

DEMYSTIFICATION OF THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE PRIMITIVIST REPRESENTATIONAL STRATEGY OF THE MOVEMENT

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Abstract

The Harlem Renaissance is often simplistically defined as a ten-year literary activity of African-Americans in 1920s New York which ended with the advent of the Great Depression. However, a thorough survey of the movement introduces us to a complex and conflicted phenomenon which critics still struggle to define. Far from being a purely monolithic, black community-oriented entity, the Harlem Renaissance was strongly influenced by white America's sociological and literary climate in 1920s. White American intellectuals of the Jazz Age, disillusioned with the traumatic experience of World War I and tired of the country's puritan background, showed a strong proclivity for "Other" cultures that could satiate their yearning for exoticism and hedonism; and the handiest option for them was the African-American community that had been subalternized for centuries. This faddist interest of white intelligentsia led to a primitivist vogue among young black writers of the Harlem Renaissance who decided to make use of the unprecedented opportunity and thus succumbed to the exoticist whims of white publishers and patrons. Considering the sociological and literary climate of the Jazz Age white America and its huge impact on black writers of the day, this paper aims to analyze the primitivist representational strategy of the Harlem Renaissance and its detrimental drawbacks.

Keywords: Harlem Renaissance, Primitivism, Jazz Age, Exoticism

Introduction

There are many hypotheses regarding the origins and orientations of the Harlem Renaissance: some call it the outburst of black Americans' self-assertion against white supremacy; some view it as connected with anti-colonial movements worldwide and even there are critics who regard it as an elitist local phenomenon which could not cross the boundaries of Manhattan to have an indelible impression on the quotidian and literary lives of African Americans in the early twentieth century (Hutchinson 2007, p.1). All these diverse interpretations suggest that the Harlem Renaissance was never a cohesive movement and a monolithic entity; so it goes without saying that any effort to analyze the movement with one single approach and one unchanging mindset will certainly fail. The Harlem Renaissance was a product of overlapping social and intellectual circles; groups which were connected together by a common desire for racial self-definition in the face of white domination. But alongside this point of similarity, one can detect many different sociopolitical and literary trends that molded the inchoate movement of young black aspirants in 1920s: avant-garde Modernism, Freudian psychology, the Great Migration, African American participation in World War I, the

Garvey movement, black nationalism, Marxism and Boasian anthropology were all among the crucial factors that contributed to the formation of the Harlem Renaissance.

This paper tries to shed light on one aspect of the movement which is of grave importance and at times has not received the critical attention it deserves: the direct impact of the white ideology on the formation and development of the Harlem Renaissance. The 1920s, the era of Modernism, the Lost Generation and the Jazz Age, witnessed a paradigm shift in American social and literary worlds. Regarding Western culture as a barren wasteland, Modernists, first in Europe and then in the United States, went for primitivism as a remedy for its sterility and bleakness. The younger generation of white American society was frustrated with the domination of puritan values imposing strict moral and sexual codes. Advocating an unlimited release of instinctive desires, the Jazz Age youth opted for a new lifestyle in which hedonism was prioritized. Similarly, as the aftermath of the gruesome bloodshed of World War I, a great many people were disillusioned with the much vaunted logic and science of the West. These all led to an unprecedented interest by the younger generation of white America for the "primitive" culture of the most accessible "exotic" group; i.e., black Americans. This inclination was rapidly transferred to the literary stage of the period and finally brought about the direct contact of black and white writers. Though this acquaintance provided a suitable ground for the florescence of blacks' literary creativity, it also influenced young black writers into giving an exaggerated and naïve portrait of Negro life, especially Harlem nightlife. This new stereotype of Negro life was merely a continuation of the degrading stereotypes that had circulated for centuries in American society. By elaborating on the sociopolitical and literary climate of 1920s America, this paper studies the formation of the primitive stereotype of the American Negro in white mass and literary circles, and goes on to explore the reasons why young black writers of the Harlem Renaissance naively adopted the same primitivist representational strategies in their works.

