CONTESTED BOUNDARIES: RACE, CLASS AND GENDER
IN THE WRITINGS OF FOUR HARLEM RENAISSANCE WOMEN

By

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To K.M.O
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CONTESTED BOUNDARIES: RACE, CLASS AND GENDER IN THE WRITINGS OF FOUR HARLEM RENAISSANCE WOMEN

By

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This study offers an analysis of four urban-based female writers of the Harlem Renaissance: Anne Spencer, Angelina Weld Grimke, Mercedes Gilbert and Marita Bonner. Focusing on their class-based literary representations, my study comprehends their poetics as inviting a feminist reading of class-based themes. It attempts an explanation of how class based themes defined the central issues of the Renaissance: the meaning of race, the legacy of the folk, and the potential of art.

Building on the theoretical approaches of materialist feminists, black feminists, and womanist criticism the study
examines how contentions about race representations during the Harlem Renaissance were also class contentions that divided the participants in two competing camps. A close examination of the poetry of Anne Spencer and writings of Angelina Weld Grimke reveals that like their elder peers Alice Dunbar Nelson and Georgia Douglas Johnson they favored a "bourgeois" integrationist art. Mercedes Gilbert and Marita Bonner subscribe more to the "New Negro" sentiments of the 1920s. Gilbert embraced "folk aesthetics" with a difference, exploring how race, class and sexism affected both urban and rural black women. Bonner brought to the movement the most challenging experimental styles and themes, exploring the relation between women, race and economics in the urban areas. The study acknowledges the generational gap between the two group of writers Anne Spencer and Angelina Weld Grimke/Mercedes Gilbert and Marita Bonner and attributes the difference in language, genre, and style to historical circumstances. It affirms that in their own different ways all four women were concerned with race, class and gender in their writings.
INTRODUCTION

Articulating the contradictions surrounding this period, William L. Andrews said that "the literary and cultural phenomenon known as the Harlem Renaissance has given rise to more conflicting assessments, more praise, more detraction, than probably any other comparable movement, period or school of writers have received in African American literary history" (3). Even so, Andrews did not anticipate that black feminist scholars would be compelled to rewrite the period to correct omissions in literary criticism and inaccurate and partisan judgment of women writers.

Gloria Hull accurately observes that those writing about the period have always done so with various analytical methodologies gauged by their own biases, needs and imaginations. Historians have reconstructed the era's social and political dynamics. Literary critics have scrutinized the texts and revealed the thematic and linguistic strategies of the writers. Cultural historians have analyzed the relation between the Harlem Renaissance and the "Black is beautiful" generation of the Black Arts Movement in the 1970s (Color, Sex 3-4). Recently, with the advent of a new
focus on African American women, academicians, scholars and critics have become interested in the writings produced by black women during this period.²

African American women made significant literary contributions to the Harlem Renaissance, but the dearth of literary criticism regarding their work made it appear initially that their sole function during this era was to entertain the male literati. Erlene Stetson states that “if the Harlem Renaissance had a gender, it was male” (404). It is now evident that many women who provided encouragement for the male writers during the literary symposiums were themselves authors. Strong figures like Jessie Fauset, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Gwendolyn Bennett and Zora Neale Hurston made their mark across a range of genres. Others, like Nella Larsen, Anne Spencer and Helene Johnson, mastered specific forms. Still others, especially poets such as Clarissa Scott Delany and Lucy Ariel Williams, “flashed briefly and less brightly” (Hull Color, Sex 7). Indeed, as Nellie McKay acknowledges, we now know that black female literary models were not too busy keeping the “race” alive over its 300-year-old American history to have found time to write (xv).

Zora Neale Hurston, Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, Alice Dunbar Nelson and Georgia Douglas Johnson have received respectable critical attention within the last ten years.
Unfortunately, not enough has been done for other writers. These women were not alone. Lesser known women writers need to be brought to light as well if we are to understand the writings of those Hull describes as "the female half of human experience that swelled the ranks of the New Negro artists" (Color, Sex 31).

As Laura Harris maintains, interpretations of the Harlem Renaissance depend on the scholar's critical stance. Some have interpreted it positively: as a successful Afro-American version of modernism, a vision of black art as a crucial means of effecting social and political change, as an effort to negate presumptions of the intellectual inferiority of a race through the greatness of its artistic contribution. Some allege it was a failure, a negligent moment of cultural elitism, a parochial vision of art as propaganda, a primitive fecundity of spirit that soul-dead American letters desperately needed. I take my stand with a slight modification from Andrews' argument that an attentive reading of the [women's] writings of the renaissance will not yield easy judgments about "success" or "failure" as those terms have sometimes been applied in summary fashion to the renaissance as a whole (10).
What the Harlem Renaissance failed to accomplish is not as important as what individual writers of the time had to say about central issues raised by the movement: the meaning of race, the legacy of the folk and the potential of art (10).

Initiated by various social, political and economic developments in the second and third decades of the twentieth century, the renaissance was both an intellectual and cultural movement. As Hull points out, the movement was, by self-definition, race-oriented. The name of the era, its debates and manifestos, book titles and art illustrations all indicate that race defined the Harlem Renaissance (Color, Sex, 17). How race is defined and handled in the writings becomes a necessary focus in any study relating to the period. As other literary critics have suggested, contentions about race representations during the renaissance can also be read as class contention. I contend the central question of the renaissance "How should the Negro be portrayed?" was more of a class rather than a cultural issue.5 Black feminist scholars have addressed the relationships between race and gender, but few have addressed how women writers of the period dealt with race, class and gender in a manner that destabilizes the centrality of one.6

Most of the controversy surrounding the Harlem Renaissance proceeds from the desire of the participants to
gain recognition for black cultural influences in American social and cultural activities. Those who made the traditional distinction between folk and formal art doubted whether the representations of ordinary black folks would gain recognition for the race as vital and equal in American society and culture. Others felt folk culture was a fertile domain for form and thematic content. How writers handled the legacy of the folk depends on whose philosophy they followed.

Alain Leroy Locke, W.E.B. Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson are among the leaders who gave significant direction to the New Negro Movement. However, their approaches and interpretations of the Negro cultural heritage differed and these differences affected how the members of the movement regarded their own work as well as each other’s work. Since black women writers did not determine these public intellectual debates, analyzing the works of individual women writers while paying attention to the politics of representation discloses the division among the women writers that has been discussed but confined to only three female writers.

I wish to suggest that “primitivism” and “folk identity” are not synonymous and do not share similar resonances. Primitivism is a complex term. Very often the term has been used as a binary opposite of civilization. The
Harlem Renaissance white participants expected to find it in the literature written by African Americans. Unlike "primitivism," folk identity is derived from folk forms. Black writers during the renaissance consciously drew artistic power from these forms referred to as the vernacular. The African-American vernacular consists of forms sacred-songs, prayers, and sermons—as well as secular—work songs, secular rhymes and songs, blues, jazz and stories of many kinds (Norton Anthology 3). In the introduction to the "Vernacular Tradition," Robert O'Meally argues that the vernacular [as it is used in contemporary African American literature] is not a body of quaint, folksy items, it is not a male province, nor is it associated with a particular level of society or with a particular historical era. Instead,

The vernacular encompasses vigorous, dynamic processes of expression, past and present. It makes up a rich storehouse of materials wherein the values, styles, and character types of black American life are reflected in language that is highly energized and often marvelously eloquent (1).

Ralph Ellison has provided one of the best description of what the vernacular tradition means to African-American literature.

The vernacular art accounts, to a large degree, for the black American's legacy of self-awareness and endurance. For black performers and listeners it has often served the classic function of teaching as it delights. Refusing to subscribe wholly to white America's ethos and world-view, African Americans
expressed in these vernacular forms their own ways of seeing the world history, and its meanings. (Quoted in Norton Anthology of African American Lit 2)

Supporting Ellison's observation, Houston Baker argues that, in an effort to recover that "racial past," the writer must journey back to his or her origins. Neither Ellison nor Baker is the originator of the idea, their language echoes Alain Locke's argument that it is in the South that writers and thinkers can find the spirit that underlies and best describes the black experience in the United States (Cureau 81).

Ann Ducille, Hazel Carby and Deborah McDowell have questioned the privileging position of the folk in African-American literary criticism.¹¹ I contend that the valorization of folk identity and culture during the Harlem Renaissance was derived from African American's marginality. Since the folk is marginal to American culture, it can be an effective method of protest. bell hooks argues convincingly that the margin has an important place in the discourse of blackness. She states it is "a central location for the production of counter hegemonic discourse. . . . a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one's capacity to resist" ("Marginality" 341).

Folk identity was not specifically a male thing, and Zora Neale Hurston is not the only woman who embraced the folk in her writings. Studying and understanding how other
women writers dealt with the legacy of the folk is pertinent for comprehending how they negotiated the crisis of representation during the period.

The leaders and participants of the Harlem Renaissance assumed that the responsibility of art is not only to express the view of the artist but also to alter the vision of the nation. In the preface to the first edition of The Book of American Negro Poetry, James Weldon Johnson says that "the world does not know that a people is great until that people produces great literature and art" (9). He maintains that the status of the Negro in the United States is more a question of national mental attitude toward the race than actual conditions. Johnson believed that "nothing will do more to change that mental attitude and raise status than a demonstration of intellectual parity by the Negro through the production of literature and art" (9). Unlike Johnson, Du Bois was prepared to move beyond demonstration and use black literature as a weapon for social justice.

Although all the Harlem Renaissance participants agreed that art was a way to initiate change, what the subject of that art ought to be became a controversy. I maintain that, just as there was a division among male writers who dominated the movement in many ways, class themes also divided the women writers, although as black females they all belonged to a gendered second class. How women writers
defined and comprehended the potential of art becomes a necessary way of understanding the artistic strategies they opted for in order to successfully address pressing issues affecting the conditions of black women.

Focusing on the work of four urban-based female writers of the Harlem Renaissance—Anne Spencer, Angelina Weld Grimke, Mercedes Gilbert and Marita Bonner—I present in this study an analysis of how their work addresses the three major issues that I have outlined in this introduction. I contend that there is a discrepancy in subject matter language, style and genre between the writings of those women who sought their identity within the black middle class and those who embraced the rural and urban folk culture. I am convinced that the Harlem Renaissance was not a monolithic one-dimensional movement and that women writers were as diverse in their writings as the movement itself. Unfortunately, in an attempt to present a unified picture of women artists, black feminist critics have been careful to avoid literary topographies that divide rather than unite.

Chapter one examines the historical moments that symbolized a new kind of black awakening. I introduce Anne Spencer, Angelina Weld Grimke, Mercedes Gilbert, and Marita Bonner as major figures of the study. Although the Harlem Renaissance is a period that has been well-studied, not much is known about Spencer and Grimke, whose poetry was accorded
the respect of being included in Alain Locke’s anthology of renaissance writers, titled *The New Negro*. Gilbert and Bonner represent the spirit of the young Negro writers. After the introduction, I discuss the overall view of black women writers of the period by reviewing the related literature. I then discuss my theoretical framework.

In chapter two I examine closely the term “New Negro.” As Robert Bone observes, the term “presents difficulties, for it has been used to describe both a radical attitude and a literary movement” (57). I trace the origin of the term back to 1895 when it implied a tension between strictly political and artistic concerns. I discuss what defined the new and how it differed from the old. I then elaborate on how Alain Locke’s appropriation of the name in 1925 represents a measured co-opting of the term from its fairly radical political connotations. I discuss the conflict and paradoxes involved in creating the new, then move on to discuss the most neglected aspect of the term—its radical working-class meaning. Radical intellectuals like A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen, editors of the *Messenger*, associated the “New Negro” and the Harlem Renaissance with the worldwide forces that were bringing political, economic and social changes to the Western world.

I analyze the neglected position of New Negro women by examining the 1923 issue of the *Messenger* dedicated to the
New Negro woman. I then expose the conditions that turned the black radical perspective into a dualistic thought pattern of the African American petite bourgeoisie. This pattern divided women writers of the Harlem Renaissance into two competing camps: Those who supported traditional assimilationism of the educated strata, and those who argued that the culture of the African American masses should be the base for a new "high black culture" (Allen 52).

In chapter three, I discuss the "bourgeoisie aesthetic" through the works of Anne Spencer and Angeline Weld Grimke. I argue that the age of these two women—they were in their late forties at the time of the Harlem Renaissance— influenced the style and subject matter of their poetry. By making references to some of their poems, I argue that, despite being traditionalists and advocates of genteel culture who adhered to the Romantic conventions of the nineteenth-century Anglo literary establishment, these women did not retreat from the harsh social reality of African Americans during the first decades of the twentieth century.

Focusing on what I define as "folk aesthetics," I explore the writings of Marita Bonner and Mercedes Gilbert in chapter four and show that gender discrimination is the reason these writers did not receive the recognition they deserved. Although their writings fit in well with those of the male "young Turks," their feminist perspective left them
unrecognized by their peers. Bonner and Gilbert were young when the renaissance was at its peak. Their concerns were confined to two issues, acknowledging the beauty and value of black culture and portraying the difficulties of black working-class women. In my view these women represent writers preoccupied with documenting "authentic" African American culture. Focusing on Bonner's Frye Street and Environ and Gilbert's Selected Gems of Poetry, Comedy and Drama and Aunty Sara's Wooden God, I demonstrate what race meant to them, what they thought about the legacy of the folk, and how they viewed the potential of art.

In the concluding chapter, I look at the current critique of essentialism and argue for the need to recognize varied black experiences. Specifically, I look at James Oliver Horton's statement that the African American community has never been monolithic, despite a shared black history, and relate it to my study.

I discuss the differences among the writings of Spencer, Grimke, Gilbert and Bonner. Lastly, I give a cautionary note that although black women who wrote during the Harlem Renaissance responded differently to the central issues of the movement they were all concerned with the plight of African Americans. In their own different ways they represent the aspirations of the "New Negro" women.
1. "Harlem Renaissance" refers to the literary and cultural movement in the United States that involved black and white Americans. I have used "Harlem Renaissance" interchangeably with the "New Negro movement" throughout the study because both refer to the same phenomenon. Some scholars have queried the legitimacy of the phrase Harlem Renaissance since the movement was not confined to Harlem.


3. Those who have looked at the Harlem Renaissance positively include Houston A Baker, W.E.B. Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson.

4. Those who have interpreted it as a failure include David Levering Lewis, Nathan Irvin Huggins, and Carl Van Doren.

5. I am using the term class here to show the contentions among Harlem Renaissance participants on what social group was the best to be represented in all works of art. The racial politics during the Harlem Renaissance were centered around strategies for blacks inclusion in the American society.

6. I was able to locate only two dissertations that have analyzed how women writers dealt with race, class and gender. Laura Alexandra Harris, Troubling Boundaries: Women, Class and Race in the Harlem Renaissance, Ph.D. in Literature, University of California, San Diego, 1997, and Sharon Lynette Jones, Re-reading the Harlem Renaissance: The "Folk," "Bourgeoisie" and "Proletarian" Aesthetics in the Fiction of Jessie Fauset, Zora Neale Hurston and Dorothy West. Ph.D. University of Georgia, 1996.
7. Gene Bluestein argues in *The Voice of the Folk* that those who do not distinguish between folk and formal art believe that "the lower layers" of society are a major source of material that "sophisticated society" uses to fashion its literature (Introduction pg xiv).


9. Most of the studies conducted have been confined to Zora Neale Hurston, Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen.

10. In this dissertation "folk identity" is used to refer to vernacular intellectualism that is beyond intellectual and political life. This term is based on a more communal identified than broadly defined public identity.

CHAPTER 1
WOMEN AND THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

Harlem Renaissance’s Historical Moments

Between Spring 1924 and Fall 1926, three events occurred that symbolized a new kind of black awakening. The Civic Club dinner organized and hosted by Charles S. Johnson of the Urban League, the publication of a special issue of Survey Graphic dedicated to black literature and the publication of Fire, the only magazine produced by and devoted to the artists and writers of the Harlem Renaissance. Black female artists were actively involved in all three events.

Gloria Hull, Cheryl Wall and George Hutchinson acknowledge that even before the cultural awakening had begun in Harlem, “New Negroes” had been meeting in intellectual circles in Washington, D. C., and specifically in Georgia Douglas Johnson’s home. Wall suggests that Washington rivaled Harlem as a center for the female literary community (10). Referring to Johnson’s meetings, Gwendolyn Bennett wrote in her “Ebony Flute” column,
We who clink our cups in New York fire-places are wont to miss the fact that little knots of literary devotees are in like manner sipping their "cup of warmth" in this or that city of the "provinces." Which reminds me that I have heard Georgia Douglas Johnson say that there is a Saturday Nighters' Club in Washington, too. (Quoted in Hull, Color, Sex, and Poetry 165)

Although the major event occurred in New York, other literary activities went on in different places around the country.

There are conflicting views concerning the Civic Club dinner Charles Johnson hosted on March 21, 1924. The party was originally meant to celebrate two events, the debut of young writers and the publication of Jessie Fauset's novel There is Confusion. Hull claims the idea for the event originated with Regina Anderson and Gwendolyn Bennett, which suggests that women were in the forefront during the early stages of the renaissance (Color, Sex 6). But Hutchinson says the idea came from a group of writers known as the Writers' Guild. He disagrees with scholars who accept Jessie Fauset's view that the dinner was meant to celebrate the publication of her novel, saying the publication of one book would scarcely have merited a banquet for more than a hundred people (390). In either case, the organizers of the Civic Club dinner overlooked the achievements of black women artists just as scholars have done traditionally.
Almost all of the New Negro writers were present at the dinner: Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Bennett, Jessie Fauset, Regina Anderson, Eric Walrond and a few others. Among the elders were James Weldon Johnson, Georgia Douglas Johnson and W.E.B Du Bois. Representing the mainstream publishing houses were Fredrick Allen of Harper Brothers, Horace Liveright of Boni, Liveright and Walter Bartlett of Scribner's. Influential journal editors included Carl Van Doren of Century, Devere Allen of World Tomorrow and Paul Kellogg of Survey Graphic. There were other notable guests from the Urban League and the NAACP.¹

The function followed Charles Johnson's agenda, which Wall describes as geared "to announce the existence of the black cultural awakening to the white men and women with the money and clout to sponsor its artists" (70). Among the guests who spoke were Du Bois, Carl Van Doren, Horace Liveright and Jessie Fauset. After being introduced as a representative of the "older school," Du Bois remarked that "the Negro writers of a few years back were of necessity pioneers." He stressed that their writing had been constrained because "much of their style was forced upon them by barriers against publication of literature about Negroes of any sort."²

Carl van Doren expressed "genuine faith in the future of imaginative writing among Negroes in the United States."
He said that "the Negroes of the country are in a remarkable strategic position with reference to the new literary age which seems to be impending" (144). Although Horace Liveright was the publisher of the book being inaugurated, he said nothing about There is Confusion. Instead, as Wall notes, he promoted another book on his list, Jean Toomer’s Cane.

Jessie Fauset, the "evening’s guest of honor," spoke last. Her speech is not even included in Opportunity magazine’s report on the event. The author of "The Debut of the Young School Of Negro Writers" reports that Fauset was given a place of distinction on the program. He then quotes her thanks to those friends who had contributed to her accomplishments; specifically, Du Bois, whom she referred to as her "best friend and severest critic." A deeper and more sincere celebration of Fauset’s achievement is probably reflected in Gwendolyn Bennett’s "To Usward."

We claim no part with racial dearth;  
We want to sing the songs of birth!  
And so we stand like ginger jars  
Like ginger jars bound 'round  
With dust and age;  
Like jars of ginger we are sealed  
By nature’s heritage.  
But let us break the seal of years  
With pungent thrusts of song,  
For there is joy in long-dried tears  
For whetted passions of a throng!

(Quoted in Opportunity, Vol 2, May 1924)
In *Shadowed Dreams*, Maureen Honey reprints the note Gwendolyn Bennett wrote dedicating the poem to "all Negro Youth known and unknown who have a song to sing, a story to tell or a vision for the sons of earth. Especially to Jessie Fauset upon the event of her novel *There is Confusion*" (104).

Despite the Civic Club Dinner's success, the conflicts that would divide the New Negro movement were already evident. The middle-class black intellectuals Victorian respectability agenda was in conflict with the "down to earth" realism of the newer school of young writers. The second event, publication of *Survey Graphic* devoted to black literature and its later development to *The New Negro* aggravated the division. As Hutchinson suggests, the growing competition between *The Crisis* and *Opportunity* for the control of the movement structured the general frame through which the arts of New Negro was dramatized (391). The NAACP, the Urban League and associates of *Messenger* took control of the movement and eliminated other interest groups like the Graveyites.

Alan Locke and Paul Kellogg, the chief planners of *Survey Graphic* determined what was published in "Harlem Mecca of the New Negro." Women artists are represented by the poetry of two women, Anne Spencer's "Lady Lady," and Angelina Grimke's "The Black Finger," by the portraits of
Negro women drawn by Winold Reiss and by two articles, "Breaking Through" by Eunice Roberta Hunton and "The Double Task: the Struggle of Negro Women for Sex and Race Emancipation" by Elise Johnson McDougald. Despite Locke and Kellogg's good intentions, the publication was heavily criticized. Phillip Randolph accused Locke of being a snob and leaving out the issues of the proletariat. James Weldon Johnson and others were worried about the consequences of publishing Winthrop Lane's article, "Ambushed in the City: The Grim Side of Harlem," that drew attention to evils in Harlem. Jessie Fauset criticized the inclusion of Winold Reiss's portraits of two dark skinned schoolteachers. There were also other members of the Harlem elite who objected to Reiss's artwork. Elise McDougald wrote to Locke stating how the artwork had "created a furore" (Hutchinson 394). Even at this very early stage of the cultural movement, the issue of black representation had already shown signs of conflict. The divisions and back stage fights between NAACP and The Urban League affected the publication of The New Negro and the direction of the movement. Despite being marginalized, women artists were not spared these conflicts.

The third event that signaled a black cultural awakening was the publication of Fire, a quarterly magazine devoted to the younger Negro artists. Edited by Wallace Thurman and a few others, Fire attempted to blend a
“somewhat militant and avowedly independent bohemian outlook” (Wintz 82). Fire’s militant stand can easily be detected on the journal’s foreward page. The editors wrote a poem about fire.

Fire. . . . weaving vivid, hot designs upon an ebon bordered loom
and satisfying pagan thirst for beauty unadorned. . .
the flesh is sweet and real. . . . the soul an inward flush of fire. . . . Beauty? . . . flesh on fire-on fire in the furnace of life blazing. . . .
“Fya-ah,
Fy-ah, Lawd,
Fy-ah gonna burn ma soul!”
(Fire foreword)

Unfortunately, Fire did not survive. It offended and shocked the conservative literary scholars and critics. Benjamin Brawley accused the editors of Fire of confusing vulgarity with art (Wintz 85). Although the magazine was not successful, it nevertheless represented the young writers’ desire to create their own journal free from the restrictions and control of the older black leaders.

Three female writers were actively involved with the organization and production of Fire. Gwendolyn Bennett and Zora Neale Hurston served as associate editors and also had their work published in its first issue. Helene Johnson published a poem “A Southern Road.”
Lady, Lady, I saw your face,
Dark as night withholding a star...
The chisel fell, or it might have been
You had borne so long the yoke of men.
(Anne Spencer, "Lady Lady" The New Negro 148)

I have just seen a most beautiful thing
Slim and still,
Against a gold, gold sky,
A straight black cypress,
Sensitive,
Equisite,
A black finger
Pointing upwards.
Why, beautiful still finger, are you black?
And why are you pointing upwards?
(Angelina Weld Grimke "The Black Finger" New Negro 148)

Despite the inclusion of these two poems in Alain Locke's The New Negro, present day readers do not regard Anne Spencer and Angelina Weld Grimke as New Negroes. Instead they are considered as members of what Robert Bone labeled the "rear guard" (97). The rear guards are those writers "who lagged" behind holding on to the old established literary tradition. For most scholars, the New Negroes and the Harlem Renaissance are generally characterized by the younger generation of black writers principally, Langston Hughes, Claude Mckay and Wallace Thurman, who are sometimes referred to as the "Young Turks" and whose works have obscured that of Anne Spencer and
Angelina Weld Grimke's generation. In the introduction to the Selected Works of Georgia Douglas Johnson, Claudia Tate observes that "the young Turks were destined to become the dominant canonical figures, . . . their black nationalistic values were resurgent during the 1960's and early 1970's when scholars of African American culture rewrote the literary history of the New Negro" (xxi).

