

Beyond the Harlem Renaissance

By Herman Beavers

Introduction/Preface

Beyond the Harlem Renaissance seeks to achieve several objectives. First, it seeks to demystify the processes by which there came to be a “literary movement,” often referred to as the Harlem Renaissance. In so doing, the seminar seeks to complicate the ways that faulty acts of historical periodization lead us to reduce what we understand as the Renaissance to a brief interval in African American literary history (most often 1912-1929) more often associated with failure and underachievement as an isolated cultural phenomenon rather than with the more wide-ranging and complex processes emerging out of Modernism. As such, this seminar seeks to understand Harlem, not as a segregated community designated as the “mecca” of black life in the U.S. but rather as a part of the overall cultural scene in Manhattan, where artists engaged in cross-racial and cross-cultural contacts such that influence flowed in both directions.

Second, the seminar seeks to explore the impact of the Great Migration on the life chances of African Americans leaving rural (and agricultural) life for the challenges of urban (and industrial) life in cities in the Northeast and Midwest. Though a number of narratives of the Renaissance paint it as a heroic circumstance, where black writers sought to portray the African American community in positive terms, closer examination of the materials in the anthology (along with more recent historical scholarship) suggest that a more accurate portrayal of what went on leads us to characterize the Renaissance as an instance where a plethora of cultural tensions were played out when writers sought to represent black life. These tensions often sprang from the divergent perspectives of blacks long established in Northern urban life and newly-arrived blacks from the South, whose adjustment to their new surroundings produced stories of both tragedy and triumph. To be sure, the association of black life with urban impoverishment becomes a staple of representations of black life beginning in the 1920s. Further, because the residual effect of slavery produced caste and class conflicts between those who sought to be “modern” and those who sought to live according to traditions passed down from previous generations a number of debates arose with regard to how black life would (and should) be represented. However, there were other struggles being played out along lines of gender and sexuality that are only now being understood as intrinsic elements of the Renaissance. As a phenomenon in which black women were deeply involved at all levels—e.g. editorial, creative, and critical—an assessment of the Renaissance must attend to the silences, erasures, and slippages that have diminished their role, just as the sexual politics of urban life led both men and women to reconfigure (often via acts of masking and misdirection) their notions of romantic love.

Using the anthology, *Double-Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology* (Venetria Patton and Maureen Honey, eds.), the seminar examined the phenomenon

known as the Harlem Renaissance from a variety of perspectives that began with an assessment of writers' enactment of generic choices (in some cases, multiple genres) as they sought to conduct themselves as professional writers working to create poems, plays, short stories, and essays whose main subject matter was life in the black community. As a number of commentators that included Alain Locke, Gwendolyn Bennett, Marion Vera Cuthbert, Jesse Redmon Fauset, Langston Hughes, and Marcus and Amy Jacques Garvey frequently observed, life in the 20th Century swung between the desire to be true to W.E.B. DuBois's call for greater political activism for the sake of achieving the spoils of American citizenship and a propensity to see black life as the embodiment of primitivism, exoticism, and hedonism. But in many instances, the debates centered on the writer's approach to literary form, with some writers like Countee Cullen working in established forms like the sonnet and the ballad and others like Hughes, Sterling A. Brown, and Zora Neale Hurston creating forms reflective of African American traditions, like the blues poem or prose fictions whose stylizations harkened back to folk culture.

In the curricular units arising out of this seminar, readers will see a variety of approaches, some of which emphasize performance and creativity, others which insist on reimagining what we think we know as women's history or hip-hop culture. Extending from elementary to secondary education, these curriculum units also put a premium on the notion that the Renaissance, whether it took place in Harlem, Chicago, Washington, or Paris, is best understood as a conscious effort of self-fashioning. As such, these units understand that writers during the Renaissance sought to acquire a literary voice capable of articulating the challenges of trying to negotiate urban life, even as that voice enacted the Modernist formulation of "making it new."

Herman Beavers, Associate Professor of English