Remembering the Harlem Renaissance and Its People in the Time of #Black Lives Matter

Anna Ciamparella
Department of Humanities
Florida SouthWestern State College
8099 College Pkwy,
Fort Myers, FL 33919, USA
Email: aciamparella@fsw.edu

Abstract:

This article offers a brief overview of the Harlem Renaissance and its people in the light of a renewed interest in the African American literature produced in the 1920s that the Black Lives Matter Movement generated in recent years. Since its inception, the Black Life Matter grassroots organization rekindled a strong, collective desire for social justice as a result of the continuous police brutality against black people. The systemic episodes of racially motivated violence experienced in the last decade or so in America are not that different from the racial tensions that inspired the production of the Harlem Renaissance. This literary enterprise, also known as the New Negro Movement, became a cultural phenomenon capable of attracting the attention of domestic and international followers who supported the idea of reassessing, by means of cultural renovation, mainstream representations of black people. Like the #Black Lives Matter Movement today, the Harlem Renaissance asserted the unlimited value that black individuals had in the fabrics of American society and its history. While this essay discusses the main production and ideas of the New Negro Movement, it also aims at showing that the complexity and the legacy the Harlem Renaissance left calls for further investigations especially in consideration of the racial divide still taking place today in the United States.

Keywords: The Harlem Renaissance, #Black Lives Matter, Langston Hughes, Systemic Racism, Literary Rebirth

On July 13, 2013, following the release of Trevin Martin's assassin, social activist Patrisse Cullors responded with the hashtag "BlackLivesMatter" to a post that her friend, Alicia Garza, wrote on Facebook after hearing the news of the acquittal. Cullors recalls in her memoir that a few days after the slogan was created, she was brainstorming ideas with Garza on how to develop a major network for black people. Garza reached out to Opala Tometi, an organizer for Black Alliance for Just Immigration in New York, who eventually created the first Black Lives Matter Movement website together with its Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr accounts (Khan-Cullors and Bandele 2020, 180). In a short period of time, #Black Lives Matter become a worldwide organization demanding justice for black people victims of racial violence.

According to the *Pew Research Center*, between 2013 and 2018 alone, the slogan has been

used thirty million times (pewresearch.org). The numerous uses of the mantra Black Lives Matter occurred in a mere five-year period are a clear indication of the swift pace with which the movement acquired acolytes all over the world. Despite the social mobilization the movement caused, however, police barbarity against black people did not cease, and when George Floyd was killed in May 2020, street protests erupted again throughout the United States. During one of these passionate manifestations, as Laura Ryan reminds us in article published in the online journal *The Modernist Review*, *CBS News* featured an African America teenager reading the poem "Let America Be America Again" by Langston Hughes, one of the major figures of the Harlem Renaissance. According to Ryan, in the last few years, Hughes's words were cited on multiple occasions during many peaceful demonstrations embracing the cause of the #Black Lives Matter movement. In an interview with *The Huffington Post*, Arthur Rampersard, one of the major biographers of Hughes, says that he had no doubt the poet would "have strongly approved of ["Let America Be America Again"] being used to protest anti-black violence [...]" (Mathias 2015).

These many references to Hughes indicate that a connection exists between the social, political, and cultural outlook of the Black Lives Matter Movement and the Harlem Renaissance. In one of his recent articles appeared on *Time* magazine, historian Ibraham X. Kendi claims that, today, a new Black Renaissance is taking place. As he puts it, "a renaissance does not emerge on its own. Structures must be built to allow creativity to truly flourish. During the past six or so years, black artists formed mechanisms to lift up their own work and that of their peers." Contemporary black intellectuals and various public figures (among the others Kendi mentions Oprah Winfrey and Ava DuVernay) are building these structures by helping their community not only to keep on fighting for their freedom but also to emphasize that black Americans cannot, and should not, be defined by racism.

