Questionnaire Responses

Houston A. Baker

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

I understand the Harlem Renaissance in ways that were inconceivable on my first encounter with the phrase “the Harlem Renaissance.” In the 1960s, fiercely black nationalist and Black Arts advocates castigated the Harlem Renaissance as a bourgeois, individualistic, narcissistic movement working under the commands of white patronage and black bourgeois audience demands. Never mind that most of the 1920s black writers benefited little from financial, publishing, or critical editorial input from whites. Despite their generational angst, the black nationalist and black aesthetic practitioners dubbed themselves “Renaissance II” and claimed themselves collective, committed, and committing with respect to the black majority, the masses. As the winnowing of time and critical judgments have worked their ineluctable offices, the Black Arts have revealed their own debts to mainstream (i.e., white) patronage and their errant strivings that often reached bombast and have missed “the racial mountain” altogether.

So here we are in a new millennium with nearly a century separating us from that time when Harlem was in vogue. The modes of literary and artistic understanding and reading technologies and practices have changed dramatically. With biographies such as Arnold Rampersad’s of Langston Hughes and David Levering Lewis’s of W. E. B. Du Bois, Thadious Davis’s of Nella Larsen, Robert E. Hemenway’s and Valerie Boyd’s of Zora Neale Huston (and many others), the dramatis personae of the 1920s have been brilliantly illuminated. So, too, have the temper and complexities of their era. With the shift in the incumbencies of intellectual, artistic, sociological, and psychological fields of inquiry surrounding the 1920s, our scholarship has enlarged the “normal practice” of inquiry. Our critique of the Harlem Renaissance has segued into a global project.
For example, the works of Paul Gilroy, Brent Edwards, Cheryl Wald, Angela Davis, George Hutchinson, John Jackson, and Lawrence Jackson (to name but an arbitrarily designated few) have expanded the geopolitical influences and gender expanses of study. Diaspora studies has swept away parochialism with respect to the 1920s. Which is to say, W. E. B. Du Bois’s concluding essay in Alain Locke’s *The New Negro* titled “The World and Africa”—like so much of the Sage of Great Barrington’s labors—was prophetic. Du Bois’s critique of colonial terror, duplicity, and oppression was unequivocally a forerunner to our current expanded critique. In a sense, one might say that under the aspect of newly emergent modes of study, the so-called Harlem Renaissance vigorously inverts Hegel. Rather than *Africa* being a sphere “without history,” African, African American, and diaspora studies today mark the ur-commencement of new histories of race, class, gender, social organization, and economic arrangements of the world. A fine pedagogy has accompanied this perspectival and philosophical shift.

The dedicated and brilliant scholars who have shaped complex new global accounts have dramatically shaped my ideas about the renaissance of the 1920s. I have also been blessed by the work of those who were supposed to be “my students,” but who, in fact, have been some of my finest instructors in the arts and cultures of the renaissance. I am especially grateful to participants in my first National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Seminar on the anthropology of art conducted at the University of Pennsylvania. Out of that work came my monograph *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (1987). My graduate students have also been more than instructive and generous in bringing me up to speed on matters of gender and sexuality, class, and global intersections of the works of those who populated the 1920s.

The most challenging aspect of work on the Harlem Renaissance today is the sheer proliferation of source materials easily accessible. There was, perhaps, a time when a necessary—though surely not sufficient—understanding of Langston Hughes would read him as a young man from complicated and distinctively black American circumstances who made himself into a “local color” Negro poet. Now, one commences any critique or appreciation of Hughes with (metonymically) *Africa* and questions of international cosmopolitanism pertaining to Haitian indigeneity, African negritude, Cuban vernacularity, global South collaboration, communist collectivity, and gender and identity politics, among other issues. The Harlem Renaissance contains such multitudes as these. One almost sometimes longs for the old lacunae! Virtually any course I can imagine, of whatever stamp, might well commence with a newly conceptualized Harlem Renaissance.

What figures, connections, or areas of inquiry require further attention or reflection?

Toward future study, it would be extremely interesting and productive to bring added attention to matters of migration—those crossings to and from, say, Africa and the Caribbean that had great effects on the contours of production, politics, art, and sociology. To that end, one might also want to bring attention to matters of the multilingual. What were, for example, the French, Spanish, and African linguistic entail-
ments of the productions of the Harlem Renaissance? How is what might be deemed a “multilingual mode of study” vital for our present day work on the movement? The prospect of a center for the study of the Harlem Renaissance is terribly intriguing for future scholarly endeavors.

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Emily Bernard

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

My ideas about the Harlem Renaissance haven’t changed much in the last twenty years, but they have expanded. I began reading and writing about the Harlem Renaissance while I was still in college. I was initially drawn to it because of its surfaces—stylish people in attractive clothing, the elegant interiors and exteriors of its nightclubs and magazines. Style drew me in, but as I began to read and write more, it wasn’t the style itself but the intriguing degree of importance assigned to the issue of style that kept me interested in the Harlem Renaissance. I was fascinated by the assumption that was prevalent during the time that aesthetics could impact—even transform—the social and political position of black people in the United States. Those who believed in the inextricable dynamic between art and politics did so ardently, and so did those who believed the opposite. The wars that were waged over this issue in the pages of newspapers, magazines, books, and correspondence have long been the inspiration for my own professional passion.

For years, I have been interested in the role that whiteness played in the construction of the New Negro. Primarily, I have been curious about the way that anxieties about whiteness circulated—and continue to circulate—around Carl Van Vechten. I believe that the discussions occasioned by the role Van Vechten played in the lives and careers of black artists, as well as the firestorm generated by the publication of his 1926 novel Nigger Heaven, are mirrored in current controversies over racial identity, particularly as it relates to cultural authority and authenticity. The debates over art that reflect the ideological fissures and inconsistencies of the Harlem Renaissance period are still foundational to the construction of racial identity as it continues to evolve. I imagine that my interest in the Harlem Renaissance will remain steady as long as I can continue to locate connections between the period when the Negro was in vogue and the role that blackness plays in American culture in the twenty-first century.