

THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE AND THE CANONIZATION OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERARY EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

The Harlem Renaissance, an African-American socio-political, cultural and literary movement, was known, among many other things, for its literary outpourings and has continued to attract a flurry of critical attention. While critics have focussed on the ripple effects of the cutting-edge issues of identity, subjectivities and cultural rootedness which pre-occupied the writers of the Harlem Renaissance and which have undoubtedly traversed national and international boundaries, it is its canon-forming potentialities that we explore in this paper. Thus based on a new-historicist approach, the paper seeks to examine the various ways by which the movement has subtended the present canonical status of the African-American literary tradition. The paper delves into the historiography of canonicity in African-American literature before critically analysing the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance to arrive at the conclusion that the movement was catalytic toward the eventual canonization of black American literature.

Key-words: *Harlem Renaissance, Canon-Formation, Black Literature, African-America, Poetry*

1. INTRODUCTION: THE EVOLUTION OF CANONICITY IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN LITERATURE

According to *The Oxford Companion to African-American Literature*, the word “canon” derives from the Greek “kanon” which meant “a measuring rod or rule” (119). It also asserts that the word, until recently, had been limited to discussions of ecclesiastical concerns. “Critics appropriated the word ‘canon’ to emphasize the subjectivities, ideologies or acts of faith that blessed some works and banished others...Many scholars agree that canonization is a continuing if not contested process influenced by a variety of factors, including when a work is published and by whom, who wrote it, how representative it is,

who reviewed it, and who champions it" (119). George P. Landow in "The Literary Canon" succinctly corroborates that:

To enter the canon, or more properly, to be entered into the canon is to gain certain obvious privileges...Belonging to the canon confers status: social, political, economic, aesthetic, none of which can easily be extricated from the others. Belonging to the canon is a guarantee of quality, and that guarantee of high aesthetic quality serves as a promise, a contract... (33)

Willie Van Peer in his "Canon-Formation: Ideology or Aesthetic Quality?" has taken exception to the above assertions by underscoring the uniquely political factors which condition canonicity. He asserts that, "Selecting something for inclusion in the canon (and excluding others) would be considered political action in the very sense of the word. Is not evaluation always relative to some aims or purposes, thus readily linked to political action?" (97)

This paper, however, considers all the above definitions as mutually inclusive and valid to a certain extent. Firstly, we consider canonicity in terms of the combination of certain cultural, political as well as artistic factors that condition a work's acceptance by critics, academics and the general public as a whole. Secondly, that these factors may either be explicit or implicit. For instance, Alice Walker's 1980 novel, *The Color Purple*, received the Pulitzer Prize precisely for these three reasons: politically, the book exposed the inhuman treatment of young and unprotected black girls at a time when black feminism was making important strides across the American sub-continent; artistically, the book's innovative form (the epistolary mode represented in the Black Vernacular English) was hailed by both critics and the general public while its combination of both African and African American oral/traditional customs was acclaimed as an important patrimony. Thus canonicity, from this perspective, involves at once aesthetic, artistic and political characteristics which qualify a work for admission into the pantheon of canon-formation. Since most of these characteristics are also culturally-specific, our paper considers canonicity from an afrocentric perspective¹

African-American literature began as a reflection of the traumatic experiences of the African-American people with the evil forces of slavery, racism and classism. During slavery, black people received the most barbaric treatment ever in the history of mankind. Apart from being used as field hands, they were dehumanized and treated merely as beasts of burden. The women were also used as objects of the slaveholder's lechery and also as breeders. The black man's image is thus shrouded in this legacy of slavery and is reflected in the literature at the time. Symbolically, the first literary work to be written in African American literary history was by a slave woman named Lucy Terry, who composed a poem entitled, "Bars Fight" in 1746, later published in 1885. By her act, "she set in motion a poetic tradition characterized by a furious pursuit of liberation in all of its dimension as well as a cultivation of a cultural voice authenticated by its own distinctive oral forms and remembered, communal values," notes *The Oxford Companion to African American*

¹For more on "afrocentricity" see Molefi Kete Asante. *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change* (1988).

