African American Women’s Short Stories in the Harlem Renaissance: Bridging a Tradition

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The two major magazines with the longest publication history and the largest readership in which African American women published their works during the Harlem Renaissance were *The Crisis* and *Opportunity.* The key difference between these two was determined by the agenda of the organizations which supported each magazine. *The Crisis,* founded and edited by W.E.B. Du Bois from 1910 to 1935, was an organ of the NAACP. The goals of *The Crisis* were two-fold. Its first aim was to inform and educate both African American and white readerships on issues concerning social, economic, and racial justice for Negroes. Its second purpose was to publicize and encourage the growth of African American culture, both in art and education. *Opportunity* began its publication thirteen years after *The Crisis.* The epigraph for *Opportunity* is an edited version of Galatians 6:10—“As we have therefore opportunity let us do good unto all men...”—and, as its title indicates, the magazine was more positive in its content than *The Crisis.* It reflected the National Urban League’s doctrines of self-help and support. The magazine also differed from *The Crisis* because of its strong emphasis on supporting the arts. It published literary works in various genres, including poetry, sketches, short stories, plays and essays. Poetry submissions were the most frequent and regular of the literary examples with one to three poems appearing in each monthly edition. Short stories were the second most frequent genre represented. At least one short story appeared in every issue after its first eleven issues.

To one who reads the 135 stories published by African American women in *The Crisis* and *Opportunity,* it becomes immediately clear that the Harlem Renaissance was a period in which diversity flourished. But more importantly is the fact that women short story writers responded to the call to create literature that would ennoble the African American. Their response, however, may not have been
what the framers and leaders of the intelligentsia had wanted or expected. As a result, scholars have tended to ignore women who wrote short stories during the Harlem Renaissance and thus have misrepresented the era. By refocusing on these stories, we come to a broader perspective on the values this era represented. In addition, these women's short stories also provide a link in the long and rich tradition of African American women's writing.

Then and in succeeding years, their works were rarely anthologized and are scarcely studied by scholars of the Renaissance era. In fact, scholarship which addresses the short stories written by either men or women during the Harlem Renaissance is surprisingly limited—there are only two books, and no articles, which focus solely on the short stories as a group. These books practically ignore the stories written by women. Margaret Perry's 1976 survey of all the literature written during the Harlem Renaissance discusses the works of twenty-three male writers and only eight female writers. Three-fourths of her chapter on short stories is devoted to the works of Rudolph Fisher, John Matheus, Cecil Blue, Arthur Huff Fauset and Claude McKay. The two women writers mentioned in this chapter (Zora Neale Hurston and Dorothy West) are included in order to demonstrate Perry's belief that, in the hands of women, the short story was immature and overly sentimental. Perry also suggests that Hurston should really not be included in the literary canon of the Harlem Renaissance because the bulk of her work appeared after the "true time of the Harlem Renaissance" a period that, according to Perry, "begins in 1919, reaches its peak in the years 1925 to 1928, and tapers off in 1932" (15). Thus Perry excludes one of the most widely recognized woman writer of the period because all of her novels were written between 1934 and 1948. Likewise, she excludes most of the short fiction written by African American women which appeared in Opportunity after 1929. The impression one gets after reading Perry's analysis is that very few women wrote short stories and those who did publish were underdeveloped, amateur artists who succeeded by and large because of a passing market for sentimental fiction. Perry's examination is incomplete primarily because she examines only four percent of the short stories published by women and because she has abbreviated the Renaissance to thirteen years.

Robert Bone's Down Home: A History of Afro-American Short Fiction from Its Beginnings to the End of the Harlem Renaissance (1975) first identifies writers that he considers are its literary forebears—Paul Laurence Dunbar and Charles Chesnutt. The Renaissance writers that he includes in his study are Zora Neale Hurston, Rudolph Fisher, Claude McKay, Eric Walrond, Jean Toomer, Langston Hughes and
Arna Bontemps. According to Bone's "history," African American short stories were written primarily by men, and these men, including Dunbar and Chesnutt, were good short story writers because they relied for models on stories written by white men (xv). Moreover, Bone proposes that stories written by African Americans during the Harlem Renaissance gravitated towards either the pastoral or anti-pastoral tradition. He identifies the pastoral by the following conventions: "(1) people of a low socio-economic class, (2) living in simplicity and harmony, (3) against a background of rural nature" (xvi). The antipastoral, according to Bone (xix), takes on characteristics of satire and picaresque. He then suggests that regardless of the mode, all African American short fiction writers incorporate the following "deep structures":