As literary historian Nathan Huggins acknowledges, the New Negroes' "assertion of the militant self, search for ethnic identity and heritage in folk and African culture, [and] promotion of the arts as the agent which was to define and fuse racial integrity reflect on what we hear about us now." (Huggins 7). As a result, Tate observes, the black aesthetic of the late 1960s and 1970s redefined the New Negro Renaissance as a model of the black arts movement. This redefinition has distinguished the "young Turks" as creative and progressive, while classifying the writers of Anne Spencer's and Angeline Grimke's generation as reactionary and integrationist, indeed, as "old Negroes." This viewpoint is one among many that has obscured the work of black women writers of the Harlem Renaissance.

Women writers like Marita Bonner and Mercedes Gilbert, who were relatively young during the time of the renaissance, have been marginalized and left out of the loop, neither because they belong to the "old Negroes" group
nor because their writings have anything to do with the rear guards, but because of their gender. Bonner and Gilbert's writings fit in well with those of young male radical writers like McKay and Hughes, who were concerned about the conditions of the black working class. Any difference lies in the fact that, as women, their emphasis was on women and labor and how working conditions affected black women in general, rather than nationalistic trends. The nationalistic agenda articulated almost exclusively by black males did not take into consideration the problems, objectives or concerns of black women. As Pauli Murray argues "the rhetoric about self-determination, the main trust of black militancy" was a move by black males to "share power with white males in continuing patriarchal society in which both black and white female were to be relegated to secondary status" (92).5

Evidence from their writings indicate that Bonner's and Gilbert's concerns about issues of autonomy, responsibility and self-determination were not confined to race relations, but extended to gender as well. It is therefore reasonable to expect that just as there was a division between the old and young generation of male writers, there was a similar division between the women authors, although this has not been established by scholars. Black women scholars have established that the role played by women authors of the renaissance was overshadowed by the prominence granted their
male peers. It is now possible to see that the women writers also were engaged in a contest of loyalties between elite and folk culture. The elite held that "assimilation was the prevailing idea in Negro endeavor." The folk pointed to the race's distinctive achievements, a capitalization of the race's endowments and particular inheritance of temperament and experience (Tate xxiii). This conflict of values between generations led writers of the younger generation to define themselves in opposition to the reigning standards of assimilationist literature. Tate argues that this task was accomplished by attributing the "older" generation of writers, to a rigidly defined bourgeois conservatism so as to highlight their [the young writers] liberalism originality and self-assertiveness (xxiii). The older generation writers include Anne Spencer, Angelina Weld Grimke, Jessie Fauset, and Nella Larsen. Among the men were W.E.B Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson and Walter White. Although these older artists held more varied artistic qualities than the "young Turks," they were at a disadvantage because they viewed art as a vehicle for racial uplift (Tate xxiii).

Historians like David Levering Lewis and Cary D. Wintz and literary critics like Robert Bone and Bernard Bell have dealt extensively with the division between the older and the younger men of the Harlem Renaissance. But this division
has hardly been discussed regarding the women writers. This dichotomy provides a challenging entry point to the discussion and analysis of the New Negro women and how each camp handled important aspects of the Renaissance.

Tate correctly asserts that the Harlem Renaissance provided the occasion for a contest between elite and folk culture (xxii). Writers upholding the elite culture developed what I define as "bourgeoisie aesthetic," which functions as counterpoint to the "folk aesthetic."

According to Bernard Bell, these Harlem Renaissance writers introduced the novel of "manners and genteel realism" into the tradition of the African American novel by focusing on the morals and manners of well-educated members of black high society (106). In Reconstructing Womanhood, Hazel Carby cites Jessie Fauset in particular when she notes the prevalence of the "bourgeoisie aesthetic" in works by Harlem Renaissance writers. Carby argues that "Fauset's intellectual contribution was the development of an ideology for an emerging black middle class which would establish it as being acceptably urbane and civilized and which distinguish it from rural influx" (167).

The foundation of this division lay in the demands and instructions provided by black intellectual leaders who were mostly men: W.E.B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, Charles Johnson and a few others. An example relating to women writers can be
derived by looking at an appeal made by Elise Johnson McDougald in "The Task of Negro Womanhood," published in Alain Locke's The New Negro. McDougald highlights the economic divisions among African Americans and documents the diversity and complexity of black families along class lines. She says:

From grace to strength, they vary in infinite degree, with traces of the race's history left in physical and mental outline on each. With a discerning mind, one catches the multiform charm, beauty, and character of Negro women, and grasps the fact that their problems cannot be thought of in mass (369).

McDougald distinguishes between problems caused by the mind and by economics. She argues that Black women suffered psychologically because they realized that the ideals of beauty as represented in the fine arts and pop culture did not include them. The Black woman was represented instead by the grotesque figure of Aunt Jemima. The Black woman was also misrepresented in drama that did not recognize her finest spirit but was most often used to provoke the mirthless laugh of ridicule. Her femininity was portrayed as vulgar and vicious, both in popular culture and literary and theatrical texts of the period (370). This negative portrayal of Black women had an effect on the literature produced by some renaissance women. The women writers who sought Black identity within the more affluent Black-middle class tried in their writings not to conform even in the
slightest manner to the hateful stereotypes. As Wall argues, their writings project a version of the feminine ideals glorified in the dominant society's literature and culture (14).

McDougald understood that the black community was not homogeneous. She explained how the social and economic circumstances in which women and men live their lives are central to an understanding of culture and society. The point I am suggesting here is that McDougald might have understood that one cannot comprehend culture without understanding politics and economics. As materialist feminist critic Judith Newton suggests, culture, politics and economics are mutually sustaining pieces of an over-determined whole (Starting Over 8-10). In other words, culture does not develop in isolation from other social processes.

On the problems caused by economics, McDougald divides Black women into four social groups on the basis of their economic activities. At the time of the Harlem Renaissance, the highest social group was comprised of a very small leisure group. As McDougald observes, these were the wives and daughters of men who were in business, the professions and a few well-paid personal service occupations. No doubt this small group was pleasing to see. They could afford summer trips to Europe, had "well-appointed" homes,
beautiful cars, and belonged to tennis and golf country clubs.  

McDougald characterizes the second group of business and professional women as faced with stress and struggles. She observes that most of these women are either widows or wives and mothers with husbands who are insufficiently paid or have abandoned the family. Writing during the renaissance period, McDougald salutes these women and argues that one cannot resist the temptation to pause for a moment and pay tribute to these Negro mothers. "If mothers of the race should ever be honored by state or federal legislation, the artist's imagination will find a more inspiring subject in the modern Negro mother" (372). McDougald's appeal to the artist is directed in favor of this group of Black women, the ones she calls "the modern Negro mother." She asserts:

In the fields of literature and art, the Negro woman's culture has once more begun to flower... Negro women dramatists, poets, and novelists are enjoying a vogue in print. There is every prospect that the Negro woman will enrich American literature and art with stylistic portrayal of her experience and her problems (377).

The experiences referred to here are those of women in business and professional jobs, teachers, librarians, nurses, etc. McDougald saw the Black middle-class as being solely responsible for art and poetics (concepts of literature). For her, the potential of art lay in the representation of the Black middle class. Art had to be used
as a vehicle for racial uplift, as evidence of social advancement.

McDougald characterizes the last group as the third social grade. She says most of the women are domestic and casual workers. These, together with those women in trade, are ones at the bottom of society. They and their children suffer most because of the harsh conditions of their work. It is through their drudgery that the women of higher groups find the leisure time for progress.

It is interesting to see how McDougald analyzes sexuality along class lines. She argues that the women of the working-class will react, emotionally and sexually, similarly to working-class women of other races. She states very strongly that "sex irregularities are not a matter of race, but social-economic conditions" (379). She criticizes those who have had contact only with the lower classes of Negro women and who then conclude that they are more immoral than other groups of women. McDougald's argument is that if lower class Black women are sexually immoral, that does not mean that all Black women are sexually immoral. Her defense is given in terms of class differentiations rather than along racial lines.

McDougald's position on sexuality mirrored her own identity. She tried to rebut racist imaging of Black women as morally loose by arguing that only lower class Black
women were loose. In contrast, Harlem Renaissance writers like Marita Bonner, who wrote for and about the urban folk, avoided questions of class-constructed imaginings about sexuality by attacking all the actions and assumptions of the Black bourgeoisie. She called them

an empty imitation of an empty invitation. A mime: a sham; a copy cat. A hollow re-echo. A froth, a foam. A fleck of the ashes of superficiality. Do you need to be told what that is being? (Frye Street 5)

Cheryl Wall contends that Bonner’s attack on bourgeois vacuity might be considered in the context of Langston Hughes’s essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (7). Hughes also regarded the black middle-class culture as empty; he argued that the black middle-class represented “a very high mountain indeed for a would be racial artist to climb in order to discover himself and his people” (“The Negro Artist” 560).

Like Hughes and Bonner, Zora Neale Hurston’s measure of a people’s self-respect was the love they had for “their own things”: their songs, their [stories], and proverbs, and dances” (quoted in Wall’s Women of The Harlem Renaissance 141). In “How It Feels to be Colored Me” (1928), Hurston offers no apology for being Black: “I am colored but I offer nothing in the way of extenuating circumstances except the fact that I am the only Negro in the United States whose
grandfather on the mother's side was not an Indian chief." As Wall contends, the joke is aimed both at those whites who assume that Blackness is a condition requiring some apology or explanation and those Blacks, (almost certainly including race conscious New Negroes) who want it understood that they are not merely Black (25). Unlike Countee Cullen, who said "If I am going to be a poet at all-I am going to be Poet and not Negro Poet" (quoted in Watson 78), Hurston claims her color gladly. Bonner and Hurston, like Hughes and Claude McKay, offer an interesting contrast to the views of the "New Negroes" propagated by Du Bois and Alain Locke, who sought to reconstruct the idea of who and what a Negro was or could be.

By analyzing the material condition of black women during the Harlem Renaissance, Elise Johnson McDougald concluded that African Americans were not a homogeneous group. She observed the economic stratification of the whole group. Her class analysis is useful in comprehending the problems the leaders and artists of the New Negro movement faced and gives us insight into the political contradictions raised by middle-class leadership of movements like the Harlem Renaissance.

Hazel Carby points out that World War I contributed to a large-scale movement of black people into the cities of the North. This influx led to a fragmentation of black
intellectual leadership and its constituencies. It became almost impossible to mobilize an undifferentiated address to “the black people” once an urban working class was established (164).

As other literary critics have suggested, the contentions about race representations during the renaissance can also be read as class contentions.9 Du Bois’s debate on what constitutes the “proper” portrayal of black Americans led to a rift that forced the participants to choose between two polemical renaissance ideals, the value of folk identity or “authenticism” in black art versus a bourgeois integrationist art. As Laura Harris suggests, much of the intellectual activity of the renaissance struggled to define these contesting versions as liberatory. The younger generation artists were not interested in bourgeois integrationist art because it appeared to them less liberating and in conflict with the renaissance’s goals (20-21).

If the renaissance was a male-dominated movement as Hull, Wall and Stetson have argued, how did women participants respond to cultural issues central to the renaissance? My research shows a discrepancy between the writings of Anne Spencer and Angelina Weld Grimke, who embraced what I have defined as a bourgeois integrationist art or the “bourgeois aesthetic” versus the work of Mercedes
Gilbert and Marita Bonner, who opted for a rural/urban folk art which I have defined as the “folk aesthetic.”

III. Theoretical Framework.

My methodology is primarily materialist, a composite of Black feminist and materialist feminist criticism.

In “Black Feminist Theory and the Representation of the Other,” Valerie Smith writes that “Black feminist theory proceeds from the assumption that black women experience a unique form of oppression in discursive and non discursive practices alike because they are victims at once of sexism, racism, and by extension classism” (47). Elaborating her point, she quotes Elizabeth V. Spelman and Barbara Smith’s separate demonstrations on how one can oversimplify the point by saying merely that black women experience sexism and racism. According to Smith it would be wrong to suggest that black women experience the same oppression as black men because their gender makes them second class even to their fellow black men. It is also incorrect to suggest that black women experience the same oppression as white women because as blacks they rank second class to their fellow women. Smith states that “such a formulation erases the specificity of black women’s experience, constituting her as the point
of intersection between black men's and white women's experience" (47).

As black feminists have argued, the meaning of blackness in the United States shapes profoundly the experience of genders. Similarly, the conditions of womanhood affect the experience of race (Smith 47). It is therefore necessary for any critic analyzing black women's writings to seek "particularized methodologies that might reveal the ways in which [black women's] oppression is represented in literary texts." Smith suggests that one has to be able to hold in balance the three variables of race, gender and class (47).

The artistic works of women who portray how gender and race affect women do not pose a problem for literary critics because these are issues that have been dealt with extensively by black feminist theorists. Critics dealing with race, class and gender face problems. In Labor and Desire, Paula Rabinowitz states that "both Marxist and feminist theories assign primacy to one category of difference-class on one hand, gender [and race] on the other" (4). I contend that once class, race and gender are read as mutually sustaining discursive systems dependent upon re-presenting each through the other we get an understanding of how to read writers like Mercedes Gilbert and Marita Bonner whose works produce a complex rendering of
the race/class/gender nexus. Lastly, Smith suggests that just as "gender and race taken separately determine the conditions not only of oppression but also of liberation" The interplay between race, class, and gender categories give rise to its own conception of liberation (47).

Since black feminist criticism is not monolithic, I have adopted Smith's approach while considering seriously Alice Walker's "womanist" criticism. Clarifying the difference between womanist and black feminist theories, Walker argues that womanist theory is "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female" (xi). Spencer, Grimke, Gilbert and Bonner fit both designations black feminist and womanist. Their writings delve into issues related to black female versus black male, black female versus white female, and black female versus black female. Though not always confined to women, some of the issues they address seem to support the possibility that men and women can find their voices and achieve wholeness. They thus touch on the basic tenet of womanist theory.

Language is one of the major concerns of black feminist criticism. In determining the differences between the language used by Anne Spencer and Angelina Weld Grimke and that used by Mercedes Gilbert or Marita Bonner, I am reminded of Barbara Smith's early attempt to formulate a black feminist theory. In "Towards a Black Feminist
Criticism," she asserts that a "black feminist critic should work from the assumption that black women writers constitute an identifiable literary tradition" (174). Smith thought it was possible to reveal commonality between black women's writing because of the common experience of the writers and the shared use of black female language.

Like Deborah McDowell and Hazel Carby, I question the existence of a monolithic black female language.\(^1\) I accept Carby's assertion that no language or experience is divorced from the shared context in which different groups that share a language express their differing group interests (Carby 17). In Marxism and The Philosophy of Language, Volosinov explains how different social groups use language in different ways, depending on the condition of their respective internal interactions. It is therefore right to argue that the "terrain of language is a terrain of power relations" (21). From Carby's viewpoint the "struggle within and over language reveals the nature of the structure of social relations and the hierarchy of power, not the nature of one particular group" (17).

The language used by Harlem Renaissance women writers is by no means monolithic. There are similarities between the poetry written by Anne Spencer and that of Angelina Weld Grimke but it would be naive to assume that the similarities are a result of a shared racial identity. Similarly, Gilbert
and Bonner are black women writers whose writings project a use of folk language characteristic of the black working class. To understand the similarities and different language usage between these women I have applied black feminist criticism, radically examining how language operates in black women’s history. Although I have examined how the women in my study support through language what becomes a flourishing culture, I refuse to privilege discourse (systems of signification that extend beyond mere words) to the exclusion of other things. I see the inattention to other social, economic and political conditions when reading literary works as a big problem for those who are interested in social change. As Michele Barrett argues “there is a world of difference between assigning some weight to ideological struggle and concluding that no other struggle is relevant or important” (95).

My approach combines black feminist with materialist feminist criticism. By materialist I mean a position that argues for the “primacy of being over thought.” I have taken from historical materialism the argument that real objects exist independently of how they are known, and as a precondition for any knowledge of them (Macdonell 78). In “Toward a materialist-Feminist Criticism” Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt distinguish materialist feminism from other feminist approaches. They elaborate on how materialist
feminists construct and use a theoretical position that involves a double commitment:

work on the power relations implied by gender and simultaneously on those implied by class, race and sexual identification; an analysis of literature and an analysis of history and society; an analysis of the circumstances of cultural production and an analysis of the complexities with which at a given moment in history they are inscribed in the text. (xix)

By using materialist feminism I push Smith’s articulation of race, class, and gender closer to non-discursive practices by avoiding the discussion of semiotics. Although I am fully aware of the insights to be gained by semiotics, semiotics can never resolve political matters which are linked to larger and more potent structures of oppression, my analysis therefore focuses directly on the representation of the living and laboring conditions of the people designated in the United States as black working class and black bourgeoisie. Like materialist feminists, I have interpreted the form, style and meaning of the selected works as products of a particular history. I have resisted the view of history as a "static tale of unrelieved oppression of women or of their alleviated triumphs." Instead I have looked at history as "a process of transformation" (Newton xxiii).

By combining materialist feminist, black feminist and womanist criticism, I hope to expose how class based themes
shaped the writings of the women of the Harlem Renaissance. As black women, Spencer, Grimke, Gilbert and Bonner were all gendered second class. Despite this similarity their responses to central issues of the renaissance like the meaning of race or the legacy of the folk indicate a further class differentiation resulting from the way they portrayed blacks in their works. Their writings disclose how class narratives framed and shaped the dynamics of race representations during the period.

NOTES


2. Du Bois’s message is paraphrased in “The Debut of the Younger School of Negro Writers” Opportunity Vol 2 no 17 May 1924.

3. For clarity see “The Debut of the Younger School of Negro Writers.”

4. Paul Kellog was greatly inspired by the coming out dinner of the New Negro writers. He extended an invitation to Alain Locke to edit a special issue of his magazine to black literature.

5. Murray cites the articles in Ebony magazine published in a special issue on the Negro woman in 1966 as an example of the thinking of black male during the Black Nationalist Movement. The editorial reminded the readers that the past was behind them, the immediate goal of the Negro woman was the establishment of a strong family unit in which the father is the dominant person.

6. My use of the word overdetermine is derived from Donna Landry and Gerald Maclean definition. In Materialist
Feminisms they state that "things don't have a single or a simple cause. . . overdetermination is a denial of essentialist thinking by which a complex structure can be reduced to a single kernel of truth" (4-5).

7. Statistics published by the Encyclopedia of African American Culture and History 1996 estimates that there were about 10,000 blacks in the upper and middle classes out of a population of ten million in 1920.

8. "Class" is a difficult term to define. My use of the term here is derived from Bart Landry's study The New Black Middle Class which proposes the "concept of class rests on . . . the existence of overall gross differences in the real economic rewards received by individuals in different occupational groups" (11). One is justified to speak of a black middle-class rather than a broader American middle-class because of their unique historical differences.

9. I am indebted for this observation to Laura Harris. She discusses this idea in her dissertation "Troubling Boundaries: Women, Class, and Race in the Harlem Renaissance" Ph.D University of California, San Diego, 1997.

10. I have in mind here authors like Anna Spencer and Angelina Weld Grimke who did not acknowledge class as a fundamental difference and therefore a problem among black people.

CHAPTER 2
THE NEW NEGROES

New Negroes Or Talented Tenth?

He scans the world with calm and fearless eyes, conscious within of powers long since forgot; At every step, new man-made barriers rise To bar his progress—but he heeds them not. He stands erect, though tempests round him crash, Though thunder bursts and billows surge and roll; He laughs and forges on, while lightening flash Along the rocky pathway to his goal. Impassive as a Sphinx, he stares ahead—Forsees new empires rise and old ones fall; While caste-mad nations lust for blood to shed, He sees God’s finger writing on the wall. With soul awakened, wise and strong he stands, Holding his destiny within his hands.

(James Edward McCall, “The New Negro” Caroling Dusk. 34-35)

In this chapter I examine closely the concept “New Negro” and establish that the term did not refer only to the Harlem Renaissance literary and artistic intellectuals, as it is perceived today, but had a radical working-class meaning. Radical intellectuals like Philip A. Randolph and Chandler Owen, editors of the Messenger, associated the “New Negro” and the Harlem Renaissance with the world-wide forces that were bringing political, economic and social changes in the Western world.
Anne Spencer, Angeline Weld Grimke, Mercedes Gilbert and Marita Bonner all fit into the "New Negro" category. Looking at class, and the ideological issues surrounding the renaissance, I am convinced that many of the arguments about the different positions that women writers took cannot be adequately understood without a broader discussion and detailed understanding of the renaissance as a political and cultural movement. The discussion leads to the conclusion that Black women writers developed different ideological stands which resulted in some writers favoring the bourgeois aesthetic and some embracing a folk aesthetic.

The term "New Negro" has been used to describe two things, a racial attitude and a literary movement (Bone 57). Henry Louis Gates argues that the term goes back as far as 1895, when it was used as a sign of a new racial self ("The Trope" 133). Leon Coleman asserts that although the meaning of the term was somewhat vague, "It contained the implication of the Negro’s psychological break with past racial attitudes of subservience, humility and self-apology" (133). The "New Negroes" were a class of their own. They differed from other African Americans by education, money, and prosperity. In 1900, Booker T. Washington, Fannie Barrier Williams and N. B. Wood published a book titled A New Century for a New Negro. As Gates observes, the book was intended to turn the new
century's image of the black away from the stereotypes in plantation fictions, black-face minstrelsy and vaudeville (137). Indeed, the book now reads as a list of the individual achievements of black men and women as abolitionists, soldiers and artists, and presentation of the twentieth century's new class of African-Americans representing the race's capacity to rise. The book's introduction by Washington stresses the difference between "New Negroes" and their predecessors:

The negro of today is in every phase of life advanced over the negro of thirty years ago. In the following pages the progressive life of the Afro American people has been written in the light of achievement that will be surprising to people who are ignorant of the enlarging life of these remarkable people. (3)

Washington and his fellow editors emphasized the achievement of African Americans. As Gates argues, black intellectuals seem to have believed that the racism that blacks experienced in real life was a result of the way racism was manipulated in art (137).

The relationship between the old and new Negroes as presented by Washington is problematic. The old Negro was completely forgotten. The history of the old Negro is buried beneath the "New Negro." These early "New Negroes" lacked a political strategy. They were convinced that the race's public perception depended largely upon the connotations of a name. Their success therefore depended fundamentally upon
self-negation, a turning away from the old Negro and the memory of black enslavement toward the registering and self-acceptance of a "New Negro."

The difference between the old and the new was only utopian thinking. In supporting this critique, Gates quotes Michel Foucault, who argues that this form of neological utopia (ideal state of being, of renewal) can exist only in "the non place of language." Gates contends that just as utopia signifies "no place," the New Negro, as defined by Washington signifies a "black person who lives at no place," and no time (132).

After 1895 the term "New Negro" developed a different meaning. It moved from identifying a new racial self to being a strictly political term. The term was appropriated by a group which came to be known as the "New Negro Radicals" or the "New Negro Crowd" (Anderson 86-87). Prominent members were Richard B. Moore; Otto Huiswood; Cyril V. Briggs, editor and owner of Crusader; Hubert Harrison editor, of the Voice; William Bridges, editor of the Challenge; William H. Ferris, a black nationalist and editor of Negro World; W.A. Domingo, Philip Randolph, and Chandler Owen. With the exception of Ferris, all were initially socialist or economic radicals. Another distinguishing mark of the group was that most members came from the Caribbean Islands. The difference between the early
"New Negroes" and the "New Negro Harlem radicals" is that
the latter identified and rejected the class interest of the
former.

These young radicals in Harlem questioned whether the
black masses could be liberated by the effort and example of
the black aristocracy known as the "Talented Tenth." They
correctly realized that the educated professional class was
either "helping to perpetuate conservative political
traditions or acting more in behalf of its own cultural
interests and aspirations than of the urgent practical needs
of the masses" (Anderson 102). Philip Randolph outlined the
crucial flaw in the character of the Talented Tenth. He
cited its philosophy of "individual merit" and the idea its
members held of themselves as "exceptional men" as the
reasons it failed to provide the political grass-root
leadership that was expected of it (102).