The creators of the Harlem Renaissance who came together to dismantle racial discrimination certainly contributed to creating these scaffoldings, which people still use or want to rebuild today. The correlation of the various Black Renaissances, rebirths which Kendi, for instance, hints at in his essay, across time and people encompasses both the rendering of a modern and more authentic vision of society filtered through the African American experience and an unyielding quest for social justice. The tragic, and unfortunately common, episodes of police violence against African Americans, cement even more the association between the Harlem Renaissance and the #Black Lives Matter.

In his very last speech delivered on February 16, 1967 – about three months before his death – at the University of California, Los Angeles, Hughes shared with the audience the memory of a vicious incident occurred many years earlier. According to the blues poet:

> The word 'bebop,' I asked one of the bebop musicians one time, where they got the word bebop for their music; he said, well you know, that comes from the sound of the club of the cops on the head. Every time it hits the clubs: ba-bap-bi-bap-map-map. Well, the story was they used to work the Negro's head so well that a rhythm was developed.

Despite demonstrating a great resilience inherent to the African American culture, the anecdote resonates with today's most dramatic confrontations between blacks and law enforcement officials who used, and still employ, unwarranted ferocity against non-whites.

Throughout his life, Hughes objected fearlessly white supremacy. In one of his most anthologized essays, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," he suggests that what he calls 'racial mountain' "stand[s] in the way of any true Negro art in America—this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible" (Patton and Honey 2001, 40). Hughes' words denote that racism is so imbedded in the fabrics of American society that, as they attempt to participate and succeed in mainstream culture, black writers force themselves to adopt white standards. Thus doing, they deceive their legacy, which, on the contrary, should rather be the sole source of inspiration to create genuine representations of their own community, especially the black poor and disenfranchised.

Together with other black intellectuals, Hughes tried to construct a new identity for the new generation of artists. This modern black *self* came to be identified as the 'New Negro' and represented not only a new mode of depicting African Americans in artworks, but also, and more importantly, perhaps, a new way for blacks to relate to their own surroundings. The sentiment of protest and affirmation animating these people founded an unprecedented social, cultural, and literary venture where the stories of black individuals (themselves included) determined to succeed despite racial and social adversities could be told in their own words. The New Negro Movement became as popular as to attract the attention of domestic and international black acolytes who supported the idea of reassessing, by means of cultural renovation, mainstream representations of black Americans meant to entertain white audiences.

The exact beginning and end of the Harlem Renaissance are still a source of academic debate. Venetria K. Patton and Maureen Honey, for example, submit that the movement began with the production of Angelina Weld Grimké's play *Rachel* and culminated with the publication of Zora Neal Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Patton and Honey 2001, xxvi). Other scholars like Eugene C. Holmes suggest that rather than starting in New York, the New Negro Movement originated somehow in Philadelphia, but ended up developing in Harlem (Holmes 1968, 61). As Hughes puts it in his first autobiography, *The Big Sea*, "Harlem was like a great magnet for the Negro intellectual, pulling him from everywhere" (Hughes 1993, 240). Again, Nella Larsen's Helga Crane in *Quicksand* describes her first encounter with the "teeming black" place as a site that "welcomed her and lulled her into something that was [...] peace and contentment" (Larsen 2011, 40).

Between the two world wars, Harlem became like a mecca for African American culture. In that period, the city of New York registered a rapid demographic growth of African Americans. In *Gay New York*, George Chauncey suggests that the black population expanded in Harlem because of a real estate market crash occurred in 1904 (Chauncey 1994, 245). Because of this

economic crisis, housing in the area became more affordable to blacks and those who lived in the West Thirties area due to the construction of the Pennsylvania Station (Chauncey 1994, 245). In addition to this internal migratory flow, the African American population in the Big Apple also expanded due to the so-called first Great Migration (1916-1940), which began a movement of six million blacks from the South to the North and ended with a second migratory flow between 1940-1970. Howard Dodson and Sylviane A. Diouf note that "[i]n the decade between 1910 and 1920, New York's black population rose by 66 percent" (Dodson and Diouf 2005, 123), and that the conditions of the migrants were one of the sources of inspiration of the Harlem Renaissance (Dodson and Diouf 2005, 133).

