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## The “Vagabond Black” Renaissance

Pamela L. Caughie

Loyola University Chicago, [pcaughi@luc.edu](mailto:pcaughi@luc.edu)

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The “Vagabond Black” Renaissance  
Pamela L. Caughie  
Loyola University Chicago

Panel: The Harlem Renaissance after the Transnational Turn  
Modern Language Association Convention, January 2017

The transnational turn in contemporary scholarship on the Harlem Renaissance is actually a *return* to the perspective of the writers and artists who were formative of that movement. In fact, that global perspective marks a, if not the, key difference between what has been called the “Harlem” Renaissance and the “New Negro” Renaissance that preceded it, and is often conflated with it. Whereas George Hutchinson sees the Harlem Renaissance as “part of a ‘long’ New Negro movement” (445), and my co-presenter, Cherene Sherrard-Johnson, suggests the Harlem Renaissance be renamed the New Negro movement, as it was more commonly understood in its day, I want to maintain a distinction between these two terms, one that reveals the Harlem Renaissance as indisputably modern and modernist. Where the New Negro Renaissance of the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was provincial, rural, primarily southern, and specifically American (focused on the US context), the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 30s was cosmopolitan, urban, modern, and international in scope. The sentimental attitude toward the Negro gave way to the scientific; the Talented Tenth to the masses; the problem of the color line to the social problems of the modern era; an emphasis on education and racial uplift to a concern with racial diversity and racial solidarity; folk tales and the sorrow songs to jazz, blues, and modern dance. Certainly the outpouring of artistic and cultural activity that many of us have long known as the Harlem Renaissance took place elsewhere in the world, as many scholars have

shown,<sup>1</sup> but just as certainly that “elsewhere” inhabited the heart of the Harlem Renaissance—or what might more appropriately be called the “vagabond black” renaissance, to borrow a locution from Claude McKay. Understanding this movement in terms of the “elsewhere within” refigures the modern black artist as vagabond, partaking of and contributing to the modernist sensibility of unlimited boundary crossing.

When I teach African American literature, I make a distinction, as do Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Valerie Smith in the Norton Anthology, between the New Negro Renaissance (roughly 1900 to WWI) and the Harlem Renaissance (1920s and 30s). For me, though, the difference between these two movements is not primarily temporal. Although W.E.B. Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson, who appear in the New Negro section of the Norton, have much in common, the differences between their writings can illustrate the attitudinal shift between the New Negro and the vagabond black writer. For Du Bois, “all Art is propaganda, and ever must be” (776); art is “part of the great fight” for social justice and recognition (771). Johnson is more doubtful of propaganda. When in his preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry* he acknowledges that the “colored poet” in the US faces limitations, Johnson refers not to social *restrictions* but to social *expectations*, in particular “the pressure upon him to be propagandistic [which] is well nigh irresistible” (889). There is an emphasis on individualism and independence here that is expressed in Langston Hughes’s assertion that the younger Negro artists “intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves,” and not write to please either white or “colored” readers (“The Negro Poet and the Racial Mountain,” Norton 1324).

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<sup>1</sup> I have in mind Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* with chapters on DuBois in Germany and Wright in France; Lisa Brock and Digna Castañeda Fuertes’s *Between Race and Empire*, on African-Americans and Cubans; and Brent Edwards’s *The Practice of Diaspora* on black internationalism.

In his preface to the 1912 edition of *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, Johnson claims his narrative lifts the veil, giving “the reader ... a view of the inner life of the Negro in America,” thereby initiating him “into the ‘freemasonry, as it were, of the race’” (792). His audience is implicitly white, as is Du Bois’s audience in *Souls of Black Folk* (1903) for whom he too lifts the veil so that the reader may understand “the strange meaning of being black” in America at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (687). Yet the seriousness and sentiment of *Souls* has given way to the irony of *Autobiography*. Johnson’s first paragraph gives us a narrator who is a trickster figure, a practical jokester, one the reader cannot comfortably trust. When he describes the glass bottles stuck in the garden of his childhood home in Georgia, for example, the narrator does not reveal the meaning of those bottles, thereby keeping the white reader at bay. As Paul Gilroy notes, both Du Bois and Johnson’s protagonist learn how to be black through music, through “the codes, rhythms, and styles of racialised living” (116), Gilroy writes. Yet for Du Bois the sorrow songs of exile and hope are “distinctly Negro” (755), while for Johnson ragtime was national, not racial (Preface 873), and Johnson’s protagonist’s desire to transform ragtime and slave songs into “classic” music was as much about distinguishing himself as his race (847). Du Bois is the one initiated into the freemasonry of the race through the Negro’s expressive arts; the ex-colored man remains apart, the anthropologist not the apologist of the race.