Black Image in the 1920s: A "Jazzed Up" Stereotype

The decade of 1920s seemed in many aspects to represent the true inception of the twentieth century in popular culture, arts, politics, and international relations. As Americans wrestled with the disenchantment that resulted from World War I, they entered a new era. For some of them, it was the Jazz Age and the Roaring Twenties, characterized by homemade gin, speakeasies and jukebox music, with many young women smoking in public and wearing their skirts and their hair as short as they could, all phenomena which had been considered never-to-be-broken taboos up to that time (Carlisle 2008, p. vii). This variety-seeking attitude also worked its way into the realm of art and literature where the fad of making everything new manifested itself in the new poetry (the poetry of Eliot, H.D., Crane and Williams), New Criticism (the critical theories of Allen Tate and the Fugitives), New Humanism (the moralistic program of Babbitt, More and Foerster) and new cinema (the films of Chaplin, Eisenstein, Lang and Murnau) (Early 1991, p.136; Osofsky 1965, p. 234). However, for others, dismayed by such challenges to decorous codes of conduct, the time necessitated a return to strict conventions and a revival of fundamental Christian norms (Carlisle 2008, p. vii).

With the end of World War I, the so-called "Age of Innocence" was over, too. The deaths of more than 106,000 American soldiers in the war, no more deemed as a heroic

sacrifice to the advertised causes of democracy and peace, seemed in retrospect to be the calamitous outcome of a misguided idealism, since neither democracy nor peace predominated in Europe or all around the world after the Great War. However, one of the main sources for the spate of cultural activity in 1920s was in fact the disillusionment resultant from World War I. The young survivors of the war, in the famed words of Gertrude Stein, became members of a Lost Generation with frustrated artists like Ernest Hemingway and John Dos Passos as their spokesmen. Regarding Prohibition and the pervasiveness of capitalist consumerism as the tokens of a bourgeois culture that oppressed individualism, many American intellectuals sought out a release either by immigrating to France or by taking refuge in certain regions of the United States that seemed more receptive to their bohemian lifestyles. In a similar vein, many young Americans despised the restrictive manners and conventions of their parents, rejecting them as either Puritan or Victorian; trying to ignore what happened in the League of Nations or in Europe, they decided to indulge in the newly-achieved freedoms that sprang from their rejection of the strict moral codes of the previous generation (Carlisle 2008, pp.viii-x). The same predilection was transferred to the literature of the period which was mostly apolitical notwithstanding a good deal of political activity in post-World War I United States (McCormick 1971, p. 165).

To many people, the 1920s seemed to be an era of prosperity and bonanza with earthshaking changes which signified that a new and modern world had come to the fore and that the old had passed away. In this seemingly prosperous atmosphere, Republicans started to describe their economic plan and the alleged prosperity that stemmed from it as the New Era, reflected in soaring stock prices, a considerable increase in stock market trade, and an expansion in real estate values, an abundance that brought about new fortunes and new methods of spending money. All the same, the New Era was new in more fundamental ways. Prohibition, legislated during Wilson's term of office, produced an unprecedentedly restrictive legal climate in which otherwise law-obeying citizens became suddenly law-breakers by buying a cocktail and a bottle of beer, or by attending a party in which scotch, bourbon, or gin were served. In other words, through criminalizing what was hitherto regarded as ordinary behavior, the authorities unwittingly transmogrified social and cultural values in a new, if not to say opposite, direction. Trying to evade such stifling ambiance, the nation, especially the youth, headed for consumerism, hedonism and the cultural restructuring of what they regarded as outmoded manners and morals, and turned their backs on anything that was redolent of politics such as world peace, democracy, and justice (Carlisle 2008, pp. vii-ix).

One of the most important factors in the creation of the new cultural trend in the 1920s was the nation's rapid modernization from a rural and small-town lifestyle to a complicated urban industrial society. Nevertheless, the transition did not take place smoothly. The rural and small-town white puritan provincials launched vigorous resistance against what they considered as the morally depraved culture of America's big cities, populated in large part by recent immigrants from Europe, mostly Catholics, and by black migrants from the agricultural South. White Protestant provincials believed that these nascent ethnic cultures posed a serious danger to the United States' Anglo-Saxon values of frugality, abstinence and self-reliance. Consequently, a bitter cultural war soon flared up. Pitting small-town residents against city inhabitants, natives against

foreigners, and religious groups against secularists, the cultural war also worked its way into the realm of politics and caused controversy over such issues as immigration, alcohol consumption, municipal administration and labor unions (Washington 2001, pp. 29-30; North, qtd. in Echeruo 1996, p. 180; Scruggs 1977, pp. 548-9; Huggins 1971, p. 85).