Randolph is correct in his argument that if the
Talented Tenth were in any kind of political motion, it was
a motion against those conditions of American life that
affected their personal interest, and not against the
ordinary problems of the masses (102). As Horace Cayton and
George Mitchell put it, the Talented Tenth "had pursued
their own class objectives in the name of the masses."
(Quoted in Anderson 102). This does not mean that the
Talented Tenth ignored the harsh social reality of African
Americans during the first decade of the twentieth century; rather, they conceived radicalism in very limited terms. Randolph, like many of the "New Negro Crowd," felt that the Talented Tenth lacked the racial, social and economic militancy to give strength and force to the liberation of the black masses (Anderson 103). As Anderson contends, Randolph dismissed the elite leadership as "old crowd" and "hat in hand," not because they behaved like "Uncle Toms," but because they were "affirming their allegiance to limited modes of racial protest by opposing political and economic radicalism among blacks, thereby helping to perpetuate the political and economic values in America that had first enslaved and subsequently oppressed the race" (103).

In his first essay, Alain Locke, a member of the Talented Tenth and prominent leader of the New Negro movement, indicated that the migrating peasant held the final answer to the success of the New Negro. But his second essay "Enter the New Negro," contradicts his earlier version. In this second essay he made it clear that the black peasants moving from the South to the North were expected to leave their immediate future to the upper crust Talented Tenth. Locke said, "The only safeguard for mass relations in the future must be provided in the carefully maintained contacts of the enlightened minorities of both races" (quoted in Lewis 115). Locke's apology regarding the
New Negroes radicalism shed light on the position of the new Talented Tenth as far as economics and politics were concerned. His admission that the New Negro was becoming slightly radicalized, but remained conservative on other issues indicates the weakness of the Talented Tenth’s leadership. As Judith Stein claims, “There was a tremendous gap between the thinking of the Negro elite and the black mass” (96).

Analyzed closely, the term “New Negro” becomes a complicated paradox. It implicitly combines an eighteen-century vision of utopia with a nineteenth-century idea of progress. After 1900, black intellectuals expanded the term “New Negro” and gave it a broader meaning. In 1908, Ray Stannard Baker outlined his idea of the New Negro in “Following the Color line.” He was followed by S. Laing Williams who elaborated what the term meant in a magazine known as Alexander. In 1916, William Pickens published a whole book on the New Negroes and named the book The New Negro. Ray Baker, Laing Williams and William Pickens used the term “New Negro” in almost the same fashion. They all argued that the New Negro was not really new: but the same old Negro under new conditions and therefore subjected to new demands. Pickens clarifies the newness of the New Negro by arguing that

the New Negro is sober, sensible creature conscious of
his environment, knowing that not all is right, but trying hard to become adjusted to this civilization in which he finds himself by no will or choice of his own. (239)

Certainly one can argue that there is little or no difference in use of the term compared to its use by Booker T. Washington in A New Negro for a New Century. It is only after 1916 that we begin to see the appropriation of the term for radical economic, social and political motives.

Between January and March 1920, the New York Age published an open forum titled "The New Negro: What is He?" Responses to this forum came from different individuals and indicated a shift in the meaning of " New Negro" as defined by Booker T. Washington and earlier scholars. The term now indicated a radical change among those who considered themselves New Negroes. Whereas the earlier scholars had stressed the achievements of New Negroes as a social class, the latter demanded full political rights, economic opportunities and complete social equality. They argued that the New Negro is found in the spirit of independent unity, racial understanding and self defending Negro. The Negro of today is not wondering about what he is going to get, but is determined to get what he should have always had and never got. (Henderson 1)

The response in the New York Age and the Messenger indicates a political awakening among educated, working-class African Americans. Theirs became an effort to demand and secure rights. Randolph argued that the New Negro’s
"social methods are: education and physical action in self defense." He stressed that education must constitute the basis of all action and that self defense, should be accepted as a matter of course. Randolph considered those unwilling to fight to protect their lives as unfit to live (Messenger August 1920). As Gates notes, Randolph's New Negro was "a militant, card carrying, gun-toting socialist who refused to turn the other cheek" (147).

W.A. Domingo supported Randolph's militancy. He wrote in the November 1920's issue of the Messenger that to him the New Negro is "he or she who realized that labor is the common denominator of the working class of the world. Exploitation ... the common denominator of oppression everywhere." Domingo stressed that a New Negro has grievances against those who profit from the system which operates against the interest workers (144). This awakening was embraced and expanded by what Anderson termed "left-wing radicals." They chose the Messenger as the official magazine for their views.

Philip Randolph argued in "The New Negro-What is he?" that the first accurate test of what a man, institution or movement wants is to identify the aims, method of achieving those aims and the relationship between the aims and the prevailing conditions (73). He contended that the aim of the New Negroes falls under three general headings: political,
economic and social. He stated clearly that the methods by which the New Negroes expect to realize their political aims are radical. He mentioned the lack of economic foundation as the reason neither the Republican nor the Democratic party was capable of solving the New Negroes' problem (72).

Randolph argued that since the majority of the blacks were basically workers, it was necessary for them to support a working-class political party (74). The only party that supported the working class workers at the time was the American Communist party, which was not interested in black workers. The white socialist Eugene Debs declared that any socialist who failed to speak out "for the Negro's right to work, live and develop his manhood, educate his children, and fulfill his destiny equally with whites misconceives the movement he pretends to serve or lacks the courage to live up to his principles" (Anderson 148). Although Debs' call was taken seriously by some white workers, the racial conflict among workers was never solved. With the majority of white workers prejudiced against blacks the dream of a united working class was never achieved. By 1925, Randolph had withdrawn from socialist activism and lost interest in socialism because cooperation between the races of the working class failed. He realized the problem was not only class, but also race. Anderson, Randolph's biographer, quotes Ernest McKinney who argued that "Negroes had two
disabilities, one being Negro, and one being workers" (149). They therefore had to struggle on two fronts.

Philip Randolph was not the only Black leader who lost hope with the American Communist Party. Hubert Harrison, the oldest of the New Negro radicals and "father" of socialism in Harlem, became an advocate of black nationalism after analyzing the racial situation in America. Harrison's complete break with the Socialist Party came in 1917 when he realized that socialism could not offer an answer to the race problem in America. Arguing against socialism, he said;

The roots of class consciousness inhere in a temporary economic order; whereas the roots of race consciousness must of necessity survive any kind of all changes in the economic order.

(Quoted in Anderson 120)

This argument convinced the black working class that socialism was not a solution to their problems. Rejecting socialism Harrison proposed a new direction for the Negro radicals. He urged them to cut off their ties with the socialist movement and follow a strategy that put race first (Anderson 1). With the withdrawal of most members from the party that supported the Messenger, the magazine began to crumble. Messenger's identification with a revolutionary tone and its commitment to organizing Negroes for class struggle made it unpopular. The Justice Department declared it the most dangerous of all the Negro publications. By
1920, it had lost most of its black subscribers and had stopped calling itself "The only radical magazine published by Negroes." By 1923, it had completely lost its socialist radicalism (Anderson 139). The New Negroes had changed from economic radicals to cultural philosophers.

Theodore Kornweibel argues that, although the *Messenger* was sympathetic to the New Negroes' spirit, it never committed itself to them totally. It opened its pages to new talent as well as old, and provided space for a certain amount of cultural criticism and comment, but its editorial columns and comment never embraced the cultural movement or spelled out a coherent philosophy for it (107). Commenting on Kornweibel's criticism, George Hutchinson argues that although the *Messenger* failed to provide a coherent philosophy for the cultural movement, it did in fact present a more united front on the issue of racial and national identity (290).

**The New Negro Movement**

The man behind the New Negroes' change from economic radicalism to a cultural and social movement is Alain Locke, a Harvard-trained Ph.D. Rhodes scholar, and Howard University professor. Just as the radical New Negroes had found the New Negroes of Booker T. Washington and Fannie
Williams unacceptable, so the rising black intelligentsia, which included scholars like Alain Locke, W.E.B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson and Charles Johnson, found the politicized New Negroes too potent and problematic. Alain Locke transformed the militancy associated with the New Negroes into a non-political movement of the arts. In 1925, he edited a special number of Survey Graphic entitled "Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro." This launched the New Negro movement that has come to be known as the Harlem Renaissance.

Locke’s New Negro was a literary artist: poet, artist, sculptor, musician and writer. Defining Locke’s New Negro, Gates says, "It would be in the sublimity of the fine arts, and not in the political sphere of action or protest poetry that America [they thought] would at last embrace the Negro of 1925" (147). Gates stresses that Locke’s New Negro was an ahistorical Negro, a citizen like every other American but more deserving than the old Negro because he had been reconstructed as an entity somehow new ("The Trope" 147). Gates’ analysis of the New Negro stretches Alain Locke’s description and understanding a bit too far. Locke had indeed stripped off economic determinism from the New Negroes’ agenda, but he understood the reason for doing so. Locke, had no option. His decision to work through culture and not politics resulted from Blacks’ being barred from
most meaningful direct political activity. Locke had to translate politics into cultural terms. The Harlem Renaissance therefore stands as a cultural movement with a political strategy. Locke and J.W. Johnson believed that African American artistic abilities could win political sympathies of the white middle class who would then support an end to racial inequality in America.

It had become obvious to Locke that the failure of radicalism initiated by the New Crowd Negroes had to be replaced by a new movement, and understood the movement's commencement as a break from past racial attitudes of subservience, humility and self-apology. Locke wanted and encouraged the Negro artist of the 20's to give expression to the more positive attitudes of self-acceptance and self-respect. Hutchinson offers the best explanation of what Alain Locke wanted to do. Arguing against those who have taken Locke to task for what they consider his prejudices and elitism, Hutchinson argues convincingly that Locke truly did undermine past elitist approaches to African American cultural reality, but he promoted new types of emphasis on "race values" and "folk endowment" (397). As Hutchinson contends, Locke's intention was to further a cultural awakening based on a "racially proud, yet cosmopolitan, sensibility drawing confidence from classical African and African American folk culture and from a belief that
important sectors of white America were prepared for an interracial and culturally pluralist future" (397). Locke regarded the New Negro artists as a vibrant young generation with a new psychology. The New Negroes, he said, represented "the first fruits of the Negro renaissance" (The New Negro 47).

Alongside Alain Locke was W.E.B. Du Bois, the founder of the (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) N.A.A.C.P. Similar to Locke, Du Bois was not in favor of economic radicalism, at least at the beginning of his political career. The NAACP was therefore not militant. Its strategy was based on a political leadership that was bi-racial. Because of its strong leadership and organized funding, the organization could stand competition with other black organizations. NAACP black leaders Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson supported the idea of using art as a weapon in the struggle for racial equality. Under their leadership they encouraged black writers to publish in the organization's journal, The Crisis. Analyzing the contribution of The Crisis to the Harlem Renaissance, Abby and Ronald Johnson suggest that it stimulated the artistic flowering of the 1920's (41). It is also clear from Johnson's analysis that W.E.B. Du Bois's capacity as an editor gave him control to dictate what was to be published.
A controversial subject in the New Negro’s literary circles was the issue concerning art and propaganda. Du Bois’s theory of the Black aesthetic, suggests that he failed to establish a proper stand on the subject. As Johnson and Johnson have pointed out, in the first part of the decade Du Bois advanced a theory of art over propaganda although he did not define what he meant by art. For Du Bois, a literature which did not exist for a moral purpose was decadent and socially dangerous. He therefore advocated for a true depiction of black life, the bad along with the good. He argued that New Negro artists should not limit their horizon to propaganda, which he saw as the exclusive presentation of only the most favorable images (45).

Du Bois changed his position drastically during the Harlem Renaissance era. He did this after reading Locke’s *The New Negro*. Du Bois criticized Locke for stressing beauty rather than propaganda and argued that Black art should be propaganda. With time, Du Bois had come to believe that African American literature could shape public opinion in a constructive way if only it dealt with the black middle-class, which he considered essentially decent and industrious (Johnson and Johnson 46). In the February 1926 issue of *The Crisis*, Du Bois developed seven questions which, as Johnson and Johnson have argued, essentially proposed that New Negro artists ought to concentrate on the
lives of educated blacks. Questions like, How should the Black people be portrayed? Or, what are Negroes to do when they are continually painted at the worst and judged by the public as they are painted (Johnson and Johnson 46)? These questions were meant to support Du Bois in his decision to use art as propaganda. Young New Negroes like Langston Hughes and Claud Mckay disagreed with Du Bois and challenged him openly. Du Bois responded with an emphatic statement of his stand on art.

All art is propaganda and ever must be despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda.

("Criteria of Negro Art" 296)

According to Darwin Turner, Du Bois's weakness is that "he did not clearly define and delimit his theory" (46). Turner points out that Du Bois unlike great authors like Wordsworth or T.S. Eliot, never created in his fiction, the great work that would have illustrated and probably justified his literary theory (46). It is easy to comprehend why Du Bois insisted on art as propaganda. This was at the peak of the Harlem Renaissance. Many books by African American authors were being published. The cultural movement was aimed at producing social and political results. The New Negroes had believed that art could and should support progressive change; however, it became
evident, especially to Du Bois, that African Americans could not achieve the desired results if they kept on writing about their negative and weakest sides. The biggest controversy that divided the New Negroes during the Harlem Renaissance, both men and women, developed from this issue.

Along with Alain Locke and W.E.B. Du Bois was Charles Johnson, a sociologist and a pragmatist whose approach toward the Harlem Renaissance differed significantly from that of Du Bois. Johnson had analyzed the black Americans' movement from the rural south to the urban north and concluded that discrimination and segregation prevented Blacks from completing the transition from folk culture to industrial culture. This situation had left them suspended in a marginal situation. Neither their heritage nor the urban white culture had prepared them to cope with the racially segregation situation. Black Americans were thus left with a deep seated feeling of inferiority which later developed into intense frustration and hostility. Charles Johnson believed that the solution to this problem was for Black Americans to stop thinking about impossible dreams and engage themselves with realities and real possibilities. His appointment as an editor of Opportunity magazine gave him a platform for his sociological ideas regarding the black course. He developed a positive view of African American folk culture in the South, differentiating himself strongly
from earlier black nationalists who had denigrated lower class black culture. Johnson argued that "meaning must come and values must be forged out of experiences, not derived from abstract beliefs in a group mind or racial spirit" (Hutchinson 58). Johnson and Johnson have observed that Charles Johnson’s editorial style was "an example of deliberate and rational analysis, usually objective, often subtle, generally complex and balanced in judgement" (50).

As a sociologist he was not interested in pushing a dogma or a doctrine, but he insisted on carefully investigating facts and then publishing them to shape public opinion (Hutchinson 56). This became the method of Opportunity magazine. Owing to Johnson’s overall stance toward black culture, Opportunity strongly encouraged folk realism in the arts as well as in fiction, focusing on the urban lower working class. Johnson wrote that he was convinced the road to new freedom for black Americans lay in the discovery of the surrounding beauty of their lives. He recognized that beauty itself is a mask of the highest expression of the human spirit.

Criticizing W.E.B. Du Bois and the Crisis, Johnson argued that it was very unfortunate that Du Bois had chosen to defend the race rather than explain the race in the Crisis. As a fellow editor, he acknowledged that Du Bois was brilliant, highly cultured and racially sensitive.
Johnson thought Du Bois was also bitter to the point of being destructive (Johnson and Johnson 50).

The differences between Johnson and Du Bois emerge clearly as one contrasts the two in their approach toward art. Du Bois insisted on an outmoded formula of art as solely propaganda. Johnson insisted on "substituting self-expression and interpretation for racial rhetoric and overt propaganda" (51). This was an important strategy for Johnson. As Johnson and Johnson have noted, Charles Johnson understood well the social function of literature but expressed his ideas in a very diplomatic way. Avoiding the expression "art as propaganda," Johnson suggested repeatedly that writers and artists have a responsibility to themselves as well as to the community (51).

Despite their different approaches, the three active promoters of the Harlem Renaissance--Alain Locke, W.E.B. Du Bois and Charles Johnson--saw literature as a means of addressing the racial problems African Americans faced. Unlike Du Bois, Alain Locke and Charles Johnson rejected the premise that political concerns should take precedence over literary ones. As Judith Musser contends, the two agreed that realistic literary examination of the social and psychological experiences of African Americans was in itself the greatest service that African American writers could provide for their race and the most valuable contribution
that they could make to the efforts of African Americans to adjust to life in urban America and achieve self respect (11).

**New Negro Women**

Despite the contributions of Black women in a number of political and social organizations, Black American cultural and literary history commonly regards the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in terms of great men. Hazel Carby argues correctly that this has marginalized the political contributions of African American women during the period, although the efforts of some Black women were so extraordinary that they managed to register and perpetuate their ideas (7). These New Negro women, like their male peers, attempted to formulate a political strategy to promote social change. Unfortunately, their contributions were not acknowledged because at that time men did not consider women as having the intellectual authority.

Mary Helen Washington points out this gender bias through reference to the early 1890's when black intellectuals decided to form an organization of colored authors, scholars and artists with an intention of raising the standard of intellectual endeavor among American Negroes. One member declared himself "decidedly opposed to
the admission of women to membership" because he believed "literary matters and social matters do not mix." This member was following the lead of distinguished luminaries like Alexander Crummell, Francis Grimke and Du Bois, who had proposed from the beginning that "the American Negro Academy, a kind of think tank for the intellectual black elite called the Talented Tenth, be open only to men of African descent" (quoted in The Darkened Eye Restored 33). I mention this example because women are left out in all the literature about New Negroes. This gives a false impression that the New Negroes were only males. Tracing the role of women in reports of the New Negroes' endeavors, one can confidently say that the phrase has been identified with males only until very recently.

When Booker T. Washington published A New Negro for A New Century, one of the earliest attempts to picture the New Negro, he was assisted by Fannie Barrier Williams. Although not much is known about this Black woman who took part in recording "accurate and up to date record of the upward struggles of the Negro women race," she qualifies as one of the earliest women in a leadership role among New Negroes (1). She insisted that the mission of the first national convention of colored women was to make it known that the race "must begin to help itself to live better, strive for a higher standard of social purity, exercise a more helpful
sympathy with the many of the race who are without guides and enlightenment in the ways of social righteousness” (quoted in A New Negro for a New Century iv). Williams asserted that the black woman was “the real new woman in America.” The black woman, she argued, had “succeeded in lifting herself as completely from the stain and meanness of slavery as if a century had elapsed since the day of emancipation”(iv).

Two of the eighteen chapters in A New Negro for a New Century are devoted to the New Negro woman. What differentiates these women from other black women of the same period is their education, teaching profession and social activities associated with the club movement. Their “newness” is therefore associated with the nineteenth-century idea of progress, which American society considered to be an indication of the potential of human intelligence. Speaking from a Black women’s perspective, Fannie Williams argued that self-respect and acceptance for one’s race began when one started to think that she was something better than a slave, or a descendent of an ex-slave. It was also a feeling that one was a unit in the womanhood of a great nation and a great civilization(404). Reread today, Williams’ characterization of the New Negro woman is not without fault.
The problem with Williams' understanding of the New Negro derives from her association with black leadership that associated the New Negro with a new racial self. Williams' intention in writing and providing photographs of New Negro women was very similar to that of her co-editor Booker T. Washington, and involved restructuring the race's image of itself. Since most black intellectuals seem to have believed that their racist treatment in life mirrored their racist treatments in art, the book, as Gates mentions, was intended to turn the new century's image of blacks away from the stereotypes found in plantation fictions, black face minstrelsy, vaudeville and racist pseudo science ("The Trope" 136). Williams, like her fellow editors, manipulated the reality of the black image by providing photographs of refined, educated mulatto women. As Gates notes, by doing so Williams and Washington were buying into the idea that the public Negro self was an entity to be crafted (137). Absent in Williams' New Negro women are the Southern black women who were not of mixed parentage but were equally engaged in economic survival. This tempts one to question the class nature of the New Negro women. As Patricia Hill Collins observes, "While working on behalf of all black women, members of the black women's club movement did not work with them as equals" (153). One also wonders how many generations might be required for the black masses of women
to reach the point where they could enter this imagined utopia Fannie Williams portrays.

Writing about the same topic in *Progress of a Race*, Fannie Williams elaborates on the activities of the "Club Movement Among Colored Women." They made a commitment to educate fellow women and to provide a better home environment for themselves and their children (203). Educated, middle-class, and to a certain extent privileged, black women in the early twentieth century were conscious of and deeply troubled by the social implications of race. They therefore organized sewing schools, rescue agencies, night schools and gave lectures on all subjects of social interests. Nevertheless, they faced discrimination from white women's organizations (216).

Williams explains how the color line controversy helped some colored women by exposing that "colored women were not alike; they had social, mental and character differences" (228). The controversy had also helped to reveal that among the colored women there were clever writers, fluent speakers, doctors, dentists, lawyers, linguists, artists, business women and thousand of teachers. Fannie Williams' call that "colored women must bring to the front and encourage their best women; their representatives must be of the best they have" (228) echos Du Bois philosophy of the Talented Tenth. I contend that the conditions that were
molding a New Negro man were also subtly molding a New Negro woman, they all had a common vision of the social task of elevating the race.

When the New Crowd Negroes led by Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen shifted the struggle for ideological and political hegemony among the black middle-class, they did not have women in mind. Randolph defined the New group as a "crowd composed of educated, radical, and fearless young men" (Messenger May 1919). But the "New Crowd Negroes" could not ignore the contribution of black women to their group for long. In July 1923 the official magazine for the group heralded the arrival of the New Negro woman with a special issue. The Messenger’s July editorial proclaimed that

In politics, business and labor, in the professions, church and education, in science art and literature, the New Negro woman, with her erect and spirit undaunted, is resolutely marching forward, ever conscious of her historic and noble mission of doing her bit toward the liberation of her people in particular and human race in general. (Messenger July 1923)

This special edition has seven essays by black women. Their discussions center around the importance of labor unions, the problems of working-class black women, and the constant humiliation of being both black and female. The difference between the "New Crowd Negro" women and their predecessors of the club movement association is seen by comparing the aims and activities of the two groups. Just as
the New Crowd Negro men had become a political movement fighting against black workers' exploitation, the New Crowd Negro women also emphasized the working conditions of black working class women.

In an article published in the Messenger's issue dedicated to the New Negro woman, Nora Newsome discusses the position of black women in trade union movements. Her article "The Negro Woman in the Trade Union Movement" fits in well with the aspirations of Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen. Newsome refrains from discussing the problems black women face in the workplace and instead discusses how trade union organizations in the nineteenth century were a product of the struggle between labor and capital. She argued that the union movement brought an immeasurable degree of economic independence to women and tried to convince black women to join unions wherever they worked. She was convinced that the labor movement could offer a glorious opportunity to young black women of education and ideas. It could also provide creative, constructive service to the black race in particular and, to workers in general (762).

In a different article, Mary Louise Williams discusses the problems that black women faced in the workplace around the country. She described Black women as the last to be hired and the first to be fired. Positions advertised for black women with high school diplomas were the lowest in the
job market. Positions like "bootblack" in a ladies room should not require a high school diploma, but Mary Williams contends that "the reason why they wanted an educated black girl was to keep the wealthy customers from coming in contact with objectionable Negroes" (763). Williams' article eloquently articulates the disabilities black women faced. It appeared that all doors had been closed to them. Despite all the disappointment Black women faced, Williams' article demonstrates the spirit of the New Crowd Negro women. She ends her article with an optimistic rhyme:

    Out of the shadow of night
    the world moves into light.
    It is daybreak everywhere.

    (Messenger July 1923 : 763)

The New Crowd Negroes emphasized political rights, economic opportunities and complete social equality, and the Messenger's editorials and articles reflected their aspirations. It is therefore not surprising that all the articles published in the issue dedicated to the New Crowd Negro women emphasized issues pertaining to labor. Anna Jones Robinson wrote about Negro women in the professions. Writing in 1923, she highlights the obstacles black women had to overcome to attain positions ordinarily filled by men. She congratulates the few black women who were medical doctors, lawyers, journalists, architects, accountants and in various other professions which kept them always before
the public. These successes did not come easily. As Robinson notes, there was more to be done to help black women get positions they deserved. It was hoped that the efforts of the New Crowd Negroes would open up more opportunities to Negro women. Robinson argued that the possibilities and opportunities for self development and service to New Negro women in the professions were as yet unexplored. "As more of them enter the field...their influence cannot but be felt and seen in the improved condition of their community" (766).

