

“I am the woman with the black black skin”

Mapping Intersectionality in Harlem Renaissance Women’s Poetry

by

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## ABSTRACT

*Mapping Intersectionality in Harlem Renaissance Women's Poetry* comprises the first book-length study devoted to examining the role women's poetry played in the Harlem Renaissance, an artistic and sociopolitical movement that reached its zenith in the 1920s. This study is situated in a theoretical interdisciplinarity that complicates critical approaches to Black women's subjectivities with respect to resistance and representation. It combines literary, race and gender theory to perform close readings of New Negro Women's poetry. Central chapters of the text theorize the poets' overshadowed engagement with the political movement via the tropes of interiority, motherhood, and sexuality; a closing chapter puts New Negro women's poetry in conversation with the Black Arts Movement. Building on the feminist sociological framework of Intersectionality, which considers the lived experience of individuals who embody multiple layers of marginalization, this dissertation works to identify and unpack sources of racialized gendered disparity in Harlem Renaissance studies.

In acknowledging that self-actualization and self-articulation are central to this identity-based movement – a presupposition that informs this study's thesis – it becomes necessary to consider the gendered aspects of the writing for a more comprehensive review of the period. The analytical framework of Intersectionality provides a means to acknowledge New Negro women poets' perspectives regarding their racialized and gendered selves. In essence, *Mapping Intersectionality* is a concentrated effort toward unearthing evidence of their significant push against race and gender oppression. The motivation driving this study is revision and reclamation: revisionist in its concern for redefining the parameters in which the movement is traditionally perceived; a

reclamation in its objective to underscore the influential, but nearly forgotten voices of the women poets of the Harlem Renaissance.

## DEDICATION

For Mommy and Michael

*my left and right ventricles*

For Jordan, Jayden, and Amber

*anything is possible when you have a dream, a plan, and a wide wingspan: i can't  
wait to see you fly*

For the Village – the grandparents, the aunties, the uncles, the cousins

*thank you for filling in the blank spaces - everything i am is because of  
everything you are*

And, with emphasis on Finally, for Sister Poets

*who wait in dark, neglected places*

*hand in hand, here we go....*

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## CHAPTER 1

### *Introduction*

“For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives”

Audre Lorde<sup>1</sup>

#### **Fragment**

I am the woman with the Black Black skin

I am the laughing woman with the Black Black face

I am living in the cellars and in every crowded place

I am toiling just to eat

In the cold and in the heat

And I laugh

I am the laughing woman who's forgotten how to weep

I am the laughing woman who's afraid to go to sleep

-- *Angelina Weld Grimké*<sup>2</sup>

Angelina Weld Grimké and Audre Lorde serve as gateway toward understanding the overshadowed, yet foundational role New Negro women poets played in the Harlem Renaissance. Though Lorde was not a Harlem Renaissance poet, her words inform the major argument that threads this study together: a close examination of the relationship between poetics and identity as necessary to achieve a more inclusive and comprehensive

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<sup>1</sup> Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: The Crossing Press, 1984), 37.

<sup>2</sup> Angelina Weld Grimké, “Fragment,” in *Anthology of Modern American Poetry*, ed. Cary Nelson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 146.

review of the Harlem Renaissance movement. Too often marginalized in the annals of literary history, New Negro women poets are the premier source of study for identity poetics and politics because they embodied, challenged and deconstructed multiple cultural constructs in their works and lived realities. Race, gender, sexuality, religion, class – the inscribed self as silenced, as Othered, as “fragmented” – is explored and theorized in the many metered lines of their poetry. Equipped with the burgeoning framework of intersectionality – an analytical tool that considers the lived realities of individuals who embody multiply marginalized identities (i.e. race, gender, sexual orientation) -- scholars can now revisit New Negro women’s poetry with a wider and more amplified lens. Kimberlé Crenshaw initially used the term “intersectionality” in her exploration of the judicial system’s failure to acknowledge the multidimensionality of Black women’s lived experience.<sup>3</sup> She argues that a single axis framework designed to recognize singularly marginalized groups (i.e. Black men or White women) theoretically erases populations that embody more than one of these categories. Crenshaw’s analysis sheds light on the treatment of Harlem Renaissance women writers, which, until recently, has been tantamount to gender invisibility.

Returning to the Harlem Renaissance era via the notion of intersectionality not only helps to illuminate the material contribution of New Negro women poets via their publications and editorial work, but it also provides methods for substantive scholarly criticism of their literary output. Thus, the layering of this study rests on this primary

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<sup>3</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989): 139-167.

goal: close readings of the poetic works of New Negro women that analyze their contributions to literary production, protest and the legacy of the Harlem Renaissance. Melissa Harris-Parry sums the significance of Black women's contributions in the following: "The struggle for recognition is the nexus of human identity and national identity, where much of the most important work of politics occurs. African American women fully embody this struggle. By studying the lives of black women, we gain important insight into how citizens yearn for and work toward recognition."<sup>4</sup> The distinct contributions of New Negro poets offer another perspective on dichotomies plaguing gender and race theory: domesticity versus progressiveness, masculine versus feminine, and Black versus White. The possibilities of education and awareness become infinite, particularly as some of the same gender and race stereotypes continue to resurface in post-millennium life.

Though much recent scholarly attention has been dedicated to understanding the contribution of the Harlem Renaissance's contribution to the literary, cultural and global landscapes, remarkably little discussion has extended beyond a central focus on race to include matters of gender and sexuality. Despite recent gendered anthological and historical contributions from researchers like Cheryl Hall, Claudia Tate, Gloria T. Hull and Maureen Honey, the belief that the movement belonged solely to men remains deeply entrenched and largely under-examined. While groundbreaking work has surfaced for a few women fiction writers, comparably little literary criticism exists for the women poets of the era. Hesitation to seriously include women poets as contributors to the era is

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<sup>4</sup>Harris-Perry, Melissa V., *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes and Black Women in America*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), <<http://lib.myilibrary.com?ID=327985>>.

surprising when one considers that poetry would become one of the most strategic components of a movement that fused politics and art in archetypal ways. The compact nature of poetry made it easier to publish in smaller magazines. The lack of support for New Negro Women's poetry and their legacy begs for rigorous critical analysis and theorization if scholars are to understand more fully the implications of this historical moment and its influence on subsequent literary cultures.

This study is situated in a theoretical interdisciplinarity that complicates our understanding of Black female subjectivity with respect to resistance and representation. Unpacking many of the sources of racialized gendered disparity in Harlem Renaissance studies is a driving force pushing this dissertation forward. Thus, my work's purpose supports measures of revision and reclamation: revisionist in its concern for redefining the parameters in which the Harlem Renaissance is traditionally perceived; a reclamation in its objective to underscore the influential, but nearly forgotten voices of the women poets of the era.

Known also as "The New Negro Movement," this era offers a profound and distinct contribution to race and gender studies. Ripe with political and social angst, this early twentieth century defining moment offers a multilayered intersection of race, gender, class, and literary histories. With the fresh wounds of slavery ever present and the reign of Jim Crow ever pressing, Renaissance artists considered the technological and experimental nature of modernity not only as weapons in the arson against racism, but also as a means to the agency of constructing one's own sociopolitical, cultural identity. The turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw a flourishing of technological advancement that resulted

in major advancements in printing, publishing and travel. Modernist used this boon in advancement to reach new audiences and to blur the boundaries of identity, which includes race, gender, class and nationhood. As Sharon Jones explains, it is necessary to push beyond the narrow scope of race to fully appreciate the movement's call for agency to construct and define the self:

The Harlem Renaissance also coincides with the modernist movement. The sense of fragmentation, alienation, and deterioration brought about by World War I created a malaise among writers, intellectuals and artists during the 1920s and 1930s. The Western world, which many viewed as the origin of civilization, had been destroyed, and a new world would emerge. Harlem artists sought to conceptualize the new world despite their ambivalence about whether the future held more promise than the past.<sup>5</sup>

Though race and class matters have historically been prioritized in Harlem Renaissance studies, the implications of gender and female sexuality to the movement have largely gone unexplored. There is an overwhelming sense that the Renaissance is decidedly masculine as key figures like DuBois, Alain Locke, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay and Langston Hughes have been lauded for taking the movement by the reins and dictating its direction and goals. However, their prioritization of race over gender marginalized the voice and concerns of Black women writers whose literature is often overshadowed, if not ignored, as compared to their male contemporaries.

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<sup>5</sup>Sharon Jones, *Rereading the Harlem Renaissance: Race, Class, and Gender in the Fiction of Jessie Fauset, Zora Neale Hurston, and Dorothy West* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2002), 11.

In highlighting troubling patterns in Locke's editorial discrepancy and support, Hull explains that despite the apparent "full participation of women in the Harlem Renaissance," exclusionary efforts often thrived: "One of the most basic is how male attitudes toward women impinged upon them, how men's so-called personal biases were translated into something larger that had deleterious effects. This became especially invidious when such men were in influential and critical positions. They made blatant the antifemale prejudice inherent in the whole of society."<sup>6</sup> While it is encouraging to note that the critical oversight of gender is becoming more acknowledged by literary historians, one wonders how gender informed, influenced and altered the direction of the movement. Thus a review removed from color-driven perspective of the period not only challenges the conceptualization of the artistic aspects of Harlem Renaissance, but it also reinvents our understanding of American history with respect to critical race theory in general. In contemplating the landscape of opportunities for Renaissance studies, Cheryl Wall explores the potential: "Individually and collectively, the biographies of the women of the Harlem Renaissance both offer models and cautionary tales. But if these literary foremothers were sometimes unable to live their dreams and convictions, they left a legacy in their art."<sup>7</sup>

Ultimately, there are many layered reasons for the disparity in gender awareness in New Negro construction and analysis. Renaissance elite may have felt their race struggle was all inclusive, their purview not being broad enough to consider the unique

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<sup>6</sup> Gloria T. Hull, *Color, Sex, and Poetry: Three Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 7.

<sup>7</sup> Cheryl Wall, *Women of the Harlem Renaissance*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 204.

positioning of New Negro women. Perhaps, then, the traditions of unity and communal purpose overshadowed that distinction. Or, possibly, the leaders of the demanding race movement felt progress would be threatened by acknowledging gendered concerns. Methodologically, I analyze the ramifications of gendered disparity on New Negro era scholarship, including the general heteromasculinist perception of the historical period, the masculinized construction of racial protest, and ultimately the suspiciously critical approach to the poetic contributions of Renaissance women, which arguably led to critical and theoretical neglect.

### ***Mapping Intersectionality: The Road to Recovery***

Grimké's lyric poem "Fragment," simultaneously embodies the modern sensibility of fragmentation and the complex layering of intersectionality, making it a premier example to illustrate the methodological underpinning of this project. In tune with Harlem Renaissance ideology, the work is concerned with identity. However, Grimké's poem moves beyond the singular axis of race to give the self and gender equal billing. Repetition is essential to understanding Grimké's strategic and perhaps expressively futile attempts at identity balance. The "I am" appears at the beginning of seven out of eight of the poem's lines as a marked attempt to define the self. The speaker's race is noted four times in the first two lines and the consecutive repetition as in "black, black" signals the doubly oppressed reality of this speaker. Interestingly, the speaker's gender also appears in the poem four times, twice in the poem's opening line and twice in the closing couplet. If we consider the poem's strategic placement of the "I"

and the numerical balance in the mention of race and gender, we can deduce that no single aspect of identity is prioritized. Instead, each informs and influences the other.

The culmination of these identities is clearly a source of internal turmoil for the speaker, evidenced by her psychological battle to find balance and peace. The fact that her struggle is both visible and invisible as in “I am living in the cellars and in every crowded place,” is a motivating principle of intersectional studies, which argues that theoretical erasure is byproduct of multiply marginalized identity. Grimké’s poem thus serves to articulate the fragility of the multiply inscribed existence of Black womanhood. Elroy Romero-Munoz explores the poet’s successes:

The "woman" may remain as unidentified as the poem that describes her, but the lack of details by no mean renders her anonymous, let alone voiceless. Together with the use of the definite article, this fundamental indeterminacy elevates her to the status of *Everywoman*. The peculiar use of the modifier "Black" in lines 1-2 creates a pattern of omission and repetition that suggests that the poem deals with the gender of the I-persona as much as with her skin colour, but never syntactically mixing the two. What we have here is thus a Black *Everywoman*.<sup>8</sup>

Romero-Munoz’s argument proves particularly poignant to an intersectional reading of the poem. While acknowledging the variations in social and professional statuses of New Negro women, Grimké taps into a shared experience with world.

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<sup>8</sup> Eloy Romero-Munoz, “Gendering the Color Line in Angelina Weld Grimké’s ‘Fragment’,” *Modern American Poetry: An Online Journal and Multimedia Companion to Anthology of Modern American Poetry*, ed. Cary Nelson. 2001, [http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/g\\_l/grimke/fragment.htm](http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/g_l/grimke/fragment.htm).



Grimké's exploration New Negro Womanhood is layered with both confidence and insecurity. Her confident laugh is diffused by the inability to sleep and weep as in the final couplet of the poem: "I am the laughing woman who's forgotten how to weep/ I am the laughing woman who's afraid to go to sleep." The couplet marks a signature performance in Harlem Renaissance rhetoric and poetics and is acknowledgement of the metaphoric veil – the public façade that hides the internal struggle. Though haunted by the past, this Black Everywoman presents a confident persona to the world. Mary Unger argues that the speaker is unable to reconcile the segmentation in her identity: "As she moves through the poem, the speaker devolves into a state of paranoia and disillusionment, undercutting the opening declarative statements of the poem . . . . The speaker thus can never wholly articulate or inhabit an empowered subject position; rather, she embodies an incompleteness that is emphasized by the "unfinished" nature of Grimké's 'fragment.'" <sup>9</sup> Arguably, inspiration from this poem is drawn from Grimké's own masked and fragmented life.

Offering testament to the miscegenation of slavery, the poet is often confused with her famous White abolitionist aunt Angelina Grimké Weld. The poet was reared by her father in a liberal, upper-class community of old Boston. Hull argues that her social status was a source of disillusionment: "To an undeterminable extent, her background also probably contributed to a kind of personal unhappiness that impelled her toward themes of dejection and loss. Angelina also felt the psychological pressure of having to live up to family name and standards, exaggerated by the 'we must prove ourselves'

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<sup>9</sup> Mary Unger, "On Fragment," Ibid.

syndrome that operated among educated Blacks.”<sup>10</sup> To consider the New Negro Woman poet’s dilemma is to imagine devoting one’s creative energies only to a fragment of identity at the expense of all other aspects. This would take a toll on the writer, particularly in the matters of self-awareness and hypocrisy.

It is quite likely that the lived reality of doubly marginalized existence is reflected in the disturbingly short careers of Renaissance women poets. Nellie McKay argues that Black women were essentially asked to fragment their identities: “Black women have felt torn between loyalties that bind them to race on one hand, and sex on the other. Choosing one or the other, of course, means taking sides against the self, yet they have almost always chosen race over the other: a sacrifice of their self-hood as women and of full humanity, in favor of the race.”<sup>11</sup> Taking a cue from Grimké’s work, which stresses that one’s identity is much more than the marker of race, I argue that potential analysis of the intersectional conflict exists in the poetry of New Negro women. Intersectionality, which has roots in Black feminism studies and was championed most recently by scholars like bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins, proves especially useful in discussing the complexities of overlapping marginalized identities. Only through the layering of literary, gender and critical race theories can we appreciate that poems like Grimké’s “Fragment,” with its consideration of race, gender and identity construction and

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<sup>10</sup> Hull, *Color, Sex and Poetry*, 110.

<sup>11</sup> Nellie McKay, “Remembering Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas: What Really Happened When One Black Woman Spoke Out,” in *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power : essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Pantheon, 1992), 277.

deconstruction, can be lauded for its contribution to modernity, to Harlem Renaissance, and to American cultural studies via its access to subjugated knowledge.

While the interdisciplinary tool of intersectionality is essential to this project, my readings of the poetry center on several race, class and gender-imprinted literary tropes: motherhood, sexuality and protest. The strategic choice of tropes is two-fold. First, though the subject matter of Harlem Renaissance women's poetry published in both collected volumes and the small magazines of the era seems infinitely diverse, much of the work reflects a concern with one or more of these themes. Secondly, these tropes, though problematically and singularly racialized in Harlem Renaissance studies, prove to be major sources of intersectional tension for the movement's participants. If we accept that self-actualization and self-articulation are core to this identity-based movement – a presupposition central to my thesis – then studying literary production in the context of gender becomes necessary for a comprehensive review. Assessing their perspective on motherhood, sexuality and resistance as it appears in their poetry, this study unearths evidence of their significant push against racial and gender oppression.

### *Defining the Harlem Renaissance Movement*

One of the biggest challenges for contemporary critics of Harlem Renaissance studies is confronting the longstanding critical perception of the movement as a political and aesthetic failure. Scholars are forced to confront attitudes about Black literature penned before the onset of the 1940s protest era. Disturbed by the realization that the movement failed to impede the institutionalized system of racism that was Jim Crow,

many Harlem Renaissance participants and subsequent critics chose to identify markers of failure informed by the relatively narrow litmus of racial development. In his autobiographical review, Hughes notably stated that “the ordinary Negroes hadn’t heard of Negro Renaissance. And if they had, it hadn’t raised their wages any.”<sup>12</sup> Houston Baker explains that participants in the movement were highly concerned with defining themselves in “modern” terms. Art, poetry, and literature, he explains, were vehicles to help rid the country of racial prejudice. Like other fractions of the modernism, Baker argues that members of the Harlem Renaissance may have held a “too optimistic faith in the potential of art.”<sup>13</sup>

Conversely, this study by no means intends to undermine the import of racial consciousness to the self-identified Black writer. Calvin Hernton who notes, “By virtue of its origin, nature and function, Black writing is *mission-conscious* and is necessarily a hazardous undertaking. In turn, being a Black writer is an ennobling exigency, and Black literature constitutes one of the supreme enrichments of Black culture and Black life. This has been and is the burden as well as the heritage and the legacy of every Black person who takes up the pen in the United States.”<sup>14</sup> Certainly, the movement’s concern with racial uplift<sup>15</sup> – an ideology that is explored, defined, and challenged by many of the

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<sup>12</sup> Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1963), 228.

<sup>13</sup> Houston A. Baker, “Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance.” *American Quarterly*. 39, no.1 (1987): 92.

<sup>14</sup> Calvin Hernton, *The Sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers: Adventures in Sex, Literature and Real Life* (New York: Double Day, 1987), 38.

<sup>15</sup> Racial Uplift was an ideology reflected well in W.E.B. Dubois’ famed call for writers, artist and intellectuals to produce works that would confront negative imaging and

poets in this study—was an influential force in its literary and artistic output. However, participants of the movement and its close successors were arguably too close to its construction to fully appreciate the ripple effects of the movement. Ultimately, I argue that it was the limited interpretive scope of color that failed our previous understanding and reading of the period.

Thus, this study extends Jeffery Stewart’s assertion that “the New Negro” must be analyzed beyond the singular focus of race. He describes this individual as “an on-going complex transaction between a Black sense of self and a sense of self as urban, industrialized and also White.”<sup>16</sup> Stewart later adds gender and sexuality to the equation, pointing to women’s poetry as “a new poetry of love, intimacy and maternal sacrifice that knitted together sentiments and metaphors from American women’s poetry and the Black experience.”<sup>17</sup> He continues:

To be New Negro meant to live in the present with the echoes of past crimes and silenced communities echoing in one’s head, regardless of what the rest of the nation thought of it. And it meant dreaming in the 1920s of a new kind of citizenship, of at-homeness, grounded in the capacious Black urban community

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portrayals of African Americans. In “Criteria for Negro Art,” he wrote: “Thus all art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of Black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent.” W.E.B. Du Bois, “Criteria for Negro Art,” in *Crisis* Vol. 32, (October 1926).

<sup>16</sup> Jeffery Stewart, “The New Negro as Citizen,” *The Cambridge Companion to the Harlem Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 18.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

that was far more advanced in its foregrounding of feminist and homosexual identities than the rest of the nation. It meant the courage to resist not only 100 percent Americanism, but also gender bias and homophobia within a Black community in transition.<sup>18</sup>

Stewart's departure from a patriarchal construction of the New Negro evidences the rather recent acknowledgment of the diversity within Renaissance citizenry and mission. In revisiting the Harlem Renaissance's motivation and purpose, one has to reexamine what it means to write about race, particularly from an explicitly gendered perspective. As Mary Loeffelholz notes, men and women experience race differently. The modern affinity toward Africanism is a prime example of that distinction. She writes:

"Modernism's idealization of the 'noble savage,' for example, the primitive and sexualized Negro, might well have been received and reenacted differently by Black women writers than by Black men. If cultural dualism energized the Renaissance, women writers conscious of both racism and sexism may have been particularly sensitive to its dilemmas."<sup>19</sup> The multiplicity of audiences and concerns would become some of the most demanding aspects of participating in Harlem Renaissance culture.

Male and female writers including Zora Neale Hurston, James Weldon Johnson and Sterling A. Brown would often write about the challenge of developing craft while serving two masters – both Black and White. In considering his process, James Weldon Johnson explores the difficulty of the double audience:

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Mary Loeffelholz, *Experimental Lives: Women and Literature, 1900-1945* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992), 174.

The Aframerican author faces a special problem which the plain American author knows nothing about—the problem of the double audience. It is more than double audience; it is a divided audience, an audience made up of two elements with differing and often opposite and antagonistic points of view. His audience is always both White America and Black American. The moment a Negro writer takes up his pen or sits down to his typewriter he is immediately called upon to solve, consciously or unconsciously, this problem of the double audience.<sup>20</sup>

Because of their relationships with White patrons and publishers, Renaissance writers too often fell victim to harsh accusations about their work's authenticity and contribution to racial progress. The problem becomes further compounded as women writers and poets sought to create literature that spoke to gender-specific matters. In responding to the needs of their various audiences, concerns, and self, these poets relied on poetic tools of irony and ambiguity to write protest poetry.<sup>21</sup> The variation of voices and techniques proved problematic for critics like Henry Louis Gates, who argue that the movement failed to find its voice.<sup>22</sup> In contrast, Keith Leonard's call for a critical shift in readings of Renaissance poetry is particularly useful: "Rather than make exorbitant claims either for the political effect or political failure of their work, scholars need to be more precise

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<sup>20</sup> James Weldon Johnson, "The Dilemma of the Negro Author," in *The Harlem Renaissance 1920-1940: Politics and Aesthetics of "New Negro" Literature*, ed. Cary D. Wintz (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), 247.

<sup>21</sup> Margaret Ann Ried, *Black Protest Poetry: Polemics from the Harlem Renaissance and the Sixties*, (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2001), 7.

<sup>22</sup> Henry Louis Gates, *Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 224.

in defining the cultural agency of Harlem Renaissance art as this difficult pursuit of antihegemonic poetic formalism derived from the complexities of Black selfhood and of Black culture themselves. What mattered was the defiant American imagination, the existential genius that unified the otherwise disparate and competing poetic strategies of this rich movement.”<sup>23</sup> This project builds upon Leonard’s emphasis on individualism as a Harlem Renaissance tenet that informs the close readings performed throughout this dissertation.

Arguably, the women poets discussed herein are asserting their own agency in defining and constructing their identities as removed from the limited dicta of racial uplift and racially prejudiced imaging. To appreciate the theoretical moves these poets are making means acknowledging that these modern writers were negotiating concerns of race with matters of gender, sexuality, class and nationhood. One poet that I return to often to explore this awareness of intersectional complications is Helene Johnson, a younger poet in the Renaissance canon. While she did not publish a collection of poetry during the era, she won numerous poetry contests, and her work appears in most of the noteworthy publishing venues of the period. Verner Mitchell notes, “Indeed, Johnson’s willingness to challenge accepted boundaries—both aesthetic and political—is likely the most prominent feature in her poetry.”<sup>24</sup> Her poem “Futility” is a prime example of her boldness in craft and content.

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<sup>23</sup> Keith Leonard, *Fettered Genius: The African American Bardic Poet from Slavery to Civil Rights*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006), 116.

<sup>24</sup> Verner Mitchell, “Introduction,” in *Helene Johnson, Poet of the Harlem Renaissance: This Waiting for Love*. ed. Verner Mitchell (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 12.



### **Futility**

It is silly—

This waiting for love

In a parlor.

When love is singing up and down the alley

Without a collar.<sup>25</sup>

The poem's brevity and fragmentation reflect an appreciation of the modern aesthetic. Mitchell associates the poet's style with Hughes and Walt Whitman.<sup>26</sup> For me, this poem echoes the proto-modernist technique of Emily Dickinson, with strategic employment of the dash and slant rhyme. Johnson's catalogue is diverse with a range that includes conventional poetic forms, free verse, and jazz infused poetics.

"Futility" makes no explicit reference to race. In the first chapter of this dissertation, I explore how much of New Negro women's poetry is unjustly discarded because it does not explicitly prioritize a concern with race. But as Loffeloholz notes "judging women's poetry raceless implies that the judger knows with some certainty what it means to write *with* race."<sup>27</sup> When Johnson's poem is read in context with its publication, first appearing in *Opportunity* in 1926, readers can appreciate that her poem is in conversation with the classed implications of racial uplift. Mitchell reads the poem as a celebration of sexuality: "Like Andrew Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress' and Gwendolyn Brooks' 'a song in the front yard,' 'Futility' renders a ringing endorsement of

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<sup>25</sup> Helene Johnson, "Futility," *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>27</sup> Loffeloholz, *Experimental Lives*, 174.

love without coyness or shame. And in rejecting bourgeois rituals of courtship, it exemplifies the air of defiant sensuality present in so much of Johnson's verse."<sup>28</sup> The poem engages in a larger conversation about class. The work proclaims that the culture's obsession with class is literally futile, senseless and removed from reality. The speaker's rejection of the "parlor" and the "collar" declares that we cannot obtain the much sought after achievement of love – love of self, love of culture, love of the other – while hiding behind the segregate border of class.

Johnson carpe diem poem is most astute in posing this dilemma, as class is one of the most unexamined aspects of racial uplift ideology. The tenuous nature of class in early twentieth century Black communities generates great challenges in this vein. For instance, education is a highly regarded element of racial uplift, yet institutionalized racism denied educated Blacks access to gainful employment and economic equality. Educated men and women were relegated to minimum wage careers as a consequence. Another way class ideology was skewed in racial uplift ideology is evidenced in what is often referred to as "the cult of true (Black) womanhood." In Chapter Two, I explore how the cult of true womanhood – a Victorian era byproduct that relegated women to the domestic sphere – becomes nuanced in twentieth-century Black communities. Because of slavery and sexualized racism, Black women's labor had always been public and visible in American consciousness. Thus, the classed notion that women's work should remain unseen and inside the home was essentially impractical and unconceivable in Black culture. Shirley Carlson explains that Black Victoria strove to negotiate between a commitment to home and to the racial progress of her community:

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<sup>28</sup> Mitchell, *Helene Johnson*, 11.

The Black community's appreciation for and development of the feminine intellect contrasted sharply with the views of the larger society. In the latter, intelligence was regarded as a masculine quality which would "defeminize" women. The ideal White woman, being married, confined herself almost exclusively to the private domain of the household. She was demur, perhaps even self-effacing. She often deferred to her husband's presumably superior judgment, rather than formulating her own views and vocally expressing them, as Black women often did. A woman in the larger society might skillfully manipulate her husband for her own purposes, but she was not supposed to confront or challenge him directly. Black women were often direct, and frequently won community approval for this quality, especially when such a characteristic was directed toward achieving "racial uplift." Further, even after her marriage, a Black woman might remain in the public domain, possibly in paid employment. The ideal Black woman's domain, then, was both the private and the public spheres. She was wife and mother, but she could also assume other roles, such as schoolteacher, social activist, businesswoman, among others. And she was intelligent.<sup>29</sup>

Many of the poets in this study fit well into Carlson's description of Black Victoria, as some were educated activists in their respective communities. Class, race and gender were often clashing forces in their lived realities. This contradiction would prove important to New Negro women poets.

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<sup>29</sup> Shirley Carlson, "Black Ideals of Womanhood in the Late Victorian Era," *The Journal of Negro History*, 77, no. 2 (Spring, 1992): 62.

### *Renaissance Marks an Upwelling in Women's Poetry*

Despite facing great obstacles in recognition, criticism and publication, women poets drew inspiration from this race-defining moment to articulate their gendered, sexual, political experience. In fact, comparatively speaking, women would publish more poetry during the Harlem Renaissance than their male contemporaries. At the movement's zenith, women were publishing poems in the era's popular small magazines. Crystal Lucky explains how this fact was etched out of the collective Harlem Renaissance memory:

There were, without doubt, more women publishing during the 1920s in Harlem who, for various reasons, were not being included in male-edited anthologies. Because of their exclusion from the Black mainstream vehicles, their works were relegated to even more marginalized journals and poorly distributed publications. In light of that fact, their works have not been consistently included in courses in American literature. Subsequently, the exclusion of many early twentieth century Black women's works from the existing canon of American literature facilitates the further truncation of an Afro-American literary ancestry.<sup>30</sup>

This study is built on the premise that singular theoretical approaches to New Negro women's poetry have been detrimental to its critical and canonical survival. Intersectionality helps to reposition these writers out of the margins and illuminates their aesthetic, literary, and historic value. In the last three decades, a few noteworthy anthologies and collections have established a record of their contribution. Poets like

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<sup>30</sup> Crystal Lucky, "The Harlem Renaissance: A Revisionist Approach," in *The Harlem Renaissance 1920-1940*, ed. Cary D. Wintz, (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), 149.

Grimké, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Gwendolyn Bennett and Alice Dunbar Nelson remain among the most anthologized. But beyond obligatory reproductions of a select few poems, surprisingly little has been done to explore the significance and merit of Harlem Renaissance women's poetry.

In the marking of nearly a century since the onset of the Harlem Renaissance with the 1916 production of Grimké's *Rachel*, scholars are now better able to define the period beyond a singular race axis.<sup>31</sup> By excavating the ways that New Negro women poets negotiated their identity when confronted with both White and Black male imaging, only now can readers unpack the works of these female poets to find insightful analysis. While considering the gendered gaps in critical reception, Anne Stavney argues that there are patterned flaws in the exploration of coding within New Negro Woman poetry. She writes: "[D]espite the call to contextualize Black female-authored discourse within the historically specific constraints of early twentieth-century American culture, scholars have focused little critical attention on ideological and iconographic forces which competed *intra*racially as well as *inter*racially in the fiction, poetry and artwork of the period."<sup>32</sup> Conversely, this project supports charges made by historians and Black

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<sup>31</sup> Periodization of the Harlem Renaissance is highly contested, though most agree it reached its zenith in the 1920s. Incorporating gender as a factor, Maureen Honey and Venetria Patton make a compelling argument for pointing to landmark publications to set the parameters for the movement: Angelina Weld Grimké's play *Rachel* (1916) and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). *Double-take : A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology* (New Brunswick, N.J. : Rutgers University Press, 2001), xxvi.

