

**I BEG YOUR PARDON, PLEASE PART THESE PAGES:  
WHY THE BLACK MAGAZINE NEEDED HARLEM'S  
LITERARY SCENE**

---

A THESIS PRESENTED TO THE HAVERFORD COLLEGE FACULTY OF  
THE HISTORY DEPARTMENT

---

IN FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE BACHELORS OF  
ARTS DEGREE IN HISTORY

---

**MATTHEW LUTHER RIDLEY '19**  
**HAVERFORD COLLEGE HISTORY DEPARTMENT SENIOR THESIS**  
**SUBMITTED TO PROFESSORS ANDREW FRIEDMAN AND**  
**ALEXANDER KITROEFF**

**APRIL 26, 2019**

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	2
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	3
SECTION I: “ONLY WE CAN TELL THE TALE” [INTRODUCTION].....	4
The Harlem Renaissance and “The New Negro”.....	4
The Black Press.....	8
Literary Contests & Dinner Networking Events.....	10
Why the Black Magazine Needed Harlem (Thesis).....	16
SECTION II: THE MANY FACES OF THE SAME BODY [POETRY].....	19
Prayer and Devotion.....	19
The Transformation of Struggle.....	25
The Passions Between Sleeping and Waking.....	31
Youth and Aging.....	35
SECTION III: CRYING OUT FOR A REVOLUTION [ONE-ACT PLAYS].....	42
SECTION IV: “YOU WILL CARE.” [FRAGMENTED SHORT STORIES].....	62
SECTION V: IT ALL COMES TOGETHER [THE PAGE].....	78
<i>The Crisis</i> Poems on the Page.....	78
<i>The Opportunity</i> Poems on the Page.....	84
<i>The Messenger</i> Poems on the Page.....	87
The Plays on the Page.....	92
The Stories on the Page.....	97
SECTION VI: CONCLUSION.....	105
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	108
Primary Sources.....	108
Secondary Sources.....	110

## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the role of African-American newspapers as conduits for African-American literature during the Harlem Renaissance. Since the 1827 debut of the *Freedom's Journal*, the black press has been a defender for black rights, upholding the race while opposing the prejudice and slavery that many African-Americans endured. This mission was important to achieve racial equality, as it influenced slave rebellions, protests, boycotts, and demonstrations. The aftermath of the Great War, along with worsening Southern conditions, represented another rebellion; one that led African-Americans to migrate upward in the 1920s. This change uprooted many southern black lives, encouraging a “rebirth” in the North, with new opportunities for success and kinship.

The modern perception of the Harlem Renaissance has been contested, especially considering the characters’ roles in supporting black rights while also “performing” under the white gaze for societal acceptance. The books of Shawn Christian Anthony and Anne Elizabeth Carroll serve as foundations with which to place the literature of the Harlem Renaissance within context as an important tool for developing the “new Negro reader,” and for combating racism by changing perceptions regarding African-Americans. Using *The Crisis* (NAACP), *The Opportunity* (National Urban League), and *The Messenger* as lenses, this thesis investigates the relationships between these magazines and the literature they include. Through literary analysis of the poems, one-act plays, and fragmented short stories, a connection is made between the authors behind these works and their integration within the Harlem Renaissance through the transmutation of emotional and social themes, external forms of discrimination, and internal conflicts within the black community that hinder the opportunity to form a collective identity.

The authors, backed by the editors of these magazines, bring these prospects and issues to life to create a sense of sympathy and empathy for readers to connect. The thesis then supplements this information with a close reading of these literary works in juxtaposition with the surrounding articles and advertisements in their issues, showing how these magazines used literature to engage the imagination of their readers and construct a new form of black identity; one away from slavery and prejudice, to one that emphasizes the race’s diversity, community, and interconnectedness that would be sufficient to build larger connections for black writers and as they continue the fight against prejudice.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For what could I do without my instincts,  
    god-fearing and ripe with maturation,  
bursting forth on this spring afternoon.

My family for the root, for I cannot remember who remembered;  
    my hands stained with ink, unable to stray  
from my most tender of roots. For what was ever possible

without Philadelphia Futures, showing me life beyond  
    the concrete. For Devaney, bringing me to my senses.  
For Saler, building the foundation. For Friedman

and Kitroeff, laying runways for me to fly. For the department  
    for which I built the highest tower. For the friends  
made along the way, who made me visible in the darkest times.

For those wanting to break borders, writing about your past  
    and future in a sea of unfamiliar faces; for you,  
who may encounter this thesis in a dark corner of the archive.

And lastly for Haverford College, for which this thesis  
    signals my resignation from the rain.

## SECTION I: “ONLY WE CAN TELL THE TALE” [INTRODUCTION]

### **The Harlem Renaissance and “The New Negro”**

The Harlem Renaissance was a product of the slavery and segregation that had affected America for the last two centuries, as well as World War I. Because segregation “was the law in much of the United States” and practiced everywhere else<sup>1</sup>, the fight for racial equality remained a struggle, even with the introduction of organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Urban League (which formed in 1909 and 1910 respectively) advocating for black rights. The war’s conclusion brought a renewed sense of optimism for African-Americans who fought in the war. Jim Europe’s presence as a jazz leader performing for multiple audiences with his band while commissioned in the New York Army National Guard brought African-American musicians and music to the mainstream, accessing domestic and international worlds and making black creativity known within the social atmosphere of the Great War and post-WWI period. Europe became a catalyst for others to make breakthroughs in their art, shifting consciousness in the same way that the migration of black people to the northern U.S., emphasized the need to improve one’s lifestyle conditions. Nearing the war’s end, the South lynched African-Americans in frightfully large numbers (3,000 between 1885 and 1918<sup>2</sup>), and in conjunction with lower wages for menial work and a lack of secondary schools in rural communities for black children, black migration to the North seemed inevitable with the region’s “promise of better wages, sanitary housing, public school education for their

---

<sup>1</sup> Cheryl A. Wall, *The Harlem Renaissance: A Very Short Introduction* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

children, and freedom from mob violence”<sup>3</sup> especially with the increase of labor needed for the war effort.

The migration represented a transmutation in the African-American consciousness, in which past forms of oppression had been diluted and made into positive experiences through culture and community. In his musings, philosopher Alain Locke specifically defined this migration as the “New Negro Movement,” particularly classifying Harlem as “the home of the Negro’s zionism”<sup>4</sup> based on a transition of the group’s social and racial consciousness that followed such a move. In his view, black people were becoming an “omen for democracy in America,” moving beyond “the Old Negro’s” tendencies to be objectified and presented as a cultural myth to having a more interactive presence within the 20th-century U.S., being able to view the lens of the white world with the lens of other worlds and being able to make their own choices. His book *The New Negro* compiled a series of poetry, essays, and illustrations within the decade, making a case for the transformed African-American who had attained a more refined sense of culture. Within this context, Harlem became a metropolis for the black elites and working classes, giving such groups the impetus to build a renewed sense of black identity and pride through their own merits and experiences. Harlem and the negro were both “in vogue,” as borrowed from the words of Langston Hughes’s short story, accumulating a number of star players in the scene that included musicians, writers, and other artists who ushered in a new era of rethinking and rebuilding the identity of African-Americans in America.

However, does the postmodern view of the Harlem Renaissance bear similar weight? It could be defined in modern context as a post-World War I period within American history,

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 4-5.

<sup>4</sup> Alain Locke. "Enter the New Negro." *Survey Graphic*, March 1925, 633.

“emerging from an America that had experienced vast changes in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.”<sup>5</sup> A more precise description would include the fact that it was an artistic, intellectual, and cultural “explosion” for the African-American community originating in Harlem, New York. Going even further, it was a period during which black people “redefined themselves and announced their entrance into modernity”<sup>6</sup> with a range of race-conscious intellectuals, artists, editors, and politicians who turned Harlem into a mecca for social and political involvement; the results of which were noticed by the rest of American society and, at times, even prompted them to interact with the African-American community more willingly. Alongside the positives exist more negative, or tempered connotations: Aderemi Bamikunle, for example, argues that a pattern of white criticism of black writing was influential in the period’s development<sup>7</sup>, while Nathan Huggins conceptualizes the African-American during this time as “the performer in a strange, almost macabre, act of black collusion in his own emasculation.”<sup>8</sup> Such views portray the Harlem Renaissance as less of a black movement and more of a “performance” for whites to accept the creative abilities of African-Americans. While the Harlem Renaissance’s own “actors” considered themselves to be at the foreground of a revolutionary movement in which they decided to be “the instruments of history-making and race-building,”<sup>9</sup> the modernist perspective is decidedly mixed in terms of the period’s application and its scale of impact, especially in comparison to the strides that the 1960s Civil Rights era made toward breaking down barriers for

---

<sup>5</sup> Robert L. Perry and Melvin T. Peters. "The African American Intellectual of the 1920s: Some Sociological Implications of the Harlem Renaissance." *Ethnic Studies Review* 19, no. 2 (Oct 31, 1996): 155, <https://ezproxy.haverford.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/215501942?accountid=11321>.

<sup>6</sup> Cheryl A. Wall, *The Harlem Renaissance: A Very Short Introduction* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 3.

<sup>7</sup> Aderemi Bamikunle. "The Harlem Renaissance and White Critical Tradition." *CLA Journal* 57, no. 2 (2013): 81-94. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44325853>.

<sup>8</sup> Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (Cary, NC: Oxford University Press, 2007), 245.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

racial equality. As such, the Harlem Renaissance is known more for its cultural impact within the black community than for bringing the community together in the face of prejudice and racism.

Despite this outlook, literature appears to have been a central cause for this cultural transformation as the “hope that the arts—especially literature—would contribute to the end of racism is an aspect of the Harlem Renaissance that has gotten a good deal of attention from scholars of the movement.”<sup>10</sup> Shawn Anthony Christian, an associate professor at Wheaton College, brings to light three specific changes that may have fueled the consideration of a “new Negro reader” during the Harlem Renaissance: literacy gains, a thriving press, and more tangibly recognized literature.<sup>11</sup> He argues that writers “signaled their literature’s potential to elicit racial pride and mirror African Americans’ changing place within the nation” across articles, columns, and book advertisements within popular periodicals.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, Anne Elizabeth Carroll raises an important topic regarding two of the largest magazines during this period, *The Crisis* and *The Opportunity*: “the main question debated in the two magazines is not so much whether the arts could contribute to changing ideas about African Americans but how they might do so most effectively.”<sup>13</sup> Consequently, this thesis seeks to reveal this potential of literature based on the mission of the black press to bring forth such racial pride, using the columns and articles of these newspapers in helping to signify a new readership that is aware of the African-American’s modernity toward forming communities. It does not necessarily concern itself with how the Harlem Renaissance has been imagined after its departure, but instead plays into the mindset that

---

<sup>10</sup> Anne Elizabeth Carroll, *Word, Image, and the New Negro* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005), 89.

<sup>11</sup> Shawn Anthony Christian, *The Harlem Renaissance and the Idea of a New Negro Reader* (Amherst and Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016), 3.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>13</sup> Anne Elizabeth Carroll, *Word, Image, and the New Negro* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005), 89.

these players truly believed that they were at the vanguard of a new realization, with the black press and its accompanying literature mediating this transformation.

## **The Black Press**

The thesis argues that the black newspaper played an essential role in the movement. Newspapers had served this role in progressive thinking on the part of African-Americans since the advent of the *Freedom's Journal*, the first African-American newspaper that formed in 1827 as a response to “defend free blacks”<sup>14</sup> with assertive arguments defending the existence of black people against racism and associated forms including lynching and discrimination. During the Great War, the editors wondered “why Americans were so much more concerned about atrocities far away than they were about lynchings right at home.”<sup>15</sup> The black newspaper historically focused on the premise that “the black press could fight for African Americans”<sup>16</sup> as both a defender for their existence and an attacker against racism. A collection of antebellum magazines that included *Rights of All*, the *Struggler*, the *Colored American*, and many others “had firmly planted the seeds of publishing in the minds of those who saw the potential of the printed word to unify and uplift the Negro.”<sup>17</sup>

This premise to unify and uplift African-Americans has been a central focal point to racial equality, through slave rebellions and protests, to boycotts and demonstrations. At a point where even existing in white spaces could be seen as revolutionary act, the Harlem Renaissance

---

<sup>14</sup> William G. Jordan, *Black Newspapers & America's War for Democracy* (Chapel Hill and London, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 1.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>17</sup> Armistead S. Pride and Clint C. Wilson, II, *A History of the Black Press* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1997), 45.

migration followed such a trend as African-Americans migrated as a form of silent protest over worsening conditions in the Southern U.S. While migration to the North offered black people opportunities to form relationships and communities with one another to be revolutionary in establishing their own narratives of black identity that was no longer tied to the oppression of the South, *The Crisis* (owned by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) and *The Opportunity* (owned by the National Urban League), documented this migration as a means to signify African-Americans breaking free from southern persecution to build new roots in the North. Although the organizations behind these magazines had difficult starts in presenting themselves as the vanguards for African-American rights, they rebounded during the Harlem Renaissance not only as conveyors of news and articles, but also of literature through their issues. While *The Crisis* and *The Opportunity* were originally publications from these funded organizations that sought to alleviate racial tensions through education, *The Messenger*, another prominent publication during the Harlem Renaissance, began as a small, socialist black newspaper that focused on the necessity of labor unions to protect black interests, actively criticizing war efforts and advocating for equality as a voice for the socially and economically oppressed. While the former two publications announced with intent their decision to engage with the arts and culture of the Harlem Renaissance through their mission statements and literary contests, *The Messenger* silently accommodated the arts and culture of the Harlem Renaissance as the literary scene emerged despite their initial insistence that politics and economics took precedence over art. Founded within the black community as staple sources for political news, economic op-eds, and sociological research, these three journals ultimately broadened their original specialties of black liberation to allow for the inclusion of black art and literature during

a period in which they were underrepresented to the American majority, giving them the advantage over other papers as a means to play pivotal roles in providing for and nurturing young black writers and their literature, and to also help reframe black identity as one that would champion culture. In short, these papers used and helped to facilitate the influx of black art and literature during the Harlem Renaissance to push their agendas for engaging and connecting African-Americans to the larger society, using their culture within these works to propel and encourage these readers to actively take part in the fight against racial prejudice and discrimination.

### **Literary Contests & Dinner Networking Events**

Why was literature a focal point for encouraging African-Americans to take active roles in their communities? Prior to 1920, the majority of literature that referenced black people was composed by whites, which was often “written in a tone of condescension.”<sup>18</sup> In his article for the *Survey Graphic*'s famous March 1925 issue, titled “Enter the New Negro,” Alain Locke once again touched upon this phenomenon, describing the “Old Negro” as a product of its time, being surrounded by white representation and attempting to emulate its society but instead being objectified and presented as a cultural myth.<sup>19</sup> America’s long-standing narrative of the black individual as an illiterate and dim-witted concept dominated the mainstream, in comparison to a handful of literary works by black people that achieved some conventional success. The bulk of African-American writing at that time (which, while numerous, was not at all mainstream) included autobiographical spiritual narratives and slave narratives. Both these forms of black and

---

<sup>18</sup> William Stanley Braithwaite, "The Negro in Literature," *The Crisis*, November 1924, 24.

<sup>19</sup> Alain Locke, "Enter the New Negro," *Survey Graphic*, March 1925, 631.

white literature combined made for a biased, one-sided perspective of the African-American that would have made many black people either unrepresented or misrepresented in American literature. However, the arrival of the 20th century, particularly the construction of literary communities within the Harlem Renaissance along with these magazines taking an interest in publishing black art and literature, allowed new opportunities for writers and artists of the black community to move beyond their limited surroundings to write their own stories that represented who they were, and have their voices heard within the larger context of the African-American community. This reality provided a grand opportunity for these magazines to reinvent their mission to fight racial prejudice by incorporating literature in their issues as a means to do so, as well as providing stimuli through factors such as literary contests and dinner networking events.

The editor-in-chiefs for *The Crisis* and *The Opportunity* during the Harlem Renaissance, W.E.B. Du Bois and Charles S. Johnson respectively, held grand ideas as to the importance of literature in both the black press and in the African-American community. Both saw the potential of literature as a means to bring forth African-American voices; the former hoped to use the propaganda of black expression as a means to showcase the power of the black community, while the latter used monetary incentives and networking opportunities to acquaint influential whites to black writers.<sup>20</sup> While Du Bois first contrived the idea of literary contests and Johnson contrived the first dinner networking event, the editors used both practices to develop a regular following for their respective magazines, bringing members of the community to not only literature, but the social and political articles surrounding them.

---

<sup>20</sup> Addell P. Austin "The "Opportunity" and "Crisis" Literary Contests, 1924-27." *CLA Journal* 32, no. 2 (1988): 245, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44322018>.

These literary contests and dinner networking events in particular derived from the desire to show more black art and literature to mainstream publications, especially to encourage the younger generation to become more involved in the fight for racial equality against prejudice through their work, while also building members of this generation to become future leaders and advocates for black rights. In order to provide incentives for young black artists to contribute to its journal, *The Opportunity* first announced its literary contest in August 1924, a year after the Civic Club dinner, a networking event that featured over 100 publishers, magazine editors, writers, and artists celebrating the emergence of new black talent, through a description that reads:

To stimulate creative expression among Negroes and to direct attention to the rich and unexploited sources of materials for literature in Negro life, Opportunity will offer prizes for short stories, poetry, plays, essays, and personal experience in the amount of FIVE HUNDRED DOLLARS.<sup>21</sup>

Here, the motivation behind the literary contest is to bring to the surface more literature by black authors, but the editor-in-chief Charles S. Johnson decided to supplement this information in a later edition with another editorial titled “On Writing About Negroes,” in which he provided his views on black authorship and literature. From his insistence that regarding black themes, that African-Americans, “knowing them best, should be the ones to do it,”<sup>22</sup> there is a clear desire present to make sure that black narratives are done authentically without any of the preconceived notions by whites in order to broaden black identity to accommodate more personalities of African-Americans, not merely the ones who fall under uneducated stereotypes. In comparison, both as a response and with a desire to produce its own literary contest *The Crisis* announced the

---

<sup>21</sup> Charles S. Johnson, "Opportunity Literary Contest," *The Opportunity*, August 1924, 228.

<sup>22</sup> Charles S. Johnson, “On Writing About Negroes,” *The Opportunity*, August 1925, 227-28.

Amy Spingarn Prizes in Literature and Art for its November 1924 issue. Named after the donations of Amy Spingarn, a woman whose husband, Joel Elias Spingarn, was a Jewish educator and civil rights activist who had an interest in black literature, this was *The Crisis*'s first literary contest aimed at providing opportunities to young black writers:

“We have today all too few writers, for the reason that there is small market for their ideas among whites, and their energies are being called to other and more lucrative ways of earning a living. Nevertheless, we have literary ability and the race needs it. A renaissance of American Negro literature is due; the material about us in the strange, heart-rendering race triangle is rich beyond dream and only we can tell the tale and sing the song from the heart.”<sup>23</sup>

*The Opportunity* was a direct influence of this decision, given that *The Crisis* acknowledges that they published the idea first without consulting them in advance:

Without either knowing the other's plans or intentions, both *The Crisis* and the magazine published by the Urban League, *Opportunity*, have offered a series of prizes. Mrs. Spingarn's offer was made to us in July, but *Opportunity* first gave publicity to its prize offer. In order, therefore, to give young authors every chance we have put the date of our competition well on in the spring so that there will be no unnecessary rivalry and all can have the full benefit of this great generosity and foresight on the part of friends.<sup>24</sup>

These contests were the result of discussions during networking events between both magazines in which they contrived ways to encourage black talent. Despite this rivalry and “betrayal,” Johnson did not believe the appropriation was a crime as long as it “promoted racial progress through the arts,”<sup>25</sup> especially as both literary contests co-existed as a chance to acknowledge black writers, and there were many who won prizes and opportunities from both contests, including Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and G. A. Stewart.<sup>26</sup> An interesting note is that *The*

---

<sup>23</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois. "To Encourage Negro Art." *The Crisis*, November 1924, 11.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), 97-98.

<sup>26</sup> Addell P. Austin "The “Opportunity” and “Crisis” Literary Contests, 1924-27." *CLA Journal* 32, no. 2 (1988): 241, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44322018>.

