty of Cullen's poetry. His poetry cover universal subjects like love and death, and he also penned many poems that address racial concerns. *Color*, Cullen's debut collection of poems, was released in 1925. Upon returning to New York, when he was already well-known as a major literary figure, Cullen started writing “From the Dark Tower,” a column on literature and social concerns for *Opportunity*, the National Urban League's periodical.

In his poem “Heritage” he reminds blacks of their past African origins and their heritage. In the poem he interrogates the meaning of an Africa unknown to most black Americans. The poet introduces Africa to blacks from which they were separated hundred years ago. As Joyce Pettis rightly says that in the poem, “the narrator indicates many misconceptions of the continent through a mix of images romantic and realistic and Christian and pagan. That ancient place, the poem suggests, is physically and culturally inaccessible” (Pettis: 76).

Unlike Hughes, whose themes and subjects in poetry were always dealt with racism, lynching and frustrations of blacks, Cullen did not accept the idea that his poetry should always treat racial themes. In “Yet Do I marvel,” one of Cullen's most famous sonnets, he addresses the dilemma of vacillating between playing aesthetic and racial spokesman as he says:

“Yet Do I marvel at this curious thing
To make a poet black and bid him sing” (*Color*, lines 13-14)

This demonstrates Cullen's theory that black poets could create poetry just like white poets, and that they were not constrained by themes, subjects, or languages. Thus he wanted his poems not to be limited to the racial art, but to be evaluated on the basis of universal art not only as a black poet. Robert A. Smith rightly remarks in his paper “The Poetry of Countee Cullen,” that “Cullen's poetry of protest places him in the class

of McKay and James Weldon Johnson, although he never seems quite as bitter as they” (Smith,217). Compared to other black poets of the era, his voice was less vociferous while protesting.

Born in Jamaica, Claude McKay is another great exponent of the Harlem Renaissance, who migrated to New York in 1920s. He was not only a great poet, but also an essayist, journalist, autobiographer and novelist. He is best known for his novel “Home to Harlem” which gained him distinction as a best seller and won the Harmon Gold Award for literature. McKay was also a noted Harlem poet, although his writings were different than those of other poets. He chose the sonnet form as it was the best technique to explore strong emotions. O. Jemie in his book Langston Hughes: Introduction to Poetry rightly remarks that “The best of McKay’s poetry is radiant with strength particularly because of the brief space of fourteen lines out of which it is forced” (1976:156). He used his sonnets entitled as “If We Must Die,” “The Lynching,” “Tiger”, as a tool to awaken the oppressed and exploited race to have proud of their own culture and heritage.

In his famous poem, “If We Must Die,” which was published in *The Liberator* in 1919, he called upon all the African Americans to get united and meet violence with violence. The poem’s origin was in response to various race riots during the summer of 1919 which swept across all over America. So much bloodshed occurred that the summer of 1919 was labelled as “red summer”. The poem is militant in nature in which the speaker calls blacks to arm against racial oppression and violence. Unlike Hughes, whose poems developed love and respect for African culture and heritage, McKay poem was a call to action.

Through this poem, he encourages blacks not to submit before whites. He is urging them not to become weak like “hunted and penned in an inglorious spot” but fight against those attacking them while attacking may cause death. He urges them to make their deaths noble. As Joyce Pettis says, “if death is the result, it will be a noble death met in spite of a unified counterattack” (2002: 243). Thus the poet in the poem expresses the kind of new awareness, courage and determination in blacks. The poem became amazingly popular and recited by all those who were oppressed and abused. As McKay himself confirmed in his essay that he began to see himself as “transformed into a medium to express a mass sentiment” (1970:28). The poem also became the inspiration for the civil rights activists in the 1960s. “Lynching” is one other poem of McKay expresses the pain and grief at the killings and the slayings of blacks without being questioned. The poet expresses the unlimited pain of a father who painfully witnesses the murder of his son and could not question the brutal action of whites. *Enslaved* is a poem in which he expresses his nostalgia, grief and sorrow towards the conditions of blacks in America. He writes:

“Oh, when I think of my long- suffering race,
For weary centuries, despised and oppressed
Enslaved and lynched, denied a human place” (1953:41).

The poet laments at the sufferings and frustrations of his race right from the slavery that are denied any position and status in white's world. Jean Toomer is a "bright morning star of a new day of the race in the literature. (1977:44). With the publication of *Cane*, Toomer made his mark as a significant Harlem Renaissance writer. To Arna Bontemps *Cane* appears as the product of "seven blood mixtures in which he attempts at harmonising different strains of his heritage with a great concern of his life and self without subduing any one element to any other"(1969: 9). Unlike other Harlem Renaissance writers, Jean Toomer does not have many poems to his credit. His *Cane* includes thirteen poems and he also published a long poem entitled "The Blue Meridian" in 1936. He through his poem talks about black race and its roots in Africa. *Cane* is also about the search of the roots of the blacks and sufferings and pain of people being uprooted from their land.

Thus the poetry of 1920s was an expression of inner most experiences of poets, their desires, yearnings, desires and anxieties. It dealt with several themes such as racism, imperialism, hypocrisy and other forms of social injustice. The creative energy of Harlem Renaissance fed developments in the African American poetry. African American poets continued to write black poetry and had begun its onward journey. Black poets of the 1930s and 1940s were influenced by the creativity of the Harlem Renaissance and produced influential black poetry. Thus next three decades, 1930-1960, trace the poetry of Sterling A. Brown, Melvin B. Tolson, Robert Hayden, Margaret Walker and Gwendolyn Brooks. These were the major poetic voices that brought black poetry to new heights of competence and maturity. They laid the foundation for militant and resistance black poetry of 1960s.

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