W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk* influenced greatly the intellectual stance of the Harlem Renaissance by creating a new perspectivism for the black culture. In the book, Du Bois describes the way in which he came to realize how *different* he was from other children and elaborates on the crucial ideas of the so-called "veil" and "double consciousness." Du Bois recalls that one day his schoolmates decided to buy and exchange visiting cards, but a white girl refused to take his. Reflecting on the disturbing anecdote in the book, he writes that, in that moment, he felt as separated from the white world "by a vast veil" (Du Bois 1996, 4). The "veil," Du Bois posits, is the social element that keeps whites and blacks divided, but its presence is so subtle that a black individual might perceive it only when something as dramatic as being refused by a white person may occur.

The writers of the Harlem Renaissance explore the image of the "veil" in many ways. Just to give an example, Rachel, the heroine of Angeline Weld Grinmké's play, gradually learns to recognize its existence. One of the moments in which she understands the meaning of the "veil" happens when her mother reveals to the family that a white mob lynched her husband (Rachel's father) and one of her sons (Rachel's little brother). Again, in another episode, Rachel encounters a woman looking for a place to rent because in the neighborhood where she currently lives white kids bullied her daughter in school and the teacher did nothing to stop them. Listening to the mother's story, Rachel is clearly dumbfounded and upset and says that, as a child, she too "was made to feel my color – but I never had an experience like that" (Patton and Honey 2001, 217). After talking to the woman, Rachel is told that one boy she cares deeply about was also bullied in school.

These three crucial episodes suggest that Rachel lives in an environment where racial discrimination is so rooted and normalized that she must deal with a traumatic experience in order for her to understand fully the trials affecting the emotional and social state of black Americans. As she recognizes once and for all that American society treats blacks differently, Rachel also shows signs of what Du Bois calls "double consciousness," which he describes as follows:

> [It is a] sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an

> American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (Du Bois 1996, 5).

The passage portrays African Americans as people in between two cultures that are often confrontational, but the Harlem Renaissance took on the challenge to synthesize this ubiquitous duality.

One of the defining moments of the New Negro Movement was the publication of *The New Negro: Voices from the Harlem Renaissance*, the first anthology of the Harlem Renaissance, published in 1925 and edited by Alain Locke, a well-known literary critic and professor at Howard University. The anthology represents a comprehensive volume of the newest generation of African American writers (though the text also contains works by white writers) who reject the assumption of black inferiority (see preface to the 1997 edition of the book by Arnold Rampersad xv-xvi).

The book also includes an essay, "The New Negro," written by Locke where he redefines the social significance of African American culture and praises the new generation of black writers over the "Old Negro." Locke says:

> for generations in the mind of America, [...] has been more of a formula than a human being – a something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be 'kept down,' or 'in his place,' or 'helped up,' to be worried with or worried over, harassed or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden (Locke 1997, 3).

Locke's contemporaries rejected all these demeaning categories and felt compelled to debunk anti-black, derogatory imageries such as the *mammy* (a black, robust woman who nursed the children of the white master) and the *coon* (abbreviation for 'racoon,' a lazy, ignorant, and gullible individual). Steaming from the way in which black slaves were perceived in the South, whites repeatedly refurbished these figures to demonstrate that African Americans were still undeserving and to legitimize the infamous Jim Crow laws enacted right after the Reconstruction period.