*Opportunity* had a more relaxed goal than *The Crisis*; W.E.B. Du Bois, the editor for *The Crisis* at the time, in a future editorial, states that "We want especially to stress the fact that while we believe in Negro art we do not want art for art's sake,"<sup>27</sup> specifically meaning that literature that could not be used to advance the educated qualities of African-Americans (in other words, standard works that had no emphasis on the race) was of no use to him, which is a clear indication for propagandistic leanings for future *Crisis* literary contests, where winning works exclusively focused on African-American self-identification. In this sense, the views of propaganda exist along a spectrum for all three magazines: with *The Messenger* at one far radical end, and *The Opportunity* at a slightly more liberal perspective (in the sense of not being as concerned with elements of propaganda) than *The Crisis*.

Whereas literary contests provided incentives, dinner networking events provided inspiration, both through meeting individuals with leverage in publishing and fellow writers. Referring back to the first event sponsored by *The Opportunity*, Carl Van Doren's "The Younger Generation of Negro Writers" speech captivated an audience of over 100 individuals. Doren begins by saying that he has "genuine faith in the future of imaginative writing among Negroes in the United States."<sup>28</sup> Given their oppressed background, they have the stories that can bring "a happy balance between rage and complacency."<sup>29</sup> Although he does not deny that "Negro writers must long continue to be propagandists,"<sup>30</sup> he also talks about the necessity of black writing to still be propaganda without being vulgar, as "the facts about Negroes in the United States are themselves propaganda – devastating and unanswerable."<sup>31</sup> In this context, propaganda is

---

<sup>27</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois. "Krigwa, 1926." *The Crisis*, January 1926, 115.

<sup>28</sup> Carl Van Doren, "The Younger Generation of Negro Writers," *The Opportunity*, May 1924, 144.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 145.

referred to as being able to highlight the culturally gifted qualities of the African-American race without being explicit about its description. Based on his previous views of black art and literature, this comment is something Du Bois would not have minded. Such talks provoked grand ideas about the nature of writing and the African-American writer, which were documented well in editorials. In its corresponding article for the first *Opportunity* dinner awards, the *New York-Herald Tribune* gave an impression that its representation was:

“...only a somewhat more conclusive indication of a phenomenon of which there have been many symptoms - of the fact that the American Negro is finding his artistic voice and that we are on the edge, if not already in the midst, of what might not improperly be called a Negro renaissance. . . . These young people - and youth was another striking thing about this gathering - were not trying to imitate the white man nor repeating the professional white story-teller's dreary stencils of the "darkey.”<sup>32</sup>

These dinners often included presentations by the winning artists of the awards and plays, also giving them free membership to the *Crisis* Guild of Writers and Artists (KRIGWA), through which Du Bois claimed that each winner would receive a letter for advice on his or her work.<sup>33</sup> Based on the idea that black writers should be recognized for their work, these events were essential tools for these magazines to scout black talent, and introduce them to publishers and other writers, hoping that they would foster connections and develop into leaders for black rights. The focus around both of these events seems to have fostered a community meaning of no longer having to adhere to the “white man’s standards” in literature, which, prior to 1920, focused the black community within tropes of servitude and ignorance that presented it as a dimwitted race with little hope for prospects. The new “black standard” would have African-American writers

---

<sup>32</sup> A Negro Renaissance," *New York Herald-Tribune*, May 7, 1925.

<sup>33</sup> Addell P. Austin "The “Opportunity” and “Crisis” Literary Contests, 1924-27." *CLA Journal* 32, no. 2 (1988): 241, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44322018>.

who took pride in their race, expressing the diversity and qualities of being black within their work in juxtaposition with news, history, and events that pertained to larger society. With monetary incentives and recognition, there was also a desire to keep tabs on the winners, to promote their growth within the Harlem Renaissance through different means (such as joining the KRIGWA) and by providing access to publishers and other authors in New York who can aid in their successes and abilities to reach larger audiences, as the awards dinner “was an important way for black writers to make contacts with established writers, editors, and publishers.”<sup>34</sup>

### **Why the Black Magazine Needed Harlem (Thesis)**

Because of the mass migration to the North and Harlem due to war efforts and better perceived opportunities, these newspapers turned in the same direction to take advantage of the social and intellectual growth that followed. They showcased for African-Americans their ability to form their own communities within a city that provided the necessary economical, social, and geographical resources to establish them. The impact of African-American culture on this process, in comparison to its politics and social reforms, made art, music, and literature stand out in high regard to both black and white communities. Although most art forms were divided as to whether to express pressing issues to the community, creative writing provided a convenient medium, being able to maintain literary qualities while still containing elements of “propaganda” that can still be relevant to political and social reform. This would be in contrast to traditional news and article writing, that would focus on current events but not have as large an impact, because forms of culture captivated the imaginations of Harlem residents in ways that other

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 246.

forms of writing could not. The act of imagination was important at this moment as it stemmed from the optimism of the times; the visibility of African-Americans during and after the war, along with the movement to the north opened opportunities for African-Americans to explore the world, to be able to create communities and think beyond what was capable for them in the century prior. The dreams of those staking a new life in Harlem were reciprocated by works that sought to express and replicate these dreams, ultimately drawing residents into larger readerships for these magazines as soon as the volume of literature increased. Literature accessed this reservoir of confidence; the newspapers needed literature in order to connect to the masses and their determined attitudes of the era, developing their readership and connections that would influence their political and social base, in addition to literary. As such, *The Crisis* became known for its literary impact despite being a political and news-based magazine, *The Opportunity*'s readership increased to 11,000 readers by 1928, during Charles. S. Johnson's time as editor<sup>35</sup>, and *The Messenger* increased its amount of literature as the time passed. Poetry, plays, and short stories used specific techniques to convey these magazines' missions of combating racial prejudice in novel ways, through establishing black identity in literature, through the use of distinct poetic themes that seek ways to transmute struggle, the relation of plays to identity and politics, and the appeals from discriminated victims made to white audiences through fragmented story structures. Furthermore, the placements of these literary works within the magazines also represented commentary, based on their neighboring social/political articles and advertisements that gave readers insight into U.S. activist efforts, international news, and colleges and technical schools. As such, the use of literature in

---

<sup>35</sup> N. W. Ayer & Son's American Newspaper Annual and Directory. Library of Congress, n.d. 29 Feb. 2012. N. W. Ayer & Son's Directory of Newspapers and Periodicals.

newspapers also linked them to community and political action through these juxtapositions. Through the combination of these means, this thesis argues, creative writing in *The Crisis*, *The Opportunity*, and *The Messenger* acted as conduits for the Harlem Renaissance by using literature to present topics pressing to the African-American community, creating awareness of issues related to colorism, prejudice, and racial discrimination while also encouraging them to be addressed in activist missions of establishing black identity and fighting racial prejudice in the public sphere.

## **SECTION II: THE MANY FACES OF THE SAME BODY [POETRY]**

For *The Crisis*, *The Opportunity*, and *The Messenger*, a common goal was to clarify and define black identity in the face of white prejudice and violence. Despite their various backgrounds and initial interests in using their power to educate African-Americans through news, economic and political information, they ultimately decided in their own ways to uncover black literature as one such avenue in which African-American culture could be reclaimed for the purpose of promoting equality, or black excellence in the face of opposition. While the inclusions of literary works in the 1920s were quite numerous, there were specific themes across all three magazines that provide a guideline of the thought-provoking work they were seeking for inclusion within their publications, and to illustrate the forms in which intentional literature, with both the author's intention and the publication's planning, would be able to speak to the masses to usher in a new era of redefining black identity.

### **Prayer and Devotion**

One poetic theme that shows its prominence within these publications includes prayer and devotion, primarily used as a tool to either come into contact with God or a higher power and address one's concerns, or to reaffirm one's faith in the face of conflict. Difficulty was nothing new to Joseph Seamon Cotter, Sr., a self-educated poet and playwright who was born at the start of the Civil War. Growing up in Louisville, Kentucky as part of a mixed family, he was raised in poverty and dropped out of school in the third grade to help provide for them; he had no formal education until he was 22, earning a high school diploma and teaching credentials after years of working manual labor. Eventually, he became the founder and principal of Samuel

Coleridge Taylor High School (1911-1942), elected to the Louisville Board of Education, and established storytelling contests within the town's public libraries.<sup>36</sup> By the time his poem "A Babe Is A Babe" was published in the December 1925 issue of *The Opportunity*, Cotter Sr. was 64, a man who had accomplished much in his lifetime as a black educator, including being known as "Kentucky's first Negro poet with real creative ability."<sup>37</sup> His poem's substance reflects this ability, as it is structured as an inquiry made to God, questioning the state of black people in the South, comparing the plight of baby Jesus to the plight of a black baby to show the differences. Cotter, Sr. starts the first stanza by retelling Jesus's origin story to God, using the latter's ability to "see all" as a point to confirm that He saw "The little Christ Jesus / In the arms of Mary / On the back of an ass, / Led by Joseph into the Land of the Blacks / That its life might be saved."<sup>38</sup> Cotter, Sr. then flips this scenario, using the plight of a black baby in the South facing a similar situation in the next stanza:

"Crying all alone,  
Because its father's dead body  
Is a part of yon charred tree;  
Crying alone,  
Because its mother is out in the swamps  
Calling—"Husband, husband."<sup>39</sup>

This stanza directly presents the problem Cotter, Sr. envisions: how can one as "omniscient" as God be so willing to have Jesus protected by African-Americans, but not provide the same support for a black child? After all, Cotter Sr. repeats the title at the end of the poem, "A babe is

---

<sup>36</sup> Anthony D. Hill and Douglas Q. Barnett, *Historical Dictionary of African American Theater* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2009), 119.

<sup>37</sup> William Smith Ward, *A Literary History of Kentucky* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1988), 99-100.

<sup>38</sup> Joseph S. Cotter, Sr., "A Babe Is A Babe." *The Opportunity*, December 1925, 357.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

a babe.”<sup>40</sup> He essentially comes across as bitter, criticizing God for letting scenarios like this happen while He “saw” what happened, but neither hearing nor caring. The poem responds vividly; a woman’s frantic search being answered with fire, and constant cries echoing throughout the poem makes for grand imagery that responds by showing the damage through the scene, while not outwardly telling what had occurred. In short, this poem is a direct confrontation to God about his perceived hypocrisy in helping one child but not others, signaling a wavering faith in both God and the religion which constructs him.

While Cotter, Sr.’s knowledge of God and religion clearly came from his Southern upbringing and education, Countee Porter Cullen was the son of Reverend Frederick Asbury Cullen. His father was also the pastor of Salem Methodist Episcopal Church, considered to be “a pillar of the community.”<sup>41</sup> Considered “Harlem’s poet prodigy,”<sup>42</sup> Cullen was one of few writers who participated in and won awards from both *The Crisis* and *The Opportunity* literary contests, making him a literary prodigy with a steady connection of friends and influences, despite other facets of his life becoming unclear to the public (his homosexuality, confusion regarding parental lineage, and a “double life” regarding the moods in his poetry). His poem, “Pagan Prayer,” also questions religion, but in a more general sense: “Not for myself I make this prayer, / But for this race of mine / That stretches forth from shadowed places / Dark hands for bread and wine.”<sup>43</sup> Published in the March 1924 issue of *The Messenger*, this poem is clearly biblical in the context that it mentions bread and wine, which are often food sources for the idea of communion among Christian themes. However, the people in Cullen’s poem are struggling; needing hearths to keep

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), 75.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Countee P. Cullen, “A Pagan’s Prayer.” *The Messenger*, March 1924, 75.

them warm and complaining about their hands in life. The speaker himself cannot keep still, his own faith “fallowing”<sup>44</sup> while others of his kind remain humble and believe, which he finds credulous. The speaker, like the one in Cotter, Sr.’s poems, is ready to go straight for “Our Father, God; our Brother Christ”<sup>45</sup>: he views their kinship as appearing insignificant, and asks if he and his race are “bastard kin / That to our complaints your ears are closed...”<sup>46</sup> At this point, the speaker identifies his heart as “pagan mad,” which also throws back to the title. In the last stanza, he asks: “Retrieve my race again; / So shall you compass this black sheep, / This pagan heart. Amen.”<sup>47</sup> The use of praying language, particularly the finality of the word “amen,” the capitalization of religious figures, and the confession of needing to see a change in order to believe again, creates an ironic tone; one that appears humble, but is also snappy and demanding truth. This poem becomes an intense version that seeks either validation or a reason to pray to God, compared to Cotter, Sr. who is merely asking God why he is not helping the race that has helped him long ago. Like Cotter, Sr.’s use of his Southern upbringing and education, Cullen uses his background as a pastor’s son to fuel the poem, which turns cynical based on the general brooding nature of his works, making a more directed response toward religion using logical questioning.

While the previous two poems seek to question and criticize God and Christianity about the situations put upon them and the entirety of the African-American race, a third poem decides to stay the course, believing that peace will ultimately come within the end. Its author, Leslie Pinckney Hill, was born in Lynchburg, Virginia. Despite being the son of a former slave, he

---

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

attended primary school before relocating to East Orange, New Jersey for high school. His grades allowed him to skip junior year, and he was accepted to Harvard University in 1899. After graduating with honors, he spent another year securing a master's degree in education,<sup>48</sup> which he then used for teaching at the Tuskegee Institute (1903-1907) before becoming president at the Manassas Industrial Institute (1907-1913) and then at the Cheyney Institute for Colored Youth.<sup>49</sup> At the time of the poem's publication in *The Opportunity* in April 1923, he would have still headed Cheyney, using his role as an educator to influence his literary works.

The poem, "Voyaging," is a nod toward Hill's *The Wings of Oppression*, (1921), a collection of poems in which he desires "to exhibit something of this indestructible spiritual quality of my race"<sup>50</sup> after noting the advancements black people have made despite the oppression placed upon them. "Voyaging" feels a much more standard poem in comparison to the previous two; the majority of its form represents a trochaic octameter, having eight "feet," or syllables, per line. Furthermore, its relatively even spacing, proper AABB rhyme scheme, and composure on the page makes every word feel planned and carefully etched, alluding to the order that believing in God may entail. The first stanza already intends to reassure the reader: "However hard the winds may blow, / However strong the tides may flow, / Though lightning flash and thunders peal, / We trust the Master at the wheel."<sup>51</sup> The fact that "Master" is capitalized surely refers to God, or at the very least, a higher power that is deemed to control fate. In addition, the usage of "we" also connects back to the concept of community in the same

---

<sup>48</sup> Werner Sollors, Caldwell Titcomb, and Thomas A. Underwood, *Blacks at Harvard: A Documentary History of African-American Experience at Harvard and Radcliffe* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1993), 123-128.

<sup>49</sup> Patsy B. Perry, *Southern Writers: A New Biographical Dictionary*, ed. Joseph M. Flora and Amber Vogel (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 200.

<sup>50</sup> Leslie Pinckney Hill, *The Wings of Oppression* (Boston, MA: Alpine Press, 1921), Foreword.

<sup>51</sup> Leslie Pinckney Hill. "Voyaging". *The Opportunity*, April 1923, 23.

way that the previous two poems do, but this in favor of faith and hope rather than in opposition. Storms become the author's favorite metaphor, as he describes with certainty how the Master will keep the "ship" course "forward to the distant shore."<sup>52</sup> He does sympathize with the "Poor children with the human race,"<sup>53</sup> considering the difficulties they have to go through, represented by "angry seas."<sup>54</sup> Nonetheless, Hill believes that "Faith in the Master, and mankind / Some day beyond the flood will find, / When dark and wind and peril cease, / The shining harbor shores of peace."<sup>55</sup> Here, faith is the underlying factor behind peace; unlike Cotter Sr. or Cullen, Hill does not ask how peace will be attained, or through what means; he simply believes that it will happen, which can be motivating for moving forward. While the speakers of the previous two poems would find this poem to be surface-level and naive, Hill firmly and without hesitation grounds himself to his faith to God, using the steady movement and flow of order to maintain positivity despite the suffering and trauma that his race confronts, which would have been difficult for many African-Americans in these situations during the era's racism and prejudice.

In sum, faith becomes a tool to connect African-American voices and their concerns about their existence in the context of racism, prejudice, and general hardship through God and the religious language used to speak to a higher power. The use of prayer and certain diction (such as the "O" and capitalization of saints) provide a one-sided dialogue to Christianity that enables the authors to feel empowered in stating the plights and hopes of their race, making faith a central part of Harlem Renaissance poetry and an opportunity to use religion to plead for the equality of African-Americans through case examples and the acknowledgment of suffering.

---

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

## The Transformation of Struggle

Another theme that is prevalent across Harlem Renaissance works within these magazines includes the transformation of struggle, which captures the ways in which black suffering can be viewed as a concept greater than itself in order to serve some larger purpose.

An opportunity to see this theme shine occurs in Frank Horne's poem that debuted in the December 1925 issue of *The Opportunity*, "On Seeing Two Brown Boys in a Catholic Church." Although Horne ultimately became more known for his work as a public official improving African-American housing, Horne did play "a significant, if minor" part of the Harlem Renaissance.<sup>56</sup> A Brooklyn native, Horne was born in 1899 to middle--class parents who were part of the NAACP. He graduated from the City College of New York in 1921 and in 1923, he obtained his doctor of optometry degree from the Northern Illinois College of Ophthalmology and Otology, coming back to New York soon after to practice as an eye doctor in Harlem.<sup>57</sup> A prodigy in several fields at a young age, it is no surprise that he also played a role in the Harlem Renaissance, also being part of the younger generation who took part in the literary contests.

Although "On Seeing Two Brown Boys in a Catholic Church" technically fits the theme of prayer and devotion as well, Horne does not present the poem toward God or another omnipresent figure; he simply envisions the two children as receptacles for Christ, as evidenced in the starting stanza, which sets the tone for the theme by juxtaposing the children's eyes with those of Christ: "'Tis fitting that you be here, / Little brown boys / With Christ-like eyes / And curling hair."<sup>58</sup> Horne then uses biblical references as a method to pursue this comparison

---

<sup>56</sup> Henry Louis Gates and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Harlem Renaissance Lives: From the African American National Biography* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009), 272.

<sup>57</sup> Jimmy Fenison, "Frank Smith Horne (1899-1974) • BlackPast," BlackPast, January 30, 2019, , accessed March 31, 2019, <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/horne-frank-smith-1899-1974/>.

<sup>58</sup> Frank Horne. "On Seeing Two Brown Boys in a Catholic Church." *The Opportunity*, December 1925, 357.

between the children and Christ, particularly stating important events within Jesus's life, of how "Judas' kiss shall burn your cheek"<sup>59</sup> and "You, too, will suffer under Pontius Pilate."<sup>60</sup> To Jesus, these two individuals were those who betrayed and advocated for his crucifixion respectively. Because of the period's social context, it is clear that Horne imagines that the two boys will go with their fair share of suffering as Jesus did, especially as they are "related" through the eyes. This stream of pain and suffering on the part of racial prejudice and violence will ultimately lead to a reward, as Horne imagines that after such tribulations the boys will be stronger, "And in this you will exceed God / For on this earth / You shall know Hell—."<sup>61</sup> The last stanza is a near replica of the first, but rearranged from a stanza of amusement to one of clear conviction: "O little brown boys / With Christ-like eyes / And curling hair / It is fitting that you be here."<sup>62</sup> This change that transforms and solidifies Horne's belief in these two as reincarnations of Christ is further presented in the idea of Christian transformation, through which Horne describes the potential troubles and suffering that these children may face in their futures regarding racism and prejudice as a prerequisite to being God-like in their knowledge of the world; he believes that their struggles will transform into strengths, and being contained in church provides a necessary foundation on which to build those strengths for their futures as African-American men.

Another representation of this theme comes from Helene Johnson's "Fiat Lux" (a Latin translation for "Let there be light"). The use of the Hebrew language and mention of light in of themselves reference something biblical, similar to the methods that Horne reveals in his aforementioned poem. Like Horne, Johnson was one of the lesser known poets of the period but

---

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

still highly esteemed, publishing poems that cover love, race, nature, and Harlem in structured and free verse.<sup>63</sup> Johnson was born in Boston, Massachusetts in 1906. Despite being the only child of Southern parents whose marriage failed shortly after, she had a productive childhood with an extended family, including her cousin Dorothy West, a Harlem Renaissance novelist and short story writer whose most prominent works are based on the life of an upper-class black family. Johnson eventually attended Boston University for writing, making headway in her writing with Boston publications and newspapers. This opened the door for her in New York City, where she and West quickly became acquainted with the Harlem scene, attending *The Opportunity* awards dinner at only 19 years old<sup>64</sup> and gaining publications with other magazines.

