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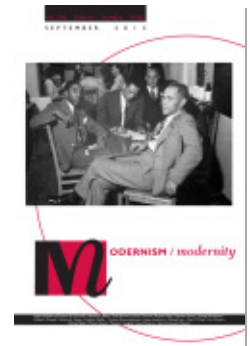
## Questionnaire Responses

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### Venetria K. Patton

#### What do you think is the most interesting or challenging work being conducted in this field today, and why?

The timing of my completion of this questionnaire is quite apropos, as I have just completed teaching a semester-long upper-division course on the Harlem Renaissance. Thus, as I consider my response, I am motivated by pedagogical concerns. My Harlem Renaissance course was offered as a cross-listed course between the English Department and the African American Studies and Research Center at Purdue University, so I was particularly interested in highlighting the interdisciplinary aspects of the period rather than merely presenting the literature of the era. In fact, this was one of the goals Maureen Honey and I had for our anthology *Double-Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology* (2001). By including artwork and illustrations from periodicals and anthologies of the period as well as song lyrics, we hoped to signal the intersections between the various art forms; however, I wonder if our teaching has, like our research, moved beyond our disciplinary silos.

One of the first images I typically discuss with my students is the cover of the May 1923 "New Negro" issue of the *Messenger*. We look at this image alongside images of Rodin's *The Thinker* and talk about how the image reflects ideas presented in essays such as A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen's "The New Negro—What Is He?" and Alain Locke's "The New Negro." This is always a dynamic conversation, one that sets the stage for future class sessions, such as a related discussion of Vivian Schuyler's "The Library Hour," which appeared in the February 1928 issue of the *Crisis*. Her image of two young African American women reading books is a perfect complement to our discussion of Elise Johnson McDougald's essay "The Task of Negro Womanhood." We also have fruitful discussions about other images that appeared alongside stories or poems, such as Laura Wheeler's illustration "Wishes," which appeared in the middle of Georgia Douglas Johnson's "Wishes" when it appeared in the April 1927 issue of the *Crisis*. I generally begin by unpacking students' interpretation of Douglas Johnson's poem and then ask them how the illustration adds to their reading of the poem. Navigating these discussions of the interplay of the illustrations and the literature is aided by interdisciplinary research such as Caroline Goesser's "The Case of *Ebony* and *Topaz*: Racial and Sexual Hybridity in Harlem Renaissance Illustrations." This essay provides a detailed analysis of the illustrations by Charles Cullen and Richard Bruce Nugent as well as a lucid discussion of the editorial approach taken by Charles S. Johnson and the

450 relationship between the artwork and the literary selections. Goeser's analysis focuses on the way in which Johnson's collection of essays, poetry, and illustrations resisted restrictive classifications of race, gender, and sexuality. Goeser builds on this excellent work in *Picturing the New Negro* (2007), which takes up such topics as Aaron Douglas, magazine illustrations, and book jackets. I should note that my tendency throughout this piece is to use articles as examples rather than books because articles such as these might be references for the instructor or assigned to the class as part of the course readings, depending on the level of the undergraduate course being taught.

In addition to the exciting interdisciplinary work related to visual culture, there is a good deal of research that addresses the influence of blues and jazz on the literature of the period. For example, Bruce Barnhart argues in "Chronopolitics and Race, Ragtime and Symphonic Time in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*" that James Weldon Johnson's narrator uses ragtime and classical music to negotiate a racialized landscape. Discussions of music in connection to Langston Hughes are also quite common, as seen in essays by Felicia M. Miyakawa, Günter H. Lenz, and John Lowney. I regularly address the impact of the blues on writers such as Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown. For instance, I find that students can better appreciate Brown's "Ma Rainey" after listening to her sing "See See Rider" and discussing the lyrics. However, we have discussion only after I've given students a basic introduction to the blues tradition. Yet it is work like Mike Chasar's "The Sounds of Black Laughter and the Harlem Renaissance: Claude McKay, Sterling Brown, Langston Hughes" that can allow instructors to bring additional depth to their interdisciplinary discussions. Chasar takes a different approach to musicality by analyzing the sounds of laughter in his essay. He contends that the combative black laugh could uniquely challenge white-controlled public space. Thus his analysis can assist instructors in unpacking the laughter in Brown's "Sam Smiley" and move the class beyond obvious interdisciplinary linkages of literature and music to more subtle matters relating to the role of sound. The train noises that appear throughout the literature might give rise to similar discussions that connect these sounds to the role of migration in African American history.

While there is much exciting interdisciplinary research available, it was a 2008 special issue of *American Studies* devoted to Aaron Douglas and the Harlem Renaissance that really whet my appetite for the type of interdisciplinary analysis I crave to augment my teaching. This special issue grew out of an interdisciplinary conference held in conjunction with the Spencer Museum of Art's exhibition *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist* at the University of Kansas in September 2007. The essays in the special issue considered Douglas in relation to such topics as music, art, literature, and drama. This approach truly highlights the cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary nature of the Harlem Renaissance. I suspect that I was particularly excited about this special issue because it achieved the sort of range that I aspire to in my teaching of the period.