<sup>32</sup> Anne Stavney, "'Mothers of Tomorrow': The New Negro Renaissance and the Politics of Maternal Representation," *African American Review*. 32.4. (1998): 533-561. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2901236>, 534.

feminist scholars like Collins who assert that women of color, having been stripped of political and social platforms for which to resist race and gender oppression, are often forced to seek alternative methods of activism.<sup>33</sup> Poetry, with all of its promise of coding, double meaning, language efficiency and mass production, proved a useful resource for New Negro women who sought to disrupt fault lines of class, race and gender.

Proving that the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance has aesthetic value is an even more daunting task than evidencing its historical significance. With the exception of Hughes, many movement's harshest critics are disillusioned by the poets' perceived unwillingness to branch away from Romantic forms like their White modern contemporaries. Cullen's poetry mirrored Keatsian sensibilities, and Claude McKay was committed to the Elizabethan sonnet. Women's poetry was certainly not exempt from these sweeping generalizations. Poet Georgia Douglas Johnson's commitment to Victorian form is too often confused for a gendered loyalty to gentility and high sentimentality. Post-Black Arts critics are notably not drawn to forms marked as "outmoded" and European. In the following chapters, I address the long-standing attitude that Harlem Renaissance poetry is monolithic and homogenized in form and content.

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<sup>33</sup> A major premise of Patricia Hill Collins's groundbreaking text, *Black Feminist Thought*, is that the cultural marginalization of African American women has motivated "independent, oppositional yet subjugated knowledges concerning our own subordination" (16). Her methodology includes looking outside of institutional sites to find and develop Black feminist thought: "One is neither born an intellectual nor does one become one by earning a degree. Rather, doing intellectual work of the sort envisioned within Black feminism requires a process of self-conscious struggle on behalf of Black women, regardless of the actual social location where that work occurs." *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, (New York: Routledge, 2000), 18.

A disturbing aspect of New Negro woman poetry criticism is the failure to acknowledge generational diversity. For instance, younger Renaissance participants like Mae Cowdery, Gwendolyn Bennett and Helen Johnson often used jazz, dialect and colloquialisms in their works. Their poetry confronts many scholarly assumptions that Harlem Renaissance women poets struggled to develop their craft beyond purportedly outdated Victorian structure and ideals. Mitchell's collection of Helen Johnson's work proves useful to this study. However, in praising the poet's work, the critic essentially dismisses the poetry of Johnson's female peers: "Johnson's poems defy the genteel conventions that governed many early twentieth-century female writers."<sup>34</sup> Mitchell's promotion of Johnson as a gendered exception reflects a rather disturbing aspect of the criticism of New Negro women's poetry. Exploring the diversity in talent and technique of women's poetics helps to correct literary criticism rooted in generalization and gender assumption.

I extend the criticism of efforts made by Claudia Tate and Maureen Honey who argue that the use of conventional verse can also be read as revolutionary, thus contributing to the movement's spirit of resistance and representation. My readings of the poetry are historically-based: these poets were of their era. Mastering forms and language previously denied them because of unjust racial hierarchies should be read as liberating. Infusing those same Romantic forms with polemical rhetoric and newly conceptualized ideals of beauty, identity and selfhood is quintessentially modern. Readings of Harlem Renaissance women's poetry must begin by acknowledging these elements. Maureen Honey explains, "The Renaissance generation, therefore, conceived

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<sup>34</sup> Mitchell, *Helene Johnson*, 3.

of itself as carrying on the struggle through attaining the highest possible level of literary accomplishment and surpassing the boundaries a racist society tried to impose. Writers saw no contradiction between social activism and the production of nonracial literature because the two were fused in their minds: artistic achievement moved the race upward.”<sup>35</sup> In spite of the numerous dismissals of New Negro’s women’s poetry as sentimental, “raceless” and classed, my readings of the work identify patterns of resistance, militancy, and revolutionary.

### ***Chapter Review***

Scholars are beginning to approach women’s literary contributions to Renaissance culture with some academic intensity. Fiction writers like Zora Neale Hurston and Nella Larsen, for example, have garnered much interest in modernist circles for several decades. Yet, comparatively little has been done to analyze the poetic aesthetics, literary inspirations and cultural contributions of New Negro woman poets whose poetry surely help to contextualize and evaluate Hurston’s and Larson’s achievements. In turn, this project illuminates the unique critical challenges these poets faced.

Chapter One centers on the women poets’ varied approaches and contributions to the movement’s spirit of protest, mapping their successes and setbacks in the face of literary criticisms. Notably, while relatively recent poetry collections and anthologies have worked to successfully historicize the contributions of these women poets, much of the relatively small efforts toward literary criticism comprise at-times veiled but often

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<sup>35</sup> Maureen Honey, *Shadowed Dreams: Women’s Poetry of the Harlem Renaissance* (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1989), 5.



overt negative criticism of their poetry. I say this not to imply a need for the blanket praise of Harlem Renaissance women's poetry but to interrogate the consistent attacks against their quality. It seems counterproductive to present poetry to a public only to dismiss large bodies of work as deficient. This critical reaction reflects an aversion to the critically presumptive readings of their poetry as classed and thus out of touch from authentic working-class Black women's lived realities. The tendency to direct readers away from literary women to blues culture and women singers as a response to the class dilemma has gone underexamined for too long and is also explored in Chapter One.

To build on scholarship by Houston A. Baker, Claudia Tate and Sandra Adell, I argue that future Harlem Renaissance scholars must develop new ways to read race and gender-imprinted works if poetry written by Black women of this and subsequent eras is to survive systematic erasure. Specifically, Chapter One revisits the criticism of New Negro women's poetry. Many of the critics of the day asserted that the work somehow fell short of movement's call for protest against racial oppression and marginalization. My reading considers how a gendered poetics of silence theorizes the internal ramifications of a systemically oppressed experience. Poetics of silence is a nuanced technique of interiority that explores ways in which internal awareness and self-empowerment can be a liberating response to social and political injustice. My readings of the poetry in this chapter will employ gender theory to consider how these women poets supported and employed alternative methods of resistance.

Chapter Two's focus on mothering outlines methods and aesthetics New Negro women poets used to obtain literary and sociopolitical agency. The construct of Black

motherhood is quintessentially a site for intersectionality analysis as it is both gendered and racialized. Surprisingly, motherhood would become a central focus of the Harlem Renaissance movement, at one time serving as its primary symbol in its ability to personify matters of uplift, strength and renewal. The men of the era were acutely aware of the symbolic power of mothering in Black communities, and often evoked the concept to fight negative cultural imaging. The construction of a Black maternal image was of great import to the Harlem Renaissance movement and is frequently revisited in the evolving field of African American cultural studies. As it pertains to the New Negro era, what has become painstakingly clear is that the New Negro woman's primary gift, sacrifice and obligation to the racial uplift movement was primarily motherhood.

Ultimately, Chapter Two explores how Renaissance women poets contributed to the debate circling their respective assigned role in the movement as both symbolic and biological mothers. In recontextualizing this often overshadowed representational role, I provide insight and an historical glance at the ongoing challenge of defining motherhood in Black communities. I argue that the widespread stereotypical imaging of the nonsexual Black mother as a quintessential element of the "good women's" identity would prove problematic in terms of gender formation. The cost of this imaging would be that Black women were socialized into sacrificing their sexuality and femininity for the race movement. This becomes magnified at a time when both their sexuality and beauty are being attacked by White racist imaging. The call for and expectation of fragmentation of identity was not only devastating to Black female representations: As it

was explored in New Negro women's poetry, it also produced negative ramifications in male and female relationships.

Chapter Three examines the overtly gendered trope of sexuality to theorize strategic ways in which it was racialized by Harlem Renaissance elite and the modern moment. One pressing concern involved the prevalence of racist sociological imaging that branded Black women as oversexed and promiscuous. This stigma takes root in American cultural history, taking on momentum in slavery and post-emancipation. Black women were considered the antithesis of White women and were deemed "prostitutes" and "harlots." Certainly, New Negro women were not immune to the effects of this sexualized stigma as it is a relationship that continually appears in the lines of their poetry. Problems distinct to Black womanhood -- sexualized imaging in particular -- were only peripherally treated or excessively tabooed by both the New Negro and Women's movements. Concerns of New Negro Women were often seen as distractions for these respective causes. As Barbara Christian outlines, it was the division that existed for Black women within both Black and women's movements that made Black women writers "more inclined to formulate their own concepts of the relationship between race and gender."<sup>36</sup> Literary analytical tradition is still lacking in its response to the reality of sexualized imaging in Black womanhood, and the physical and psychological attacks stemming from it. Chapter Three also examines how matters of sexual orientation are represented in New Negro women's poetry. I seek to dispel the "evidence of sexuality"

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<sup>36</sup> Barbara Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1985), 121.

prerequisite for queer readings by gesturing toward the influence of the modern moment which blurred the various borderlines of identity to include sexuality.

The coda chapter puts the Harlem Renaissance into conversation with the Black Arts Movement via the work of Gwendolyn Brooks. Traces of the New Negro women poets' methodologies and motivations are evident in Brooks' famed Black Arts poem, "In the Mecca." Brooks is the premiere poet of choice to explore this interconnectedness between the Harlem Renaissance and BAM. She is a prolific poet with direct relationships to Renaissance and BAM leaders such as Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, and Haki Madhubuti. Her prose operates as a commanding force throughout the 20th century. Brooks' engagement in interiority, motherhood and sexuality not only harkens back to Renaissance women's poetics, but it also offers insights and outlooks for future criticism.

As a writer interested in the creative process that fuels poetry, and as someone who identifies as Black, woman and American, I am intensely curious about how race and gender filter into the creative process. What is the poet's role in the midst of cultural turmoil? How does that role shift when gender is added to the equation? How and where do identity and poetry intersect? This project theorizes the complex relationships of identity-based literature by adopting principles of intersectionality. This integrated framework provides fertile ground for more inclusive and comprehensive discussions of the Harlem Renaissance.

## CHAPTER 2

“It is dangerous for a woman to defy the gods”

### The Subversive Nature of Women’s Poetry of the Harlem Renaissance

“So--being a woman--you can wait.

You must sit quietly without a chip. Not sodden—and weighted as if your feet were cast of the iron of your soul. Not wasting strength in enervating gestures as if two hundred years of bonds and whips had really tricked you into nervous uncertainty.

But quiet; quiet. Like Buddha—who, brown like I am—sat entirely at ease, entirely sure of himself; motionless and knowing, a thousand years before the White man knew there was so very much difference between feet and hands.

Motionless on the outside. But inside?”

*Marita Bonner, “On Being Young-a Woman-and Colored.”<sup>37</sup>*

### **Letter to My Sister**

*Anne Spencer*

It is dangerous for a woman to defy the gods;  
To taunt them with the tongue's thin tip,  
Or strut in the weakness of mere humanity,  
Or draw a line daring them to cross;  
The gods own the searing lightning,  
The drowning waters, tormenting fears  
And anger of red sins.

Oh, but worse still if you mince timidly--  
Dodge this way or that, or kneel or pray,  
Be kind, or sweat agony drops  
Or lay your quick body over your feeble young;  
If you have beauty or none, if celibate  
Or vowed--the gods are Juggernaut,  
Passing over . . . over . . .

This you may do:  
Lock your heart, then, quietly,  
And lest they peer within,  
Light no lamp when dark comes down  
Raise no shade for sun;  
Breathless must your breath come through

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<sup>37</sup> Marita Bonner, “On Being Young – A Woman – and Colored,” in *Double-Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology*, ed. Venetria Patton and Maureen Honey (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 112.

If you'd die and dare deny  
The gods their god-like fun.<sup>38</sup>

Read in concert, Marita Bonner's essay and Anne Spencer's poem unveil ways in which coded measures of silence become subversive and empowering in much of Black women's poetry of the Harlem Renaissance. The very notion of silence, or specifically silencing the self or being silenced by others plays a peculiar role in our critical understanding of oppressive methodologies. It is usually considered in the realm of one-dimensionality: a dominant class silences *the Other* with the systematic incorporation of physically-, psychologically- and economically-based strategies. America's legacy of racialized silencing (though similar strategies were certainly employed in gender oppression) includes the physical and emotional violence of slavery, segregation and disenfranchisement, all institutionalized through governmental agencies. In this one-sided conceptualization of silencing, the marginalized are muzzled.

What is most troubling about many critical discussions of silencing praxis is that they too often reinforce the very systems of power being critiqued by not acknowledging the other side of that story.<sup>39</sup> Marking distinctions in power through the gage of "silence" often validate disputed power hierarchies by ignoring alternative methods of

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<sup>38</sup> Spencer, Anne. "Letter to My Sister." *Shadowed Dreams: Women's Poetry of the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Maureen Honey (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 51.

<sup>39</sup> Evelyn Nakano Glenn's text, *Unequal Freedom: How Race and Gender Shaped American Citizenship and Labor*, offers a cogent argument regarding a critical tradition of ignoring the methods of resistance that inform our culture of democracy. She asserts that America's sociopolitical culture, to include the trumpeting of principles like "universal equality," is actually the culmination of negotiations between methods of oppression and methods of resistance.

communication. Yet, it was a communal reliance on subversive methods that proved essential in helping to overcome and overturn slavery, segregation and disenfranchisement. Opening this discussion to include methods of resistance directly influences Harlem Renaissance studies. At its core, the motivation of the Harlem Renaissance was to locate alternative modes of expression to circumvent institutionalized silencing measures.

More than just a preoccupation with race, the movement was more of an assertion of one's right to self-definition. The Renaissance was a rejection of supremacist ideology that afforded Whites and males the privilege of defining and thus silencing the Other. While race was certainly a catalyst for Renaissance productivity, the movement's proclamation toward the liberating power of self-definition also included overshadowed matters of sexuality, gender, class, and nationalism. As both Bonner and Spencer intimate in a move of acute inversion, silence is not necessarily a marker of victimization, but instead potentially a source of self-revelation and resistance. New Negro women poets employed degrees of interiority in their poems, turning conversations about racism and sexism inward. Much of the poetry positions discussion away from the oppressive culture and toward a community, essentially silencing themselves against racist entities. But, in publishing the poetry for public consumption, the concerns of the silenced are recorded. Thus, poetics of silence is a strategy that reflects the intersectionality of black women's lives in that it negotiates the paradoxical reality of visibility and invisibility. In this chapter, I turn to Spencer, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, and Gwendolyn Bennett to argue

that the exploration of the subversive nature of silence and coding drives much of the poetry written by New Negro women during the Harlem Renaissance.

*The Silenced Other Speaks: The Subversive Power of Silence*

Integrated into much of the poetry I will discuss is a subversive ideology that not only relegates wisdom and power to those who embrace silence, but this ideology also asserts that Black women – ironically because of their experience with multiple oppressions – have the ability to obtain and use that power to liberate their communities. It is a measured, yet assured power, Bonner asserts, “Not wasting strength in enervating gestures as if two hundred years of bonds and whips had really tricked you into nervous uncertainty.”<sup>40</sup> Bonner’s gesture toward the overtly propagandistic and generally masculinist fractions of the movement highlights a gendered advantage of an insight derived from being situated, as she puts it, both “outside” and “inside.” Her thesis is a precursor to Patricia Hill Collins’ contemporary theoretical analysis of intersectionality – a theoretical framework that encourages consideration of the lived realities of individuals who simultaneously embody multiple layers of marginalization (i.e. race, gender, sexuality).<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Quoted in the epigraph.

<sup>41</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw initially used the term “intersectionality” in her exploration of the judicial system’s failure to acknowledge the multidimensionality of Black women’s lived experiences. She argues that a single axis framework designed to recognize singularly marginalized groups (i.e. Black men or White women) theoretically erases populations who embody more than one of these categories. The lens of intersectionality sheds light on the treatment of Harlem Renaissance women writers, which, until recently, has been tantamount to gender invisibility. Kimberlé Crenshaw. "Demarginalizing the Intersection



Essential to Collins' work is the tracking of the tradition in Black women's feminist thought of passing on the subjugated knowledge gained from an intimate experience with intersecting oppressions of race, class and gender. She explains, "By insisting on self-definition, Black women question not only what has been said about African-American women but the credibility and the intensions of those possessing the power to define. When Black women define ourselves, we clearly reject the assumptions that those in positions granting them the authority to interpret our reality are entitled to do so. Regardless of the actual content of Black women's self-definitions, the act of insisting on Black female self-definition validates Black women's power as human subjects."<sup>42</sup> During the Harlem Renaissance, poetry was New Negro women's expressive vehicle of choice.<sup>43</sup> Comparatively, more women were publishing in small magazines than their male contemporaries.

Encoded in much of Black women's poetry of the era is "a knowing" derived from the vantage point of being Black and female. The "knowing" factor pertains to those aspects of intersectional realities that are lived and felt, but rarely expressed. A shared acquaintance with the clashing forces of racism, sexism and classism fosters a system a knowledge in which only the participants can fully access and understand. New Negro women's poetry often dwells in this terrain at the risk of being viewed as esoteric. As

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of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989): 139-167.

<sup>42</sup> Collins, Patricia Hill, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 125.

<sup>43</sup> Honey, Maureen. Introduction in *Shadowed Dreams*, 1.

their motivation appears to be self-liberation and expression, a more nuanced criticism is necessary to acknowledge their contribution to the movement.

Spencer's "Letter to My Sister" is a prime example of this intersectionality informed positioning. Notably, the poem makes no explicit mention of race. This overt absence is often a source of contention for critics of women's poetry of the period. In her review of women's poetry, Cheryl Wall concludes that much of the work reflects "far less of the race consciousness characteristic" than the male poets of the era.<sup>44</sup> The critical perception regarding the degree to which women writers have committed themselves to race matters, or the lack thereof, has had a deleterious effect on the reception of New Negro women's poetry. Their poetry is too often removed from central discussions of the movement or treated in obligatory tones. While tracing the tempered critical rejection of Black women's literary contribution, Mary Helen Washington notes, "women's writing is considered singular and anomalous, not universal and representative, and for some mysterious reason, writing about Black women is not considered as racially significant as writing about Black men."<sup>45</sup> Any meaningful approach to women's poetry must confront this assumption on its face. Accordingly, if New Negro women's poetry is to be considered successful expressions of intersectionality, it must be read in the context of the period and their initial publication. Publishing in primarily Black small magazines

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<sup>44</sup> Wall, Cheryl. "Poets and Versifiers, Singers and Signifiers: Women of the Harlem Renaissance.," *Women of the Arts and the 1920s*, ed. by Kenneth W. Wheeler and Virginia Lee Lussier (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1982), 76.

<sup>45</sup> Mary Washington, "The Darkened Eye Restored: Notes Toward a Literary History of Black Women." *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Angelyn Mitchell (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 445.

and anthologies whose polemical rhetoric and agenda are explicitly articulated in editorials, essays, reviews and news stories, poets understood that the work would be accessed primarily via the lens of race.<sup>46</sup>

Publication choice is certainly a factor in considering much of Spencer's work. An activist and highly anthologized poet, Spencer never published a collection and ceased publishing after 1931. Her poetry comes to us via an array of popular small magazines and period anthologies. James Weldon Johnson first published Spencer's poetry in his *Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922); shortly after, she made frequent appearances in *The Crisis* and *Opportunity*. She is one of the few women poets to appear in *The New Negro* (1925), *Caroling Dusk* (1927), and *Ebony and Topaz* (1927).<sup>47</sup>

Spencer's "Letter to My Sister," first published in *Ebony and Topaz*, exemplifies many of the characteristics of New Negro women's poetry. It is rooted in a conversation between

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<sup>46</sup> Abby Johnson and Ronald Johnson's *Propaganda and Aesthetics: The Literary Politics of Afro-American Magazines in the Twentieth Century* explores the polemical nature of the era's small magazines which included the arts as a vehicle in the struggle for civil rights. "Afro-American magazines of the twentieth century have carried a double function. They have provided Black writers with an outlet for their work and have thereby participated in the shaping of Black literature and culture. At the same time, they have recorded basic concerns of each period and became historical documents in their own right" (204).

<sup>47</sup> Each of these anthologies has an expressly different purpose. *New Negro* editor Alain Locke gestured toward the representative nature of the book, stating that the "volume aims to document the New Negro culturally and socially" (xxv). *Caroling Dusk* editor Countee Cullen claimed that his text sought to document the poetic successes of the movement: "For most of these poets the publication of individual volumes of their poems is not an immediate issue" (x). *Ebony and Topaz* editor Charles Johnson wanted to offer to his writers a space for exploration beyond the limitations of racial uplift: "It is a venture in expression, shared, with the slightest editorial suggestion, by a number of persons who are here much less interested in their audience than in what they are trying to portray" (11). Spencer's inclusion in all three texts evidences her multidimensionality.

two Black women, fictionally away from the dominant gaze, as indicated in its title. The poem celebrates the subversive power of silence most poignantly in the final stanza:

This you may do:  
Lock your heart, then, quietly,  
And lest they peer within,  
Light no lamp when dark comes down  
Raise no shade for sun;  
Breathless must your breath come through  
If you'd die and dare deny  
The gods their god-like fun.

The third stanza represents something of a compromise between the actions of the first two: the first stanza warns of the danger of defying the “gods,” and the second stanza declares that it is worse to “mince timidly.” The gods are read here as the “powers that be” -- be it White or male. But the third stanza suggests that reservation and withholding can be strategically empowering. Gesturing toward the Renaissance trope of the veil, the speaker warns to “raise no shade for the sun.” This image asserts that the subject of the poem has the ability to control what is seen and not seen by the dominant gaze. The poem suggests that true power hides beyond what is seen by the gaze.

Efforts to analyze women’s poetry of the Renaissance begins with an understanding of Black women’s feminist culture, which almost always infuses gender and class into race-based discussions.<sup>48</sup> While there is no singular, hegemonic Black woman’s experience or position, much of the negative criticism of women’s poetry of the

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<sup>48</sup> Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 32.

era is rooted in the assumption that their poetry gives voice to a narrowly gendered, middle-class population. The tragedy of this assumption is that the poets face harsh accusations of ignoring the *real* problems of the *real* Black masses. The fallacy of using class as a binary litmus test for culture authenticity must be dispelled if New Negro women's poetry is to have opportunity for fruitful criticism. More importantly, readers must be concerned to acknowledge patterns of silencing and coding in Black women's intellectual thought and poetry. Collins explains that "U.S. Black women intellectuals have long explored this private, hidden space of Black women's consciousness, the 'inside' ideas that allow Black women to cope with and, in many cases, transcend the confines of intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender and sexuality."<sup>49</sup> In considering the "inside" motif, critics of New Negro women's poetry also note that much work is in conversation with those "inside" the circle of oppression. Often, this conversation included Black men, but the work primarily serves the interests and concerns of Black women.<sup>50</sup>

Using art to prompt an internal dialog of affirmation is slightly out of step with much of the male writing of the era, which was most frequently in conversation with the "outside" forces of oppression. In theorizing ways to transcend their oppression via

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>50</sup> Josephine Donovan discusses the internal process of silenced communities "coming to consciousness" in this way: For the silenced Other to begin to speak, to create art, she must be in communication with others of her group in order that a collective "social construction of reality" be articulated. Other social witnesses from the oppressed group must express their views, to validate one's own truth, that one may name it. "Toward a Women's Poetics." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 3, no. 1/2. (Spring - Autumn, 1984), 102.

silence, coding, and self-definition, Harlem Renaissance women poets were more specifically participating in a communicative tradition of communal support. Honey asserts that many New Negro women poets preferred internal poetry because it helped them better articulate their relationship to the natural world: “They found congenial poetic models in the Imagists and English Romantics because these forms allowed them access to a core self. Communing with nature in spontaneous, associative ways or unself-consciously exploring the intensity of their most intimate connections with lovers furnished a markedly female strategy for claiming an Afro-American worldview.”<sup>51</sup> Turning inward with poetry informed by silence and coding written by and for those who can most closely understand it from a lived perspective serves as validation for Black women continually assaulted by depictions of themselves as constructed by both Black and White men.

Writing themselves into being thus becomes a liberating act, according to Collins: “One can write for a nameless, faceless, audience, but the act of using one’s voice requires a listener and thus establishes a connection. For African American women the listener most able to pierce the invisibility created by Black women’s objectification is another Black woman. This process of trusting one another can seem dangerous because only Black women know what it means to be Black women. But if we will not listen to one another, then who will?”<sup>52</sup> Again, Spencer’s epistolary poem performs this conversational act with a speaker writing to her “sister.” The letter is secretive in nature,

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<sup>51</sup> Honey, *Shadowed Dreams*, 33.

<sup>52</sup> Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 114.

warning of the danger in defying the gods. In its layering, the conversation between the two women is internal as well as the directive to its subject. The poem serves the Harlem Renaissance's spirit of resistance by offering a strategic blueprint for a poetics of silence.

By not overtly participating in the propagandistic demands of the era, much of the women's poetry was dismissed during the era and almost completely discarded by subsequent generations of critics. Writing their racialized *and* gendered lives into definition, New Negro women poets assumed the risk of being misunderstood by those "not in the know." Audre Lorde speaks of the complex reality of writing poetry from this vantage point long before the term intersectionality was coined. She exclaims, "I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood. That the speaking profits me, beyond any other effect."<sup>53</sup> Acknowledging the ways that New Negro women's poetry has been "bruised and misunderstood," this chapter calls for a revision of critical approaches applied to New Negro Women's poetry. Nearly a century later, we are now better able to unpack gender and racially integrated messages to acknowledge a more comprehensive review of the movement's political and polemical landscape.

### ***'Keeping it Real' – Reading a Movement: A Criticism of Criticism***

A critical preoccupation with race may have prevented foundational Harlem Renaissance critics from acknowledging gendered contributions to the movement's spirit

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<sup>53</sup> Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: The Crossing Press, 1984), 40.

of protest. Much of the early foundational scholarship about the era is working from the singular premise that the movement was race driven. Hull asserts that the conventional defining of the movement within the confines of color is problematic for the era's women writers: "Clearly if one narrowly judges the worth of writers associated with the era by what they produced on race during those specific years then these and other women writers will be devalued."<sup>54</sup> Renaissance writing is too often evaluated by the degree to which the writers were able to exemplify racial consciousness, and a critical culture of searching for authenticity is the consequence.

Questions of authenticity in Black criticism -- i.e. the writer's ability to accurately represent a community's values, needs, and lives -- are too often funneled through the blurred criteria of class. The construct of authenticity is critically problematic under the weight of diversity within African American communities. Under these conditions, significant portions of Renaissance writing have been deemed failures, and women's poetry, in particular, took on the brunt of the critical blows. Maria Balshaw explains, "For female and male authors alike, writing is very often judged in terms of the supposed authenticity of its racial representation. Works which deviate from a direct addressing of the 'problem of the color line' (to quote DuBois), particularly when they take up what one might categorize as 'women's issues,' are all too frequently regarded as second-order

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<sup>54</sup> Hull, Gloria T. *Color, Sex, and Poetry: Three Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 20.



texts, or as signal evidence of the ultimate failure of the Harlem Renaissance movement.”<sup>55</sup>

Periodization and writer’s locations outside of Harlem also resulted in critical neglect. A concluding thought in the introduction of Venetria Patton and Maureen Honey’s timely revisionist anthology helps to put the need for more inclusive periodization into perspective: “Overshadowed by texts that have made it into the canon, those often considered minor or left to languish in the period’s journals can come to life when viewed within the contexts of sexism, homophobia, and racism. Whether major or minor, female- or male-authored, texts of the Harlem Renaissance enrich our understanding of African American history and culture. These texts served as inspiring, pathbreaking trails—away from silence, against all odds, toward futures their creators only dimly perceived.”<sup>56</sup> Critical discussions of Black women’s writing begins with recognition of its sociopolitical and historical context. This is particularly true of New Negro Women’s poetry because it was not only subject to the criteria of art that thrived during the Renaissance, but subsequent criticism inspired by the Black Arts moment is even more didactic. Balshaw explicates the relationship between the two movements, arguing that the Black Arts Movement helped to solidify a critical process that measured Harlem Renaissance works “according to the supposed authenticity of racial

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<sup>55</sup> Balshaw, Maria, “New Negroes, New Women: The Gender Politics of the Harlem Renaissance,” *Women: A Cultural Review*, 10, no. 2 (1999), 128.

<sup>56</sup> Maureen Honey and Venetria Patton *Double-take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology*, ed. by Venetria Patton and Maureen Honey (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2001), xxxix. They offer a cogent review of the ways periodization of the movement affects our canonical appreciation of the literature, xxv-xxvii.

understanding they evince.”<sup>57</sup> Perhaps driven by moves to help navigate and structure their own movement, scholars influenced by the Black Arts Movement uniformly deem the Harlem Renaissance to be a cultural, political and literary failure.

Though the causes of the alleged failure vary among critics -- the obvious being that the arts movement was unable to squelch the supremacist momentum of segregation and lynching – many critics conclude that the movement “failed to find its voice.”<sup>58</sup> Nathan Huggins points to the movement’s middle class interests in racial uplift as a debilitating factor against the movement’s success. His seminal text, *Harlem Renaissance*, situates Huggins’ historical moment against the Harlem Renaissance: “Like other progressives, Harlem intellectuals saw political issues and reform in moral terms and assumed a high moral tone. Racial problems were social aberrations due to the moral corruption, fear, or ignorance. They offered *no radical solutions* therefore the system was basically sound” [*emphasis added*].<sup>59</sup> Within the context of the sixties Black Power movement -- when race, gender and social angst prevailed – pointing out discrepancies and pitfalls of preceding racial movements was common practice.<sup>60</sup> But, distanced from that lens, one can connect the rhetoric of Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X, or trace

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<sup>57</sup> Balshaw, Maria, *Looking for Harlem: Urban Aesthetics in African American Literature* (Sterling, Va: Pluto Press, 2000), 6.

<sup>58</sup> Gates, Henry Louis. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 224.

<sup>59</sup> Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 27.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5. As Huggins work was penned in the 1960s, he is notably rendering commentary on the methods of Renaissance contributors within the context of his historical moment. And though he strives to separate the movements, the line is frequently blurred.

similarities in tone and content between Claude McKay and Amiri Baraka. Thus, where the fruits of Renaissance labor may not have been evident within the restrictive parameters set by Huggins, perhaps the Renaissance literary enterprise was successfully archetypal in its collective and proactive approach to revising identity.

In returning to the criticism of the movement, Huggins' critique echoes a more scathing one of the Renaissance written by Richard Wright in 1937. Arguing that most of the writing of the era was ornamental, and not substantive, authentic representations of oppressed realities, Wright proclaimed that the literature failed to address "the Negro himself, his needs, his sufferings, his aspirations."<sup>61</sup> Consider the following critique: "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 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. For the most part these artistic ambassadors were received as though they were French poodles who do clever tricks."<sup>62</sup> Wright's criticism is irrefutably class based, and as it was written during the apex of the Great Depression, understandably so. The implication in Wright's landmark essay is that the middle class successes achieved by Renaissance leaders somehow removed them from a genuine awareness of the needs and values of the Negro masses, from the Negro self.