“Fiat Lux” is one such poem published following the awards, which was taken in by *The Messenger* in its July 1926 issue, and seems to replicate the idea of finding the good in bad situations, using transmutation as a method to make the best out of a punishment. In Johnson’s piece, a woman finds a flower blooming within the prison yard that she is contained within and admires it, only for it to be “wrestled”<sup>65</sup> from her hand by a guard who then proceeds to unintentionally whip her to death as a result of the harsh punishment she receives. The true appearance of the theme lies during the whipping, in which the woman undergoes a process of transformation from her physical body to a spiritual one that cannot feel pain. The following stanza encapsulates the process:

“Her pale palmed hands grasped the thin air in quest  
Until, like two antalgic words, they fell...  
On a cross of bigotry she was crucified  
Because she was not white. And like her Father

---

<sup>63</sup> Leantin L. Bracks and Jessie Carney Smith, *Black Women of the Harlem Renaissance Era* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 136.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Helene Johnson. “Fiat Lux.” *The Messenger*, July 1926, 199.

On the holyhood, whispered “Forgive.”  
And in her eyes there shone a Candlemas light.”<sup>66</sup>

Like Horne, Johnson references biblical themes here, including God and Candlemas, a Christian Holy Day that commemorates the presentation of Jesus at the Temple and the Virgin Mary’s purification. Although not referring to specific individuals as Horne does, Johnson’s character goes through a process of transformation. Losing consciousness from the beating, she may have been beginning to hallucinate a sense of God within the air, who is comforting and telling her to “forgive”<sup>67</sup> as her soul begins to leave the body. The last line’s reference to Candlemas can also point to the character’s purification of having done nothing wrong, leaving the world without sin. In this way, the woman is transforming the struggle of violence both voluntarily and involuntarily; the involuntary transmutation of being whipped to death forces her into a realm of suffering through which she retreats into the voluntary transmutation of seeing light as a source of strength and safety. In another sense, her death by the prison guard’s whip at the end of the poem signals another kind of transforming the struggle of racism and prejudice into something that is more “wholesome”; the absence of pain by literally and permanently leaving the body, keeping the “purity” intact while leaving the battered remains behind.

At a glance, Jean Toomer’s “Song of the Son” also appears to extend the concept of death as a way to transform struggle; but instead of using death as a finality for the soul as Johnson demonstrates, Toomer uses death to transmute souls into other objects. Although also considered to be part of the Harlem Renaissance, Jean Toomer’s work was considered to be a catalyst instead; his debut novel, *Cane*, which features a series of vignettes on the African-American experience, was met with wide acclaim within the black community in 1923. Up until *Cane*, he

---

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

had “flirted” with communism, worked as a ship fitter in New Jersey, sold cars in Chicago, taught physical education in Milwaukee, and then became interested in Greenwich Village, where his friendships with prominent white literary figures such as Waldo Frank and Hart Crane opened the doors to many newspapers and publications.<sup>68</sup> As such, “Song of the Son” helps to illustrate some of his musings on race and the South in the months leading up to *Cane*.

The poem’s first couplet combines a soul into the fabric of music and nature: “Pour O Pour that parting soul in song, / O Pour it in the sawdust glow of night”<sup>69</sup> describes such a soul as a liquid that combines both music and night, both of which are then carried along by the valley. Emphasis is made for each the song and sky mentioned, as twice one reads the line: “And let the valley carry along in the valley.”<sup>70</sup> The second stanza is just as obsessive; the first and the last couplet are near repetitions of each other, primarily to set forth the notion of returning to the earth as one’s true home:

“O land and soil, red soil and sweet-gum tree,  
So scant of grass, so profligate of pines,  
Now just before the sun’s epoch declines  
Thy son, in time, I have returned to thee.  
Thy son, I have in time returned to thee.”<sup>71</sup>

The red soil and sweet-gum tree are general characteristics of the American South, fitting from Toomer’s biographical experience, while also being one such location for which the souls of slavery are being transmuted, given the area’s history of black lynching and racial violence. Also present is the alternating usage of “sun” and “son”; the use of the last couplet implies a

---

<sup>68</sup> David Levering Lewis, ed., *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1994), 763-764.

<sup>69</sup> Jean Toomer. “Song of the Son.” *The Crisis*, April 1922, 261.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

relationship between the slaves and the sun, and the action of having “returned to thee” signifies a sense of returning, to a state of regression into nature. The sun that is in the process of setting on a “song-lit race of slaves” but not yet complete, urges the souls to be “caught” (in this sense, captured and remembered) before they are gone forever. The penultimate stanza then identifies Negro slaves as “dark purple ripened plums / Squeezed, and bursting in the pine-wood air / Passing before they stripped the old tree bare,”<sup>72</sup> which then focuses inward on the speaker as the recipient of such a plum, one of its seeds becoming “An everlasting song, a singing tree / Caroling softly souls of slavery.”<sup>73</sup> The relation to the theme present is the transmutation of black slaves and their sounds into fruit and trees, representing a return to nature while also retaining their identities through “song” that may also represent sound.

As such, the poem also bears some relevance to Horne’s consideration of the idea of the African-Americans as something larger than themselves, particularly how their physical struggles and suffering create a path for enlightenment or transcendence by transmuting into another object or ideology; while Horne positions the two boys to become bigger than God, Toomer imagines the souls of black slaves to transcend their bodies to become embedded within song and nature, expanding further on Johnson’s death method as a means to transcend the body to be free from pain. While Johnson’s case desires to remove pain entirely, Toomer’s decides to keep mementos in the trees, songs, and seeds that carry reminders of slavery. While distinctly different approaches, all three poems capitalize on the idea that the existence and struggles of the African-American are poised to become something greater and larger, which is a trope that black

---

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

newspapers especially wanted to compound on as a means to state a reason for facing racial prejudice.

### **The Passions Between Sleeping and Waking**

Another prevalent theme revolves around the passions exhibited between sleeping and waking, which focuses on the interplay and conflicts between dreams and reality as means to embrace life and its perceived difficulties. One poem of this theme comes once again from Countee Cullen, whose “I Have a Rendezvous with Life” is one of the more well-known poems of the Harlem Renaissance, especially as it was one of Cullen’s earliest entries into the world (a smaller version, titled “Life’s Rendezvous,” had been published in his high school magazine in 1921).<sup>74</sup> Included in the January 1924 issue of *The Crisis*, the title is also the poem’s first line, keeping the premise that the reader chooses to embrace life and its difficulties “Lest Death should meet and claim me ere / I keep Life’s rendezvous.”<sup>75</sup> The primary method in which this idea is conveyed is through the use of contractions between youth and old age, explicit in the middling lines “In days I hope will come, / Ere youth has sped, and strength of mind, / Ere voices sweet grow dumb.”<sup>76</sup> However, the theme between sleep and wake shows itself apparent afterward as the speaker comments: “Sure some would cry it’s better far / To crown their days with sleep / Then face the road, the wind and rain, / To heed the calling deep.”<sup>77</sup> Here, the concept of sleep can have many meanings: it can mean literal sleep that prevents oneself from attending events, an unawareness to ongoing events, an avoidance of life’s struggles, or even

---

<sup>74</sup> David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), 75.

<sup>75</sup> Countee Cullen. “I Have a Rendezvous with Life.” *The Crisis*, January 1924, 5.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

death. Nonetheless, the mention of the “crown” implies whichever this unconscious state may entail, it takes precedence to engaging life as a whole as mentioned by the travel and weather conditions. This is the portion that Cullen acknowledges, stating that while he also shares those sentiments (“Though wet nor blow nor space I fear, / Yet fear I deeply, too”<sup>78</sup>), he decides to continue forward with life’s events before death can stop him. In this context, waking is referred to the state of being conscious and aware of realities, which is a common concept for African-Americans who struggle to deal with the consequences of prejudice and violence toward them. Thus, while sleeping may be an idea that many African-Americans share regarding their conflict, there are, nonetheless, people who have to stay awake in order to fight against the perceived white prejudice and stereotypes of the era.

Next, Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s “The Proletariat Speaks” shows another variation on the theme between sleeping and waking, this time capturing the differences and similarities between the speaker’s dreams and realities. Born in New Orleans, Louisiana in 1875, Dunbar-Nelson was the daughter of a merchant marine and seamstress, attending public schools before getting her teaching degree from Dillard University in 1892.<sup>79</sup> She taught in her hometown before moving to teaching positions in New York, where she met Paul Laurence Dunbar. They married for four years before divorce, and she spent the next decade in two marriages, writing and editing books while also being involved in activist efforts to battle racism and sexism, taking roles within prominent organizations. The same year that this poem was published in *The Crisis* magazine’s

---

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Leantin L. Bracks and Jessie Carney Smith, *Black Women of the Harlem Renaissance Era* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 68.

November 1929 issue, she became the first African-American woman to serve as a Republican state committee member in Delaware.<sup>80</sup>

Already from the beginning line, the speaker knows what she wants by stating “I love beautiful things,”<sup>81</sup> followed by an intense description of glamour, featuring flowers, marble basins, and tapestries. However, these descriptions are then followed by the reality of her situation, which feature less than ideal circumstances including “a dusty office, whose grimed windows / Look out in an alley of unbelievable squalor.”<sup>82</sup> The poem’s diagram alternates between stanzas highlighting the beauty of nature and furniture that the reader concocts, paralleled with stanzas that bare the speaker’s true surroundings, just as descriptive as the first set but in a less than endearing manner. The true highlight in correlation with the theme comes at the last stanza, which blends both sleep and waking:

“And so I sleep  
In a hot hall-room whose half opened window...  
Admits no air, only insects, and hot choking gasps,  
That make me writhe, un-like, in sackcloth sheets and lumps of straw.  
And then I rise  
To fight my way to a dubious tub...”<sup>83</sup>

This stanza blends both concepts together, and it proves that the reality of the speaker’s conditions are so powerful that they permeate the speaker’s dreams, causing her to suffer in sleep and wake in a virtually similar state. The speaker in Dunbar-Nelson’s poem has to endure difficulties regardless of whether she is in a state of sleep; her environment has played a large enough role that the previous passions in dreaming that she mentions in the poem no longer have

---

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 69-70.

<sup>81</sup> Alice Dunbar-Nelson, “The Proletariat Speaks.” *The Crisis*, November 1929, 378.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

an effect on her, and that she is forced to deal with her circumstances without having a thought to escape to.

Lastly, Thomas Millard Henry's "Dreams Are the Workman's Friends" provides a more positive spin to the idea of dreams and sleep in comparison to Cullen's and Dunbar-Nelson's poems, this time as a spur to action. Henry's first stanza captures this theme well:

"Dreams are the workman's friends. Their rapture can  
Awake his spirits better than old wines..."<sup>84</sup>

Taking into note the initial stanza, the rest of the poem continues on for three more stanzas on the impact of dreams with the title as the starting and ending line for each, particularly the ways in which the "rapture"<sup>85</sup> empowers the speaker through his work and duties while also keeping opposers at bay in confusion. The use of biblical tones through light and rapture are a prevalent method throughout the poem to extend the imagery of the impact of dreams, but the first stanza specifically attests to the statement of dreams being used to empower one's reality. Being from *The Messenger*, this poem's significance in the context of such a radical publication could give notice to the idea of the speaker being part of a worker's union, which would not be far from the truth considering that the activist Henry has written numerous poems for the publication between 1923 and 1925 and would have been interested in *The Messenger's* mission of promoting unions during the time as a way to protect the black working class from capitalism, which would have blended with the decade's piqued interest in socialism as another method to break from racism and prejudice. Nonetheless, Henry brings the complexity of dreams and waking to a fuller picture of how this theme was utilized during the Harlem Renaissance. In general, dreams are often viewed as a blissful state in which one can either find peace or motivation; it is the waking

---

<sup>84</sup> Thomas Millard Henry. "Dreams Are the Workman's Friends." *The Messenger*, January 1924, 26.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

after that defines the life of the African-American. As shown with these three poems, there are different methods to interpret dreams and sleep to accommodate one's goals with confronting racism and prejudice in their lives, but the reality of waking is inevitably met with struggle; one that can either be avoided or met head on (Cullen), one that is endured with little resistance (Dunbar-Nelson), or one that can be exceeded as long as one has a clear mind and focus (Henry). As such, this theme was prevalent for black newspapers and African-Americans of the period in continuing to find ways to be "awake" to combating racial prejudice and stereotyping, while also using their "dreams" of a world of racial equality as a strong means to propel those missions and goals into action.

### **Youth and Aging**

A final theme expressed within the poetry of these magazines is the idea of youth and aging, which seems to work toward bridging the gap between African-Americans of different generations. Gwendolyn Bennett may have been well aware of this gap despite her young age during the time of the Harlem Renaissance, considering her work as assistant editor for *The Opportunity*, along with her work with the Federal Writers' Project.<sup>86</sup> Born in Giddings, Texas, Bennett was the daughter of teachers, the husband of which was also an attorney. Their rocky relationship led to a move to Washington D.C., and to a divorce that favored the mother in custody, but led the father to evade both his former wife and the law by moving her from one city to another before settling in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania with his new wife.<sup>87</sup> Her father eventually passed his examinations to become an attorney while working as a janitor, and the

---

<sup>86</sup> Leantin L. Bracks and Jessie Carney Smith, *Black Women of the Harlem Renaissance Era* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 17.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

family moved to Brooklyn, New York. Her beginnings may have provided the impetus to become an artist and writer, considering that she became the first black member of her literary and drama societies, graduating just as the Harlem Renaissance was beginning to take shape. She graduated from the Pratt Institute in 1924, after leaving Columbia University due to hostility.<sup>88</sup> At this time, she was creating illustrations for magazines, and participating in *The Crisis* and *The Opportunity*'s contests, allowing her to present the poem "To Usward." In this piece, she compounds on the complexity of sound in order to express the diversity of African-American backgrounds:

"If any have a song to sing  
That's different from the rest,  
Oh let them sing  
Before the urgency of Youth's behest!"<sup>89</sup>

As the original focus of the poem uses ginger jars on a "Chinese shelf"<sup>90</sup> as a simile for looking inward and expressing one's self (also considering that these shelves are often separated into different sections and as such are smaller parts of one whole), the reader comes to realize that the selves expressed within these lines are numerous and attest to a variety of different experiences. As there exists an "urgency" (as the age of youth commands from "Youth's behest"<sup>91</sup>) to express oneself, this statement opens the path to a diverse amount of writing that black newspapers seek in upholding the complexity of African-American literature. The diversity and complexity of black identification and expression would unify old and young black writers through this poem, under the premise that they each have a story to tell that can uphold the race. Here, youth and age

---

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Gwendolyn Bennett. "To Usward." *The Crisis*, May 1924, 19.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

are commands of urgency to get one's voice out while there is still time. Compare that section of Bennett's poem to this one:

“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...”<sup>92</sup>

Here, the reader comes into contact with age: compared again to ginger jars, but this time covered with dust and more inclined to be reticent by “heritage.”<sup>93</sup> The aforementioned expressions of song seem to be a remedy for age, breaking “the seal of years”<sup>94</sup> and reviving emotions and passions. Thus, the theme of age is optimized by the unsealing of ginger jars used as a metaphor for African-Americans of different ages and backgrounds to speak more openly.

Born in Joplin, Missouri, Langston Hughes was considered to be the “poet laureate” of Harlem.<sup>95</sup> His parents separated from a young age, and he became estranged from his father, a successful expatriate businessman who moved to Mexico. Hughes's family had relative fame; his maternal grandfather was the abolitionist Charles Langston who fought with John Brown at Harper's Ferry, and whose half-brother was a U.S. congressman.<sup>96</sup> He moved around seven cities for elementary school and his “literary precociousness” won him election as class poet in elementary school and editor of the class yearbook at Cleveland's Central High School, where he graduated in 1919.<sup>97</sup> In 1921, Jessie Fauset published his first short story in the children's magazine *The Brownie's Book* and his poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” dedicated to Du

---

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> David Levering Lewis, ed., *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1994), 748-749.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 749.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

Bois, in *The Crisis*.<sup>98</sup> He then spent the next three years traveling to West Africa and Europe working odd jobs, before coming back to America in 1924 and being rediscovered as a “busboy poet.”<sup>99</sup>

The following poem published in the December 1924 issue of *The Crisis*, “Mother to Son,” represents the first stretch of many poems he submitted. In the poem, a woman gives advice to her son about life based on a general summary of her own experiences. “Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair”<sup>100</sup> serves as a refrain near the beginning and at the end of the poem, seeking to make concrete the notion that the woman’s life has been challenging from the start, which is simplified with the stair metaphor. In keeping with this image, the mother proceeds to state that life “had tacks in it, / And splinters, / And boards torn up, / And places with no carpet on the floor— / Bare.”<sup>101</sup> This extended imagery serves to highlight the tense periods that this woman may have experienced during her lifetime, but nonetheless, she says that, “But all the time / I’ve been a-climbin’ on, / And reachin’ landin’s, / And turnin’ corners, / And sometimes goin’ in the dark / Where there ain’t been no light.”<sup>102</sup> This set of lines show a particular kind of perseverance that she encourages her child to have, instructing “don’t you turn back.”<sup>103</sup> As with Bennett’s poem, the connections between young and old are in conversation; however, whereas Bennett views the old as something that can be remedied through song, Hughes places the old as a motivating factor, as a wealth of experiences from which the younger can learn. Much of this idea is replicated through the works of the editors of these magazines, who sought to build and

---

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Langston Hughes. “Mother to Son.” *The Crisis*, December 1924, 87.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

nurture a younger group of African-American artists and writers through their literary contests, dinner networking events, and guild initiatives.

Lastly, Charles Bertram Johnson's "Old Things" diversifies the theme's selection by portraying age in a gentler light, reflecting oldness with youth that illuminates the appreciation of the former. Born at Callao, Missouri in 1880 to a Kentuckian mother and Virginian father, Johnson became acquainted with "the art of writing" from his one-room school.<sup>104</sup> He also cites his mother as an influence in teaching him rhyme, particularly Dunbar. He followed the traditional teaching route, but also found himself as a preacher in half of those years. His preaching background seems to highlight his direction in "Old Things," as the first stanza immediately juxtaposes the young and old as if he is giving a personal speech: "I love old faces mellow wise, / That smile; their young-old laughing eyes / Undimmed, still view, in sheer pretense / Of youth, their own sweet innocence."<sup>105</sup> From this stanza, it is clear that the speaker sees the youth in the smiles of those aged, as they retain a particular "innocence" that is often associated with youth. The second stanza follows a similar style, this time using the hands trembling as a code to "Youth's wild impetuous duress,"<sup>106</sup> thereby strengthening the connection between youth and aging. It is the final stanza, however, that ties the connection up nicely: "Old things to me are dear and best: / Old faith—that after life is rest; / That somehow, from above our will, / God works His gracious marvels still."<sup>107</sup> Here, the speaker simply reasserts his love of old people and objects, and that even in old age and beyond, God is still working His "marvels" into old people and objects. It appears that oldness in this poem is revered in the same way that songs

---

<sup>104</sup> Robert Thomas Kerlin, *Negro Poets and Their Poems* (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers, 1923), 96.

<sup>105</sup> Charles Bertram Johnson. "Old Things." *The Crisis*, March 1923, 229.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

are in Bennett's poem; with potential for rejuvenation through the expression of a younger self. Compared to Hughes, oldness is also something to be admired through the experiences of having been youthful and facing challenges that have led to being old.

From the culmination of all twelve poems, some clear themes that come out of the Harlem Renaissance's poetry scene include God and biblical references, expressions of youth and aging, the passions between sleeping and being awake, and the transmutation of struggle. Transmutation in particular plays a large role within these works and in all the other themes, as these themes include smaller concepts that transmute African-American lives into elements of sound, time, and passion. These authors' backgrounds show clear influences as well; teachers, pastors, and award-winning poets grapple with questions concerning religion, time, passion, and conflict, revealing a complexity revolving the black identity that addresses the ways in which African-Americans experience their world. Furthermore, these poems from authors across the country gather to themes that are sent into Harlem, also making the case that regional identity is combined and transmuted into Harlem. Transmutation functions as a key factor to put these experiences into other themes that work as either a temporary distraction, a way to reconcile grief, or a way to keep motivation in the face of such grief or struggle. These themes are essential as to why these magazines incorporated literature; under the mission to capture the imagination of the readers, the themes become gateways to permeating the minds of African-Americans, connecting their racial struggles into one unifying medium with which to connect. Although each poem conducts different methods and devices to achieve these outcomes, the inclusion of these works within *The Crisis*, *The Messenger*, and *The Opportunity* signal the kind of African-American expressionism and intellectual work these newspapers were seeking for their

purposes of enlightening American society by refuting racial prejudice and stereotypes in favor of creating and presenting more nuanced narratives of African-Americans by African-Americans that focus on dealing with how they experience and transmutate the race and identity-based struggles and hardships created by racism and prejudice.