Another New Crowd Negro Woman, Rose Whitehead Whaley, discussed segregation and equated it with "closed doors." Analyzing the psychological implication of segregation, Whaley contends that it would not be bad if it were nothing more than separate schools, churches and housing districts. The most frustrating thing she had observed was the atmosphere that segregation carries on that nurtures a peculiar train of thought, a distinct psychological reaction. Whaley considers segregation the chief support of "divine right of race," empowering the dominant group to excuse and justify racism with false and illogical reasoning. According to Whaley, segregation eventually has an "unwholesome effect upon the oppressed" (771). Whaley notes that one figure who has been the victim of twofold, segregation and discrimination is the New Negro woman. She
stressed that if there has been one person against whom the doors have been closed, it is the New Negro woman. "Her closed doors," Whaley notes, "are of the thickness of two—she is first a woman, then a Negro" (772). Written in a highly artistic style, "Closed Doors: A Study in Segregation" also ends on an optimistic note. This is characteristic of the women's overall view that the situation for Blacks in America was definitely going to be better.

In the cycle of the year, the evolution and revolution of ideas and civilization the segregated Negro will also come into his own. He will lose his "inferiority" when and as he loses its mate, injustice. Finally the shadow will be lifted. The closed door swings ajar.  

(Messenger 772)

Although the main message of the special issue pertained to labor issues, Sadie Marie Peterson wrote about the importance of developing a reading culture in the Black community. Her article "The Library a factor in Negro Education" outlines the services provided by 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library. This library fostered communities activities and also served as the center for black culture. Peterson rejects Fannie Barrie Williams' utopian idea that success depends fundamentally upon self-negation, a turning away from the old Negro and the memory of black enslavement. She says, "It is not necessary to erase the slave regime thought, or to forget the past, but
to read the best, think the best and encourage higher education" (772). Peterson shares her belief in education by providing us with a poem that shows what learning does to the mind:

when minds of men are fed on books
that bring them education
How can they lose their goal or aim,
or their determination?
'T will wear away the prejudice.
The fertile, well fed brain
where hate once was, Love enters in
And ever there remains. (Messenger July 1923:773)

Both men and women among the New Crowd Negroes published most of their political articles in the Messenger. The editors of this magazine did not encourage literary articles, nor were they interested in publishing competitive short stories or poetry. That work was left to the Liberator an equally radical magazine publishing both white and black activists. The Liberator, as Hutchinson notes, "had an important impact on the Harlem Renaissance birth because Claude Mckay helped edit and constantly contributed to it, and because many young black writers read it and aspired to publish in it in the years before the movement really took off" (250).

Mary Burrill became the first New Negro woman to publish in the Liberator. Although her name has never been listed among the literary artists of the Harlem renaissance her play "Aftermath" was a featured contribution to the
Liberator in April 1919. The play dramatizes a militant New Negro political consciousness. Commenting on the play, Hutchinson said the play does not "fit the Crisis line that typically portrayed black soldiers as Christ like saviors risking their lives in Europe for a worthy cause; or Opportunity's favored type of folk play." Instead "it perfectly matches the editorial bent of the Liberator as it combines vernacular drama with class consciousness, a view of the Great War as an elaborate confidence game played on the oppressed peoples who fought it for their overloads" (263).

The magazine published creative work by other New Negroes, like James Weldon Johnson, Fenton Johnson, Georgia Douglas Johnson and Jean Toomer, in addition to Burrill and Mckay. The Liberator just like the Messenger, did not have a long life span, in less than four years Mckay and most black contributors had left. Just as Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen had felt it was inadequate to address class consciousness without addressing the race factor in America, Mckay left the Liberator because he believed it failed to devote sufficient attention to the race question.

Mckay felt that the Liberator's white editors did not appreciate the central importance of race to the class struggle in the United States. In The Negroes in America Mckay states, "For the Negro in America, it is very useful
to be imbued with race consciousness. .. The Negro in America is not permitted for one minute to forget his color, his skin, or his race." Mckay thought that an American Negro not imbued with race consciousness constituted a strange phenomenon (4). This became the spirit of New Crowd Negroes. They were particularly adamant that race consciousness could and should not be subordinated to class consciousness.

By the early 20's the radical socialist revolutionary sentiments among the New Negroes were replaced by a literary movement that participant believed African Americans could use their "production of literature and art" to demonstrate their intellectual parity with white America (James Weldon Johnson, vii). The New Negro movement incorporated New Negro women from both the conservative and conformist older generation and younger generation who questioned the social, economic and political position of black working-class women while embracing the black race's endowments.

The New Negro women of the Harlem Renaissance were as divided as the movement itself. In some members of the group, one can detect the remnants of black women's aspiration in the nineteenth-century, while others had the revolutionary aspirations of New Crowd Negro women of the early twentieth-century. It is only fair to say that the mass activity and social upheavals engendered by the World
War I and the occurrence of race riots in which blacks vigorously fought back, introduced a more radical perspective into the young New Negro women of the Harlem Renaissance. Their era was described by the editors of *The Crisis* as “a critical time in history of the advancement of men” when “bigotry and prejudice” would lead to violence if “reason and forbearance” did not prevail (*The Crisis* Nov 1910).

Referring specifically to black women, Paula Giddings states that, this was a time when “black women were on the cusp of a new era” (139). Many black women who found jobs in the Northern cities worked in inferior positions, performed the least desirable tasks, and were paid less than white women (144). It is therefore not surprising that to address these issues writers like Mercedes Gilbert and Marita Bonner embraced styles that were very different from those of their elder sisters.
CHAPTER 3
BOURGEOIS AESTHETICS

This chapter, examines the writings of Anne Spencer and Angelina Weld Grimke and interprets their work as part of what I consider "bourgeois aesthetics."¹ The argument is Anne Spencer and Angelina Weld Grimke’s poetics² privileges specific characters, genres, styles and language that reveal the position they took during the Harlem Renaissance. I analyze how Anne Spencer’s poetry and Angelina Weld Grimke’s poetry, play and short stories address the central issues raised by the Harlem Renaissance. Focusing on the absence of radical racial issues in the work of both writers, I establish how race is constructed in their poetics. The absence of an exploration of vernacular forms in their writings shed light on their stand about the legacy of the folk. Finally I address the role that both writers gave to art.

Anne Spencer: The Poetry of controversy

Anne Spencer is an important poet because of the quality of the poetry she wrote and the association she had with writers of the Harlem Renaissance. She was born an
only child February 6, 1882, on a farm in Henry county, Virginia. After her parents’ separation when she was very young, she developed a close relationship with nature. In her biography, Lee Greene narrates that the outhouse was one of Anne’s favorite places. It became a place where she could have the undisturbed solitude that she cherished (15). This solitude facilitated the development of the desire for personal freedom, a character that later influenced her lifestyle and writing.3

Anne received no formal education until she was eleven years old. Sarah, Anne’s mother, wanted her daughter to get an education but was not confident of the black schools that were mostly for children of coal miners. After pressures from her husband, Sarah finally enrolled Anne at Virginia Seminary, a boarding school for blacks in Lynchburg, Virginia. The school had a first-rate faculty and motivated and intelligent students, and Anne was able to pick up what she had missed by being taught at home. She was an excellent student and graduated class valedictorian in 1899. Anne’s interest in literature and art began during her second year at Virginia Seminary. She started writing poetry when she was fourteen years old. Her cordial relationship with Gregory Hayes, the school’s principal, enabled her to learn more about literature. Greene attributes Spencer success in poetry to Dr. Hayes. He was instrumental in teaching her the
close affinity between literature and life. Spencer wrote her first poem on the conflicts she had between her view of life and the views expressed by others. It was from this poem, "The Skeptic," that she developed her lifelong habit of writing to express the more private side of her character. In an interview with J. Lee Greene, Anne Spencer recalled how writing changes the thinking of the writer completely. She argued that "when you’re beginning to think, you feel, you taste, you see, you smell." This, she remarked, is like sniffing from the outside and touching. The second stage is "when something boils up in you, you have thoughts that you’ve never had before" (31).

The education she received at Virginia Seminary shaped Anne Spencer's future significantly. In school, as Greene notes, "She progressed from a little girl of eleven who could barely read and write to a mature woman whose diligence in learning made reading and writing a cherished function of her life" (Time's Unfading 33). At the time of Anne Spencer's graduation, educated young blacks were limited to the professions of teaching and preaching only. Spencer got a job as a second-grade teacher in West Virginia. She later transferred to Elkhorn, another small community school, where she taught for another year. Following her marriage to Edward Spencer in 1901, she moved back to Lynchburg where she lived until her death in 1975.
Anne Spencer is important in my study because of the poetry she wrote before and after the Harlem Renaissance. Although many of her poems were published in black magazines like *The Crisis*, and *Opportunity*, her position during the renaissance is controversial. She is among the few black women writers who had the opportunity of associating with almost all the leaders of the renaissance yet she never changed her writing to represent the mood and the spirit of the period. The opportunity bestowed to Spencer was a result of her acquaintance with James Weldon Johnson, who was at the time of their meeting an official of the NAACP and a strong supporter of the cultural movement which was underway. James Weldon Johnson became not only a friend but also a literary adviser to Spencer. He introduced the Spencers to other prominent black leaders who became guests of the Spencers when they visited Lynchburg. In return, they invited Edward and Anne to New York, Washington, D.C., Atlanta and other places, where they expanded their social and intellectual contacts. Greene contends that the people whom the Spencers came to know after 1920 frequently used their home as a resting and intellectually stimulating place to stop when traveling (*Time's Unfading* 68). Among the prominent figures of the Harlem Renaissance who were guests at the Spencer house were Charles Johnson, W.E.B. Du Bois, Sterling Brown, Langston Hughes, and Georgia Douglas.
Johnson. Mrs. Spencer was introduced to other literary artists like Claude Mckay and Carl Van Vechten through letters (Greene, *Time's Unfading* 72).