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<sup>61</sup> Richard Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing." *The New Challenge: A Literary Quarterly*. 2. No.1 (Fall 1937), 53-65.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

In turn, by adopting literary forms of the dominant culture, the Renaissance literati are accused of aligning themselves with White culture -- a premise Wright contends overshadows whatever technical achievements they obtained. Removed from Wright's historical moment, Keith Leonard provides a more receptive reading of Renaissance writers' use of conventional forms: "So, though many Harlem thinkers largely accept preexisting, Eurocentric ideals of "great art," they did not entirely give into bourgeois assimilationist desires, nor did Hughes and Brown entirely reject them. In both cases, formalism interacted with ethnic self-definition, in effect when not in intention, to render new meanings for poetic identity and therefore for ethnic identity that unified a disparate movement and motivated an entire tradition of ethnic self-definition in poetry."<sup>63</sup> As Wright's accusations are directed toward a movement motivated by cultural pride and construction, it had a resounding effect on critics to follow. And yet future scholars must work diligently to remember that class is not a marker for race. Hull reminds us in the analysis of the poets in her study that "large amounts of ambivalence, White blood, and caste privilege did not obliterate the basic race-color reality of these three women's existence. They were all touched by it and all responded in their lives and writing."<sup>64</sup>

The ramifications of early criticisms of Harlem Renaissance writings that determine the movement lacked racial authenticity have arguably peppered the canonical

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<sup>63</sup> Leonard, Keith. *Fettered Genius : The African American Bardic Poet from Slavery to Civil Rights* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006), 117.

<sup>64</sup> Hull, *Color, Sex and Poetry*, 20. Hull's study focused on Georgia Douglas Johnson, Angelina Weld Grimké, and Alice Dunbar-Nelson.

construction and appreciation of the movement. Balshaw contends that elements of criticism informed by the conceptualization of authenticity materialized during the Black Arts movement. She argues that critics concerned with “authenticity” tend to consider the following before deeming a work successful: “This generally means utilizing dialect and/or blues forms and working-class subjects, excluding wide swathes of literature written by and for the burgeoning Black middle classes. Texts that dwell on the sexual, the spectacular or the sensational are regarded warily because of their perceived association with White primitivism. Further, anything that appears to veer toward stylistic experimentation of a modernist persuasion is regarded with deepest suspicion because of its perceived complicity with White values and White writers.”<sup>65</sup> For New Negro women poets who are most often critiqued for being preoccupied with technical proficiency, overcoming this rigid criterion for Black writing has inherently particular challenges. In recent years, efforts to overcome a critical obsession with race authenticity have helped to redefine the movement by revisiting our understanding of the movement’s concerns, influences, location and periodization. Women’s studies, in particular, has led to a series of anthologized reprints of Harlem Renaissance women’s poetry that expand our appreciation of their prolific contribution.

Despite the growing interest in New Negro women’s poetry, critics still find fault with their work for reasons tantamount to the lack of racial authenticity. Reviews of women’s poetry generally fall into one of two camps: 1) explaining away conclusively bad poetry as a consequence of cultural pressures and opposing audiences, or 2) dismissing technically and lyrically good poetry as outmoded and racially removed.

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<sup>65</sup> Balshaw, *Looking for Harlem*, 6.

Consider Georgia Douglas Johnson's poetry. Wall contends that "the pressures operating in the lives of the women poets" had a negative effect on the overall quality of Johnson's work: "It is fully understandable that she would hesitate to experiment with language or theme, or in any way reject a tradition that had not yet admitted any Black woman – or man, for that matter. Her compromise necessarily yielded inferior verse."<sup>66</sup> As the most prolific and popular female poet of the era, Johnson is understandably the most conjured female poet in critical consciousness, which prompts the perception that all Renaissance women were participating in the genteel tradition. Women who did not participate in this tradition are deemed exceptions.

Renaissance women poets who somehow managed to avoid derivative, sentimental verse, have been critically discarded for not participating in jazz culture. New Negro women poets are often pitted against the blues women, who are, in turn, heralded for capturing the lived experiences of working class Black women. Critics of Harlem Renaissance women's poetry often lament the lack of reflection of the decade's blossoming presence of blues and jazz in women's verse. Wall offers the following in her comparison of the contribution of literary and blues women:

As in other cultural awakenings, the Renaissance produced more versifiers than poets, and a large number of these were women. No woman rivaled the achievement of Langston Hughes or Countee Cullen. Only in music did women and men share equal billing; Bessie Smith's reputation is as lustrous as that of any artist of the period. The twenties marked the heyday of classic blues singers, all

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<sup>66</sup> Wall, Cheryl. "Poets and Versifiers, Singers and Signifiers: Women of the Harlem Renaissance.," *Women of the Arts and the 1920s*, ed. by Kenneth W. Wheeler and Virginia Lee Lussier (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1982), 77.

of whom were female. Free of the burdens of an alien tradition, a Bessie Smith could establish the standard of her art; in the process she would compose a more honest poetry than any of her literary sisters. They lacked the connection to those cultural traditions which shaped Smith's art.<sup>67</sup>

Wall's use of "honest" here begs for analysis. As literary and blues women explored many of the same topics, the implication that the literary women were somehow dishonest is perhaps a comment on class distinctions. However, in using "honest" as a marker for "authentic," Wall's comparison employs a critical response of cultural authenticity to underscore the perceived failures of the "literary sisters." It is not clear why Cullen is mentioned in this context, other than to emphasize the women poets' alleged failures by comparison. In steps taken to avoid being considered a "Negro poet," he did not participate in the blues tradition. Apparently, male departures from blues and jazz toward "alien" poetic forms, like those performed by Cullen and Claude McKay, are somehow acceptable.<sup>68</sup> Wall's description of the form as "alien" is indicative of the very binary that New Negro poets were critiquing in employing lyrical forms. Conversely, Maureen Honey reads the use of conventional form as empowering: "The conventional verse from which Renaissance poets have been criticized was a logical outgrowth of this focus on literary achievement and the western humanistic tradition. If mastering the poetic forms of a language forbidden their parents or grandparents were a political act, then viewing those forms as timeless and universal invested the act with even greater

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>68</sup> I explore this distinction in greater depth in Chapter Three.

power.”<sup>69</sup> Mastering and employing language and forms that were denied them as a method to subversively confront oppression then becomes revolutionary. Repurposing and redefining Romantic forms is arguably part of the modernist tradition.

The critical practice of privileging blues women over literary women is perplexing. Oral texts (and music in particular) rely on elements of performativity such as vocal inflection and pitch, dramatic expression, and instrumental support that do not directly translate to poetic composition. Conversely, blues songs – removed from performance of singer – do not translate well to page as the repeated verses are often lacking in the linguistic acrobatics to which most poets aspire. As a great number of Bessie Smith’s songs, for example, were written by men and other lyricists; what Bessie Smith brought to the table was a performative talent arguably borne from a lived Black woman’s experience. It is difficult to quantify the soulful response to a masterful crooner or a well-timed presentation of call and response. Positioning blues women against literary women is not a valid critical practice. As Angela Davis’ *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* evidences, there is certainly room for study of both oral and literary traditions within Harlem Renaissance studies without privileging one or gesturing toward claims of authenticity.

Arguably, Hughes’ immense success as one of the few poets – male or female – to use blues or jazz forms left many critics wondering why more poets did not follow his lead. Actually, many women poets included Black vernacular and colloquial forms in their poetry – Helene Johnson, Mae Cowdery and Gwendolyn Bennett, to name few. Bennett explored the intersectionality of New Negro womanhood in the context of the

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<sup>69</sup> Honey, *Shadowed Dreams*, 7.



post-slavery condition and the evolution of women's liberation. Poet, graphic artist, journalist, activist and educator, Bennett was one of the most versatile figures of the Renaissance. Bennett's most productive period as a creative writer is embedded within a five-year span of 1923 to 1928. Her poem, "Song," explores the emotional elements hidden within blues and jazz. Consider the second stanza:

A-shoutin' in de ole camp-meeting-place,  
A-strummin' o' de ole banjo.  
Singin' in de moonlight,  
Sobbin' in de dark.  
Singin', sobbin', strummin' slow . . .  
Singin' slow, sobbin' low.  
Strummin', strummin', strummin' slow . . .  
Words are bright bugles  
That make the shining for my song,  
And mothers hold down babies  
To dark, warm breasts  
To make my singing sad.<sup>70</sup>

In a coupling of literary and blues traditions, Bennett's speaker weaves in and out of Black colloquialisms and dialect, an act contrary to much of the Renaissance elite's aversion to its use. Participating in one of the many shades of silence, the speaker's "singin'" and "sobbin'" is done low and in the dark. The first stanza underscores the speaker's mission: to "sing the heart of a race." Poems like "Heritage" and "Hatred" are testament to Bennett's use of more direct and self-affirming language, far removed from the expectations of a "lady poet." Consider the following images in "Hatred":

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<sup>70</sup> Bennett, "Song," *Shadowed Dreams*, ed. Maureen Honey, 106. The poem in its entirety is included on page 74 of this report.

I shall hate you  
Like a dart of singing steel  
Shot through still air  
At even-tide,  
Or solemnly  
As pines are sober  
When they stand etched  
Against the sky.  
Hating you shall be a game  
Played with cool hands  
And slim fingers.  
Your heart will yearn  
For the lonely splendor  
Of the pine tree  
While rekindled fires  
In my eyes  
Shall wound you like swift arrows.  
Memory will lay its hands  
Upon your breast  
And you will understand  
My hatred.<sup>71</sup>

Here, Bennett embraces the protest spirit of the Harlem Renaissance. Written in free verse, the poem is modern in form and content. Power hierarchies are being disrupted in this poem, which becomes clear at the poem's conclusion with the gesture toward memory. The speaker of this poem meets the opponent's gaze with a bold contempt

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<sup>71</sup> Bennett, Gwendolyn . "Hatred," In *Black Sister: Poetry by Black American Women, 1746-1980.*, ed. Erlene Stetson (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1982), 73.

steeped in history. Moreover, this speaker announces that former passive responses to racism are now replaced with knowledge, epitomized with “you will understand.”

Neither race nor gender is mentioned in this poem, and yet its context and violent images implicate and code both. One also wonders if the object of the speaker’s hatred is a woman, a White woman in particular. The violence of the work is balanced with traditionally feminine images. Each attribute of the object of the work is supported by female imaging. The description of “breast,” for example, is generally associated with women. The speaker of the work also warns the object of the hatred that “your heart will yearn.” The heart descriptor has also been metaphorically gendered feminine. In the poem’s gesture toward race, consider the following lines: “Memory will lay its hands/ Upon your breast.” Memory connotes history. Arguably, the writer’s post-slavery existence affords opportunity to explore this intense degree of hatred. The poem also makes two references to trees, a motif used often in Renaissance poetry discussion of lynching. In essence, the hatred is calculated, and more importantly, masked. Not until the end of the poem does the object of the hatred “understand.”

In giving voice to what was once silenced, Bennett also performs a Renaissance objective of speaking for “the group.” Distinctions in class or even gender did little to disrupt a shared belief in linked fate.<sup>72</sup> Houston Baker asserts that this ability to discuss the group through exploration of the one is a “founding condition of the Afro-American

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<sup>72</sup> Evelyn Simien offers this definition for linked fate: “For African Americans, linked fate is the recognition that individual life chances are inextricably tied to the race as a whole.” “Race, Gender, and Linked Fate.” *Journal of Black Studies* 35 no. 5 (May, 2005): 529 – 550. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40034336>, p. 529.

intellectual discourse.”<sup>73</sup> This layered discussion is solidified through an exploration of “metalevels” in African American existence. Baker’s discussion of metalevels is similar to that of DuBois’s double consciousness in that both consider Black America’s struggle to negotiate the relationship between African and American ancestry. Baker says one historically effective way to explore metalevels is through autobiography. “What I want to suggest,” he writes, “is that the African American’s negotiation of metalevels, in combination with his or her propensity for autobiography as a form of African survival, has always enabled him or her to control a variety of levels of discourse in the United States.”<sup>74</sup>

A poet’s choice to use either conventional or contemporary forms to perform these acts of representation and recognition seems to have been divided along generational lines, with poets of the older guard – such as Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Georgia Douglas Johnson, and Anne Spencer – utilizing lyrical verse. Nevertheless, in reviewing the contribution and lives of three of the older women poets of the era, Hull asserts that their lack of experimentation hindered the potential of their poetry:

The lack of formal innovation exhibited by these three poets (were women conditioned to be less daring?) combined with their conventional age-old theme (were these deemed more suitable for the lyric feminine sensibility?) made their work relatively unexciting in Renaissance awakening that required some flash and newness. Because of temperament and socialization, *they did not loudly raise*

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<sup>73</sup> Baker, Houston. *Workings of the Spirit: The Poetics of Afro-American Women’s Writing* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 38.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 43

*their voices* in protest, pride, or primitivism. The quality of their achievement could not obliterate this difference. Nor could the fact that, for the first time in Afro-American literary history, women were entering the scribal tradition in more than token fashion, and largely as poets. ... Perhaps the women writers of the Harlem Renaissance were truly having more of a nascence than a re-nascence [*emphasis added*].<sup>75</sup>

Hull's assertion of the "lack of innovation" in the poetry of her subjects speaks to the aforementioned preoccupation with a critically imagined racial authenticity. In other words, not relying on Black tropes of boastful, cultural pride proclamations, and African ancestry signification led many post-Renaissance critics to conclude that the poetry somehow fails.<sup>76</sup> She points to matters of the writer's middle-class standing to proffer an explanation for poetry deemed "unexciting," any potential quality of the work is literally obliterated.

Conversely, as Honey and Tate intimate in their analysis of Renaissance women poets, implementation of European literary forms such as the ode, elegy and sonnet does not necessarily signal a departure from the Renaissance's culture of protest. Honey explains that these forms "were conceived as politically neutral vehicles through which Black culture could be made visible."<sup>77</sup> Writing in these forms thus qualifies as acts of

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<sup>75</sup> Hull, *Color, Sex, and Poetry*, 25.

<sup>76</sup> Anthologies and collections of Harlem Renaissance Women's poetry published around the time Hull's groundbreaking text (arguably informed and inspired by her work) have since provided a wealth of poetry that does, in fact, incorporate these tropes. See *Shadowed Dreams*, *Double-Take*, and *Black Sister*.

<sup>77</sup> Honey, *Shadowed Dreams*, 7.

appropriation and coding as defined by Joan Radner and Susan Lanser, “opening up the paternal narrative to what it excludes.”<sup>78</sup> Again, early critics of the movement hardly saw the irony of this strategic element in their longing for more culturally imprinted literature. Beginning with the cultural authenticity premise certainly curtails potential to explore any aesthetic success of the poetry created by women during this period.

In spite of the burden that was their middle-class prowess, many of these women poets were concerned about the issues that plagued working-class Black women. The overwhelming theme in their poetry is the doubly oppressive condemnation of invisibility. Renaissance women poets were keenly aware that the historical and paradoxical nature of Black women’s labor had rendered them both visible and invisible. Dating back to slavery, Black women worked beside men as part of the institution; the distinction in gender afforded to White women was not a major factor in work distribution. Because of race matters, Black women’s labor was not relegated to the domestic sphere, which made it visible. Their gender was hardly acknowledged when it pertained to labor, which rendered them invisible. Yet, Black women’s labor had not only been crucial to their very survival, explains Collins, it had also been a key element to the evolution of American capitalism: “Taken together, the supposedly seamless web of economy, polity, and ideology function as a highly effective system of social control designed to keep African-American women in an assigned, subordinate place. This larger system of oppression works to suppress the ideas of Black women intellectuals and

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<sup>78</sup> Radner, Joan, and Susan Laser. “The Feminist Voice: Strategies of Coding in Folklore and Literature.” *The Journal of American Folklore*, 100, no. 398 (Oct. - Dec., 1987), 415.

to protect elite White male interests and worldviews.”<sup>79</sup> Women’s poetry of the Renaissance often illuminates the methods of race, gender and class oppressions used against Black women and comforts the afflicted via efforts of recognition. Middle-class status did not necessarily remove these poets from the concerns of working class women.

As Bonner observes, class status afforded these writers “the one real thing that money buys. Time. Time to do things.”<sup>80</sup> For the women poets of this study, money translated into time to study, time to write, and time to theorize. Spencer’s “Lady, Lady” epitomizes a layered exploration of Black women’s visibility:

Lady, Lady, I saw your face,  
Dark as night withholding a star . . .  
The chisel fell, or it might have been  
You had borne so long the yoke of men.  
Lady, Lady, I saw your hands,  
Twisted, awry, like crumpled roots,  
Bleached poor white in a sudsy tub,  
Wrinkled and drawn from your rub-a-dub.

Lady, Lady, I saw your heart,  
And altered there in its darksome place  
Were the tongues of flames the ancients knew,  
Where the good God sits to spangle through.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 7.

<sup>80</sup> Bonner, “On Being Young,” 109.

<sup>81</sup> Honey, *Shadowed Dreams*, 56.

Spencer's manipulation of the ode solidifies her union with the Renaissance movement and modernity. She uses the form to express praise for what is unseen and unappreciated: Black women. The choice of form validates that praise effort and operates to make Black women and their labor visible. In accordance with Renaissance tradition, Spencer performs an inversion of connotative associations between of Black and White, male and female images. This is a process that peppers much of her poetry. Devon Boan explains that literature of inversion is often the most confrontational of African American literary types:

Seemingly playing on White America's fear of Black America, works of inversion stake out the high ground in what a White audience would generally perceive to be an adversarial portrayal of racial issues in America. One significant effect of the Literature of Inversion then, is to make the White reader a stranger in his or her own house—the domicile of language, political power, and social hegemony—while conveying to African American readers an exclusive solidarity of heritage, purpose, insight and will.<sup>82</sup>

Spencer's poem reverses racial stereotypical imaging. Dark is beautiful and safe, "where the good God sits to spangle through." The oppressive characteristics of Whiteness crumple, wrinkle and overwhelm; it marks the body "poor" White. This poem's tension is in visibility. The object of the poem is clearly marked by class, recognizing that this washerwoman had limited opportunity to escape her fate. The design of her life, the metaphorical "chisel," was calculated without her input. And, despite the fact that her

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<sup>82</sup> Boan, Devon, *The Black "I": Author and Audience in African American Literature* (New York, Peter Lang, 2002), 40.



labor is equivalent to a man's, Spencer's speaker repeatedly calls her "Lady" in a provocative effort to acknowledge her femininity, respectability and worth.

The repeated refrain, "I saw" marks the subject's (in)visibility in dominant culture, yet serves to affirm and comfort via recognition. Notably, the object of the poem does not speak; she survives. Using one of the most frequent of New Negro women's poetic images, Spencer evokes the heart to symbolize the internal strength of this dark woman. It is there "where the tongues of flames the ancients knew" reside. Honey explains how the practice of turning inward served many women writers of the movement: "Women's search for roots and identity led inward, moved backward to an imaginary Eden where sensitivity could survive and even flourish. For writers who largely could not travel to Europe or Africa, the concept of a hidden self, rich with wisdom, offered an attractive substitute for an unknown, removed history. Moreover, it was accessible and consistent with the Romantic notion that truth lies within, uncorrupted by one's external circumstances."<sup>83</sup> The critical and preferential attention for poets who spoke outwardly in calling for a more immediate treatment of supremacist ideology inadvertently edited out the polemical undertones found in much of women's the poetry era. A true awakening and revolution would require analysis of both.

If recent scholarship on the Harlem Renaissance is any indication, the parameters of our critical and historical understanding of the era are now expanding. Traditional constrictions for the movement that would have edited many of the women poets out of critical consideration – such as periodization, the writer's residence, and medium – have

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 18.

been successfully contested. George Hutchinson's 1995 study is an important contribution to the historicization of the era. His text is motivated by the realization that many of the previous studies of the movement were limited "with too exclusive a focus upon issues of race, inadequate notions of American modernism, insufficiently particularized narratives of the intellectual and institutional mediations between Black and White agents of the Renaissance, and curiously narrow conceptions" of the cultural environment "in which those agents acted."<sup>84</sup> Henry Louis Gates once asserted that the movement "was surely as gay as it was Black," and over the last decade Renaissance queer studies has opened traditional readings of the literature and movement.<sup>85</sup> To borrow from Gates' turn of phrase, the Renaissance was certainly as female as it was male. Scholars such as Tate, Honey, Davis, Hull and Wall have made significant strides toward including women scholars, editors, essayists, novelists, playwrights, composers and poets into canonical discussions of Renaissance studies.

The sum of this critical revolution provides opportunities for more receptive readings of women's poetry. If we replace race as the singular preoccupation of the Harlem Renaissance with our more intersectional understanding of identity, then we can fully appreciate that the movement's most central pursuit was the aggressive reclamation of one's right to self-definition. Like any cultural awakening, methodological debates as to how to obtain this goal were abundant. Indeed, the lack of a single voice perplexed

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<sup>84</sup> Hutchinson, George. *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), 3.

<sup>85</sup> Gates, "The Black Man's Burden," In *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, ed. Michael Warner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 233.

many of the early scholars of the movement, which led to resounding proclamations of the movement's failure. However, revisiting the work removed from criticisms unveils its rich, diverse interests. To that end, the diversity in women's poetry not only reveals a range in poetic technique, but it also reflects varied interests in matters of gender, race, class, nationalism and sexuality. Leonard explains:

Like Harlem Renaissance men, these women artists disagreed over whether they should prove that they were cultured in traditional bourgeois terms by writing in Anglo American artistic styles or demonstrate the distinctiveness of African American culture by transforming jazz and the blues and folk language into poetry. Also, like the men, they explored the role of individuality for defining ethnic identity and political agency, though their emphasis on gender identity complicated their relationship to the movement. While supporting husbands, raising children, and pursuing same sex love affairs, these poets rejected the notation that they could only be voices of righteousness. They wanted to be themselves.<sup>86</sup>

In fighting for the right to be themselves, Renaissance participants knew that surrendering the right of self-definition to dominant culture would ultimately lead to their own demise. So, while they were often critiqued for lack of a "radical" response, their intellectual response is rather acute. If racist and sexist imaging were considered qualifiers for legislative, judicial and criminal oppression, then it was necessary to this generation's survival to construct their own image.

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<sup>86</sup> Leonard, Keith. "African American Women Poets and the Power of the Word." *The Cambridge Companion to African American Women's Literature*. Eds. Angelyn Mitchell and Danille Taylor (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006), 173.

By opening Renaissance studies beyond the nexus of race, we can include poems that do not loudly assert racial consciousness into the discussion of protest. A limited definition of protest almost immediately exorcises significant portions of Renaissance women's poetry from the conversation. By "not *loudly* raising their voices," Renaissance women poets actually perform negotiations in inversion and subversion that inflect the empowering agents within a culture of silence. In the following section, I offer close readings that examine their strategic use of coding as polemical expression.

### ***Understanding the Code: Close Readings of Renaissance Women's Poetry***

A well-known proverb declares that "silence is the most powerful scream." The paradox rings especially true in New Negro women's poets who seemed to appreciate the strategic use and contemplative gains of silence. The communicative power of silence is one of the most underestimated aspects of critical race and gender theory, and yet it would prove to be one of the most explored motifs in New Negro women's writing. Hush tones, secrecy, curtain pulling, masking, reserve, and the movement's universal homage to "the veil" are all modes of silence which helped women poetic strategists transcend, circumvent and destabilize vehicles of oppression. In many cases, in refusing to acknowledge so-called dominant positions of self-proclaimed power, the silenced entity effectively nullifies said power. Maureen Mahoney calls for a more nuanced consideration of silence in feminist studies:

I suggest that silence can also be understood as an avenue to power. The simple equation of voice with authority, and silence with victimization, needs to be

reexamined in the spirit of recent challenges to the notion of women's unitary "voice." Just as women's voices are as multiple and diverse as our cultural and personal histories, so the meaning of silence -- being unwilling or unable to speak-- can be seen as complex and multidimensional. Such a reassessment is timely because it allows for a new perspective on the psychological sources of women's --indeed, anyone's--subjective experience of power.<sup>87</sup>

Read in this context, Renaissance women's poetry begins to exemplify the core tenants of the movement: protest, ancestral pride, identity and revolution. In this section, I explore how New Negro women poets used codes of silence – such as signifying, specifying, inversion and appropriation – as self-definition and empowerment. Poetry as a genre allows for coding and subversion with its inherent use of rhetorical devices such as metaphor, simile, double meaning and ambiguity. Even poems with more explicit racial overtones are contained on the page under the umbrella of “art,” and thus deemed nonthreatening. The logic in using the trope of silence as protest is this: we are more likely to invade the oppressor's house with a whisper, not a shout.

Honey posits that the perceived anachronistic subject matter has hampered readings of the poetry. “When placed in its historical context,” she argues, “women's poetry comes alive and its significance as the first modern Black female voice becomes clear. Furthermore, a new reading reveals that it is animated not by an imitative impulse, but rather stems from a defiant sensibility reflective of the Black women who wrote it.”<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Mahoney, Maureen A., “The Problem of Silence in Feminist Psychology.” *Feminist Studies*, 22, no. 3 (Autumn, 1996), 1.

<sup>88</sup> Honey, *Shadowed Dreams*, 3.

The nod toward their “defiant sensibility” begs the question: Why is coding such a prevailing practice in New Negro poetry? Certainly, in participating in the coding tradition, these writers had to appreciate the risk of their work being misunderstood. Radner and Lanser explain, “Coding allows women to communicate feminist messages to other women; to refuse, subvert, or transform conventional expectations; and to criticize male dominance in the face of male power. At the same time, because ambiguity is a necessary feature of every coded act, any instance of coding risks reinforcing the very ideology it is designed to critique.”<sup>89</sup> The most obvious answer to why New Negro women poets would opt for this strategy is that they understood the reward to far exceed that risk for both the writer and potential “true” reader – the one capable of decoding.

For the Black woman writers, Lorde explains, poetry is not only a cathartic response, but it also helps her to name the nameless and share knowledge in the process: “As we learn to bear the intimacy of scrutiny and to flourish within it, as we learn to use the products of that scrutiny and for power within our living, those fears which rule our lives and form our silences begin to lose their control over us.”<sup>90</sup> Again, those readers who are “in the know” are able to decipher the code. Participants in the coded conversation are better able to plan and perform transformative acts removed from the gaze of the dominant Other. Radner and Lanser’s essay provides a blueprint of feminist coding that explains the writer/reader relationship within the code. Their work informs my discussion, illuminating patterns of coding in New Negro women’s poetry. They

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<sup>89</sup> Radner and Lanser, “The Feminist Voice,” 423.

<sup>90</sup> Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 36.

explain the process of coding: “By coding, then, we mean the adoption of a system of signals—words, forms, signifiers of some kind—that protect the creator from the dangerous consequences of directly stating particular messages. Coding occurs in the context of complex audiences, in situations where some of the audience may be competent to decode the message, but others—including those who might be dangerous—are not. Thus, a coded text is by definition complex, and its messages may be ambiguous. The coding need not be a conscious act.”<sup>91</sup> The very nature of the historical moment delivered to Harlem Renaissance women writers a diverse readership. These poets knew that their readers – Black women, Black men, White women, White men, in particular – brought misconceptions and stereotypes about Black women with them to the page. Writing in an atmosphere where rampant racism and sexism led to violence and incalculable injustices against the Black female body, they were faced with audience awareness challenges unique to members of oppressed communities.

Conversely, a writer’s loyalty – be it to self, art, or community – would become a preoccupying debate during the era. James Weldon Johnson often wrote of this conflict:

[T]he Aframerican author faces a special problem which the plain American author knows nothing about—the problem of the double audience. It is more than a double audience; it is a divided audience, an audience made up of two elements with differing and often opposite and antagonistic points of view. His audience is always both White American and Black America. The moment a Negro writer takes up his pen or sits down to his typewriter he is immediately called upon to solve, consciously or unconsciously, this problem of the double audience. To

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<sup>91</sup> Radner and Laser, “The Feminist Voice,” 414.

whom shall he address himself, to his own Black group or to White America.

Many a Negro writer has fallen down, as it were, between these two stools.<sup>92</sup>

For women writers (and not so transparently for male writers), gender complicates this notion of a double audience. While I have argued that Renaissance women writers were primarily writing to and as a representative for other women readers, poets had to consider a broader audience if they expected to publish. Coding helps writers of marginalized communities meet the needs of their various readers. And, the criticism of women's poetry during the era suggests that they were successful in this pursuit.

Only Georgia Douglas Johnson consistently published poetry collections during the movement. A prolific writer, playwright, lyricist and poet, Johnson produced poetry that easily fits into the genteel tradition. Period reviews of women's poetry are almost always written by women and generally include some nod toward acknowledgment of understanding the code. Charlotte Taussig's 1927 review of Douglas Johnson's poetry in *Opportunity* an example of this gendered recognition: "Her first book of lyrics was entitled *The Heart of a Woman*. Mrs. Johnson is a poet who is neither afraid nor ashamed of her emotions. Through all her poems one can sense the longing for a fuller chance at life. Without one word or hint of race in all the book, there lies between its covers the full tragedy of her people."<sup>93</sup> Where scholars of the generations after the Renaissance

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<sup>92</sup> Johnson, James Weldon. "The Dilemma of the Negro Author." *The Harlem Renaissance 1920-1940: Politics and Aesthetics of "New Negro" Literature*, ed. Cary Wintz (New York: Garland Publications, 1996), 247.

<sup>93</sup> Taussig, Charlotte, "The New Negro as Revealed in His Poetry." *The Harlem Renaissance 1920 - 1940: Critics and the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Cary Wintz (New York: Garland Pub, 1996), 54.



temper the success of women's poetry with the argument that their work was not race conscious, Taussig's assessment shows an awareness that these poets labored within the context of an overarching conversation about race, gender and identity. In fact, Taussig's review indicates a preference for art that is not blatantly political, claiming that such text imposes "great limitations" on itself. In considering the flourishing of literature during the era, she writes that "it is often self-conscious and is propaganda rather than straight writing. But much of it, and this is particularly true of the poetry, is of such merit that it bears comparison with the best of the moderns. And this from a race that sixty years ago were slaves, of whom one in ten could read and write."<sup>94</sup> If poetry innately enjoys an economy of language as part of its construction, why then would poets waste words on givens understood by both writer and reader? This is particularly true of writers and readers who are operating within coded culture.

Alice Dunbar-Nelson's dramatic monologue "I Sit and Sew" certainly participates in the code tradition. The highly anthologized poem presents a woman speaker questioning the constricting gender roles of her time by ironically using the image of war to prompt the discussion. Although the poem is often read as a commentary on gender norms via militarism, the concept of war could very well serve as a coded critique of the gendered battles that existed within the race movement.<sup>95</sup> Coded in couplets, a technique perfected in the gospels of slavery, the integrated message of the poem often eludes

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>95</sup> Consider Gloria T. Hull and Mary Loeffelholz's readings of the poem. Hull, *Color, Sex, and Poetry*, 80.

critics more concerned with aggressively vocal preoccupations than with race matters.

Consider the poem in its entirety:

I sit and sew—a useless task it seems,  
My hands grown tired, my head weighed down with dreams—  
The panoply of war, the martial tread of men,  
Grim-faced, stern-eyed, gazing beyond the ken  
Of lesser souls, whose eyes have not seen Death  
Nor learned to hold their lives but as a breath—  
But—I must sit and sew.

I sit and sew—my heart aches with desire—  
That pageant terrible, that fiercely pouring fire  
On wasted fields, and writhing grotesque things  
Once men. My soul in pity flings  
Appealing cries, yearning only to go  
There in that holocaust of hell, those fields of woe—  
But—I must sit and sew.