Literature. Yet the hard nut was cracked precisely in 1773 when the first ever formal publication of a literary piece composed by an African slave in America entitled *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* appeared. Composed by an adolescent African slave woman named Phyllis Wheatley who was kidnapped from her native African homeland and sold as a slave in America in 1761 at the tender age of seven, this book served as a path-finder with regard to the context of its publication. Due to the fact that colonial America did not believe in the “myth” of the humanity of African slaves, and hence in their ability to write the fine arts, Wheatley, also nick-named as the “Sable Muse of Boston” (Quoted in Henry Louis Gates, Jr., 7) had to be subjected to an oral examination before a grand jury constituted of the best known patriarchal dignitaries of her home town, Boston. The “Attestation” issued at the end of the examination, and which featured in bold characters in the prefatory part of her published poetic collection, read as follows:

We whose Names are underwritten, do assure the World, that the poems specified in the following Page, were (as we verily believe) written by Phyllis, a young Negro girl, who was but a few years since, brought an uncultivated Barbarian from Africa, and has ever since been, and now is, under the Disadvantage of serving as a Slave in a Family in this Town. She has been examined by some of the best judges, and is thought qualified to write them. (Quoted in Henry Louis Gates, Jr., 8)

According to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Wheatley’s poems earned her scores of reviews which argued that the African was indeed a human being and should not be enslaved (9). Soon afterwards, Wheatley’s publication led to her eventual manumission as well as to that of a black male slave named George Moses Horton (noted as “the slave poet”), who emulated her example (fifty years later) by publishing a book entitled, *The Hope of Liberty* (1829)². Thus canonicity for these beginning slave authors served not only a literary/aesthetic purpose, but also a utilitarian one, that is, accession to manumission. The significance of Wheatley’s heroic contribution, not only to the ultimate canonization of Black women’s literature in America in particular but also to the general, mainstream, canon of African American literature in general, can only be assessed within the context of the exceedingly difficult circumstances of the acquisition of literacy by slaves in America. A concrete example is the following 1740 South Carolina statute prohibiting the acquisition of literacy by slaves:

Be it enacted, that all and every person and persons whatsoever, who shall hereafter teach, or cause any slave or slaves to be taught to write, or shall use or employ any slave to write; every such person or persons shall, for every offense, forfeith the sum of one hundred pounds current money. (Quoted in Louis Gates, Jr., 1985: 10)

Such statutes completely barred the way for slaves’ acquisition of formal education, and hence stymied their eventual accession to literary composition.

²One of the greatest ironies of slavery is precisely the fact that slavers made it a cherished creed to keep slaves illiterate and sternly punished individuals who contravened this rule yet early cases of manumission were obtained through royalties from the sale of slaves’ published books.

Hence it took slaves extra-human courage to acquire literacy. Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s description of her as "the progenitor of the black literary tradition" (Quoted in *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*, 446) summarises the whole issue. Nonetheless, Evelyn C. White notes that Alice Walker has had to champion a move toward a serious reassessment of Wheatley's literary achievements because she discovered that this eighteenth century enslaved but brave writer was a victim of undeserved derision among black Academics:

We now know that you were not an idiot or a traitor; only a sickly black girl, snatched from... your country and made a slave' Alice Walker declared in defense of a poet whose work had been dismissed as conformist and fawning to whites. (Alice Walker in Evelyn C. White, 223)

Furthermore, and in connection with the canon-forming trajectory of the African American literature, Nat Turner published the first ever literary testament entitled, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1860), which is noted for its strong protest undertone. In a sense her work set the stage for resistance writing in the African American literary tradition, especially as subsequent confessions adopted almost the same protest undertone, themes and styles.