Similar to this confrontation in the nation's mass culture was a tension in America's intellectual circles between conservative and cosmopolitan thinkers. The cosmopolitans consisted mainly of New York-centered young white intellectuals, mostly graduates of elite Ivy League universities, who were inclined to venerate European civilization and disparage American culture. Regarding small-town Americans as stupid, parochial and emotionally throttled, these cosmopolitan intellectuals embarked on a ferocious assault on what they saw as the narrow-minded, repressive American lifestyle (Washington 2001, pp.29-30). An illuminating example of this outlook can be traced in Sinclair Lewis's novel *Main Street* which scorned small-town American life as "a negation canonized as the one positive virtue ... the prohibition of happiness ... slavery self-sought and self-defended" and "dullness made God", and derided provincial Americans as "a savorless people, gulping tasteless food, and sitting afterward, coatless and thoughtless, in rocking chairs prickly with inane decorations, listening to mechanical music, saying mechanical things about the excellence of Ford automobiles, and viewing themselves as the greatest race in the world" (2005, p. 321). In a similar vein, Albert C. Barnes, the famous American chemist and art collector, described the white American individual in the following way: "Many centuries of civilization have attenuated his original gifts and have made his mind dominate his spirit. He has wandered too far from the elementary human needs and their easy means of natural satisfaction. The deep and satisfying harmony which the soul requires no longer arises from the incidents of daily life" (qtd. in Kellner 2004, p. 55). In fact, no aspect of the old cultural structure escaped their disdain; the young revolutionary cosmopolitans repudiated almost all conventional institutions of their country such as American religious beliefs, American politics, American media, and even American educational system (Washington 2001, p.30).

In 1920s America in which modern secular and scientific values were achieving increasing popularity, these cosmopolitan intellectuals began to denounce sacrosanct concepts like patriotism and religious piety as vestiges of ignorance and superstition. Following the bloodshed of World War I, religion and patriotism lost their pivotal places in American mass and intellectual cultures, and so many young Americans, feeling spiritually astray and anomic, were attracted to exotic, hedonistic and unnormative lifestyles in order to recenter their lives. Such a cultural rebellion eventuated in the mushrooming of speakeasies, self-indulgent nightlife of cabarets, new rhythms of jazz music, sexually provocative dance styles and even self-imposed expatriation of many bohemian writers to Europe (Washington 2001, pp. 30-1).

These iconoclastic thinkers, disgruntled by industrialism, commercialism, and the ensuing standardization, sensed growing nostalgia for primitive, forceful and unmechanized lifestyles. However, this nostalgic yearning was not limited to the intelligentsia and literary men. Physicians and psychologists of the day diagnosed Americans, and especially women, with a malaise called neurasthenia which they maintained was caused by the crippling effect of civilization and fatigue and ennui were its symptoms. They decided that the remedy or the preventive medicine of this unfavorable condition lay in direct exposure to primitive and less civilized cultures. Therefore, in their pursuit of cultural and psychological reform, the discontented

Americans in most of the fields were attracted to the long-looked-down-upon black American ethnic world and developed an unprecedented liking of and perspective on black American life. Incited as much by drastic sociopolitical transformations of African American community as by a quest for the exotic, the intelligentsia of white America became extremely curious about Negro life, since they maintained that African American ethnic culture, due to its supposed affinities to African *modus vivendi*, enjoyed an unimpeded emotional life force which was exactly what white American culture lacked (Washington 2001, p. 29; Osofsky 1965, p. 230; Singh 2004, p.24; Brooks 1982, p.142; Corbould 2009, p.7). Believing that "life in the United States is too thin, too lacking in social convention and picturesque artifact, too un-historical, in fact, to provide material sufficiently rich for the novelist's imagination" (McCormick 1971, p. 209) and that "American literature had been too long conventional, drab, without music and color" (Sterling Brown, qtd. in Washington 2001, p. 32), the new generation of white American writers sought a return to spontaneity and uninhibited emotionality which they claimed could be found in the subalternized section of their own population, i.e., African Americans communities.

Maintaining that the primitive Negro could live more fully than the civilized white man, disaffected white Americans flocked to Harlem nightclubs in their hope to find the remedy of their discomfiture. These curiosity-seeking slummers constructed an erotic and hedonistic image of African Americans in which all Negro women were passionate and all Negro men potent, qualities which they assumed could give rise to healthy sexuality and save the modern man (Beja 1964, p. 325; Hudlin 2004, p. 10).