First, his deep attachment to the Protestant tradition, and especially the Bible, whose pages are saturated, both in the Old and New Testaments, with the rhetoric of pastoral. Second, his deep affection for the rural South, despite the terror and brutality which all too often were visited upon him within its precincts. And third, his deep anxiety concerning his future role in American society, which manifests itself in the emotional plane as a painful vacillation between hope and despair. (xix-xx)

While these generalizations have limited applications to "his" short fiction, they do not apply to "hers" at all. The stories written by African American women contain themes, settings, ideals and events largely outside Bone's list of characteristics.

For example, one of the most notable features of the short stories of women is that their settings are not predominantly rural—statistically, the ratio of urban settings versus rural settings is approximately equal (52% are urban and 48% are rural). Most of the women writers are particularly clear about where their stories are situated, such as Detroit, Boston, Chicago, Manhattan, Harlem, the Bronx, and New Orleans. Like the ratio between rural and urban settings, the frequency of Northern stories to Southern stories is approximately equal (58% are Northern and 42% are Southern). Stories which incorporate both sections of the country emphasize that life in North, despite the difficulties of adjustment to the city, is far better than life in the South. Women's stories challenge Bone's suggestion that the short stories of the Harlem Renaissance reflect a "deep affection for the rural South."

Further, there are few descriptions of idyllic beauty or pastoral harmony, even within women's stories that involve rustic settings and simple folk. Instead, the lives of the poor in women's writing involve struggle and conflict. Likewise, this realistic portrayal is usual-
ly not written satirically or in the picaresque mode, for there are few stories that evoke wit, humor or on-the-road adventure. Finally, Bone’s suggestion that writers of the Harlem Renaissance are concerned about their place in America’s future is not an anxiety shared by the women writing during this period. The characters in women’s short fiction, the majority of which are female, are far more attentive to issues which affect their lives personally than on the large question of African American and American destiny. The conflicts that face these characters are daily, immediate living concerns, such as how to find and keep a job, save enough money, feed, clothe, and educate children, deal with a spouse (or life without a spouse), and maintain personal dignity in the face of routine oppression and prejudice. In this fiction of everydayness, there is very little philosophizing about the role that the “New Negro” has in the broad sweep of an imagined future. None of these characters has the opportunity to influence the national political power of the African American or debate the type of education most profitable for a “Talented Tenth.”

By focusing on examples in which women writers offer a perspective markedly different from those of male writers, I do not mean to suggest that the women who wrote short stories during the Harlem Renaissance set out to write against the precepts laid out by the leaders of the movement. But when given the opportunity to write and publish their works, they chose to work within their own horizons and out of their experiences as women. The result was not an affirmation of an intellectually and economically advancing civilized race. Instead, the themes of their stories offer a less positive treatment but also a much broader spectrum of issues than can be found in prominent male writers. The importance of this is that it strongly suggests a gendered point of view which involves ritualistic journeys, articulated voices, and symbolic spaces characteristic of a tradition of African American women’s writing. The women of the Harlem Renaissance need to be accounted for within this tradition, frequently identified nowadays with writers like Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, but already evident during the time of slavery and in the period of the Harlem Renaissance.

One of the characteristics identified in African American women’s writing is pointed out by Michael Awkward in the introduction to his study of African American women’s novels: “...the dominant image in the recent creative and critical writing of Afro-American women [is] the struggle to make articulate a heretofore repressed and silenced African American female’s story and voice” (1). Efforts to formulate a story that particularly addresses the needs and concerns of women and the attempt to create a narrative that allows different
voices to be heard is strongly evident in the short fiction written by women of the Harlem Renaissance. One manifestation of this characteristic is close adherence to the actual words and dialect of those speakers. Of the 135 stories written by women in *The Crisis* and *Opportunity*, 124 use rural folk dialect in the dialogue of both female and male characters. And despite the fact that half of the stories take place in the North, the phonetic spellings, ellipses and vocabulary reveal a predominantly Southern dialect. The use of dialect has particular significance to contemporary African American women. Ntozake Shange, for example, explains her orthography as follows: “The spellings result from the way I talk or the way the character talks, or the way I heard something said. Basically the spellings reflect language as I hear it” (qtd. in Tate 163). June Jordan, arguing for the legitimacy of Black English, observes, “If we lose our fluency in our language, we may irreversibly forsake elements of the spirit that have provided for our survival” (34). This attention to actual speech has evolved in the history of African American women’s writing. For example, Alice Walker’s portrayal of her heroine’s speech in *The Color Purple* (1982) contrasts drastically with Frances Harper’s presentation of Iola’s voice in *Iola Leroy* (1892). Whereas Iola Leroy is largely indistinguishable from the southern Lady and is devoted to the mission of middle-class racial “uplift,” Celie is a poor, simple, rural, barely literate African American woman. Unlike Iola’s language, no ornate and elevated speeches come trippingly to her tongue. The question, then, is what happened between the ninety years that separate these two women’s novels? The works of African American women of the Harlem Renaissance provide a link to contemporary writers, for they were concerned with representing the woman’s voice. In this respect they are literary forebears of women writers that followed.