Anne Spencer's meeting with fellow poets like Sterling Brown and Langston Hughes gave her the opportunity to discuss poetry in great detail. Greene narrates incidences when Sterling Brown spent with Anne Spencer that developed the seed for his two poems "To a Certain Lady in her Garden (For Anne Spencer)" and "Odyssey of Big Boy" which was published in *Southern Road* in 1932. What Greene leaves out, which seems to be important in understanding Spencer's views on the Renaissance, is her impression of the poetry of Sterling Brown. In "Odyssey of Big Boy" the narrator says

```
Lemme be wid Casey Jones,
Lemme be wid Stagolee,
Lemme be wid such like men
When Death takes hol' on me,
    When Death takes hol' on me. . . .

Done skinned as a boy in Kentucky hills,
    Druv steel dere as a man,
Done stripped tobacco in Virginia fiels'
    Alongst de River Dan,
    Alongst de River Dan;

Done mined de coal in West Virginia
    Liked dat job jes' fine
Till a load o'slate curved roun' my head
    Won't work in mo' mine,
    Won't work in mo' mine;
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*(Caroling Dusk* 130-131)

The narrator goes on "Done shocked de corn in Marylan, . . .
/Been roustabout in Memphis. . . /Done worked and loafed on
such jobs." Brown’s ballad is an adaptation of one of Big Boys Davis’s song. It has a touch of the blues form and captures the heart of the type of black character once common in the South. Compare "Odyssey of Big Boy" with Anne Spencer’s "Life-long, Poor Browning" published in the same anthology.

Life-Long, poor Browning never knew Virginia,  
Or he’d not grieved in Florence for April sallies  
Back to English gardens after Euclid’s linear:  
Clipt yews, Pomander Walks, and pleached alleys;

Primroses, prim indeed, in quite ordered hedges,  
Waterways, soberly, sedately enchanneled,  
No thin riotous blade even among the sedges,  
All the wild country-side tamely impaneled. . .

Dead, now, dear Browning, lives on heaven,—  
(Heaven’s Virginia when the year’s at its Spring)  
He’s haunting the byways of wine-aired leaven  
And throating the notes of the wildings on wing;  
(Caroling Dusk 49-50)

The genre, language and subject of these two poems are completely different. Brown’s poem is a ballad, using black dialect, he chose an ordinary working person as his subject matter. Spencer’s genre is formal verse, she uses standard English and has Browning a renowned poet as her subject. Spencer was definitely very far away from Brown’s poetry that stressed the modernity of folk culture and the possibility of artistic expression born of eclectic antecedents. One can conclude that she was aware of the new forms of poetry that was popular at that time but refused to
conform. Spencer might have believed that the whole of literature is a hierarchical system in which some genres and styles are more serious than others.

Alain Locke and H.L. Mencken are among the influential people who wanted to assist Spencer in becoming more widely published, if only she could change her form and follow their suggestions about the kind of poetry she should write for publication. Spencer was neither interested nor willing. She viewed art as something to be honed and appreciated for its beauty. Most of her poems are formal lyrics. Her subjects range from religion to personal poems dealing mostly with herself, her family, garden or other women. She remarked that "she always had written primarily for her own enjoyment and not for publication or praise" (Greene, *Time's Unfading* 50).

Langston Hughes is another Harlem Renaissance poet who was in close contact with Anne Spencer. Their friendship crystallized in the mid 1920s. Spencer respected and maintained a special fondness for Hughes. However, she did not endorse his style of poetry. When Hughes declared the right of young Negro artists to express their individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame, Spencer supported him. She shared his declaration of the artists' independence of expression but argued against his force of "Tom-Tom" into poetry (Greene, *Time's Unfading* 52). What she saw as "Tom-
"Tom" can be interpreted in many ways. It is certain this was a new approach to poetry that did not conform with the genteel Victorian lyrics that Spencer wrote and approved. On the other side, Langston Hughes respected and allowed Spencer to be herself. There is no record that suggests Hughes in any way tried to influence her style of writing.

James Weldon Johnson is another person who tried to change Spencer’s writing. He was more than a friend to Spencer. Johnson was the first person to notice her poetry and was instrumental in getting it published. Impressed by her poetry, Johnson realized Spencer’s potential. In 1922, he edited *The Book of American Negro Poetry* and included five poems by Spencer. “Translation” is one of the poems.

The persona in the poem says:

We trekked into far country,  
My friend and I.  
Our deeper content was never spoken,  
But each knew all the other said.  
He told me how calm his soul was laid  
By the lack of anvil and strife.  
“The wooing kestrel,” I said, “mutes his mating-note  
To please the harmony of this sweet silence.”  
And when at the day’s end  
We laid tired bodies ‘gainst  
The loose warm sands,  
And the air fleeced its particles for a coverlet;  
When star after star came out  
To guard their lovers in oblivion—  
My soul so leapt that evening prayer  
Stole my morning song!

*(Book of American Negro Poetry 218)*

Written as a sonnet with 16 lines in standard English, “Translation” expresses the contrasting feeling of
disappointment and delight of two people who care for each other. Like all sonnets the poem has an octave and sestet. The major shift in the narrative occurs in the middle of the poem when the persona says “And when at the day’s end / we laid tired bodies ‘gainst / The loose warm sands.” The turn in the argument is signaled by the shift of the narrators concern from everyday life experiences to the pursuit of death and the quest of immortality. It is this close link in language and style with Neoclassical poets like Robert Browning that make Spencer’s poetry very different from that of the younger renaissance poets.

Walter White reviewed the book in the Nation and wrote favorably of Spencer’s poems. Impressed by “Before the Feast of Shushan,” White wrote, “Had Mr. Johnson done nothing else than introduce us to the works of Anne Spencer in her charming ‘Before the Feast of Shushan’ and her beautiful ‘The Wife Woman,’ or to the vigor and genuine merit of Claude Mckay, he would have done well” (Nation 1922).

Although the inclusion of Spencer’s poem in Johnson’s anthology brought her a lot of attention and recognition as a competent poet, Johnson knew that she had to change her style if she was to become fully involved with the renaissance movement. Johnson was concerned about the content of her poetry and was of the opinion that she should try writing prose instead of confining her work to poetry.
Greene states that, in trying to change Spencer’s approach to poetry, Johnson sent her books dealing with the writing of poetry as well as newly published anthologies of contemporary poetry. Johnson believed that, although Spencer’s poetry showed a remarkable talent, it was a little “too unconventional” in experimenting with “newer forms” gaining impetus in the 1920s (Greene, Time’s Unfading 56). Spencer’s response was not positive. She continued writing lyrics about nature and restricted her political concerns to the social activities she was involved with in her community.

The only contemporary female artist who had extensive contact with Anne Spencer was Georgia Douglas Johnson. Greene lists her name among the important guests of the Spencers at 1313 Pierce street in Lynchburg (68). Georgia D. Johnson spent most of her life in Washington, D.C. Being close to Lynchburg, she visited Anne Spencer on several occasions, and the Spencers visited Washington quite often. However, no records show any type of support network for these two black women. As Erlene Stetsn notes, “The literature is silent on the support network that black women had/ might have had/ shared or/ did not share” (405).

The similarities between the feelings of Anne Spencer and Georgia Douglas Johnson on the subject of their poetry is striking. In an introductory note Spencer wrote in
Countee Cullen's *Caroling Dusk*, she says, "I write about some of the things I love. But have no civilized articulation for the things I hate" (47). This remark is similar to the one Georgia D Johnson gave to Arna Bontemps. She said she did not enjoy writing racially and whenever she could, she forgot her special call to sorrow and lived as happily as she could (quoted in Hull, *Color, Sex* 19). This may have been a topic that was discussed among the women poets or it may have been an attitude that was privately shared by women poets during the Renaissance.

Anne Spencer's direct support for Georgia D. Johnson's poetry is apparent in the review she wrote on *An Autumn Love Cycle*. Johnson's first book of poetry *The Heart of A Woman* and *other Poems* was published in 1918. The poems as William Stanley Braithwaite noted in the introduction are "intensely feminine, and deeply human (vii). One need only to glance at the titles: "Sympathy," "Dawn," "Peace," "Quest," "Tears and Kisses," "Tired," "Smothered Fires," "My Little Dreams," to understand why James Weldon Johnson said they were " songs of the heart, written to appeal the heart" (181). After being accused of having no feeling for the race Johnson wrote *Bronze: A Book of Verse* in 1922. Johnson was not pleased with it despite its racial content and success, she therefore resorted to writing the lyrics she enjoyed most. This is evident in *An Autumn Love Cycle*. Cedric Dover had
expressed his disappointment with the book. He had argued that the book, a collection of poetry failed to concentrate on the awareness Johnson had expressed in *Bronze*. He further pointed out that, instead of enlarging the new vitality, Georgia D Johnson had reverted to the personal notes of her first poems. He therefore accuses Johnson of being overwhelmed by herself (*The Crisis* 59). Reviewing the same book in *The Crisis*, Anne Spencer praises Georgia D. Johnson for daring, as a person of color "to write of love without hypothecating atavistic jungle tones: the rumble of tom-tom, voodoo ebo, fetish of sagebrush and high spliced palm tree." This is a direct expression of Anne Spencer's distaste for the "colloquial-folk-slang" poetry that was characteristic of verse during the Harlem Renaissance. Spencer's denunciation of "folk poetry" was against what many poets of the Harlem Renaissance thought was an opportunity to use vernacular forms as literary vehicles. By holding on to the old forms and refusing to initiate changes in African American poetry, Spencer can rightly be accused of embracing a bourgeois aesthetic. She was not convinced that literature and particularly poetry could be used for propaganda. Spencer was, as Greene notes, "a private poet" in the sense that "her poetry, a private record of her attitude toward life, mirrors in poetic form the ideas and themes which shaped her life and personality" (126).
Looking through her published and unpublished poems one sees that it is correct to regard Anne Spencer as a private poet, but one should also take note that this same private poet was fully aware of and proud of her blackness. She declared openly that she loved being a Negro woman. Anne Spencer was also an activist who, through both private and public movements, fought Jim Crow in Lynchburg (Greene, *Time's Unfading* 88). The point I am suggesting here is that one has to be very careful when reading some of Spencer’s poetry and pay particular attention to the different ways Spencer produces rather than represents experience. This kind of reading diverts one’s attention from Spencer’s life and encourages a reading based on her consciously chosen textual strategies.

“At the Carnival” is one of the earliest poems Anne Spencer wrote. It was first published by James Weldon Johnson in *The Book of American Negro Poetry*. Spencer wrote this poem as a lyric composition. The depth of the poem cannot be grasped in a single moment because of the creative impulse attached to the lyric. The girl’s “straight air and radiant inclusive smile” is contrasted with the bull-necked man’s “itching flesh.” It would seem that the contrast depicts good in the midst of evil. One captures the atmosphere and scenery of the carnival in the middle of the poem:
In the presence of a blind crowd.
The color of life was gray.
Everywhere the setting seemed right
For my mood!
Here the sausage and garlic booth
Sent unholy incense sky ward; (215)

Although the atmosphere is initially presented as

 gloomy and dull, it is juxtaposed with an imaginary world of
love and natural beauty. Within this gloomy atmosphere the
persona notices the innocent beauty of the "Girl-of-the-
diving Tank"

Gleaming Girl, how intimately pure and free
The gaze you send the crowd,
As though you know the dearth of beauty
In its sordid life.
We need you my-Limousine-Lady, ... 
Seeing you here brave and water-clean,
Leaven for the heavy ones of earth,
I am swift to feel that what makes
The plodder glad is good; and
Whatever is good is God. (216)

As Lee Greene notes, the personae’s message is that by
embracing the innocent beauty of the "Girl-of-the-Diving
Tank" one can embrace the representative of god, the girl is
goodness personified (105).

"Questing" is another poem that Spencer wrote in search
of goodness and beauty against the evil and ugliness of this
world. The poem is divided in two stanzas. The first stanza
has four lines and is basically about the search for beauty.

Let me learn now where Beauty is;
My day is spent too far toward night
To wander aimlessly and miss her place;
To grope, eyes shut, and fingers touching space.
The second stanza has fifteen lines. The first ten lines are a continuation of search for goodness and beauty, which seem to be far away. The journey toward this goodness is filled not only with uncertainty but also with pain and suffering, with sorrow, with all the conditions that makes one yearn for this unseen good. References to the difficulties of attaining this good make the task seem worth pursuing, and the last three lines make it seem like a necessary endeavor.

But let me learn now where Beauty is;
I was born to know her mysteries,
And needing wisdom I must go in vain: (Time’s 181)

The poem shows how we are placed on the road of life destined “to grope eyes shut, and fingers touching spaces for that almost unattainable world of pure beauty.” According to the poem, it seems that men does not have much choice about his circumstances in this world. “At the Carnival” and “Questing” adequately convey the essence of Spencer’s poetry. The two thematically represent poems that reject a degenerated world in quest of a supernatural beauty.

The poem “Substitution” falls within the same category. It is a sonnet about the desire to change this uncertain world to one of certainty, beauty and love. The imagery presented is that of a tropical storm and men-freighted seas gradually moving to a moonlit garden in bloom.
Is Life itself but many ways of thought,
How real the tropic storm or lambent breeze
Within the slightest convolution wrought
Our mantled world and men-freighted seas?
God thinks. . . and being comes to ardent things:

(Time's Unfading 176)

Greene offers an insight to the poem by disclosing the ideas that initiated its writing. "Substitution" was written after Mrs. Spencer witnessed the trial of a black preacher accused of murder. The man, according to Spencer was possessed more by lust than love for the young girl, whom he murdered out of passion. Mrs. Spencer recorded in her notebook that "the test by which we can know we have reached the high point in human love is not only what I will do for it, but what I absolutely refuse to do against it" (quoted in Greene 102). The line "My thought leans forward. . . / quick! you're lifted clear / Of brick and frame to moonlight garden bloom. . . " indicate the persona mentally leaves this world of ugliness, impurity and hate, and finds a visionary world of pure love and beauty.

Spencer's poetry is very impressive. Literary critics have commented positively on her style. Benjamin Brawley aptly says, "She has an independent mind and compressed style of writing that makes special appeal to the intelligent" (229-230). After including Spencer's poems in their book of poetry, the editors of The Negro Caravan
remarked that "her poetry is closer to the metaphysical than that of any other American Negro poet" (281). "Metaphysical" here means that most of Spencer's poems are theoretical or abstract in the sense that you cannot easily grasp the message. The compliments that Mrs. Spencer received were not without criticism. Referring to Anne Spencer's style, Erlene Stetson argues that "the erudite quality can easily be seen as bordering on a kind of dilettantish virtuosity—the bourgeois philistine notion of art as something to be honored, appreciated, and contemplated for its utter beauty" (400-401). Stetson concludes that it is precisely this quality that has led male critics to call Anne Spencer "lady poet" (401).

Defending Spencer, Maureen Honey argues that "if mastering the poetic forms of language forbidden their parents or grandparents was a political act, then viewing those forms as timeless and universal invested the act with even greater power" (Shadowed Dreams, 6). Honey states that there is no evidence to suggest that the non-radical poets of the Harlem Renaissance considered the models they followed to be the province or reflection of the conqueror. Instead they "conceived these forms as politically neutral vehicles through which black culture could be made visible" (Shadowed Dreams 6). I would here like to suggest that Spencer did not realize that these same forms could not be
used to reconstruct a new, visible black heritage. The style and language she used were neither suitable for expressing anger at racism nor appropriate for expressing a militant proud spirit.

Anne Spencer's poetry can be divided into three major groups: nature, love and protest. Her choice of nature and love poetry is related to the appeal of Western literary forms. Honey argues that Spencer might have been drawn to these subjects as expressions of a higher, more sublime plan than the problematic reality of daily life (Shadowed Dreams 7). Nature seems to have offered many women poets of the Harlem Renaissance an alternative to the corrupted, artificial environment created by progress. However the desire of women to experiment with these forms is certainly the major reason why many of them remained within the genteel school of "race less" literature. It is worthwhile in this context to review briefly "Creed" as another example of Spencer's poetry that falls within this category.

"Creed" has eighteen lines; it is written as a lyric composition; the end is very challenging. The lyric can be read as both a love message and a nature poem. I am more interested in how nature is incorporated into the poem. The persona admires an oak tree and envisions how the tree will provide a bare ledge where mistletoe will grow. The persona then imagines how a battered, worthless, masterless dog will
find refugee in someone's house and be assured of food and a place to sleep. The imagery is that of a helpless individual or item being helped and appreciated by another. The poem ends with the expectation and confidence of the persona that her husband will love her till death separates them. With this attitude the persona concludes that she will have to challenge God when she meets him and that he should certainly respond.

The most impressive thing about the poem is how Anne Spencer uses nature, like an oak tree, birds, garden, to veil the subjective and topical and achieve something that is objective and universal like freedom and love expressed in the poem. Her poetry is, as Gloria Hull notes; "attractive because of the originality of her material and approach. . . her unusual diction, vivid images and metaphors" ("Black Women" 94). But at the same time it misses the ideas and moods that characterized the art and literature of the period. I would argue that Spencer's poetry lacks the spirit of race solidarity and pride expressed by many Harlem Renaissance writers.

The love poetry she wrote drew her even further from the Harlem Renaissance aspirations. Greene notes that love was sacred to Anne Spencer. She concentrated on that kind of love which is distinguished by an eternal bond between two people "less as flesh into flesh more as heart into heart."
Her most outstanding love poems are "He Said," "Lines to a Nasturtium," "For Jim, Easter Eve," "Transition" and "I Have a Friend." It is difficult to choose one poem that adequately expresses Spencer's love, but "I Have a Friend" can serve the purpose of enlightening one on how she expressed love. This is a lyric poem with thirteen lines. The first and last line stress the importance of the overall message in the lyric:

I have a friend  
We are such friends. (Time's Unfading 188)

The persona in the poem discloses the type of relationship she has with this friend. The depth of the friendship is expressed by the following lines:

He watches me thru the long night,  
And when I call he comes,  
or when he calls I am there; (188)

Spencer took friendship seriously. Greene quotes Spencer regarding her views on the sacredness of friendship. She said, "There are two things that happen to real friends. Of a real friend you don't ask a lot of questions. And if he dies, you still have that friend's influence on you" (24). It is therefore not surprising that the persona in "I Have a Friend" says exactly the same:

He does not ask me how beloved  
Are my husband and children,  
Nor ever do I require  
Details of life and love  
In the grave-his home,-  
We are such friends. (188)
Once again one notices that the love expressed in this poem is a platonic love, the love of heart to heart and not the love of flesh. Reared on the proper middle-class, almost Victorian, virtues of piety, domesticity, submissiveness and sexuality only within the confines of marriage, Spencer could treat sex only romantically and obliquely in her work. Subjects particularly related to sex were taboo to many of Anne Spencer's age mates because at that time black women were burdened with an almost exclusively sexual identity. As Cheryl Wall contends, what seems as their conservatism reflects in part a determination not to conform in even the slightest manner to hateful stereotypes (14).

Erlene Stetson contends that "protest was not characteristic of Anne Spencer's poetry" (406). In a similar tone Gloria Hull maintains that Spencer did not write racial protest poems ("Black Women" 94). Although there is truth in what these scholars have said, it will be unfair to ignore the racial and protest sentiments embodied deep in some of Spencer's poetry. Indeed, Spencer's approach is very different from the other Harlem Renaissance poets. As Greene notes, she was cautious enough to treat her material in a manner that allowed the poems to transcend topicality and therefore embrace a broader scope (129). In Shadowed Dreams, Honey lists six of Spencer's poems under the heading "Protest Poems." "White Things," "The Sevignes," "Letter to
my Sister," "Innocence," "Before the Feast of Shushan," and "Lady Lady." In general, I would say, these poems comprise three categories of protest literature: racial and ethnic sovereignty, feminist rights, and individual liberties. "White Things" best represents Spencer's deep thoughts on race relations in the United States. The poem has twenty lines and can be divided into two stanzas. The depth of the message is apparent in the first two lines:

Most things are colorful things—the sky, earth, and sea.
Black men are most men; but the white are free! 
(Time's Unfading 191)

The contrast between black men being most men and white man being free reflects the troubling truth of one race being free and the other being enslaved. The second stanza delves into lynching, a troubling aspect of American history. The personae says

They pyred a race of black, black men, 
And burned them to ashes white; then, 
Laughing, a young one claimed a skull, (192)

By providing the imagery of fire, ashes, and skull, the poem decries the white race’s hostility toward the black race and stresses the inhumanity of the white race by juxtaposing lynching with laughter as if there was joy in the event. The protest is almost timeless because the imagery and language make the poem as effective now as it was one hundred years ago.
The same can be said about "The Sevignes." This poem fits well into the protest category. With clarity and depth, Spencer discusses the peculiar institution of American slavery. Reading through the poem, one is left with neither bitterness nor anger. The poem draws the attention of the reader to the relationship between those who fled slavery in Europe and those who established it in America. The last two lines of the poem state:

For these women who had so lately fled from the Slavery of Europe to the great wilds of America.
(Time's Unfading 191)

The question to the audience is, what about these women? The title of the poem "The Sevignes" clarifies the ambiguity. There is in the poem an established relation between the cultured aristocracy of France and Madame Sevigne. It is this same aristocracy that established the aristocracy of the Southern States in America and therefore has implications for the race problem in the United States (Greene 137). In writing the poem, Anne Spencer is protesting the hypocrisy of people who were theoretical heralds of human liberty but at the same time were enslaving blacks and killing the Native Americans. These two poems are the best that Spencer wrote in protest of what she saw as inhumanity in this world. It is unfortunate that they are the least quoted. For a woman who always voiced a deep concern with the race question, and who argued that the
concept of black power expressed in the 1960s was "not a new thing" but something she had expressed in 1890 and that had been expressed even earlier, the protest poems were just too few. Writing at a period when racial poetry was at its height, to be universal or non-racial as Spencer was most of the time, implied a rejection of the spirit of the times. Anne Spencer's failure to write more forcefully about being black in America was perhaps motivated by her gentility. She was more interested in producing poetry that was correct, conservative, and highbrow making her more in line with bourgeoisie sentimentality than with folk culture.

"Who will ever find me?" : Angelina Weld Grimke

Two years older than Anne Spencer, Angeline Weld Grimke, poet, short story writer and dramatist, was born in 1880 in Boston, Massachusetts. Michael Greene notes that Grimke stands as a "transitional figure somewhere between the writer's of the genteel tradition and those of the Harlem Renaissance" (149). Her poetry binds her to the genteel tradition; her plays and short stories makes her part of the race conscious writers of the "New Negro" period.
Angelina was the daughter of Sarah and Archibald Grimke. Her father, supported by his great aunts, attended Harvard Law School and obtained a law degree in 1874. He became a prominent lawyer, diplomat, editor and executive secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Grimke's mother, Sarah E. Stanley, was a writer and a prominent member of a respectable Boston family. She married Archibald Grimke in 1879, but family pressures that opposed their interracial marriage caused her to leave him immediately after Angeline was born. Four years later, she took Angelina back to her father. Sarah died in 1898, when Angeline was eighteen years old.

Angelina was raised as a well-to-do, light skinned girl. With a loving and caring father, she had a privileged childhood. She attended a variety of upper-class liberal schools, including Carleton Academy in Northfield Minnesota, and Cushing Academy in Ashburnham, Massachusetts. Like most educated women of her times, Grimke became a teacher. She began teaching at the Armstrong Manual Training school in 1902 and later transferred to Dunbar High School. Although she began writing at an early age, her better known writings were produced during her years in Washington when she was part of a coterie of black artists, writers, and scholars.4

Grimke is best known as a playwright because of her play Rachel, which was first staged in 1916 by the NAACP.
Although the play was finally published in 1920 when the cultural renaissance was at its peak, it is her poetry that best reflects her bourgeois attitude to the renaissance. For this reason, my discussion of Grimke will focus first on a later period of her life, when she was in her mid-forties. This is the time she shared the glory and good fortune of the Harlem Renaissance. As Gloria Hull notes, Grimke's poetry was published frequently in *Opportunity* magazine in the mid-1920s (*Color, Sex* 136). Her work also appeared in almost every anthology or special magazine issue of black poetry during the period. Her poetry is included in Alain Locke's *The New Negro*, Countee Cullen's *Caroling Dusk*, Charles S. Johnson's *Ebony and Topaz* and *Caroline* magazine.

Although she was in close contact with many of the Harlem Renaissance writers and artists, like Spencer, Grimke produced relatively few racial poems. Her circle of friends and acquaintances included many prominent black leaders like Charles S. Johnson, educators like W.E.B Du Bois, and writers like Langston Hughes, Jessie Fauset and Georgia Douglas Johnson. Despite these contacts, Grimke for unexplainable reasons, did not share with any of them her point of view on the Harlem Renaissance's aspirations. While we certainly know Anne Spencer was against "Tom-Tom" forced into poetry, it is difficult to establish Grimke’s attitude
on the style of poetry advocated by the younger artists of the renaissance.

Grimke's poetry can roughly be divided into four categories: nature lyrics, love lyrics, elegies and racial poems. It is unfortunate that Grimke never considered poetry as an appropriate genre to air her protest against either social or economic injustices. Like Anne Spencer she wrote poems about nature. The poems are quiet, delicate and very personal. "At the Spring Dawn," "Dawn," "A Winter Twilight," "Dust," "Grass Finger," "The Black Finger," and "Tenebris," are among her poems that deal exclusively with nature.

The poem "At the Spring Dawn," is composed of fifteen lines in one stanza. Grimke combines colors with nature to deliver a somber message about love. We are introduced to four different colors—red, grey, blue and black—in the poem. The imagery of a rising sun represented by a red color is juxtaposed with the black color of singing birds. The persona immediately rises, stretches her arms and laughs saying,

Ah! it is good to be alive, good to love,
At the dawn,
At the spring dawn. (78)\(^5\)

Grimke might have written this poem in an effort to appreciate life, since her biography indicates that she led a very unhappy life.\(^6\)
"A Winter Twilight," is another poem that draws heavily on nature. The poem has one stanza with nine lines. The imagery is that of a group of trees "lean, naked, and cold," against a "sky-green gold background." With the central message being admiration for nature, Grimke's lyrics as Michael Green notes, resemble the sentimental morbidity of several of the late Victorian and Edwardian poets (155).

The love poetry that Angeline Weld Grimke wrote reveals her pain and her human capacity to be vulnerable and suffer deep disappointments. Although she possessed the gift of laughter, it is clear from her love lyrics that sadness and suffering occupied a big part of her life. In "El Beso" the persona speaks of love but presents it as a restricted love. The first eight lines are an expression of the persona's admiration to her lover. She admires her lover's teeth, provocative laughter, hair, eyes, lips and mouth. The next eight lines are an expression of sorrow because of an inhibition the persona suddenly realizes. An inhibition that prevents her lover from responding to her love. The last seven lines of "El Beso" are worth quoting in full because they express the pain and suffering the persona experience by being denied the love she desires. The persona says

And madness, madness,
Tremulous, breathless, flaming,
The space of a sigh;
Then awakening-remembrance,
Pain, regret-your sobbing;
And again quiet—the stars,  
Twilight—and you. (82)

Gloria Hull argues that much of the sadness in Grimke’s poetry’s comes from the conflict in her emotional life. Grimke had to suppress her lesbian feelings because she was afraid of being ostracized by her family and society at large. It was almost impossible to be a Black lesbian poet in America at the beginning of the twentieth century. Hull argues that Grimke’s lesbianism ultimately meant, she had to stop writing altogether, dying, no doubt, with her real gifts sifted within—leaving behind the little that manages to survive of her true self in fugitive pieces (Color, Sex, and Poetry 145).

“El Beso” is not the only poem with lesbian sentimental feelings. In “A Mona Lisa,” “To Her of the Cruel Lips,” “At April” and “The Want Of You,” Grimke writes in a fragmented style that Hull identifies as “shackles-chained between the experience she wanted to say and the convention that would not give her the voice” (“Under the Days” 77). In “At April,” the persona goes a little further and exposes what she feels is the joy of having a relationship with a fellow black woman. She admires “Brown girl trees/ gay lovely hands/ that has russet curls/ brown faces/ brown slim bodies/ brown slim arms/ brown slim toes/ dark, dark bodies” (65).
The poem suggests that the loved one is a black female. To avoid censorship and ostracism from publishers and society at large, Grimke did not publish most of her lesbian lyrics. The poetry now appears in the *Selected Works of Angelina Weld Grimke*, a Schomburg Library publication of its nineteenth-century black women writers. I support Gloria Hull’s observation that one reads it “sensing the poet’s tremendous need to voice, to vent, to share...what was pulsing within her” (”Under the Days” 79).

The love that Angelina Weld Grimke expressed was not confined to lesbian sentiments. On several occasions she wrote about the heart to heart relationship she had with her family. “To my Father upon his Fifty-Fifth Birthday” is an example. In this poem, Angelina discloses the type of relationship she had with her father. The poem ascertains their extremely close bond. Explaining what her father meant to her, Grimke laments:

> When I was still a child, whose was the eye, that watched  
> Me night and day? Whose ear was ever ready, kind,  
> unto my plaints, and ever ready too, to share my joys?  
> . . . .  
> It should have been my mother, but it was not so;  