Furthermore, in 1861 Harriet Jacobs published *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* which ushered in the era of the genre of slave narrative. Her work's unique significance lay in the then taboo subject which formed its central thematic focus, namely, the sexual exploitation of slave girls, a theme which, up till present, still occupies center stage in modern literary composition by African American women. Next in this chain of canon-formers was Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the first novel ever by an African American published in 1852 and whose popularity was such that it sold three hundred thousand copies in its first year. As an abolitionist novel, it based its thematic focus on the various slave narratives existing at the time. The popularity of Stowe's novel was such that the central protagonist, Uncle Tom, became a stock figure among both white and black writers alike. The novel was particularly inspirational to many black women writers, hence Stowe became canonized, albeit informally, in her lifetime as many subsequent female writers considered her a spiritual, moral and intellectual guide. Henrietta Cordelia Ray and Paul Laurence Dunbar's 1898 classic sonnet praised Stowe as a "prophet and priestess" whose voice "spoke to consciences that long had slept" (Quoted in *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*, 1997: 705). Frances Ellen Watkins's classic *Iola Leroy* (1892) which continues to endear itself to many a reviewer today was wholly inspired by *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. On the contrary, many eminent male critics rather demonised Stowe's novel. James Baldwin, for instance, referred to it simply as "a bad novel" characterised by a "self-righteous, virtuous sentimentality motivated less by sincere empathy for African Americans oppressed by slavery and more by Stowe's desire for moral salvation and the assimilation of African Americans into her own moral and cultural purview" (Baldwin, 1955: 14). Such acerbic indictments notwithstanding, Stowe still stands tall today as a canon-forming prodigy in the African American literary tradition.

By the first half of the twentieth century, precisely with the advent of the Harlem Renaissance and the emergence of avant-garde writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, Jessie Redmond Fauset and the legendary Gwendolyn Brooks (with the publication of her best-selling, first ever African American Pulitzer-Prize winning novel, *Annie Allen* (1949)), the full contours of the African American women's literary canon were beginning to be fully stretched. The emergence of phenomenal writers such as Toni Morrison (first Nobel prize laureate), Alice Walker (second Pulitzer prize laureate), Ntozake Shange, Margaret Walker, Maya Angelou, among many others, helped in fully defining the blueprints of the canon.

Interestingly, the first critic of African American literature did not betray any sexist instincts. William Wells Brown's *The Black Man, His Antecedents, His Genius and His Achievements*, published as early as 1863, was epoch-making in the sense of providing a pioneer exploration of the African American literary tradition. Despite the phallic connotation of its title, Brown's work provided a fairly balanced representation of the writers of both sexes. His critical work explicitly argued for the existence of a cultural "genius" peculiar to African Americans, which he defined as rooted both in their American past of resistance to racial oppression and in African culture.

Following on the heels of Brown's work, many more critical analyses of the tradition of African American literature and its blueprints continued to stumble out of the press. Most notable among those was Monroe A. Majors's *Noted Negro Women, Their Triumphs and Activities* (1893) which marked a formal recognition of Black women's capital role in the African American tradition. Next was the flourishing of literary societies, which made an effort, though very niggardly, to include women. One of the most famous and influential of them was the Washington, D.C., Bethel Literary and Historical Association in which a black woman, Anna Julia Cooper, was a member.

Given the increasing demands for the African American woman to be the true interpreter of her own experience, the first African American women's newspaper, *Woman's Era*, was founded in 1894 which logically gave a greater impetus to the production of more critical works focusing specifically on women's literary works. Works such as Gertrude B. Mossel's *The Work of the Afro-American Woman* (1894), the magazine, *Voice of the Negro* (1894-1907) which brought out the series "Famous Women of the Negro Race", came out as a consequence. W.E.B. Dubois's 1913 canon-making article "The Negro in Literature and Art" was profoundly influential for two reasons: firstly, it emphasized the syncretic nature and folk roots of African American culture thus providing subsequent critics (such as Houston Baker and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.) with principles of criticism to articulate an independent African American literary tradition and to evaluate autonomously the aesthetic value of each black author and of each text. Secondly, and on a negative note, it manifested a masculinist bias in mentioning dozens of male writers and only two women. The gauntlet cast by Dubois was soon taken up by succeeding generations of African American critics such as Benjamin Brawley in his 1918 book entitled *The Negro in Literature and Art* which focused basically on the distinctive properties of African American literature such as the influence of folklore and folk music.

