

## On What Was African American Literature?

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### ABSTRACT

African American literature emerged in response to the disfranchisement of blacks in the south, which set the stage for the consolidation of Jim Crow segregation. As a cultural accommodation to segregation, writers of African American literature, most of whom were located in the north, sought to speak on behalf of the race, most of which was still located in the south. With the end of Jim Crow and southern disfranchisement African American literature has likewise come to an end.

So, why write about African American literature in the past tense? Well, quiet as it's kept, it's been possible for some time now to ask, 'When was the last work of African American literature written?' and to do so without decamping to the realm of the speculative, the magical, or the utopian (or if you prefer, the dystopian). Rather, the question has become (indeed always was) an historical one—or more precisely a literary historical one—which makes it answerable, in principle if not definitively. In fact, the publication date of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1974)—the work alluded to in my second sentence—might be one possible answer. But the task at hand is not to fix a single date for the termination of African American literature. Rather the need here is to make it clear why this literature, like all literatures, was an historical phenomenon, and, further, why for this literature, unlike perhaps for most, the possibility of its demise was built into its very reason for being.

By way of illustration, it may help to point out that while literary scholars may debate (and have debated) endlessly when the Harlem Renaissance began and ended, it is not a highly controversial claim to insist that the Harlem Renaissance *did* begin and that it *has* ended. To be sure, given the nature of scholarly inquiry, there will be those who hold that the label is a misnomer and that some other term best describes literary activity at that moment, or those who insist that in many ways we are still in the Harlem Renaissance, which is to say, that it hasn't ended. No matter. As scholars, we accept that history and geopolitics, however fuzzy around the edges, offer up the parameters that enable the coherent study of literary phenomena, or make possible an argument about those phenomena. Of course, what makes these markers palatable in writing about literatures of identity is that they are seen as designating a moment in an ongoing enterprise of literary production, such that the end of the particular moment does not put a final punctuation mark on the enterprise as a whole. Conceding that the Harlem Renaissance ended has no bearing on whether or not after the movement black Americans continued to write imaginative literature (they did) or whether or not

black Americans have continued to write self-consciously as black Americans (most, if not all of those who write literature, still do).

But the contention here is that African American literature as a designation is precisely like the Harlem Renaissance in that it sets out the terms within which it becomes possible to move from the unsurprising observation that black Americans were writing imaginative literature during the twentieth century (after all, why wouldn't some of us have done so?) to an intellectually significant claim that this writing constitutes or is best seen as a collective enterprise of some sort. And the claim about African American literature in general has never been simply that it is a collective enterprise of just any sort, but rather an enterprise that is significantly implicated in the political and economic fortunes and misfortunes of the nation's African-descended citizens.

Such, to return to the Harlem Renaissance as an example, was the belief that, as pointed out by David Levering Lewis and others, led scholars and writers like Charles S. Johnson, W.E.B. Du Bois, Jessie Fauset, and Alain Locke to cultivate black writers and artists (Lewis 119-30). The flowering of the literary and fine arts among African Americans was deemed to be of import because of the status of second-class citizenship that had been imposed on the racial group of which these writers were, however eagerly or reluctantly, members. The presumption of inferiority that subtended laws, statutes, and the customary practices that imposed this status, were presumed to be vulnerable to the presentation of evidence that black Americans were indeed fully equal to their white fellow citizens. Under such conditions there might indeed be reason to believe that the significance of writing a poem could be equally a matter of politics and aesthetics. Such was this potentiality that gave us African American literature.

From the outset such a connection was subject to debate and skepticism—and I don't have in mind here Booker T. Washington's insistence in *Up from Slavery* that "[n]o race can prosper till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem" (157). For though Washington infamously derided liberal arts education as a model for educating black freedmen, his reasons for doing so exemplify rather than reject the representational logic that made the midwives of the Harlem Renaissance tout literary achievement as politically significant. For both Washington and the Harlem *literati*, the activities of some small number of black Americans could be taken as tokens of the capacities and character of the whole. Rather, the more substantive objection lies in Langston Hughes's perhaps not entirely ingenuous appraisal of the Harlem Renaissance as the fevered political delusion of black intellectuals who believed that "the race problem had at last been solved through Art plus Gladys Bentley," and that "the New Negro would lead a new life from then on in green pastures of tolerance created by Countee Cullen, Ethel Waters, Claude McKay, Duke Ellington, Bojangles, and Alain Locke." The kicker was Hughes's concluding observation: "I don't know what made any Negroes think that—except that they were mostly intellectuals doing the thinking. The ordinary Negroes hadn't heard of the Harlem Renaissance. And if they had, it hadn't raised their wages any" (228).