> And, father dear, the sweetest tribute, that my hand  
> Can find and lay before your feet this day, is this,  
> That you have been a gentle mother to your child. (63)

Lacking a mother Grimke was totally dependent on her father. His death in 1930 marked a turning point in her life. The psychological problems she developed later in life
might have been due to loss of the only person she trusted and lived for.

Angelina Weld Grimke’s love was also expressed in the elegies she wrote. Having had good and close relationships with some members of her family and friends, she felt obliged to write elegies in their memory. Most of her elegies were positively acknowledged by friends. In Color, Sex, and Poetry Hull quotes a remark by Julia Parks, one of Grimke’s correspondents, that Grimke surely did appreciate her friends (137). Among her finest elegies are “To Keep the Memory of Charlotte Forten Grimke” and “To Clarissa Scott Delaney,”

“To Keep the Memory of Charlotte Forten Grimke” reflects Angelina Grimke’s love, respect, and appreciation of her aunt, who died in 1914. The poem is divided into four stanzas. The last lines of the first three stanzas end with a statement “But she who loved them well has gone away.” The last line of the fourth stanza concludes the poem by saying “she came, she loved, and then she went away.” The main theme can be grasped in the fourth stanza:

Where has she gone? And who is there to say?  
But this we know: her gentle spirit moves  
And is where beauty never wanes,  
Perchance by other streams, mid other groves,  
And to us here, ah! She remains  
A lovely memory,  
Until Eternity; (34)
Grimke eases the pain associated with the grief of death by accepting death as a beautiful phenomenon that enables the departed to be reborn; she therefore evokes a sense of the deceased’s continuing presence (Hull, *Color, Sex* 138). “To Clarissa Scott Delaney” is slightly longer with nine stanzas. The poem is not as well written as the one she wrote in memory of her aunt Charlotte Grimke. The stanzas are not uniform, some have five lines while others have four and some three lines only. Like many of Grimke’s elegies, the poem speaks of life after death. Her central message in this poem is that Clarissa Scott Delaney, although physically dead, is spiritually still alive. The message is made clear in the last stanza:

O, hasn’t she found just a little, thin door
And passed through and closed it between?
O, aren’t those her light feet upon that light floor?
... That her laughter ... O, doesn’t she lean
As we do to listen? ... O, doesn’t it mean
She is only unseen, unseen? (38-39)

Angelina Weld Grimke, like many of the black women poets of her generation—Anne Spencer, Alice Dunbar Nelson and Georgia Douglas Johnson avoided race poems. The influence of romantic, Victorian, and even Edwardian writers on her had a tremendous impact on the subject and style she dealt with in her writings. The few racial poems she wrote deal with frivolous issues like love and beauty.
"Beware Lest He Awakes," "Lullaby," "Surrender," "The Black Child," "Tenebris" and "The Black Finger," are among the few racial poems Grimke wrote. Some of these poems reflect her concern about racial injustice in America. In "Beware Lest He Awakes," a poem that was originally written as "Beware When He Awakes," Grimke presents a dialogue that narrates the wrong done to black people and warns the white man to be careful because when the black man awakes, he will fight to the very end. Written in a lyric form, the poem has two long stanzas. The wording is powerful and frightening. In the middle of the stanza, the persona refers to the enemy saying:

You are a nobler man  
Because you have no tan,  
And he a very brute  
Because of nature's soot;  
But though he virtue lack,  
And though his skin be black  
Beware lest he awakes!

After narrating how badly the man with the tan is treated the persona continues his warning at the end of the second stanza saying:

You hang him to a tree,  
You hound of deviltry.  
You burn him if he speak,  
Until your freelands reek,  
With bloody, bloody sod...  
But mark! There may draw near  
A day red-eyed and drear,  
A day of endless fear;  
Beware lest he awakes!

(119-120)
The word "deviltry" seems a curious choice, its effect is chilling especially when it is combined with words of similar tone at the end of the poem "burn," "your freelands reek," "bloody, bloody sod," "red-eyed," and "endless fear." The combined effect of these words create a person infuriated with a killing rage. Despite the militant tone that recurs throughout the poem, this poem was not initiated or had anything to do with the Harlem Renaissance spirit. The poem was written and published in _Pilot_ a Boston magazine in 1902. The momentum for the Harlem Renaissance occurred after major historical events of the first half of the 1900s. Having been written and published in a much earlier period, this poem cannot serve as a rebuttal to critics who have accused Grimke of holding on to genteel writing when most black writers were writing militant, race-conscious poems.

In "Surrender," the persona asks for peace. The first line of the first stanza says, "We ask for the peace, We at the bound." The persona stresses that they who are asking for peace have forgotten the past unrest and desire one thing, harmony. While not mentioning race, Grimke evokes an agency for peace in this poem that can be read as a plea from those without power to those who control and have power. "Tenebris," and "Black Finger" fall within the same category of racial poetry, but in these two poems Grimke
uses nature to invoke the desired image. As Hull argues, Grimke's greatest strength is her affinity for nature, her ability to really see it and then describe what she has seen with precision (Color, Sex 144). Take, for example, this stanza from "Tenebris:"

There is a tree, by day,  
That, at night,  
Has a shadow,  
A hand huge and black.  
With fingers long and black.  
   All through the dark,  
Against the white man's house. (113)

In this poem the speaker envisions a shadow of a tree that turns into a huge black hand at night. Through the dark, the black hand plucks at the blood-red bricks of the white man's house. Despite being subtle, the poem is threatening. The last line of the poem ends with a question, "Is it a black hand, or is it a shadow?" This creates an opportunity for further discussion, thereby preventing the closure of the poem. Closure is achieved when the text leaves the reader with no further questions or expectations, but "Tenebris" lacks a sense of finality because it ends with a question rather than a conclusion.

In "The Black Finger," Grimke's best known and most often anthologized poem, imagery dominates. Grimke equates the beauty of a black woman with the strength of a straight cypress tree. Maureen Honey suggests that the use of trees in Black women's poetry should be analyzed carefully. She
argues that trees became a common imagery for Harlem Renaissance women poets because trees are stationary and therefore symbolically represent women who are immobilized by confining roles. Despite being immobilized, Honey suggests that they can nevertheless be viewed positively. Like trees, Black women transcend their condition of immobility and stand quiet, with pride, dignity and aspiration (Shadowed Dreams 14).

Angelina Weld Grimke did not confine her writings to poetry alone. Her belief that poetry was supposed to be correct and conventionally poetic made her voice her protest against lynching and racial prejudice through other genres. She wrote two famous plays, Rachel (1916) and Mara. Mara was never published and is not included in Angelina Weld Grimke’s selected works. Lynching is the major theme in Grimke’s drama and fiction. It is difficult to establish exactly why Grimke concentrated exclusively on this theme. Hull claims that it might be because lynching was the biggest, most glaring social evil at the time when she was writing (Color, Sex 131). It could also have been due to the fact that Angelina being very light-skinned and protected from direct experience of the condition of most blacks of the period was relatively unconscious of other racial grievances.
Her protected childhood might have limited her access and knowledge of most of the racial hatred experienced by many underprivileged black folks.

Rachel is a propaganda play about the psychological effects of lynching on black couples. The program that advertised the play announced it as "the first attempt to use the stage for race propaganda in order to enlighten the American people relative to the lamentable condition of ten million of colored citizens . . . (Hull, Color, Sex 117)."

The play is set in New York, all the three acts take place in the apartment of Mrs Loving. Throughout the play Rachel the main character is presented as having a deep desire for children. She expresses this love in a very sentimental and emotional language. At the beginning of the play she says:

It’s true. It was the best in me that said that—it was God! (Pauses.) And, Ma dear, if I believed that I should grow up and be a mother, I’d pray to die now. I’ve thought about it a lot, Ma dear, and once I dreamed, and a voice said to me—oh! It was so real—"Rachel, you are to be a mother to little children."

Wasn’t that beautiful? (134-135)

Rachel’s desire and dream for children come to an end when she learns the truth about her father and brother’s deaths. "They—they were lunched!!" "Lynched! Yes-by Christian people—in a Christian land" (145). The central message of the play comes after this dramatic revelation. At the end of act one Rachel says"
Then, everywhere, throughout the South, there are hundreds of dark mothers who live in fear, terrible, suffocating fear, whose rest by night is broken, and whose joy by day in their babies on their hearts is three parts—pain. . . . How horrible! Why—it would be more merciful—to strangle the little things at birth. (149)

This play as Nellie Mckay suggests responds "to events of an era when the lynching of black people were common place and frequent occurrences" (155). The message embodied in the play, the sentimental language used by characters and the last dramatic event contributes to its failure. Instead of confronting the problem and struggle for a better life Rachel ends with a scene that correspond to its central message. The last stage direction reads "The light in the lamp flickers and goes out. . . It is black. The terrible, heart-breaking weeping continues" (209). The audience is left with sounds of people weeping instead of fighting. The play did not get an overall good response. After being criticized for preaching genocide, Grimke defended herself by arguing that her motivation for writing the play was to show how affluent black girls interested in having children would reject motherhood in the future because of the forces of racial prejudice (413-414). Arguing that the majority of women everywhere form one of the most conservative elements of society, Grimke targeted the play to white women, whom she believed were the worst enemies with which the colored race had to contend. Grimke remarks;
If . . . the white women of this country could see, feel, understand just what effect their prejudice and the prejudice of their fathers, brothers, husbands, sons were having on the souls of the colored mothers everywhere, and upon the mothers that are to be, a great power to affect public opinions would be set free and the battle would be half won. (414)

As Hull suggests this was idealism. In a desperate effort to find a solution to black women’s problems Grimke thought by appealing to the white women she could create an allowance for the establishment of an alliance between black and white women. Grimke did not understand that the ideologies of white womanhood, as Hazel Carby argues, “were the sites of racial and class struggle which enabled white women to negotiate their subordinate role in relation to patriarchy and at the same time ally their class interests with men and against establishing an alliance with black women” (18).

The request for sympathy from the white women was not the only reason for writing Rachel. Having been born to an upper middle class family, Grimke was disturbed by the society’s simplistic generalization of black people. She was therefore determined to portray the lives of the upper middle class family. Stuart Hall define this as an attempt to change “the relation of representation.” In “Rachel, the Reason and Synopsis by the Author,” Grimke remarks certainly colored people are living in homes that are clean, well kept with many evidences of taste and
refinement about them. There are many of them well educated, cultivated and cultured; they are well mannered. . . they love beauty; they have ideals and ambitions, and they do not talk-this educated type-in the Negro dialect . . . . I drew my characters, then, from the best type of colored people. (415)

Grimke is similar to Nella Larsen and Jessie Fauset on this stand. They represent the Harlem Renaissance writers who made efforts to combat racist cultural practices in an assimilationist manner. Their aspirations conform with those of the "New Negroes," whose basic intentions was to restructure the race's image of itself. Despite their good intention, it is difficult to see how their portrayal of the black upper-middle class could have contributed in any way to the liberation of either the economic or social position of black people in America. By arguing that black people were really like white people, they elided the differences in history and culture between whites and blacks (West, Keeping Faith 17). As many social critics have argued, the educated professional class of the early New Negroes was acting more on the behalf of its own cultural interest than that of the general population (Randolph 102). Grimke, Larsen and Fauset's approach can be viewed as an acknowledgment of racial unity but a denial of racial solidarity. An acknowledgment of racial solidarity would mean that people of all classes and gender were acting in the interest of the liberation of all.
Lynching and the portrayal of middle-class blacks is also the main theme in Grimke's short stories. In "The Closing Door," published in *Birth Control Review*, Grimke chooses a black middle-class family to express the same message discussed in *Rachel*. Agnes Milton and Jim voice the despair and frustration created by lynching. This happy family questions the validity of having children in a racist society, children who they believe will end by being lynched. When Agnes learns of her brother's lynching, she becomes psychologically devastated to the extent of killing her own son. The most dramatic scene comes at the end of the text when the nameless character realizes what Agnes had done, "And then as though there had been a blinding flash of lightning I knew—the breathing wasn't there. Agnes Milton had taken a pillow off of my bed and smothered her child" (281). This traumatic situation has affinities with the story in Grimke's play *Rachel*. That Grimke decided to repeat the same event using a different genre shows how desperate she was to get her message across. While in the play the message is to refuse motherhood to protect black children, the text in the short story suggests that Agnes was prepared to sacrifice her son in order to prevent the re-enactment of her brothers fate. The main character in the short story attempted to bring an end to the cycle of death and reproduction.
The same theme dominates the short story "Goldie," published also in Birth Control Review.

Grimke wrote a letter to the Atlantic Monthly explaining the source for the plot of her short story "Blackness" later revised and given the title "Goldie." She explains that the story, though not a pleasant one is based on facts about a colored woman in Georgia who was lynched. While the women was shrieking with pain and agony, a man ripped her abdomen and out fell her unborn child. The child uttered two little cries but was crushed to her death by brutal boots. Grimke remarks that her story is a protest in response to the magazine's article that suggested that these things could not have happened. She argues that the facts upon which she based her story happened in the civilized U.S.A in the twentieth century (Grimke 417-418).

After the publication of "The Closing Door" and "Goldie," Grimke was advised by a literary friend to try writing something different (Hull, Color, Sex 133). Lillie Chase Wyman, a writer of some reputation herself, advised Grimke to show the world that she could do different things in literature. In a letter she wrote to her in 1922, Wyman urged Grimke to write a story that will be less tragic, a story that people will read with pleasure (quoted in Hull, Color, Sex 133). "Jettisoned" was the result of Lillie Wyman's suggestions. It is indeed a different story. It is
also an attempt by Grimke to incorporate the spirit advocated by young Negro writers of the renaissance. Grimke portrays the lives of black working-class women, Miss Lucy and Miss Robinson. The text begins with the description of Miss Lucy's feet "never, at any time, under any circumstances, had anyone ever possessed feet as painful, as enormous, as heavy as" Miss Lucy's. The reasons for such painful feet, "all day long she had been standing at the 'White folks' ironing board, eight solid hours" (320). Miss Robinson "was unmarried, of uncertain years, highly respectable. . . . There was a deliberation about her that would have been maddening to any one but the good natured Miss Lucy" (329). These two main characters in "Jettisoned" reflect the central metaphor argued for by Gloria Wade Gayles in No Crystal Stair. Wade Gayles argues that there are three major circles of reality in the United States, which reflect the degrees of power and influence. There is a large circle of white people, then within the circle there is a smaller circle of people who experience uncertainty, exploitation and powerlessness. Within this circle, there is an even smaller circle, a dark enclosure in which black women experience pain, isolation, and vulnerability (xx). Miss Lucy and Miss Robinson in "Jettisoned" conform to this structural metaphor. They experience hardship and pain from the jobs they hold; indeed, for them, life has been no
crystal stair. In "Jettisoned," Grimke moves away from preoccupation with the Black middle-class and portrays the hard life of black women at the turn of a century. She also attempts writing in Black dialect, words like "nuffin tah eat," "Monf aftah monf," "tiahed," "nebbah mine," "beg pardon," "ebryboddy," "doan misunnastan' me," "kin' fohd," "gwinetah," "prayah-meetin," "annuddah," are used throughout the text. Despite her good intentions, the language is poorly handled and contributes to the failure of the story. Given her background, Grimke was ill-equipped to handle black dialect. That she tried attests to the popularity of the style during the renaissance. Commenting on Grimke's use of dialect, Charles Johnson claims that he felt the dialect was not convincingly spelled (quoted in Hull, Color, Sex 135). Johnson is not the only one disappointed by Grimke's poor handling of black dialect. Modern readers have argued that the difficulty that reading it presents shows that Grimke could not write dialect like either Zora Neale Hurston or Alice Dunbar Nelson (Color, Sex, Poetry 135). Although "Jettisoned" was never published, it adds to our understanding of Grimke's writing.

Discussion in this chapter identifies Anne Spencer and Angelina Weld Grimke as active members of the first "New Negro" movement. It also defines the boundaries that these two women set for themselves. How these writers constructed
race in their writings can be understood only in relation to the times in which they lived. Although the idea of racial hierarchy has been generally discredited today, in the early 1920s at the time of the Harlem Renaissance "scientific racism" was at its height. By "scientific racism" I mean the belief that certain human beings are genetically more intelligent than others because of their racial background. Both Spencer and Grimke address issues of race by protesting against what they saw as injustice being done to black people, especially black women. Spencer addresses racial issues in a few of her poems, but reserved the radical protest to the activist movement she was involved with in Lynchburg, Virginia. Grimke addresses racial issues in her short stories, plays and some of her poems. She goes further than Spencer by rejecting the scientific racist theory of white superiority. By portraying middle-class black families in her fictional world, Grimke wanted it to be known that "Human nature . . . is the same. . . if the white man only cared to find out, he would know that, type for type, he could find the same in both races. . ." (Grimke "'Rachel' The Play" 415). As Black women, Spencer and Grimke could not ignore the race factor altogether. As Patricia Collins contends, "In spite of differences created by historical era, age, social class, sexual orientation, or ethnicity, the legacy of struggle against racism and sexism is a common
thread binding African-American women” (22). Spencer and Grimke were no exception.

Spencer and Grimke’s failure to include a new vision of the race’s common past in their poetics is a serious shortcoming. The Harlem Renaissance was closely linked to the black folk. One can safely argue that it was a popular movement, in the sense that the Black intellectuals drew their inspiration from black folks. As John Brown Childs contends, renaissance leaders stressed the importance of integrating the reality of the city with the cultural past as a weapon against the dominant society (73). One of these leaders, Alain Locke, stressed that the renaissance artists had to find new beauty in their heritage and new values in their own lives. Locke believed that memories of the Black people’s past, if properly directed and transformed by “newer voices” could assist in the creation of “new values” essential for racial success in America (Childs 73). It is unfortunate that Spencer and Grimke never understood this. None of their writings indicates that they appreciated the legacy of black folk culture. As members of the early black middle class, they emphasized genteel traditions in their lives and writings, and confined themselves within the narrow circle of friends and relatives. This attitude inclined them to avoid contact with the rank and file of black society.
One of the most difficult questions for Black writers during the renaissance was what did their art stand for? Most of the writers had to make a choice, whether their art should aid in the advancement of their people or maintain a disinterested posture. Black writers, as Jean Wagner contends, did not have a free choice. The psychological and social realities beyond their control confined them within harsh limits (170). Du Bois initiated a symposium on "The Negro in Art" in 1926 when the renaissance was at its peak. He wanted literary artists and publishers to consider pressing questions regarding their works.

Are writers under obligation or limitations as to the kinds of characters they portray? Should authors be criticized for painting the best or worst characters of a group? Can publishers be criticized for failing to publish works about educated Negroes? What can Negroes do if they are continually painted at their worst? Should Negroes be portrayed sincerely and sympathetically? (Crisis 31, 1926: 165)

Responses to this symposium varied from one writer to another. There was never a consensus among them. Anne Spencer, as I have discussed earlier, stressed that she had always written primarily for her own enjoyment and not for publication or praise (Greene, Time's Unfading 50). Despite this confession, re-reading Spencer's poetry shows that she did not confine her writing to pleasure and certainly did use her artistic skills to protest against issues she found humiliating to women and Black Americans. "White Things" and
"The Sevignes" are examples. Although Spencer's poetry lacks the revolutionary sentiments necessary for propelling women toward social emancipation, it was certainly not confined to statements about pleasure.

Angelina Weld Grimke's case is different. She understood and took seriously the potential of art to change society. She stated clearly that she wrote Rachel to soften the hearts of white women, who were, according to her, "the worst enemies with which the colored race has to contend" (Grimke, "'Rachel' The Play" 414). She was convinced that Rachel would soften white women's hearts, and by doing so "a greater power to affect public opinion would be set free and the battle would be half won" (Grimke 414). Grimke failed to comprehend that, since there is no one-to-one relationship between an author's intentions and the way in which a text will be received, she could not control the effects of her work. The result, as I have pointed out was her being wrongly accused of preaching genocide. She like others during the Harlem Renaissance overestimated the potential of art to change society. It seems to me, as many materialist feminists have argued, that culture (art being part of culture) alone can liberate neither women nor the society at large. Like materialist-feminist film critic Julia Lesage, I maintain that, although feminist art "cannot alone effect the transformation of relations between public
and private spheres" the greater self-awareness and imaginative capacity it fosters, when linked with a social movement, is an essential component of change in society (1-8).

NOTES

1. Angela Davis in Women Culture and Politics states, the Bourgeois aesthetics seeks to situate art in a transcendent realm "beyond ideology, beyond social economic realities and beyond Class struggle" (206). I contend that there is no art that is beyond ideology. I am using the term to refer to the literature that privileges specific genres and styles, favors upper middle class characters, upper middle class values and ignores the prevalence of class struggle in society.

2. I am using the term poetics here to refer to all the rules governing aesthetic principles in any literary form. This will include all genres, poetry, plays, short stories etc.


6. Gloria Hull in "'Under the Days': The Buried Life and Poetry of Angelina Weld Grimke" says that Grimke lived her life in virtual isolation; this may have added to the complexity of her troubled and unhappy being.
CHAPTER 4
FOLK AESTHETICS

The writings of Mercedes Gilbert and Marita Bonner are part of what I consider "folk aesthetics." Their poetics feature characters from lower social economic backgrounds in rural and industrial settings who connect with the rich African-American cultural heritage. The style, form, language and subject matter which these women opted for relate to the central issues of the Harlem Renaissance. Their writings construct a classed and gendered notion of race that has not been addressed before. Since their writings explore what is now referred to as the hallmark of the Harlem Renaissance--the vernacular (folklore, folk speech, and folk forms such as spirituals--my argument is Gilbert and Bonner open new avenues in understanding the neglected writings of renaissance women writers.

When compared to Anne Spencer and Angelina Weld Grimke, Mercedes Gilbert and Marita Bonner become the "New Radical Negro Women." Their approach to the Harlem Renaissance themes was similar yet different from that of their colleagues Spencer and Grimke.
Gilbert and Bonner revolted against the "social engineering arguments" advanced by Spencer and Grimke. Cornel West argues that social engineering arguments claim "since any form of representation is constructed... black representation should offer positive images of themselves in order to... counteract racist stereotypes" (Keeping Faith 18). Cultural critics analyzing the Harlem Renaissance suggest that many of the younger generation of renaissance writers—I include Gilbert and Bonner—were "reflectionists." The reflectionist's argument holds that "the fight for black representation and recognition must reflect or mirror the real black community" (West, Keeping Faith 18). The real black community has sometimes been referred to as the "authentic black community." West cautions that "since we have unmediated access to what the 'real black community' is" and what "positive images" are the notion of the "real black community" is socially loaded and ideological charged to such an extent that to pursue the discussion is to call into question the possibility of an uncontested consensus regarding them (Keeping Faith 19). All the same I would argue that during the Harlem Renaissance it was necessary to acknowledge black folk culture positively and demonstrate how it was different from, yet part of American culture.
Mercedes Gilbert and Marita Bonner not only repudiated the older generation "social engineering arguments," they went on to attack their old style conservatism. Gilbert and Bonner, among other things, realized that the problem for black American women was not only racism and gender discrimination but also the exploitation of their labor by private capital. These women, like many other "New Negro Radicals," realized that black women's problems could not be solved without reference to other fundamental social, political and economic problems of their times.

Mercedes Gilbert: The Voice of the Folk

Although grouped with the younger generation women, Mercedes Gilbert was born in 1889 and was slightly younger than Spencer and Grimke. She was not as young as Bonner and Helene Johnson, who shared the same aspirations as she. In the introduction to Gilbert's literary works, Susanne Dietzel points out that Gilbert was a writer of fiction, poetry and plays. She was also a well-known Broadway actress, newspaper writer, composer and songwriter (xv).

Gilbert was educated at home and in private schools. Dietzel states she graduated from Edward Waters College in Jacksonville with the intention of becoming a teacher but later changed her mind and reentered college to get a
nursing degree (xvi). In 1916 she moved from Florida to New York City with the intention of becoming a city nurse. Unable to practice nursing, Gilbert decided to become an actress instead of enrolling in yet another nursing program at a teaching hospital (xvi). It was at this time in her life that she started writing. She wrote during the day and performed in theaters at night. Refusing to conform to one single genre, Gilbert wrote songs, plays, poetry and a novel during her lifetime.²

When the Harlem Renaissance was in full swing in the 1920s, Gilbert was acting in movies. She acted in The Call of His People (1922), Secret Sorrow (1922), and in Body and Soul (1924). In the late twenties she moved from acting in movies to acting on stage. Her stage debut was in 1927 when she acted as "Mammy Dinah" in The Lace Petticoat, a musical comedy about old New Orleans. In 1929 she performed in Bombola and Melinda. As Dietzel notes, these were musical comedies with an already familiar plot that chronicled the journey of a black showgirl trying to make a career in the nightclubs of Harlem (xvii). From 1930 to 1935 Gilbert acted both on Broadway and on a tour as Zipporah the wife of Moses in the play The Green Pastures. According to Dietzel, The Green Pastures was an enormously successful play based on the collection of short stories Old Adam and His Children by
Roark Bradford. The play, extremely stereotypical in its portrayal of African-Americans, elicited a response from Gilbert. She wrote *In Greener Pastures*, a one-act play that was performed by the Harlem YMCA in 1938. It would have been appropriate to analyze Gilbert’s attempt to correct the misrepresentation of African-Americans presented by Roark Bradford and Marc Connelly. Unfortunately the play she wrote in response to *The Green Pastures* has been lost (Dietzel xviii).

Gilbert had a long acting career. Her career did not stop after the end of the Harlem Renaissance. Nor did she encounter hardship during the Great Depression as most black writers did. She continued acting and was active until the time of her death in 1952. Her most successful years were those spent on her own in her “one-woman theater” where she performed her own material. Dietzel states that in 1946, Gilbert went on a tour within the United States and Canada, performing combined music, comedy, drama and monologues (xviii).

Gilbert’s participation in the Harlem Renaissance is slightly different from other female writers because she did not publish her material in either *The Crisis*, *Opportunity*, or *Liberator*. She therefore missed the opportunity of making acquaintance with either the leadership of the
movement or the renaissance women's literary circle. Having spent most of her time in theaters, Gilbert was unable to participate actively in the salon culture of the renaissance. However, she had a close relationship with Langston Hughes and also played Cora, the female lead in Hugh's highly successful play Mulatto. Despite her low participation in the salon culture, the poems and monologues she wrote during the renaissance, correspond stylistically and thematically to the writings and aesthetic principles of the movement. Her work touches many of the themes that were central to the Harlem Renaissance. Her focus is mostly on African-American folk culture.

Despite having been born to a middle-class business family, Gilbert refrained from writing about the black middle-class. She is among the few writers who was able to overcome her class and race-biased education and draw on innovative African-American dialect for her work. Her interest in the rural South was motivated by her Southern upbringing. She was particularly interested in correcting the misrepresentation of African Americans that she encountered on the stages in Broadway and around the country. Gilbert was convinced that literature, art, music and drama could challenge the misrepresentation of blacks on the mainstream stage and America society in general. Although Gilbert was interested in challenging "the
relations of representation," if I may use Stuart Hall's terminology, her approach differs from that of Larsen, Fauset and Grimke in the sense that she avoided the "assimilationist manner" of setting out to prove through art that black people are really like white people and therefore disregarding or ignoring the fact that there are differences in history and culture between whites and blacks. As West argues, it is true that there is a common humanity between whites and blacks, yet this is jettisoned when an assimilationist manner subordinates black particularity to a false universalism (17). Gilbert, like Zora Neale Hurston, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Mary P. Burill and May Miller, to mention only a few, was more interested in celebrating black cultural expression than in proving to the American people how sophisticated black people can be. I would argue that theirs was a cultural affirmation of everyday experiences of ordinary black folks. As women they not only questioned the position of black women in America but went further and revised traditional vernacular forms to give voice to women.