These perspectives were pushed to a wider spectrum of overlapping concerns and issues in the first half of the twentieth century by modernist critics such as Langston Hughes in his essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (1929), Richard Wright’s “Blueprint For Negro Writing” (1937) (which has been hotly contested by many black feminists for its summary dismissal of precursory works of black women such as Zora Neale Hurston’s as lacking literary worth), Ralph Ellison’s “Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity” (1953) and Arthur P. Davis’s “Integration and Race Literature” (1956). These works helped to define an evolving aesthetic that moved black culture from the periphery to the center of literary discourse. It was symbolized in the movement called the Black Aesthetic Movement. Beyond the sixties till the present, the Black Aesthetic Movement has received a critical/theoretical insight from eminent black scholars like Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal and Maulana Ron Karenga who rejected in unequivocal terms the idea (supported by James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison) that black literature be judged by a universal aesthetic rather than by its political content or its author’s racial identity. They insisted that all literature has a social function and that the so-called universal aesthetic was racist and oppressive.

No sooner had the black aesthetic school gained shape and grounding than another, diametrically opposed, school emerged among the black critics called the “Reconstructionists.” Led by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., the reconstructionists read African-American literature in purely formal and literary-historical, rather than political terms. Their poststructuralist positions later expanded to a wider perspective which eclectically combined symbolic anthropology, sociolinguistics, social constructivism, and other elements that emphasize discursive practices in the study of literature.

On the whole, African American literature has come of age and has attained a canonical status. Not only is the mainstream literature making great strides across the world, other peripheral canons such as black women’s literature have equally left an indelible mark.

2. THE CANON-FORMING THEMES AND STYLE OF THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE POETRY

Having traced the historiography of the evolution toward the canonization of the African American literature, this part of the paper explores the canon-forming themes and styles of the Harlem Renaissance poetry. Some of these themes and styles included, among many others, activism, spirituality, primitivism, music, Black Vernacular English and liminal humour/

To begin with, the 1920s witnessed the blossoming of an identity consciousness amongst the blacks in the United States of America that came to be referred to as the Harlem Renaissance. Apart from the centuries of slavery, exploitation and racism that blacks have been subjected to, the aftermath of the First World War was a defining moment in the history of African Americans as far as their quest for liberty and equality is concerned. The hope of the black community for acceptance and equality turned to disillusionment and bitterness at the end of World War I, when returning black soldiers experienced untold rate of unemployment and marginalisation. At this period, Harlem was host to many African American intellectuals who started employing arts to raise

awareness about the maltreatment of the blacks in the USA. This renaissance to a great extent ushered in the civil rights movement of the late 1940s and early 1950s. These black artists used music, poetry, paintings and organised meetings to voice out their frustrations.

In this part of the paper, we shall focus on the selected poems of such Harlem Renaissance poets as Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Jessie Rodman Fauset, Claude McKay, Alain Locke and James Weldon Johnson. The works of these writers clearly reveal the canon-forming potentialities of the Harlem Renaissance literature as revealed by the detailed and critical analysis of the selected poets.

To begin with, one of the most important canonical themes of the Harlem Renaissance is activism. Activism is a term borrowed from German *Aktivismus*, from *aktiv* + *-ismus* -ism. It comes from the word activist (1915) which stands for one who advocates a doctrine of direct action. Originally, the word activism was used in reference to a political movement in Sweden advocating abandonment of neutrality in World War I and active support for the Central Powers. According to the *Webster's World New College Dictionary*, activism is defined as a doctrine or policy of taking positive, direct action to achieve an end, especially a political or social end.⁽¹²⁾

The theme of activism in the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance will be explored from a new historicist viewpoint. New historicism posits that literary works are not singular or solitary forms, but, instead, a product of different networks of socio-material practices. New Historicism is characterised by a parallel reading of a text with its socio-cultural and historical conditions, which form the co-text. New Historicism, as Louis Montrose suggested, deals with the “textuality of history and the historicity of texts.” Textuality of history refers to the idea that history is constructed and fictionalised, and the historicity of text refers to its inevitable embedment within the socio-political conditions of its production and interpretation. It is worth noting that the artistic renaissance that blossomed within the ranks of African Americans in Harlem in the 1920s was informed by the vexing history of racial segregation in the United States of America.

