

The advent of the New Negro Renaissance brought a generation of black women intellectuals, artists and musicians to the forefront of American culture. Paula Giddings suggests that this progression coincided with social transformations that allowed black women to have more agency in the 1920s¹. At the turn of the century, black women were getting married later, having fewer children, and in general, demanding more autonomy within the private sphere². This movement coincided with the first migration, which brought a disproportionate amount of women than men into urban cities³. Urban landscapes presented young women with the opportunity to engage in commercial activities away from their family's watchful eye⁴. Their newfound independence was met with disapproval; as young black women were expected to model prosocial behavior dictated by the cosmopolitan elite. The politics of respectability required that black women prove they were worthy of social equality⁵. While novelists like Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen and Angelina Weld Grimké appeared to lead the Renaissance through their commitment to both respectability and cultural advancement, their literature reveals that the ideal of New Negro womanhood debilitated their own sense of self⁶. Blues performers like Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey used their space in the entertainment industry to contend with

¹ Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in* 2002. *Used their space in*

these issues, broaching themes of migration, urban life and sexuality⁷. Cookie Woolner explains that most of the women who lived in these urban cities were working class migrants from the South⁸. These women existed outside of the cultural spaces where the New Negro Movement was taking place, and were mostly unaccounted for in the historical record⁹. As subjects of criticism, these women used discreet social networks in order to find all-women communities where they could define their own womanhood and sexuality outside the gaze of the middle-class¹⁰. This considered, feminist frameworks introduced in the 1970s have allowed historians to reevaluate what black women living in city spaces really thought about New Negro ideals¹¹. While their contributions went undetected for decades, black women who participated in the Renaissance often disguised cultural critiques of the combined force of racism and sexism within their art, literature and life.

In her essay, “Histories and Heresies: Engendering the Harlem Renaissance”, Cheryl A. Wall discerns that the leaders of the New Negro Movement often described the avant-garde through masculine terms¹². The philosopher Alain Locke defined the “New Negro” in 1925 through the geography of Harlem, asserting that this city was “the first concentration in history of so many diverse elements of Negro life”¹³. Like others at the forefront of the movement, Locke considered men to be at the crux of this diversity. He continues to explain that everyone

from “the peasant” to the “professional man” will convene in Harlem to pursue complete social equality¹⁴. Although they were not validated in Locke’s philosophy, black women were expected to fulfill a crucial role in this process. Racial equality required that black women were to become respectable companions to the New Negro man. Women living in urban cities were so bound by expectations

more obvious plots about heterosexual marriage²⁹. Considering Cheryl A. Wall's essay, "Passing for What? Aspects of Identity in Nella Larsen's Novels", it becomes clear that black women writers were skilled at confronting their agitation surrounding New Negro Womanhood under the guise of approved subject matter. Sexuality was often reclaimed in black women's literature throughout the 1920s, as their desire was equated with their political responsibility³⁰. Novelists like Larsen communicated through their characters that the expectations of women to model respectful desire suppressed their own sense of self.

Diverging from Woolner's assessment of *Passing*, Cheryl A. Wall argues that Larsen's most important contribution was her portrayal of the psychological dilemmas that plagued middle-class black women during this time period³¹. Larsen's characters often took the form of the "tragic mulatto", through which she reimagined the convention to uncover her internal struggles³². This is most evident through the mask that she projected onto her characters, which allowed them to present as socially acceptable in black middle-class settings. On the contrary, her characters often felt suffocated by the militancy of her peers in approaching the race problem³³. Larsen's characters become jaded as they arrive in Harlem, where they realize that they felt isolated in communities where they thought they might encounter like-minded friends. The role of Harlem in her novels is significant, as it was recognized as a cultural center of the New Negro Movement. While Harlem appears to be a place where Larsen's characters will feel emboldened, they begin to resent other Harlemites for being "superficial, proud and

Woolner, 408.

³⁰ Carby, 12.

³¹ Wall, 98.

³² Wall, 110.

³³ Wall, 100

Depictions of the Great Migration in women's blues are considerably different from that in Larsen and Hurston's literature. While their written work focuses on the urban elite's shallow

Same-Sex Desire and Violence in the Urban North- 1920-1929". Instead of exploring this period

was visible in women's blues music, as performers like Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey vocalized their frustration surrounding imposed standards of womanhood and sexuality in urban cities. The effort to engender the Harlem Renaissance has revealed that the New Negro Movement introduced nuanced discourse about what it meant to be black women in the modern era. Through examining works of different historians in the field of gender and queer studies, it is evident that there were multiple dealsCcnt to be black women in the8or(or)3(k)-9(s of dif)3(fe)7(r)-6(e)4(nt hi)-3

Bibliography

- Beemyn, Brett. "The New Negro Renaissance, A Bisexual Renaissance: The Lives and Works of Angela Weld Grimké and Richard Bruce Nugent." In *Modern American Queer History*, edited by Allida M. Black, 36-48. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001.
- Carby, Hazel V. "It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues." *Radical America* 20, no. 4 (1986): 9-24.
- Giddings, Paula. *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*. New York: Amistad Press, 2006.
- Hurston, Zora Neale. "Writer and Anthropologist, Takes Her University Training Home, 1927" in *Major Problems in African American History 2*, edited by Thomas C. Holt and Elsa Barkley Brown, 198-199. Boston: Wadsworth, 2000.
- Krasner, David. "Migration, Fragmentation, and Identity: Zora Neale Hurston's "Color Struck" and the Geography of the Harlem Renaissance." *Theatre Journal* 53, no. 4 (2001): 533-550.
- Locke, Alain. "Philosopher, Defines the "New Negro", 1925" in *Major Problems in African American History 2*, edited by Thomas C. Holt and Elsa Barkley Brown, 192-194. Boston: Wadsworth, 2000.
- Wall, Cheryl A. "On Being Young- A Woman- And Colored: When Harlem was in Vogue" in *Women of the Harlem Renaissance*, 1-32. In

Woolner, Cookie. ““Woman Slain in Queer Love Brawl”: African American Women, Same-Sex Desire, and Violence in the Urban North, 1920-1929,” *The Journal of African American History* 100, no. 3 (2013): 406-427.