The literature of the Harlem Renaissance expresses the predicament of black lower classes and migrants together with gender issues as they were perceived by women writers. In the poem "I Sit and Sew," Alice Dunbar-Nelson – wife of the poet Paul Laurence Dunbar and herself a migrant from Louisiana – addresses the condition of black working-class women and their desire to free themselves from male dominance while still fighting for social justice. The composition also suggests that the speaker's lack of means and own gender prevent her from fulfilling her dreams. "I sit and sew – a useless task it seems/ My hands grown tired, my head weighted down with dreams," she writes at the beginning of the poem (Patton and Honey 2001, 148). Here the act of sewing is not in itself worthless but appears to be so in the speaker's eye because, like other women of her generation, she believes she has the potential to find a position more useful to help her community. Clearly, she would rather like to be on the battlefield. According to David A. Davis, Dunbar-Nelson believed the war to be a way to end racial violence. The poet

encouraged African Americans to join and support the war and she raised funds for war relief (Davis 2008, 479). At the very end of the poem, she reinforces the idea that she sees herself fit to perform more complex tasks than sewing. Thus, invoking God, she says, "You need me, Christ! It is not roseate dream/ That beacons me-this pretty futile seam, / It stifles me-God, must I sit and sew?" (Patton and Honey 2001, 148).

While the Harlem Renaissance tried to dismantle gender roles and various black stereotypes, they also aimed at creating literature that spoke to and for the black community. In the essay "Blueprint for Negro Writing" published in 1937, Richard Wright indicates that black writers had the role to guide their community through their collective struggle and proposes them to become the voice of their race by reaching a deep understanding of its diversities. He writes:

> [...] a Negro writer must learn to view the life of a Negro living in New York's Harlem or Chicago's South Side with the consciousness that one-sixth of the earth's surface belongs to the working class. It means that a negro writer must create in his readers' mind a relationship between a Negro woman hoeing cotton in the South and the men who loll in swivel chairs in Wall Street and take the fruits of her toil" (Patton and Honey 2001, 58).

Black writers were then invested with an unprecedented social role demanding to be the voice of their community.

The Harlem Renaissance shared the same breath of renovation and embraced the social and cultural changes of modern time, but its representants were rather divided on deciding which aesthetics in particular they needed to espouse to accommodate the complex images steaming from "new negro" projects. Holmes suggests that, as it happened to the generations of writers and visual artists whose compositions predated the New Negro Movement, the new authors too grappled with issues directly related to linguistic and aesthetic choices (Holmes 1968, 61). For these writers the matter revolved around the possibility to choose to express their feelings in vernacular, standard English, or even both languages. Together with other intellectuals, Locke and Du Bois proposed a departure from vernacular poetry because it "had neither the wit nor the beauty of folk speech, but was only a continuation of the stock stereotypes about gentility, humility and buffoonery, and an evasion of the realities of Negro life" (Holmes 1968, 61). This outlook resonated with an emergent black middle class that valued European, mainly white, standards (Holmes 1968, 61).

Other writers, however, resisted this call and conceived the Harlem Renaissance as a moment for black vernacular to reach higher literary standards. Hughes, together with Starling A. Brown and James Weldon Johnson, was one of the most vocal supporters of vernacular poetry. He even used to criticize those who believed that black writers should use the same language found in the compositions by white writers. At the beginning of his essay on the racial mountain, referring to Countee Cullen, who once told Hughes he wanted to be like a white poet, Hughes, again, argues that "this urge within the race'" to take whites as model, thereby becoming

standardized, is the element preventing black production to be elevated to the rank of fine art (Patton and Honey 2001, 40). Hughes was so convinced that the black vernacular was the ultimate linguistic solution of the new negro's expression that he created a new poetic form, which came to be known a blues poetry – a literary, and controversially successful experiment, which even though was harshly criticized, aimed at reframing the black American poetic tradition.

The schism between the promoters of white cultural values and the advocates of a more genuine black popular culture suggests that black artists and critics used to categorize artifacts according to a "low" and a "high" black culture. All this illustrates an evident class stratification of the black community. Black middle classes wanted to assert themselves through white standards and were very critical of those who did not. Many black writers of the time embraced European writing standards, others like Claude McKay, for instance, with time converted to it. Born in Jamaica, British West Indies, McKay started writing poetry in Jamaican dialect for which he was awarded the medal of the Jamaican Institute of Arts and Sciences, but once in the USA, he favored standard English (Patton and Honey 2001, 271), and published mainly in white avant-garde magazines and not in black periodicals like *The Crisis* and *Opportunity: a Journal of Negro Life* (Sayre 2014, 68).