### **SECTION III: CRYING OUT FOR A REVOLUTION [ONE-ACT PLAYS]**

One-act plays represented another literary genre in which African-Americans were able to express black identity in *The Crisis*, *The Opportunity*, and *The Messenger*, both as a defense against white prejudice and opposition and as a complex expression of culture in its own right. One-act plays can be shorter versions of longer plays, the former of which can be considered as the concentration of a particular idea that the author wants to convey. However, unlike poems, which are also brief and descriptive in style, one-act plays focus more on the dialogue of the moments and scenes encapsulated within them; enough to be able to portray identity-based conflicts as either a conversation or passing comment, in order to take into account how people think and talk about these issues. Furthermore, a larger contrast is realized through the amount of these works published within the magazines; while poems were plentiful and often scattered across multiple pages within newspapers and journals, one-act plays were rare occurrences that often did not get much mention outside of the occasional Broadway performance. Where one-act plays have an advantage over poems, however, is that they portray and replicate African-American lives and their interactions complete with various societal practices, specifically religion, funerals, and relationships. Through the aforementioned use of dialogue, voice (in its literal sense) becomes a crucial method within these plays as a means to express the conflict of ideas, something that cannot necessarily be expressed through poetry. This further advances the importance of using literature over nonfiction in order to express black identity, given that while one-act plays still lie in the realm of lesson-making and creation that enables poetry to express messages, they are also able to put these ideas into practical contexts that are physically relevant to the world as a whole. In addition, while essays are able to present relevant

news, one-act plays are able to show political ideas as lived in everyday life, capturing multiple perspectives of an argument or conversation despite having one author; essays are based primarily on factual or imagined evidence that fails to offer a comprehensive illustration of societal problems, and as such cannot imitate everyday life to be more effective than one-act plays.

Out of the one-act plays found within these magazines, there is a special emphasis on the roles and expressions of African-American women during the 1920s, both in the context of the aforementioned conflict with white prejudice and also within the context of their own communities due to gender roles presented within a patriarchal society and the sexism that accompany them regarding status, vulnerability, and skin color. One such play, *Plumes*, explores the relationship between African-American women and faith, and the conflict it brings when applied to making medical decisions. Two other one-act plays, *Exit, An Illusion* and *The Yellow Peril*, examine the conceptions and complexities of mixed race women through relationships with themselves and black men. As such, these one-act plays were proactive forces in describing and bringing to the forefront ideas of colorism and gender, which were crucial areas of political exploration for the papers in order to fully encompass black identity that could not merely be expressed through poetic themes. These one-act plays introduce colorism and gender through interaction and dialogue, while maintaining some of the descriptive elements usually found within poetry.

*Plumes*, a one-act folk drama, was one such play that conveyed authentic voices of the African-American experience, particularly informing of the complex relationships between race, gender, and medicine. Its author, Georgia Douglas Johnson was one of the Harlem Renaissance's

most famous poets and earliest female playwrights. Born in Atlanta, Georgia in 1877, she grew up an multi-instrumentalist, studying violin, piano, and composition at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music. She moved back to Atlanta soon after and married Henry Lincoln Johnson, with whom she had two sons.<sup>108</sup> She became intensely involved in literature in 1910 upon moving to Washington D.C., where she hosted many writers and artists in her home, referred to as the “Saturday Nighters’ Club”; because of these events, she helped to shape the literary scene in Washington D.C.,<sup>109</sup> which also became a smaller literary center alongside Harlem. From her first poetry volume in 1918 that explored gender issues, to subsequent works that examine racial violence, miscegenation, and black motherhood, to the death of her husband in 1925, she worked full-time while continuing to write and publish.<sup>110</sup> She submitted *Plumes* in *The Opportunity*’s 1927 contest: it won first prize in its play category.

*Plumes* features four characters: Charity Brown, a mother who could be considered the main character of interest; Emmerline Brown, Charity’s fourteen-year old daughter; Tildy, Charity’s friend; and Dr. Scott, a white physician who provides counsel to Charity. The play begins with Charity heating a poultice over the stove in the kitchen of a two-room cottage, hoping to ease the pain of Emmerline, who appears to be sick and groaning from one of the interior rooms. However, it does not seem that Charity has much faith in her daughter’s conditions improving, seeing as at the same time, she is finishing a dress that could be used for her funeral. When Tildy arrives to check in on the both of them, Charity explains to her that she has “been trying to snatch a minute to finish it but don’t seem like I can.. She won’t have nothing

---

<sup>108</sup> Leantin L. Bracks and Jessie Carney Smith, *Black Women of the Harlem Renaissance Era* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 135.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

to wear if she—she——.”<sup>111</sup> The em dashes, signaling pauses, set the tone of hesitancy for the rest of the play, which ultimately becomes a decision between either using the money Charity has saved from washing clothes for Emmerline’s operation (which, Dr. Scott describes, is “just a chance—a last chance”<sup>112</sup> for her to be saved) and using the money for a proper funeral. This decision has political undertones, namely focusing on the struggles between working-class African-Americans and the medicine field.

There are three specific points that lead Charity in favor of a funeral over the operation. The first is the pain that comes from having lost her other two children, which has led to a general distrust of white doctors that is shared between her and Tildy:

“CHARITY—...I made up my mind when little Bessie went that the next time one of us died would have a sho nuff fun’ral—plumes! So I saved and saved and now—this doctor——

TILDY—All they think about is cuttin’ and killing and taking your money. I got nothin’ to put ‘em doing.”<sup>113</sup>

Here Tildy comforts Charity regarding the death of her children and the lackluster funerals that resulted, after Charity states feeling “low-spirited” about Emmerline’s prognosis and tying it to her lack of faith in doctors. This would be indicative of a larger social context in which low-income African-American families would be forced to prioritize: their faith in a racist medical system that discriminates against them and holds their lives as having lesser value, or their faith in the afterlife as a means to put their minds at ease that there exists comfort after death, that they would no longer have to suffer from the racial prejudice and conflict of their surroundings. Charity’s previous experiences in expending money trying to save her last two

---

<sup>111</sup> Georgia Douglas Johnson. *Plumes: A One Act Play. The Opportunity*, July 1927, 200.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 200-201.

children gives her remorse, as they received burials that did not convey that they were important enough to her. Such events justify Charity's choosing to spend the money on Emmerline's potential funeral rather than on an operation, as she fears saving Emmerline is pointless, and that she will be once again unable to provide a proper funeral.

Another specific point that leads to Charity's preference of saving for the funeral is faith, which is also apparent as the main contradicting force to medicine. Soon after the first point, while Charity is fixing Tildy coffee in order for both of them to keep up their energies, there is a small reference made to tasseography, or the Turkish tradition of finding patterns within tea leaves and coffee grounds to predict the future. In this scene, reading coffee beans becomes indicative of holding some sort of psychic power:

“CHARITY (*looking into her empty cup thoughtfully*)—I wish Dinah Morris would drop in now. I'd ask her what these grounds mean.

TILDY—I can read 'em a little myself.

CHARITY—You can? Well, for the Lord's sake look here and tell me what this cup says.”<sup>114</sup>

Presented here is a fortune-telling that manifests within this play as an omen, forewarning what will happen later in the play. While not “practical” in the sense that it is the direct result of a religion such as Christianity, it comes across as superstitious and does give a glimpse into the powerful impact that religion and faith has played within African-American communities, as well as the need to believe through instinct. Curious about Tildy's potential to tell the future, Charity inquires further of her abilities:

“CHARITY—Tell me what you see, I want to know...

TILDY (*awed like*)—Looks like (*hesitates*) a possession.

CHARITY—You think it is?

---

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 201.

TILDY—I know it is.”<sup>115</sup>

A procession in this case is likely a funeral, considering that Tildy gives the hint that the event is “bad news.” This foreshadows Emmerline’s death, given the future’s context and the immediacy of the decision between whether to have her undergo surgery. This also complements later in the play as a reason as to how Charity explains her hesitancy to Dr. Scott:

“CHARITY—Sure, doctor, I do want to—do—everything I can do to—to—  
Doctor, look at this cup. (*Picks up fortune cup and shows doctor*). My  
fortune’s been told this very morning—look at these grounds—they  
says—(*softly*) it ain’t no use, no use a tall.

DR. SCOTT—Why, my good woman, don’t you believe in such senseless things.  
That cup of grounds can’t show you anything. Wash them out and forget  
it.”<sup>116</sup>

The culmination of this discussion between Charity and Dr. Scott is dissected into different forms of faith, belief, and knowledge. While Johnson uses tasseography (coffee reading) as an element of faith within the play, it is a Turkish tradition rather than any based in Christianity. Inevitably, this complicates the precise type of faith that is being shown throughout the play, but concepts of the future and afterlife are prominent and can be generally attributed to religion. Hence, the focus becomes more on religion vs. science in order to convey the importance of faith (in this context, general religion) within African-American communities, sometimes even over standard medical procedures. Charity is making a decision to either use Tildy’s superstitions and concept of doctors as faith for putting money toward the funeral, or to use Dr. Scott’s “logic” of using science in an attempt to restore Emmerline to full health.

The last point of reference for Charity’s preference involves witnessing an actual procession of Bell Gibson’s funeral from Mt. Zion taking place right after the coffee reading.

---

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 218.

Tildy and Charity watch from their windows, marveling at the decorations of the carriages, and particularly the plumes on the horses:

“TILDY—I bet it cost a lot.

CHARITY—Fifty dollars, so Matilda Jenkins told me. She had it for Bud. The plumes is what cost...

*(Both women’s eyes follow the tail end of the procession, horses’ hoofs die away as they turn away from window).*

*(The two women look at each other significantly).<sup>117</sup>*

The last italicized line explains all; both Charity and Tildy are “transformed” by the procession, especially upon looking at the horses with their plumes. Their presence seems relevant to the Christian theme of the four horsemen of the apocalypse that arrive to signal the end of the world; not only fitting for a funeral in progress, but also as a forewarning to what Charity would have in mind for Emmerline. In another sense, the decorations of the horses could be interpreted as ‘evils’ by which Charity and Tildy become corrupted, and as such seek to let Emmerline die rather than to give her another chance to be saved. Regardless, the grandeur of the event literally leaves the both of them speechless for a solid minute before they decide to clean their coffee cups and before Dr. Scott arrives.

These three points that sway the decision in favor of a funeral results in a combination of religious faith, kinship, and fortune-telling that can make the identity of an African-American woman such as Charity Brown. Through Charity, there is a “code” for black motherhood that includes black women doing what they can to support their families. Despite Charity’s wanting to save Emmerline by putting her faith in science, she realizes that based on personal experience and intuition that she would prefer putting her faith in the afterlife instead, especially considering the funds she has left. Because of this reality, Charity becomes a representation of single black

---

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 201.

mothers who also have to make difficult decisions regarding their families; whether to spend money on food or health, having kids to help around the household, and how to accept help without being taken advantage of. As such, *Plumes* offers insight into the connectedness of African-American women's identity through their conflicts in determining what is best for them and their families, as well as the battle between faith and science, and how specifically these beliefs and instincts can take precedence over scientific and logical knowledge. The arrival of Dr. Scott exists as a means to put Charity's faith to the test; Dr. Scott decides to offer her a discount to operate on Emmerline, totaling fifty bucks; coincidentally the same as was expected for the cost of Bell Gibson's funeral. There is further ambiguity regarding Dr. Scott, as it is unknown what kind of "care" he actually gives, whether it is a surgical procedure or something else (in addition, not allowing Charity into the room when he checks on her also raises suspicion). Furthermore, the cost of the "operation" immediately puts each decision at face value of one another, making it easier to see the conflict between a black woman's faith and white society's perceptions:

“CHARITY—I can't forget it doctor—I feel like it ain't no use. I'd jest be spendin' the money that I needs—for nothing—nothing...

DR. SCOTT—I didn't think you'd hesitate about it—I imagined your love for your child—

CHARITY—I do love my child. My God, I do love my child. You don't understand... but... can't I have a little time to think about it, doctor... it means so much—to her—and—me!<sup>118</sup>

Here, there are two main conflicts present: Charity's inability to reconcile for herself, and her inability to confront and oppose society. In the former case, Charity knows what she wants based on her experiences with lackluster funerals, coffee ground fortune, relationship with Tildy,

---

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 218.

distrust of doctors, and observance of another procession. Together, these elements create a faith-based knowledge that can appear to be even more effective than science-based knowledge, especially as the bias and emotion put into the former can override logical statements. However, through her inability to confront and oppose society with this faith-based knowledge, she is confronted with the idea of being a “good mother,” as evidenced by Dr. Scott’s idea (and to an extent, the majority of society) that a “good mother” would want to do everything she could to keep her child alive. While Charity has a reasoned case to rely on her faith and resources to determine that she is unable to afford the procedure both financially and mentally, she also does not want to be condemned for doing so, much like how African-American women often had to keep up appearances in the context of masculinity and white society.

Ultimately, Charity’s inability to either accept Dr. Scott’s operation or to refuse outright leads to Emmerline dying, creating a passive middle ground between the two choices that Charity may have been intending to walk the entire time. Consequently, the use of voice makes itself clear when considering that the plight of African-Americans, foregrounding her halting speech and struggle, and particularly fixating this play as one hardship that they had to face during their lifetimes. This play then becomes more of a commentary of how African-American mothers may have had to define their womanhood and motherhood given what they could muster in the face of majority opposition. This scenario then becomes one of potentially many stories in which the African-American community may have had to define themselves in the context of white majority ruling, which would have been highlighted in *The Opportunity* as a means to bring forth this idea to the public. What stands out about *Plumes* in comparison to the poetry in *The Opportunity*, would be the direct conflict that one can read in dialogue, and how its

replication of an actual conversation on the basis of decision-making makes it all the more applicable to daily life, and thus more relatable on a practical level.

In comparison to *Plumes*, *Exit: An Illusion* and *The Yellow Peril* go into dialogue with the complexity of mixed races, in addition to mixed decision-making. Marita O. Bonner, a fellow Harlem Renaissance playwright and close associate of Georgia Douglas Johnson (as well as her mentee), got the former published in *The Crisis*'s October 1929 issue. Born in Brookline, Massachusetts in 1899, Bonner never lived in Harlem, and rarely ever visited New York.<sup>119</sup> She excelled in school, eventually gaining a degree in English and comparative literature from Radcliffe College in 1922. She took some teaching positions for the next two years in West Virginia, and then Washington D.C., where she met Johnson and began a very productive writing career, known for her critiques of masculinity and challenging the racial, gender, and class dynamics of Harlem.<sup>120</sup>

*Exit: An Illusion* focuses on two characters: Buddy, who is defined as “blackly brown with the thin high-poised features that mark a “keen black man”<sup>121</sup>, and Dot, who has light brown hair and a thin face “almost as pale as the sheets.”<sup>122</sup> This supposed skin color contrast of the two characters is complemented by the setting, which is frequently described as “mixed” in the foreword, including dishes and kicks on the table, and objects scattered about the room. The two are in bed together but “They are most assuredly not brother and sister. Neither are they man and wife,”<sup>123</sup> which initially indicates something of a loose relationship. This proves not to be the

---

<sup>119</sup> Leantin L. Bracks and Jessie Carney Smith, *Black Women of the Harlem Renaissance Era* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 25.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>121</sup> Marita O. Bonner. *Exit, An Illusion The Crisis*, October 1928, 335.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

case however; as soon as Dot gets out of bed and tells Buddy that she has a date, Buddy strictly forbids her from going:

“BUDDY (*fully awake at once*)—”Date? Where you think you’re going keeping a date sick as a dog and with the snow on the ground? (*He looks toward the window*) Snowing now! Where you think you’re going?”...  
DOT—”Aw cut that stuff! How long since you thought you could tell me when to go and when to come! Store that stuff!”<sup>124</sup>

Despite the setting, it seems obvious that Buddy has an attachment to Dot, despite not having a formally committed status. When Buddy interrogates her about this man she is meeting, she hesitantly replies, “Mann. Exit Mann. That’s his name. Yeah—”<sup>125</sup>. It is from here that things immediately seem amiss; aside from the name, and Dot alternating between “I been knowing the guy all my life!”<sup>126</sup> and “I never met him!”<sup>127</sup> Buddy appears to get more and more enraged by her lack of consistency. Another note is the mention of race through this titillating dialogue:

“BUDDY—”You ain’t fixin’ to go out passing are you?”  
DOT—”Aw don’t ask so many fool questions!”  
BUDDY (*growing angry*)—”Don’t get too smart! Guess there’s something after all in what the fellers been saying ‘bout you anyhow.”  
DOT—”What you nigger friends been saying now?”  
BUDDY—”Nigger friends? You’re a nigger yourself for all your white hide!”  
DOT (*shrugging*)—”I may not be—You’d never know!”  
BUDDY—”Aw shut up! You’d like to think ya was white! You’d have never lived with niggers if you’d been all white and had a crack at a white man!”<sup>128</sup>

Here, the reader learns many things; namely that Dot can be considered of mixed race and that she appears to be self-deprecating of her black heritage in favor of her “white hide.” This may likely point to a struggle that many lighter skinned individuals had during times such as the

---

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 336.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 335.

Harlem Renaissance, especially in terms of “passing” for special privileges. Writers such as Jean Toomer and Walter White used this to their advantage, generally through writing in southern areas for the former and gaining support for the NAACP for the latter. As such, people who passed for white were seen as assets to the African-American community for gaining leverage, although they may have still felt isolated due to their heritage, not fitting completely within black or white society. In this play however, it is a struggle for self-acceptance rather than a critique: Dot is attempting to embrace her “white side” as much as she can despite living with a black man; as such the play is arguing about the difficulties that arise from a “mixed” relationship, particularly Buddy’s fear that Dot is going to leave him for a white man:

BUDDY—“...This is the guy! Oi’ lop-sided lanky white thing! Been hanging around you at all the cafes and dances and on the streets all the time I’m out of the city!...So no ‘count he got to come in nigger places, to nigger parties and then when he gets there—can’t even speak to none of them. Ain’t said a word to nobody the fellers say! Ain’t said a word! Just settin’ ‘round—settin’ ‘round—looking at you—hanging around you—dancin’ with you!”<sup>129</sup>

Dot continues to exclaim that Exit is coming, and Buddy starts cursing. He takes out his pistol, repeating that no one is going to come. He feels betrayed by Dot. Regardless, while being just as frantic, Dot repeats that she has to go with him if Buddy does not love her. Buddy gets angrier and decides that he’ll kill the both of them. Both characters do not seem to be in direct conversation with each other, fixated on their own problems while attributing them to the other: Buddy projecting a “white man” as interfering in his relationship, and Dot’s insistence that she needs to see this person. However, when Exit Mann finally appears, Bonner makes his description just as ambiguous:

---

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 336.

DOT—"He's here! (*she points*) "There he is." (*And close behind Buddy you see a man standing. He is half in the shadow. All you can see is a dark over-coat, a dark felt hat. You cannot see his face for his back is turned...*)<sup>130</sup>

At this point Dot is desperate:

DOT—(*rubbing a hand across her face*) "Buddy!" (*gasping*) "Buddy! Say you love me! I don't want to go! I don't want to go with him!" ...

DOT—"Buddy—Buddy—Buddy! Do you love me? Say you love me before I go!"<sup>131</sup>

At this point, Buddy fires his gun. The lights suddenly go out. When Buddy calls out to Mann and Dot, it is clear:

(*At that the man turns fully and you see Dot laid limp—hung limp—silent. Above her, showing in the match light between the overcoat and the felt hat are the hollow eyes and fleshless cheeks of Death.*)

Exit Mann is the personification of Death. When Dot talks of getting ready throughout the play, she is really talking about getting ready to die. Apparently Buddy saying that he loves her would have been some sort of cure or antidote, but instead Buddy took Exit Mann literally and did not get to say so, leaving Dot to die. This is confirmed when, like a dream, Buddy wakes up next to Dot, with the room in the place it was before they woke up. This time, it is Buddy who wakes up first, still believing he is in the dream, to hear Dot rattling in her breath until she stops. Buddy then feels intense remorse as he begins to cry and finally say that he loves her, but too late.