Greatly influenced by the primitivist vogue in Europe, many works of 1920s American writers captured the same faddist preoccupation with an "Other" culture that could supposedly redeem the soulless mechanical life of post-war America and also cater to the prevalent predilection in the Jazz Age for hedonism and exoticism. Interestingly, the so-called "vogue of the Negro" reached more popularity and influence in 1920s America than in Europe which was bewitched by negrophilie and Josephine Baker's "danse sauvage". In fact, black culture and art were exotic imports in Europe. However, they were domestic in America and had the potentiality to be increasingly mass-produced. If Western postwar disillusionment judged the dominant bourgeois culture as artificial, neurotic, and restrictive, Americans had an easily available alternative. The need for such an Other engendered a rhetoric which portrayed black Americans as uncivilized exiles from the jungles of Africa with the rhythms of tom-tom still in their blood and an indelible happy-go-lucky spirit in their hearts. Pitted against the mannered, stunted and impotent civilized men, Negroes, and whatever related to them, became paragons of natural human behavior in the eyes of disenchanting Americans (Chinitz 1997, p. 61; Cooper 1987, p. xvii).

In search of what Carl Van Doren called "color, music, gusto" (qtd. in Washington 2001, p. 34), many white primitivist writers constructed and underscored the emotional vivacity of black American lifestyle in order to psychologically liberate white America. Among the literary works by white writers of the era that reflected the primitivist vogue were Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* (1920) and *All God's Chillun Got Wings* (1924), Sherwood Anderson's *Dark Laughter* (1923), Waldo Frank's *Holiday* (1923), DuBose Heyward's *Porgy* (1925), Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* (1926), Harvey Wickham's *The Impuritans* (1929), and William Seabrook's *Magic Island* (1929) and *Jungle Ways* (1930). The egregious blunder of the exotic representational strategy of these works was that at

the end of the day, it made a fetish of sex and the nightlife rather than giving a faithful, realistic image and analysis of Harlem life. As Sterling Brown put it, "The figure who emerged from their pages is a Negro synchronized to a savage rhythm, living a life of ecstasy, superinduced by jazz (repetition of the tom-tom, awakening vestigial memories of Africa) and gin. A kinship exists between this stereotype and that of the contented slave; one is merely a 'jazzed up' version of the other, with cabarets supplanting cabins, and Harlemized blues instead of the spirituals and slave reels" (Sterling Brown, qtd. in Washington 2001, p. 27).

Harlem Renaissance: the Offspring of Whites' "Negretic Hysteria"

Why was it that the Renaissance of literature, which began among Negroes ten years ago, has never taken real and lasting root? It was because it was a transplanted and exotic thing. It was a literature written for the benefit of white people and at the behest of white readers, and started out privately from the white point of view. It never had a real Negro constituency, and it did not grow out of the inmost heart and frank experience of Negroes; on such an artificial basis, no real literature can grow (Du Bois, qtd. in Moses 1987, p. 76).

When we look at African American literature in pre-1920s United States, the one conspicuous fact that grabs our attention is its considerable marginalization which stemmed from white Americans' negligence of literary works by black writers, a disregard which took place due to the firmly established patterns of extreme social injustice. The social structure of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries America was generally based on the exacting practices of domination, such as slavery, colonialism, feudalism, servitude, or caste subjection, by means of which the ruling group reined and exploited the subaltern stratum of society; put differently, the dominant group controlled not only the subaltern group's economic and sociopolitical world, but also its cultural representations. As a matter of fact, the long-held artistic, journalistic, economic, and historical images of low-status groups in American society originated from a cultural network of paternalistic hegemony under which the dominant literary representations of black American life were constructed by white publishers, newspapers and magazines prior to 1920s; consequently, even though African Americans wrote novels and poems during this time, their literary productions were always demoted to a fragile marginalized role. This hegemonic procedure of the pre-1920s American cultural and racial system was marked by three significant characteristics: its producers and propagators were white American authors; its portraits of black American life were derived from white American ideological standpoints; and its credibility was supported and bolstered by the predominant white racial stereotypes about Negroes (Washington 2001, pp. 16-7).

In such an atmosphere, it inevitably remained extremely difficult for African American writers to get into print due to their supposedly inferior black English and their marginalized social status (Allen, Smith, and Malgaretti 2003, p. 588). However, considering the new assertiveness African Americans had achieved from the Great Migration and their participation in World War I, white American society could no longer afford to overlook black voices. As mentioned earlier, the artistic and literary celebration of the primitive and the exotic had become the intellectual fashion of the era in Europe. In a similar vein, many young white American writers, disillusioned

with the Western civilization, were fascinated with this primitivist vogue and went for the handiest option in their society which was the long-neglected and long-oppressed Negroes. Since whites never had a sufficient and tangible cultural interaction with blacks before the 1920s, they needed to collect first-hand material about the allegedly primitive African-tinged qualities of Negroes and, in order for that to happen, fostered friendships with African American intellectuals and writers who aided them to find access to isolated black ghetto communities and in this way, provided primitivist white writers with evidence in support of their exotic and hedonistic representations of black Americans. In fact, the primitivist vogue in America appeared from a new interracial partnership under the hegemonic leadership of white writers (Washington 2001, p. 33).