Chapter five on the narrator’s experience in a cigar factory in Jacksonville provides a diasporic perspective missing in much New Negro writing, making explicit reference to the Cuban fight for independence in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Motivating this shift in perspective was the expanded global circulation of cultural products, such as cigars, as well as of writers and artists themselves, that followed World War I. The ubiquitous symbol of sound recording, for example, the dog with his ear to the horn of a gramophone, “assail[ed] the eye in

all the shopping centers of the world,” as Claude McKay writes in *Banjo*.<sup>2</sup> Even if for McKay, modernity in the form of new technologies, urbanization, and mass culture threatened to homogenize differences and thus to endanger black culture, it also served an enabling function, facilitating black cultural expression.<sup>3</sup> The swift dissemination of cultural products worldwide through the forces of mass culture—the gramophone, the radio, and the cinema; fashion, food and brand-name products—rendered the borders separating nations permeable. Like British *Vogue*’s masthead, “Vogue Knows No Frontiers,” the title of Marcus Garvey’s journal, *Negro World*, and the masthead for the *Messenger*, “**World’s** Greatest Negro Monthly,” sought not just to reach out to other peoples and markets, but to define the Negro artist through internationalism, to bring the New Negro into modernity, rendering him cosmopolitan. Garvey gave out free copies of West Indian author René Maran’s *Batouala* (published in France in 1921 and translated into English in 1922) with subscriptions to his journal. Many black journals of the time sought such global expansion through articles, editorials and special issues, such as in *Survey Graphic*’s May 1924 issue on Mexico and articles in the *Messenger* on Russia, India, Ireland, and Japan. As Adam McKibbe and Suzanne Churchill write in their introduction to the Harlem Renaissance issue of *Modernism/modernity*, the *Crisis* (which began publication in 1910) “routinely addressed issues of migration, international relations, and global politics.” It’s not just that the term “Harlem Renaissance” is too narrow to encompass these magazines’, and the movement’s, transnational scope, as McKibbe and Churchill suggest; it’s that the transnational scope defines the Harlem Renaissance. The “elsewhere” is already within that movement.

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<sup>2</sup> In his 1926 review of Carl Van Vechten’s *Nigger Heaven* and Walter White’s *Flight*, D. H. Lawrence writes that in reading these novels one is disappointed to discover that the “Negroid soul ... is an Edison gramophone ... which is what the white man’s soul is, just the same” (*Phoenix* 362). This attitude toward mass culture crossed the color line.

<sup>3</sup> “The Harlem Renaissance,” write Gates and Smith, “can be understood as a conversation (and at times, a debate) among African American artists and intellectuals about the very meaning of modernity from a black perspective” (943).

The most celebrated case is that of Claude McKay, the Jamaican writer whose 1922 poetry collection *Harlem Shadows* is said to have launched the Harlem Renaissance. McKay left Harlem for the Soviet Union that very year and spent the next twelve years traveling and working in Russia (shortly after the 1917 revolution), England, Germany, France, Spain and Northern Africa. His novels, *Home to Harlem* (1928) and *Banjo* (1929), were published when McKay was living abroad. *Banjo* likely had the greatest international reach of any novel associated with the Harlem Renaissance, according to Gates and Smith (1003). With its vagabond protagonists Jake and Ray and its international loosely bound cast of characters who are Arab, African, West Indian, and American Negroes, *Banjo* reveals the migratory movements of modernity and promotes a diasporic (as opposed to national) black identity. And that migratory spirit is bound up with globalization. “Barrels, bags, boxes,” writes McKay.

Grain from Canada, rice from India, rubber from the Congo, tea from China, brown sugar from Cuba, bananas from Guinea, lumber from the Soudan, coffee from Brazil, skins from the Argentine, palm-oil from Nigeria, pimento from Jamaica, wool from Australia, organs from Spain and oranges from Jerusalem. In piled-up boxes, bags and barrels ...  
(Norton 1016).