The little useless seam, the idle patch;  
Why dream I here beneath my homely thatch,  
When there they lie in sodden mud and rain,  
Pitifully calling me, the quick ones and the slain?  
You need, me, Christ! It is no roseate seam  
That beckons me—this pretty futile seam,  
It stifles me—God, must I sit and sew?<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Dunbar-Nelson, Alice. “I Sit and Sew.” *Shadowed Dreams.*, ed. Maureen Honey, 74.

In the speaker's world, men are expected to participate in the battle while women are relegated to the stifling call of a "futile seam." This speaker not only rejects the logic of her confinement to the domestic sphere, which was a major tenant of the culture of True (Black) Womanhood, but she also proclaims her desire and ability to participate in the battle for freedom.

In a move that exemplifies truth-revealing aspects of silence, the speaker's revelation is notably born out of isolation and quiet contemplation. Hull points to the juxtaposition of the purposeful world of men and the systematic futility of women exemplified by repetitive sewing as way for Dunbar-Nelson to enter the ongoing debate of gender responsibility to uplift. Hull argues that disruptions in iambic meter help support both the contrast and the disillusionment of the speaker. She writes, "the question of war's desirability aside, one woman's complaint about her specific "uselessness" becomes an impassioned commentary on the narrowness of culturally defined sexual roles."<sup>97</sup> The adherence to form, as the poem is written in clean septet stanzas, mirror's the speaker's concerns with the constrictions on her life and her abilities. The form, like its speaker, is almost too aware of its parameters; the tension of the poem is in both the speaker and the form's adherence to this restrictive reality. The use of form, then, becomes quite strategic in visually modeling the speaker's engagement with rigidity and racialized gender mores.

Though not explicitly race centered, the poem dwells in elements of intersectionality explored more directly by the other poets of this study. Notably, the

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<sup>97</sup> Hull, *Color, Sex and Poetry*, 79.

women of this study are writing in a transitional era, near the dying curve of the Victorian age and the evolving social and legal reverberations of modernity. “As a young, informed, progressive Black woman, Dunbar-Nelson reflects the contemporary debate, but also her own personal historical experiences of work and women’s roles.”<sup>98</sup> Thus, the irony within this poem is particularly telling. The speaker of the work enjoys the leisured comfort and freedom of her gender without having to participate in the violence of war, yet she is also constricted and held captive by her class and gender.

Dunbar-Nelson’s exploration of the expectations of womanhood includes radical disruptions of cultural gender and middle-class norms. In 1920s and 1930s America, the poem, and its critique of classed and gendered ideology, represents an empowering idea for women, especially for a movement that is most often critiqued for subscribing to middle-class ideology. Notably, the speaker’s revelation is informed by her experience of domestic silence and isolation – a performance that appears in Black women’s writing across generations, claims Mae Henderson: “In their works, Black women writers have encoded oppression as a discursive dilemma, that is, their works have consistently raised the problem of the Black woman’s relationship to power and discourse. Silence is an important element of this code.”<sup>99</sup> Certainly, Dunbar-Nelson’s work is a critique of the patriarchal gender structuring. Veiled in the subterfuge of a prayer (“God, must I sit and sew?”), the speaker of the poem does not explicitly direct her disappointment to the

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>99</sup> Henderson, Mae. “Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer’s Literary Tradition,” *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black women*, ed. Cheryl Wall (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 24.

forces that imprison her in domesticity. The publication of the poem conveys the message to outside parties for her.

In using the poem as a mediator between the silenced and the oppressed, Dunbar-Nelson participates in one of the many rhetorical strategies of specifying – a gendered reflection of signifying. Signifying, as Henry Louis Gates has defined it, is a Black cultural and confrontational rhetorical response of irony, double voicing and wordplay used to confuse and disarm the dominant presence. Signification, Gates explains, creates “a noisy disturbance in silence, at the level of the signifier.”<sup>100</sup> Specifying, in turn, is a deceptively less confrontational rhetorical response. In specifying, the speaker’s naming of the problem aims for specificity (not double-talk) – the irony in specifying is that the message is generally not directed toward the object but shared within a contained community. In the context of New Negro women’s poetry, specifying facilitates a conversation among Black women. Through the act of publishing, the world is invited to listen, thus planting seeds of subversion and transformation.

Susan Willis explains that specifying is one of the most patterned occurrences in Black women’s writing, elevating elements of community and history over the individual: “Specifying” represents a form of narrative integrity. Historically, it speaks for a noncommodified relationship to language, a time when the slippage between words and meaning would not have obtained or been tolerated.”<sup>101</sup> Included in specifying are traditions in oral histories, name-calling, gossiping, storytelling and epithets. Willis’

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<sup>100</sup> Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 45.

<sup>101</sup> Willis, *Specifying*, 16.

extensive analysis of the specifying in Black women's fiction cites Zora Neale Hurston as one of the premier writers operating in the specifying tradition. While the communication is fixed within the silenced community, specifying performances operates as a means of empowering. Willis contends that "'Specifying' may be one the most self-affirming forms of discourse, but it is bound up by its inscription within a specific group of language users. And it is circumscribed, held in check, by the larger system of domination."<sup>102</sup> Though specifying is generally gendered as female, New Negro women poets participated in both traditions of specifying and signifying. I extend Willis' discussion of specifying by exploring how women poets of the Renaissance negotiated interiority and code culture.

Bennett's work often performs elements of signifying. Her poem, "To a Dark Girl," illuminates the concept of intersectionality in an engaging way. Once decoded, the work serves as a celebration and liberation of Black womanhood under the weight of degradation from negative gender and race imaging. A close reading reveals the extent to which Bennett boldly gives female sexuality, independence and intellect regal status:

I love you for your brownness,  
And the rounded darkness of your breast,  
I love you for the breaking sadness in your voice  
And shadows where your wayward eyelids rest.

Something of old forgotten queens  
Lurks in the lithe abandon of your walk

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 37.

And something of the shackled slave  
Sobs in the rhythm of your talk.

Oh, little brown girl, born for sorrow's mate,  
Keep all you have of queenliness,  
Forgetting that you once were slave  
And let your full lips laugh at Fate!<sup>103</sup>

Employing movements similar to Spencer's "Lady, Lady," Bennett quatrains not only praise what is undervalued in the depiction of the dark girl, but she also traces the subject's transition from "Old Negro" to New Negro woman, from slave to queen. End rhyme draws the reader to make specific associations between rhyming pairs, and conversely, unrhymed pairs. This strategy is particularly striking in the second stanza: walk/talk signifies mobility and expression. This guides readers to consider the implications of the unrhymed endings of the second stanza: queen and slave. Bennett is challenging the reader to consider how Black women's lives and histories embody both of these identities. The dichotomy of queen and slave personify intersectionality's consideration of visible and invisible.

The work's mantled title is the most glaring strategy. The announced proclamation that the poem will discuss a "girl" connotes a degree of innocence free from sexual implications. Yet, the first two lines of the opening quatrain romanticize the "girl's" physical form. "I love you for your brownness/And the rounded darkness of your breast." Notably, it is unlikely that poet's subject is a child as she is endowed with

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<sup>103</sup> Bennett, "To a Dark Girl," *Shadowed Dreams.*, ed. Maureen Honey, 108.

“rounded” breasts. Thus, the juxtaposition of the innocence of girlhood and the sensuality of womanhood provides insight into an element of fusion in Black female identity. Bennett presses forward with the inclusion of “brownness” and “darkness,” descriptions redefined and elevated out of the lower class position in the White evaluation of beauty into a new place of praise and adoration. The second stanza exemplifies this goal more concretely:

Something of old forgotten queens  
Lurks in the lithe abandon of your walk,  
And something of the shackled slave  
Sobs in the rhythm of your talk.

Again, the image of the young girl is replaced by the more mature, more sophisticated “queen.” But, more apparent, Bennett reflects the political dicta of the Renaissance with the brief but weighted reference to slavery. More distinctive than the broad acknowledgment of social injustice is a message specifically designed for Black women. In performing the Black feminist communal trope similar to that Spencer’s “Letter to My Sister,” the poem is written to another Black woman. In this incorporation of intersectionality, new meets old, blatant meets hidden, liberation meets captivity, and celebration meets mourning. Bennett’s astute exploration of this series of dichotomies speaks volumes to her inherent audience. Her work employs the widely practiced African American techniques of coding, masking and signifying.

Imani Fryar argues that the Black aesthetic is historically rooted in an inability to assimilate fully into Western culture. “Their [Black Americans] roots are African,” she explains, “and this is clearly demonstrated in language. In order to survive, they



developed codes that led to two separate languages.”<sup>104</sup> To that end, this shielding of identity is evident in the second line in the second stanza of the poem as “forgotten queens lurk” within the subject’s identity. The reader questions why a queen is condemned to hide. From what is she hiding? What are the consequences of her exposure? The answer for “the little brown girl, born for sorrow’s mate” comes in the final stanza. This portion of the work encourages the subject to unveil what is hidden by “forgetting that you once were slave.” The irony of this oversimplified suggestion of identity amputation should not be lost on the reader. For as difficult as it is to forget the ugliness of the past, it is equally difficult to embrace the beauty of one’s self in the contemptuous present. A beauty, one might add, that the principles of racial uplift attempted to shield and downplay as part of a pressing need to fight stereotypes and prejudice.

The layering of internal conflicts – domesticity versus progressiveness, masculine versus feminine, Black versus White – informs the works New Negro women poets. Their response had been to find strength in silence. Their poetics of silence offers important contributions to the study of modernity. New Negro women poets were theorizing their own intersectionality by exploring how their lived experiences fall between the rigid fault lines of race and gender identity. As evolved readers removed from the singular purview of race that influenced the criticism of early 20<sup>th</sup> century poetry, critics now have a responsibility to revisit the overshadowed women writers of the Renaissance for a more comprehensive understanding of the era.

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<sup>104</sup> Fryar, Imani. “Literary Aesthetics and the Black Woman Writer.” *Journal of Black Studies*, 20, no. 4. (1990), 445.

## Song

By Gwendolyn Bennett

I am weaving a song of waters,  
Shaken from firm, brown limbs,  
Or heads thrown back in irreverent mirth.  
My song has the ush sweetness  
Of moist, dark lips  
Where hymns keep company  
With old forgotten banjo songs.  
Abandon tells you  
That I sing the heart of race  
While sadness whispers  
That I am the cry of a soul. . . .

A-shoutin' in de ole camp-meeting-place,  
A-strummin' o' de ole banjo.  
Singin' in de moonlight,  
Sobbin' in de dark.  
Singin', sobbin', strummin' slow . . .  
Singin' slow, sobbin' low.  
Strummin', strummin', strummin' slow . . .  
Words are bright bugles  
That make the shining for my song,  
And mothers hold down babies  
To dark, warm breasts  
To make my singing sad.

A dancing girl with swaying hips  
Sets mad the queen in the harlot's eye.  
Praying slave  
Jazz-band after  
Breaking heart  
To the time of laughter . . .  
Clinking chains and minstrelsy  
Are wedged fast with melody.  
A praying slave  
With a jazz-band after . . .  
Singin' slow, sobbin' low.  
Sun-baked lips will kiss the earth.  
Throats of bronze will burst with mirth.  
Sing a little faster,  
Sing a little faster,  
Sing!

## CHAPTER 3

“Don’t knock at my door little child”

### The Mantled Poetics of Harlem Renaissance Motherhood Poetry

“In a racist culture that deems Black children inferior, unworthy, and unlovable, maternal love of Black children is an act of resistance; in loving her children, the mother instills in them a loved sense of self and high self-esteem, enabling them to defy and subvert racist discourses that naturalize racial inferiority and commodify Blacks as other and object.”

-- Andrea O’Reilly<sup>105</sup>

#### **Oriflamme**

by Jessie Fauset<sup>106</sup>

*I can remember when I was a little, young girl, how my old mammy would sit out of doors in the evenings and look up at the stars and groan, and I would say, “Mammy, what makes you groan so?” And she would say, “I am groaning to think of my poor children; they do not know where I be and I don’t know where they be. I look up at the stars and they look up at the stars!”*

-- Sojourner Truth

I think I see her sitting, bowed and Black,  
Stricken and seared with slavery’s mortal scars,  
Reft of her children, lonely, anguished, yet  
Still looking at the stars.

Symbolic mother, we thy myriad sons,  
Pounding our stubborn hearts on Freedom’s bars,  
Clutching our birthright, fight with faces set,  
Still visioning the stars!

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<sup>105</sup> Andrea O’Reilly, *From Motherhood to Mothering: The Legacy of Adrienne Rich’s Of Woman Born* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 12.

<sup>106</sup> Jessie Fauset, *Shadowed Dreams: Women’s Poetry of the Harlem Renaissance*. Ed. Maureen Honey (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 64.

Jessie Fauset's poem "Oriflamme" would be her first published in *The Crisis* after joining the staff in 1925.<sup>107</sup> Contained in these two compact quatrains are motives, ideologies, gendered and racialized relationships that arguably represent the driving force behind the Harlem Renaissance. Many of the characteristics of Renaissance writing are included: the spirit of universalism represented with the knowing and empathetic "we," the fight against the imprisoning forces of oppression, and the collective gaze toward something better, brighter, toward the "stars." Moreover, the poem includes another Renaissance trope that is an often overlooked component of the movement by critics both within and beyond the era. I contend that the trope of Black motherhood is both essential to this poem and to the progression of the Harlem Renaissance.

Fauset's poem shares many traits with other women's poetry of the era, much of which is concerned with analyzing, challenging and reconstructing racial uplift's one-dimensional, superficial characterization of Black motherhood as a solid, unflinching force. Accordingly, this poem is indicative of the work Harlem Renaissance women poets were doing to articulate their individualized disillusionment with their respective marginalization and to define, for themselves, their unique gendered role in the burgeoning race movement of uplift. The intersectional trope of motherhood would prove an effective and creative tool for women poets to broaden the parameters of their own representation and resistance. This chapter explores how New Negro women poets contributed to the gender debate of motherhood within the race movement both implicitly and explicitly.

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<sup>107</sup> The Crisis Magazine was first published by W.E.B. DuBois and the NAACP in 1910. It became one of the premiere publications of the Harlem Renaissance.

In contrast to the construction of the quintessential Black mother that was inspired by the mores of racial uplift, New Negro women's poetry boldly presents the vulnerability and internal struggle of mothering within racist society. Doing so not only satisfies Renaissance dicta that demands art be used as a means to fight racism and subjugation, but it also calls into question many of the beliefs that permeated through early twentieth century Black culture. Kevin Quashie contends that because of the intersectional race and gender implications of mothering, Black women have inherited a naturally political relationship with motherhood – whether or not they choose to participate in the institution. He explains:

For Black women, in particular, motherhood is further imbued with social and institutional narratives because of the impact of race, class, and colonialism on the delineation of what a mother is. Appropriately, motherhood is an amazingly political and ambivalent site for many Black women: in the United States, for example, choosing to give birth in a legal system designed to restrict and control Black women's reproduction is an act of political significance and resistance; conversely, choosing not to have a child in a context where Black women's bodies are imagined as reproductively prolific is also political, resistant. This vexed quality of motherhood acknowledges both the material appraisal colonialism imposes on Black women's children and the (de)valued commodity that Black bodies become. It is this latter consideration that especially makes Black mothering an impossibility, a hard-to-bear responsibility that begins with inevitable despair and failure: if being a good mother is to secure the best for

one's child, the Black mother cannot be a good mother and can hardly be a mother at all.<sup>108</sup>

The complexity of raced mothering, as outlined by Quashie, poses significant challenges for New Negro women as outlined in their poetry. Their response to the racist imaging attacking their ability to mother and the racial uplift demands that they become self-effacing mothers – both versions complete with its respective expectations and assumptions of Black women and their bodies – is outlined in the poetry. The culturally introspective aspect of the work, however, proved disarming for those factions of the Harlem Renaissance which prioritized a focus on the external ramifications of patriarchal colonial ideology such as racism, over the internal ramification of sexism.<sup>109</sup> In other words, these women writers violated racial uplift expectations by not foregrounding Black men's experiences with racism.<sup>110</sup> Consequently, much of Renaissance motherhood poetry was disregarded as distracting, if not irrelevant, musings despite the works' multilayered analysis of matters such as resistance, identity, race and gender relations.

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<sup>108</sup> Kevin Quashie, *Black Women, Identity, and Cultural Theory: (Un)Becoming the Subject* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 66.

<sup>109</sup> Adrienne Rich offers a particularly telling review of the link between patriarchy and motherhood: "Patriarchy would seem to require, not only that women shall assume the major burden of pain and self-denial for the furtherance of the species, but that a majority of that species—women—shall remain essentially unquestioning and unenlightened. ... Patriarchy could not survive without motherhood and heterosexuality in their institutional forms; therefore they have to be treated as axioms, as "nature itself, not open to question..." *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* 2<sup>nd</sup> (New York: Norton and Company, 1986), 43.

<sup>110</sup> Ajuan Mance's reading of Esther Popel's work is particularly useful in contextualizing women's writer's negotiation of this social norm. *Inventing Black Women: African American Women Poets and Self-Representation, 1877-2000* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2007), 65.

Read anew, however, Harlem Renaissance women's poetry offers authoritative and viable contributions to the continuing debates about manifestly racialized mothering. Hence, this chapter examines how the intersectional trope of Black motherhood was strategically used to inject women's voices into the discussion. To that end, several concerns frequently emerge in the poetry: 1) the legacy of slavery and its intrinsic link to Black mothering, 2) the contradictory and hypocritical racist and sexist expectations of motherhood, and 3) methods of resistance and empowerment in motherhood. In presenting speakers who are mothers, or speakers who are daughters, or poems that perform acts of mothering on the reader, these writers clearly position motherhood as a multifaceted political site of protest.

### ***'The Damnation of Women': Renaissance Leaders Discuss Motherhood***

In considering New Negro women's poetic and polemical interest in motherhood, we must revisit the period's more vocal preoccupation with race construction. While the question of gender has too often been removed from race discussion, what has become clear is that the New Negro woman's primary gift, sacrifice, and obligation to the racial uplift movement, was motherhood. Kevin Gaines depicts the underlying motive of the Renaissance movement in *Uplifting the Race*, explaining that "amidst the violent racism prevalent at the turn of the twentieth century, African American cultural elites struggling to articulate a positive Black identity developed the middle-class ideology of racial uplift."<sup>111</sup> Intersectionality study argues that it is reckless to review middle-class

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<sup>111</sup> Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1966), 4.

ideology without peeling through its race and gender implications. The roots of patriarchal structuring within middle-class ideology gesture toward such a necessity – a necessity that DuBois illuminates in his essay “The Damnation of Women.” The essay confirms Black women’s expected contribution and sacrifice to the movement via motherhood most extensively:

The world wants healthy babies and intelligent workers. Today we refuse to allow the combination and force thousands of intelligent workers to go childless at a horrible expenditure of moral force, or we damn them if they break our idiotic conventions. Only at the sacrifice of intelligence and the chance to do their best work can the majority of modern women bear children. This is the damnation of women.

All womanhood is hampered today because the world on which it is emerging is a world that tries to worship both virgins and mothers and in the end despises motherhood and despoils virgins.<sup>112</sup>

As empathetic as DuBois’ review may be, the essay ends with the familiar lauding of the mythic, strong Black woman and her ability to endure her predestined “damned” role of Negro mother. He writes: “Today the dreams of the mothers are coming true. We have still our poverty and degradation, our lewdness and our cruel toil; but we have, too, a vast group of women of Negro blood who for strength of character, cleanness of soul, and unselfish devotion of purpose, is today easily the peer of any group of women in the

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<sup>112</sup> W.E.B DuBois, *Dark Waters 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 1999), 96.



civilized world.”<sup>113</sup> Though seemingly complimentary, within DuBois’ description are gender expectations tantamount to sacrifice and submission in the name of racial progress. Comments such as “cleanness of soul” and “unselfish devotion” paradoxically describe the New Negro woman’s damnation while asserting her need to quietly acquiesce to this position. Her success at such a feat is met with platitudes, but little gesture toward change.

Though the racial uplift inspired construction of Black motherhood would foster inherent challenges for New Negro woman identity, its characterization of the infallible, strong Black mother was a strategic response to the stereotypes of “mammy” or “jezebel” imposed on Black women by White racist imaging. The belief that Black women operate in only these two roles helped not only to fuel supremacist ideology, but as Trudier Harris explains, helped to maintain dominant power structures:

Images of asexual, culture-supporting Black women in the American popular imagination and media are largely the construction of White Americans. From the vantage point of slavery and the history of Black women’s caregiving and other roles in relation to White Americans, it is understandable that such images would have been constructed to soothe the constructors. .... Those comforting images range from the large Black women who keep Black men in line for White Americans, to the very large Black women who are eternally happy to be in the kitchen making pancakes for their White charges, to mammy figures specifically conceived to provide broad bosoms of comfort for Whites. If Black women should fall into one of those categories, then they are in their “proper” roles, as

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 107.

defined by the scale of perception of Black female bodies in American popular imagination. Another type of proper role, less altruistic—if such a conception could apply to roles named—locked Black women into the uncontained lustiness of sexuality and animalism in which they were stereotypically considered to lead upstanding, Christian White men astray during and after slavery.<sup>114</sup>

In the context of Harris' review, the concept and implementation of racial uplift becomes radical in its rejection of White supremacist ideology. It is then understandable how many Black women would align with principles of uplift which met them at their pursuit for "respectability."<sup>115</sup> Yet, while many Black women, informed and inspired by uplift, would use motherhood/mothering as a site for resistance to raise empowered children that reject racial stereotypes, they hardly conformed to the sexist dicta that demanded they accept maternal suffering in silence. Nor, did they consider themselves relegated solely the domestic sphere. Even women who subscribed to tenets of Black Victorian respectability and gentility could easily be considered "race women" in their community activism, educational aptitude, and professional success.<sup>116</sup>

Notably, Black women's histories place them on the frontlines with men; Black women's labor in America has always been public via the institution of slavery. The race

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<sup>114</sup> Trudier Harris, *Saints, Sinners, Saviors: Strong Women in African American Literature* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 2.

<sup>115</sup> Jacqueline Moore, *Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, and the Struggle for Racial Uplift* (Wilmington: SR Books, 2003), 105.

<sup>116</sup> Shirley J. Carlson's article "Black Ideals of Womanhood in Late Victorian Era Laws," is particularly useful in explicating the ways some middle class Black women participated in Victorian ideology while simultaneously performing radical "race woman" duties. *The Journal of Negro History*, 77, no. 2 (Spring, 1992).

and gender collision places women in the paradoxical terrain of visible and invisible. Renaissance poet Anita Scott Coleman explores this dichotomy most vividly in her poem

“Black Baby.” Consider the following lines from the poem:

The baby I hold in my arms is a Black baby.

I toil, I cannot always cuddle him.

I place him on the ground at my feet.

.....

The baby I hold in my arms is a Black baby.

Today the coal-man bought me coal.

Sixteen dollars a ton is the price I pay for coal –

Costly fuel...though they say:--

Men must sweat and toil to dig it from the ground.

Costly fuel... ‘Tis said:--

If it is buried deep enough and lies hidden long enough

‘Twill be no longer coal but diamonds...

My Black baby looks at me.

His eyes are like coals,

They shine like diamonds.<sup>117</sup>

Coleman’s poem fuses matters of gender, class and race. The speaker’s labor – both as a worker and a mother – is quite public, presumably out of classed necessity. Mothering has not hindered her ability to toil with the men. In fact, it would seem that the opposite is true as she is not able to “always cuddle” the male baby who is placed at her feet. Indeed,

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<sup>117</sup> Maureen Honey, *Shadowed Dreams*, 112.

both the literal and symbolic price of coal are among the most pressing questions of this poem. In giving the baby the qualities of earth and coal, and in the speaker's expressed duty of toiling over both, Coleman's work surmises the woman speaker's potential to produce diamonds in both spheres of her labor.

For many women who struggled with negotiating the public sphere of race and the domestic sphere of gender, poetry would become an accessible outlet to express their distress in being asked to mother with the solitary dedication outlined by White patriarchal structuring, but without the access to White privilege. As Dorothy Roberts explains, "Black women can never attain the ideal image of motherhood, no matter how much we conform to middle-class conventions, because ideal motherhood is White. The maternal standards created to confine women are not sex-based norms that Black women happen to fail. They are created out of raced, as well as gendered, components."<sup>118</sup>

Much like DuBois' "damned women," many male leaders of the movement acknowledged the unbalanced toil placed on women, but talked little of change. Black male leaders wanted to prove that their women were the epitome of femininity in her ability to take care of her man and his children; she would be celebrated with the crown of "strength" for her ability to fulfill womanly roles under the shared umbrella of race. Accordingly, while male leaders of the Renaissance movement saw racial uplift as a means to dispel racial prejudices by evidencing the New Negro's ability to assimilate White patriarchal structuring, women poets of the era used it as an opportunity to analyze, challenge and disrupt the sexist underpinnings of a racist system. Poetry by

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<sup>118</sup> Dorothy Roberts, "Racism and Patriarchy in the Meaning of Motherhood." in *Mothers in Law: Feminist Theory and the Legal Regulation of Motherhood*. eds. Martha Albertson Fineman and Isabel Karpin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 252.

Langston Hughes, Georgia Douglas Johnson and Mae Cowdery personify this gender-specific approach to uplift.

The heralding of the New Negro mother became a reoccurring theme in the Renaissance, but in distinctively gendered ways. Consider Hughes's famed poem "Mother to Son." Encased in a setting of domesticity, as both the setting and metaphor of the poem is a staircase, the mother's sole purpose to encourage her male child toward progression by modeling her strength of character, her determination and her courage. In reference to her socially worn, "splintered" condition, the mother asserts the following:

I've been a-climbin' on,  
And reachin' landin's,  
And turnin' corners,  
And sometimes goin' in the dark  
Where there ain't been no light.<sup>119</sup>

Hughes's mother figure reflects the archetypal Black mother that frequently appears in Black male-authored literature. She is elevated through an inner strength. Her modesty is larger than life. She survives by putting her head down and burrowing forward. And, not as apparent, but certainly understood, she is parenting alone. Her lack of reference to a mate with the singular "I" equally depicts this woman speaker's struggle toward ascension as singular. The only relationship between the sexes reflected in this work, and much of the maternal poetry of the era, is parental.

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<sup>119</sup> Langston Hughes, "Mother to Son," In *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Eds. Henry Louis Gates and Nellie McKay (New York: WW Norton and Company, 2004), 1292.

Again, the poem is thus participating in the aforementioned Black male response of confronting extreme fictional negative race imaging with extreme positive imaging. Anne Stavney explains: “Defending their women against these primarily White, racist assertions, Black males produced an idealized image of Black womanhood in the form of the “moral mother.” From civic leader to politician to writer to artist, Black men of the 1920s and 1930s promoted an ideology of glorified Black motherhood.”<sup>120</sup> What Hughes is depicting in “Mother to Son,” if not arguably endorsing, is the raced woman’s intersecting role to nurture, sustain and prepare her children for life in a racist society. His speaker has mastered this technique as she is unflinching in both the example of her response to oppression and in her instructions to the son as she demands: “So boy, don't you turn back./ Don't you set down on the steps/ 'Cause you finds it's kinder hard./ Don't you fall now.” In this respect, Hughes’ speaker is quintessentially the racial uplift mother. bell hooks argues that such an expectation of Black motherhood, while sexist at its core, reflects a deeply embedded cultural process of politicizing the homeplace. She explains,

Since sexism delegates to females the task of creating and sustaining a home environment, it has been primarily the responsibility of Black women to construct domestic households as spaces of care and nurturance in the face of a brutal harsh reality of racist oppression, of sexist domination. ... Black women resisted by making homes where all Black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where we can be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty, hardship and

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<sup>120</sup> Anne Stavney, “Mothers of Tomorrow,” 534.

deprivation, where we can restore ourselves the dignity denied us on the outside in the public world.<sup>121</sup>

Hughes' mother-speaker not only overcomes her oppression in her ability to continue to endure it, as noted in her closing remarks "I'se *still* climbin'" (emphasis added), she does so without complaint. Her instruction, while inspirational on its face, is not so much about change as it is about endurance. And, her gendered example of endurance would appear to be her most sought contribution to the movement.

Moreover, the symbolic staircase serves as a metaphor for the desired progression and the Jim Crow stalemated condition of Black life. The poet defines the role of Black women in this progression as supporter and nurturer, however, not as lover and confidante. But, the tension of the poem is not the speaker's ability to progress despite life's obstacles; it is instead rooted in the son's unwillingness or inability to climb the metaphorical "staircase." Again, the relationship Hughes designates to mark this uplifting of Black culture is not that of husband and wife, but of mother and son. Clearly, patriarchy allows for mothers to have enough agency over sons to offer welcomed advice and wisdom without the fear of emasculation. Also, in presenting a mother-child relationship, with no mention of a paternal figure, the poem skirts concerns of negative sexual imaging. Despite its lack of reference to social partner, there is no room in this construction of motherhood for vulnerability, fear, or loneliness.

By contrast, Johnson's motherhood poems present a more conflicted and vulnerable woman. Johnson's construction of the New Negro mother is not as absolute as

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<sup>121</sup> bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 42.

Renaissance leaders often presented. It is fluid, contemplative, and responsive. In lieu of crafting a stoic mother who personifies the ideal gendered participation in racial uplift, Johnson's motherhood poems often present a woman who is paralyzed by doubt and who questions her ability to fulfill prescribed gender roles. This layering of race and gender is evident in "Shall I say, 'My Son, You're Branded?'" The poem explores the raced reality of having to make children aware of their own oppressed existence. Unlike Hughes' unrestrained and determined speaker, Johnson's mother experiences a doubt-ridden paralysis in her inability to negotiate the gendered call to nurture with the racial uplift mandate to educate. Consider the following lines of the poem:

Shall I say, "My son, you're branded in this country's  
pageantry,  
By strange subtleties you're tethered, and no forum  
sets you free?"  
Shall I mark the young lights fading through you soul-  
enchanelled eye,  
As the dusky pall of shadows screen the highways of  
your sky?  
Or shall I, with love prophetic, bid you dauntlessly  
arise,  
Spurn the handicap that clogs you, taking what the  
world denies,  
Bid you storm the sullen fortress wrought by prejudice  
and wrong  
With a faith that shall not falter, in your heart and on  
your tongue!<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Georgia Douglas Johnson, *Selected Works of Georgia Douglas Johnson*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, (New York: G.K. Hall and Company, 1997), 121.



The gendered expectation to nurture and protect the male child is frequently disrupted by racial norms and conditioning. The mother's tumult is in conversation with the very principles of racial uplift. With this work, Johnson questions the prioritization of race from a mother's perspective and from a lived experience. Notably, Johnson relies on conventional forms in her work, a pattern that appears in much of the poetry written by the more mature women poets of the movement. However, she stretches the parameters of her quatrains with long lines; the rhymed aspects of these lines spill over and are indented for additional emphasis. This poem, with its concluding couplet in slant rhyme, is not as contained in form as much of the body of her work. Arguably, its disruption in conventional form parallels the speaker's inability to cleanly perform acts of mothering because of racial anxieties.