These friendships also helped black American writers to promote their careers through literary training and to find support networks and access to publishing institutions, an opportunity that finally eventuated in the first great African American literary school, i.e., the Harlem Renaissance. However, these black writers failed to discern the potential drawbacks of their relationship with white primitivist writers. On the contrary, they viewed their white counterparts as racially enlightened intellectuals who denounced the racist conventions of the previous generations (Washington 2001, p. 33; Hudlin 2004, p. 9). Influenced by the white primitivist vogue and willing to take the most advantage of the provided opportunity, many of the Harlem Renaissance writers optimistically embraced the same representational strategy in their works. The primitivist vogue is evident in many of the literary productions of the movement, including Langston Hughes' *The Weary Blues* (1926), Countee Cullen's *Copper Sun* (1927), James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones* (1927), Wallace Thurman's *Harlem* (1929), *The Blacker the Berry* (1929) and *Infants of the Spring* (1932), Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1928), *Banjo* (1929) and *Gingertown* (1932), and Arna Bontemps' *God Sends Sunday* (1931). The egregious blunder of the primitivist representational strategy employed in these works was that at the end of the day, it made a fetish of sex and the nightlife rather than giving a faithful, realistic image and analysis of Harlem life. In other words, these works catered to the whims of white Americans and did not give them much information and insight into the racist climate of the early twentieth century United States and the real plight of African American life.

In effect, the key assumptions that formed the Harlem Renaissance writers' understanding and outlook of the American racial atmosphere emanated from their experiences in the perplexing environment of the Jazz Age. They generally maintained that the United States was finally moving in the direction of emancipatory racial reforms, that their literary and artistic productions would play a major role in achieving these racial reforms, and that the major influence of their literary and artistic works would emotionally and psychologically unchain the stunted white America (Washington 2001, p. 25).

Their first supposition, that American society was heading toward racial reforms, appeared to be verified by the increasing interest of white Americans, especially the younger generation of writers, in African American life and culture. The Harlem Renaissance writers believed that American society had barely achieved racial equality and justice. All the same, they thought that "the interest in the cultural expression of Negro life . . . heralds an almost revolutionary revaluation of the Negro" (Alain Locke, qtd. in Osofsky 1965, p. 231); in other words, they held that they saw palpable signs, especially in the primitivist fascination of the young white American writers, that the

country was beginning to reject its conservative Anglo-Saxon mores and prize the cultures and customs of its ethnic and racial minorities. Though conservative white traditionalists regarded this trend as the disconcerting evidence of white America's cultural deterioration, the young black writers viewed it as a testimonial that the United States was finally embracing progressive racial reform (Washington 2001, p. 25).

Second, their supposition that their literary and artistic productions would expedite the process of racial reform was based on their conviction that their works depicted the richness and singularity of African American culture and thus would finally win the recognition and appreciation of white American society. Influenced by the modernist hope of all-encompassing reform through aesthetics and literature, they deemed their productions not simply as artistic works but also as sociocultural credentials that would enlighten and finally transform white American racial attitudes. Since they maintained it was the verve and vivacity of Negro culture that was enchanting white intellectuals to black Harlem nightclubs and cabarets, they concluded that their literary productions, through portraying the "real" ethnic life of black Americans for a broader audience, had the potentiality to expand white society's comprehension and recognition of Negro culture. To achieve that purpose, they held it necessary that black American writers break free from the legacy of pleading and propaganda that had beleaguered earlier African American literary works, and dedicate themselves to writing candidly about the supposedly veracious aspects of black America. This commitment to what they viewed as "literary realism" stemmed from their optimistic confidence in upcoming racial reforms that they claimed would take place after they completed the process of cultural citizenship (Washington 2001, pp. 25-6; Allen 2002, p. 235; Lewis, qtd. in Baker 1987, p. 90; Gates 1997, pp. 3-4; Early 1991, p. 144; Perry 2004, p. 21; Huggins 1971, p. 5; Stewart 2007, p. 17).