This play packs many things that are relevant to the voices of the era: either Dot gets her love reciprocated by Buddy and she begins to love her black identity, or she goes with the "white" Exit Mann, who symbolizes not only death, but the death of her black identity and into assimilation into the larger white society. This would especially be fitting for *The Crisis*, as it

---

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

intends to incorporate literary works that can function as some form of propaganda for African-Americans to preserve different elements of their culture. In another sense, there is also a focus on Buddy; in many African-American households, the “man” of the house would be expected to be the provider, as evidenced when Buddy mentions himself going out of town to support Dot and himself during one of his tirades. There is a similarity between Buddy and Charity, through which both characters’ choices are constrained by economic resources: Charity’s inability to pay for both an operation and the funeral, and Buddy’s inability to truly love Dot without his own misconceptions feeling deceived. His necessity in needing to keep Dot home, despite not having a formal relationship with her, detects a sense of ownership that Buddy fears that he is about to lose. When Buddy forms his own conceptions and the story is spun to portray Dot as betraying him, he feels that he must preserve his masculinity by killing them both. It is, however, when Dot dies that Buddy feels foolish, losing his sense of masculinity and leading him to regression, as happens when he “begins to cry like a small boy.”<sup>132</sup>

The play’s inclusion in *The Crisis* is likely an appeal to both African-American men and those of lighter complexion to reaffirm their black identities and reform their patriarchy; for the former to acknowledge and realize the importance of family and relationships, and the latter to have a newfound sense of respect for their black identities and to not assimilate into the white majority. Such a lesson would be helpful during a time in which the African-American community may have been fragmented in terms of racial composition, and then all who identified as “other” needed to come together for the goal of combating racial prejudice and stereotyping. Assimilation into white culture would be the opposite of this goal, and would be

---

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 352.

against what *Crisis* editor-in-chief Du Bois had in mind when he wanted to preserve black culture by presenting black literary works within *The Crisis*.

*The Yellow Peril*, in comparison, also fixates on a mixed race woman as the main character, but focuses more on comedy and satire. The play's author, George S. Schuyler, was an African-American journalist, author, and social commentator born in 1895 in Providence, Rhode Island. He enlisted in the army for seven years with the famous 25th U.S. Infantry Regiment.<sup>133</sup> Through his association with A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen (founders of *The Messenger*) upon moving to New York in 1922, he worked for *The Messenger* in its satire and essays section, and published this play in the same magazine in its January 1925 issue.

"The Girl," who is referenced as such until near the end of the play, is described as "an octoroon who could easily pass as white."<sup>134</sup> The play's setting describes the epitome of luxury; the woman is in silk pajamas with "lustrous black hair,"<sup>135</sup> wearing a gold watch and reading a "snappy" magazine with a poodle at the foot of her bed. There is also a Caribbean focus on representation and diversity; the woman's maid, Martha, is "a dark brown girl with rigidly straightened black hair" from Jamaica in comparison, likely referring to the idea that she straightened her hair to appear more in norm with the white majority of society.

"Martha: Well, you can get away with it; you're a high yaller. I wish I was your color. I've used everything advertised in the *Chicago Defender*, but I'm just as black as I was when I came from Jamaica two years ago. Have you ever tried to "pass"? You could get by easy, anywhere. (*The girl goes into the bedroom*)

The Girl: (*Returning with a blue dressing gown which she lazily dons*) Sure. I lived downtown for a year or two; but there's better pickings up here. Downtown, I was only another white girl. Up here I am worshipped by all

---

<sup>133</sup> David Levering Lewis, ed., *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1994), 761.

<sup>134</sup> Schuyler, George S. *The Yellow Peril: A One-Act Play*. *The Messenger*, January 1925, 28.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

the successful business men, professional fellows and society swells, because I am a high yaller. Yes, it's lots easier up here because there's less competition. These college graduates and swell dames don't stand no chance with me, even if I didn't finish grammar school. All I've got to do is wink and I can have a hundred black men running after me."<sup>136</sup>

As with *Exit, An Illusion*, there is also an obsession present with “passing” to fit in with white society. Martha’s background may allude to the potential pressures that black women face in appearing to “assimilate” into mainstream culture, evidenced in that she has tried multiple things from newspaper advertisements to make herself look more “white.” Consequently, as someone still relatively new to an American lifestyle, it is easy to understand Martha’s interest in how “The Girl” is able to afford so many luxuries from a wealth of other men. This one-act play is especially interesting considering that the “protagonist” is written by a black male, whereas the previous two plays were written by black women. Schuyler is presenting satire, but he may be using “The Girl” to direct his critique of other black men, who seem to be easily deceived by a lighter woman to the point that they lose their logic and sensibilities. As such, *The Yellow Peril* may also be Schuyler’s idea of how the typical light-skinned woman would act, which would include being vain and spoiled by countless other black men. *Exit, An Illusion* is more sympathetic toward the lighter-skinned woman from a black woman’s perspective. Nonetheless, the one-act play has some insight into the black male working world from a black male, indicating some personal experience that black men who are higher in class attempt to have relationships with the “most passing” black women possible as a sense of security toward their African-American identities without looking to favor white women. This insight would represent one issue these magazines would be seeking to address in their issues: the fragmentation of black

---

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 28-29.

identity. The concept of black men seeking the “whitest” women possible would sound as if they are ashamed of their skin color reflected in women, and as such seek to compromise. The complex issue here is that even extremely passing black women can still be considered part of the African-American community, and such conflict has created a divide in terms of how to classify black identity. While one perspective imagines those who are easily able to access the white world as more likely to stay within that realm, another perspective would simply attribute this to the complexity of black identity, which would not only cover the themes expressed in art, but cover the varieties in skin color as well.

The plot is very straightforward; “The Girl” (also known as Corinne) survives by maintaining relationships with multiple black men, who give her the items she wants. The play features six men: Johnnie, the “Rent Man”; George, the “Shoe Man”; Frank, the “Coat Man”; Sammy, the “Dress Man”; Henry, the “Hat Man”; and Charlie, the “Jewelry Man.” Corinne attempts to control the flow of these men entering her apartment by hiding them in different areas of the room after they refuse to leave after gifting her items and the next man appears at the door; this then reaches a standstill when Charlie enters (who is also a police officer, which seems ironic as if infidelity is a punishable crime) and notices Henry trembling under the bed. Charlie’s introduction as the final man does give some idea of him offering Corinne safety and security in addition to resources, especially as she convinces him that all the other men suddenly appeared in the apartment. Charlie, however, realizes the delusion as all men appear from their hiding spots, each claiming to be Corinne’s only man:

“Charlie: What are you guys doin’ here?”

The Other Men: (*In a chorus*) We came to see Corinne!”<sup>137</sup>

---

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 31.

At this point, the charades are finished. The men realize their folly, with Charlie stating “I guess we’re monkey men, like the rest of the guys in Harlem.”<sup>138</sup> In a way, this sentence seems to put all the classes of Harlem on an even field; realizing that they all can fall for the same deceptions. They decide to take all their things from Corinne and head out the door. Corinne loses what she gains during the play.

*The Yellow Peril* gives off the impression of the mixed race woman as deceptive (although, the fact that she is described as an “octoroon” could be telling that this deceptiveness is more on account of her “white side”). In both plays, there is this trend of African-American men looking to shower and protect black women who pass as white, possibly giving precedence to them over darker-skinned women, connecting to a wider racial structure and history of racial violence by placing lighter skin in higher regard while those darker remain to be mistreated. The colorism may be apparent through the fact that lighter was generally seen as a better status, primarily because of its relation to the white ideal in society. Because *The Yellow Peril* is written from a male’s perspective, the message may lie more toward the black men; to be aware of oneself and the situations one is placed in, and to reject the notion of needing to find a secure identity in dating lighter women. Schuyler’s play points to a form of patriarchy by establishing a brotherhood who realizes Corrine’s trickery, with Charlie’s profession as a police officer who “solves the case” as the leader. The ability for these men to come together and take back their items and their pride also represents gender-survival, considering that in the face of conniving women, Schuyler believes that men should stick together and support each other; in this case, not being deceived. With these intentions within the magazine’s placements, there is a wider

---

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

message regarding not straying too far from one's race and gender as well as education, as evidenced by the lack of logic some of the characters face in making their decisions before they become enlightened by their community.

Compared to *Plumes*, such decisions seem to be an essential component of the one-act play, in addition to dialogue. Whereas in poetry, decisions have already been made subconsciously on the part of the author, through the play one can see thoughts constructed and deconstructed in action; the motivations behind actions, as well as characters outright saying what they believe in their own words. Furthermore, these decisions have been extended to another theme focusing on the idea of white death vs. black love: *Plumes* features Charity loving a family member based on giving them a grand funeral, compared to spending money to get them help from a white doctor and be unable to provide afterlife preparations; *Exit, An Illusion* focuses on Buddy loving Dot or letting her leave with the "whiteness" of death; and *The Yellow Peril* realizes Martha's autonomy with her black life, while witnessing Corinne be victim to the pressure of white social society. As with poetry, the inclusion of these one-act plays may have shown these literary themes for inclusion within magazines like *The Crisis*, *The Opportunity*, and *The Messenger*, while also conveying with complexities the relationships between African-American men and women through the variations of skin color, as well as the emphasis placed on intuition and faith over science. These magazines realize that in order to combat racial prejudice, changes must also be made within the community regarding long-held beliefs of white superiority in order to solidify black identity in the face of the larger white social world. Each of these one-act plays grapple with this concept by having black characters interact with themselves

and white characters, and offer their own insights to how these situations can be encountered and realized in real life scenarios.

#### **SECTION IV: “YOU WILL CARE.” [FRAGMENTED SHORT STORIES]**

While poems define black identity by categorizing African-American hope and suffering into themes and transmuted objects and one-act plays solidify this identity through conversations and dialogue that bring issues of colorism and gender within the African-American community to the forefront, fragmented short stories combine both aspects to review black identity within a larger social frame. As a genre, fragmented short stories are short stories that have intentionally been divided into segments by the author, usually to create an effect or show a theme, adding experience and context. As with poetry, fragmented short stories are capable of being structured in a way in which their prose can contain similar thematic styles or literary devices; similar to plays, they also introduce thoughts and ideas through dialogue. Fragmented short stories are distinct, however, in how they express themselves through the author’s intentions while being longer than both mediums to expand on different subjects, which would be important for the author and the magazines in offering a single, comprehensive argument based on a diversity of smaller stories, which happen to be closely interwoven based on their content and themes. These stories have the opportunity to engage closely with the lives of African-American characters on the page to engross the reader in what they are facing, and then detach from them in order to contextualize those lives within society to provide a broader perspective of African-Americans and their surroundings through either conflict or community.

In *The Crisis*’s December 1927 issue, Marita O. Bonner appears a bit earlier than her one-act play with her fragmented short story “Drab Rambles,” which observes the obstacles that African-Americans face within the workforce, using the “portraits” of two fictional characters who are victims of racist working conditions that put their health and safety in danger. While the

characters in the story may not be real, the contexts in which they find themselves placed are real to those who have been discriminated against on the basis of race and gender. In addition, the title exudes an ironic factor as a result of the content; the concept of black pain as something dull or uninteresting to the masses helps to situate the undertone in which Bonner believes that the plight of black people are viewed. As such, despite this story being in *The Crisis*, there is some thought of this story also being for white audiences as well, given that black pain is presented here not only for the solidification of those who have gone under similar experiences, but as for a potential call to arms to spark change.

This idea of a call to action to gain the attention of a white audience is supported by a “plea” that asks this group to consider black pain as their own. Before the two “portraits” are presented, Bonner’s words act as a disclaimer, stating briefly but sternly: “I am hurt. There is blood on me. You do not care.”<sup>139</sup> This beginning statement already acknowledges the distance between the author and the supposed white audience, who are already separated by conceptions of racism, sexism, and the stereotypes that follow these prejudices. Regardless, Bonner attempts to bridge this gap before the portraits by declaring that black people are all people: “I am an inflow of God, tossing about in the bodies of all men: all men tinged and touched with black.”<sup>140</sup> This appeal to the masses specifically focuses on the idea that all men are “black” to drag initially uncaring readers into the narrative out of interest, and that this relation is what will convince the audience to begin to care about the portraits that are written soon after.

---

<sup>139</sup> Marita O. Bonner. “Drab Rambles.” *The Crisis*, December 1927, 335.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

The first portrait focuses on Peter Jackson, a fifty-four-year-old city laborer who develops severe heart problems from overworking. The initial paragraphs give a glimpse into his background as he sits in the outpatient area, being characterized with the following condition:

“His heart was beating fast. Faster than it should. No heart should beat so fast you choke at the throat when you try to breathe. You should not feel it knocking—knocking—knocking—now against your ribs, now against something deep within you. Knocking against something deep, so deep that you cannot fall asleep without feeling a cutting, pressing weight laid against your throat, over your chest. A cutting, pressing weight...”<sup>141</sup>

One important thing to note about this quote is the quality of prose present that describes Peter’s pain and suffering. As with poetry, the repetition present through the word choices of “knocking” and “cutting, pressing weight” sonically helps to serve Bonner’s desire of transitioning Peter’s problems to those reading, as a means to both sympathize with the pain and emphasize under the guise that all men are one with God, as inferred in the introduction. This prose then connects the readers to the rest of the portrait, which follows Peter’s struggle with accepting his diagnosis of having a heart that is “all gone” in conjunction of his needing to work, with “three children and a wife to feed.”<sup>142</sup> Despite the doctor’s apparent scorn at Peter for not taking proper care of himself and insisting that he leave his job immediately for a newer one and “not live hard,” Peter gives the doctor the cold reality of his situation: “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 have even worked in this hospital.”<sup>143</sup> Here, Peter (and to an extent Bonner) reveal that even if Peter wanted to live a better life, he is unable to due to his racial status and family obligations. In the context of the short story’s mission, Peter’s portrait reveals how black men are worked into an “early grave” by

---

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 336.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

dealing with hard labor jobs that offer no security or protection, and that such a condition is inherently racist based on the idea that a “ignorant black man” would scarcely find opportunity anywhere else. It is the naivety of the doctor in understanding Peter’s condition that leads Peter to conclude that he could have also worked in the hospital if only his skin color changed. As such, the interaction between the doctor and Peter can also illustrate the ways in which an educated white person may attempt to help and sympathize, but never really understand the plight of African-Americans. As such, the plea at the beginning of the story acts as a determined effort for the audience to actively sympathize and empathize with the black community, to be able to understand their struggles from their own perspective; in this case, the need to push one’s limits in order to take care of one’s family. This connection is solidified by the fact that the doctor attempts to give Peter some medicine intended to relieve some of his pain, which Peter eventually forgets to pick up as he leaves.

The second portrait focuses on Madie Frye, a black woman who struggles to keep a job due to the sexual advancements of her employers. As in Peter’s story, Bonner seems to emphasize the use of repetition to describe the prose in her works, especially through the usage of the em dash: “She tried to get jobs—dishwashing—cleaning—washing clothes—but you cannot keep a job washing someone’s clothes or cleaning their house and nurse a baby and keep it from yelling the lady of the house into yelling tantrums.”<sup>144</sup> Along with the poetry-like prose and device usage, Madie’s story comes alive for the audience to sympathize and potentially empathize with the struggles of a single mother who is trying to support her child through a number of jobs, but cannot due to the expectations of others. When things seem to be going okay

---

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 354.

for Madie in Kale's Fine Family Laundry, with the baby calming down and herself seeming to be in better spirits, one of the bosses eventually takes notice and rapes her. Through this story, black women are not only subject to racism in the sense that they are given lower paid and laboring positions, but they are also subject to sexism in the sense that they must remain on decent terms with male workers to avoid conflict, and even then they may be subject to sexual harassment or rape solely based on gender dynamics out of their control. Both Peter's and Madie's stories speak of death and oppression, common themes that often go with African-Americans when working in the unsafe conditions of general society. Issues of gender and the complexity of black identity become more prevalent, as both characters make decisions given a lack of resources and support from others in the same way that Charity and Buddy struggle, giving more emphasis on how African-Americans deal with trauma.

As such, "Drab Rambles" functions as a fragmented short story by combining prosaic elements of em dashes and repetition with the voices of oppressed African-American workers in order to create a commentary around unsafe working conditions for African-Americans that seem to be neglected by whites. Following a similar pattern to the prosaic style, Bonner concludes: "Not in my day or your tomorrow—perhaps—but somewhere in God's day of meeting—somewhere in God's day of measuring full measures overflowing—the blood will flow back to you—and you will care."<sup>145</sup> In summarization, Bonner hopes to connect to white audiences by referring back to this sense of kinship through God, hoping that these portraits will instill some sense of compassion and caring for better conditions.

---

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

As with “Drab Rambles,” Eric D. Walrond’s “Vignettes in the Dusk” also structures its story as a conglomeration of brief stories that serve as case examples to describe the multiple facets of racial discrimination; the only difference is the shift in terminology from portrait to vignette. The title itself is an eloquent manner of describing the content within the story, which is a series of stories that focus on African-American lives. Walrond himself was born in Guyana, learning both English and Spanish as he also grew up around Barbados and Panama.<sup>146</sup> He worked as a reporter for the *Panama Star* and *Herald* before moving to New York in 1918, where he enrolled in writing and literature courses.<sup>147</sup> He then attempted to make his own paper, working for *The Negro World* and associating with a number of Garveyites, downtown whites, and members of the Talented Tenth.<sup>148</sup> Walter White of NAACP fame and *Opportunity* editor Charles Johnson saw his potential and encouraged him “to introduce promising poets and writers to influential whites and influential whites to Harlem.”<sup>149</sup> “Vignettes of the Dusk” was published in *The Opportunity*’s January 1924 issue, a year before Walrond would work for the magazine for two years as its business manager. As such, it would then seem apparent that his ability in making and fostering connections would translate into him creating a fragmented short story in which he is able to investigate the many voices and perspectives within the African-American community.

While Walrond offers no outside commentary in the way that Bonner makes her appeal, his constant use of the “I” pronoun in four of the five vignettes indicate a sense of solidarity across color, economic status, education, and vocational status. The leftover story, which focuses

---

<sup>146</sup> David Levering Lewis, ed., *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1994), 764.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*

on discrimination based on country of birth, is interesting to note in its third person perspective, considering the author's Guyanese background and probable personal relation to the story.

While the first story is focused entirely on race, there are aspects of class and wealth that influence the character's decision to eat at a relatively fancy dining place, with architecture reminiscent of "a medieval palace."<sup>150</sup> The first is his feeling of being "flush" by having more money than usual at lunchtime. Despite his color and class status, he becomes patriotic, compelled to "rub elbows" with millionaires, bankers, and office girls while remarking of America's "beauty."<sup>151</sup> He seems to temporarily forget his origins, hinted at in his usual visits to Max's Busy Bee, which is the "most democratic eating place I know" where there exists "no class prejudice, no discrimination...." Instead, he transforms into someone who is the opposite of these ideals, constantly remarking on the possibilities of America while lambasting immigrants who have troubles. This boost in patriotic confidence is however negated, as the character becomes oblivious to his presence in the dining place; he fails to realize that his order is served in a brown paper bag to go, a polite way of saying that "we don't serve no colored here."<sup>152</sup> In addition to the fact that racial prejudice exists regardless of the amount of money one has, it can also be inferred that a rise in class may be parallel to a heightened sense of patriotism, or the premise that with higher class, one can abandon his or her origins and physical features. This is obviously not the case, as shown in this vignette.