This reality, again, fractures the mother identity from the individual identity, which culminates to show the multidimensionality of the speaker's experiences. She is not solely a mother; implied in her indecision is an experience with the world that pushes beyond the maternal sphere. That experience has inspired a series of questions that not only trouble her mothering, but speak to the core of raced identity. To what degree does awareness of this "branded" condition help the oppressed? To what degree does the awareness hinder? The question is not resolved in this poem, but a point is made in the asking. While the speaker does not come to a resolution, the mother's frustration is understood with the emphatic exclamation point that concludes the work. Johnson's intersectional analysis of New Negro motherhood, I suggest, offers a more comprehensive review of gendered elements of racial formation.

Mae Cowdery, another prolific poet who was acclaimed by both Hughes and Alain Locke, wrote motherhood poems that seemed to question the racialized mother's ability to nurture. She is one of the few women in the era to publish a book of poetry with the 1936 edition of *We Lift Our Voices*. Her approach to the motherhood trope is surprising, considering that the ability to nurture is arguably the premier prerequisite of mothering. Even Hughes' raced mother softened her tough love lecture by calling the male child "Honey." Cowdery's motherhood poems present a speaker whose desperate desires to celebrate the beauty and wonder of mothering are continually interrupted by outside burdens and strife. Indeed, Cowdery's work often wrestles in the gray area between the domestic and worldly spheres. In her poem, "...to...Judith Lynn...On Her First Birthday," one of a series of poems written to her daughter, Cowdery writes:

Oh God,  
Make me White and shining as a star  
To light the darkness  
Of her first despair.<sup>123</sup>

As indicated in the poem's title, the child in question is quite young. And yet the mother is overwhelmed with concern regarding her child's first of likely many despairs. This mother knows worldly pain is coming, and her desperation bespeaks an awareness that there is little that the mother can do about it. Herein lies the paradoxical nature of raced mothering: the gendered desire and responsibility to nurture meets the raced impossibility

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<sup>123</sup> Mae Cowdery, "...to...Judith Lynn...On Her First Birthday," *We Lift Our Voices and Other Poems* (Philadelphia: Alpress, 1936), 47.

of completing the task at hand. The call to nurture is often trampled by the need to protect, an ability that, too, becomes fragile in a racist society.

In considering Cowdery's critique of how the outside world affects the maternal and internal dynamic of raced motherhood, it is useful here to return to hooks' theoretical construction of the "homeplace" as protest. She explains: "The task of making homeplace was not simply a matter of Black women providing a service: it was about the construction of a safe place where Black people could affirm one another and by so doing heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination. We could not learn to love or respect ourselves in the culture of White supremacy, on the outside: it was there on the inside, in the "homeplace," most often created and kept by Black women, that we had the opportunity to grow and develop, to nurture our spirits."<sup>124</sup> hooks' revisionist explanation of the role of motherhood in Black communities explains a radical intersection in Black thought and identity that extends beyond childrearing.

New Negro women poets would proclaim, this cultural assumption of Black mother identity would weigh on women's hearts and minds. Another of Cowdery's motherhood poems, titled "A Modern Mother Sings for...Judith Lynn who is Three," captures this dichotomy most vividly:

My lips have not learned  
To utter always gentle words  
But they never weary  
Of kissing a bruise

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<sup>124</sup> bell hooks, *Yearning*, 42.

Or crooning 'til fretful eyes  
Are closed in healing sleep.<sup>125</sup>

What is notable about the mother speaker of the poem is an acknowledgement that she is only confident in her ability to respond to pain. For this speaker, love outside the context of pain has not been “learned.” Her expertise, however, flourishes when the child is “bruised” and “fretful.” The focus of the poem reveals a young mother who wants to know how to separate the love from pain. This problem is not resolved in the internal space of the poem. But, as Cowdery’s work announces, it is a dilemma that demands scrutiny.

Yet, despite efforts like those of Cowdery and Johnson, it was the image of the strong, racial champion New Negro mother that prevailed during the era. This immovable, subsuming mother became a symbol of the entire movement as evidenced in the 1925 publication of *The New Negro*. At this Renaissance moment, the movement had found its footing and was diving into the American conscience with a surge of artistic creativity unparalleled by any Black cultural movement that preceded it. Artists strategically used literature, music and art to fight social ills, to give voice to silenced communities, and to testify to their own humanness. Ultimately, the decision was made to capture the moment in this representational text. Locke edited and released *The New Negro*. A frontispiece to the collection titled “The Brown Madonna,” which visually depicted a young Negro mother and her infant child, exemplifies woman’s role in the movement of uplift while symbolizing the spirit of rebirth that mobilized the movement.

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<sup>125</sup> Mae Cowdery, “A Modern Mother Sings for...Judith Lynn who is Three,” *We Lift Our Voices*, 48.



Figure 1. Image of “The Brown Madonna”

To fully appreciate Locke’s decision to use “The Brown Madonna” in the initial printing of *The New Negro*, one must consider the importance of the book. The collection of visual art, poetry, literature and drama would later be heralded as the movement’s “definitive text” and “Bible”; Renaissance scholar Arnold Rampersand explains its significance this way: “*The New Negro* alerted the world in 1925 that something approaching a cultural revolution was taking place among Blacks in New York, as well as elsewhere in the United States and perhaps around the world. The book also attempted in a fairly ambitious, expansive way to offer a definition of this cultural movement.”<sup>126</sup> Locke’s decision to use “The Brown Madonna” is particularly telling when we consider the purpose of the collection. While proclaiming the objective for racial renewal and redefinition, the portrait also promotes a non-sexualized, domesticated version of Black womanhood. Created by Austrian painter Winold Riess, the work arguably instantiates cross-cultural stereotypes, even if it does so unwittingly.

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<sup>126</sup> Arnold Rampersand, “Introduction,” *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Alain Locke, (New York: Touchstone, 1992), ix.

Many critics ultimately agree, however, that it serves as a glaring reminder of New Negro Woman suppression via the role of motherhood. Emily Orlando points out that the image promotes the ironically virginal Black mother role heralded by men of the era:

The woman wears the blue of the traditional depictions of the Virgin Mary and her hair modestly frames her forehead and temples as if to mimic the wimple worn by the Virgin. Further, Riess has framed her shape with shadows that suggest a heavenly glow radiating from her being. Reiss's image is innovative insofar as the Virgin Mary is rendered Black. Yet she is not a proud, confident figure: her gaze is diverted; she humbly looks down; she seems rather sedate. We see only one of her hands, which is engaged in the act of nurturing: the hand cradles the (presumably) male child; it most certainly does not hold a pen or an artist's brush.<sup>127</sup>

This image works to articulate several messages. It asserts the Black woman's role and ability to mother against the attacks of racist stereotypes. Presenting the mother as virginal, a puzzling irrationality considering the presence of a child, not only meets supremacist prejudices that Black women are oversexed, but it also situates her in the context of Christianity. In so doing, it meets dominant culture in the common ground of religion. And, circularly, Christian religiosity declares that childbirth and rearing are woman's burden to bear. Orlando continues:

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<sup>127</sup> Emily Orlando, "'Feminine Calibans' and 'Dark Madonnas of the Grave': The Imaging of Black Women in the New Negro Renaissance," *New Voices on the Harlem Renaissance: Essays on Race, Gender, and Literary Discourse*. eds. Australia Tarver and Paula Barnes, (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2006), 63.

So here again the image of the Madonna is revisionist in that she is Africanized—as a gesture of race pride—yet it serves to send a message to Black women that the role of self-sacrificing, attendant is one of the few available to her. Further, the reference to the Immaculate Conception recalls Christianity’s emphasis on the Madonna’s reliance upon a male savior for redemption. She is not so very empowered after all.<sup>128</sup>

Perhaps, then, the religious underpinning of the work explains Riess’ choice to avert the women’s eyes and to press her lips shut. Her joy, or lack thereof, is irrelevant. She is silenced. She humbly accepts her obligation without the confrontation that direct eye contact implies.

Stavney’s assessment of the portrait offers additional insight into the portrait’s analysis. Of the woman in the piece, she notes that “she is plainly dressed, without jewelry or makeup, her hair simply bobbed at her ears. ... Neither she nor the child is smiling either. The facial expression suggests tranquility and quietude; her mouth is undemonstrative, serene. The overall image is one of nonsexual modest womanhood.”<sup>129</sup> Conceivably, presenting a nonsexual, maternal version of Black motherhood as the representation of New Negro female identity was problematic for Black women. The cost to Black female identity has traditionally been to sacrifice sexuality and femininity in support of the race movement. This call for gendered racial solidarity conflicts with cultural gendered expectations of femininity and sexuality. And, furthermore, the

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>129</sup> Anne Stavney, “Mothers of Tomorrow,” 545.

demands of race and gender are magnified at a time when Black women's sexuality and beauty are repeatedly and strategically undermined by White racist imaging.

Conversely, this call for fragmentation of identity is not only problematic for Black female representation, but it also produces conflict between men and women. Stavney explains how the imaging of the long suffering, nurturing Black mother, though complimentary at its surface, may have proven problematic during the Harlem Renaissance era. She writes, "Reinscribing the image of the archetypal earth mother, these Black, male-authored works rarely attend to the actual social and economic conditions encountered by most Black women of their era. Womanhood is conflated with motherhood and the latter functions as a literary trope. The broader dimensions of Black woman's material reality, especially urban reality, go virtually unaddressed."<sup>130</sup> The maternal imaging evidenced in "The Brown Madonna" prompts another challenge in Stavney's discussion in that it subjected Black women to a level of domesticity which was ultimately outside "Black Harlem's geographic and discursive space." Certainly, this mirroring of White patriarchal systems presents a clash between race and gender movements by placing New Negro women in a precarious position within the race movement. Gendered concerns that explored sex-based subjugation and conflict were frowned upon if they hindered the prioritized race-driven center of the movement.

Still, despite the overwhelming shadow of male contemporary writers, female essayists of the movement were able to weigh in on the discussion. One of the most noted additions to this discussion came from Renaissance writer Alice Dunbar-Nelson.

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<sup>130</sup> Anne Stavney, "Mothers of Tomorrow," 544-545.



Her essay, “Woman’s Most Serious Problem,” implores women of “leisure classes” to reexamine the dwindling population of the Black middle class and her potential role in curbing impending doom that the talented tenth faced. She argues that birth control and the limiting of offspring had become the premiere solution for economic independence.<sup>131</sup> This is troubling, she asserts, because “[n]o race can be said to be a growing race, whose birth rate is declining, and whose natural rate of increase is dropping sharply.”<sup>132</sup> Dunbar-Nelson admits that there is no easy solution to this problem, offering only, that in acknowledging the problem, “young and intelligent women should give pause.”<sup>133</sup> Still the implication is glaringly apparent: woman’s most significant and pressing gift to racial uplift was childbirth and childrearing. Dunbar-Nelson, also a poet, would revisit the New Negro woman’s uniquely gendered conflict between individual, economic autonomy and the sacrifice-based loyalty to her race in her creative works as well.

Using poetry as a vehicle to express gender and race concerns harkens back to Stavney’s intraracial discussion which considers how the New Negro woman’s writing “contested not only White racist imaging, but Black male constructions of her as well.”<sup>134</sup> In response to Stavney’s arguments, I am tempted to fragment Black female identities within the context of the era to focus scholarship on the gendered aspects of their work.

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<sup>131</sup> Alice Dunbar-Nelson, “Woman’s Most Serious Problem,” *Double-Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology*, ed. Venetria Patton and Maureen Honey (New York: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 114.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 534.

As the principles of intersectionality explain however, this, too, would be problematic. Each aspect of identity augments and enhances the other. Accordingly, Stavney agrees that within Black female identity constructions, “race [does] not exist apart from or even alongside gender, class and sexual norms; rather these issues are articulated through one another.”<sup>135</sup> Thus, one must consider the fusion of these characteristics in exploration of the multi-consciousness reflected in the New Negro Woman poetic. Such a fusion exists in the question of Black motherhood.

### ***The Road to Define and Theorize Black Motherhood***

While the question of Black motherhood’s role in Black culture and the country at large has hovered historically long before the Harlem Renaissance found its footing, certainly the Harlem Renaissance movement left its imprint on the concept. However, the evolution of the American conceptualization of Black women’s identities has since rendered insights that help illuminate readings of New Negro women’s poetry. The construction of Black motherhood has become essential to theorizing Black feminisms. Few efforts in this regard have gone far without examining the Black maternal presence in Black culture and the ramifications that the Black mothering conceptualization has had on racial and gendered relations.

Though many scholars of Black culture agree that the construction of the mother is essential to cultural studies, this acknowledgement has been relatively small in Black literature studies. Barbara Christian explains:

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

Motherhood is a major theme in contemporary women's literature, the "unwritten story" just beginning to be told as a result of women's struggles to become all that they can be. Since a woman, never a man, can be a mother, that experience should be hers to tell; since we all come from mothers, it is striking that such a story remains secondary in the world of literature. As important is the fact that the role of mother, with all that it implies, is universally imposed upon women as their sole identity, their proper identity, above all others. The primacy of motherhood for women is the one value that societies, whatever their differences, share.<sup>136</sup>

In recent years, there has been some momentum toward addressing this concern. Angelita Reyes, for example, examines the postcolonial reverberations of the Black mother trope in greater depth and "across cultures." She considers the argument that motherhood can be both a venue for gender oppression and "a place where women of color can turn for solace and emotional support, even if the communities are not perfect."<sup>137</sup> Viewed through this lens, mothering can actually become a source of agency in a community plagued by powerlessness.

As Andrea O'Reilly argues, Black mothering perceptions and practices differ from White privileged mothering experience in concrete ways:

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<sup>136</sup> Barbara Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1985), 212.

<sup>137</sup> Angelita Reyes, *Mothering Across Cultures: Postcolonial Representations* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 16.

First, mothers and motherhood are valued by, and central to, African American culture, and secondly, Black culture recognizes that mothers and mothering are what make possible the physical and psychological well-being and empowerment of African American people and the larger African American culture. The focus of Black motherhood, in both practice and thought, is how to preserve, protect, and more generally empower Black children so that they may resist racist practices that seek to harm them and grow into adulthood whole and complete. To fulfill the task of empowering children, mothers must hold power in African American culture and mothering likewise must be valued and supported.<sup>138</sup>

O'Reilly's assertion is useful in considering gendered Renaissance poetry. New Negro women poets best explored the potential of a mother's agency when they wrote about their own mothers. Often referring to their mothers as queens, many women poets used their gendered perspective to acknowledge and restore their mothers' value and radical agency. The image of the Black mother queen is prevalent in Renaissance poetry. Assigning the position of royalty to Black women can be read as a measure of resistance against negative sexual imaging while appropriating power.<sup>139</sup> Helene Johnson's short poem "Mother" presents a speaker paying homage to her mother's seamless integration of modesty and radicalism. The mother subject's willingness to commit blasphemy in her capacity as mother is an empowering rejection of sexist dicta:

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<sup>138</sup> O'Reilly, *From Motherhood to Mothering*, 11.

<sup>139</sup> Renaissance poet Carrie Law Morgan Figgs frequently returned to the queen motif in her writing.

Soft hair faintly white where the angels touch it  
Pale candles flaming in her eyes  
Hallowing her vision of Christ;  
And yet I know  
She would break each Commandment  
Against her heart,  
And bury them pointed and jagged in her soul –  
That I may smile.<sup>140</sup>

Johnson's willingness to break away from conventional forms pairs well with the subject's willingness to defy religion and cultural mores for her child's happiness. In form and in subject matter, this poem identifies sites of gendered resistance against the dicta of uplift.

The poem begins by almost meeting the male leaders of the era at the image of "The Brown Madonna." The first three lines are filled with religious imagery; the mother comes close to disappearing in her "White" and "pale" commitment to be devout. The poem disrupts the reader's assumptions of the mother with an internal truth signaled by the line: "And yet I know." This angel-touched woman is able and willing to break from the social mores of religion – and by extension patriarchy – in the name of motherhood. The plurality of this work is quite fascinating: its complexity is in its simplicity. The mother defines the terms of her sacrifice. There are two conflicting yet cohesive versions of this mother: one that is humble and Christ-like, another that is capable of unabashedly "break[ing] each Commandment." The speaker of the poem keeps the secret truth of this

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<sup>140</sup> Helene Johnson, *This Waiting for Love*, 32.

internal/external mother, yet speaks it into existence in the action of the poem. This “knowing” for both the mother and the speaker makes space for empowerment that cannot fall victim to dominant culture.

Black maternal imaging would become a prominent concern for Georgia Douglas Johnson. Her opening octave stanza of her poem “Black Woman” depicts a scenario that is in stark contrast to traditional conceptions of motherhood as embodied in “The Brown Madonna.”

Don't knock on my door, little child,  
I cannot let you in;  
You know not what a world this is  
Of cruelty and sin.  
Wait in the still eternity  
Until I come to you.  
The world is cruel, cruel child,  
I cannot let you through.<sup>141</sup>

This poem's speaker rejects the title of mother because of the “cruel cruel” world. Notably, Johnson's work underscores this perceived notion of cruelty to help readers understand the rejection. The cruelty reference, for example, is noted three times in this stanza. It is not until the second stanza that the source of the cruelty is identified as “the monster of men/ Inhabiting the earth.” This woman speaker rejects the power of these “monster” men by asserting her authority to perform or resist motherhood. Honey speaks

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<sup>141</sup> Maureen Honey, *Shadowed Dreams*, 64.

to Renaissance women's poetic treatment of motherhood and the *Brown Madonna* in the following:

As a representation of rebirth, such an image was irresistible and women, too, made use of it but more ambivalently. Often, for instance, birth is distanced by embedding it in a natural landscape described as pregnant or maternal. Though mothers and babies appear in their verse, child-rearing or nurturing roles are not favored topics. In turning so often in poems to moments of erotic passion, women suggested that they valued most highly those relationships they could enter as autonomous persons from which they could fashion adventurous lives.<sup>142</sup>

Clearly, Johnson's treatment of motherhood exemplifies Honey's thesis. Again, Johnson retains authority in the face of social and cultural expectations. In the following discussion, I explore how this construction of resistance in the racially-imprinted experience of motherhood appears in Johnson's poetry.

***“The mother soothes her mantled child”***

Poet, playwright, musician, fiction writer, mother, and wife, Johnson was one of the most prolific members of the movement. She is evidently the most productive woman poet of the Harlem Renaissance, publishing three volumes of poems between 1918 and 1938 at a time where few women published one volume. While Johnson also wrote short stories, one-act plays, and songs, her reputation rests on poetry as she was the most anthologized woman poet in the New Negro movement. Claudia Tate sheds light on the poet's placement in the Harlem Renaissance: “Neither a subscriber to Victorian ideology

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 21.

nor a fully modern woman, Johnson stood between those of the generation who understood sex as the husband's conjugal right, race as fixed and poetry as sedate, speculative wonder on one extreme, and those of the next generation who assumed sexual liberty, fluid racial identities and poetic sensibility of social activism on the other."<sup>143</sup> Much of Johnson's motherhood poetry, like other women's poetry of the era, presents a speaker confounded in her role to raise a "mantled" child. The word "mantled," meaning "cloaked in darkness," is a theme that reappears in much of her poetry.<sup>144</sup> Her poem "One of the Least of These, My Little One" renders an example of this theme in her work. While the mother speaker is not explicitly present in the lines of Johnson's poem, it is she who is capable of viewing the world through both the weariness of the oppressed and the innocence of an infant.

The infant eyes look out amazed upon the frowning  
earth,  
A stranger, in a land now strange, child of the mantled-  
birth;  
Waxing, he wonders more and more; the scowling grows  
apace;  
A world, behind its barring doors, reviles his ebon face:

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<sup>143</sup> Tate, "Introduction," *Selected Works of Georgia Douglas Johnson*, xix.

<sup>144</sup> Hull, *Color, Sex, and Poetry*, 161.



Yet from this maelstrom issues forth a God-like entity,  
That loves a world all loveless, and smiles on Calvary!<sup>145</sup>

The mother subject's only source of solace to a child burdened by a "mantled" birthright is a daunting comparison to the crucified Christ. Indeed, the dilemmas explored in Johnson's poem reflect race and gender-based critiques that appear throughout many Renaissance works. And, as I have thus explored in the poetry of other New Negro women, this speaker, too, places pressure on the movement's romanticized depictions of a strong Black mother to unveil her vulnerability and resistance.

What distinguishes much of Johnson's work from other women poets is her focus on the intra-cultural pressure to silence these concerns. In this context, writing poems that break the silence becomes a radical pursuit. The poem titled "The Mother," which launches the motherhood series in her 1922 book *Bronze: A Book of Verse*, best captures this objective. The work, composed of three stanzas, surveys the relationship of a mother to her "mantled child." The child is male, another recurring theme in Johnson's motherhood poems. This may reflect her own experience as her children were male. Arguably, however, her constant revisiting of the child's sex throughout these poems becomes a tool to explore gendered relationships. Gender meets race most explicitly in the following lines as the speaker explores the eroding presence of slave history:

The mother soothes her mantled child  
With incantation sad and wild;  
A deep compassion brims her eye  
And stills upon her lips, the sigh.

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<sup>145</sup> Johnson, *Selected Works of Georgia Douglas Johnson*, 120.

Her thoughts are leaping down the years,  
O'er branding bars, through seething tears,  
Her heart is sandaling his feet  
Adown the world's corroding street.<sup>146</sup>

The vulnerability of the Black mother is explicated in ways that vividly contrast with the strong, unflustered mother constructed in racial uplift. The ability to protect, to love, to mother is inhibited by the world's corrosion. The poem makes a brief, but poignant reference to slavery ("O'er branding bars") in its attempt to show constricted condition of the marginalized mother. All she has to offer the child is love, but in an unjust world, she knows that will not be sufficient.

The work's strength is in its layering: though the poem's mother places the mantled male child's suffering at the forefront of the discussion, the poem itself positions her silent struggle as a necessary point of inquiry. Consider the final lines of the poem: "And Only God will ever know/ The wordless measure of her woe."<sup>147</sup> Readers must approach these revelatory lines through an intersectional framework to investigate the conflicting racialized and gendered experience of silencing oneself and being silenced by others. Johnson uses the literary medium, one of the few available to women of the era, to break through such confines by providing the words for "the wordless measure of her woe."

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<sup>146</sup> Johnson, *Selected Works of Georgia Douglas Johnson*, 117.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*

As Johnson's redondilla succeeds in highlighting, the constant defense of racial identity coupled with the fight for gender visibility must have posed an immeasurable challenge for New Negro women. One can imagine what women poets had to relinquish in an effort to achieve literary success. This becomes obvious when readers acknowledge that the women of the period did not have the same financial and emotional support afforded to the men. Only now can readers unpack the works of Harlem Renaissance women poets to find insightful avenues into Renaissance culture. Stavney underscores the need for such excavation. She writes, "despite the call to contextualize Black female-authored discourse within the historically specific constraints of early twentieth-century American culture, scholars have focused little critical attention on ideological and iconographic forces which competed *intra*racially as well as interracially in the fiction, poetry and artwork of the period" [Stavney's emphasis].<sup>148</sup> Not unlike their male contemporaries, New Negro women poets were charged with a distinct, but overshadowed, mission and audience to serve during the Renaissance era. To further complicate the issue, few critics acknowledge the diversity within Black women's citizenry of the era to the extent that Locke reviewed the Black male population in *The New Negro*. Yet, awareness of these various factions and their needs also provides insights into New Negro Women poetic inspirations and motivations.

Gertrude Elsie Johnson McDougald, a famed educator in the Harlem Renaissance, provides a review of New Negro womanhood worthy of consideration. She places New Negro women in four general categories. The smallest would be the "leisured" wives and

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<sup>148</sup> Anne Stavney, "Mothers of Tomorrow," 534.

daughters of business and professional men. This group was primarily concerned with matters of family and home while enjoying the amenities of travel and social clout. The second category consisted of progressive, professional women who were secretaries, lawyers, dentists, social workers, doctors, probation officers, and above all, school teachers. The third group was contributors to trade and industry who were quite often denied advancement to managerial positions. The final group, McDougald explains, was comprised of domestic and casual workers.<sup>149</sup> From McDougald's conclusions, readers come to understand that the purely maternal caricature of Black womanhood that thrived in the Renaissance was in direct conflict with the lived realities of the middle and working-class existence of New Negro women.<sup>150</sup> Again, each woman suffered struggles unique to her class, but universal in her relationship to race and gender.

While Johnson clearly worked to fulfill this responsibility in her writing, her lyrical verse -- complete in ballad stanzas and heptameter couplets -- reflects a connection to Victorian ideologies that still vexes critics who temper the poet's success by dismissing her work as predictable and trite. One needs only to consider Hull's assertions. She summarizes reader impressions of Johnson's poetry in the following: "A modern reader does not usually find her efforts very impressive -- mainly because of the sameness of her themes and manner, and her conventional style. She writes either melancholy love lyrics or muted, attenuated poems of racial protest."<sup>151</sup> Johnson

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<sup>149</sup> Hull, *Color, Sex, Poetry* 4.

<sup>150</sup> Anne Stavney, "Mothers of Tomorrow," 550

<sup>151</sup> Gloria T. Hull, "Black Women Poets from Wheatley to Walker," *Negro American Literature Forum*, 9, no. 3 (1975): 93. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3041099>.

received many accolades for her significant contribution to the Renaissance, but her harshest critics found fault with her seemingly indirect approach to race concerns.

Houston Baker provides some insight into how Johnson's work may not have been readily perceived in his exploration of modernism and the Harlem Renaissance. Participants in the movement were primarily concerned with defining themselves in "modern" terms. Art, poetry, and literature, he explains, were seen as vehicles to help rid the country of racial prejudice. Baker argues that the tenets of the Harlem Renaissance may have held a "too optimistic faith in the potential of art."<sup>152</sup> This argument mirrors James Weldon Johnson's reflections on the pitfalls of an otherwise thriving movement. Penned only four years after "Black Tuesday," Weldon Johnson expressed his disillusionment with the movement and his hope of success for the next generation. He wrote, "we expected much; perhaps, too much. I now judge that we ought to be thankful for the half-dozen younger writers who did emerge and make a place for themselves."<sup>153</sup> This retrospective view of the demands for successful participants of the Renaissance reveals how Georgia Douglas Johnson's poetry – which did not explicitly attack racial injustice — may have been an easy target for Renaissance critics.

Comparatively, Tate salvages Johnson's work with a comprehensive review. Tate argues that the poet's position as a traditionalist did not equate to an abandonment of race matters. Instead, Tate affirms that Johnson's poetic style and anachronistic verse were part of the poet's strategy to veil opinions fostered by social oppression. As she asserts,

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<sup>152</sup> Houston Baker, "Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance," *American Quarterly*, 39, no. 1 (1987): 92.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

“this perspective offered her the means to describe freedom, beauty and especially her renegade sexuality without the censure of her peers.”<sup>154</sup> To consider Johnson’s dilemma would be to imagine devoting one’s creative energies only to a fragment of identity at the expense of all other aspects.

Johnson penned *Bronze* as a response to critics who accused her of not being concerned with race matters.<sup>155</sup> In musing over the inspiration of *Bronze*, Johnson confessed to Arna Bontemps in 1941: “My first book was *The Heart of a Woman*. It was not at all race conscious. Then someone said—she has no feeling for the race. So I wrote *Bronze*—it was entirely racial.”<sup>156</sup> She prefaces the text with an explicit declaration that she will be the voice of the oppressed: “This book is the child of a bitter earth-wound. I sit on the earth and sing—sing out, and of my sorrow.” Interestingly, the preface is grounded in maternal symbolism. In her attempt to contribute to the racial movement, Johnson was ever conscious of the need to nod toward male leaders of the movement. An acknowledgement of gratitude is given to Locke. But, despite the poet’s efforts to align with the movement’s racial and artistic sensibilities, the collection, like her first, garnered moderate praise for its contribution, it was heavily critiqued for its technical confinement. Even the foreword of the collection, written by DuBois, is laden with patronization. Consider the following excerpt:

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<sup>154</sup> Claudia Tate, “Introduction,” *Selected Works of Georgia Douglas Johnson*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates (New York: G.K. Hall and Company, 1997), xviii.

<sup>155</sup> Hull, *Color, Sex, and Poetry*, 160.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

Those who know what it means to be a colored woman in 1922—and know it not so much in fact as in feeling, apprehension, unrest and delicate yet stern thought—must read Georgia Douglas Johnson’s *Bronze*. Much of it will not touch this reader and that, and some of it will mystify and puzzle them as sort of reiteration and over-emphasis. But none can fail to be caught here and there by a word – a phrase – a period that tells a life history or even paints the history of a generalization. ... Her word is simple, sometimes trite, but it is singularly sincere and true, and as a revelation of the soul struggle of women of a race it is invaluable.<sup>157</sup>

DuBois admits here that Black women’s experiences have been neglected in literature, while simultaneously describing the work as “overemphatic” and “trite.” There is a stirring curiosity among Johnson critics and scholars as to how such a derogatory review was permitted publication in Johnson’s volume. Hull speculates that perhaps any consideration from DuBois during the era, even ambivalent, was idyllic.<sup>158</sup> Still, one wonders how critiques like that of DuBois may have clouded the mission and successes of Johnson’s race poems. Even Hull declares the book as the poet’s weakest, reading “like obligatory race poetry.”<sup>159</sup> However, in the face of dismissive reviews, much of the work survives because of its representations of the lived experience of mothers of oppressed realities.

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<sup>157</sup> Johnson, *Selected Works of Georgia Douglas Johnson*, 85.

<sup>158</sup> Hull, *Color, Sex, and Poetry*, 163.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

Returning to one of Johnson's most sustaining and troubling poems helps to illuminate the poet's concern with representation. Titled "Black Woman," the work skews the identity of mother. Indeed, it is universal in its labeling. Peppered with exclamation, it tells the story of a woman who refuses pregnancy under the cloud of racism. Consider the lines of the second and final stanza of the poem:

Don't knock at my door, little child,  
I cannot let you in,  
                    You know not what a world this is  
Of cruelty and sin.  
.....  
You do not know the monster men  
Inhabiting the earth,  
Be still, be still, my precious child,  
I must not give you birth!<sup>160</sup>

Johnson's highly anthologized poem was originally titled "Motherhood" when it was published in a 1922 edition of *The Crisis*. In later publications the poem would appear newly minted as "Black Woman," as it is in *Bronze*. Orlando notes that the "dual classification underscores the inextricable link between motherhood and Black women and the problematic assumptions therein."<sup>161</sup> The title change signifies a cultural norm that flourished in Black middle class circles of the Renaissance elite who often made no distinction between woman and mother identities. As both identities – woman and mother

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<sup>160</sup> Johnson, *Selected Works of Georgia Douglas Johnson*, 119.

<sup>161</sup> Orlando, "Feminine Calibans," 91.



-- are innately gendered, it becomes increasingly necessary to read beyond the male voices of the era. Johnson's title changes, for example, evidence her keen awareness of the complexity and ironies of this dual classification as she presents a speaker who defies both race and gender expectations by rejecting motherhood.