One of the most steadfast and significant apologists of black literary realism was undoubtedly Alain Locke (1885-1954), the prominent cultural critic and publicist of the Harlem Renaissance. He called the younger generation of black Americans "the New Negro", since he believed they despised the old bequest of propagandistic literature that had plagued earlier literary representations of black America. "The intelligent Negro of to-day is resolved not to make discrimination an extenuation for his shortcomings in performance", Locke declared in his famous essay heralding the New Negro and added: "He is trying to hold himself at par ... He must know himself and be known for precisely what he is, and for that reason he welcomes the scientific rather than old sentimental interest" (4). Claiming that "the day of 'aunties', 'uncles' and 'mammies' is ... gone", that "Uncle Tom and Sambo have passed on" and that "the popular melodrama has about played itself out" (2), he encouraged 1920s black writers to imitate European modernism, find their African origins and depict facts realistically, by which he meant the portrayal of the seamy side of black life in the northern cities, especially New York. Locke's stance, that "it was through the sublimities of the fine arts, not through political action or protest, that white Americans would at last embrace the Negro", was later criticized by many black intellectuals and civil rights activists who believed that Locke's vision "transformed black militancy and translated it into an apolitical movement with the arts" (Gates, qtd. in Harris 1994, p. 45).

Their third supposition, that the "truthful" representations of African American life and culture would transform white America's narrow worldview, functioned as the covert sociological policy of the Harlem Renaissance, an agenda that was the product

of fledgling black writers' exaggerated optimistic confidence in their social role and influence as literary artists. Aiming to "inject some black blood, some black *intelligence* into the pallid main stream of American life" (John O. Killens, qtd. in Redding 1964, p. 63), they sanguinely envisioned that their "realistic" images of black American culture would emotionally emancipate withered white Americans, and this would in time pave the ground for greater racial understanding and cultural tolerance. In other words, the Harlem Renaissance writers held that by helping white Americans to get rid of their inhibitive conventions and to unchain their desire for sensual pleasures, these black primitivist artistic productions would psychologically liberate white America, and in doing so, they would also humanize the dominant American cultural norms and customs and make them contributive to racial reform. It was in fact the intricate logic of their sociological policy that made them feel justified in depicting African Americans in the context of a hedonistic primitivist ideology (Washington 2001, pp. 26-7).

It should be acknowledged that 1920s American society was undergoing drastic transformations. Nevertheless, contrary to what the Harlem Renaissance writers anticipated, neither the great sociopolitical alterations nor the growing fascination of white American society with black American life gave rise to any considerable change in the racial attitudes of the whites. By grossly underestimating the profundity and the staying power of white American racism, the Harlem Renaissance writers fell prey to a transient white primitivist literary fad whose potential detrimental aftermaths they never took into consideration (Washington 2001, pp. 26-7). In other words, the Harlem Renaissance writers neither grasped the cultural regimen of co-optive hegemony which stemmed from the new interracial friendships, nor cared if their emphasis on certain aspects and features of African American life could confirm and reinforce white America's racist beliefs. They believed that the rebellious black literary standpoint of the Jazz Age originated from sociopolitical, cultural and economic factors within the black American community, and especially from the new assertive and militant racial consciousness of the black masses. However, in reality, the primitivist ideology of the Harlem Renaissance did not emanate from the African American community, since black Americans never considered themselves as uninhibited primitives. In fact, Harlem in the literature of the Renaissance was depicted to be "the Mecca for the sightseer, the pleasure seeker, the curious, the adventurous, the enterprising, the ambitious, and the talented of the world", an "erotic, colorful and sensuous" place "where life wakes up at night" (James Weldon Johnson, qtd. in Shaw 1987, p. 59); that is, few Harlem Renaissance intellectuals dealt with the widespread crime, violence and poverty in the black ghetto. Consequently, a huge void gaped between primitivist ideology of the Harlem Renaissance and black American social consciousness and real life (Washington 2001, pp. 36-7; Huggins 1971, pp. 4-5; Osofsky 1965, p. 235). As Larry Neal stated, the Harlem Renaissance "did not address itself to the mythology and the life styles of the Black community. It failed to take roots, to link itself concretely to the struggles of that community, to become its voice and spirit" (qtd. in Scott 1985, p. 426); Ralph Ellison shared a similar belief and maintained that the Harlem Renaissance writer "had wanted to be fashionable and this insured, even more effectively than the approaching Depression, the failure of the 'New Negro' movement'" (qtd. in Singh 2004, p. 26).