The second story then focuses on an American immigrant, and the aforementioned third-person pronoun preference makes more sense in this regard, considering that the first story

---

<sup>150</sup> Eric D. Walrond. "Vignettes in the Dusk." *The Opportunity*, January 1924, 19.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*

includes a remark toward “intellectual immigrants who howl about the barrenness of America”<sup>153</sup> during the character’s heightened patriotism. This character is described as a “foreign Negro” who, while believing that coming to America to become a citizen will be the “Big Adventure of his life,”<sup>154</sup> is also acutely aware of Southern lynchings that he reads about in the papers. This note becomes a big influence, as despite his awareness of the South through these readings and constant urges by others to not travel there, he concludes that “I must! I can’t be an American unless I am able to go South! I’ve got to go.”<sup>155</sup> He then reflects on his friend, Williams, who is Jamaican and has lived in America for twenty years. Despite having fair success, however, he is still not a citizen and does not intend to be one, stating that “America is all right...but I ain’t taking no chances!”<sup>156</sup> This vignette in particular focuses on the alienation that exists between black immigrants and the country they reside in. The character and Williams exist on two opposite sides of the spectrum; the former is a newly minted immigrant who seeks to know more about his host country, while the latter is a veteran with years of American experience. Regardless of citizen status, they both share the same fear and hesitancy toward American citizenship, with racial discrimination as a lingering consequence of becoming an American citizen. Williams’s example hints at the idea of a black foreigner being less prone to violence and hatred as a black American, hence why he still retains his Jamaican citizenship. There exists this fear of those being lost with American citizenship, which may also be thought of as consenting to racial discrimination and prejudice from others. Considering Walrond’s own identity as an immigrant, this vignette (or portrait) connects back to the larger point of how these stories

---

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 20.

engage with the lives of African-Americans, introducing another variety of black identity by including black immigrants and their anxieties in terms of how they respond to the treatments of African-Americans. This vignette becomes a unifying story for many of these real-life immigrants, who seek to navigate being black under the white gaze while also having another heritage that is not completely similar to the African-American experience.

The third and fourth vignettes are loosely connected through the idea of the character being “a listening post.”<sup>157</sup> These vignettes in particular focus on the divisions between different skin colors within the African-American community, the third providing a bleak outlook on “the young Negro generation” as not amounting to anything above being porters, elevator men, or janitors, and the fourth featuring a “very fair, almost white” black man being unable to join others on an outing because “the folks don’t like no yalla men.”<sup>158</sup> For the brevity in these vignettes, there is much consideration in how different black factions view each other; the conflicts that arise from these interactions are important in solidifying black identity, whether it be through seeking new avenues of solidarity, or by highlighting the differences and reasons for separation, which could then be addressed and resolved. The third focuses more on a generation and age gap. Despite some of the strides that the younger generations have made in making their prominence known, the older generation does not believe any good will come out of it and that there is a sense of perpetual doom that exists for black people as being eternally inferior. The fourth seems to be an indication of some hate toward those who may remind one of the oppressors, and this rejection may seem to be a painful response to those feelings or as a temporary relief from negative feelings in power. It also adds to the complexity that mixed-race

---

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

persons may have in establishing their identities, often facing discrimination from both black and white sides for not being more toward one side or for “passing.” Through these diverse portrayals, black identity is solidified; it enables the reader to consider those who appear to be marginalized based on their skin tone or age, and seeks to bring these groups together in real life through readings in order to create a better support base with which to fight back against racial prejudice. Although these vignettes are brief, they are able to be engaged with fully and then picked apart, helping to provide such a broader perspective of the conflicts of discrimination surrounding African-Americans.

Lastly, the fifth vignette focuses more on the perceptions of gender and sexism toward women. The victim in this case is a “jet black trollop”<sup>159</sup> with folliculitis on the back of her neck, which is exposed as her hair is bobbed. The character “snorts” in response before going to Archie’s, in which the owner is having a conversation about a woman who he wanted to marry but could not because he felt she was “too white.”<sup>160</sup> The woman, now referred to as “the anthropological metamorphosis,”<sup>161</sup> passes them by and, for a moment, they are unable to speak until she is gone. The conversation then partly seems to focus on her when Archie says, “she ain’t white. Can’t you see her neck?”<sup>162</sup> This blending from one woman to the next may present a general view of women as objectified through their physical features. While Archie’s conversation about the woman he knew was entirely focused on her physical attributes and her connections such as her wealthy father, her home, and her college education, the character does the same thing to the woman who passes, laughing at her look, assuming her to be promiscuous,

---

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

and referring to her as an “anthropological metamorphosis.” Here, it seems that women are objectified regardless of their skin color within the black community, functioning in a similar vein to the fourth vignette when white-appearing black men were also prejudiced against. The general concept of policing between these vignettes constitutes a “gatekeeping” of black identity through which certain traits are seen as desirable or undesirable. While the fourth vignette features the man who does not fit into his acquaintances’ standards of the black community due to his lightness despite being black nonetheless, the woman does not fit in part due to her looks and her inability to interest the men, despite being visibly black. While these situations may appear minor in real-life conversation, it is the fact that they are highlighted through these vignettes which present them as a problem within the black community as an obstacle to solidifying black identity. By being able to read these stories from a distanced perspective, the issues are brought up, which makes the reader more aware of them, trying to stir some disbelief at the ways African-Americans criticize each other and spurring proactive action to prevent further discrimination from occurring.

In condescension, these vignettes reflect on a part of society; the first vignette features racial discrimination with regard to class and facility, the second covers perceived discrimination and fear from black immigrants, the third and fourth both use the same character to overhear conversations that turn discrimination inward to the black community, and the fifth focuses on discrimination toward darker-skinned women within the community. There is a clear transition from looking on the “outside” of discrimination with the first vignette to more inward reflections and struggles in the third, fourth, and fifth vignettes. As such, the story may also be structured to

show this progression and place an importance on the issues of colorism and sexism within the black community, especially as these issues become more prominent in the latter vignettes.

In sum, the collection of these vignettes allow Walrond to showcase the multiple forms in which racial discrimination takes place, not just through external circumstances, but also within the black community. The sense of appeal to whites and the internal critique of hierarchies and power relations within the black community make more sense toward the later years of the Harlem Renaissance, especially as black writers were gaining larger audiences through the inclusion of their works in magazines such as *The Crisis*, *The Opportunity*, and *The Messenger*. While they were still functioning as black publications, they also had a white following through their networks, which would have made their literature more accessible to the white public. Bonner's story focuses more intently on an appeal to whites, while Walrond accommodates both audiences, displaying how both domains intersect with each other and pointing out how each undermine the black community. However, Walrond is more directed toward critiquing the black community than making an appeal to whites, given that the latter three vignettes focus on internal racism and sexism. To highlight and critique these differences means to allow black readers to reflect on similar situations that they may have been involved with in terms of discriminating others, or to place themselves in the perspective of those who are discriminated against. Furthermore, his use of the "I" pronouns with different points of view add to the prosaic and empathetic elements by allowing the readers to immerse themselves within these scenarios, while also including dialogue that shows the thought processes of those victimized and those who are doing the victimizing. Consequently, the black community becomes identified as the "I" pronoun across these differences in the vignettes.

Zora Neale Hurston's "The Eatonville Anthology" is also composed of a series of smaller, seemingly interwoven stories. These compositions appear more realistic as a result, as they more closely mimic actual conversations in passing in comparison to a larger story, which would focus on one singular life and events surrounding it. The difference, however, is that "The Eatonville Anthology" is more so a collection of stories combining Hurston's storytelling with folklore to build a sense of community within the boundaries of her origins, rather than to focus on the racial prejudices and discriminations that plague African-American characters in Bonner's and Walrond's works. Although Hurston was born in Notasulga, Alabama as the second daughter of eight children, she moved to Eatonville when she was three years old, the setting of which became "a central character of many of her works from which she drew her personal experiences and situations she witnessed."<sup>163</sup> After her mother's death in her early teens and her father's remarriage (to which she disapproved), Hurston found herself moving from relative to relative, keeping Eatonville in the back of her mind as a nostalgic beginning. She worked as a maid for a troupe for some time, gaining an interest in the dramatic arts that she carried into her studies at Morgan Academy in Baltimore, Maryland.<sup>164</sup> It was after her 1918 graduation and her entrance into Howard University where she would find her beginnings in the Harlem Renaissance, joining Alain Locke's literary club and becoming a regular member of Georgia Douglas Johnson's literary salon along with other writers who would "make up the younger generation of the New Negro writers."<sup>165</sup> Upon Locke's encouragement, she wrote more short stories, many of which won awards throughout the 1920s and catapulted her into literary fame.

---

<sup>163</sup> Leantin L. Bracks and Jessie Carney Smith, *Black Women of the Harlem Renaissance Era* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 122.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*

Appearing in *The Messenger's* September and October 1926 issues (divided in two parts), the story is divided into 13 shorter illustrations that include tropes, legends, and events that make up this narrative of Eatonville, Florida. As such, it appears that Hurston is using folklore as a prosaic element with which to tell these stories, and focuses on the interactions between these characters as a means to show and tell the stories and relationships between them, working as a microcosm of the magazine's goal of bringing the black community together to solidify their identity. Furthermore, while Bonner's and Walrond's pieces attempt to bridge together a better concept of black identity by pointing out the problems with white ignorance and black hierarchies, these are absent in Hurston's version, and in their places exist an imagined state of what a solidified black identity would look like within a fairly thriving black community.

All of the stories, in some way, function as portraits of urban-like legends. While told in the present, they also feel archaic. The first story is about Mrs. Tony Roberts, a woman who constantly asks around for things, particularly food; she is viewed as a beggar, but the community still gives her what she wants, only for her to do the same thing the next day. This story fits into the idea of continuity, as something that one would expect upon visiting Eatonville.

Throughout, there is an emphasis placed on the active engagement of these portraits of African-American life that are both singular and continuous, ones that are repeated throughout later stories. They include Brazzle's claim that he saw a doctor remove, wash, and replace the organs of a woman in Orlando; Mrs. Crooms's revenge on Daisy Taylor for insulting her by hitting her with a shovel in the town ditch; and Cal'line Potts following her husband with an axe to supposedly teach him a lesson. There is the story of Tippy, the dog who cannot die; Becky

Moore's eleven children and the refusal of the other mothers to associate with her; Sewell's isolation; Mrs. McDuffy's loud testimonies of "determination"; and the creation of the double-shuffle dance before and after the World War. There are also stories that mediate between singular and continuous by having a singular event constitute a continuous pattern, such as Old Man Anderson's fear of trains as a result of their sound, and Coon Taylor's occasional stealing of mayor Joe Clarke's crops, leading the latter to hold Coon at gunpoint while he chews up the last of the sugar cane he devours from the garden, and then bans him from the town for three months. Continuously occurring events, singular events that have an impact on individuals and the town, and events in between work in conjunction with her storytelling to provide an immersive town that seems and feels realistic enough to accept as real. The context of Eatonville in this story, both as an actual community and as one imagined in Hurston's imagination, adds to the impact. It is this combination of experience and content that distinguishes these stories from their literary counterparts, as well as convey their authenticity to the reader about an idea of black community, what it could entail and what Harlem could contain. The town's voices also add a compelling portion to the story, given that in comparison to the previous two stories, there is no distinction between the oppressed and the oppressor; people merely exist as part of a large black diaspora, and the black individuals in this community remain unified despite their differences. This town also finds its relatability through the backbone of folklore and superstition; many African-American communities revolve their history around religion or a form of legend and superstition, and hence those experiences may make the town more connected to the lives of others who reside within African-American communities.

In conclusion, the stories of Bonner, Walrond, and Hurston are going after the audience for different reasons; Bonner pleads to have whites sympathize with black suffering, Walrond seeks to highlight biases of race and gender within the black community and how white society has consequently threatened the solidification of black identity through this lack of unity, and Hurston envisions the final product: a black community that maintains its sense of unity despite their differences, seeking to build a communal identity that all can be proud of. Throughout, elements of language are used from the repetition of words to emphasize suffering, multiple-person perspectives, and folklore in order to promote black characters and the situations involving them, which is then further amplified by the voices that these characters have in the context of their surroundings, which bring to light their issues and offer the readers the chance to identify and respond to them in their own lives. The culmination of these efforts give the authors abilities to make commentaries on a wider context of society, whether it be through urging people to be sympathetic toward those who suffer from racist and dangerous working conditions, highlighting various forms of racial prejudice both within and outside of the African-American community, and orchestrating a sense of what the black community could aspire to be through the introduction of folklore and different event styles that compose such a community. With these goals in mind, the magazines are able to use the authors' intentions behind solidifying black identity to create an environment in which these issues are addressed and put to rest, creating a stronger sense of black unity that cannot be penetrated by racial prejudice, and can accommodate all forms of black individuals as they continue to make their presence known in the era of the "New Negro."

## SECTION V: IT ALL COMES TOGETHER [THE PAGE]

This thesis argues that when juxtaposed with political articles, editorial opinion pieces, and advertisements, these literary works convey a larger purpose and reveal each newspaper's reasons for participating in the Harlem Renaissance's literary scene. This section focuses on the ways in which *The Crisis*, *The Opportunity*, and *The Messenger* used literature within the pages of their newspapers. These close readings are intended to help contextualize the political and social aspects of the poems, one-act plays, and fragmented short stories in accordance with the literature and to find the ways in which previously mentioned forms and themes are expressed within the newspapers, as new avenues for engagement with the public.

### *The Crisis* Poems on the Page

In comparison to both *The Opportunity* and *The Messenger*, *The Crisis* devoted the most of its magazine space to poetry. In the *Crisis* April 1922 issue, Jean Toomer's "Song of the Son" stands on its own page, adding to the significance of poetry during the beginning stages of the Harlem Renaissance. The page preceding it is a small book description for Benjamin Brawley's "Social History of the American Negro," highlighted for its race consciousness in promoting black deeds and exploits as "it presents American history as it must have appeared to black men."<sup>166</sup> This book's orientation toward narrating a detailed history of African-Americans from precolonial times to the early 20th-century connects to the poem based on the idea of legacy; whereas Brawley's book uses the lives of past African-Americans as a means to transcend into modern history, Toomer's poem fixates on the transcendence of African-American death to transmute into music and nature. This poem is then followed by the NAACP's announcements of

---

<sup>166</sup> "Brawley's "Social History of the American Negro." *The Crisis*, April 1922, 260.

the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill, which passed through the House of Representatives by a sizeable margin and was being prompted toward the Senate for further action. This is then followed by a piece about the Bullock Case, an example through which Plummer Bullock was lynched for simply talking back to a white store owner for being sold rotten apples. This fixation on lynching can connect back to the concept of spirituality in Toomer's poem, considering the transmutation of struggle through death and the fact that the poem likely takes place in the American South, where the root of lynchings occurred. Through this example, *The Crisis* uses "Song of the Son" as a piece to transmute the politics of black history and racial lynching into personal expression and political material.

In its December 1922 issue, *The Crisis* places Langston Hughes's "Mother to Son," at the bottom of "The Looking Glass," which is a recurring feature of the magazine that focuses on a general survey of literature and race-related events. Following the poem are then several college advertisements, as well as an open teaching position and medical school. The snippets closest to the poem emphasize black achievement in athletics and a report from *The Pathfinder* that:

"According to a recent report, in the last sixty years Negroes in this country have acquired 22,000,000 acres of land, 600,000 homes and 45,000 churches. They operate 78 banks and 100 insurance companies, besides 70,000 other business enterprises with a capital of \$150,000,000. Owing to the large number of schools and colleges for colored children illiteracy has been reduced to less than 27 per cent."<sup>167</sup>

This sudden wave of achievements in the last sixty years reflects the sentiments in Hughes's poem, as a mother is reflecting on her life to give her son advice about moving forward during times of great difficulty. The aforementioned achievements are real-world examples of doing so, especially in the context of African-American struggles. Following the poem are more college

---

<sup>167</sup> "Our Wonderful Race." *The Crisis*, December 1922, 87.

advertisements. Although these advertisements are included in every issue, this particular case may be special due to the mother encouraging her son to keep climbing and not turn back. For *The Crisis*, higher education is seen as a means to transcend one's environment and to increase one's potential within the black community, as evidenced by W.E.B. DuBois's focus on "The Talented Tenth." As such, this poem is used for the advancement of African-Americans through higher education when placed within its context within the issue.

In *The Crisis*'s March 1923 issue, Charles Bertram Johnson's "Old Things" is situated at the bottom of an essay titled "Cöoperation and the Negro" by E. Franklin Frazier, an American socialist and author known for his works on the development of the Negro family. A Baltimore native, he was awarded his high school's scholarship to attend Howard University, where he graduated with honors and engaged with the NAACP and Intercollegiate Socialist Society. He then went for his master's degree at Clark University in 1920, where he began to study sociology, using his interest in the lenses of African-American history and culture to do so. In this article, he continues this focus by expounding on the ways in which Negro farmers can benefit from the social and economical "advantages" of cooperation despite large percentages of illiteracy. His conclusion focuses on the following solutions: to distribute literature on the principles of economic enterprises, to get rural leaders to organize farmers based on the mode of production of different communities, and "to liberate the Negro from the present share crop system of farming."<sup>168</sup> "Old Things" itself focuses on seeing the youthful in the old; in a way, having Negro farmers focus on socialist methods in expanding their enterprises is in itself a form of rejuvenation for the farming profession, similar to finding the youthfulness as described in the

---

<sup>168</sup> Frazier, E. Franklin. "Cöoperation and the Negro." *The Crisis*, March 1923, 229.

poem. This is especially true as farming is one of the oldest and most traditional professions available; combined with the “newness” of 1920s socialism, the poem is condensing the themes that the essay expands on. Following the poem is the *Crisis*’s monthly “Looking Glass” series, which includes a Christian poem about the birth of Black Christs by Guy Fitch Phelps and Harvard president Abbott Lawrence Lowell’s attempts to exclude African-Americans from freshman dormitories, before heading to college advertisements. Coincidentally, there is also an announcement that the National Urban League “is issuing a monthly journal "Opportunity" of which Charles S. Johnson is editor.”<sup>169</sup> Through these articles and notices, one encounters the main themes of *The Crisis*: literature, education, and black liberation. Black liberation in particular is an essential component to “Old Things” as well; finding youth in the old gives the latter strength in its own right, a reversal of death and a testament to the longevity of black identity and unity.

In the May 1924 issue, Gwendolyn Bennett’s “To Usward” is preceded by Valentine Nieting’s essay “Black and White,” which focuses on the author’s visit to India, the Indian educational system and the author’s friendship with Tawde, a young adult seeking to become a teacher. The title of the essay itself feels as though it is a nod to the poem, given that it was first publicly performed at *The Crisis*’s first awards dinner, during which black artists networked with white publishers. In sum, however, the connections that African-Americans are making with other parts of the world is also a representation of coming into their own within modernity, no longer merely a subtext in American history but also an active player. The inclusion of international sources within *The Crisis* can attest to its sophistication, as it is not only showing

---

<sup>169</sup> “Looking Glass.” *The Crisis*, March 1923, 230.

concern for the African-American race, but also of other races. Such celebration of community and unity is what derives from the feeling of “To Usward” being the dedication poem to Jessie Fauset during one of *The Opportunity*’s dinner events. The following page is an NAACP article on preparations for the 15th Annual Philadelphia conference taking place, which includes giving an entire day to African-American achievements in music and literature, among discussions of politics and accusations of propaganda from prominent hate groups such as the Ku Klux Klan. The preparations for the conference references an aesthetic in which the black community is represented within an institution. Ultimately, the coordination of the conference also represents a similar move toward unity, or the act of building and putting effort toward a larger event, while also discussing dissenting opinions. This stretch of literature and articles is solidified by celebrating differences, which is what *The Crisis* appears to expound on through its inclusion of these domestic and international events.

In *The Crisis*’s November 1929 issue, Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s “The Proletariat Speaks” is one of a handful of poems on “The Poet’s Corner” page, which is an occasionally recurring section that groups all of an issue’s poems into one compact area. This shift is quite noticeable in comparison to earlier issues, especially in juxtaposition with Toomer’s page debut, which occupies an entire page in its issue. This change in sectioning may have been the result of *The Crisis*’s wavering interests in poetry on the part of W.E.B. Du Bois, who, by the latter part of the decade, wanted more propagandistic forms of black expression than the flowery poems that were making headlines in the Harlem Renaissance. Dunbar-Nelson’s piece does just that; it is a clear, straightforward poem that contrasts the difference between what the narrator desires in their life and their actual living situation, reaching the point where the practicality of the real world takes

over. This poem is preceded by but still connected through “The Negro in Literature,” which surveys a short description of various books and their contents from May to September 1929, including Sir Sidney Oliver’s “White Capital and Colored Labor.” The concept of labor becomes a central theme here, as education and propaganda play prominent themes within the books surveyed, and are connected to labor due to their outreach to the black working class. The poem is then followed by “The N.A.A.C.P. Battle Front,” which is a posting of current events undertaken by members of the group. In this case, in the middle of a campaign to raise funding, leaders in different parts of the world are asked to comment on the NAACP’s 20th year and its overall record. The titles of the articles and poem all point to the idea of labor as something being experienced within the African-American community, as a sort of “battle” that must be toiled through in anticipation of achievement and results; in other words, as a political transformation.