To begin with, Langston Hughes, who is one of the most authoritative voices of the Harlem Renaissance vividly captures and contextualises the spirit of the movement in his poetry. As a valiant and militant activist of the black cause, his poetry clearly depicts the theme of activism. His famous poem entitled “Let America be America Again,” is a lamentation on the unfulfilled aspirations of the New World’s dream of freedom and equality for all the citizens. Instead of the freedom, brotherliness and equality that was evoked by the planting fathers³ of the United States long before American independence, what Langston experiences as a black in America is a sharp contrast of this lofty dream. In anger and frustration, Hughes takes to writing as a means to urge 20th century Americans to return to the fundamental values that the American nation was built on. In the second and fifth stanzas of the above poem, the speaker berates thus,

³ Planting fathers of the United States of America are the early immigrants (Puritans) who landed on the New World with a vision to raise a nation that would be described as a Christian commonwealth or as a city on the hill.

Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed—
 Let it be that great strong land of love
 Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme
 That any man be crushed by one above... (6-9)
 ... I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars.
 I am the red man driven from the land,
 I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek—
 And finding only the same old stupid plan
 Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak. (19-24)

By employing the technique of contrast, the first stanza above clearly portrays the American dream for a better, more glorious future but contrasts it with the second stanza which rather depicts the dream deferred. The metaphoric reference to the “Negro bearing slavery’s scars”, the “red man driven from the land” and the “immigrant clutching the hope I seek” evokes the bitter memory of a long history of brutality and dehumanization that has rendered Americans spiritually and morally decadent. The image of “dog eat dog” and “mighty crush the weak” represents a satiric rendition of the inhumane characteristics of the American capitalism. Langston Hughes’s activism is revealed in this poem by his exhortation of Americans to revive the American dream which tends toward the general welfare and spiritual wholeness of the entire American peoples. This theme has endeared itself to several generations of African American writers including Richard Wright, Margaret Walker, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker,

Claude McKay is another prominent Harlem Renaissance poet whose activism towards the black liberation cause cannot be under-estimated. Being an active member of the Universal Negro Improvement Association⁴, he published several articles in this association’s journal entitled, *Negro World*. In one of his famous poems entitled “If we must Die,” he reiterates his stance to aggressively fight back the tyranny and oppression of the blacks by the whites in the United States of America. In the closing lines of his poem, “If We Must Die”, the poet speaker warns thus:

...If we must die, O let us nobly die,
 So that our precious blood may not be shed
 In vain...
 Like men we’ll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
 Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back! (13-14)

The speaker in the above poem sounds like a staunch revolutionary who is ready to pay the ultimate price for the freedom of his race that is under severe threat of complete annihilation by a ruthless powerful majority of oppressors. Due to the degree of victimisation and cruelty against the blacks, the poet-speaker is bent on resisting even if it means giving his life in the struggle for freedom and equality. Facing “the murderous, cowardly pack” is suggestive of the cruelty and recklessness of the oppressors that the speaker is fighting against. McKay’s spirit of activism like that of Langston Hughes is a peculiar characteristic of Harlem Renaissance poets. Being a movement whose main objective was to champion the cause of black liberation and freedom in the New

⁴ This was a black nationalist fraternal organization founded by Marcus Garvey in July 1914.

World, the activist option was necessarily adopted to portray the plight of their oppressed race in the racist/capitalist 20th century American society.

Jessie Redmon Fauset (1882–1961) was a female African American activist whose poetry greatly contributed to the effervescence of the Harlem Renaissance. In 1912, Fauset began to write for the NAACP's⁵⁵ official magazine, *The Crisis*. After several years contributing poems, essays, and reviews to *The Crisis*, Fauset became the journal's literary editor in 1919, moving to New York City for the position. Her poem "Oriflamme" published in 1920 depicts her fervent wish for the alleviation of the plight of the blacks in the United States of America. In the first stanza of the poem, the speaker in disillusionment declares thus,

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. (1-4)

From the excerpt above, Fauset's choice of words to capture the black traumatic experience in the New World (their land of bondage) evokes a deep feeling of pain. Like an ardent activist, she captures the predicament of the Negroes in a way that sets every conscientious American ready for affirmative action to alleviate the plight of the black race that she metaphorically represents as "bowed and black, stricken and seared with slavery's mortal scars." The pain is increased when the speaker states that apart from the affliction from slavery, the oppressed/exploited ones still reel from the fact that their children have been forcefully separated from them to continue working as slaves elsewhere. Such is the gross abuse of human rights that was perpetuated on fellow humans in the "supposedly land of the free." Entangled in such a dilemma, Fauset uses poetry as her tool or weapon to stir the blacks to stand up and fight for their freedom.