As Jeffrey S. Stewart (2007) pointed out, "the trajectory of success laid out for the black educated was along a path of absorption into the mainstream, and barring that, as was the reality under Jim Crow segregation, lobbying against exclusion and for inclusion

from the position of the outsider" (16). In a similar manner, the African American writer of the early twentieth century was always fluctuating between remaining faithful to subject matters and aesthetic standards derived from his own people and thus less commercial success, and seeking recognition and material reward from the dominant white audience who rejected both his race and his aesthetic standards. For the majority of black writers in America, getting a book published was the ultimate goal (Bernard 2007, p.34). However, the American literary marketplace was extremely hostile to the life-like depictions of African Americans in the works of Negro artists, and this caused a double consciousness for the aspiring black writer who wanted to be the voice of his people and recount their excruciating experiences while at the same time he had to conform and pander to what white society desired African American characters to be (Du Bois, qtd. in Allen 2002, pp. 231-3; Scruggs 1977, pp. 543-4; Scott 1985, pp. 432-3). In other words, the Harlem Renaissance writers were gravely determined to transform the stereotypical Sambo and coon images, which portrayed African Americans as ugly, hauntingly wicked, inferior, barbarous ex-slaves, into an image of a gifted race with unique and liberating folk culture (Scott 1985, p. 429; Gates 1997, p. 10; Bernard 2007, pp. 28-9). However, the movement became trapped in the Jazz Age mythical representational strategy which one-dimensionally depicted African Americans as noble savages and pastoral ideals and, with one or two minor exceptions, could not manage to rise above the dominant stereotype of primitive Negro (Early 1991, p. 142; Singh 2004, p. 24). In fact, the exotic curiosity and the romantic interest of 1920s made little or no distinction between Africans and black Americans and were still nourished by a superior/inferior binarism; therefore, the image of primitive Negro in the Harlem Renaissance literature was just a continuation of the old stereotypes of plantation darky, comic lazy servant and minstrel banjo strummer reconstructed in accordance with the discourse of the Jazz Age, all of which existed only in the fantasies of white America (Moses 1987, pp. 63-4; Beja 1964, p. 324; Osofsky 1965, pp. 234-5; Hill 1966, p.xxii; Huggins 1971, pp. 84-5; Cooper 1964, p. 304; Lemke 1998, p. 27; Arden 1959, p.30). The Harlem Renaissance perpetuated these negative stereotypes and gave rise to a misconception among white Americans regarding the lifestyle and daily affairs of blacks in the urban ghetto. In *The Big Sea*, Langston Hughes described white America's conception of black life in 1920s as "firmly believing that all Harlemites left their homes at sundown to sing and dance in cabarets, because most of the whites saw nothing but the cabarets, not the houses" (qtd. in Bernard 2007, p. 33).

Though racial nationalism and bohemian celebration of Negro exoticism were seemingly black-oriented features of the Harlem Renaissance, they were in fact European artistic trends and the whims of white American readers and patrons that sparked the Harlem Renaissance and molded its prominent features (Washington 2001, p. 45; Podesta 1991, pp. 409-10; Hudlin 2004, pp.8-9). As David G. Holmes (2006) put it, due to "the institutional legacies of slavery and segregation, even broadminded whites are (just like the abolitionists who wrote prefaces attesting to the veracity of slave narratives) more likely to occupy the positions that shape and restrict the production of a range of black discourses" (294). In fact, few white Americans wanted to share, or were capable of sharing, the real experiences of black life in the United States since the representation of these experiences could divulge truths about themselves that they did not dare face. White patrons, or the practitioners of "refined racism" as Louise Thompson called them (qtd. in Kellner 2004, p. 58), had erotic and exotic inclinations,

and were interested in promoting and spending money only on those writers who would feed their uncompromising perceptions of blacks as happy-go-lucky, picturesque and tempting creatures. White publishers and editors, in a similar manner, considered African American literature as belonging, like pornography, to the category of "curiosa" (Redding 1966, p. 1) and usually placed it in a distinct class alongside Chinese or East Indian materials (Singh 2004, p. 30). On that account, patrons, publishers and other culture brokers forced the Negro writer to wear a mask that was not of his own fashioning and function within the ideological and representational structure that white society had set (Redding 1964, p. 64; Kellner 2004, pp. 56-8; Scruggs 1977, p. 544; Ellison 1972, pp. xxi-xxii; Bernard 2007, p. 33). Langston Hughes wrote in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" about what white Americans wanted black authors to write about: "Be stereotyped, don't go too far, don't shatter our illusions about you, don't amuse us too seriously. We will pay you" (29); and Sterling Brown described this restrictive literary market in the following words: "The more truthfully we write about ourselves, the more limited the market. Those novels about Negroes that sell best ... touch very lightly upon the realities of Negro life, books that make our black ghettos in big cities seem very happy places indeed" (qtd. in Redding 1966, p. 5). To state it concisely, the Harlem Renaissance writers succumbed to the tantalizing veneer of the "negretic hysteria", as Wyndham Lewis called it, and their desire to get published; their over-dependence on white patrons' alms and white writers' artistic criteria made them oblivious to the fact that integration could dangerously lead to cultural negation, and therefore, they failed to represent a distinctly African American aesthetic (Lemke 1998, p. 17). This white-prescribed mask, set to be a primitive one in 1920s, gradually turned into a commercialized fad and jaded the faddist appetite of white Americans; as a result, primitivist exoticism, and concomitantly the Harlem Renaissance, fell out of vogue with the occurrence of the catastrophic Great Depression and the financial crisis.