In conclusion, *The Crisis*’s poems are carefully woven within its structure in order to maintain and advance its narrative as a sophisticated publication. The poems shape *The Crisis* as a magazine for political transformation through its necessity to highlight domestic and international events, for black liberation based on labor-based articles and history surveys that focus on the ways in which African Americans can improve themselves and their surroundings. They also stress community unity by engaging with these two points for the larger purpose of strengthening black identity, while also representing this unity of identity through celebratory actions such as involvement in the construction of the Philadelphia annual conference, as well as contest awards and dinners through which many of these poems have been acknowledged and celebrated.

### ***The Opportunity* Poems on the Page**

As with *The Crisis*, *The Opportunity*'s poems are also connected through structure, sequence, and design by surrounding articles and features, but with a less militant approach. Although just as concerned with racial interests and improvements, *The Opportunity* appears to be lighter in tone but somewhat darker in article content, more readily able to allow the inclusion of poetry and other forms of art as a means to break up such "serious" moods with optimistic poems. However, there also appears to be less space for these poems to thrive, compared to *The Crisis*'s initial issues in giving poems space to breathe without being crushed under the weight of editorials and essays.

In *The Opportunity*'s April 1923 issue, Leslie Pinckney Hill's "Voyaging" is placed at the bottom of a four-page article by Esther Fulks Scott titled "Negroes As Actors in Serious Plays," which highlights a number of Chicagoan African-Americans undertaking artistic roles along with comments from Chicago newspapers about the success of the racial theater through plays such as *Salome*. This positive note of African-Americans fulfilling theater roles that stray from stereotypes fit a similar tone to the poem, which focuses on preserving and keeping positivity through the harshest of times. The similes of weathering storms in the poem could be similar to the pressures performed in a play, considering the elements of performance involved through acting, performance, lighting, and the audience as "storm." Following the poem is a page-long article titled "Living Monuments" by Albon L. Holsey, an Atlanta-born executive who joined the Tuskegee Institute's staff in 1914 around the time that the famous educator and presidential advisor Booker T. Washington led the Institute. The article features the construction of a new hospital for black veterans of the first World War by the U.S. government. This action

was created in part by the ideals and interactions of Abraham Lincoln and Booker T. Washington and in the essay, vice-president Calvin Coolidge states, “Our greatest need is to live in harmony, in friendship and in good will, but not seeking an advantage over each other, but all trying to serve each other.”<sup>170</sup> In this case, *The Opportunity* appears to be tying the poem within themes of black positivity and equality, through the idea of making something bigger (such as a hospital or black theater roles) through positive mindsets that benefit all parties. As such, it also shows the poem’s connection to black aesthetics and a broader aesthetic tradition, as another larger construction.

Countee Cullen’s “I Have a Rendezvous with Life” in the magazine’s January 1924 issue is set toward the beginning of the issue, wedged within the Editorials section, specifically under the “Home for Negro Workers” columns. While the term “editorial” generally refers to pieces written by or on behalf of an editor who gives his opinion on different issues, this piece is focused on gathering information from facts; because the great bulk of African-Americans “remains in the area where numbers increase and no more houses are built,”<sup>171</sup> there arises a necessity to support a growing population with more housing, especially for employers of Negro workers who could benefit from such an investment. As such, faith is “literally” at the heart of this editorial; in the center exists Cullen’s poem about living life to its fullest in spite of death and hardships, cutting off the discussion being made to have more African-Americans becoming homeowners, given the rising population in the North in the past couple of years. The poem works here as a sharp contrast to the discussion, but reframes the stakes of the facts and also benefits the discussion by adding a positive note about staying motivated. As this issue is also

---

<sup>170</sup> Holsey, Albon L.. “Living Monuments.” *The Opportunity*, April 1923, 24.

<sup>171</sup> “Home for Negro Workers.” *The Opportunity*, January 1924, 5.

the first for the year, the editorial features reflection for both 1924 and also for *The Opportunity* itself (at this point being one year old). The editorials and poem are followed by a four-page essay by Alain Locke titled “The Black Watch on the Rhine,” which considers the role of the African-American in Europe, as well as Germany’s presence as a tool for indicating international race relations. An idea gained from the culmination of these pieces may be expressing a desire to live life by going beyond one’s surroundings and initial limitations to explore the rest of the world despite the obstructions and barriers of death (in the poem) or geography (in the editorial and article). It is often necessary, the poem argues, to place reflection on oneself and what one can do to achieve a better life.

Lastly, Joseph S. Cotter’s “A Babe is a Babe” and Frank Horne’s “On Seeing Two Brown Boys in a Catholic Church” lie within the same page in *The Opportunity*’s December 1925 issue, right next to each other with two other poems. Religion is a common theme on the poetry page (titled “A Page of Poetry”), and this issue is similar to January 1924’s issue in the sense that these poems are placed after the editorials at the beginning of the issue. Placement wise, it could signify the importance of poetry to *Opportunity* editor Charles S. Johnson, considering that he was a progenitor of the literary contests and networking events, as well as the primary reason behind the magazine’s interest in literature that could not have been replicated after his departure in 1932. It can also be considered as Christianity’s authority against race and science, considering that Cullen’s aforementioned poem also breaks through more logical discussions for an interjection of faith. In addition, the closest editorials include the Pullman Porters’ recent organizational gesture to protest their working hours and low pay, as well as some comments on an article involving racial biology and race relations within the South, which

would align with this concept of poetry breaking barriers between discussions. Following the poetry page, there is a four-page essay titled “Outstanding Negro Newspapers of 1925” by Eugene Gordon, which highlights an analytical survey of black newspapers, going into details regarding their make-ups and content, and even ranking a series of newspapers on their “excellence attained” in comparison to the standard that the survey has placed for editorials, news, and features. Across this section, the poem contributes to a general theme of relaying a message due to the connectedness regarding information about newspapers and speech through poetry, whether it be religious, scientific, or analytical; it may be part of the method to engage readers by having messages directed toward them in order to captivate them and make them committed readers.

As such, it seems that the poems in *The Opportunity* function as temporary breaks between “serious” and logical discussions on race, biology, and science, hoping to place belief in either faith or a higher power in religion as a means to not only diversify the magazine’s content, but also to keep spirits up despite the less-than-optimistic tones of the editorials and articles and to keep an eye on the larger stakes. This manner points to *The Opportunity* using poems to relay inspiring messages about hope and faith in the face of opposition, as well as literally breaking within articles as a reminder for the reader to keep their spirits high and their faith central.

### ***The Messenger Poems on the Page***

In comparison to those of *The Crisis* and *The Opportunity*, the poems in *The Messenger* do not show up on the table of contents; instead they are placed sporadically throughout each issue, often as footnotes to essays, articles, and short stories. They are generally placed between

an item that is either literature or has an art theme (such as a short story or one of Theophilus Lewis's theater reviews), and an item that focuses on a survey of African Americans in an area (such as the "These 'Colored' United States" series) or a biography of an African-American. As such, the poems function as bridges; but instead of creating contrast as with *The Opportunity* and its poems, *The Messenger's* poems blend in with the content of surrounding articles and reports, solidifying the content matter without standing out significantly. This would work considering that the ideas expressed in *The Messenger* are more "radical" in nature as they appear in a socialist-based magazine, and that much space would be needed as possible to support these ideas, also considering the publication's infrequent publication schedule due to a lack of reliable funding. While the poems themselves may not have explicitly loud themes in comparison to those that surround them, this general trend helps to support the notion that poems exist to connect art and literature to the social and racial topics, conforming to the magazine's larger goals in their placement. *The Messenger*, while solidifying black identity with the same premises as the other two publications, attempts to solidify its own sense of black identity differently from the others: one based more in socialism, or toward the black working class.

In *The Messenger's* January 1924 issue, "Dreams Are the Workman's Friends" is one of several of Thomas Millard Henry's poems that take over "random" parts of two pages. This form of compartmentalization, in addition to its lack of identification in the table of contents, signals poetry as secondary; many poetry verses are left over and scattered from page to page, amid a series of larger articles. This goes back to the aforementioned idea that there is a lack of proper placement for these poems, despite some coherence in having poems by the same author attached together.

Similar to the poems, the article preceding the collection is actually brought over from thirteen pages before, part of a series titled “These ‘Colored’ United States.” This particular version is by scholar William H. Ferris, A.M., and it discusses the colored population within Connecticut. This essay is then intercepted with a theater article, which is then also cut by an essay regarding New York titled “The Black City” by Eric D. Walrond. This series of sporadic snippets from page to page make it difficult to gauge the placement of articles within *The Messenger*, as it bypasses the regular convention to possibly inform readers about different topics as quickly as possible. This could be considered as modernist as the decade in which the publication exists, as these directions make the magazine’s issues a collage of different pieces that fit one theme of fixating on the working class. Even the article that follows the poems, “A Repudiation of War” by Fanny Bixby Spencer, is a continuation of the article posted in the December 1923 issue. The combination of these different articles into one another may be an indication of their overlapping importance with each other; it indicates that what is regular should be occurring every day, hence the routine of similar segments, and that there is a connection between war, politics, geography, and art that *The Messenger* seeks to group through community.

In the March 1924 issue, “Pagan’s Prayer” is also unlisted in the issue’s table of contents, once again considering poems as secondary to the listed articles, or as a “filler” intended to be a break between while still fulfilling the magazine’s purposes of distributing radical information. The poem’s placement follows a similar concept to *The Opportunity*’s direction, being one of three poems to cut off a theater article by Theophilus Lewis, who reviews a handful of plays featuring black female characters. While “Pagan’s Prayer” permeates articles similar to the

poems of faith in *The Opportunity*, “Pagan’s Prayer” actually depicts a lack of faith from the narrator, and emphasizes black power through self-education instead. This is supported with the next page, as following the poem is another segment of “These ‘Colored’ United States,” this time by Lionel F. Artis, who focuses on African-American history and residents in Indiana. Both the narrator in “Pagan’s Prayer” and “These ‘Colored’ United States” refer to self-education, or a “do-it-yourself” practice of putting into one’s own words and context what it means to be African-American or a non-believer of the Christian religion. It is this method of trusting your own intuition (as well as *The Messenger*’s) that dictates the poem’s existence within the magazine, reinforced across the pieces.

Lastly, the July 1926 issue portrays some difference in comparison to the previous two poems. “Fiat Lux” stands on its own without another poem to accompany it, although placed at the bottom of Dorothy West’s “Hannah Byde,” a short story of a suicidal pregnant woman who feels tied to her marriage and has contempt toward her husband. The story associates her with the whip, one of the most known tortures of slavery: “She had learned to whip him out of a mood with a scathing tongue.”<sup>172</sup> “Fiat Lux” shares a similar state, as it is also a poem that features the whip, this time used on the women within the context of actual slavery. Regardless of whether they hold or are being held by the whip, the women in both works suffer from being confined within their circumstances and envision death as a way to escape. This is especially true by the uses of death and light in “Fiat Lux” as a means to transcend struggle, while suicide is in itself often an attempt to alleviate problems. This inclusion is also interesting to note, considering that as *The Messenger* progresses in age, more works similar to the Harlem Renaissance begin

---

<sup>172</sup> Dorothy West, *Hannah Byde*. *The Messenger*, July 1926, 197.

appearing within the issues, in comparison to the intense focus of social news and politics that cover the magazine's earlier issues. A common premise is the idea of the black excellence aesthetic, which fixates on successful black individuals as pertinent to the magazine. The story and poem are followed by a partial biography of Samuel Coleridge Taylor, an English composer of mixed race, that focuses on his musical origins; finding a fiddle within a store with the keeper telling him that he can keep it if he were to play an actual tune. This narrative in particular is the first article of a five-article series that extends from July to November 1926, focusing on Taylor's short life from 1875 to 1912. While an element of suspense exists (another biography section is promised), Taylor's biography and "Fiat Lux" both refer to shared innocence; Taylor through his musical preoccupations, and the narrator's fixation with the flower. *The Messenger* pinpoints moments in which these preoccupations give these characters' lives purpose through rebellion: Taylor exceeding racial standards and the character choosing the flower. Both operate on this rebellious nature that links to *The Messenger's* struggle of being a prominent magazine despite its tumultuous journey in accessing an audience through its radicalism and socialist-based articles. In addition, this issue feels more literary and consequently less political than its predecessors, reflecting *The Messenger's* literary-based progression as the Harlem Renaissance flourished.

In comparison to *The Crisis* and *The Opportunity*, *The Messenger* has a pretty clear use of poetry for confirmation of its radical publishing, being used as a "bridge" to engage more with these ideas of trusting one's own intuition and not the mainstream in terms of accessing black history and culture, as well as focusing almost exclusively on the black working class rather than higher classes, which support *The Crisis* and *The Opportunity*. While this has given *The*

*Messenger* a prominent voice in comparison to its two competitors, its lack of reliability in publishing due to a lack of funds and lack of structural support may have led to the magazine changing its structure to fit more in line with a generic magazine of the Harlem Renaissance, as the founders' departure from the magazine to take active roles within the Pullman Porters protests and the takeover of George S. Schuyler and Theophilus Lewis in editing made a huge impact in making the magazine more literary-based.

### **The Plays on the Page**

For the sake of brevity, all three plays from the different magazines will be placed here. In *The Crisis*'s October 1928 issue, "Exit, An Illusion" is preceded by a two-page article titled "A Message to the American Negro from Rabindranath Tagore," which highlights the individual as a Bengali scholar. The message primarily focuses on the author's discomfort with visiting America, feeling prejudice regarding his Asian heritage. The idea of discrimination based on race is something slightly underlined through the concept of colorism from the international to the intimate in the following play, in which Buddy and Dot occasionally come at each other with racially charged remarks. Dot and Buddy's characters are relevant to the article, as the prejudice that they face from each other is a microcosm of the prejudice they would experience in the larger world, beyond their walls. In this sense, the integration of the world of color threatens U.S. colorism as it cannot wholly describe the experiences or actions of those who fall between black and white associations; due to this inability to compartmentalize individuals who do not fall into traditional black and white colors, their experiences vary from finding some acceptance in black and white communities to being wholly ignored or not taken seriously.

Something else to note about the play is that while it spans two pages, the very last piece of dialogue is removed and placed several pages later, toward the end of the issue where the reader is faced with a multitude of advertisements for colleges, universities, and specialized schooling. In a way, these college advertisements may be hinting at Buddy's stupidity regarding being unable to save Dot, as well as their ignorance toward each other in terms of the aforementioned racially charged remarks. It is clear throughout that *The Crisis* disapproves of any interaction in which black identity becomes fragmented, as the goal for literary works is to hold a standard of black unity regardless of skin color variations. As such, the play and advertisements function as a compromise between each other. *The Crisis* may be intentionally placing the last piece of dialogue from the play right next to these advertisements to ask the reader to be smarter by not replicating Buddy and Dot's behaviors. By pursuing higher education, *The Crisis* insinuates, one is able to break free from the prejudice and hesitations one may have regarding differences within a larger community and then decide to educate oneself on how they can help to establish and solidify a broader reaching terminology of black unity through black identity.

*The Opportunity's* July 1927 issue is actually their annual contest issue, meaning that it features a series of winning entries from the most recent *Opportunity Awards*. Consequently, prize winning pieces are scattered throughout the issue, with *Plumes* being situated after a series of winning poems and before a personal experience sketch by Shad Jones. The poem immediately preceding *Plumes*, "Summer Matures" by Helene Johnson, represents love through the evolution of summer and the nature revolving around the season. *Plumes* is also an expression of love, but through a mother's love for her daughter that is conflicted by economic

want and necessity. The two works are also connected through weaving; one line depicts weaving “a bed of reeds / And willow limbs and pale night flowers”<sup>173</sup> for someone’s arrival, while Charity in *Plumes* is making the hem for Emmerline’s dress, intended for her “arrival” into the afterlife. Both of these works use creation as a method for preparing for what is to come in their respective worlds.

As these are all literary works due to their inclusion in this contest issue, they represent a sort of dream-like quality that is used to engage with the world at large. The qualities and references to supernatural beings through Greek mythology such as Pan, Phaon, Euterpe in “Summer Matures” is equated to the qualities and references to supernatural practices in *Plumes*. Ultimately, this stretch of the imagination is a crucial bargaining point for *The Opportunity*; while W.E.B. Du Bois does not want art for art’s sake, Charles S. Johnson does, and his inclusion of these works shows his willingness to express black identity through the past, as reimagining states that were previously inaccessible to African-Americans. *The Opportunity* clearly wants to express themes of love and belief in ways that capture the imagination of the Harlem Renaissance; through realizing the endless opportunities of topics and identities that exist within the landscape of the black imagination. Such motivation is what drives the magazine for publishing its contests, as well as the type of works that it wants to see expressed toward the nation; revealing the diversity of African-American artists and writers not only through literary form and themes, but also through subject matter and more international and foreign modes of thought.

---

<sup>173</sup> Helene Johnson. “Summer Matures.” *The Opportunity*, July 1927, 199.

Unlike some of the poems for *The Messenger*, plays are included in the table of contents. This could be because plays have larger prominence on the page in comparison to poems, which can more easily fit into the crevices of editorials and other articles. The poems being blended in within these other works as explained earlier may also prove to be a reason as to why they do not stand on their own within the contents. In its January 1925 issue, *The Yellow Peril* is preceded by “The Letters of Davy Carr,” one part of a series of epistolerics based in Washington D.C. that would soon comprise the novel *When Washington Was in Vogue* by Edward Christopher Williams. This section is written as a letter in which the character Davy writes about his search for a lodging while in Vanity Fair. The glamour and luxury highlighted of different lodgings in the text, as well as the women that the narrator converses with, bears a high resemblance to Corinne and her lavish living area in *The Yellow Peril*, especially within the context of showcasing luxurious items. There are also two small ads for the Lincoln Theatre and a confectionery company, which seem to contradict luxury; the Lincoln Theatre, while a house for high art such as opera and performance, served Washington D.C.’s African-American community when segregation kept them out of other prominent venues. Confectionery, while focused on sweets and sugars that would be considered luxury food items and not necessities, still carry the risk of obesity and diabetes from too much sugar. From the epistolary and the play, a first impression is made to others that may not be truthful when considering all aspects of a person, store, or theater as a result.

After the four-page play, which stands complete in its entirety, is a piece by Paul Robeson titled “An Actor’s Wanderings and Hopes,” which focuses on Robeson’s opportunities between working within law while also acting for various popular plays. While part of this piece

connects to the concept of luxury, especially considering that Robeson is immersing himself with the art and glamour associated in acting, it also contrasts heavily to the role of men within the play as single-minded and gullible. An earlier argument made about the play focuses on Schuyler's intentions: that black men are lacking the education to see beyond their tendencies to prefer "lighter-skinned" women as part of societal construct that encourages prejudice. Although Robeson has some of his faith in breaking into acting, a sort of naivete that could be replicated through the suitors' hopes for being the sole partner of Corinne, he is also focusing his sights on his career in law, something the men in *The Yellow Peril* may have been better off for if they had not been so easily deceived and duped by Corinne's mischief. Here, the transition from letter to play to narrative is not as clear-cut and represents many transitions of faith, deception, and pragmatism within. Each piece appears to be in some conflict with whether to fall into desire or to stay focused on the task at hand; the narrator's insistence on trusting women in "The Letters of Davy Carr," the men's initial delusions in believing that Corinne is solely theirs despite seeing the other men in her room, and Robeson's balance between acting and practicing law. As such, one is led through the collection of these works, an entryway into showing examples of luxury and glamour, and whether it may be better to keep focused on concrete, practical roles. Robeson in particular represents another part of the black excellence aesthetic, given his apparent success through his article. Furthermore, the success of black excellence and wealth in these works point to a focus of hope and ambition, that other readers can attain such wealth as well. This would come back to captivating the minds of the readers, as by reading these stories about success, it becomes their success as well based on the collective black community, while also encouraging them to make their own impact on the world. If one were to consider these works as a transition

one after the other, then *The Messenger* prizes practicality above all, which would make sense given their “do-it-yourself” mentality that pushes them through their publications, despite a lack of a large following and funding source.