During the Harlem Renaissance, the black community was internally fragmented due to social and economic differences existing among its members. Cultural divisions were exacerbated by the idea and the act of *passing,* a phenomenon occurring among lighter skinned individuals who were indeed able to *pass* for white and enjoy white privileges. The act of passing was not unique to the Harlem Renaissance experience. We know that runaway slaves who were light-skinned and were able to pass for white had to behave and talk like white people (Dodson and Diouf 2005, 33), however, some New Negroes criticized those who passed. By *passing* for white, these individuals tended to discriminate against their own community. Many authors of the Harlem Renaissance, among whom Hughes, Larsen, Wallace Thurman, and George S. Schuyler, show in their prose how quickly social actors engaged in passing learn to play their role as whites, thereby abandoning their true self. Hughes clearly disapproves of the practice in one of his short stories, "Passing," included in the collections of brief narratives titled *The Ways of White Folks*, Larson ended up exploring the obnoxious subject in her novel *Passing*, Schuyler in his *Black no More*, and Thurman in the book *The Blacker the Berry*.

Hughes's "Passing" consists of a letter that Jack, a man passing for white, writes to his mother after, while walking with his white girlfriend, accidently sees his parent in the street and pretends not to recognize her. The reader does not know whether the message will ever reach Jack's mom, but the man starts it as following:

> "DEAR MA,
> I felt like a dog, passing you downtown and not speaking to you. You were great, though. Didn't give a sign that you even knew me, let alone I was your son. If I hadn't the girl with me, Ma, we might have talked [...]. Since I've begun to pass for white, nobody has ever doubted that I am a white man.

> Where I work, the boss is Southerner and is always cussing out Negroes in my presence, not dreaming I'm one. It is to laugh! (Hughes 1990, 51).

Here Jack expresses consternation by likening himself to a dog. Since at this point of the narration the audience is not yet familiar with the reason why Jack is passing for white, at first one may even show some sympathy to the young man's predicament, but as the narration unfolds, s/he realizes that, according to Jack's perspective (which never changes in the story), his mom totally surrenders to her son practicing passing. Because Jack can easily play the part of a white man and do pretty much anything he wants without restrictions, he turns out to be as racist as his boss who cusses African Americans out while Jack has the nerve to laugh at the matter.

In her novel *Passing*, Larson discusses the intermittent friendship of two black women, Clare Kendry (the character passing for white married to a white man named Jack) and Irene Redfield. The two are childhood friends, but somehow lost connection when Clare started living with her white aunt after her father died. When the women meet again, Irene does not approve Clare's choice of racial passing; she thinks, indeed, that it is too risky to try to follow the whites' lifestyle. On her part, Clare believes that her husband Jack will never discover her secret, but one day, the man sees her with a black female friend, and Clare's fate is forever marked. Soon after, during a party, Clare falls out of an open window where she is standing waiting for Irene to arrive.

Thurman's novel deals with racial passing by narrating the story of Emma Lou Morgan who, having a very dark skin color, experiences firsthand what it means to be discriminated against by her own people. Everywhere she goes (she attends a college in Los Angeles), she notices that black women who are able (and willing) to pass have privileges she will never be able to attain.

The idea of passing takes a different turn in yet another story, *Black no More* by Schuyler, a satiric novel in which the main character, Mark Disher, decides to undergo a procedure that allows blacks to become white. Mark, who in the meantime has also changed his name into Matthew Fisher, finally marries Helen, a white woman he loves but who used to reject him because of his skin color. Eventually, due to the results of a genealogical project, sponsored by Helen's father, Rev. Givens and his political supporter, Arthur Snobbcraft, people start believing that every American has some African ancestry. So, when Helen and Matthew have a biracial baby, Helen thinks that it is because of her. Matthew, however, tells her the truth about him and she accepts the situation. The genealogical project turns out to be a disastrous political move, and at the end, Rev. Givens and Snobbcraft are killed and burned in Mississippi.