Conclusion

Delusionally optimistic and mired in ethnic provincialism, Harlem Renaissance's choice of primitivist representation of African American life could not alter African Americans' sociopolitically marginalized status and poor financial conditions and advance the black freedom movement. The movement's assimilationist and integrationist strategies and its attempts to cater to the white society's tastes and likings were based on the optimistic agenda that blacks' emulation and appropriation of the dominant primitivist vogue could bring the conflicting races closer together and render a fundamental change in race relations possible. However, the Harlem riot of 1935, in which thousands of blacks took to the streets and showed their deep frustration by damaging millions of dollars worth of white resources, can best depict the fact that the promises of Jazz Age America in effecting racial reforms were mostly delusional (Baker 1987, pp. 88-91; Hutchinson 2007, p. 8). Constructed as "the world's most glamorous atmosphere" and a place "like the Arabian nights" in the literature of the period (Duke Ellington, qtd. in Shaw 1987, p. 59), Harlem could only satisfy the shallow hopes of the frustrated black community, like meeting some white men in Harlem cabarets or dancing with a white girl (De Jongh, qtd. in Echeruo 1996, p. 177). Capitalizing on the new demand of white America for exotic thrills, there opened more than one hundred and twenty-five entertainment centers located in a condensed area between 125th and 135th streets, and between Lenox and

Seventh Avenues, including a number of spectacular cabarets (Shaw 1987, p.59), some of which barred blacks and exclusively catered to white slummers (Washington 2001, p.50).

All in all, Harlem Renaissance could seldom address the real concerns and desires of African Americans. The reason for this lies in the valorization of the putative exoticism, sensuality and hedonism of Harlem life. This romanticized portrait eclipsed the realities of that time which were completely different from this idealized picture: the death rate in Harlem was 42 percent higher than in other sections of New York; the infant mortality rate in the late 1920s Harlem was twice as high as in the rest of the city and the unemployment rate was 50 percent (Gates 1997, p. 11). This stark contrast can best be captured in the words of the narrator of Toni Morrison's novel *Jazz*, set in 1926 Harlem: "Word was that underneath the good times and the easy money something evil ran the streets and nothing was safe - not even the dead" (qtd. in Gates 1997, p. 12); and also in the following extract by LeRoi Jones:

So in one breath Harlem will be the pleasure-happy center of the universe, full of large, hippy mamas in electric colors and their fast, slick-head papas, all of them twisting and grinning in the streets in a kind of existential joyousness that never permits of sadness or responsibility. But in another breath this same place will be the gathering place for every crippling human vice, and the black men there simply victims of their own peculiar kind of sloth and childishness. But perhaps these are not such different versions after all: chances are both these stereotypes come from the same kinds of mind. (qtd. in Lee 1998, pp.50-1)

Unlike what the aspiring black writers of the 1920s believed, the black-white relationship during the Harlem Renaissance and American modernism took place at the height of segregation and at the nadir of race relations (Lemke 1998, p. 17; Sanders 2006, p. 137). There are numerous clues that can attest to this claim: the disaffected white slummers flocked to Harlem cabarets to stare voyeuristically at the supposedly exotic and primitive blacks "like amusing animals in the zoo", not to consider them as equals (Langston Hughes, qtd. in Bernard 2007, p. 33); great black activists of the day, such as Johnson and Du Bois, were unfamiliar names to the average white (Early 1991, p. 140); no federal anti-lynching law was legislated during and after the time the primitivist vogue was at the zenith of popularity and anti-lynching bills were consecutively filibustered in 1921, 1935 and 1940 (Klotman 1985, pp. 55-6); and more famous than all, the Ku Klux Klan gained popularity and momentum in the 1920s, and spread into the North (Zinn 2005, p. 382).

The Harlem Renaissance was irrefutably an important factor in shaping and advancing African American cultural history. However, it transpires under scrutiny that the movement was more a "culturally willed myth", as Henry Louis Gates called it, and "a forced phenomenon", as David Levering Lewis argued (qtd. in Bernard 2007, p.30).

Notes

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