The collection of Gilbert's works in one book has made it possible for researchers to get access to many of her works. *Aunt Sara's Wooden God* (1938), *Environment* (1931) and *Selected Gems of Poetry, Comedy, and Drama* are among her works that have survived. Two plays, *Ma Johnson's Harlem*
Rooming House and In Greener Pastures, have not been located anywhere, and are assumed lost. Unlike her peers Georgia Douglas Johnson and Angelina Weld Grimke, who sought support from renaissance leaders like Alain Locke, Gilbert was either too preoccupied with her acting career or understood the gender politics that dominated the publishing industry and so gave up trying to get her work published.

Her work Selected Gems of Poetry, Comedy, and Drama is divided into three sections: poetry, drama and novel. The poetry section is comprised of twenty poems. It is difficult to classify Gilbert’s poetry, as many of her poems don’t fit into one single category. One can confuse “I Am So Small,” “Disappointment” and “The Stream of Life” as spiritual poems dealing with religious sentiments. Read closely, these poems mention God but are about ordinary day to day life. Many of Gilbert’s poems have strong moral messages but can also be read as nature poems. For discussion purposes I have grouped the poems into two sections: those written in an English traditional style and those written in a narrative folk style.

In subject matter and style, Gilbert’s traditional poems resemble the poetry of her nineteenth-century predecessors, most noticeable Francis Ellen Watkins. As Dietzel observes, the poems are informed by Christian ethics
and carry strong moral message (xxiii). "True Worth," "I Am So Small," "The Stream of Life," "Dreams" and "The Game of Life" best represent Gilbert’s traditional poems. The poems are written in a simple language and lack the intense complexity one finds in poems written in figurative language. In "True Worth" the narrator asks:

What are riches, that I should crave,
And cannot carry beyond the grave.

What is fame, that soon passes by,
It cannot my redemption buy.

Riches and fame, oftime at great cost,
Are hard to find, and easily lost.

They are the passing gifts of earth,
But as death, as at birth.

It is only the soul,
That has "true worth." (9)

What makes "True Worth" important is the strong moral message that the narrator poses. In the 1920s when the economic condition of the majority of black folks was poor, the poem posed a very challenging question. It is an acknowledgment that material possessions and fame are not what makes human beings valuable. Mercedes Gilbert seems to have been concerned with the meaning of life. She uses nature themes to question and express her deep thoughts on the whole purpose of living. In "I Am So Small" the narrator compares the natural world to herself as a human being and comes to the conclusion that human beings are sometimes
very helpless. The helplessness is expressed in the first and last stanza. The first stanza says

I’ve watched the sunset’s golden ray,
Paint the western skies, with colors gay,
I’ve stretched my arms, towards the skies,
I’ve tried it’s greatness, and might, to realize.
I’ve turned away abashed, and asham. (13)

In the middle of the stanza the narrator contrasts human helplessness with the power of God. The narrator admires God’s kindness and ends the second stanza by lamenting “He is so great and I am so small.” In the last stanza, the narrator returns to the initial message and again stresses the helplessness of human beings

I’ve gazed across the ocean’s great expanse,
And wondered, after all what is man?
All puffed up with silly pride,
He cannot stop the ocean’s roar,
Nor halt the sun, or falling snow. (13)

The poem ends by stressing the narrator’s need for God. This poem is not only about nature’s might, it is also about the power greater than man, God. There is no reference to a specific religion. It seems Gilbert was interested in philosophizing about life rather than arguing for or against religion. Making God a “he” and reference to man as a “he,” Gilbert draws a parallel between man and woman where men assuming power do not actually have all the powers.

In “The Stream of Life” the narrator equates life with a flowing stream. As the stream meanders through different places so does life. The juxtaposition of a stream and life
enables the narrator to analyze how little control human beings have on the direction of their lives. "Life is like a little stream / some-times we glide by cities vast / some-times by meadows green / some-times we float close to shore / . . ." Eventually all life comes to an end. The last stanza stresses the central message of the poem, "And as each stream, must reach its course / in Gulf or in sea some-day / our journey too, must come to an end /" (20). "Dreams" and "The Game of Life" fall within the same group. Written in simple language, Gilbert delves into the deep meaning of life. In "The Game Life" the narrator says,

Take all that life has to give,  
Count that day lost, that leaves for you  
No lasting memory of some great joy.  
Live well, love well, while you may.  
With no regrets of yesterday. . . .  
Take all that life has to give,  
While you have breath,  
Just live, and live, and live. (17)

"The Game of Life," can be read as a simple narrative poem expressing the persona's admiration for life. Yet the knowledge that Mercedes Gilbert is an African American women writing in the 1920s invites an alternative interpretation. The words "live well, love well, while you may / with no regrets of yesterday / take all that life has to give" might allude to the difficulties and sufferings that black women have to go through.
As a Harlem Renaissance poet, Gilbert was aware of the need to make use of Negro folk material. Keenly conscious of the value of folk culture, Gilbert used Negro dialect and idioms in her poetry and monologues. "Li'l Black Boy," "Think Brudder Think," "You Jes Hit' Em Back" and "My Dear John's Place" are some of the poems written in Negro dialect. The poems follow a conventional traditional style; they are broken into stanza and the wording has rhythm. "Lil Black Boy" best represents Gilbert's folk narrative poems. The poem has six stanzas, each four lines long. The central message can be grasped by looking at the first, third and last stanza. These are worth quoting for clarity.

Don't you get to thinkin' honey,
Dat de lord ain't treat you right.
Jes' 'cause yo' hair is kinky,
And yo' face is black as night.

Dey says man's made in God's image,
When I look at you, I know it's true
'Cause I can see his own great spirit,
Jes as plain 'er shinin' through.

Don't you let this old world fool you,
You just stay hopeful, true and mild.
Show dem you can take dere' cuffin,
And still give dem back a smile. (10)

What distinguishes "Li'l Black Boy" from Gilbert's earlier poetry is not only the Negro dialect but the theme of black affirmation. The poem celebrates blackness by providing a positive representation of both black language and black race. Gilbert reverses a common reading of the
Bible that denotes black people as descendant of Ham and therefore cursed, and makes them represent the image of God. The narrator in the third stanza says "Dey say man's made in God's image / when I see you I know it is true."

Included in Selected Gems of Poetry, Comedy and Drama, are monologues that reflect Gilbert's familiarity with African-American oral culture. Like the Negro folk poems, the monologues are in Negro dialect. "A Talk on Evolution," "The Air Was Made for Birds" and "Why Adam Ate the Apple" reflect Gilbert's deep deliberation on epistemological and theological questions. "I'm Glad I Ain't No Hand To Talk," "Ain't Men Deceitful" and "Chip of the Old Block" discuss issues pertaining to everyday life. These monologues can be equated to "words of wisdom," an informal method of teaching passed down through generations orally. The monologues now in print were originally read and acted out for entertainment (Roses and Randolph 123).

In writing these monologues Gilbert successfully dramatizes ordinary black folks conversations and draws on "the interactive quality of much of the oral African American literature." Dietzel observes, the monologues "emphasize [African Americans] communal sensibility and interactive function" (xxv). Gilbert's monologues come closer to Zora Neale Hurston's short stories in Mules and Men. Like Hurston, who occasionally appropriates black
folklore to foster female equality, Gilbert uses traditional African-American verbal art to register a protest against male deception, as in "Aint Men Deceitful." Gilbert's Negro folk poetry and her monologues prove that she, like Hurston, had a strong sense of racial pride and saw great value in drawing upon the black racial heritage.

Though Negro folk material had been used before by male writers like Dunbar and Charles Chesnutt, it is the Harlem Renaissance writers who made extensive use of this important body of folk material. By using their artistic skills, female writers like Gilbert and Hurston modified the dialect tradition and created new forms based on the spirituals, blues ballads, work and dance songs, as well as folk sermons. In Aunt Sara's Wooden God, Gilbert creates a scene where men piling lumber sing in an effort to forget their misery.

"Ah got'uh gal, huh man,  
Ah loves my gal, huh man,  
Ah piles dis rail, huh man  
Throws it high, huh man  
Cause Ah loves my gal, huh man  
Till de day Ah die, huh man." (336)

This folk blues song is an adaptation of the call and response pattern normally found in nineteenth century work songs.

Call: Ah got' uh gal,  
Response: huh man,  
Call: Ah loves my gal,  
Response: huh man
The song expresses a toughness of spirit and resilience, a willingness to transcend difficulties. It also reflects a communal expression of black experience. Houston Baker says that "work songs, group seculars, field hollers, sacred harmonies, proverbial wisdom, folk philosophy... and much more... constitute an amalgam that seems to have been in motion in America—always becoming, shaping, transforming, displacing the peculiar experiences of Africans in the New World" (5). Hurston and Gilbert therefore stand as the leading women writers who embraced what are now considered the building blocks of African American modernism.

Mercedes Gilbert also merits attention as a playwright. She wrote three plays: Ma Johnson’s Harlem Rooming House (1938), In Greener Pastures (1938) and Environment (1931). Of the three plays, Environment is the only one that survived. It is included in Gilbert’s selected works. The play is about the effect of blacks migration to the urban North. It is a domestic drama that offers a representation of the condition of the lower black working class in the 1920s. In act one, we are introduced to Mary Lou Williams, a worried mother who is concerned about the welfare of the entire family. James William, the father and head of the family, is frustrated and has resorted to drinking. Mary and James have two children: Edna May, an industrious hard-
working girl, and Henry, a young man who is being corrupted by friends and an environment that is socially damaging. Act one ends with the disappearance of James William. Wrongfully accused of murder, he escapes from police and goes into hiding.

In act two, Henry gets involved in a robbery, is shot, caught by police and awaits trial. To save Henry, Mary Lou and Edna participate in a drug deal with Mr. Johnson, who in return promises to help Henry. The title of the play symbolically represent the 1920s urban living conditions that turned innocent people into criminals. Explaining what is happening to Henry, Millie says,

He is not in any racket, and you know it. It’s these environments that’s got him. Just like it got me. Then there is Teddy to push him. “God, I’m tired of the whole business.” (75)

What makes this play a success is its optimistic ending. Act three shows Henry’s recovery from environmental pressure, two years after the family moves back to the rural South. He finds a job and is preparing to get married to Margaret, the daughter of Charles Jackson, who in his own way was also caught up by environmental pressures. The play ends with Mary Lou’s forgiving statement to Mr. Jackson “Yes, Jackson. Maybe God will forgive you, and the rest of us. We can all start life anew. Yes, in a better environment (89).
Race, gender and class oppression intersect in this play. While many blacks who migrated to the urban cities did so for better opportunities, the results were contrary to their expectations. Urban conditions turned out to be worse than the rural life they had experienced in the South. This seems to be the central message of Gilbert’s play. Women take a leading position in the play. When men resort to drinking or escape police brutality as it is with Henry, it is women who take responsibility for the family. Despite exploitation through labor and oppression because of gender, black women in *Environment* are given a positive image representing working class women who fight against urban evils and win. Unlike Hurston, who concentrated on rural black folks, Gilbert added a new dimension to black folk characterizations by providing a representation of the urban and rural folk. The folks in *Environment* are the rural black Southerners who were becoming the urban proletariat. Unlike Spencer and Grimke, Gilbert paid more attention to both the urban and rural masses than to the culture of the black bourgeoisie. My intention here is not to give credit to Gilbert for depicting the lives of the lower classes but to argue that women writers of the Harlem Renaissance contrary to what scholars like Huggins have argued were as diverse in their subject matter and style as their male peers.
Primitivism might have been a male fantasy, but folk identity, as I will demonstrate in Gilbert’s works, was shared by both men and women writers.

_Aunt Sara’s Wooden God_ is the only novel that Mercedes Gilbert wrote. Published in 1938, it received little publicity and was reviewed by few people. John Lovell, an assistant professor of English at Howard University, published his review in the _Journal of Negro Education_, criticizing _Aunt Sara’s Wooden God_ as not having one defined theme and following an indulgent-mother-spoilt-son-motif. Lovell notes at the end of his article that the best thing in the book are the two prayers by Aunt Sara that are reminiscent of James Weldon Johnson’s _God’s Trombones_. Had Lovell paid more attention to the text he would have appreciated or acknowledged the resemblance between _Aunt Sara’s Wooden God_ and Johnson’s philosophy on the exploration of the Negro folk heritage. As Rebecca Cureau observes, J. W. Johnson, like Alain Locke, urged black artists to strive for the universal themes by dramatizing their racial experience (79). This is exactly what Gilbert did. I would argue that, in asking artists to be universally relevant Johnson and Locke were not suggesting that they drop racial perspective but rather that they blend the two.
Following Johnson's philosophy, Mercedes Gilbert in *Aunt Sara's Wooden God* takes her audience back to the rural South and juxtaposes her novel's action between the communal church-based life of Byron, Georgia, and the more worldly and corrupt ways of the semi-urban life of Macon. The country is portrayed as follows:

Byron was beautiful with its velvet-like green grass in which nestled wild pansies and violets. The smell of young pines filled the air with a clean sweetness, as the busy farmers tilled their soil, stopping in the heat of the day to sprawl beneath the welcome shade of trees. (217)

In contrast the city is portrayed as:

Streets filled with strangers, their dirty, sweaty overalls sticking to their bodies, as they loitered around Broad street, filling up on white mule, playing pool and Georgia skin or dancing in Daddy Jenks' back room to rancorous tinpanney music. (110)

Despite having a pleasant representation, the country life is not as decent as it appears. Gilbert's text uncovers the evils associated with the pastoral South. The history of slavery, white supremacy and the sexual exploitation of slave women are part of Byron history that Sara Lou "would have loved to forget" (*Aunt Sara* 114).

Gilbert adapts the oral mode of narrating family histories by making Aunt Salisbury trace the genealogy of Sara Lou. Aunt Salisbury, presented as an old woman who has lived long enough to understand the history of most of the people in the village, narrates the history of Sara Lou. Her
narrative begins after she puts herself in a talking mood. The narrator describes the scenery as follows:

Aunt Salisbury... gave her snuff brush, a tiny oak twig, a swish as she pushed it with her tongue from one side of her bony cheek to the other, and spat out a long string of brown sniff before she answered. Then, turning her feeble, squinty eyes heavenward, her jet black face seemed to take on purplish hue as she exclaimed. . . . (12)

Aunt Sara uses a language that affirms her rural identity. She begins by saying "Law uh mercy man, yuh ain't gone an' took no notice uh dat strumpet is yuh?" (12) She ends her story about Aunt Sara Lou's biography by saying "Dat's bout all dere is to it, son" (15). Negro dialect is used in the text by other characters to provide a more accurate representation of rural folks. Gilbert skillfully trims and fits folk saying to make them part of an integral segment of the narrative like "Sticks an stones kin break yo' bones but names ain't never goin to hurt yuh, son" (18), "If two strands of hair from the heads of two people in love were tied together and buried at the roots of a tree, as the tree grew they would grow closer" (27), "Folks whut lives in glass houses gotta watch out whey dey throws stones" (159). Although these are ordinary sayings, presented in Negro dialect they emphasize the narrator's understanding and appreciation of folk wisdom and customs.
Although *Aunt Sara’s Wooden God* revolves around the lives of two brothers, William and Jim, it is their mother Sara Lou who connects their lives with the activities of the rest of the community. Byron seems to be holding on to the old ways of communal sharing, the people having retained most of their old cultural values. Religion as a form of spiritual salvation plays a significant role in the people’s lives and relationship. As Lovell notes, Aunt Sara’s prayers are reminiscent of J. W. Johnson’s “God Trombones.” I would argue that this similarity is not a coincidence; Gilbert, like Johnson, recreated and incorporated in her fictional work her style of the black folk church sermon. The prayers are performed in a call and response manner, as is done in black churches. Instead of using a male preacher, Gilbert creates an opportunity for a woman to direct the prayer.

Make ‘im know dat you is God,
An’ ‘side you dere is no odder,
Dat he gottuh die,
An’ dat he got an ebber dyin’ soul to save,
Paralyze his throet agin’ dat poison liquour dat’s Killin’ his soul an’ drivin’ im from yo’ presence.
Lawd, Ah knows dat you kin unlock doors dat’s locked,. . . (30-31)

In the course of the prayer Luke and his wife respond by saying Amen in between sentences. The performance becomes an organized ceremony among three people. One gets the image by following the text’s description of the performance. By
describing Aunt Sara’s voice rising, the narrator successfully creates an image similar to that of the black preacher. The whole prayer ceremony appears again at the end of the text. This time Sara Lou prays for the return of her lost son. The prayer is less ceremonious but is loud enough for Jim, sleeping in an adjacent, room to hear. The narrator says that “pain would clutch Jim’s heart and he would join in silently with his mother’s prayer for William’s return” (258). What brings pain to Jim are the words expressed by his mother in the prayer:

My Lawd an’ strong God.  
Ah done bowed heah humbly at yo’ feet.  
Make me yo’ footstool Ah pray Thee.  
Look down in pity on my humble plea,  
Kaise Ah ain’t got no other name to call on but yuh, an’ yuh alone.  
Ah bows heah to humbly ask yuh to send my boy back to my arms. (257)

It is not only Sara Lou’s prayers that affirm the spiritual world in which the black folk of Byron struggle to survive. The structure of the text itself is pertinent in understanding and appreciating the relationship between black folk and their spiritual beliefs. Gilbert establishes this connection by beginning and ending the text with a common Negro spiritual “Down by the Riverside.”

Although Mercedes Gilbert has received very little attention from literary critics. She is one of the few women who engaged Negro spirituals in her writings. In Aunt
Sara's Wooden God, the spiritual "Down by the Riverside" is sung by women throughout the text. The words "Ah'm gonna lay down my burden down by the river side" represent the sufferings of Aunt Sara Lou; these words can also be read as a lament expressed by many black women. Joined by her black sisters, Aunt Sara sings bravely as the text ends "An ain't gonna study war no more" (359).

Contemporary criticism on Aunt Sara's Wooden God has made no account of this fact; instead, two male critics Noel Schraufnagel and Hugh Gloster, have unfairly established that Aunt Sara's Wooden God is dominated by the theme of miscegenation. In From Apology to Protest, Noel Schraufnagel maintains that "the folly involved in clinging to illusions of white superiority is the theme of Aunt Sara's Wooden God" (18). Hugh Gloster observes the same thing in Negro Voices in American Fiction, he goes further by arguing that, unlike most novels that handles the themes of miscegenation, Gilbert's work is "neither bitter nor preoccupied with racial issues" (241). I would argue that Schraufnagel and Gloster read Gilbert's text from a male perspective and ignore its black feminist perspective. They also do not pay attention to the incidents in the text that represent the racial tension that existed in the Southern states during the 1920s. When Jim is sentenced to prison, Ruth remarks, "Ole Judge Graham is uh deacon in his church an' Ah ain't
never seed nobody act any more unfair den he did tryin’ Jim” (166). William supports Ruth and asks, “When is you seen them act fair when there’s one uh us on trial? Dey jes’ takes it for granted dat we’se guilty ‘fo we’se tried. . . .” (166). Ruth and William’s observations are supported by Gordon an old respected white man in the community. As soon as he arrives in Byron from abroad, he visits Judge Graham and tells him straight, “You tried the boy only looking at it from the standpoint of his color” (223).

These two quotes are not the only places where black folk express their bitterness on Southern race relations. When William is promoted to a higher position at his job in Florida, he accepts the position wholeheartedly and refuses to quit when his life is threatened by a white man who had the job before him. His determination to show his fellow workers that the mere mention of a white man does not frighten him leads to his disaster. He is shot; “the bullet pierced his left lung and rendered him unconscious” (255). I would strongly argue Gloster’s observation that Aunt Sara’s Wooden God is neither bitter nor preoccupied with racial issues is misleading. It is true that the text deals with miscegenation, but it is also preoccupied with gender and racial issues.
Enacting difference: Marita Bonner's Short Stories and Plays

When Marita Bonner's first essay "On Being Young-a Woman-and Colored," (1925) was published in The Crisis, the Harlem Renaissance was in full swing. Harlem had become the Mecca of many aspiring young black writers and artists, but it was not the only center. There were young writers in other locations like Washington, D.C. In Harlem, Alain Locke published The New Negro, widely accepted as the manifesto of the period. Written from Washington, D.C., the images in Bonner's "On Being Young. . .," as Cheryl Wall notes, evoke "stasis and claustrophobia, not change and movement" (4). Unlike Locke, whose essay takes on a masculinist cast, Bonner's essay addresses a female audience that is probably well-educated but is not mobile. A woman cannot plan a trip alone from Washington to New York because to travel alone would not be acceptable in social conduct. Bonner's reference to a train echoes the music and songs of women blues singers.

I hate to hear that engine blow, boo hoo
I hate to hear that engine blow, boo hoo
Everytime I hear it blowin, I feel like ridin too. . .

When a woman gets the blues she goes to her room and hides.
When a woman gets the blues she goes to her room and hides.
When a man gets the blues he catch the freight train and rides.
("Freight Train Blues" by Trixie and Clara Smith.)
In “It Jus Be’s Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women Blues,” Carby brings up the same issue and, like Bonner, maintains that it was not as easy for women as it was for men to hop freight trains (15). Bonner concludes her essay with an image of a woman similar to Buddha perhaps motionless on the outside but struggling on the inside.

“On Being Young—A Woman—and Colored” was not very well-received because the heightened racial consciousness that surrounded the Harlem Renaissance period made issues of sexism more difficult to raise (Wall 6-7). Paula Giddings mentions “the rise and subsequent decline of black militancy and the decline of feminist consciousness after the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment that gave women the right to vote” as factors that made black women subordinate their concerns about sexism (183). Giddings asserts that the talk of the twenties was about femininity and not feminism (185). Women who persisted in raising concern about feminism at a period when the effort was to forge a revised racial identity were regarded as disloyal to the race (Wall 7). Bonner was neither disloyal to her race nor to the black women’s struggle. She claimed both a racial and a gendered identity. She was particularly concerned with the conditions of black working-class women. Although this aspect is not mentioned in her essay, it comes out vividly in her short stories.
In her essay she hints on black class difference by dismissing the black Bourgeoisie's imitation as "a mime; a sham; a copy cat" (5).

Born to a working-class family, Marita Bonner grew up in Boston. She was educated in Brookline primary and secondary schools. She entered Radcliffe College in 1918, where she studied English, Comparative Literature, Music Composition and Creative Writing. Professor Charles T. Copeland had a tremendous impact on Bonner's future writings. During her college days, Copeland lauded Bonner's ability as a writer but warned her not to be bitter. This admonition stiffened her determination to voice protest. She wrote The Purple Flower in 1928, the only radical and revolutionary play written by a woman during the Harlem Renaissance.³

Bonner began her literary career in the 1920s by publishing in black journals. Opportunity, A Journal of Negro Life and Black Life, published in Philadelphia and The Crisis were her popular journals. Fortunately almost all of Bonner's works have now been published in a book titled Frye Street and Environs (1987).

Although she is still not popular among literary critics, Bonner was an active participant in the Harlem Renaissance. She was also a member of Georgia Douglas
Johnson's working group and had the opportunity of meeting other women writers like Angelina Weld Grimke, Mae Howard Jackson, Rebecca West and probably Zora Neale Hurston. Judith Musser mentions that there is no concrete evidence to show that Hurston and Bonner ever met although they were both participants of Johnson's gathering on "S" Street ("African American Women and Education " 74).

Bonner is an interesting author because her style and subject matter conform with the most neglected aspect of the renaissance, its early period of political radicalism. Unlike all the women in this study, Bonner did not write poetry. She wrote two essays, three plays and more than twenty short stories. The two essays, "On Being Young-a Woman-and Colored" and "The Young Blood Hungers," were written when the renaissance was at its peak. As I mentioned earlier, the first essay was not very well received because of the time it was produced. Many scholars thought race was more important than gender and class. Surprisingly, the second essay was not well received either. According to Bonner, gender and class were as important as race. She was therefore determined to write against the discrimination imposed on black women by males and by the society at large. In "On Being. . ." she asks:

    Why do they see a colored woman only as a gross collection of desires all uncontrolled, reaching out
for their Apollos and the Quasimodos with avid indiscrimination? (5)

Bonner’s other writings are sensitive to what Frances Beale describes as the “double and triple jeopardies” African American women are exposed to in a society that is dominated by race, class, and gender discrimination (90). In “The Young Blood Hungers” (1928), Bonner delves into the complicated and psychological nature of hunger. The hunger for righteousness, she insists, is “the world hunger” (9).

It seems this hunger is felt not because there is no God but because there is no justice. The narrator insists that she is not speaking for herself but for the young generation who want to see change in society. “The Young Blood Hunger” is highly metaphorical; the central message of the essay depends on how one reads the essay. Issues raised are, is the essay arguing for a just society, a true religion, or both? The sentence, “I speak not for myself alone, Lord!” is repeated six, times indicating the narrator’s seriousness that this growing hunger for righteousness is felt by many. Bonner’s essay is certainly political. Although the demand for righteousness is posed in a religious manner, it can be read as a demand for economic, social and political justice for all races and genders in America.

Bonner published “The Young Blood Hungers” five months after publishing her revolutionary play *The Purple Flower*. 
This play, now acknowledged as a singular contribution to African-American theater, deviates from the realistic style prevalent among black writers of the time. It differs from the plays of the other women playwrights—Georgia Douglas Johnson, May Miller, Mary Burill and Eulilie Spencer. Encouraged by Georgia Douglass Johnson to write plays, Bonner started by writing *The Pot Maker* (1927).

*The Pot Maker* has the rural South as its setting. Bonner does not romanticize the South; instead, she gives a grim representation of the South in the 1920s. There is poverty, illiteracy and moral decadence. The main protagonist is Lucinda. After years of humiliation living with her mother-in-law, she takes a lover and cheats on her marriage. The result is death to her and her lover. The central message of the play is the moral teaching that no human being is perfect. The play emphasizes redemption.

Elias says at the end of the play,

> Set up to be gol' you all and if you ever feels weak tell God, "Master I got a crack in me." He'll stoop down and take and heal you. He won't ask you how you got cracked. He'll heal you.  

*(Frye Street 23)*

In choosing to dramatize the lives of rural folks, Bonner embraced the familiar strategy adopted by many Harlem Renaissance playwrights. Most of them had accepted Du Bois's proposition that "plays of a real Negro theater must be about Negroes, by Negroes, for Negroes and near Negroes"
There is also a possibility that, for this first play, Bonner might have been influenced by G.D. Johnson's salon playwrights. The domestic conflict portrayed in *The Pot Maker* might have been a result of conversations women playwrights had. Will Harris maintains that "the principal circumstance most of these playwrights shared was the common experience of disappointing sexist oppression" (207).

Bonner's talent pushed her to move beyond the Du Bois proposition. In 1928 she published *The Purple Flower*. Since its 1974 reprinting in *Black Theater* and its inclusion in Kathy Perkins' *Black Female Playwrights* (1989) the play has aroused a lot of interest among literary and drama critics. As Allison Berg notes, the play has been described as allegorical, surrealist, expressionistic or simply abstract. All critics agree the play was most likely meant to be read rather than performed (469).

What makes *The Purple Flower* very different from all the plays of the renaissance is that it does not conform to the Du Bois dictum that "Plays of a real Negro theater must reveal Negro life as it is" (296). Neither does Bonner's play conform to the folk play's tradition promoted by Alain Locke and Montgomery Gregory. Locke and Gregory argued:

the only avenue of genuine achievement in American drama for the Negro lies in the development of the rich veins of folk-tradition of the past and in the
portrayal of the authentic life of the Negro the Negro masses of today (159).

The Purple Flower has no focal protagonist. As Harris mentions, the "agitator element" of the whole race is the protagonist (215). This is consistent with Surrealism, with its tendency is to de-emphasize character development in favor of montage (Harris 215). Although the play draws on black folks, they are rendered allegorical as "average" and "cornerstone." The black folks are struggling for "The Flower-of-life-at-its-fulllest."

The periodization of the play is also surreal. The time is indicated as "The middle-of-things-as-They are." In parenthesis we are told this means "the End-of-Things for some characters and the Beginning-of-Things for others. The place "might be here, there or anywhere-or even nowhere (30). After presenting the characters, time, place and setting, Bonner puts forth the argument of the play as follows:

The White Devils live on the side of the hill. Somewhere. On top of the hill grows the purple Flower-of-Life-at-Its-Fullest. This flower is as tall as pine and stands alone on top of the hill. The Us's live in the valley that lies between Nowhere and Somewhere and spend their time trying to devise means of getting up the hill. The White Devils live all over the sides of the hill and try every trick, known and unknown, to keep the Us's from getting to the hill. For if the Us's get up the hill, the Flower-of-Life-at-Its-Fullest will shed some of its perfume and then there they will be Somewhere with the White Devils. The Us's started out
by merely asking permission to go up. They tilled the valley, they cultivated it and made it as beautiful as it is. They built roads and houses even for the White Devils. They let them build the houses and then they were knocked back down into the valley. (31)