From the analysis of the poetry of the three Harlem Renaissance poets above, the theme of activism is depicted via metaphors, imagery, and choice of diction whose *modus operandi* is the stirring of consciences and a call toward affirmative action. It is evident that the history of racism and its consequent marginalization of blacks in the United States of America has been constructed and fictionalised in the above poems. The theme of activism being a canon-forming blueprint of the Harlem Renaissance movement as depicted in the above poems reminds us of the deplorable socio-political conditions of African Americans in the Jim Crow society. This theme features prominently in the works of such contemporary writers as Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Toni Cade Bambara, among many others. This analysis of the theme of activism in the above poems ties in with the new historicists' concept of the textuality of history and the historicity of the text.

Another canon-forming theme of the Harlem Renaissance literature is music. Although music had existed among slaves in the form of Negro spirituals and the blues, Harlem Renaissance writers were the first to incorporate it into their poetic. The jazz music which emerged within the Renaissance period as a

⁵⁵ This is the acronym for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Founded in 1909 in response to the violence against blacks in the USA. The NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) was the largest and most pre-eminent civil rights organization in the nation.

by-product of the blues was incorporated into the poetry. According to Louis Porter (2018), the word “jazz” derives from the slang word “jasm,” which originally meant energy, vitality and spirit. (20) CFrom trhe heyday of slavery till the Renaissance period, not only did they use music to heal their broken souls due to centuries of inhumane servitude, they also used music especially the blues as a weapon, to protest against oppression and suppression.

Langston Hughes was amongst the first to use jazz rhythms and dialect to depict the life of urban African Americans in his work. He portrays in his poem “The Weary Blues,” how the blacks used the blues to express their feelings of despondency and anger against their oppressors. The poem evokes the mournful tone and tempo of blues music and gives its reader an insight into the mind of the speaker who himself is the musician. The opening lines of the poem already paint a bleak or mournful atmosphere in the mind of the reader. The poem opens thus:

Droning a drowsy syncopated tune,
Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon,
I heard a Negro play... (1-3)

The choice of words by the poet in the lines above is suggestive of a dreary and pessimistic state of mind. The element of “a drowsy and syncopated tune rocking back and forth” evinces the rising and falling rhythm of the jazz music as it depicts a soul seething in intermittent pain. The unequal lines of the poem finally cement the disturbed state of mind of the Negro musician in the poem. Due to the precarious conditions Negroes of the twenties were subjected to, the song is bound to be gloomy if not weary as the title of the poem denotes. This music is said to be “coming from a black man’s soul” precisely because blues and jazz are music of the soul. In his/her soul searching lyrics, the speaker asserts that:

Ain't got nobody in all this world,
Ain't got nobody but ma self.
I's gwine to quit ma frownin'
And put ma troubles on the shelf....

I got the Weary Blues
And I can't be satisfied.
Got the Weary Blues
And can't be satisfied—
I ain't happy no mo'
And I wish that I had died. (22-27)

The strength of this song lies in its choice of words that brightly paint the unhappy state of mind of the singer. His broken language not only depicts a broken and battered spirit, but is also suggestive of his vexing degree of under scholarisation. While his white oppressors go to good schools and eat fat from the labour of the Negroes, the Negro child like the musician in the poem is subjected to under paid labour, marginalisation, illiteracy and abject poverty. His sorrow and frustration are such that he prefers to die. He sings as the last resort just to help himself to somehow “put ma troubles on the shelf.” Even with the “Weary Blues” he is not still satisfied. The repetition of “I got the Weary Blues”

“I can’t be satisfied” is to lay emphasis on his alarming state of bitterness and frustration due to racism. By concluding in the song that “... I wish that I had died”, the speaker considers death as the only gateway for him to heal his broken soul. The speaker’s willingness to face death with equanimity is a tradition that started with slavery and ties with Harold Aram Veesser’s (1989) assertion that every expressive act is embedded in a network of material practices (xi). It is thus worth noting that the trauma of the poet-speaker as captured in the concluding lines of “The Weary Blues” is just a microcosm of the trauma of the blacks toiling under the bondage of whites’ heartless and prolonged exploitation in the 20th century American society.