Though not explicitly connected, the poem certainly considers Dunbar-Nelson's concerns of low birth rates in New Negro communities. But, in voicing the concerns of the "Black Woman," Johnson is operating on many levels. First, one must return to her use of punctuation in the work. She is clearly emphatic about her decision not to give birth. The repeated use of the exclamation ushers away notions of an apologetic tone, giving the speaker visibility, authority and determination. The tension builds momentum as readers approach the second stanza. While the speaker explains her logic for not wanting to give birth, the child's repeated plea, a knock that comes "time and time again" is met with a destabilizing abruptness. Johnson's technique is striking here: the conversation is crafted between a would-be mother and her unborn child, but the writer's message is probingly directed toward the "monster of men" and disrupting the silence of her confliction. The question soon becomes: Who are these monster men that are denying the Black woman her most intimate, heart-felt desire?

In the context of the New Negro movement, the most obvious answer regarding the source of poem's tension would be the growing population of racial supremacists. After all, artists of the era were looking for innovative ways to combat rampant lynching and the ever-growing juggernaut that would become Jim Crow. Such a targeted attack would certainly satisfy Renaissance elite, as she articulated was part of the goal in

penning *Bronze*. However, informed by Tate and Stavney's argument of double-coding in New Negro women's poetry, the reading of this poem offers new insights.

Considering the poem's title suggests the audience for whom the work is written, one wonders if the work is not gesturing toward men of her own race as well. To give credence to this interpretation, consider the historically-rooted dynamics of Black male and female relationships. In this vein, the work serves as a nod to Black women who face the often masculine charge that they should be giving birth to the next generation. Again, this speaker builds her own agency in asserting that she will not simply acquiesce to this demand without seeing some transformation in men, arguably Black and White. Johnson reminds us in this poem that despite all of the discussion of the New Negro woman's obligation to racial uplift, the decision to give birth is ultimately hers and hers alone. The poem presents both resistance to oversimplified heteronormative ideology and an unexpected acknowledgment of personal empowerment.

Of course, not all of the maternal poems in Johnson's *Bronze* explore models of resistance. One of the most revered gifts of motherhood is the physical and symbolic creation of a new generation and all the hope that this act entails. Johnson depicts this conception in her short poem "Utopia":

God grant you wider vision, clearer skies, my son,  
With morning's rosy kisses on your brow;  
May your wild yearnings know repose,  
And storm-clouds break to smiles  
As you sweep on with spreading wings  
Unto a waiting sunset!<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Johnson, *Selected Works of Georgia Douglas Johnson*, 125.

Again, the sestet specifically represents the relationship between a mother and son. Admittedly, the work could reflect her lived experiences as mother. However, much could be garnered from the poem's gendered implications when it is read within the context of race. The power dynamic in mother-to-son relationship is shifted to the female entity. Still, this speaker appears to be passing the symbolic torch to the male child as it is he who is equipped with "spreading wings" that will help him make it to the "waiting sunset." In this regard, implicit in the speaker's prayers for the young male child is commentary about the momentum of the current movement. Inherent in this prayer is a hope for "wider" vision and for restraint.

The work also reflects the gender culture of sacrifice as this *everymother* speaker begrudgingly accepts the current tumultuous "storm cloud" conditioning of her life under the promise of a beautiful tomorrow. In its compelling use of imagery, the writer uses beauty to confront and reject hate. Wall explains that a common, underappreciated technique for resisting racism in the women's poetry of the era was to showcase her ability to create beautiful images from an ugly reality.<sup>163</sup> Reading the work removed from the pressing literary dicta of the moment certainly contributes to the validity of such an aesthetic.

Explorations of a Black gendered aesthetic in Renaissance poetry provide fertile ground for more inclusive discussions of Black literature. Nearly a century later, readers now have an opportunity to explore shadowed, female Harlem Renaissance poets and

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<sup>163</sup> Cheryl Wall, "Poets and Versifiers, Singers and Signifiers: Women of the Renaissance," in *Women, the Arts, and the 1920s in Paris and New York*, Ed. Kenneth W. Wheeler and Virginia Lee Lussier, 74-98 (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1982), 15.

writers like Johnson with wider, more amplified lenses. An intersectional analysis of the Renaissance woman's representational contribution of motherhood not only gives voice to a silenced aspect of movement, but it also offers insights into the ongoing challenge of defining the role of motherhood in Black culture. In spite of literary traditions to the contrary, positioning motherhood in the center of their New Negro women's poetry criticism opens the discussion of their contribution and strengthens the trajectory of our understanding of this intersectional movement.

## CHAPTER 5

“A flower blooming in the prison yard”

### Love, Sexuality and Respectability in Harlem Renaissance Women’s Poetry

“Obviously, no conclave of cultural cardinals establishes a literary canon, but for all that it exercises substantial influence. For it encodes a set of social norms and values; and these by virtue of its cultural standing, it helps endow with force and continuity. Thus, although we cannot ascribe to a literary canon the decline in attention to the concerns of women in the 1920s, the progressive exclusion of literary works by women from the canon suggest that such concerns were of lesser value than those inscribed in canonical books and authors. The literary canon is, in short, a means by which culture validates social power.” Paul Lauter<sup>164</sup>

“For as we begin to recognize our deepest feelings, we begin to give up, of necessity, being satisfied with suffering and self-negation, and with the numbness which so often seems like their only alternative in our society. Our acts against oppression become integral with self, motivated and empowered from within.” Audre Lorde<sup>165</sup>

#### Secret

I shall make a song like your hair...  
Gold-woven with shadows green-tinged.  
And I shall play with my song  
As my fingers might play with your hair.  
Deep in my heart  
I shall play with my song of you,  
*Gently...*  
I shall laugh  
At its sensitive lustre...

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<sup>164</sup>.Paul Lauter, “Race and Gender in the Shaping of the American Literary Canon: A Case Study from the Twenties,” in *The Harlem Renaissance 1920-1940: Analysis and Assessment, 1980-1994*, ed. Cary D. Wintz (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996), 103.

<sup>165</sup> Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: The Crossing Press, 1984), 58.

I shall wrap my song in a blanket,  
Blue like your eyes are blue  
With tiny shots of silver.  
I shall wrap it caressingly,  
*Tenderly...*  
I shall sing a lullaby  
To the song I have made  
Of your hair and eyes...  
And you will never know  
That deep in my heart  
I shelter a song of you  
*Secretly.*<sup>166</sup>

Harlem Renaissance women's poetry offers a profound contribution to Intersectionality studies via its overshadowed contribution to both gender and queer cultural history. As Paul Lauter points out above, the systematic critical practice of narrowly prescribing race as the central driving force of the New Negro movement has etched women writers and poets out of the movement's literary canon. This chapter examines how a culturally engrained aversion toward gender and sexuality in Renaissance studies affected the criticism and inclusion of women poets. Race is experienced differently via the lens gender. It is not sufficient or even reasonable to consider gender and race separately when analyzing Black women's experiences. Dorothy Roberts explains that intersectionality provides a starting point for analyzing the methods New Negro women poets used to document the points of intersection for race

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<sup>166</sup> Gwendolyn Bennett, "Secret." in *Shadowed Dreams: Women's Poetry of the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Maureen Honey (New Brunswick,: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 160.

and gender in their daily lives: “Racism and patriarchy are not two separate institutions that intersect only in the lives of Black women. They are two interrelated, mutually supporting systems of domination, and their relationships are essential to understanding the subordination of all women. Racism makes the experience of sexism different for Black women and White women. But it is not enough to note that Black women suffer from both racism and sexism, although this is true. Racism is patriarchal. Patriarchy is racist.”<sup>167</sup> The critical exclusion of women’s voices has created a default understanding of racialized realities as implicitly masculine. Moreover, critical attention to poetic works that depart from masculinist race ideology has been damaging to the survival of Renaissance women’s poetry in the canon. By reading Harlem Renaissance women poets as representational voices, we not only broaden the historical understanding of race and gender, but we also develop a more accurate literary history.

Gwendolyn Bennett’s free verse poem “Secret” is certainly a departure from conventional Romantic forms – perhaps marking a departure from conventional thought. The work exemplifies many of the techniques women poets used to conflate race and sexuality. Namely, they explored the boundaries and expectations of love and sexuality. Privacy, personal relationships, and interiority are central to women’s poetry of the movement. Women poets negotiated the terrain of love – which was subject to debate within 1920s and 1930s racial tensions -- to blur the fault lines of race and gender relations. In contrast to the surviving poetry from male writers of the era who most often wrote of race in adversarial confines, much of the women’s love poetry sought “gentle”

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<sup>167</sup> Dorothy Roberts, “Racism and Patriarchy in the Meaning of Motherhood.” in *Mothers in Law: Feminist Theory and the Legal Regulation of Motherhood*. eds. Martha Albertson Fineman and Isabel Karpin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 224.

and “tender” unions of the dividing fractions of race and gender. Here, Audre Lorde’s analysis of the erotic is useful. In using poetry as a medium, women often write love and sensual poems to help readers “recognize our deepest feelings.” Lorde explains,

This is the one reason why the erotic is so feared, and so often relegated to the bedroom alone, when it is recognized at all. For once we begin to feel deeply all the aspects of our lives, we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life-pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of. Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives. And this is a grave responsibility, projected from within each of us, not to settle for the convenient, the shoddy, the conventionally expected, nor the merely safe.<sup>168</sup>

Bennett’s “Secret” is a premier example of Lorde’s argument. The culturally-driven fear of the sexually forbidden is at the center of Bennett’s poem. What is most interesting about the work is that the speaker acknowledges the forbidden nature of interracial love in both titling and closing the poem with secrecy. Unlike the collective activism we experience in a poem like Claude McKay’s “If We Must Die,” Bennett’s poem elevates the individual and complicates our understanding of the interconnectedness of race, gender and sex.

Redefining and expanding notions of love would become a consistent response to confrontations with racism, sexism and homophobia. Decades removed from the Harlem Renaissance moment, we can better appreciate the rationale of exploring how love, and

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<sup>168</sup> Lorde, *Sister, Outsider*, 57.



disruptions of its varied boundaries – i.e. race, sex and class – can be used to break down the constrictions of hate that dictate who and how people relate to one another. This chapter examines the works of Bennett, Helene Johnson, and Mae Cowdery to evidence the strategic ways in which women poets analyzed and critiqued cultural regulations on love to theorize their own intersectionality. Writing in the late 1920s and early 1930s, these writers represent the younger guard of Harlem Renaissance women poets. They were also most vocal in their objections to the rigidity of “racial uplift,” often turning to considerations of love and sexuality to voice their disillusionment.<sup>169</sup> In their explorations of love – self-love, interracial love and same-sex love – these women poets of the New Negro movement entered the race debate on their own terms.

### ***Aversion Toward the Feminine – Critical Tradition***

The problem of Black female sexuality – that is, the problem of how to define it, contain it, promote it – would become an unrelenting challenge for Harlem Renaissance women and men alike. The auspice of racial uplift arguably birthed from the collision of the dueling forces of Victorian dicta and modernity presented new opportunities and dilemmas for New Negro women. Racial uplift’s response to racist sexual imaging that accused Black women of being promiscuous was to elevate them to virginal mothers. On the other end of the spectrum was modernity with its obsession with primitivism and its celebration of the sexual, exotic self. The ways in which intersectionality complicates our understanding of modernity has to be fully analyzed, and it is quintessential to the

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<sup>169</sup> Both Bennett and Helene Johnson appeared in the 1926 controversial printing of *Fire!!*, a small magazine designed to represent the frustration of the era’s “younger negro artist” with the sex and class based constraints of the movement.

development of Harlem Renaissance studies and the movement's fragile critical relationship to modernism. Consider Mary Loeffelholz's analysis of the relationship between Black writers of the Renaissance and modernity:

Not surprisingly, Black writers of the Renaissance themselves had mixed reactions to modernism's idealization of "the primitive." Many of them embraced African art and African-American folk culture, seeing them as potential wellsprings of both new art forms and new forms of African-American political identity; others were less sanguine about the identification of Black people with the exotic (and frequently sexualized) primitive, and promoted instead literary forms that emphasized Black writers' access to all the old and new resources of Western culture. This divide often coincided with a related (but not identical) debate between the values of modernist, self-justifying "art" versus uplifting "propaganda": propaganda might address itself to educating both Black and White readers in liberal middle-class values, but "art," its advocates said, could and should seek out vitality regardless of its potential for edification.<sup>170</sup>

Race, gender, sexuality and class certainly placed demands on the ways in which Black writers embraced modernism. Failure to acknowledge those demands has inherently led to the aversion of women's perspectives and poetic voices in the Harlem Renaissance canon. As I explore in Chapter One, Renaissance women's poetry has systematically been either forgotten or devalued, with many critics writing off their poetry as "genteel"

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<sup>170</sup> Mary Loeffelholz, *Experimental Lives: Women and Literature, 1900-1945* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992), 173.

and “raceless.”<sup>171</sup> Notably, the most damaging of critiques of New Negro women’s poetry fallaciously lumps women together under the relatively small number of known “lady poets” of the era (i.e. Georgia Douglas Johnson, Jessie Fauset, Angelina Weld Grimké). Only recently have anthologizers turned to the small magazines of the era where the vast majority of poems were published by women.

Still, the implication of descriptors like “genteel” and “raceless” smacks of critical feminine aversion.<sup>172</sup> As the history of race, racism and race formation enters this equation, relations between Black men and Black women are complicated. In Chapter Two, I analyze the methods New Negro women poets used to empower and be empowered by the maternal function. While those poets may have delved into the controversial in their critique of Black motherhood construction, they were still operating in a relatively safe space as motherhood was a topic of great import to most of the Black intelligentsia. Gender and sexuality, however, posed unique challenges for Black women writers of the era because they are aspects of identity that were not as readily supported by the tenets of racial uplift.

Conceivably, men and women experience race differently. And yet, the descriptions of New Negro women’s poetry as “raceless” and “genteel” connotatively

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>172</sup> Kelly Oliver exploration of abjection is a useful consideration here: “In patriarchal cultures, women have been reduced to the maternal function; that is to say, they have been reduced to reproduction. So, if it is necessary to abject the maternal function to become a subject, and women, maternity, and femininity all have been reduced to the maternal function, then within patriarchy, women, maternity, and femininity are all abjected along with the maternal function. This misplaced abjection is one way to account for women's oppression and degradation within patriarchal cultures. Kelly Oliver, “Julia Kristeva,” *Center for Digital Discourse and Culture at Virginia Tech University*, 1999, <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/feminism/Kristeva.html>.

accuse the poets of committing unacceptable creative departures from the Renaissance's core value of race – this interpreted departure has led to the dismissal of women poets from the canon. Cheryl Wall argues that negative sexual imaging of Black womanhood fostered hyper-conservatism in New Negro women's poetry:

The whore image was most vicious because it was the most difficult to defend oneself against; its victims conformed to no easily distinguishable physical type. It was fairly easy to know who was not a mulatto even if it was difficult to say for sure who was. In a society reluctant to recognize sexuality in most women, Black women were burdened with an almost exclusively sexual identity. Part of the conservatism found in the writings of the poets of the period reflects a determination not to conform in the slightest manner to the hateful stereotypes. Certain subjects, particularly sex, were taboo and the language was mostly genteel.<sup>173</sup>

Wall's discussion is proffered to us as more of an explanation than a defense of "inferior verse."<sup>174</sup> This is what we know as it pertains to literary criticism of the Harlem Renaissance women's poetry: gentility fails and plain spoken language succeeds; conventional verse fails and avant-garde "jazz" verse succeeds; private, domestic sphere fails and public, outspoken works succeed. In tracing much of the literary response to Renaissance era poetry, the degree to which a writer chose to implement connotatively

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<sup>173</sup> Cheryl Wall, "Poets and Versifiers, Singers and Signifiers: Women of the Renaissance," in *Women, the Arts, and the 1920s in Paris and New York*, ed. Kenneth W. Wheeler and Virginia Lee Lussier (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1982), 76.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

feminine elements – such as gentility, convention and domesticity – is relational to his or her subsequent critical reception.<sup>175</sup>

As evidenced in Bennett's poem, many of the women poets taking on matters of sexuality did so under the cloud of secrecy. The irony of their work lies in this perception of secrecy because the mere publication of the poem unveils (to borrow from a racial uplift conceit) what was once forbidden. In turn, these poets meet their readers at the shared acknowledgment that the subject of sexuality is forbidden, if not dangerous, territory before opening the discussion for review. By conflating race and sex via intimacy, "Secret" moves beyond race and disrupts the binary in revolutionary ways. This poem explores the very nature of desire. We learn at the conclusion of the poem that the secret longing of the speaker will "never" be revealed to the subject. But the truth is that the speaker's feelings for the subject are shared with the reader, making us confront our own desires – desires for touch, for love, for what we want, and, perhaps for what we do not want. It is a poem that announces that politics are no match for human sexuality, and "secretly" readers must acknowledge that truth.

The poem becomes a site of transformation from what is suppressed to what is revealed and explored. To accomplish this unveiling, women poets often rely on the conflation of race gender, and sexual images. For instance, references to "darkness" and "night" frequently appear in Renaissance women's sexual poetry. The motifs and symbols of Blackness are prevalent in much of Harlem Renaissance literature written by

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<sup>175</sup> I include this discussion here as a means to both acknowledge and name a pattern that has suppressed the memory of Harlem Renaissance women poets, but, more importantly, to support the call for a new critical tradition. Certainly, informed close readings of women's renaissance poetry reveal how women writers approached both race and sexuality in a nuanced, gender-informed manner.

both men and women. In employing strategies of inversion, writers privilege poetic associations with Blackness to reject negative race imaging. Thus, privileging Blackness becomes a strategy to usurp White supremacist ideology. This aesthetic is well employed in Anne Spencer's "White Things" and in Claude McKay's "Outcast." It is a founding premise of Harlem Renaissance arts and letters.

However, where many women poets excel is in their efforts to transfer race-related rhetoric, ideology and images into sexuality and gender analysis and exploration. Another Bennett poem interrogates the relationship between race ideology and sexuality. She employs a more tightly-knit lyricism in octave titled "Street Lamps in Early Spring." Bennett's poem personifies "Night" as woman, which engages in the ideology of movement that identifies Blackness of beautiful:

Night wears a garment  
All velvet soft, all violet blue...  
And over her face she draws a veil  
As shimmering fine as floating dew...  
And here and there  
In the Black of her hair  
The subtle hands of Night  
Move slowly with their gem-starred light.<sup>176</sup>

Bennett's poem was first published in *Opportunity* in 1926. At the time, her implementation of the veil surely would have resonated with DuBois readers.<sup>177</sup> The veil

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<sup>176</sup> Gwendolyn Bennett. "Street Lamps in Early Spring." *Shadowed Dreams*. 224.

<sup>177</sup> W.E.B Du Bois popularized the "veil" image in his groundbreaking, 1903 treatise *The Souls of Black Folk*. This text would prove foundational to the renaissance movement, asserting double consciousness in Black culture. DuBois writes: "One ever feels his two-

symbol serves as an evolving metaphor to ruminate on what is both oppressed and empowered. The veil comments on oppression by its very existence because it is used to suppress and shy away from the dominant gaze. And yet, the bearer of the veil is empowered because she decides when to lift the veil, and it is she who determines the conditions to which she will be subjected to the gaze. DuBois made the veil conceit famous in his analysis of double consciousness in Negro life, and Bennett uses the image to reveal the multiplicity of Black women's experiences.

However, Bennett's subject is "drawing" the veil, which signals the woman subject's decision to retreat from the gaze. Steering away from the Dubois weight on the veil image for a moment, the symbol is actually gendered as it is traditionally women who wear veils. Moreover, for women, the veil is connotatively associated with either weddings or death. Renaissance women poets tend to lean on these layered associations of the veil. Certainly, Bennett's slow moving subject who is wrapped in a blue garment gestures toward melancholy. It is as if the Night character is mourning her own beauty as she both covers her face and body. The beauty of the woman subject in this poem is both celebrated and suppressed; Bennett captures the duality of the Black woman construct under the arc of racial uplift.

While Bennett's "night" poem explores the suppressed sexuality of womanhood, Helene Johnson's "Trees at Night" celebrates sexuality with a blurring of gendered images:

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ness,--an American, a Negro: two souls, two thoughts, to unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder." Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 8.

Slim sentinels  
Stretching lacy arms  
About a slumberous moon;  
Black quivering  
Silhouettes,  
Tremulous,  
Stenciled on the petal  
Of a bluebell;  
Ink spluttered  
On a robin's breast;  
The jagged rent  
Of mountains  
Reflected in a  
Stilly sleeping lake;  
Fragile pinnacles  
Of fairy castles;  
Torn webs of shadows;  
And printed 'gainst the sky—  
The trembling beauty  
Of an urgent pine.<sup>178</sup>

Trees are a common conceit for Harlem Renaissance writers as they resonate throughout American history sites of protection and terror. In revising popular Black cultural poetic images such as “night” and “trees” into the context of Black sexuality, Johnson brushes away the taboo of sexuality with both boldness and timidity. The poem is bold in its assertion of Black beauty: the trees stretch “lacy arms,” they are “stenciled on the petal of

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<sup>178</sup> Helene Johnson, *This Waiting for Love*. ed. Verner Mitchell (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 23. Johnson's poem was published in *Opportunity* in 1925.



a bluebell,” they are, in fact, “trembling beauty.” Arguably, Johnson is one of the most premiere eco-poets of her day with her ability to infuse natural imagery with race and gender content.<sup>179</sup> The poem blends masculine and feminine images, disrupting assumptions and associations of sexuality and gender. The phallic motif bookends and peppers the poem, as in “slim sentinels” and “urgent pine.” Images such as the “petals” and “sleeping lake” gesture toward women’s sexuality.

The poem’s apprehension, however, is signaled by the repeated notions of trembling, which arguably gesture toward sexual orgasm. There are three references to trembling in this very short work: “Black quivering,” “Tremulous,” “The trembling beauty.” Of the three references, the second is associated with the act of writing and is situated in the poem close to the act of stenciling and the sputtering of ink. The work leans toward meta-poeticism in its implication of the writer’s trepidation with the subject matter. But, despite the gesture toward a “trembling” hand, the writer forges on with her praise poem. In fusing nods toward self-gratification and self-expression, the speaker is exploring her own sexuality and its representation.

Notably, Johnson’s poem begins with the concept of protection. The “slim sentinels” open the poem, as if standing guard or allowing entry into this forbidden, abject territory. Images of sleep and dream are infused into the poem and reflect the unconscious, suppressed nature of sexuality. And, it is this dreamscape that our speaker intimates needs protecting. Johnson’s depictions of protection are often themselves

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<sup>179</sup> Katherine Lynes offers a compelling review of Helene Johnson’s use of eco-poetics as a site for transformation “from a place from which she is or has been excluded to in which she has been reviled to an imagined safer place.” Lynes, “Sprung from American Soil’: The ‘Nature’ of Africa in the Poetry of Helene Johnson,” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 16, no. 3 (2009): 525-549, doi:435782F8239917EED950.

vulnerable. The sentinels, for instance, have “lacy” arms. They are “quivering silhouettes.” The trees are described as “fragile pinnacles” with “torn webs.” The poem is punctuated in urgency, signaling that the pine, too, is experiences desires and need. Ultimately, Johnson’s repeated mention of the vulnerability of these “protectors” implicates the sentinels of Black sexuality as vulnerable. The poem is brilliantly layered, arguing that it is the balance of boldness and vulnerability, masculinity and femininity that creates beauty. In the end, the work begs the question: should (or, rather can) Black sexuality remain hidden?

In the remaining sections of this chapter, I argue that the women poets of this study responded to this question with a resounding “no.” Thus, it is important at this juncture to make the distinction between references to gender and to sexuality, as the two are often fused in Renaissance discussions. Within the last decade alone, for example, queer studies scholars have pointed toward the Harlem Renaissance for insights into the relationship between race and homosexuality in American culture. What is necessary to understand in considering queer culture’s contribution to the movement is this: however integral queer culture may have been to the progression of the Renaissance, it had very little impact in disrupting the gender norms that were systematic of patriarchal conditioning. While responses toward homosexuality with Harlem’s urban community certainly varied, homophobia and class elitism – which helped to foster a heteronormative narrative of the era – have prevailed through the period’s literature and subsequent scholarship. A.B. Christa Schwarz explains:

In Harlem, as in White America, the general trend of a relaxation of rules and morals clashed with forces attempting to curb the excesses of modernity and uphold a traditional value system. Changes brought about by modernity – with urbanization at the center of criticism and attacks – were regarded as reasons for what was perceived as a threatening decline in morality, particularly in the field of sexuality. Black middle-class Americans reacted to changes in very much the same way as their White counterparts, or, as seems to have been the case, even more vigorously, as at least parts of the White middle class adopted less stringent views on morality.<sup>180</sup>

Renaissance leaders like Locke, a self-identified gay man who also embodied middle class identity, prioritized racial uplift ideology despite its inherent contribution to sexual and gender oppression. Hull argues that Locke “behaved misogynistically,” making vocal his negative attitude toward feminism. With few exceptions, Hull asserts that Locke’s allegiance was toward young males to whom he was attracted.<sup>181</sup> Locke’s leadership role and practices reflected “the customary male circles of power and friendship” that informed how the movement was defined and later studied.<sup>182</sup>

It is difficult to reconcile the presence of homophobia in the writing culture of Renaissance. Same-sex love and attraction was certainly evident in Renaissance circles.

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<sup>180</sup> A.B. Christa Schwarz, *Gay Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 15.

<sup>181</sup> Gloria T. Hull, *Color, Sex, and Poetry: Three Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 8.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

But the contradiction of abjection and celebration is one of the very byproducts of intersectional lived realities. The aversion for feminine gender qualities is the fundamental element of race formation in America, argues Sally Kitch. Womanhood has been culturally associated with weakness, vulnerability, and inferiority. This premise is the source of women's movements that have struggled to dispel this presumption. Kitch argues that "gender provided organizing principles" of race ideology.<sup>183</sup> She explains:

[M]any assumptions about the ephemeral characteristic of race, particularly in the U.S., have been consistently associated with equally suspect biological claims and assumptions about gender—from behavior, to personality, to human value. These claims and assumptions constitute *gender ideology* and include prescriptions for heterosexual sex and reproduction, mandates for different male and female roles and personalities, judgments about men's superiority and dominance over women, and standards of sexual normalcy and deviance. ... [G]ender has been racialized in the production of racial categories and hierarchies in the U.S. by providing evidence that gender prescriptions, stereotypes, and expectations haunted the process of racial formation like a ghost, as political, religious, scientific, and popular discourses shaped *American racial ideology*.<sup>184</sup>

Kitch's argument is useful in understanding how gender aversion became an underlying aspect of racial uplift. For an oppressed culture to fight racism, Renaissance leaders felt that race had to appear strong, impenetrable, and united – the antithesis of femininity. As

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<sup>183</sup> Sally Kitch, *Specter of Sex: Gendered Foundations of Racial Formation in the United States* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), 4.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*

the movement's motivation is rooted in asserting authority in constructing one's own identity, the preferred cultural associations with masculinity – strength, survival, protection, leadership – reigned. Deborah McDowell further explains: “While the male gazes are fixed on the texts of Black women in which they seek to find idealized reflections of themselves, they fail to see the highest mountain, the meta-structure who has the naming power and in whose name and interests that power is secured. It is this looming, distant structure that orchestrates and dominates this literary battle royal, this already fixed match between Black men and Black women.”<sup>185</sup> As Lauter, too, points out, the “battle royal” between the sexes is implicated in the gender imbalance of representation in the Harlem Renaissance's literary history. Literature about women that did not privilege masculinist qualities was often subject to negative criticism, if any, and was too often pushed to the periphery of the movement. Racial uplift, in its response to racial sexism, essentially stamps out gender matters. Women poets of the era, however, methodologically used love and sexuality, aspects of humanity that inherently unite opposing minds and bodies and bring together the splintering elements of their lived realities. Indeed, women poets of the era addressed oppressive sexual imaging attacks from both sides of the racial binary.

### ***Confronting Sexualized Imaging in Black Woman***

Though the tumultuous atmosphere of the era merited a heightened obligation to race matters, the male-dominated movement offered limited attention to a burgeoning

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<sup>185</sup> Deborah McDowell, “Reading Family Matters.” *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women*, ed. Cheryl Wall (New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1989), 96.

women's movement. Accordingly, the limited consideration of issues unique to Black womanhood, such as the prevalence of racist sociological imaging that branded Black women as oversexed and promiscuous, were generically responded to by situating Black women within a racialized version of the cult of true womanhood. Reasons for gender exclusion from the movement's pursuit of racial equality are certainly speculative. Historical patterns point toward aversion, sexism, and fear that marking the distinction between race and gendered oppression would hinder the pressing need for racial solidarity in the face of overwhelming racial injustice.

Problems concomitant to Black womanhood, sexualized imaging in particular, were only peripherally treated or excessively tabooed by both the New Negro and Women's movements. The New Negro Woman's concerns were often seen as distractions for these respective causes. Because of the division that existed for Black women within both movements, they "were more inclined to formulate their own concepts of the relationship between race and gender."<sup>186</sup> Consequently, issues related to the sexualized imaging in Black womanhood, and the physical and psychological attacks against women stemming from them, are "the most underanalyzed aspects of African American history."<sup>187</sup> However, analysis of these intersectional issues dwells in the poetry of the New Negro woman. Additionally, deeper exploration of the struggles related to Black female sexual imaging, through the lens of Renaissance female poets,

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<sup>186</sup> Barbara Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1985), 121.

<sup>187</sup> Johnnetta Cole and Beverly Guy Sheftall. *Gender Talk: The Struggle for Women's Equality in African American Communities* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003), 130.

offers greater insight into an often overlooked, but deeply fundamental, aspect of race theory.

One poet that repeatedly challenges the fixed voice of racial uplift is Helene Johnson. Her poetry not only places sexual taboos in the center of discussion, but it also celebrates the process of self-discovery and the uncertainty of resolution of cultural dissidence. Her poem, “My Race,” first published in *Opportunity* in 1925, captures the sexual vulnerability buried in 1920s Black culture:

Ah my race,  
Hungry race,  
Throbbing and young –  
Ah, my race,  
Wonder race,  
Sobbing with song –  
Ah, my race,  
Laughing race,  
Careless in mirth –  
Ah, my veiled race  
Unformed race,  
Fumbling in birth.<sup>188</sup>

Johnson’s poem points toward the blues tradition with its structured syllabic form and tercet inspired rhyme scheme. The piece is unapologetic in its awareness of the youthful fragility of a culture that she describes as “unformed.” The repetition of the word “race” certainly situates the work well into the spirit of the Harlem Renaissance moment. The “veiled” adjective solidifies that relationship, making it almost impossible to reject this work as a period piece. But, as “race” appears in the short, list poem eight times, the

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<sup>188</sup> Helene Johnson, *This Waiting for Love*, 24.

reader is also beckoned to consider the word “race,” in the context of competition. In this context, it is conceivable to think of racial uplift as a competitively driven ideology. The notion of “uplifting” an entire culture forward via the ingenuity of a “talented tenth” arguably implicates the historic American struggle with racial supremacy. In developing a rhetoric that positions one culture against another in the race toward superiority, a rhetoric that seems to mimic the middle-class ideology of the adversary, how could the race not “fumble?”