Together with suggesting that tragedies might strike those who can and want *to pass* for white, this literature also shows that the white world was a constant concern in black American representations. During the New Negro Movement, whites interacted with blacks, especially in Harlem where whites often frequented cabarets and nightclub, listened to jazz music and drank liquor illegally (Robertson et al. 2013, 865). However, even in Harlem, blacks could rarely

enjoy the same type of entertainment whites were interested in as African Americans were not allowed entrance in the facilities offering it. In the famous *Cotton Club*, for instance, black artists could only play or be staff members. Like many other night clubs on Lennox and Seventh Avenues and 125th Street, the *Cotton Club* was owned by white businessmen and only meant for the amusement of white patrons. Contemporary newspapers like the *New York Age* and the *New York Amsterdam News* also depicted other kinds of interracial relationships in Harlem. Stephen Robertson, Shane White, and Stephen Garton note that:

> [the newspapers] are filled with reports of not only white business owners, police, and slummers, but also other whites who featured in the everyday life of black residents: deliverymen, salesmen, and bill collectors; public school teachers; hospital staff; drivers; and sports fans. They describe interracial encounters often quite different from those that occurred in Harlem's nightclubs, contacts that often led to conflict (Robertson et al. 2013, 866).

Whites also penetrated the everyday life of black artists by supporting them financially and becoming their benefactors. One notorious white philanthropists of the time was Carl Van Vechten, a well-known photographer and art critic, who wrote a novel, *Nigger Heaven*, about the way in which African Americans lived in Harlem. Regarding the novel, Chauncey suggests that, even though it caused the indignation of black intellectuals, the lasciviousness of its black characters made white New Yorkers even more interested in the place (Chauncey 1994, 246). Another popular patron was Charlotte Osgood Mason (who wanted to be called "godmother"), William E. Hurston (who founded the Harmon foundation), and Julius Rosenwald (who used to donate to African American schools). The authors of the Harlem Renaissance became very familiar with these benefactors.

If on the one hand, these people helped to make the Harlem Renaissance a phenomenon able to draw national and international attention, on the other, they also made black writers involved in the negro rebirth, but lacking financial means, more dependent on white patronage ("The Cost of Patronage"). Mason supported writers like Locke, Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Arthur Fauset, and visual artists like Aaron Douglas, the art critic of *The Crisis* who today is considered the initiator of African American art. Mason believed that black literature should have found inspiration in the so-called primitivism (often referenced in Douglas's paintings that synthesize traditional African culture and modern African American expectations), namely, through forms of "uncivilized" black culture. Her strong interest in this type of art created no little clashes with black writers whom she was sponsoring. In reference to his experience with Mason, Hughes writes:

> She wanted me to be primitive and know and feel the intuition of the primitive. But unfortunately, I did not feel the rhythms of the primitive surging through me, and so I could not live and write as though I did. I was only an American Negro – who had loved the surface of Africa – but I was no

> Africa. I was Chicago and Kansas City and Broadway and Harlem. And I was not what she wanted me to be. So, in the end it all came back very near to the old impasse of white and Negro again, white and Negro – as do most relationships in America (Hughes 1993, 324).

The passage shows, once again, that the divide between white and black perspective regarding those elements that should have been included in African American artifacts. White patrons encouraged their protégées to depict the benefactors' own vision of being black. Thus doing, more than helping black artists, white philanthropists rather managed to have them cultivate distorted representations of the African American culture.

