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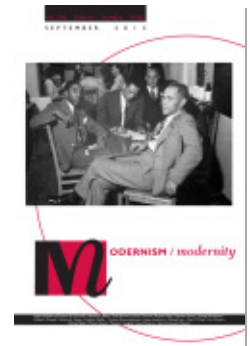
## Questionnaire Responses

Kathleen Pfeiffer

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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

numerous Harlem Renaissance courses—not only as American studies interdisciplinary classes but as senior seminars for English majors and as graduate seminars for master's students, and so my thinking about the Harlem Renaissance has been shaped as much by my classroom experience as it has by the scholarship I've read.

I mention my teaching experience because these courses fall into one of two categories: upper level courses for English majors, where we focus primarily on issues of genre and the literariness of our texts; and general education “knowledge applications” classes, where we examine course texts in terms of diversity, societal structures, and their ethical application in the contemporary world. In each crucible, I have seen the lasting value of Harlem Renaissance writing, both aesthetically and politically. Moreover, I have come to a fuller appreciation for the central debates of the era as they continue to inform contemporary literature and culture. “The Negro in Art” symposium questions, the debate between art and propaganda, the ideological divide between the “old Negro” and the “New Negro”—these all address the issues that continue to animate my students' imaginations and their understanding of literature generally; they also continue to inform my understanding of the political stakes in black studies.

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

I am most fascinated by and most appreciative of the recovery work done by the Modernist Journals Project and other such efforts. For one thing, I find the sheer beauty and imaginative range of many of these recovered journals and little magazines to be a source of great aesthetic and intellectual pleasure. These recovered texts also offer extraordinarily valuable teaching tools, bringing the visual and literary texture of the early twentieth century to life. But I am most engaged and inspired intellectually by work that reconsiders paradigms of biracial identity, interracial friendship, and the presence of whiteness in the Harlem Renaissance. Reconsiderations of biracial identity such as Nella Larsen's, reevaluation of the role of white patronage such as Carl Van Vechten's and Charlotte Mason's, and fuller understanding of such multifaceted events as the Rhinelander trial—these topics fascinate me. Perhaps I am compelled by this work because I find it so enduring, because this is where my life and my students' lives intersect with the era, in these places where cultural and racial intersections blur the boundaries that would ostensibly separate us.

**What figures, connections, or areas of inquiry require further attention or reflection? What aspects of the Harlem Renaissance are we missing or ignoring?**

This question stumps me a bit because I'm not sure who the “we” is. Unlike modernism, which was primarily an artistic movement, the New Negro movement also manifested itself in historical, economic, cultural, and sociological changes. So if the “we” refers to literary critics, then I suppose I'd be interested in more interdisciplinary collaboration between and among scholars in these fields.

454 **What question is missing from this survey?**

I would be interested to see a renewal of the “Criteria of Negro Art” symposium, perhaps one in which contemporary black writers and artists are included, not just modernist and Harlem Renaissance scholars. I may be wrong (and I hope you will edit out my error if I am), but it’s been a full twenty-five years since Henry Louis Gates revived the debate in a special issue of the *Black American Literature Forum*. Since that time, the Oprah Winfrey seal of approval has fundamentally reshaped the publishing industry—a far cry from the time when the authenticating preface written by white men was the condition on which aspiring black authors could see their work published (I am thinking here of Waldo Frank’s introduction to *Cane* or of Carl Van Vechten’s preface to the reissue of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*.) And as I write this, the *Wall Street Journal*’s editorial page has recently given prominence and authority to a nasty screed challenging the academic merit of black studies as an enterprise altogether. Such cultural and political developments suggest the ongoing significance of those questions posed to early twentieth-century writers in the pages of *The Crisis*.

**Kathleen Pfeiffer** is a professor and the chair of English at Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan. She has edited reissues of Carl Van Vechten’s *Nigger Heaven* and Waldo Frank’s *Holiday* and has published work in numerous journals, including *African American Review* and *Legacy*. Her most recent book is *Brother Mine: The Correspondence of Jean Toomer and Waldo Frank* (2010).

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**Cherene Sherrard-Johnson**
**How have your ideas about the Harlem Renaissance evolved since you first began writing about it?**

When I first began studying the Harlem Renaissance as a multidisciplinary movement the emphasis was primarily on the relationship between jazz, the blues, and poetics of the era. Richard Powell’s exhibition catalogue *Rhapsodies in Black: Art of the Harlem Renaissance* (1997) and the associated exhibit highlighted the visual and performance culture of the era, but the interdisciplinary work had not yet been undertaken in literary studies. Thanks to scholars working in and across genres, the study of Harlem Renaissance literature is now indivisible from an understanding of visual culture, high art, popular art, and race movies. Interartistic engagement has enabled scholars to excavate the dynamic nature of Afro-modernism as in constant conversation with what we once understood to be mainstream European and American modernism. My first book, *Portraits of the New Negro Woman: Visual and Literature Culture in the Harlem Renaissance* (2007), argued for an approach that places visual artists and writers in a dialogic relationship by tracing the iconography of the mulatta, which was grafted on and through the ideology of New Negro womanhood. Coterminous studies like Martha Nadell’s *Enter New Negro: Images of Race in American Culture* (2004)