Of course, Hughes's suggestion that had the Harlem Renaissance been worth its salt, the success of black poets would have redounded to the economic welfare

of the black rank and file is hyperbolic. Even so, what made the connection more plausible than risible was that Jim Crow segregation strived to make, and in certain crucial ways succeeding in making, black intraracial class differences in the south inoperative. Despite various efforts by black elites in the wake of the Civil War and the Reconstruction period to attack the injustice of early instances of racial segregation by pointing out that racial discrimination interfered with what should have been more natural distinctions permitting social intercourse among the more accomplished members of both races, the socio-political order that came to prevail in the south insisted that racial difference would be the difference that mattered. As the south perfected its Jim Crow social order, black preachers, teachers, businessmen, physicians, lawyers, or writers, regardless of their feelings toward their more plebeian racial brethren, were positioned such that in striking a blow against the Jim Crow order as it imposed limitations on their ambitions and activities they could also potentially strike a blow against the order that impoverished and degraded the lives of non-elite blacks. Indeed as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) rumbled towards its signature victory against Jim Crow in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, it was the more obvious inequities in the realm of higher education that made possible crucial test cases, such as *Sweatt v. Painter* (1950), that led to the desegregation of the University of Texas Law School.

But to understand the picture more fully, we need to return to the formative moments of the Jim Crow south in the late nineteenth century. At the outset it was not clear, as demonstrated by the role of black agricultural workers in building the Populist Movement in the 1890s, that a cross-class intraracial alliance was the obvious way to organize a movement against the system of injustice that kept black farmers and agricultural workers impoverished. Reconstruction had opened the way to political participation for black men in the south, and their experience in trying to realize their rights and privileges as freed men brought them to see that their day-to-day needs were not necessarily the same as those of black and white northern Republicans who presumed themselves to have the best interests of southern blacks at their hearts. Instead, these southern blacks saw their race interests in class terms that made the possibility of forming an alliance with white farmers and workers against southern elites the most politically sensible course to take. As Judith Stein has shown in examining the rise of disfranchisement in Alabama, it was the real threat posed by an interracial political insurgency that led elites to mount what became a successful effort to disfranchise the lower orders—an effort that while centered on black southerners, also targeted “poor whites and white Populists” (42). The point of this disfranchisement effort was to remove “the lower class from politics.” Once done, this accomplishment “had enormous effects upon subsequent black and white political movements.” Among other things, it “encouraged among northern blacks petit-bourgeois notions like Du Bois’s ‘talented tenth,’” and provided a frame for race politics that proved enduring over the next several decades. In Stein’s words, “[a]lthough northern black leaders personally possessed more rights, they were basically proposing solutions for all the black people, nine-tenths of whom were southern. The prevalent northern ideologies, like the southern, were based upon appeals to the ruling elements

of society” (42). The rise of African American literature was part of this cultural accommodation (and, yes, resistance) to the fact and implication of black southern disfranchisement.

Galvanizing the efforts of the major players in African American literature—among them, W.E.B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison—was in part a desire to do in literature what the politics of the moment could not do in real life, namely, return the disenfranchised to nation’s political stage as architects of their own fate. The fact that many of these writers felt and, for part of their careers, responded to the pull of Marxist politics stemmed from their recognition that a racial politics could not itself fully undo what disfranchisement had done at the dawn of the Jim Crow era. Even so, in the main, African American literature assisted in helping persuade liberal elites that the ‘race problem,’ defined primarily as the black-white inequality, was the nation’s most pressing moral problem, and that something like national greatness and American ideals could be realized only when that problem had been confronted, regardless of whether or not that confrontation meant the problem could finally and forever be resolved.

Nonetheless, what the Civil Rights Movement did do was to bring the majority of blacks back into politics, albeit into a political world much different from that which had existed at the turn of the previous century. Black political participation had profound effects on the nation’s political and social life, but it could not, on its own, effect a fundamental reordering of class inequalities. What it could and did do, however, was erode the real basis of representation that had been African American literature’s *raison d’être*. What had made African American literature a literature was a political reality shaped by disfranchisement in which the publication of a poem, whatever its subject matter might be, could plausibly be taken as speaking to and for ‘the race’ as a whole as it struggled against constitutionally sanctioned racial segregation. That this is no longer the case does not tell us that we have achieved an egalitarian society. But it does help make clear why the last work of African American literature has already been written.

#### Works Cited

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