Robert G. O'Meally describes his essay "The Flat Plane, the Jagged Edge: Aaron Douglas's Musical Art" as "more meditation than finished article, more improvised hypothesis than thesis" (22), but he nevertheless begins to show how music for Douglas was not merely a subject or muse but a model. O'Meally's discussion of aesthetic

similarities between Douglas and Duke Ellington point to the innovative possibilities of interdisciplinary scholarship. However, the importance of interdisciplinary research really becomes apparent when one considers the collaborative nature of the Harlem Renaissance. For example, David Krasner's "Dark Tower and the Saturday Nighters: Salons as Themes in African American Drama" explores the role salons played in facilitating discussion among artists. According to Krasner, salons hosted by Georgia Douglas Johnson and A'Lelia Walker were influential in connecting artists across genres and providing arenas for the discussion of ideas that were then reflected in the dramas of the period. It is clear that the artists of the Harlem Renaissance were not creating in isolation, and thus our teaching will only be enriched by exploring the cross-pollination that is made possible via interdisciplinary research.

Farah Jasmine Griffin's "On Time, In Time, Through Time: Aaron Douglas, *Fire!!* and the Writers of the Harlem Renaissance" from the *American Studies* special issue is an excellent example of interdisciplinary inquiry. Griffin examines the collaborative nature of *Fire!!* and Douglas's role in shaping its aesthetic and political vision. Drawing on a letter Douglas wrote to Langston Hughes, Griffin is able to show Douglas's active engagement with aesthetic concerns. Griffin also provides an astute analysis of Douglas's preacher, artist, and waitress figures found within the pages of *Fire!!*, and she suggests that these figures offer a narrative that links a southern folk tradition with the urban working class. Griffin concludes her essay with a discussion of the Egyptian-influenced cover art of *Fire!!*, contending that Douglas's cover art is part of a long-standing debate regarding Egypt's significance as an African civilization. However, by situating Egypt within Africa she argues that Douglas actually privileges black Africa and that with his art he suggests that "Egypt is not only in Africa, it is of Africa." Griffin has set forward a provocative analysis of Douglas's cover art, which leads me to wonder about the possibilities of analyzing images of Africa across genres. For example, what might Griffin's discussion look like alongside an analysis of Gwendolyn Bennett's "Heritage"? How does Bennett's Sphinx reference engage these dialogues about Egypt and Africa? My point, of course, is not that Griffin should have taken this up but that she sets the stage for stimulating class discussions.

I hope these brief comments here encourage us to continue to be daring in our conceptualization of Harlem Renaissance courses. The period produced drama, literature, music, and the visual arts, but not separate and apart from each other. O'Meally describes Douglas as "'on the scene' in Harlem and 'hanging out' with a multitude of gifted people" (24), but I suspect that this description is apt with regard to many artists of the period. They did not create their art in a vacuum, and thus our research and teaching should seek to delve into the varied nuances and intersections of their work. As an African American studies scholar, I must propose an interdisciplinary route to this goal. Harlem Renaissance studies does not fit well in a disciplinary box—the quarters are much too cramped.

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- 452 *Beyond the Grave: the Ancestral Call in Black Women's Texts* (2013) and *Women in Chains: The Legacy of Slavery in Black Women's Fiction* (2000), coeditor (with Maureen Honey) of *Double-Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology* (2001), and editor of *Teaching American Literature: Background Readings* (2006).

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## Kathleen Pfeiffer

### How do you understand the relationship between the Harlem Renaissance, modernism, and/or modernity?

I see the Harlem Renaissance and modernism as two overlapping but not necessarily interdependent movements, each emerging from traditions that both precede and outlive their intersection. The Harlem Renaissance emerges from a historically, culturally, and aesthetically specific African American literary tradition, whereas literary modernism grew from a fundamentally different set of artistic and philosophical concerns. Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston—modernist writers, all—develop their literary aesthetic from distinctly Afrocentric influences, each of them in one way or another evoking slavery, vernacular rhetorical forms, and the black American folk culture. At the same time, while self-consciously modernist writers like F. Scott Fitzgerald, Sherwood Anderson, and Gertrude Stein also tried to understand and represent blackness in their work, for each of them, black identity served more as an idea than a fact: a passing fancy, the embodiment of “otherness,” a careful of symbolic characters driving by on the way in to the city. So while the Harlem Renaissance and modernism are not necessarily interdependent, in my view, they each profoundly influenced the other, and almost always to the good. Toomer’s inspiration for *Cane* came while he was teaching rural blacks in Georgia, but he also read Gorham Munson and Kenneth Burke as he wrote and revised.

### How have your ideas about the Harlem Renaissance evolved since you first began writing about it?

Well, I first began writing about the Harlem Renaissance as a graduate student—untenured, insecure, self-conscious, and defensive—so much of my early understanding was shaped by the fact that I may have been somewhat book-smart but that my ideas were young and also untried in the classroom. Even once I obtained a tenure-track position, all of those adjectives still defined my attitude in 2000, when the *Nigger Heaven* reissue appeared. Looking back, I was right to feel that way: my work on Van Vechten did create conflict, both at professional conferences and in my own institution. But my work on Van Vechten also shaped a career of recovery work: it led directly to my reissue of Waldo Frank’s *Holiday*, which led directly to *Brother Mine: The Correspondence of Jean Toomer and Waldo Frank* (2010). “Way leads on to way,” as Robert Frost points out in “The Road Not Taken.” In the dozen or so years since my book on race passing and the reissue of *Nigger Heaven* appeared, I have had opportunities to teach