The identification of voice is manifested not only through imitative speech, but also thought and point of view. Twenty of the stories are told by a first-person narrator, usually female. These first-person narrators represent a vast array of women (and two men) who vary in age, occupation, education, race, nationality, and economic background. There is middle-aged Mary Brown confined in an insane asylum, a white school teacher, a Southern public high school student, a female newspaper reporter in New York, a mulatto man who was born into slavery, a college woman taking a trip to Europe, a woman whose only son has been called to war, a young mother who has just lost her job, a woman reflecting on the poverty in fashionable Harlem, a teacher at a Negro university, a woman who runs a boarding house in Kentucky, a white secretary, a white nurse in the South, a mother of two children living in Boston, a flapper, a twelve-year-
old girl who watches her brother escape from a lynching, a female school teacher in a southern city, an old man telling of his days in slavery, a foreign woman who attends a country dance in Georgia, and a female student at a boarding school in Louisiana. One of the results of this use of first-person narrative is that the exposition of oppression is now dramatized on a personal level. The most important battleground of racial conflict is now seen to lie within the individual, not collectively in the group or abstractly in the race.

The emphasis in these short stories is clearly on women, an emphasis that is characteristic of African American women’s writing. Seventy percent of the third-person narratives center on a female character and in each of the stories this female character combats various forms of oppression. In all cases, it is through this battle that she questions her racial, economic, social and emotional self. The result of confronting these various identities results in a divided self-image. This concept of a dual or multiple identity can be found in many of the works of all African Americans, but the naming of the identities has varied according to gender. Du Bois wrote about the self-contradictory nature of African American existence and consciousness. In his pioneering work The Souls of Black Folk (1903), he called attention to the generative split which gives form to African American culture and confuses the interpretations of it. He called it “double consciousness,” a term at once large and ambiguous enough to encompass a complex social, cultural, and psychological phenomenon:

after the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of [whites].... One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (45)

African American women such as Maria Steward, Sojourner Truth and Anna Julia Cooper were already identifying a divided self ten years before Du Bois articulated the phenomenon. But the partition African American women experience is a division of consciousness, not between their color and nationality, but between color and gender. Hurston, in her essay “How it Feels to be Colored Me,” writes that she has “no separate feelings about being an American citizen and colored” (155). And the tradition continues, as illustrated in
Frances Beale's renaming of many-sided consciousness as "double jeopardy" (92) to characterize the condition of being African American and female. Short story writers of the Harlem Renaissance, however, do not reflect their consciousness through a conflict of sexual oppression nor a concern for their American identity. Instead, these African American women writers portray two types of characters with a double consciousness: those who need to reconcile their mixed racial parentage and those daughters who need to break away from the traditions held by their mothers.

The character of the "tragic mulatto" is a familiar one in African American writing, for novels of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century concentrate on the theme of "passing." The presentation of the mulatto, however, does vary between men and women writers. African American men who wrote during the Harlem Renaissance tended to idolize the mulatto female in their works. Images of idyllic African American women in Jean Toomer's Cane, Claude McKay's Home to Harlem, and Countee Cullen's poems and dramas are usually based on African American women who have manipulated their features to make themselves more acceptably white for African American men. One of Charles Chesnutt's short stories ("Cicely's Dream") presents a black-skinned woman who is ignored and repudiated because she is too dark. Early novels by African American women, however, present characters who remain loyal to their race. For example, in Iola Leroy, the beautiful mulatto Iola is given a political role—she refuses to marry a white man and abandon her commitment to her African American heritage, and she acknowledges voluntarily her kinship to African American people even though she could pass as white. Pauline Hopkins's novel Contending Forces (1900) includes a mulatto woman whose personal battle against prejudice is located in a long, collective history of oppression. The contending forces are doom ing the entire race. The mulatto women in the Harlem Renaissance stories written by women usually resolve to remain loyal to their African American identity, as in Iola Leroy. But the decision is always a personal one, not a political and public gesture such as Iola Leroy makes.