As seen in “The Weary Blues” above, Jazz played a great role in the black struggle for survival in the deeply racist American society of the 1920s. This poem clearly depicts the motivation behind the blues and the great role it played in the conscientisation of the people world-wide about racism in the United States of America. Music became a flagship feature of the Harlem Renaissance as seen in the rise and fame that Jazz music recorded in the USA, and across the world. Even after the twenties, the civil rights movement that characterised the late forties to the sixties used music especially the blues in their non-violent demonstrations across the United States of America. This again justifies the new historicist’s view that a literary text is informed by the history of the author and its interpretation is also influenced by the history of the critic.

Another key-feature of the Harlem Renaissance poetry is its language. New Historicism assumes that every work is a product of the historic moment that created it. This theory has developed out of contemporary theory, particularly the structuralist realization that all human systems are symbolic and subject to the rules of language, and the deconstructive realisation that there is no way of positioning oneself as an observer outside the closed circle of textuality. Lois Tyson further expounds on the type of questions that traditional historians and new historicists pose when retelling history. While traditional historians ask “What happened?” and “what does the event tell us about history?”, in contrast, new historicists ask “how has the event been interpreted?” and “what do the interpretations tell us about the interpreters?” (278). The use of language in the poetry of Harlem Renaissance poets is very symbolic. Apart from the fact that it is a canon-forming feature of the Harlem Renaissance, it also reveals a great deal about the vexing history of the poets. Thus the use of broken English in the poetry of Harlem Renaissance writers is very telling of the conditions of the Negroes themselves. This is the type of English or creole that Negroes can afford to speak because they have been deprived from their indigenous African languages and good English. The language factor is also an aspect of social classification in that their language alone reflects their low level of education and their low class status in the American society. James Weldon Johnson in his poem “Sence You Went Away” is a typical example of a poem written in the Black Vernacular English that the Negroes are familiar with. There is a deep sense of regret and loss that cuts across the poem. The third and fourth stanzas of the poem glaringly portray the speaker’s bitterness:

Seems lak to me dat eve'ything is wrong,
Seems lak to me de day's jes twice ez long,

Seems lak to me de bird's forgot his song,
Sence you went away.

Seems lak to me I jes can't he'p but sigh,
Seems lak to me ma th'oot keeps gittin' dry,
Seems lak to me a tear stays in ma eye,
Sence you went away. (9-16)

The feeling of loss is deep coupled with the poor conditions that the speaker lives in with other Negroes in the American racist society of the 20th century. The poor or broken language that the poem is written in does not only depict the appalling level of under scholarisation of the negroes but also depicts their brokenness due to years of untold suffering and disillusionment.

Langston Hughes in his poem "The Weary Blues" also portrays the aspect of language as a canon-forming feature of the Harlem Renaissance. Like James Weldon, he also uses the language of the Negroes, the Black Vernacular English, in his poem. The lyrics of the blues' musical piece go thus:

Ain't got nobody in all this world,
Ain't got nobody but ma self.
I's gwine to quit ma frownin'
And put ma troubles on the shelf. (19-22)

As seen in the excerpt of the poem above, the language is not refined. However, the song communicates the plight of the Negroes in their own language. They identify with this variation of the English language and thus effectively use it as weapon to fight against marginalisation, torture and other forms of violation of their rights as humans. From a new historicist point of view, a critical method and a language adequate to describe culture under capitalism participate in the economy they describe. In a capitalist society like that depicted in the poems above, the language of the oppressed masses adequately reflect their plight not just as victims of American capitalism but also as victims of racism. This aspect of language in the poetry of Harlem Renaissance writers has indeed turned out to be a peculiar feature of the movement. Its impact is still felt in contemporary African American literature.

Furthermore, religion plays a significant role in the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance just as it has traditionally impacted on the lives of the Negroes especially during slave trade and in the Jim Crow era in the USA. Apart from their African religious practices that were considered by their oppressors and other Negroes to be pagan, the impact of Christianity in the lives of African Americans was very significant. The aspect of religion as a canon-forming feature of the Harlem Renaissance is glaring as seen in the artistic productions of African American artists of the period.