However resistant to the homogenizing forces of globalization McKay may be, his novel also conveys the romance of commerce, for Ray “loved the life of the docks” and was touched by the “magic of the Mediterranean” (66, 1016). “A story without a plot” (*Banjo*’s subtitle, and itself a signifier of modernism) by “a poet without a country” (as McKay once described himself in a letter to Langston Hughes), the novel presents the modernist artist as vagabond, both traveler and tramp, one with an international mind and a view from below.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> “I am thinking of coming home next fall or winter. I write of America as home. I am really a poet without a country. Maybe that is why I have an international mind.” (McKay to Hughes, 1927)

Langston Hughes also traveled widely, to Mexico, Italy, and France. His poem “I, Too” (1925)—“I, too, sing America”—was written in Italy, significantly, on the back of a letter from McKay; his poem “A Black Perrot” was published in René Maran’s journal in France in July 1924; and “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” (1921), which portrays a trans-historical racial consciousness that is fluid, not rooted or fixed, was written on a 1920 trip to Mexico to be with his father. Yet when we read these poems together in anthologies on the Harlem Renaissance, their cultural locations are often downplayed, if acknowledged at all, thereby consolidating a Harlem Renaissance rooted in a specific locale, eliding the “elsewhere within.”

Yet the difference between the New Negro and the vagabond black writer is less about actual travel (for surely Du Bois traveled widely in Europe as Johnson did in Latin America), than about how that travel figures in the very contours of the writing and the self. Writers and artists of the Harlem Renaissance are rootless, urban and utterly modern in their cultural expressions. As Gilroy observes, “it was through movement, travel,” that black writers came to understand the tension between “roots” and “routes”, “between identity and displacement, and the limits of conceptions of identity based on fixity” (133). Movement or displacement comes to figure an effort to escape from, in Gilroy’s words, “the closed codes of *any* constricting or absolutest understanding of ethnicity” or racial identity (138). Where the New Negro movement sought to consolidate a racial identity—namely, the *New Negro*—through literature and the arts, the modernist “vagabond black” movement unraveled the boundaries of that identity.

Alain Locke’s *The New Negro* (1925), which became a hallmark of the Harlem Renaissance when it was subtitled “Voices of the Harlem Renaissance” in Atheneum’s 1992 edition, seems to mediate between the New Negro and the Harlem renaissances. The New Negro of Locke’s collection is actually a *new* New Negro, no longer challenging the stereotypes of the “old” Negro or

writing to prove the Negro's merit. Locke refers to a new psychology of the younger "New Negroes," "the new spirit [that] is awake in the masses" (973), especially the "migrant masses" (974). Although he uses that phrase more in terms of migration from rural to urban locales rather than the vagabond black of McKay's novel moving from continent to continent, Locke also brings the migrant into modernity by stressing what Gertrude Stein called the time-sense of the 20<sup>th</sup> century figured in the speed of the assembly line. Locke writes of the migrant masses, they "hurdle several generations of experience at a leap" as with the "life attitudes and self-expression of the Young Negro" (974). And as blacks migrate to urban centers, their problems of adjustment are, Locke says, "new, practical, local, and not peculiarly racial" but rather part of the "large industrial and social problems of our present-day democracy" (975). If Harlem is "the laboratory of a great race-welding" where the Negro finds "group expression and self-determination," moving from a "common condition" to a "common consciousness" (976), as Locke writes, such an enterprise is not specific to Harlem or even to the US. Locke compares this experiment to other nationalist movements: "Harlem has the same role to play for the New Negro as Dublin has had for the New Ireland or Prague for the New Czechoslovakia" (976). And in this migration, "the rank and file" he says, "are leading" (976)—that is, the masses, not the Talented Tenth. This *new* New Negro welcomes "the new scientific rather than the old sentimental interest" (977): "In this new group psychology we note the lapse of sentimental appeal, then the development of a more positive self-respect and self-reliance" (978). What remains to be seen, writes Locke, is whether the "this wider race consciousness" as a "world phenomenon" will bring "new Armadas of conflict or argosies of cultural exchange and enlightenment" (981).

Like McKay, Locke uses the merchant ships as a signifier of transnational exchange, the forging of a new international consciousness (981). Locke's anthology, Gilroy has argued,

reveals a tension between American cultural nationalism and an internationalist cultural sensibility, especially in contributions by the Puerto Rican Arthur Schomburg's essay, the Guyanese Eric Walrond's story, Bruce Nugent's African-inspired story, and the Mexican Miguel Covarrubias's sketches. But most important is the closing essay by Du Bois, "Worlds of Color: The Negro Mind Reaches Out," which Houston Baker has recently called "prophetic": "Du Bois's critique of colonial terror, duplicity, and oppression was unequivocally a forerunner to our current expanded critique" (*Modernism/modernity* 434). Yet Du Bois's argument in this essay was anticipated by W. G. Domingo's article on capitalism and colonialism in the August 1919 issue of the *Messenger*. DuBois looks back as much as he does forward. "From its inception," write Gates and Smith, "the cultural flowering of the [Harlem] renaissance was characterized by attempts to 'reach out'" to other parts of the world," (932).