Caroline Bond Day, in her story "The Pink Hat" presents a mulatto woman's experiment with the social restrictions governing her mixed ancestry. The woman is a teacher in Boston who is visiting her Negro relatives in the South. She is shocked at the treatment she receives in the South, and by chance discovers that if she wears a certain stylish pink hat in public, she is mistaken for a white woman because the frizziness of her hair is hidden. She takes advantage of the situation and goes shopping, visits an art gallery, uses the white rest-
rooms, drinks from a white-only water fountain, and attends various concerts. It is during one of these concerts that she suddenly panics—"one does have ‘horrible imaginings and present fears’ down here, sub-conscious pictures of hooded figures and burning crosses" (380). In her excitement to escape the theater she falls and breaks her ankle, and because it is discovered that she is African American, she is not permitted to be treated by an osteopathic doctor. Despite the lame-ness that results from the injury, the mulatto woman decides she would rather live her life as an African American woman, where-upon she symbolically discards the "magic" hat. Her decision to re-main loyal to her color affects only herself; no one else has even been aware of her experiment in crossing the color line. Thus her return to her people is done in the quiet of her own conscience.

Other mulatto characters make similar choices, especially when it involves marrying within the race. Eloise Bibb Thompson’s story "Mademoiselle 'Tasie—A Story," presents an old quadroon woman who easily passes for white, but who decides to marry an African American man in order to ensure that the remaining years of her life are not lonely—a self-interested purpose that disregards racial pride as its motivation. Mariana, in Madeen C. Lane’s story "Black Mesti-za," eventually chooses to date her African American boyfriend when she overhears a white boyfriend making derogatory state-ments about African Americans. She fears that her white boyfriend would not be strong enough to deal with harassment if she continues dating him. The choices that these women make would be repeated years later in Margaret Walker’s novel Jubilee in which the heroine Vyry finds her true identity in a marriage to a lower-class African American and in fully compatible relationships within the African American community. However, for many of the young mulatto women in the short stories of the Harlem Renaissance writers, the de-cision of choosing an African American marriage partner involves a third party. Usually, this person is the girl’s mother. Thus, the mulat-to woman is faced not only with a duality of race, but with more than one claim to loyalty.

The relationship between a daughter and her mother has been ex-plored throughout the centuries of women’s writing, and the women of the Harlem Renaissance contribute to this long history. All women writers, according to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (293), experi-ence an anxiety over the “authority of authorship”—a need to define themselves in their own voices as subjects. Feminist writing and scholarship has explored this idea through a variety of personal and disciplinary perspectives, one of which focuses on the relationship between mothers and daughters. Mary Helen Washington identifies
this relationship in African American women’s writing as the “con-
nection between the African American woman writer’s sense of her-
self as part of a link in generations of women, and her decision to
write” (“I Sign” 161). Alice Walker’s essays “In Search of Our Moth-
ers’ Gardens” and “Saving the Life That Is Your Own,” and Paule
Marshall’s “Shaping the World of My Art” and “From the Poets in
the Kitchen” are conscious and public attempts, as Mary Helen
Washington puts it, to

piece together the story of a viable female culture, one in which there is
generational continuity, in which one’s mother serves as the female
precursor who passes on the authority of authorship to her daughter
and provides a model for the African American woman’s literary pres-
ence in this society. (“I Sign” 147)

Writers such as Paule Marshall, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Dorothy
West, and Ntozake Shange chose middle-aged or older protagonists
and for the most part write as daughters and not as mothers.12 Their
public celebration of maternal presence and influence and their por-
trayals of strong and powerful mothers, on the one hand, combined
with the relative absence of fathers on the other, makes this uniquely
female tradition a particularly interesting one in which to explore is-
ues of maternal presence and absence, speech and silence.