The Purple Flower is revolutionary in style and content. Its focus on the inevitability of a bloody racial war in America, or maybe anywhere else around the world makes it very radical. Although the play does not say exactly who the Us’s are, the reference to two hundred years of slavery presumably refers to African-Americans. The Us’s argue that neither books, money, work nor God has enabled them to get up the desired hill. The song by the White Devils

You stay where you are!
We don’t want you up here!
If you come you will be on par
With all we hold dear.
So stay-stay-stay
Yes stay were you are (32)

clearly indicates it is the White Devils” who are preventing the Us’s from getting up the hill.

Several interpretations have been given to the group identified as the Us’s in the play. Since they are denied something that is essential to their lives, the Us’s can represent any marginalized group in society. The idea that the solution to the existing problem is to employ a violent tactic that involves sacrificing a White Devil indicate the violent nature of the play. While it might be difficult to
imagine a war based on race, given the arbitrariness of race itself, one can visualize and understand the option of violence for those who are denied certain rights in society. These rights do not have to be political; they can be economic or social or both. Allison Berg and Merideth Taylor suggest the potential alliance between the Us’s in the play and the dispossessed, arguing that

The Purple Flower could be interpreted as an allegory about confrontation between the Haves and Have nots, a conflict bolstered (but not completely determined) by race (472).

It seems to me that they are right; the play is ambiguous enough to allow a race and/or class based interpretation.

Tracing the history of revolutionary plays in black drama, Errol Hill points out correctly that, unlike her predecessors, Bonner did not go to history for her plot; instead, she relied solely on her imagination. Rather than draw lessons from the past, she attempted to predict the future (419). The play goes one step further by presenting the Us’s in the play not as victims only but also as agents of change. The play therefore enables us to see both the forces of oppression and the seeds of resistance.

The Purple Flower and “The Young Blood Hunger” make it clear that Bonner considered bloodshed an inevitable step in the march toward any liberation. However, the play ends
by asking the audience is it time? Hill suggests "no" as an answer. He might have been referring to the year 1928, when the play was first published and the conditions were unsuitable or not yet ready. I would here take a materialist-feminist stand and argue like Newton and Rosenfelt that in all times "what is inherent in the text is not fixed verbal structure" (xxiii). Bonner's play has all the potential of being reproduced differently in changing historical situations. Had the play been read or performed in either 1965, 66 or 67 the answer to the question "Is it time yet?" might have been "Yes!" These were the years when people were killed and injured. Hill remarks that Blacks saw the police and the national guard not as protectors of citizenry but as violent agents of the oppressors. It was a matter of kill or be killed. Had Bonner's prophecy become true (423)?

Bonner was a versatile twentieth-century writer. Essays and plays were not the only genre she practiced; she also wrote a number of short stories. Many of her stories are set in a Chicago neighborhood where immigrants lived side by side with African-Americans. In many of her stories, Bonner constructs situations in which the vulnerability of black women is delineated.

Although Bonner is unquestionably a Harlem Renaissance writer, many of her stories were written after 1930, the
period scholars of the renaissance and literary critics have characterized as a time of declining in interest in black literature. Since I am more interested in articulating Bonner's position during the renaissance, I have confined my discussion to her first four stories published between 1928 and 1930. All four—"The Hands," "The Prison Bound," One Boy's Story" and "Drab Rambles"—elucidate Bonner's preoccupation with portraying American society as being structured in dominance by race, class and gender. It is right to argue from this observation that the change in genre from essays to plays and later to short stories did not alter Bonner's preoccupation with the fate of black women.

Bonner's first story, "The Hands," was published in Opportunity in 1925. It deals more with race and class than with gender. The narrator gets on a bus, and the first thing he notices are "His hands--Dark Brown, gnarled, knotted, bumping arms, in quirky knots like old brown bark on a cherry tree" (Frye Street 59). The narrator uses these hands to disclose the life of a man exhausted because of hard work. He cites the work that these hands have endured: "lugged coal, lugged oil, lugged washing, sold papers... ." Despite hard work, these hands have also experienced happiness in marriage, in holding children, and in caring for the family. The irony of the story is the question at
the end addressed to God. After working hard throughout his life he man wants to know which game he should play most so that some day he can have a house, plenty to eat and drink and something in the bank to put him and her away decently (63).

"The Prison Bound" is about a woman named Maggie. Trapped in poverty she lives in bad housing, is overweight and has a husband who adds to her misery. Maggie compares him to her filthy kitchen full of grease, soot and water bugs. It is through characters like Maggie that Bonner discloses the misery of women who find themselves in a harsh urban environment. Maggie fails to understand why her husband cannot do anything for her. The only words he hears from him are insults—"You ain't never been higher than the fifth grade... You ain't nothin but lazy" (66). In "The Prison Bound" Bonner equates the hard economic and filthy conditions in cities with prisons. Maggie is not only imprisoned in her house, she is also a prisoner of an environment that denies her a job and renders her dependent on her husband. The central message of the story is presented at the beginning and end of the story by a quote from a prayer heard in a country church:

God help the prison-bound-
Them within the four iron
walls this evening! (68)
The juxtaposition of a country prayer about helping those who are on their way to prison and the image of urban characters living in prison like conditions complete Bonner’s message. The rush towards the north especially during the great migration in 1919 was not a move to paradise. Bonner seems to be saying that the crowded confines of inner-city apartments made people prisoners, the situation was worse for women who had no jobs and were confined to the house all day. In “The Prison Bound” Maggie’s only hope is, things “might not be so bad tomorrow” (68).

“One Boy’s Story” portrays a black woman’s painful independence from her white lover. Donald Gage grows up in an all-white community where his Black mother works as a seamstress for a wealthy family. Tired of being a mistress, Donald’s mother Louise asks Dr. Swyburne, who also happens to be the father of her son, for her freedom. Donald recognizes his mother’s determination to be free by the words she says: “Dear Jesus! With your help I’ll free myself. . .All I need is strength to fight it out” (87). As Flynn notes in the introduction, Bonner’s story is structured and paralleled not only to the biblical tale of David and Goliath, but also to the classical tragedies of father-son conflicts in the Oedipus and Orestes stories (xvi). Donald’s tongue is miraculously wounded by his
mother's breast pin, immediately after killing his father. His poisoned tongue prevents him from saying what happened: "I tried to talk. I wanted to tell him to leave it so I could show my grandchildren what I used to free ma" (90). Flynn notes that the story's denouement is a paradigm of literary silencing and the dangerous truth that cannot be spoken (xvi). Recovering from the amputation of his tongue, Donald imagines he is Orestes with the Furies' whips in his mouth for killing his father. Sometimes he pretends he is Oedipus, who cut out his tongue for killing his own father (91).

It is evident from the text that although Louise was determined to get her freedom, being black and a woman prevented her from successfully claiming her independence from a white man. Flynn argues that the story is an exploration of color issues (xvi). I disagree. Neither Donald nor Louise has an identity crisis. In fact, Donald did not know that the white doctor was his father until after he had killed him. I read "One Boy's Story" as a representation of a black woman's struggle for independence. Louise wanted to end the relationship with the white doctor so that she could marry a man of her own race, gain her lost respectability and have a name for her son.

Marcy Knopf in The Sleeper Wakes: Harlem Renaissance Stories By Women states that, "Bonner brought to the
movement the most experimental of styles and techniques among women writing” (xxx). “One Boy’s Story” is written in a conventional and Eurocentric style while “Drab Rambles,” her third story, is written in a more Afrocentric and experimental style. The difference in genre between the two stories show that Bonner did not just write stories but took into consideration how the story was delivered. She tried to make the subject of the story conform with the style. “One Boy’s Story” is written in a straight forward language. Following a conventional Eurocentric style, it has a beginning, a climax and an end. “Drab Rambles” is different, the shift in style begins with the words in the title which suggest aimlessness. The division of the narrative into two sections depart from the standard ways of writing prose fiction. Bonner breaks the narrative continuity by dividing the story in two sections, one having a male and the other having a female character.

The story won a first place Opportunity award in 1927. In the first portrait we experience the crushing of a black man by the racism and economic slavery he encounters in the urban North. Sick and exhausted as a result of a weak heart, Peter Jackson seeks medical help only to be told that he should stop working if he wants to continue living. The doctor tells him he ought not to live so hard (97).
Unable to control his anger, Jackson tells the doctor, life for him has been

Ditches and picks. Births and funerals. Stretching a dollar the length of ten. A job, no job; three children and a wife to feed; bread feed; bread thirteen cents a loaf. For pleasure, church- where he was too tired to go sometimes. . . .I ain't lived hard! I ain't lived hard! . . . I have worked harder than I should, that's all (97).

The second portrait is about a black woman who is sexually harassed in the work place. Madie Frye first worked as a maid. She was fired when the lady of the house found out she was going to have a baby without a husband. The child happened to be that of Tom Nolan, her employer. She laments her daughter Madie the second came by "keeping that first job" (100). Desperate for another job she accepts a position as a washer woman in a family laundry. Another white boss tries to seduce her. This time she refuses. The question is, "was she now going to go job hunting or have a sister or brother to keep with Madie second" (100). "Drab Rambles" reminds us of Barbara Smith's statement that "the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the work of black women writers (159). To understand "Drab Rambles" requires an understanding of the cultural conditions that produced characters like Peter Jackson and Madie Frye. Peter Jackson's powerlessness is a result of his color and class position. When asked by the doctor, "Why didn't you get
another job? Didn't need to dig ditches all your life (97), he says:

I had to dig ditches because I am an ignorant black man. If I was an ignorant white man, I could get easier jobs. I could even have worked in this hospital. (970)

Madie Frye's dilemma to either submit to her boss's seduction and risk having another baby or reject him and lose the job she desperately needs demonstrates the limited choices working class women had. Madie Frye represents another aspect of what it meant "being young, a woman, and colored."

"A Possible Triad on Black Notes" matches the style of "Drab Rambles." Bonner gives a representation of three working-class families that live in Frye Street. Since the setting of all three stories is the same, the forward at the beginning serves as an introduction. Suggesting that "All the world is here," Bonner maintains that it is not only the people who are from around the world--Jewish, Chinese, Italians, Swedes, Danes, Greeks, Russians and African Americans--but one also finds all kinds of lifestyle "from the safe solidarity of honorable marriage to all of the amazing varieties of harlotry" (102). Indeed, the first story "There Were Three," is about a woman who works as a prostitute.
Neighbors asked "What kind of woman got to go to work dressed better than Sheba when she visited King Solomon and ridin' in a taxi" (104)?

Bonner narrates the events that destroy this family of three. Lucille Harris worked nights only. She has two children, Little Lou and Robbie. The narrator says Lucille Harris was a "violet-eyed dazzling blonde. But something in the curve of her bosom, in the swell of her hips, in the red fullness of her lips, made you know underneath this creamy flesh and golden waviness, there lay a black man-a black woman" (103). Lucille took advantage of her light skin and sold herself on the white side of the town. The decision to sell herself as a white prostitute implies that even prostitution was not spared from the politics of race. White prostitutes had more advantages than blacks and probably operated in a better and safer environment. The story ends with a tragedy. When Robbie, working as a bell boy discovers his mother in bed with a man, he panics. In the confusion that follows, Robbie falls to his death from a hotel window. The narrator says Robbie's mother was sent "Up at McNeil Institute where those people stay whose wealthy connections can prevent them from being assigned to an ordinary asylum" (107). We are left with the question, what happens to Little Lou, who was already being pursued by the neighborhood men for her fairness?
Marita Bonner brought a new dimension to the writings of the Harlem Renaissance women. She certainly did not romanticize the urban folk. As Flynn notes, Bonner’s writing takes up the theme of the working class that was “largely neglected in the writings of her Afro-American contemporaries such as Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen [Anne Spencer and Angelina Grimke]” (xiii).

The Harlem Renaissance was definitely not a monolithic movement. Despite its strong male leadership, many women artists found ways of voicing their concerns in whatever genre they choose. However, they were not always heard.

Gilbert and Bonner opted to write about the rural and urban masses. They understood well the politics of race in America. Gilbert’s determination to write about the black folks was not based on the desire to develop a distinctive Negro expression but on her willingness to enrich the general American culture.

Gilbert differs from Spencer and Grimke in the sense that she was more interested in an assimilation of separate groups to one another rather than black culture being assimilated to an Anglo-American culture. It is important to understand that, like Zora Neale Hurston, Gilbert’s privileging of the folk and vernacular was a political act in a racist society. By maintaining the primacy of the folk and folk culture, Gilbert and a few other renaissance
writers offered resistance to crushing assimilationism and institutionalization of African-American cultural inferiority. I read Gilbert’s work as a strategic assertion of cultural pride and political power.

Gilbert took seriously the legacy of the folk. She therefore incorporated Negro folk songs and spirituals in her work. Having worked as an actress for a long period, Gilbert knew the difference between the representation of blacks as exotic and primitive and as Americans with a sense of an African cultural past. Hutchinson acknowledges, and I agree, that the interest in a particularized and historicized yet respectful reevaluation of African cultures went along with an attitude toward the African-American “folk” that resisted their enshrinement as exotic “others” (180). Gilbert’s work promotes a reading that facilitates an understanding of African-American culture that is both mixed and uniquely American.

On the potential of art, Gilbert knew from her acting experience how literature, art and drama were being used to misrepresent blacks on the mainstream stage. She anticipated that the very same stage could be used to correct the misrepresentations. In her songs and one-act plays, she tried to correct the misrepresentation.
I would argue that Gilbert understood the potential of art in changing the way people think. For her, art was useful for the reformation of society.

Bonner's concerns were slightly different. She was particularly interested in the masses of rural black workers who were emerging into an urban proletariat. Bonner saw the urban environment turning black people, and specifically black women, into victims of extreme poverty, unemployment, sexual harassment and all the imaginable evils created by unfavorable economic conditions in towns and cities. Her plays, short stories and essays critique a social system that privileges and discriminates according to race, class and gender. Bonner is among the few women writers whose writings produce a complex rendering of the race/class/gender nexus.

On the meaning of race, Bonner created a fictional multi-ethnic community comprised of Irish, Chinese, Russians, Jewish, French, Italian, Swedish, Danish and African-Americans. The locale of this multi-ethnic community is Frye Street. It is within this setting that Bonner portrays the fallen world in terms of race relations. As Laura Harris notes, "This Frye Street diversity levels hierarchical notions of race--many inhabitants are intermixed but even more so, each inhabitant has a cultural or ethnic history" (147). The intermingling between the
residents of Frye Street enables the black residents to see the hypocrisy of the American dream. Bonner shows how race operating in a caste-like system prevents working-class blacks from experiencing a class mobility available to other ethnic groups.

Bonner tackles issues of skin color and portrays how the American color caste system favors and privileges lighter skin, the equation being the lighter one's skin the greater one's individual social value. This is portrayed in "There Were Three," "On The Altar," "One Boys Story" and "Of Jimmy Harris." It is not a coincidence that all the light-skinned characters in the short stories are women. Bell Hooks argues that

the exploitative and/or oppressive nature of color-caste systems in white supremacist society has always had a gendered component. A mixture of racist and sexist thinking informs the way color-caste hierarchies detrimentally affect the lives of black females differently than they do black males (127).

Bonner indirectly challenges the representations that define light skin and long straight hair as beautiful and desirable by creating a discourse on the impact of internalized racism. Many of her short stories challenge the reader to interrogate the meaning embodied in black women color caste hierarchies. bell hooks cautions, and I agree, that "until black folks begin to collectively critique and question the politics of representation that systematically
devalue blackness, the devastating effects of color caste will continue to inflict psychological damage on masses of black folks" (131). Bonner stands strong as an early black feminist who recognized the importance of challenging the internalized racism regarding skin color. In “Of Jimmy Harris,” Harris’s mother, known as “Marm Harris,” reflects that

She never felt easy about Jimmy. She never felt easy about Jimmy up in the big city on Frye street with a tailor shop and a blond wife who said she was colored—and Marry Linn, staying single all the fifteen years that had elapsed since Jimmy forgot her for Louise (110).

With her emphasis on the urban folks, it is hard to identify how Bonner embraced the legacy of the folk. The transition of many black folks from a rural agricultural setting to an urban working-class environment meant that life had to be changed and adjusted. Values that had kept rural communities long and stable had to be equally changed. Still, Bonner portrays those values like family relationship and extended kinship structures that blacks had to keep in order to survive the hostile environment they found themselves in. Bonner was not interested in romanticizing the rural South. Frye Street can neither represent the southern rural world nor can it reproduce the black cultural values that existed in the South.
It is from Bonner’s essays and plays that we grasp what she thought of the potential of art. “The Young Blood Hungers” and The Purple Flower identify Bonner as not only a radical but also a revolutionary writer. Unlike many women writers of her time, Bonner gave a representation of the “Black Rage,” if I may use Bell Hook’s terminology necessary for a transformative revolutionary action. When Finest Blood in The Purple Flower asks, “Can there be no other way--cannot this cup pass?” The old man answers, “No other way. It cannot pass... Finest Blood, this is God’s decree: You take blood-you give blood. Full measure-flooding full-over-over” (46)! The old man cannot accept anything short of revenge. I have equated his anger with “Black Rage” because the situations given in the play are similar to what many blacks experience as a result of institutionalized racism. This anger as the text show is an appropriate response to injustice. bell hooks urges people to see beyond black rage and understand that the problem is not the rage but the conditions and circumstances that necessitates it, she says people “need to talk seriously about ending racism” if they want to see an end to rage” (30).

Harlem scholars, male and female, have ignored Bonner’s revolutionary sentiments. The Purple Flower was written and published in The Crisis in 1927. The play, despite winning The Crisis prize for “Literary Art and Expression,” was
never produced. Why has it not received the publicity accorded to revolutionary texts like Claude Mckay’s “If We Must Die”? Recent scholarship on Bonner has concentrated on her first essay “On Being Young-A Woman-and Colored.” While I do not mean to diminish the significance of this essay, I am left wondering why literary and cultural critics have been silent on Bonner’s revolutionary sentiments.

NOTES

1. “Folk aesthetics” here refers to the literature that privileges the wealth of material provided by common people from urban cities and rural settings. They include folk songs, folklore, spirituals, dance and story telling techniques derived from the peoples own oral heritage.


CONCLUSION

The African American community has never been monolithic. Gender, national identity, color, [class], leadership, and the relationships between free blacks and slaves or with various immigrant groups have all been issues of disagreement. Here also is a people who, despite their differences, were bound by a shared oppression and the power of a collective history. At crucial times, at points of crisis, this diverse people united to support common goals. It was not necessary that they walk in lockstep in order to form a community of common direction. There were many black experiences, yet one overwhelming common black history.

(James Oliver Horton, Free People of Color 2)

James Oliver Horton’s statement delineates the difficulties of trying to construct a unified African American experience. I have added the category “class” because it is an important aspect of African American identity that is often overlooked.

Harlem Renaissance writers made a genuine attempt to respond to Du Bois’s call that “No authentic group literature can rise save at the demand and with support of the group which is calling for self expression” (Dusk of Dawn, 270). Du Bois probably meant that no “authentic group literature” can succeed unless it gets support from its own
people. Yet none of the renaissance writers understood what an "authentic" African American literature was. Similarly, it has recently become very difficult to define the notion of an "authentic group literature," which some of the renaissance participants thought their movement was producing (others had serious doubts). If, as Horton observes, there have been many black experiences, delineating certain experiences as "authentic" and others as "inauthentic" is to fall into the trap of essentialism.

Diana Fuss defines essentialism as "a belief in the real true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the 'whatness' of a given entity" (xi). The idea of authenticity--a notion that implies essence--is derived from a belief that certain things are "true and real" to a certain group of people while other things are merely representations. This kind of analysis has its shortcomings. Marion Riggs in "Black Is Black Ain't" and Martin J. Favor in Authentic Blackness have addressed the disadvantages of essentializing blackness. Riggs' documentary film identifies and confronts those forces that have attempted to consolidate, reduce and contain the lives and experiences of African Americans. By naming and critiquing these forces, "Black is Black Ain't" illuminates the complexities of black life. Favor argues that "by privileging certain African American identities and voices
over others, the critic of African American literature often restricts too severely his or her scope of intellectual inquiry into the construction of racial identity" (3). Similarly, bell hooks argues in "Post Modern Blackness" that the critique of essentialism has awakened African Americans "to acknowledge the way in which class mobility has altered collective black experience so that racism does not have the same impact on black people's lives" (28). As hooks says, the critique of essentialism empowers African Americans to affirm multiple black identities and varied black experiences, thus reducing the possibilities of defining African Americans in a narrow and limiting fashion (28).

Anne Spencer, Angelina Grimke, Mercedes Gilbert, and Marita Bonner responded in their own different ways to pressing issues that were central to the renaissance. Although they were all women who belonged to the emerging black middle class, they responded differently to the meaning of race, the legacy of the folk, and the potential of art. The New Negroes' class consciousness vigor and the legacy of the folk divide the four women into two groups: Spencer and Grimke on one side and Gilbert and Bonner on the other side.

Spencer and Grimke did not consider class differences among blacks as a problem, nor did they appreciate or acknowledge the legacy of the folk in their writings. Having
been born during the times when black women were accused of immorality, impurity, and licentiousness, these writers put gender first and subtly accepted the responsibility of upholding the morality of the black family and race. To counteract the stereotypical images of the “immoral” black women, Spencer and Grimke, as I discussed in chapter three, refrained from writing anything that would support accusations that were degrading to the black woman. They thus adopted many of the ideas and genres of the dominant class. A simple example can be seen in the speech Grimke gave to the Du Bois Circle (a group of club women interested in literature and art) in 1925. She spoke about “Women in the Home” arguing that a home was a proper sphere for women (Hull, Color, Sex 146). Grimke did this at a time when the number of black married women who worked outside the home was, on average, “five times more than any other racial or ethnic group” (quoted in Stavney 550).

Anne Stavney observes in “Mothers of Tomorrow” that “the realities of middle class and working class black women’s lives were in conflict with the major tenets of the ideology of true black womanhood” (550). This ideology, propagated by prominent black males like Alexander Crummell, Du Bois and women leaders like Mary Murray Washington, Fannie Barrier Williams, and Mrs E. A. Hickley, was aimed at restoring respect for the black woman by confining her to
the private sphere where she could devote her time to mothering the race. Unfortunately, they had overlooked the material realities that denied black women this opportunity. I cite this example to emphasize the point I made in chapter three that Spencer and Grimke were concerned with racial and gender issues that closely reflected the interest of the black bourgeoisie.

During the renaissance years Spencer and Grimke had already passed their creative peak. Spencer continued writing poetry, and although she insisted that she wrote basically for her own enjoyment, she went further than what she claimed. The subjects of her poetry range from religion to love, nature and death. She also wrote two powerful protest poems "The Sevignes," and "White Things." Grimke wrote poetry, short stories and one play. Lynching is the dominant theme in her short stories and play. She reserved her poetry to issues that were very personal to her and her immediate family.

I contend that the absence of class consciousness and folk culture in Spencer’s and Grimke’s poetics does not diminish their contributions to the Harlem Renaissance. Although they certainly form a contrast to the younger women artists of the period, they were equally concerned with racial and gender issues. As Gayl Jones asserts, "literary generations differ in their approach, though each generation
and individual within it are in concert regarding their interest in problems of African American identity and self definition in the New world" (2-3).

Unlike Spencer and Grimke, Mercedes Gilbert's and Marita Bonner's writings reflect the qualities commonly designated as characteristic of the renaissance. Gilbert and Bonner added a class dimension to their writings. They realized that none of the old forms would serve their purposes, they thus created new styles distinctly their own. This shift occurred because of a new political climate that was different from that of the earlier generation. Significant shifts in the political climate caused by post-World War I grievances, increased lynching, thus systematic black disenfranchisement and unemployment had to be addressed in a different style.

The writings of Gilbert and Bonner reflect this shift. Gilbert's poetry, comedy, drama and novel, like that of most young writers, increased the use of African American vernacular and folk motifs. Her narrative folk poems celebrate African American culture, history and language. Jones states that "the voices of the less powerful group, 'the other,' always must free themselves from the frame of more powerful group, in texts of self-discovery, authority, and wholeness" (192). This is precisely what Gilbert did in her writings; she gave her work a "liberated voice."
Race was as important to Gilbert as gender. She was very race-conscious, not only in her writing but also in the services she offered to her community. Most of her plays were performed in black neighborhood theaters and black colleges (Dietzel xviii). Gilbert took the opportunity to honor the legacy of the folk in *Aunt Sara's Wooden God*, the only novel she published. In the novel she celebrates “the life-sustaining energy of African American folk culture,” defining the strength of the black community held together by common social rituals, institutions and cultural practices (Dietzel xxxii).

As an active participant in the New Negro movement, Gilbert offered her expertise in literature and art for the benefit of her people. She was convinced that, since art and literature were being used to misrepresent the images of African Americans the same tools could be used to correct the misrepresentations. By confining most of her writing to celebrating the culture of black folks, Gilbert embraced the cultural poise of those who find beauty in themselves.

Class is also important in Gilbert’s work, but not in the Marxist model of a class struggle that attempts to dismantle an economic system based on exploitation. Rather, in *Aunt Sara's Wooden God*, she acknowledges the difference in class among black Americans that makes racism harder for the poor and uneducated.
Marita Bonner’s interest in black folks was confined to the urban poor. As a writer she had a class consciousness and revolutionary spirit that had never been expressed by a black woman writer before. Elizabeth Brown Guillory says Bonner’s preoccupation with Chicago stories dealing with class and color demarcations, poverty and poor housing may have influenced Richard Wright (36).

Most of Bonner’s short stories were published in _The Crisis_ and _Opportunity_ magazines only. This meant that her works were mostly available to the black population. This together with the failure of class politics can explain why recognition for Bonner’s work came late compared to other women writers.

Since the publication of _Frye Street and Environ_, the _Collected Works of Marita Bonner_ there has been more interest in Bonner’s works. Recently, scholars and literary critics have come to appreciate and discuss her work. Allison Berg and Merideth Taylor claim that, given the chance, _The Purple Flower_ offers students a chance of interpreting and enacting the play both as text and as theater, thus “making possible a self conscious performance of textual meaning” (472).

Bonner is mostly remembered for her essay “On Being Young, a Woman and Colored.” This is fine but continuing to see Bonner solely as a black feminist or womanist reduces
her status to one dimension, confining her concerns to gender. She was equally concerned with race and class.

The Harlem Renaissance or the New Negro movement was indeed an important period in African American literature. Despite being marginalized, African American women artists wrote essays, novels, short stories, plays and poetry contemplating the racism, sexism, and classism confronting blacks in the United States.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Lillian Temu Osaki was born in Tanzania, East Africa. She received her master's degree from the University of Dar es Salaam in 1987. Osaki is an academic member of staff in the Literature Department at the University of Dar es Salaam. She teaches courses in African, African American and Caribbean Literature. Her research interest includes the Harlem Renaissance, Black Women Writers of the Diaspora and the question of Culture and Gender in Literature. She is happily married to Dr. Kalafunja Osaki. They have three children, Haika, Victoria and Ndewina.
I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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