To begin with, Countee Cullen in his poem "Heritage," stresses the fact that a black Christ could command his faith better than the white one. This view was again highlighted in his 1929 publication entitled *The Black Christ, and Other Poems*. In "Heritage" the poet-speaker rubbishes idolatry and considers it pagan. His conversion to Christianity was a great achievement to him just like the first black American poet, Phillis Wheatley, considered her conversion

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to Christianity as the greatest thing that ever happened to her. This is the declaration of the speaker in the poem “Heritage” about his conversion:

Quaint, outlandish heathen gods
 Black men fashion out of rods,
 Clay, and brittle bits of stone,
 In a likeness like their own,
 My conversion came high-priced;
 I belong to Jesus Christ,
 Preacher of humility;
 Heathen gods are naught to me. (85-92)

Cullen does not seem to identify with the pagan gods he describes as “Quaint, outlandish heathen gods.” He is proud to declare that he belongs to Jesus Christ because Christ alone is capable of helping him to overcome the many challenges he faces including the racial challenges that Negroes faced in the Jim Crow society. It should be noted that like the Negro Spirituals, Cullen uses his poetry to pass through his message of complete dependence on Christ as a guarantee for a better society for both blacks and whites in the 20th century American society.

Similarly, primitivism and Negritude strongly characterised the Harlem Renaissance poetry. The Negroes’ precarious living conditions in the New World were such that, they started developing nostalgia for their roots. They started thinking of their lost culture and the many natural resources in Africa they were forced to abandon. The aspect of primitivism is yet another landmark feature of the Harlem Renaissance. According to Washington Ba Sylvia, **primitivism** is an outlook on human affairs that sees history as a decline from an erstwhile condition of excellence or holds that salvation lies in a return to the past simple life (31). This what she refers to as cultural primitivism (32). Negritude as defined by Leopold Senghor is the “sum of the cultural values of the black world as they are expressed in the life, the institutions, and the works of blacks (Senghor in Washington Ba Sylvia, 35).

It should be noted that writers of the Harlem revolution celebrate the natural endowment of Africa and wished that they returned to Africa. At the backdrop of racism in a foreign land, these writers instilled the spirit of nostalgia in the minds of fellow blacks as seen in their works of art. Countee Cullen in his poem “Heritage” published in 1915, celebrates the beauty and diversity of Africa’s natural resources. This can be seen in the excerpt below:

Africa? A book one thumbs
 Listlessly, till slumber comes.
 Unremembered are her bats
 Circling through the night, her cats
 Crouching in the river reeds,
 Stalking gentle flesh that feeds
 By the river brink; no more
 Does the bugle-throated roar
 Cry that monarch claws have leapt
 From the scabbards where they slept.
 Silver snakes that once a year

Doff the lovely coats you wear,
 Seek no covert in your fear
 Lest a mortal eye should see;
 What's your nakedness to me?... (31-45)

From the excerpt, identifies with his roots which some Christian fanatics describe as being pagan and devilish. The Harlem Renaissance witnessed the flowering of such nostalgic awareness in the ranks of Africans in the diaspora. The negritude movement that started within the ranks of Francophone Africans in the diaspora in the 1930s was somehow informed by the Harlem renaissance that saw its rise in America in the 1920s. It is worth noting that many African American poets including Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and Johnson Weldon actually made trips to Africa to discover and identify with their roots.

On the whole, this paper has employed the Newhistoricist concept of the textuality of history as well as the historicity of the text to, firstly, chart the historiography of canon-formation in African American literature by showing its slow and painful evolution from the heyday of slavery till present, before demonstrating how the Harlem Renaissance Movement led to the emergence of poetry whose new canonical themes (such as activism, religion, primitivism, among many others) and style (language, music, choice of words, etc) have had a far reaching impact on both the American arts and its socio-political life. It is thus thanks to the Harlem Renaissance writers that the notion of art as social entrepreneurship has pervaded the American literary landscape, and even beyond. Finally, the application of New Historicism in this study has enabled the researchers to shed more light on the historical, cultural and linguistic significance of the canons of the Harlem Renaissance literature. As a matter of fact, the canon-forming characteristics of this literary renaissance have actually given African American literature a unique impetus and placed it on the spotlight in the realm of American literature.

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