The women who wrote during the Harlem Renaissance were in a
unique position to examine their connection with and separation
from their maternal heritage. The daughters and granddaughters of
freed slaves were living in an era of increased opportunity with re-
spect to education.11 They had relative freedom to explore the possi-
bilities of occupations not limited to domestic duties to which their
mothers had been relegated. These mothers, knowing so well their
own past experiences of racial oppression, sought to improve the
conditions of their daughters by de-emphasizing their African Amer-
ican racial heritage. Edith Manuel Durham’s story “Deepening
Dusk” portrays this psychological battle between a mother and
daughter. In this story, the mulatto daughter Vivvie wants to marry
Tim, an African American man, but her mother, Kate Benson, tries to
prevent her from doing so because she has hopes that her daughter
will not have to endure the hardships that she has suffered as an
African American woman. She explains her reasoning to Vivvie:

As if I wouldn’t love my baby just the same, white as milk or black as
coal, ma like or pa like. It was only we felt it would make things easier
for you. Your Pa said then, “If the dusk doesn’t deepen, Kate, we can
send her home and make a lady of her.” He loved you, Vivvie. He took
you with him once, but you were too little to remember. Your Grand- 
ma was crazy after you. He said it again when he was passin’, and I 
promised him. And almost I waited too long. Your Grandma wrote me 
for you. Time I sent you away. You can pass. (50)

Kate chooses not to explain the absence of the white father, but in-
stead focuses on the advantages Vivvie will have if she is exposed to 
the white world of her father’s family. But Vivvie remains resolved to 
marry Tim. Moreover, in her anger towards her mother, she decides 
to leave home. As she is exiting the kitchen, her mother collapses to 
the floor. Vivvie screams and neighbor women respond immediately. 
Durham depicts the character of this multi-racial community of 
women who respond to Vivvie’s cry for help:

Pushing through the narrow door they came, plump Mrs. Jacobs, slim 
Mrs. Harris, anxious to aid. The Jewish woman’s white hands were 
stained pink from the berries she had been hulling, the dark woman’s 
brown hands were dusty, straight from the biscuit pan; busy women, 
both of them, dropping everything for a child’s cry of terror. (49)

Other women come to the house and remain in the kitchen while the 
doctor examines Kate. Throughout the night they remain to ensure 
she receives the rest prescribed by the doctor. A characteristic of 
African American women’s fiction, as identified by Mary Helen 
Washington (Invented xxi) is the importance of the community of 
women, much like the one portrayed in the kitchen of Durham’s sto-
ry—women gather together in a small room to share intimacies that 
can be entrusted only to a kindred female spirit. But Vivvie is not part 
of this community of older women, and she is left alone to sort out 
her feelings of guilt for causing her mother’s collapse as well as her 
feelings for her lover Tim. She must struggle to define herself in op-
position to and not in imitation of the maternal figure. E. Frances 
White writes about this conflicting duality that faces young African 
American women: “How dare we admit the psychological battles 
that need to be fought with the very women who taught us to survive 
in this racist and sexist world? We would feel like ungrateful traitors” 
(18). Vivvie’s sense of guilt prevents her from expressing her opposi-
tion to her mother’s plan for the future, and, as Kate recovers, Vivvie 
physically weakens. Eventually Kate realizes the pain her daughter is 
suffering on her behalf and asks, “You would rather wash and scrub 
and sweat? rather be poor and fretted with a swarm of Black and 
brown and yellow little darkies than do what I tell you? rather than 
be white and rich with your path easy?” (51). Vivvie’s emotional plea 
to be allowed to stay with her own kind moves her mother to change
her mind. Female relationships are an essential aspect of self-definition for African American women; and in this story, it is Kate who changes her ideas about who she is and who her daughter will be.

Dorothy West's story "Mammy" is a much more complex narrative which combines these themes of the mother-daughter relationship and the dual identity of a mulatto woman. It does not follow the tradition, however, of portraying a close community among women. The narrator is a young African American welfare investigator who is researching a case involving an elderly woman, Mrs. Mason, who is eligible for relief. The investigator first visits Mrs. Mason’s previous employer, Mrs. Coleman, in her apartment in the affluent Central Park area. The African American elevator boy expresses his disgust that the investigator causes his other white passengers delays. This upsets her, for she is not used to being treated so poorly by someone of her own race. This opening incident is important, for it ironically foreshadows the investigator’s treatment of Mrs. Mason at the end of the story.