### **The Stories on the Page**

In *The Crisis*'s December 1927 issue, “Drab Rambles” is preceded by another version of “The N.A.A.C.P. Battle Front,” this time focusing on the group’s numbers in sending press releases to magazines across the country, showing some statistical examples of the audiences they reach; examples of these releases include a student strike in Gary, Indiana where the organization attributes the students attempting to oust colored students to Ku Klux Klan propaganda. From the numbers, the NAACP reaches millions of readers through circulation with several magazines, including the *New York Herald-Tribune*, *New York Times*, and the *Bulletin*. In doing this work, the NAACP likens their mission to accompanying the demonstrations of spokesmen including “Negro writers, poets, novelists and dramatists, scientists, actors and singers and the many colored people who by the example of their lives have demonstrated their race’s case beyond any refutation.”<sup>174</sup> The announcement on the part of the NAACP to take active roles in presenting news and pushing forth activist efforts ties well into “Drab Rambles,” as the fragmented short story contains narratives in the absence of these efforts; cases where individuals are victims of their racist working conditions. The NAACP seems to present a realistic “dystopia” that, while the characters may be imagined, they still represent real scenarios of real people who underwent such discrimination. These accounts appear alarming to the reader,

---

<sup>174</sup> “The N.A.A.C.P. Battle Front.” *The Crisis*, December 1927, 333.

and the NAACP infers that without its organization, which has clearly accomplished activist efforts through its Battle Front segments, events like these are more likely to happen. By also juxtaposing the Battle Front series with this story, it further creates a narrative that the NAACP is actively working to prevent the cases that happen in the story through their fight to work for Negro recognition.

“Drab Rambles” is also unique in the sense that it is divided across multiple pages; while the bulk of its text is preceded by a page of prize poems by *The Crisis*’s KRIGWA (*Crisis* Guild of Writers and Artists), which feature those that have won awards in its 1927 competition. Light and darkness are prominent themes within each of these poems, the combination of which could present an ideal to “Drab Rambles,” which desires for whites to sympathize with the struggles of African-Americans by combining them all as children of God, in the same way that light and dark interplay with each other from each individual poem. From there, segments of the story follow for three successive pages, the story occupying only the middle column on each one, surrounded by a wide variety of college advertisements, a notice for the Dunbar Memorial Hospital Association, colored dolls, and information regarding The National Benefit Life Insurance Company. These each have their implications within “Drab Rambles”; as typical with *The Crisis*, the college advertisements offer a contrast to the narrative portraits, emphasizing the importance of education to avoid the situations that John and Madie are involved in due to their lack of college education and, consequently, inability to move up to higher social ladders, leading them to toil through their menial jobs and suffer from their correlated forms of workplace discrimination. Through education, *The Crisis* could argue, one can recognize their worth and be able to know when they are being discriminated against, and then work to improve

their situations. The hospital association and insurance ads nod toward John's story as a means to be prepared despite the worse-case scenarios, while the doll advertisement is geared toward Madie, due to her profession as a maid, as well as having a child on the way. These distinct advertisements offer solutions to their cases: John may consider life insurance to continue supporting his wife and kids after his inevitable demise from working menial tasks, and Madie may be able to buy a doll to keep her children occupied, while learning more about their race. These would give their characters some attempt to better themselves and give them power and control over the direction of their lives, despite being victims of workplace discrimination. As such, *The Crisis* seeks to empower all individuals regardless of their status, and to maintain their black identities through working with black companies as they attempt to care for the growing needs of their families.

In *The Opportunity*'s January 1924 issue, "Vignettes of the Dusk" is introduced by "The First Hundred Negro Workers," a four-page article defined by its sub-headline as "The Frank Story of the Experience of a Negro Welfare Worker."<sup>175</sup> This narrative, with an introduction by Charles S. Johnson, focuses on southern black labor within an iron and steel company and the accommodations and structures made in place over a 4-year period from 1916 to 1920. These accommodations include a bunk house to house families and also recreational purposes such as a chapel. The author's perception that "the white worker has about accepted the Negro as a permanent increment in northern industry"<sup>176</sup> is something to be contested in Walrond's vignettes due to their emphasis on the variations in which racial discrimination takes place across different venues, including in class and professional work. Between both pieces is an urgency to assess the

---

<sup>175</sup> W. P. Young. "The First Hundred Negro Workers," *The Opportunity*, January 1924, 15.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

African-American within larger society in how they function with whites: not just on the shop floor, but through practically all elements of life.

Following Walrond is a small poem by Angelina W. Grimke, another poet who came to prominence within the Harlem Renaissance and one of the first women of color to have their plays publicly performed, titled “Little Grey Dreams,” and a larger article titled “Harleston! Who is E. A. Harleston?” The former focuses on launching these dreams out to sea, which has a similar tone toward the essence of the American Dream within the vignettes; like the dreams floating away by sea, the American Dream for African-Americans becomes more of a dream than reality as they face racial discrimination through their work, class, and relationships. The second vignette in particular is reflective of this; an immigrant hoping to immerse himself within American culture, only to feel hesitant at having read about the number of southern lynchings. Even for someone like Williams, who has lived in America for 20 years, becoming an American citizen is still more of a drawback than an aspiration.

The latter article features Edwin Augustus Harleston, an African-American painter who is more associated with the “Charleston Renaissance” in Charleston, South Carolina, his place of birth. The article represents a living biography; previews of his illustrations, his background that includes graduating from various art schools, and his artistic habits. In comparison to vignettes of individuals suffering obstacles due to their victimization by racial discrimination, Harleston rises above in his biography, being painted as a man whose talent has afforded him multiple opportunities, the mention of his age being only 42 an indication that he still has more to accomplish in his lifetime. From these juxtapositions of “Vignettes of the Dusk,” *The Opportunity* is using the surrounding articles as a means to advance their mission as a

publication to provide enlightenment, using literature to express the suffering African-Americans face regarding racial discrimination, and offering articles that provide insight in how to address them; the articles as providing testaments to those who are building accommodations and who are thriving in such conditions, as a means to inspire others who may be feeling the weight of their race throughout their daily lives to aspire to greater achievements.

Lastly, because “The Eatonville Anthology” is divided into two parts, both *The Messenger*’s September and October 1926 issues hold relevance to the story’s context. In the September 1926 issue, the anthology follows an open letter to Pennsylvania district workers from a fellow member of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, who attempts to get more workers to join the Brotherhood by encapsulating his experience working with the Pullman Porters. The Pullman Porters are men hired as railroad workers to work as porters on sleeping cars, since the Civil War when slaves were hired by the founder, George Pullman. For many, working as a porter was a way to move into the black middle class, offering a source of income. This article comes a year after the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the first all-black union headed by A. Philip Randolph, one-half of the founders of *The Messenger*, arose as a result of unfair wages and charges with long work hours, combined with an inability to become conductors due to race. The article following the anthology is one by A. Philip Randolph himself, celebrating the Brotherhood’s Anniversary, with a recap of why the union began and the ways in which they seek action against opposition, as well as an urge for more donations.

Information about the Pullman Porters is the subject for the article preceding the next installment of “The Eatonville Anthology” in the October 1926 issue as well, a direct attack from the editor as a reply to propaganda accusations from the Pullman Porters company. From here, it

is clear that the focus of *The Messenger* is toward the Pullman Porters, considering the founders' active involvement in the protest that resulted in them resigning from their positions in order to become activists full-time. Nonetheless, there is a clear connection between the Pullman Porters and "The Eatonville Anthology" in the sense that they are connected by a sense of community. The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters is an all-black union that fights for better wages, while Eatonville is a community that establishes its identity through its existence and folklore. With the following article that is another installment of Samuel Coleridge Taylor's biography, which focuses more on his romance, *The Messenger* weaves these stories into a narrative of constructing a black community; a goal that *The Crisis* and *The Opportunity* had been constructing throughout the entire Renaissance, but something that *The Messenger* avoids based on its focus toward radicalism until it is captivated by the Pullman Porters movement, which combines their focus on radical efforts to enact racial equality with community.

In conclusion, all three magazines include literary work as a means to strengthen their own agendas. *The Crisis* uses the serious tones of suffering and discrimination in its published literature to link to its larger articles: by using the brevity of literature as an entryway into the magazine, the reader will come across literature that operates as propaganda for the real world. Such propaganda will stem from connection: the NAACP focuses on including somber literature that African Americans can connect with on a deeper level, making them inclined to stay glued to the page as they may have faced similar situations. As such, the reader will focus intently on pressing issues of colorism, discrimination, and suffering within the African-American community, which then can be remedied by the combination of articles that include the NAACP's efforts to fight back against such issues through their reports and activism, along with

college advertisements that encourage the reader to pursue higher education to become part of this change to fight racism and prejudice, while educating oneself to avoid the traps that race and low-income class can have, as depicted through its literature.

*The Opportunity*, on the other hand, uses its literature in the inverse; literature is used to break up more “serious” articles with its lighter themes of hope and encouragement as well as “higher things” related to God and religion, as a respite to maintain motivation in the face of conflict regarding African-American issues that cause suffering, such as racial discrimination and the interplay between intuition and logic. The outcome is the same as with *The Crisis*; to fight back against such issues by having the reader aware of the plights African-Americans face daily, but *The Opportunity* uses its articles as an entryway to its content instead, or uses the expressive nature and language of literature through themes of love and hope to guide readers into larger contexts of the American social sphere as it pertains to the African-American community.

*The Messenger*'s context is really what influences its content and not vice-versa, as its infrequent publication schedule, lack of adequate funding, and rarity in terms of its radicalism and socialist-based publication make it stand in clear contrast to the other publications, especially those who also publish literature in addition to articles and reports. For a while, *The Messenger* emphasized these “flaws” above all else, as the literature included seeks to function as “bridges” to keep these radical articles tightly together to prevent any lapse in writing control. The intention behind the “bridges” were to keep up with socialist themes, including unions, anti-war sentiments, and the working class. As such, the poems “bridged” articles with these themes with similar themes, keeping the magazine's content focused on socialism and radicalism. With the

advent of the Pullman Porters in 1925, however, *The Messenger* undergoes a literary transformation; the literature included now has a heavier sense of community and kinship despite being literature-based, in part due to the founders' involvement with the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and the eventual shift in editorial staff that resulted from this involvement. All three publications would have preferred literary work above other works as a means to introduce the reader more easily into their content, which would then make the other works accessible as the literature contains comprehensive information regarding their respective magazines' content. Going back to the idea of fostering connections between readers and the magazines, the included literary work followed the Harlem Renaissance's rise in cultural appreciation, and as literature captured the imagination of the readers by constructing perfectly crafted stories and concepts that could not be fulfilled with other forms of writing, literature allowed these magazines to gain access to the sympathy and empathy of the readers, not only engaging them with the world through their content, but also creating a reliable readership base to advance their missions of upholding the race while fighting back against racism and prejudice, as well as internal issues within the black community such as colorism and sexism.

## **SECTION VI: CONCLUSION**

In different ways, literature in the African-American press during the Harlem Renaissance sought to solidify and reimagine black identity through the visions of African-Americans in both their own contexts and within the pages that contained them. These magazines (as well as the authors and editors behind them) had distinct motivations for the inclusion of these literary works. These motivations ranged from showcasing the complexity of black identity through expressing internal and external struggles such as colorism and prejudice that affected the African-American community to using literary voices for readers to engage closely with the African-Americans on the page, to using the authors' perspectives through the living creation and characterization of oppressed minority voices to calling attention to plights both within and surrounding the community that need to be addressed. The magazines engage the reader through the rest of their more social and political-based articles by using literature as an entryway. Literature makes itself distinct from other forms of writing: it grabs the reader's attention during a time when cultural changes were the focus of conversations, to create a community of talented African-American writers who could use the decade as a means to propel radical change, to achieve equality by making connections with larger white publication companies, and to build bridges and offer space to connect easier through corresponding articles to political and social events. The investigation of these works reveals a cast of characters within the Harlem Renaissance who, while firmly rooted in the literary scene, were able to use their works to propel the political expression of black identity during a period in America where minority voices were severely underrepresented in the restaurants, theaters, high-rise apartments, and nightclubs of mainstream society.

As such, the literary world of the Harlem Renaissance functions as only one portion of a larger scene that included musicians, artists, dancing, night clubs, and drinks poured until the morning. Some of the writers who helped to shape this period in time go on to continuing their literary presence and craft, such as Langston Hughes, who takes an interest in the rise of communism and uses the working class to influence his later works. Others move on to other fields in academia and politics, and some, such as Georgia Douglas Johnson, have little work that remains post-1930s. It appeared that the Great Depression also brought along several changes that removed the initial optimism that had birthed the Harlem Renaissance; the worsening of economic conditions that were once a boon to Northern migration; *The Opportunity's* lack of adequate funding, leading to Charles S. Johnson withdrawing from his position as editor to become president of Fisk University in 1932; and W.E.B. Du Bois losing his faith in the written word due to society's interest in art for its own sake, instead of the propaganda that led him to include art in the beginning. This was the first of many changes within Du Bois's psyche that made him distant and cold toward other black intellectuals in addition to art. His weakened grasp on African-American society led to his resignation from both *The Crisis* and the NAACP, due to his eventual suggestion of "separation" from fellow African-Americans in attempting to re-evaluate the role of black people."<sup>177</sup> The collapse of the "Talented Tenth" was also imminent, considering their constant arguments and disagreements with each other. The loss of *The Crisis* and *The Opportunity's* editors, as well as *The Messenger's* prior departure in 1927, left a void that could not be filled, that could never be replaced or replicated. Unlike the larger-than-life personas of Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Countee Cullen, many writers who

---

<sup>177</sup> David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), 75.

gained some prominence in the 1930s had little longevity, especially as these magazines began to have difficulty in maintaining their initial stages as both Charles S. Johnson and W.E.B. Du Bois left the editorial staffs for good. The magazines had accomplished giving aid to a new generation of black writers who would find their way further into Harlem and the nation, but the new editors went back toward the old distinct styles pre-Harlem Renaissance.

For this moment in time, the pen was left inside the desk as writers began to focus on the world outside their minds, and instead their hands were holding picket signs and were led into the Harlem streets to once again fight for racial equality. While the Harlem Renaissance may have not had as pronounced a social impact as the Civil Rights era, it served as an important foundation in its own right, helping to construct black identity through literature and to build a socially connected empathetic and sympathetic readership for the magazines that provided them.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Primary Sources

- Bennett, Gwendolyn. "To Usward." *The Crisis*, May 1924, 19.
- Bonner, Marita O. "Drab Rambles." *The Crisis*, December 1927, 335-336, 354-356.
- Bonner, Marita O. *Exit, An Illusion*. *The Crisis*, October 1928, 335-336, 352.
- Braithwaite, William Stanley. 1924. "The Negro in Literature." *The Crisis*, November 1924.
- "Brawley's "Social History of the American Negro." *The Crisis*, April 1922, 260.
- Cotter, Sr., Joseph S. "A Babe Is A Babe." *The Opportunity*, December 1925, 357.
- Cullen, Countee. "I Have a Rendezvous with Life." *The Crisis*, January 1924, 5.
- Cullen, Countee P. "Pagan Prayer." *The Messenger*, March 1924, 75.
- Doren, Carl Van. "The Younger Generation of Negro Writers." *The Opportunity*, May 1924, 144-45.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. (William Edward Burghardt). "Krigwa, 1926." *The Crisis*, January 1926.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. (William Edward Burghardt). "To Encourage Negro Art." *The Crisis*, November 1924, 11.
- Dunbar-Nelson, Alice. "The Proletariat Speaks." *The Crisis*, November 1929, 378.
- Frazier, E. Franklin. "Cöoperation and the Negro." *The Crisis*, March 1923, 229.
- Henry, Thomas Millard. "Dreams Are the Workman's Friends." *The Messenger*, January 1924, 26.
- Hill, Leslie Pinckney. 1921. *The Wings of Oppression*. Boston, MA: The Alpine Press.
- Hill, Leslie Pinckney. "Voyaging." *The Opportunity*, April 1923, 23.
- Holsey, Albon L. "Living Monuments." *The Opportunity*, April 1923, 24.
- "Home for Negro Workers." *The Opportunity*, January 1924, 4-5.
- Horne, Frank. "On Seeing Two Brown Boys in a Catholic Church." *The Opportunity*, December

- 1925, 357.
- Hughes, Langston. "Mother to Son." *The Crisis*, December 1924, 87.
- Hurston, Zora Neale. "The Eatonville Anthology." *The Messenger*, September 1926, 261-262.
- Johnson, Charles Bertram. "Old Things." *The Crisis*, March 1923, 229.
- Johnson, Charles S. "Opportunity Literary Contest." *The Opportunity*, August 1924, 228.
- Johnson, Charles S. "On Writing About Negroes." *The Opportunity*, August 1925, 227-28.
- Johnson, Georgia Douglas. *Plumes: A One Act Play*. *The Opportunity*, July 1927, 200-201, 218.
- Johnson, Helene. "Fiat Lux." *The Messenger*, July 1926, 199.
- Johnson, Helene. "Summer Matures." *The Opportunity*, July 1927, 199.
- Jordan, William G. *Black Newspapers & America's War for Democracy*. Chapel Hill and London, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001.
- Kerlin, Robert Thomas. *Negro Poets and Their Poems*. Washington, D.C.: The Associated Publishers, Inc, 1923.
- Locke, Alain. "Enter the New Negro." *Survey Graphic*, March 1925, 631-34.
- "Looking Glass." *The Crisis*, March 1923, 230.
- "Our Wonderful Race." *The Crisis*, December 1922, 87.
- Schuyler, George S. *The Yellow Peril: A One-Act Play*. *The Messenger*, January 1925, 28-29, 31.
- "The N.A.A.C.P. Battle Front." *The Crisis*, December 1927, 333-334.
- Toomer, Jean. "Song of the Son." *The Crisis*, April 1922, 261.
- Walrond, Eric D. "Vignettes in the Dusk." *The Opportunity*, January 1924, 19-20.
- West, Dorothy. *Hannah Byde*. *The Messenger*, July 1926, 197-199.
- Young, W. P. "The First Hundred Negro Workers," *The Opportunity*, January 1924, 15-18.

## Secondary Sources

Austin, Addell P. "The "Opportunity" and "Crisis" Literary Contests, 1924-27."

*CLA Journal* 32, no. 2 (1988): 235-46. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44322018>.

Bamikunle, Aderemi. "The Harlem Renaissance and White Critical Tradition." *CLA Journal* 57, no. 2 (2013): 81-94. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44325853>.

Bracks, Leantin L., and Jessie Carney Smith. *Black Women of the Harlem Renaissance Era*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014.

Carroll, Anne Elizabeth. *Word, Image, and the New Negro*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005.

Christian, Shawn Anthony. *The Harlem Renaissance and the Idea of a New Negro Reader*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016.

Fenison, Jimmy. 2019. "Frank Smith Horne (1899-1974) • BlackPast." BlackPast. BlackPast. January 30, 2019. <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/horne-frank-smith-1899-1974/>.

Gates, Henry Louis, and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham. *Harlem Renaissance Lives: From the African American National Biography*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Hill, Anthony D., and Douglas Q. Barnett. *Historical Dictionary of African American Theater*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2009.

Huggins, Nathan Irvin. *Harlem Renaissance*. Cary, NC: University of Oxford Press, 2007.

Lewis, David Levering., ed. *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1994.

Lewis, David Levering. *When Harlem Was in Vogue*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1981.

- N. W. Ayer & Son's American Newspaper Annual and Directory. Library of Congress, n.d.  
29 Feb. 2012. N. W. Ayer & Son's Directory of Newspapers and Periodicals.
- Perry, Patsy B. *Southern Writers: A New Biographical Dictionary*. Edited by Joseph M. Flora and Amber Vogel. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2006.
- Perry, Robert L. and Melvin T. Peters. "The African American Intellectual of the 1920s: Some Sociological Implications of the Harlem Renaissance." *Ethnic Studies Review* 19, no. 2 (1996): 155,  
<https://ezproxy.haverford.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/215501942?accountid=11321>.
- Pride, Armistead S., and Clint C. Wilson. *A History of the Black Press*. Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1997.
- Sollors, Werner, Caldwell Titcomb, and Thomas A. Underwood. *Blacks at Harvard: A Documentary History of African-American Experience at Harvard and Radcliffe*. New York, NY: New York University Press, 1993.
- Wall, Cheryl A. *The Harlem Renaissance: A Very Short Introduction*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Ward, William Smith. *A Literary History of Kentucky*. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1988.