Johnson’s manipulation of the veil brings this critique of racial uplift to the surface. In most Renaissance poems, the subject controls the veil, as in Bennett’s “Street Lamps in Early Spring.” Again, the Renaissance conceit evokes the Duboisian concept of double consciousness; the veil is an empowering metaphor to explore what is revealed to and concealed from White America. Johnson twists the metaphor, giving it an oppressive quality. In this poem, “the race” is physically veiled. The culture is once again acted upon by being veiled. The reader is now forced to look at the veil in another way. Instead of thinking of the veil as means to inhibit the gaze of dominant culture, we are led to consider how the veil obstructs view. Ultimately, the veil metaphor illuminates aspects of racial uplift as self-destructive.

Johnson balances her critique with a poetic acuity. The race is young, barely adolescent in this poem. By associating culture with youth, the movement is allowed its mistakes. And while this poem does not offer explicit solutions, it complicates the belief that any solution to oppression will be simple or comprehensive. This includes the much heralded drive toward “racial uplift.” In this respect, there is certainly a gesture toward



the sexual with descriptors such as “Hungry” and “Throbbing,” which are layered in connotation, especially in their physical proximity to the word “young.” But, again, Johnson captures the internal angst and struggle the movement had in constructing its own identity. This is a poem of its era and a poem that criticizes its era. This is a poem that celebrates its era. It is, indeed, the Harlem Renaissance itself.

Johnson is most effective in her poetic analysis of the racial uplift ideology in her repeated challenge to its classed-based foundation. As I discuss in Chapter One, women poets are too often criticized for a perceived failure to acknowledge the voices and concerns of working women. To support this claim, scholars cite a failure to use informal language, a dependency on outdated poetic forms, and a reservation to write about sexuality. For a debatably “authentic” representation of period Black womanhood, scholars like Wall and Christian have directed students of the movement away from the literary women to the blueswomen. Christian echoes this process in the following:

[Black women poets] were not an integral part of the literary movement itself as much as they were individual talents who wrote conventional verse. And though they sometimes wrote specifically as women, it was primarily to idealize the Black women whose image was under attack in the general society. It might be said that the genuine poetry of the Black women appeared not in literature but in the lyrics of blues singers like Bessie Smith. Female blues singers were extremely popular during this period and wrote about the Black woman’s autonomy and vulnerability, sexuality and spirituality. Perhaps because the blues was seen as “race music” and catered to a Black audience, Black women were

better able to articulate themselves as individuals and as part of a racial group in that art form.”<sup>189</sup>

Unfortunately, the myth of “authenticity” which determines literary women have little to offer to our understanding of the movement survives to deter burgeoning scholars from finding value in their poetics. Johnson’s poetry, however, evidences an immediate contradiction to the characterization the so-called Renaissance “lady poet.” Her poems are often laced in colloquialisms and Black vernacular.

Her most successful works in this regard are “Poem” and “Bottled.” Many of her Renaissance era poems explicitly celebrate sexuality. In “Invocation,” she proclaims that she would like to be thought of as a sexual being, even in death:

Let me be buried in the rain  
In a deep, dripping wood,  
Under the warm wet breast of Earth  
Where once a gnarled tree stood.  
And paint a picture on my tomb  
With dirt and a piece of bough  
Of a girl and a boy beneath a round ripe moon  
Eating of love with an eager spoon  
And vowing an eager vow.  
And do not keep my plot mowed smooth  
And clean as a spinster’s bed,  
But let the weed, the flower, the tree,  
Riotous, rampant, wild and free  
Grow high above my head.<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism*, 22.

Her interpretation of the modern sonnet is indicative of modernity's revision of conventional forms. Modern poets like Edna St. Vincent Millay, e.e. cummings, and Claude McKay were especially interested experimenting with the sonnet. The form is arguably one of the most recognizable structures in poetry; giving it new purpose and function is indicative of the modernistic drive to offer new interpretations of stale images and forms. Helene Johnson is engaging in this objective.

The tone of "Invocation" is overwhelmingly sensual, complete with the rain, dripping wood, and a "girl and a boy beneath a round ripe moon." Where this poem is most poignant in its critique of the sexual suppression inherent in racial uplift is its willingness to remove the secrecy from sexuality. This poem's speaker wants to make her sexuality public and permanently visual. She wants it etched on her tombstone; she wants passersby to see the "rampant" and "free" reality of her sexuality. She does not want it maintained or cleaned as is the service of racial uplift. This poem rejects the race inspired restrictions on sexuality. The poem carves a new space for women to explore sexuality, even if that exploration occurs after her death and the death of the movement. Johnson is also astute in acknowledging that class should not regulate sexual relationships. Her short poem "Futility" disrupts the relationship between class and love:

It is silly—  
This waiting for love  
In a parlor  
When love is singing up and down the alley  
Without a collar.<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> Helene Johnson, *This Waiting for Love*, 46.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

Johnson strips away the esteem of the parlor to privilege the working class space as the locale for love. In fact, as the title of the poem asserts, waiting for love – which is open to an interpretation of love of the self or love of the other – in the pristine parlor room is futile. The would-be seeker of love must leave a structured and classed room and get into the world if they are to have any chance of finding love.

Critiquing the ideology of racial uplift is no easy feat, even for writers in our contemporary moment. Renaissance poets were writing in volatile times, where racist sexual imaging had led to the torture and murder of Black bodies. The racist propaganda that characterized Black men as predatory and Black women as promiscuous was used to inspire and justify rape and lynching. On its face, racial uplift is a rational attempt to make the irrational perpetrators of hate crimes connect to a shared humanity of the groups they oppress. Challenging uplift posed an especially difficult task for Black women who suffered from a peculiar relationship with sexuality. Joy James explains acute relationship among women’s sexuality, race and class: “Racially subordinate women are “sexual primitives” and racially privileged women are “sexually civilized” in a society where race, class and sexual orientation—and secondarily individualized behavior—still largely determine whether a woman (who so desires) can pass as a “lady.” Lesbians, prostitutes, “nonWhites,” prisoners, and poor women are categorically excluded from the caste of civilized sexual beings and chimerical rewards of being ladylike—protection from social ridicule and sexual abuse.”<sup>192</sup> Labeling Black women as promiscuous

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<sup>192</sup> Joy James, *Shadowboxing: Representations of Black Feminist Politics* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 136.

reaches back through slavery and the Middle Passage.<sup>193</sup> By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, economic prosperity extending from slavery had allowed White Americans to stray from the misogynistic doctrine of the first colonizers.

Conversely, Black women were considered the antithesis of White women and were cursed prostitutes and harlots. As Bernadette Brooten explains, “The sexual stereotype of enslaved women as licentious extends far back into history; modern racism extended it to all Black women and also used the myth of Black hypersexuality as a reason to enslave Black people.”<sup>194</sup> Accordingly, White male slave owners, armed with this history and racist, sexist stereotypes about Black women, could justify (if not explain) the sexual accosting of female slaves under their command. Enslaved women were often offered bribes to passively accept sexual exploitation, but an inference of choice would be a gross misunderstanding. Black women who refused to submit passively to rape were denying the slave owner’s right to their persons and were brutally punished.<sup>195</sup> Scholar and activist Angela Davis agrees that it was this relationship

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<sup>193</sup> Evidence is overwhelming that the stigma of overdeveloped sensuality was forced on womanhood at the nation’s birth, long before the first slaves arrived in Jamestown. Early American colonist would turn to fundamentalist Christian teachings that depicted woman as sexual temptress whose sole purpose was to lead mankind into degradation and depravity. Numerous laws were enacted to repress sexual expression and feelings out of fear that such thought would lead to eternal damnation. The Salem Witchcraft trials serve as an extreme example of the persecution of women. bell hooks 30, *Ain’t I a Woman*. Boston: South End Press, 1982, 30.

<sup>194</sup> Bernadette J .Brooten, *Beyond Slavery: Overcoming its Religious and Sexual Legacies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), <<http://lib.myilibrary.com?ID=299303>>, 12.

<sup>195</sup> Houston Baker contends that this debate of sexuality can be sourced to the Middle Passage where the distinction in bondage between men and women has historically been overlooked. While men were ironed together in the belly of ships, the women made the journey in quarter decks. The purpose of this distinction, Baker argues, is for “access,”

between Black women and the White male patriarchal system that has haunted the lives of Blacks, generally, and of Black females in particular: “Indeed, one of the salient historical features of racism has been the assumption that White men – primarily those who are economically powerful – possess an incontestable right of access to Black women’s bodies. Slavery relied as much on routine sexual abuse as on the whip and the lash.”<sup>196</sup>

Surely, New Negro women were not immune to the effects of this sexualized stigma, as it is a relationship that continually appears in their poetry. One poem within this context is “Nordic,” by Lillian Byrnes. The poem’s targeted title reflects Nordic theory, a concept rooted in the scientific racism of eugenics that proposed race could be viewed via one’s physical traits. Widely influential books like *The Passing of the Great Race*, by American eugenicist Madison Grant, endorse “Nordic superiority” and promote extremist ideas like racial purity. Byrnes uses scathing sarcasm and extended metaphor in her analysis of Black women’s predicament under the weight of Nordic theory. Consider the opening stanza from “Nordic”:

He takes his love much as he takes his wine;  
He does not sip or taste,

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which translates to “rape.” Baker writes: If the African man in coffinlike [sic] holes felt the chafing of ‘iron’ and the nauseating ship’s roll as domination by powerful men who could produce ‘iron monsters,’ then African women must have experienced a quite different and unmediated relationship to the slave trader’s technology. ... If in the shackled space below deck, deep groans betokened the death of mercy and love, then on the open and unshackled decks screams signified the brutal demise of inviolate sexuality. Baker, *Workings of the Spirit: The Poetics of Afro-American Women’s Writing* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 125.

<sup>196</sup> Angela Davis, *The Angela Y. Davis Reader*. ed. Joy James. (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1998), 130.

Or gaze upon its long imprisoned sunshine—  
He gulps.  
Men must perforce get drunk;  
It is written somewhere.

And having been drunk,  
He curses the wine for being red,  
The love for being passion,  
Ensnaring him.

Sober and repentant and miserable,  
He makes resolutions against wine and love,  
So that when he indulges in either,  
He can fall—  
As people ought who so indulge;  
And feel as people ought  
About it afterward.

Then he is Puritan.

Or he is lusty, male, resplendent,  
Knowing that he should sin  
On general principles.  
He tosses away the empty glass  
Insolently;  
Satiated and comfortable,  
He consigns the harlot, love,

To her fixed domain of the senses—

Then his is the “Great Blond Beast.”<sup>197</sup>

Byrnes announces the poem’s conceit in the first line by connecting love and wine. The emphasis on the cursed color of the wine suggests that the symbol is a metaphorical representation of the Black female body as it is dark, alluring, feminine and “long imprisoned.” The active verb of the line sets the tone and direction for the work. The word “takes” is heavily weighted with historical context as it connotes elements of violence and thievery without a moment of consideration for what is being consumed. Comparatively, the scenario mirrors the condition of the slave woman who lived under the constant threat of sexual attack. Her victimization was never considered as she was not protected spiritually or judiciously.

Despite the victimization, the poem’s speaker projects a tone that is declarative and defiant. Notably, the speaker’s discussion of the Nordic is written in short, simple sentences. Adjectives are sparse, making them that much more powerful. The charged “long imprisoned,” for example, is the only concrete adjective used in the first stanza and serves to anchor the stanza. The reader is left to ponder the “perforce” situation of the wine’s existence: to be imprisoned or to be taken. Byrnes offers commentary on the condition of Black womanhood in a raced America. The final sentence of the stanza is vague in the poem’s reality, but revealing in its historical context as it harkens back to works like that of the aforementioned Grant text that strives to justify notions of “racial superiority.” “It is written somewhere,” acknowledges Nordic theory, and simultaneously discredits its ethos with the ambivalent “somewhere.”

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<sup>197</sup>Lillian Byrnes, “Nordic,” In *Shadowed Dreams*, ed. Maureen Honey, 85.



The following three stanzas analyze the Nordic's response to his own actions. The proclaimed "Puritan" finds himself in a paradox that reverberates through turn of the century race relations and ideologies. While he experiences moments of guilt for his compulsion, he rejects any notion of accountability. The second stanza – one long, weighted sentence – exemplifies this argument: "And having been drunk,/ He curses the wine for being red,/ The love for being passion,/ Ensnaring him." While the Nordic performs all the action in the poem, taking the wine by force, he sees himself as victimized, "ensnared" by the wine's charm. The lines capture a sentiment often explored by puritanical fundamentalist teachings that contend that woman, and Black woman in particular, is an oversexed temptress leading man to evil. Byrnes references the influence of these teachings in the third stanza with: "Sober and repentant and miserable,/ He makes resolutions against wine and love." Thus, sexist doctrines, and the skewing of the concept of repentance, allows for racist tormentors to believe that Black women were not blameless participants in the raping and pillaging of their bodies. The poem's only use of color ripples throughout the work and thus garners attention through association. Again, the wine is literally cursed for being the color red. Paradoxically, while the Nordic detests the color, he is drawn to it with an innate desire to consume it. The speaker's choice of color, too, is compelling. The red, which punctuates the line, elicits visual relationships on the page with the words "love" and "passion." The color's connotative power also associates with blood, virginity, danger and death.

The final stanza rests on the Nordic's acceptance of his ailment: "Knowing that he should sin/ On general principles. He tosses away the empty glass/ Insolently." The

sin is not only acknowledged, it is embraced. The Nordic concedes that the sin is an innate, inescapable part of his nature. It should and will be forgiven. Meanwhile, the wine's fate is not so fortunate. The emptied glass is literally and figuratively tossed away with the same insolent consideration that it was consumed. Contextual meaning usurps the final lines of the poem: "He consigns the harlot, love,/ To her fixed domain of the senses – / Then his is the "Great Blond Beast." Love is gendered in these lines, not only by the usage of "her," but by the infamous "harlot." The juxtaposition of the wine's scathing title to the final reference of the Nordic, namely "Great Blond Beast." This is also indicative of arguments posed in Grant's *The Passing of the Great Race*, which highlights what he contends are "Nordic" features like blond hair and blue eyes.

Through the use of sarcasm in the poem, tormenter becomes tormented, victim becomes empowered. Thus, Byrnes embodies a Renaissance truth, the use of art as a strategy to break free from oppression. Maureen Honey explores the relationship of the New Negro writer to politics: "The Renaissance generation, therefore, conceived of itself as carrying on the struggle through attaining the highest possible level of literary accomplishment and surpassing the boundaries a racist society tried to impose. Writers saw no contradiction between social activism and the production of nonracial literature because the two were fused in their minds: artistic achievement moved the race upward."<sup>198</sup> To that end, the "Nordic" functions technically, aesthetically and philosophically. Byrnes not only accesses enhanced levels of poetic technique in her use

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<sup>198</sup> Maureen Honey, "Introduction." in *Shadowed Dreams: Women's Poetry of the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Maureen Honey (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 5.

of symbolism and paradox, but she also utilizes aesthetics that were highly prevalent in the Renaissance.

The practice of coding and masking is ever-present in the works of both female and male poets of the Renaissance. However, Anne Stavney argues that an additional level of coding was required by women writers of the era if they were going to be allowed to contribute to a very male-dominated movement. Stavney says that one cannot consider poetry of the New Negro Woman without first factoring the Black male response to “persistent attacks on Black women’s morality and sexual conduct.”<sup>199</sup> Christian explains the movement’s commitment to improving Black female imaging in this way: “By the period of the Harlem Renaissance (1917 – 1929), many Blacks felt pressured to demonstrate that Black women were as good as White women – that is, that they would be middle-class White ladies if it were not for racism. Only if such an idea was supported, many asserted, would the race be respected.”<sup>200</sup> Thus, poetic treatment of tabooed topics like Black female sexuality by the women poets was filtered through seemingly safe and broad metaphors like Brynes’ “wine.”

Another poem that explores the lived reality of negative sexual imaging is “Secret,” by Mary Jenness:

O you that strike will never flinch  
From hearts you cannot feel.  
Though I that turn the cheek may hide  
A wound that does not heal.

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<sup>199</sup> Anne Stavney, ““Mothers of Tomorrow,” 534.

<sup>200</sup> Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism*, 121.

Yet something in you has to die  
And something in me live—  
I thank you for the gift of hate  
That keeps me sensitive!<sup>201</sup>

Like Bennett's "Secret" poem, Jenness' work is housed in secrecy. In fact, that may be the single success of the poem for the reader not inspired by the work's perfect meter and rhyme. A poem driven in its rage is tempered by this obligation to secrecy and its commitment to convention. Again, like Bennett's work, the secret is revealed through the meta-service of poetry. Jenness' compact quatrains rely on this technique of poetic irony to unveil what is hidden and tabooed in Black female sexuality. Point of view solidifies a binary conversation as the poem's "you" and "I" are continually juxtaposed in adversarial positions.

Jenness' poem opens in violence. The "you," in this reading represents White America, and more specifically, the White patriarchal system. The "I" is the long suffering, yet enduring New Negro woman. Consider the opening lines of the work: "O you that strike will never flinch/ From hearts you cannot feel." The use of adjective is sparse. The language is direct and targeted. The "you" achieves power through an unabashed use of violence. Jenness critiques the tormenter's lack of empathy in these loaded lines. In a scathing blow against puritanical hypocrisy, the third line evokes scriptural truth. It is the would-be victim, not the self-righteous tormenter, who adheres to biblical doctrine: "Though I turn the cheek that may hide/ A wound that does not heal." Explicated in these lines are techniques developed by female poets of the

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<sup>201</sup> Mary Jenness, "Secret," in *Shadowed Dreams*, ed. Maureen Honey, 82

Renaissance. Anne Staveny's argument of gender coding within racial coding becomes apparent when readers view Jenness' lines through this cultural lens. A surface reading of the poem would allow the argument that Jenness is adhering to the rules of racial solidarity that drove the literary movement and voicing the oppressed condition of all Blacks, men and women alike. However, the nagging presence of "secret" and "hide" should encourage readers to dig deeper for meaning.

Considering the poem's 1928 publication, the announcement of racial injustice in art was far from hidden. In fact, writers welcomed the use of their work as a political weapon aimed at the conscience of White America. Arguably, as the movement was driven by color, Black writers had an expectation to treat these matters openly. But, most notable in the "Secret" poem is no concrete reference to race or color throughout. What is hidden in Jenness' poem, however, is more intimate and personal. The use of "I" circumvents Renaissance dicta of solidarity and reflects a private pain experienced by Black women who view sexualized imaging as "a wound that does not heal." The poem's ending stanza dwells in analysis of survival and empowerment. Though healing is not promised, change is possible through death and perseverance: "Yet something in you has to die/ And something in me has to live -/ I thank you for the gift of hate/ That keeps me sensitive!" Paradoxically, hate becomes an intimate connection between protagonist to antagonist. The "you" uses hate to foster power and domination. Tragically, the "I" recognizes the power in hate and uses it for survival and awareness, and thus becomes sensitized. The relationship becomes cyclic and the poem turns into itself as it is the hate that will not allow the wound of sexualized racism to heal.

The attacks on the character of Black women had detrimental effects on their psyche, leaving a “wound that will not heal.” History has also shown that the blows Black women’s reputation also led to physical harm, both in slavery and the years following manumission. Rapes, whippings and the lynching of Black women’s bodies were rampant during and after the slavery primarily because White privilege granted White men access to their bodies. Additionally, laws of protection were not afforded to them. Helene Johnson’s poem “Fiat Lux” dissects this pattern of racial violence against Black women’s bodies.

Her eyes had caught a bit of loveliness—  
A flower blooming in the prison yard.  
She ran to it and pressed it to her lips,  
This Godsend of land beyond the walls;  
She drank its divine beauty with her kiss—

A guard wrested the flower from her hand,  
With awful art, her humble back laid bare—  
Soft skin, and darker than a dreamless night;  
He tossed aside the burden of her hair.  
“I’ll teach you to pick flowers in this yard.  
They ain’t for niggers.” He began to flog.

Her pale palmed hands grasped the thin air in quest.  
Until, like two antalgic words, they fell,  
And whispered something to her bleeding breast.  
And she forgot the misery of her back.  
Somehow she know that God, HER God was there—  
That what was pain was but her striped flesh.

Her soul, inviolate, was havened in prayer.  
On a cross of bigotry she was crucified  
Because she was not White. And like her Father  
On the holyrood, whispered, “Forgive.”  
And in her eyes there shone a Candlemas light.  
He flung the whip into the flower bed,  
He did not even note that she was dead.<sup>202</sup>

Published first in *The Messenger* in 1926, Fiat Lux translates from the Latin as “Let there be light.” Given the religious connotations in the poem and the violence of its narrative, the title of the piece can easily be read as a call for secularized enlightenment. But, the fact that spirituality, even the pulling forth of “HER God,” was not enough to save the subject from her brutal and senseless death invites a more nuanced reading of the title. “Let there be light” could be a plea for enlightenment. In this reading, the burden of transformation is taken out of religiosity. Humankind is being held accountable.

The first two stanzas of the poem set the stage for a debate about who owns beauty and who has access to it. Sexual undercurrents throughout the poem: the flower pressed against the lips, the nakedness of the woman, the phallic symbol of the whip, the open ending of the poem that suggests continued abuse against the woman’s body. The setting of the poem is a prison. Prisons are inherently associated with punishment, detainment centers for individuals who committed societal infractions. As an institution, prisons have power. They dictate who is kept in and who is kept out, and who is allowed in and who is allowed out. In the space of Johnson’s poem, it is actually beauty being

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<sup>202</sup> Helene Johnson, *This Waiting for Love*, 29

held captive. The White guard, arguably a symbol of White power, asserts himself as able to decide who can “pick flowers from this yard.”

The likening of the murdered Black woman to the crucified Jesus illuminates the hypocrisy and embodied in the God-fearing racist. This crucified woman makes a distinction between the religiosity that informs racist patriarchal thinking and the spirituality that “saves” her through death. There is a nuanced distinction between the last words of the woman and the famous last words of the Christ. Where the original “Father” famously said “Forgive them, they know not what they do,” the crucified woman here stops at “Forgive.” Johnson is clearly saying something in what is not being said. While the murderers of Christ did not understand the nature of their injustice, this woman’s killer is all too aware. And yet, with the heart of Jesus, the woman whispers “forgive” regardless of the fact that her attacker may or may not understand the ramifications of his actions.

Johnson’s poem uncovers truths of race and gender politics of her day. The years after emancipation unfurled countless attacks on Black women’s character and person. The White patriarchal system, unwilling to relinquish power or view Blacks as equal, was even more determined to assert their control through unjust laws and physical and sexual attacks. Thus, New Negro writers had a vested interest in addressing this perception for reasons extending from psychological and physical protection and healing. Poetry was the preferred form for most Black female writers of the era as it was widely published. As I explore in Chapter Two, a common trope used in Renaissance literature to fight this sexualized stereotype is that of motherhood. Male leaders of the movement led the



charge, arguing that a belief in the sanctity of motherhood was shared with their White contemporaries. Prompted by a desire to defend Black women, male writers of the Renaissance often catered to an idealized image of Black womanhood as being the “moral” mother.<sup>203</sup> Hence, male leaders desexualized the construct of Black womanhood as a response to stereotypes that depicted Black women as oversexed.

While many New Negro women writers supported this effort, their expressions were not entirely congruent with a domesticated, nonsexualized version of motherhood prompted in much of the male writing of the era. As noted in the previous chapter, the virginal idealization of Black motherhood by male writers proved problematic for at least two reasons. First, many of the young, New Negro women did not want to embody the plainly dressed, unhappy woman of this image. Honey points out that “many of these poets were, in fact, single or childless. Some were lesbians, and those who were married often refused to assume domestic burdens and were social activists as well as writers.”<sup>204</sup> Second, Black women had a relationship to motherhood distinct from that of White women. On the first matter, these women were active participants in the experimental and liberated culture of the Jazz Age. They were the children of the emancipated. And while remnants of Victorian ethos still lingered, they, too, were ready to embrace change. Thus, they wore jewelry, cosmetics, and, owned their beauty, femininity and sensuality. This proved particularly pressing for Black women fighting a dual campaign that caricatured them as unattractive “mammies” whose only joy was completing arduous

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<sup>203</sup> Stavney “Mothers of Tomorrow,” 534.

<sup>204</sup> Honey, *Shadowed Dreams*, 21.

work and serving Whites. The “mammy” caricatures were used to further promote ideals of White beauty and to discourage race mixing.<sup>205</sup>

Poet Blanche Taylor Dickinson analyzes these layered elements of sexual repression and identity in “Four Walls.” The poem’s title commits to this discussion. In conjunction with the first line of the poem, it sets the stage for exploration of the sense of imprisonment and powerlessness that plagued the life of Black women. Consider the poem’s two opening stanzas in their appeal to the social mores of the era:

Four great walls have hemmed me in,  
Four strong, high walls:  
Right and Wrong,  
Shall and shan’t.

The mighty pillars tremble when  
My conscience palls  
And sings its song—  
I can, I can’t.

If for a moment Samson’s strength  
Were given me I’d shove  
Them away from where I stand;  
Free, I know I’d love  
To ramble soul and all,  
And never dread to strike a wall.

Again, I wonder would that be  
Such a happy state for me ...

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<sup>205</sup>Ibid., 20.

The going, being, doing, sham—  
And never knowing where I am.  
I might not love freedom at all;  
My tired wings might crave a wall—  
Four walls to rise and pen me in  
This conscious world with guarded men.<sup>206</sup>

Again, the speaker begins the poem with the announcement of entrapment. The speaker's word choice in the opening line is particularly compelling. The use of "hemmed" infers a more intimate connection with the captor. Notably, one must consider the literal power of the word "hem." The use of hands, for example, is necessary to hem borders around the edge of the cloth. The action of hemming requires a repetitive motion that entails a folding back and sewing. The action is quite deliberate in its attempt to seal.

Reminiscent of the prison depicted in Johnson's poem, this speaker is confined by "strong, high walls." The walls are the social mores that so prevalently weighted the life of New Negro Women: "right and wrong,/ shall and shan't." The speaker describes the wall as strong and high, inferably too powerful to push or climb over. As the poem unfolds, readers soon appreciate that the speaker is not describing a physical imprisonment, but rather a psychological one of the "conscience." The borders of this entrapment "tremble" when she considers rejecting her condition. Expressions of "suffering and resistance" reach a climax in the third stanza. The speaker ponders what would happen if she had the power of "Sampson's strength" to knock down the walls. This allusion serves in multiple ways. Within the poem it provides an imaginary "moment" of empowerment. However, the irony of the choice does not escape readers.

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<sup>206</sup> Blanche Taylor Dickinson, "Four Walls," *Shadowed Dreams*, ed. Maureen Honey, 77.

For through the Sampson reference, readers are reminded of a biblical story where a powerful man fell to the hands of a woman. The speaker in Dickinson's poem argues that if empowered by this strength, she will not hesitate in her escape from the wall's imprisonment: "I'd shove/ Them away from where I stand;/ Free, I know I'd love/ To ramble soul and all." Implicated in these lines is the speaker's inability to explore and find her own feminine identity under the pressure of subjugation and repression.

While the "I" of the poem is not concretely gendered, it both meets and circumvents racial solidarity dicta much like the Jenness's poem. Moreover, the non-raced reference to "guarded men" implicates all men as the "hemmers" who maintain the walls and implicates the adversarial speaker as female. In the final stanza, she concedes to a fear of freedom. Arguably, the lines reflect an uncertainty of the unknown. The speaker gives voice to the concerns of Black women who were conflicted between patriarchal dicta, Victorian ethos and modern liberality. Like much of the work of her women poet contemporaries, Dickinson's poem serves as a courageous attempt to address the tabooed regions of her life.

### ***Forbidden Avenues: Same-Sex Love and Desire***

Henry Louis Gates wrote that the Harlem Renaissance that it "was surely as gay as it was Black."<sup>207</sup> Certainly, a host of recent scholarship has surfaced to support Gates' assertion. However, most of that scholarship focuses on the purported lives of

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<sup>207</sup> Henry Louis Gates. "The Black Man's Burden," *In Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, edited by Michael Warner. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 233.

Renaissance men. Much of the attention in this regard has been on the key figures like Langston Hughes, Alain Locke, Countee Cullen and Claude McKay. The lack of focus on women writers and poets of the era is not necessarily a result of oversight. Scholars such as Hull, Wall, Christa Schwartz and Siobhan Somerville have expressed frustration with the lack of evidence surrounding many of the noted New Negro women poet's sexual orientation. Hull explains the difficulty of such a pursuit in her review of poets like Grimké and Dunbar-Nelson:

What has emerged regarding their sexuality prompts further speculation about the hidden nature of women's sexual lives in general and, more specifically, about lesbian invisibility. It also highlights some of the difficulties of doing lesbian-feminist scholarship, where the subjects feel constrained even in their private utterances from expressing themselves clearly and fully. For the sensitive researcher, there is often a gap between what one knows and what can be "proved," especially to those readers who demand a kind of evidence about the individual and the meaning of her work that could not be produced for heterosexual subjects.<sup>208</sup>

Any potential analysis of the poetry regarding sexual orientation, and specifically women loving women behavior, usually deteriorates at this juncture. The inference here is that if scholars cannot confirm specific sexual orientation of the writer being reviewed, then queer readings of the texts cannot be performed. However, as Schwartz' text successfully models in its review of key male figures of the movement, academically

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<sup>208</sup> Schwarz, *Gay Voices*, 21.

“outing” women poets is not necessary to analyze their works for queer influences. Such a concern serves only to limit the writer’s creative license and completely denies the individual who does not identify as lesbian the ability to empathize with queer culture. Moreover, the modern moment, which lent itself to sexual experimentation, easily invited interpretation from the writers of the day, much to the dismay of Renaissance leaders like DuBois. Ironically, Locke may have indirectly helped to prompt a surge in lesbian writing. As Honey contends: “Alain Locke’s intellectual leanings were, perhaps, even more instrumental in creating a tolerant atmosphere for lesbian writing. While by no means a friend to women artists (he often pointedly neglected them), his philosophical leadership in the New Negro movement fostered acceptance of the kind of writing they were doing.”<sup>209</sup> Honey points to a Sapphic reference in his foreword to Georgia Douglas Johnson’s work and his admiration of Cowdery as evidence of his philosophy. While Locke’s support of queer culture may have helped to lower some anxieties in writing about same-sex desire, it by no means evidences an equal playing field for the men and women poets of the era who participated in queer culture. George Chauncey notes that the difference in power along gender lines placed women at an even greater disadvantage for engagement and expression. He explains that guarded individuals who had same-sex desires but, who avoided acts of inversion such as cross-dressing escaped sexual persecution because of the “straight world’s ignorance of the existence of a hidden

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<sup>209</sup> Honey, *Shadowed Dreams*, 23.

middle-class gay world.”<sup>210</sup> Hull’s discussion gestures toward the fact that some of our women writers avoided this recognition.