Despite the limitations that white patronage forced on the creativity of some New Negroes, the Harlem Renaissance was established on the idea that black people should have been able to determine their own fate and choose to live their lives on their own terms. An example of this modern black American character can be found in one of Hughes' short stories, "Slave on the Block," where Luther, a black man hired by Michael and Anne Carraway – a piano player and a painter respectively – whom the author describes as "people who went in for Negroes [...]. But no in the social-service, philanthropic sort of way, no" (Hughes 1990, 19) - to be their gardener. More than taking care of the garden, however, Luther ends up posing as a model for Anne who, in her next painting, wants to capture "the boy" (Carraways' definition of Luther in the story) in the moment of being sold at a slave auction. Anne thinks that precisely because he is black and he does not have any specific skills, Luther must be available to pose every time she needs him to. At the end, however, to the Carraways' great dismay, the young man rebels against the couple. Luther will eventually leave the Carraways showing that he takes his destiny in his own hands, resisting any possible plan the white duo has for him.

The production of the Harlem Renaissance presents characters equipped with an extraordinary sense of extrication from the constrictions imposed by whites, which characteristic resonates with a modern way of thinking, making, and producing art, and embraces the climate of the streets of Harlem where people of all walks of life could communicate their creative and personal inclinations more openly. The sense of freedom imbedded in that Harlemite lifestyle allowed gay people, for instance, to express who they were without fear of being prosecuted. According to Chauncey, this open-mindedness "turned Harlem into a homosexual mecca" (Chauncey 1994, 244). Black gay life played a big role in the Harlem Renaissance and many of its artists and supporters either identified with the gay community or were sexually active with people of their same sex (Chauncey 1994, 264). Countee Cullen, Thurman, Bruce Nugent, McKay, and possibly Langston Hughes, Chauncey says, "regularly socialized with each other in gay settings and discussed the affairs they were having with other men" (Chauncey 1994, 264). McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1927), Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry* and *Infants of the Spring* (1932) and some of the poems written by women writers have either queer speakers or include LGBTQ themes.

Grimké's "El Beso" ("The Kiss") exemplifies poetry emphasizing a type of romantic love

that does not conform to well-established gender and social norms. The first part of Grimké's composition develops a *crescendo* of emotions that leads the speaker to refer to her encounter with another woman as the "Lure of you, eye and lip;/ Yearning, yearning,/ Languor, surrender;/ Your mouth" (Patton and Honey 2001, 171), but as soon as "el beso" is consumed, the speaker almost regrets that it happened. It is not clear if the kiss is exchanged in the present or it is just a "remembrance," as the verse indicates towards the end of the poem. We know though that the aftermath of the act of kissing is followed by "Pain, regret-your sobbing;/ and again, quiet- the stars,/ Twilight- and you" (Patton and Honey 2001, 171). The numerous hyphens connecting various images here show that the speaker is confused, elated, surprised, and that she is even suffering (together with the partner who is "sobbing") for exploring or having explored same-sex desire.

The queer scenario of the Harlem Renaissance inspired contemporary movies such as *Looking for Langston*, directed by British filmmaker Isaac Julien and released in the United States in 1990. As the title suggests ("looking"), rather than being about Hughes' sexuality per se, this film explores more fully the black queer life of the '20s. Another film, *Brother to Brother,* released in 2004 and directed by Rodney Evans, has as protagonist a young black man estranged by his family because he is gay. He ends up meeting an icon of the Harlem Renaissance, the writer and painter, Nugent, who now an elder man, shares his experience with the teenager.

Recent studies done on the queer life in New York City can help to understand even more the many facets of the Harlem Renaissance. Among the others, one finds *Gay Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* (2003) edited by Darlene Clark. In addition, the *NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project*, available online, displays places in Harlem where black gay art and life took place. During the Harlem Renaissance, the gay community used to frequent places like the *Hotel Olga* on 695 Lenox Avenue, the *YMCA Building* on 181 West 135th Street, the *Ethel Waters Residence* on 580 St. Nicholas Avenue, the *Gumby Book Studio* on 2144 Fifth Avenue, and the *Langston Hughes Residence* on 20 East 127th Street.

Narrating a modern vision of the African American culture, the Harlem Renaissance paved the way to other black movements that emerged in the United States after the 1930s. The complexity of the social and cultural background of the Harlem Renaissance still calls for further academic investigation, especially as the quest for social equity in today's America accentuates the historical importance of the New Negro Movement.

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