If Locke's *New Negro* anthology marks a transition from the New Negro to the *new* New Negro, Nancy Cunard's *Negro* anthology (1934) shows the Negro fully entrenched in various national cultures. The adjective "New" is no longer necessary. The internationalism of the anthology is far more extensive than Locke's, taking the reader to the West Indies, South American, Europe, and Africa. Cunard's situates black artistic expression within an international *modernist* context, and shows the extent to which race has had a shaping influence on modernist art and international politics.

As I have argued elsewhere, Nella Larsen's Helga Crane embodies this restless, migratory black identity. Helga represents not the confinement of identity by racial and sexual ideologies, as earlier readings emphasized, but, as Jeanne Scheper has argued, "the expansion of identity promised ... by geographic mobility."<sup>5</sup> Helga's movements from one geographic location

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<sup>5</sup> Jeanne Scheper, "The New Negro Flâneuse in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*," *African American Review* (September 2008): 679.

to another—to the north and then back south, across the Atlantic and then back home—like her desire to keep moving, are not an expression of the tragedy of having no home, no determinate race, but rather, Scheper claims, "a mobile performance of modern subjectivity" (686). Home, with its comfort of familiar conventions and its connotations of stasis and permanency, does not fit the modernist sensibility. Instead of longing for a home, for stasis, Helga conceptualizes herself as "moving shuttle-like from continent to continent" (96) so that (to borrow the words of Michael North) "the only place [she] finally belonged was in transit" (*Reading 1922*, 12).

The argument I am making here is neither new nor original, but I think it bears repeating as we seek to expand the spatial and temporal boundaries of the Harlem Renaissance. To conceive the Harlem Renaissance as distinct from the New Negro Renaissance, in terms of a vagabond black writer, is to situate black artistic expression within an international context and a shared experience of modernity. Such border crossing, facilitated by new technologies and fueled by an increasingly consumer culture in the interwar period, had a profound effect on the imagining of national and personal identity in modernist cultural productions. The psychic effects of such shifting and permeable borders of national and personal space define the art and literature we now call the "new" modernism.

Certainly the New Negro strain persists into the mid 20<sup>th</sup>-century, which is why the difference between the two movements is not strictly temporal. Reading Margo Jefferson's memoir *Negroland*, I was struck by the passage she sites from James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son*:

The story of the Negro in America is the story of America—or more precisely, it is the story of Americans. ... One may say that the Negro in America does not really exist

except in the darkness of our minds. . . . The ways in which the Negro has affected the American psychology are betrayed in our popular culture and in our morality; in our estrangement from him is the depth of our estrangement from ourselves.

“James Baldwin,” Jefferson writes, “is proclaiming right of entry with every possessive pronoun, integrating America by means of grammar and syntax. . . . The Negro Baldwin has inserted himself into your life, white reader.” *That’s* the New Negro strain that Hutchinson rightly traces from Du Bois to Martin Luther King, Jr.. It’s about the centrality of the Negro to American life and culture.

But there’s the other strain, the one I’m calling the vagabond black strain.” It’s in the reference to the Cuban revolution in the novel of passing, or in the life of the Puerto Rican Arthur Schomburg, who worked for Cuban independence. Let’s dig up *that* past.<sup>6</sup> When I took my students to see the *Messenger* magazine issues at the Newberry Library, I noted the names of writers they were reading in my course, those included in the Norton anthology—stories by Zora Neale Hurston and Wallace Thurman, poems by Langston Hughes, and Georgia Johnson, editorials by James Weldon Johnson—as well as articles on topics we would discuss—J. A. Rogers’s “Who is the New Negro and Why?”, W. G. Domingo’s “What Are We—Negroes or Colored People,” Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s symposium on Negro womanhood. What I passed over, unfortunately, were articles on the Bolshevik revolution, the immigration of Jews, the independence of India, Japan and the race question, De Valera (president of the Irish Republic) and internationalism. This is the “elsewhere within” that we should return to when participating in the transnational turn in studies of the Harlem Renaissance.

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<sup>6</sup> Schomburg’s contribution to Locke’s New Negro anthology is entitled “The Negro Digs Up His Past.”