Nevertheless, as Chauncey explains, it important to distinguish in queer culture between genders. He writes, “Gay men as men also enjoyed greater freedom of movement than lesbians did as women, since many of the public spaces where gay men met, from street corners to bars, were culturally defined as male spaces. Moreover, the different sexual and emotional characters ascribed to men and women meant that the boundaries between “normal” and “abnormal” intimacies, both physical and affective, were also drawn differently for men and women.”<sup>211</sup> Notably, women faced unique obstacles with experimenting in sexuality as they confront gender normativity, social mores, and racialization. Yet, 1920s urbanity marked a surfacing of sexual discourse and expression which guided the way to contemporary understandings of gender identities. During the era, “various identities involving same-sex contacts coexisted” in small, intimate urban spaces.<sup>212</sup>

Despite an individual poet’s sexual proclivities, that these writers were influenced by contact and culture. Thus, employing Schwarz’ framework removes the “evidence of sexuality” prerequisite of queer readings by gesturing toward the influence of the modern moment which sought to blur the various border lines of identity to include sexuality.

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<sup>210</sup> George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 103.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>212</sup> Schwarz, *Gay Voices*, 7.

Honey explains how a counter-culture of tolerance afforded to women an opportunity to “explore their love for other women less self-consciously than they had in the past”:

Renewed attention to the Harlem Renaissance is revealing, in fact, that gay and lesbian culture was very much a part of Harlem artistic circles. Lesbian singers Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, and Gladys Bentley, for instance, were star performers during the twenties and their sexual preferences were known to those frequented jazz clubs. In addition, the primary organizers of Harlem social life, A'Lelia Walker and Carl Van Vechten, routinely sought the company of lesbians and gay men and invited them to their parties. The intellectual and social atmosphere in which Renaissance writers worked, therefore, at least did not condemn lesbianism.<sup>213</sup>

One of the most spectacular methods women poets used to defy the dicta of racism was to blur the rigid social lines of sexuality. In the previous section, I discuss poets who challenged the taboos of heteronormativity. The poets in this section shatter the sexual absolutes that inform those patriarchal taboos by writing about same-sex love and desire. In evidencing even the successful possibilities of these forbidden taboos, the poems in this section transgress boundaries imposed by color and gender.

Angelina Weld Grimké is the most noted Renaissance woman poet to write about same-sex love between women and much of her poetry directed toward women subjects

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<sup>213</sup> Honey, *Shadowed Dreams*, 23.



was published after her death.<sup>214</sup> As Schwarz observes, “sexual dissidence was thus clearly part of the younger Renaissance writers’ transgressive strategies and their rejection of the burden of representation.”<sup>215</sup> It is quite possible that many women poets of the era were influenced by the courageous work of Grimké. She is a significant figure in Black lesbian studies, despite that fact that much of her poetry was “too lesbian and too sentimental for audiences during and after the Harlem Renaissance.”<sup>216</sup> Revisiting her work in the context of Intersectionality helps to illuminate the poetry’s value as part of the identity driven movement. Somerville reminds us how vital race and gender studies are to our understanding of the evolution of constructions (not necessarily behavior) of homosexuality: “Although gender insubordination offers a powerful explanatory model for the “invention” of homosexuality, ideologies of gender also, of course, shaped and were shaped by dominant constructions of race.

Indeed, although rarely acknowledged, it is striking that the emergence of a discourse on homosexuality in the United States occurred at roughly the same time that boundaries between “Black” and “White” were being policed and enforced in unprecedented ways, particularly through the institutionalization of racial segregation.”<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> As my investigation is primarily interested in how the published women’s poetry contributed to the movement, I primarily explore the poetry of Bennett and Cowdery who were publishing near the end of the movement.

<sup>215</sup> Schwarz, *Gay Voices*, 42.

<sup>216</sup> Carolivia Herron, ed. “Introduction,” in *Selected Works of Angelina Weld Grimké*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 21.

<sup>217</sup> Soibhan Somerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Durham: Duke University Press: 2005), 16.

While queer studies are primarily focused on male same sex behavior, many of the women poets were certainly negotiating their space in the sexual terrain of the movement. Their work is particularly poignant as their bodies were marked as nonsexual by Renaissance leaders and rendered as vessels for childbirth by patriarchal thinking. Poems that celebrate Black, lesbian love reject almost all gender assumptions and racial obligations placed on New Negro women. At the very least, such extreme resistance weakens the pillars of heteronormativity for even heterosexual men and women.

Grimké helps to open this discussion because she is one of the first female poets of the movement to blur the gender lines of sexuality in the movement. She is often confused with her famous White abolitionist aunt Angelina Grimké Weld. The poet was reared by her father in a liberal, aristocratic community of old Boston. Hull argues that Grimké's social status was a source of disillusionment for the writer. "To an undeterminable extent, her background also probably contributed to a kind of personal unhappiness that impelled her toward themes of dejection and loss. Angelina also felt the psychological pressure of having to live up to family name and standards, exaggerated by the 'we must prove ourselves' syndrome that operated among educated Blacks."<sup>218</sup> Ultimately, Grimké was impressively prolific. In addition to poetry, she wrote essays, fiction and drama. Her play *Rachel*, first staged in 1916, is often credited as the first play of the Renaissance with its aggressive critique of lynching. Confronting the race problem of the early twentieth century was an essential part of the writing process, as she notes in an essay titled "Remarks about Literature." Almost prophetic, she acknowledges that the

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<sup>218</sup> Hull, *Color, Sex, and Poetry*, 110.

race problem would likely not be resolved in her lifetime, but that the work of her contemporaries could serve as a guiding light for a future “genius.” As Grimké writes,

But before he arrives I most certainly believe there must be a change in the attitude of colored people towards themselves as a whole we are still inclined to feel ourselves inferior to White people. We do not consider what we think or say and feel and suffer as interesting or valuable. Some of us are even ashamed of these things. In preparation of the coming of this Black genius I believe there must be among us a stronger and growing feeling of race consciousness, race solidarity, race pride. ... Then perhaps, some day, some where, Black youth will come forth, see us clearly, intelligently, sympathetically, and will write about us and then come into his own.”<sup>219</sup>

Grimké’s affirmation is reminiscent of Hughes’ famed manifesto “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.” He declared that as younger members of the movement: “We build our temples for tomorrow.”<sup>220</sup> Both statements gesture toward a cultural shame that each struggles to prevent from invading their writing and their Truth. Though both championed being able to explore race on their own terms, which inevitably meant delving into the perilous terrain of sexuality, both were debatably close-lipped about their own sexual preferences. Hughes scholars continue to challenge the critical myth of his

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<sup>219</sup> Herron, *Selected Works of Angelina Weld Grimké*, 437.

<sup>220</sup> Langston Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. edited by Henry Louis Gates and Nellie McKay (New York: Norton and Company, 2004), 1314.

asexuality by pointing to clues or interpretations of same-sex behavior.<sup>221</sup> For Grimké, familial obligations appeared to have had the last word. Carolivia Herron argues that her father “seems to have been the source of some restriction and oppression in her own sexual self-consciousness as a lesbian.”<sup>222</sup> While Grimké never attempted to publish love poems that were explicitly addressed to women, much of her published work is written about loss or unrequited love or self-abnegation. For example, Grimké’s poem “A Mona Lisa” illustrates of this poetic motif:

1.

I should like to creep  
Through the long brown grasses  
That are your lashes;  
I should like to poise  
On the very brink  
Of the leaf brown pools  
That are your shadowed eyes;  
I should like to cleave  
Without sound,  
Their unrippled waters;  
I should like to sink down  
And down  
And down...  
And deeply drown.

2.

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<sup>221</sup> Schwarz offers a comprehensive review of the scholarly dispute regarding Hughes sexuality in “Langston Hughes: A ‘true ‘people’s poet’,” *Gay Voices*, 69.

<sup>222</sup> Herron, *Selected Works of Angelina Weld Grimké*, 6.

Would I be more than a bubble breaking?  
Or an ever-widening circle  
Ceasing at the marge?  
Would my White bones  
Be only White bones  
Wavering back and forth, back and forth  
In their depths?

Personal and sensual, the poem describes the object of desire in dark and “shadowed” images. Notions of race implicitly appear in this work. Melisa Girard’s reading of the poem is useful in its assertion that Grimké is exploring the pull between “lesbian desire and aesthetics”:

The transgression that the poem seems to envision is not a transcendence of the self, but a self-shattering that resituates a non-identitarian, desiring body in relation to art. The final question, with its suggestive "White bones" remains even more ambiguous, possibly, than the first two. The "my White bones" evokes a difference between surface and interior, as with the poem’s questioning of the painting surface and the woman inside. Grimké has here reduced personal identity to "White bones" leaving race, gender, and any real personal distinctions impossible or irrelevant. She has, in a sense, flattened the surface of the body to correspond to the two-dimensional surface of a painting, removing any distinction between interior and exterior, personal and public, or self and other.<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>223</sup> Melissa Girard, “On Mona Lisa” *Modern American Poetry*, 2012, [http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/g\\_l/grimke/monalisa.htm](http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/g_l/grimke/monalisa.htm).

The negotiation between what is personified and what is dehumanized in this poem is an important note on female sexuality. Interestingly, however, the question of desire sends the speaker into a state of self-destruction, as by the end of the stanza, the speaker “should like to sink down/ and down/ and down.../ And deeply drown.” Thus, the reader concludes that the speaker’s inability to connect with the object (as indicated by the subjunctives “should” and “would”) leads to a metaphoric death. Desire governs this imaginative death. The questions that comprise the poem’s second section mirror the concerns that haunt Bennett’s “Secret.” What are the consequences of fulfilling this fantasy? What is its effect on the identity of the speaker? What will happen to the speaker’s world or “bubble?” Will it collapse onto itself? Will it widen? As in this poem, questions of sexual uncertainty and exploration frequently motivate women’s poetry that blurs the boundaries of same-sex desire.

Like Grimké’s work above, Bennett’s poems are driven by the motif of the gaze. Poems such as “To a Dark Girl” and “Fantasy” celebrate the Black female body. Both poems have been read as a rejection of racist ideology that determined Black women were whores and prostitutes. Conversely, Bennett’s speaker elevated her subject to the status of royalty. Her work’s ability to reconstruct an identity that has been devalued because of racialization explains why her poetry is often contextualized in the spirit of protest and resistance.<sup>224</sup> She merits revisiting in this context because of her ability to infuse sexuality and class into her discussion. Nina Miller points out in her reading of the poem, Bennett “displays a supreme faith in art’s redemptive power, a utopian dimension

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<sup>224</sup> I explore this element of Bennett’s poem “To a Brown Girl” in Chapter One.

of modernism not often acknowledged in the (ostensibly) cynical Renaissance avant-garde. And perhaps she forces an even more important avant-garde contradiction by actually crossing class lines to stage the redemption.”<sup>225</sup> Consider the poem again below:

I love you for your brownness  
And the rounded darkness of your breast.  
I love you for the breaking sadness in your voice  
And shadows where your wayward eye-lids rest

Something of old forgotten queens  
Lurks in the lithe abandon of your walk  
And something of the shackled slave  
Sobs in the rhythm of your talk.

Oh, little brown girl, born for sorrow's mate,  
Keep all you have of queenliness,  
Forgetting that you once were slave,  
And let your full lips laugh at Fate

Indeed, the subject of the poem is redeemed, transformed from slave to queen through the speaker's gaze. This poem can easily be read in the communal sense as a love poem for all Black women. It certainly makes for a grander contribution to the movement. But the poem also operates at a more centralized level, the poem singles out “a” dark girl who transforms into a queen by the poem's end. What is interesting about the transformation is how the subject comes to us – in body parts – skin, breasts, eye-lids, lips and a voice

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<sup>225</sup> Nina Miller, *Making Love Modern: The Intimate Public Worlds of New York's Literary Women*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 232.

that is rendered speechless. She is sexually objectified with fullness of lip and roundness of breast. And, much like Grimke's "Mona Lisa," this subject is loved for these qualities.

Bennett's execution of the gaze is even more aggressive in "Fantasy." In this poem, the speaker is explicitly present:

I sailed in my dreams to the Land of Night  
Where you were the dusk-eyed queen,  
And there in the pallor of moon-veiled light  
The loveliest things were seen...

A slim-necked peacock sauntered there  
In a garden of lavender hues,  
And you were strange with your purple hair  
As you sat in your amethyst chair  
With your feet in your hyacinth shoes.

Oh, the moon gave a bluish light  
Through the trees in the land of dreams and night.  
I stood behind a bush of yellow-green  
And whistled a song to the dark-haired queen...

While the gaze is very much prevalent in this poem, the speaker's actions and motives are at the work's core. The poem begins with an "I" who is dreaming, placing the speaker at the forefront of the discussion. Because the poem's title is "Fantasy," I am drawn to read the dream not so much in the subconscious sense, though that, too, is useful in this review. Instead, dreaming comes to us more in the context of longing or desire. The "you" in the poem exists outside the context of the fantasy. The speaker, however,



conjures a version of the subject that reigns over the speaker, who in turn wishes to please the queen in song.

In addition to the motif of royalty, there are some repeated images in Bennett's work. As in "Street Lamps in Early Spring," the poet evokes both "night" and the "veil." The capitalization of "Land of Night" points toward Africa, which participates in the Renaissance movement's privileging of the African imaginary. Notably, it is only in this fantasy world where this speaker can honor the "dusk-eyed queen." Presumably, in the racialized and repressed speaker's reality, the subject cannot be worshipped and adorned by our curious speaker. The fantasy, in fact, echoes this hesitation as our speaker is last seen singing to the subject while standing behind a bush. The speaker's concern for remaining hidden, even in the safety of fantasy, is most telling. The decision implicates the heterosexual refusal to explore same-sex desire or curiosity. Instead, the speaker whistles songs (or writes poetry) for her subject in secrecy.

Very few poets wrote about lesbian desire without the shroud of secrecy. Mae Cowdery is one of few poets who explicitly wrote love poems to women. She is one of the younger poets of the Renaissance and is said to have cross-dressed having worn short hair, tailored suits with bow ties. She is also one of a few women to publish a collection of poetry, released near the end of the period in 1936. Honey describes Cowdery and her work: "The arresting personal portrait is enough to attract the attention of modern readers, but it is Cowdery's writing that proves most compelling. Her forte was the poetry of passion, anguished, fierce and erotic. While much of her work is clumsy, there is a spark of originality that makes it stand out from other poetry of her day, a modern

quality of sparseness and physical directness.”<sup>226</sup> Much of her poetry is about loss of love and the intricacies of relationship dynamics. Her unwillingness to hide her sexuality in life and on the page promotes an evolution in thought toward a sexual revolution. In the introduction to Cowdery’s 1936 collection *We Lift Our Voices*, William Braithwaite notes: “During these years when the members of the Renaissance group scattered and declined, Miss Cowdery with quiet devotion practiced and matured her art, and the results presented in this first collection reaffirms my earlier conviction of her genuine and distinctive poetic talents.”<sup>227</sup> Consider the following lines of her poem “Insatiate.”

If my love were meat and bread  
And sweet cool wine to drink,  
They would not be enough,  
For I must have a finer table spread  
To sate my entity.

If her lips were rubies red,  
Her eyes two sapphires blue,  
Her fingers ten sticks of White jade,  
Coral tipped...and her hair of purple hue  
Hung down in a silken shawl...  
They would not be enough  
To fill the coffers of my need.

If her thoughts were arrows  
Ever speeding true  
Into the core of my mind,

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<sup>226</sup> Honey, *Shadowed Dreams*, 29.

<sup>227</sup> William Stanley Braithwaite, “Introduction,” in *We Lift Our Voices*. 2.

And her voice round notes of melody  
No nightingale or lark  
Could ever hope to sing...  
Not even those would be enough  
To keep my constancy.

But if my love did whisper  
Her song into another's ear  
Or place the tip of one pink nail  
Upon another's hand,  
Then would I forever be  
A willing prisoner...  
Chained to her side by uncertainty!<sup>228</sup>

The poem complicates several norms and expectations of Black womanhood, the most obvious is its direct expression of lesbian sexuality. It breaks through the taboo as this speaker is neither ashamed nor modest in expressing her same-sex desire. Even beyond the sexual taboo of lesbian desire, this speaker outwardly rejects tenants of the cult of true womanhood as she is not humble in speech or loyal to her partner. This is a love poem that essentially rejects the socially prescribed dicta of monogamy. How ironic is the speaker's realization at the poem's close: only through her lover's infidelity can she remain faithful.

Also shattered is the taboo of interracial love. Both here and in Bennett's "Secret," the object of desire is White, marked with blue eyes and finger of "White jade." This description marks an underexposed truth about the Renaissance movement; at its foundation is interracial relationships. Interracial relationships were fundamental to the

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<sup>228</sup> Mae Cowdery, *We Lift Our Voices*, (Philadelphia: Alpress, 1936), 57.

life of the Harlem Renaissance. White publishers, White benefactors, White critics, and White audiences helped to usher Black writers of the movement into our literary consciousness. Black intelligentsia of the day seized on this relationship as a means to construct their own identities. Yet, little positive attention is afforded the fact that the Renaissance was an interracial effort. Far too often, critics of the movement point to the relationship between Whites and Blacks of the Renaissance as the primary source of the movement's failure in purpose and product. Richard Wright famously critiqued this dichotomy in his "Blueprint for Negro Writing." However, as George Hutchinson explains, investing more in the symbolic weight the interracial relationships that birthed the movement into being could prove beneficial in approaching the literature:

In fact, I believe that a tendency to scapegoat or repress interracial qualities of the Harlem Renaissance has been pivotal to prior histories of the movement and has obscured crucial aspects of its nature and importance. Yet the dynamic of repressing interracial dimensions of the movement, or (more often) blaming them for corrupting it can be found, I believe, in criticism brought to bear on some of its most important literary achievements. Indeed, this critical tendency has perhaps prevented us from fully appreciating the originality and power of certain texts, thereby contributing to another charge from which the Harlem Renaissance has suffered—that the literature it produced was not really all that good.<sup>229</sup>

Admittedly, it is difficult remove the historic power struggle infused into conceptions of interracial relationships. One cannot help but be "suspicious," as Hutchinson notes of

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<sup>229</sup> George Hutchinson, "Subject to Disappearance: Interracial Identity in Nella Larsen's Quicksand," *Temples for Tomorrow: Looking Back at the Harlem Renaissance*. eds. Geneviève Fabre and Michel Feith (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 177.

Renaissance critics, of the possible strings attached to accepting White patronage during the era. But the power dynamic inferred from racial relationship between the characters in Cowdery's poem is, at the very least, disrupted by their sexual relationship. The White subject's "power" over her lover is decidedly limited. In spite of her beauty, talent and wits, the White subject is unable to sustain her lover's attention. Only through infidelity can she achieve the speaker's loyalty. Cowdery's poem is most useful in closing our discussion on the Renaissance women poets' examination of their sexuality because of its degree of complication. Cowdery successfully argues that sexuality cannot be easily defined or contained. Echoed in the works of poets like Cowdery, Johnson, and Bennett is the reality that honest representation of Black women's sexuality can only be derived in the empowering act of writing one's own identity.

To understand the poetic power of representation, one can must consider the representational motivation of the Harlem Renaissance moment. Intertwined in the works of the overshadowed New Negro women poets are the poems of a generation. Because of their lived relationship to Intersectionality, New Negro women were better able express their frustration with racialized imprint on the imaging and suppression of their sexuality. Women poets of the day provide analysis, insight and candid rejection of the perception of promiscuity that led to attacks on their character and body. While an atmosphere of subjugation and aversion limited the reception of their work, today's readers – who are removed from oppressive race and gendered political tyranny that engulfed early twentieth century life – have a responsibility to revisit their poetry for a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the era.

## CHAPTER 5

### *Coda*

“A black finger pointing upwards”

#### The Legacy and Implications of a Poetics of Intersectionality

“When we have pleaded for understanding, our character has been distorted; when we have asked for simple caring, we have been handed empty inspirational appellations, then stuck in the farthest corner. When we have asked for love, we have been given children. In short, even our plainer gifts, our labors of fidelity and love, have been knocked down our throats. To be an artist and a Black woman, even today, lowers our status in many respects, rather than raises it: and yet, artists we will be.”

-- Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*<sup>230</sup>

#### **The Black Finger**

I have just seen the most beautiful thing

Slim and still

Against a gold, gold sky,

A straight, black cypress

Sensitive

Exquisite

A black finger

Pointing upwards.

Why, beautiful still finger, are you black?

And why are you pointing upwards?

-- Angelina Weld Grimké<sup>231</sup>

Alice Walker often discusses the importance of locating and modeling Black women writing to not only track the trajectory of a tradition, but also to avoid recycling

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<sup>230</sup> Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 236.

<sup>231</sup> Angelina Weld Grimké, “The Black Finger,” in *Shadowed Dreams: Women's Poetry of the Harlem Renaissance*, edited by Maureen Honey (New York: Rutgers, 1989), 184.

buried material. Her research led to the legendary rediscovery of Harlem Renaissance's Zora Neale Hurston and *Their Eyes are Watching God* – a text that has singlehandedly shifted our contemporary understanding of the intersections of African American Literature, American culture and Black Feminisms. I close this dissertation informed and inspired by Walker's journey with Hurston. As I have labored to evidence in this study, New Negro women poets of the Harlem Renaissance experienced a similar fate of critical erasure. They have too often been pushed to the margins of African American literary study, forgotten and footnoted in the context of the Harlem Renaissance movement.

By ending this study with a Grimké poem as the epigraph, and its powerful image of the black finger pointing upward, I mean to gesture toward new, interpretive possibilities for New Women poets of the Harlem Renaissance and Black women poets of subsequent movements. Renaissance women's gendered poetics of silence and resistance -- which was concerned with the internal preservation of the self, of the race, and of the family -- was a significant component of this identity based movement. Despite critical efforts to either minimalize or dismiss their contribution, Harlem Renaissance women poets were operating at the genesis of a legacy of racialized gendered poetics that served as a template for subsequent identity-based movements.

Consider, briefly, the moves Harlem Renaissance women poets were making alongside the contribution and criticism of Black Arts Movement poet Gwendolyn Brooks. She is the premier poet to place the Harlem Renaissance and Black Arts Movement into a conversation regarding their shared interests in intersectionality poetics.

Brooks' connections to leaders in both movements arguably influenced her poetic motivations, which operate as a commanding force throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. She came to age both literally and poetically at the tail-end of the Renaissance, and is much celebrated for her poetic evolution through and beyond the Black Arts Movement.<sup>232</sup> Brooks' long poem "In the Mecca" employs similar methodologies, functions and motivations patterned in Harlem Renaissance women's poetics. The narrative poem traces a mother's frantic search for a daughter who is later found murdered, raped and discarded. It is a work of interiority, exploring the dilapidated condition of a community weakened by the legacy of racism, sexism and classism.<sup>233</sup> Much like the patterns that I have identified in New Negro women's poetry, Brooks' "In the Mecca" engages the intersectionality-informed tropes of interiority, motherhood and sexuality.

Moreover, the work is most often associated with an identity inspired movement. She makes an explicit and concentrated investment with BAM while penning this poem.<sup>234</sup> Kathy Rugoff explores Brooks' contribution to the American poetic tradition in the following:

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<sup>232</sup> Gwendolyn Brooks' life and career placed her in prime position for literary comparative discussion. She was born in Topeka Kansas in 1917, but her family moved to Chicago shortly after her birth. Her profound interest in poetry early in life, by way of contests and publications, fostered her introductions to notable influences like James Weldon Johnson and Langston Hughes, who encouraged her to read modern poets like T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. By age 17, she was an adjunct staff member of the Chicago Defender, and she had published dozens of poems in the weekly poetry column. In coming years she would win Guggenheim Fellowships and become the first African American to win the Pulitzer Prize.

<sup>233</sup> Gwendolyn Brooks, "In the Mecca," *Blacks* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1987).

<sup>234</sup> "In the Mecca" is the longest poem in Gwendolyn Brooks' oeuvre. It was completed at a time when she, herself, was defining her connection to Black movement ideology.



By confronting issues of race, gender, and class, her poems are reflections of the social, political, and artistic worlds of African Americans from the 1930s to the end of the twentieth century. In addition, by borrowing from African American oral and written literary traditions as well as from European literary traditions, Brooks made a remarkable contribution to the history of recent American poetry. It is very likely that in future discussions of twentieth century American poetry, the work of Gwendolyn Brooks will be given extensive treatment, possibly even more than the work of the seminal poets who captured her imagination as a young woman.<sup>235</sup>

Irrefutable is the claim that Brooks' extraordinary catalogue adds valuable insights to the discourse on the placement of politics in poetry. Nor can many deny the Pulitzer Prize winning poet's innovative literary techniques, which couple African American and European literary traditions in surprising and revolutionary ways. Her contribution to

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The book *In the Mecca*, named for its title poem, would be the last published with Harper and Row; she turned to Black publishers after its release. To be clear, Brooks had explored race matters in her earlier works, but the charged atmosphere of the conference, along with its alliance to the Black Power Movement, inspired her to participate in the movement's determination to conceptualize a new vision for Blackness and Identity. In reflecting on the experience, she writes: "I was in some inscrutable and uncomfortable wonderland. I didn't know what to make of what surrounded me, of what with hot sureness began almost immediately to invade me. I had never been, before, in the general presence of such insouciance, such live firmness, such confident vigor, such determination to mold or carve something DEFINITE" [emphasis is hers]. Gwendolyn Brooks, "The Field of the Fever, the Time of the Tall Walkers," *Black Women Writers 1950-1980: A Critical Evaluation*. ed. Mari Evans (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1984), 77.

<sup>235</sup> Kathy Rugoff, "The Historical and Social Context of Gwendolyn Brooks's Poetry," In *Critical Insights: Gwendolyn Brooks*, ed. Mildred R. Mickle (Ipswich, MA., Salem Press: 2010), 35.

social and cultural awareness and her unwavering commitment to humanism serve as a driving force in her poetic analysis of racial and urban dynamics.

Yet, surprisingly few critics have attempted to situate Brooks' within an established African American women's poetic tradition. Instead, many turn to her connection to Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson and Haki Madhubuti to gesture toward poetic male influences. Few consider the fact that Brooks was familiar with popular small magazines, like *Crisis*, where New Negro women poets were publishing. She was exposed to popular anthologies like the *The New Negro* and *Caroling Dusk*, which featured many of the poets included in this study. But, as patterned in Rutgoff's reflection, many critics elect to privilege post Harlem Renaissance poetics in their constructions of African American poetic traditions. Etching New Negro women poets out of the poetic canon has created a vacuum in our collective literary memory that not only performs a great disservice to the women writers of the Harlem Renaissance, but it also diminishes readings of the context and contribution of poet's like Brooks who were actively participating in identity driven movements.

Through her fusion of the identity politics and formalist inspired poetics, Brooks' efforts are indicative of BAM women's aesthetics that are similar to New Negro women's poetic practice. Not unlike her Harlem Renaissance predecessors, much of her work before penning the *Mecca* was subject to accusations of racial neglect. In pale attempts to tarnish her 1950s Pulitzer success, a number of critics read her pre-sixties efforts as "too pleading a tone with a high aestheticism that actually excluded most Black

readers.”<sup>236</sup> It is a criticism that rings all too familiar in Harlem Renaissance poetic criticism. As Mary Washington asserts, the fact that women poets of these movements elected to write about the lives and experiences of Black women directly affected their critical reception: “If there is a single distinguishing feature of the literature of Black women—and this accounts for their lack of recognition—it is this: their literature is about Black women; it takes the trouble to record the thoughts, words, feelings and deeds of Black women, experiences that make the realities of being Black in America look very different from what men have written.”<sup>237</sup> As I have argued, the racialized critical aversion to exploring the internal and the feminine, along with the question of aesthetic authenticity is a recycled affront to women writers participating in identity-based movements. Apparently, subscribing too much to any one of these elements at the zenith of either of the Harlem Renaissance or the Black Arts moments signaled a critical failure. Accordingly, my research into African American women’s poetic traditions and contributions beyond this dissertation will challenge gendered disparity and amnesia in African American literary studies.

The implications of this particular study are far reaching. Broadening the parameters in which the Harlem Renaissance movement has been conventionally defined beyond the limited scope of race affords scholars with the opportunity to have more

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<sup>236</sup> Sheila Hughes, “A Prophet Overheard: A Juxtapositional Reading of Gwendolyn Brooks’s ‘In the Mecca,’” in *African American Review*, 38 No. 2 (Summer, 2004): 257-280. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1512289>. pg. 257.

<sup>237</sup> Mary Helen Washington, “The Darkened Eye Restored:’ Notes Toward a Literary History of Black Women.” *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Angelyn Mitchell (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 446.

substantive and comprehensive readings of the literature. Including other identity markers such as class, gender, and sexuality allows readers to have more contemplative engagements with the New Negro movement and the greater modernism project. A reconceptualization of the Harlem Renaissance movement is thus necessary to include women poets into the discussion. Principles of intersectionality demonstrate that singular determinism is not sufficient and will almost always result in a perceived failure. Therefore, singling out any one marker of oppressed identity - such as race (Black male) or gender (White female) - theoretically erases those individuals who embody more than one marginalized identity (Black women). Indeed, patterns in race-reflective criticism are inherently flawed as evident in many of the previous critical readings of Black women's poetry. Conversely, problematizing the racialized critical privileging the myth of aesthetic "authenticity" would actually lead to more accurate representations of the diversity within African American communities. Ultimately, neglected and overshadowed voices and perspectives would offer weight and texture to the movement's trajectory.

Widening the critical conceptions of protest and resistance are also necessary to future readings of identity driven poetry. Women's poetry of the Harlem Renaissance often incorporated alternative means of resistance that turned radical conversations inward and away from the domain of dominant culture. Their poetry was especially attuned to the liberating ways internal reflection translates to self-actualization and self-empowerment. Encased in this call for self-definition are, of course, race matters. But exploration of the ramifications of sexuality, gender, and class oppression were also at

the center of their concerns. In their poetics of silence, these poets were able to assert their agency and determine their own response to their lived realities in intersectionality. For many Renaissance women poets, accessing and understanding their internal power became a predominant motivation in their writing.

In considering the legacy of New Negro women poet's nuanced approach to representation and resistance, I would like to end this study with a musing on the work of contemporary poet Lucille Clifton. Her poetics of intersectionality, as captured in "Why some people be mad at me sometimes," brings this discussion of a Black women's poetic tradition of intersectionality to full circle:

they ask me to remember  
but they want me to remember  
their memories  
and i keep on remembering  
mine<sup>238</sup>

The irony that Clifton's contemporary work negotiates matters of resistance and representation in ways that are similar to New Negro women's poetry was not lost on me. Her poem, and its concern with history, with who constructs memory, with how the self and how the Other experiences a moment, and with the very vulnerable nature of history apropos one's perspective is especially useful in engaging in a discussion about poetics of intersectionality. Tracing and exploring this tradition has been my priority for the last six years. For me -- a person who connects to intersectionality by identifying as Black,

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<sup>238</sup> Lucille Clifton, *Blessing the Boats: New and Selected Poems 1988-2000* (Rochester, BOA Editions, Ltd.: 2000), 38.

Woman, and American – this project has been as much about self-discovery as it has been about excavation. As a poet-scholar, I know that it is incumbent upon me to understand this tradition as I situate my own work in women's lived experiences and in the creative responses to being alive on the planet. New Women's poetry of the Harlem Renaissance exposes readers to untapped and disregarded sources of Black women's perspectives during a critically important period in American identity formation. It behooves critics and poets alike to read these women's poetic contributions anew as intersectional expression.

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