The investigator learns about a tragic story during her investigation. Mrs. Coleman, whose infant granddaughter has died, wishes that Mrs. Mason will return to her duties as "Mammy." The family needs the comfort and support of the elderly woman who has been with them for a long time. The investigator then interviews Mrs. Mason in order to convince her to return to the Coleman family, alleviating Mrs. Mason’s need for relief assistance. Mrs. Mason, however, reveals a different story. It is discovered that Mrs. Coleman is actually Mrs. Mason’s daughter who, because of mixed racial heritage, is able to pass as white. Her African American mother has been pretending to be a family servant in order to be near her daughter and granddaughter. The granddaughter marries, becomes pregnant, and gives birth to a healthy child, but the child bears the color and physical features of its African American great grandmother. Mrs. Coleman, needing to hide her own African American background, kills the infant before her husband and the child’s father can see it. Mrs. Mason, witnessing the act, leaves, refusing to have anything to do with a home in which the "devil’s done eased out God" (302). Here the conflict over race between three generations of women has ended in tragedy. Mrs. Mason’s daughter is the one who chooses to deny her African American mother and successfully passes for white by marrying a wealthy white man.14 The African American heritage of the mother is passed to the granddaughter and the truth is revealed in the third generation. Mrs. Mason’s cruelty in denying her own mother, treating her like a servant in her own home, threatening her with never being able to see her granddaughter and eventually murdering
an African American baby, all emphasize a warped sense of racial self-hatred.

But perhaps the most shocking part of this story is the investigator’s lack of sympathy for Mrs. Mason. It is the investigator’s job to give or withhold relief, and the facts of this case dictate that Mrs. Mason has an opportunity to return to the home of her employer and thus does not need welfare. The investigator, very concerned with the fact that she needs to be back at her office by 5:00 p.m. in order to file her case, expeditiously decides against granting relief to Mrs. Mason. Like the boy on the elevator, who later explained to the investigator, “You ought to understand. I was only doing my job. I got to as same as white folks, same as you,” (300), the young woman needs to do her job too. She has worked hard for the position she now holds, and lying to her employers about Mrs. Mason would jeopardize her job. There is no sense of community here in this environment—certainly not within Mrs. Mason’s family and not within the community of African Americans in this impersonal city of Harlem.

Dorothy West’s story also reveals another characteristic prevalent in African American women’s writing—the imperative to reject the use of stereotypical depictions of African American women. Portraying African American women as stereotypical mammys, matriarchs, welfare recipients and hot mommas has been essential to the political economy of domination fostering African American women’s oppression. Challenging these controlling images has long been a core theme in African American women’s writing. Hazel Carby suggests that the objective of stereotypes is “not to reflect or represent a reality but to function as a disguise, or mystification, of objective social relations” (22). These established images are designed to make racism, sexism, and poverty appear to be natural, normal, and an inevitable part of everyday life. The image of the mammy—the faithful, obedient domestic servant—justifies the economic exploitation of house slaves and further explains African American women’s long-standing restriction to work such as domestic service. The “good” African American woman will love, nurture and care for the white children and family better than her own.” A second deep-seated image of African American womanhood is that of the welfare mother. She is condemned as bad for not being aggressive enough, content to sit around and collect welfare, shunning work, and passing on her bad values to her offspring. West’s story appears to endorse both of these stereotypes, for Mrs. Mason is viewed by the investigator as being unreasonable in her refusal to return to her white family which needs her. The truth that Mrs. Mason is actually the mother of Mrs. Coleman is revealed only at the very end of the story and this truth un-
dermines the foundations of a system of oppression based on stereotypes. So does the scene in which she kills her own grandchild in order to preserve this power. It is not Mrs. Mason but Mrs. Coleman who is the uncaring mother-figure, who endorses the "mammy-system" in order to ensure for herself the power of being white. Mrs. Mason is not shunning work, but shunning a home where morality and justice have ceased to exist, and although the welfare investigator appears to ignore this difference, the reader does not.

This rejection of stereotypes of African American women was not only advocated by African American women. Alain Locke, for instance, called for a new portrayal of all African Americans:

The day of "aunties," "uncles," and "mammies," is...gone. Uncle Tom and Sambo have passed on, and even the "Colonel" and "George" play barnstorm roles from which they escape with relief when the public spotlight is off. The popular melodrama has about played itself out, and it is time to scrap the fictions, garret the bogeys and settle down to a realistic facing of facts. (The New Negro 5, emphasis added)

One short story, Ramona Lowe's "The Woman in the Window," exemplifies Locke's description of literature of the New Negro perhaps with more "realistic facing of facts" than Locke himself would have wanted.

Mrs. Jackson, a single African American parent of four children, is hired to cook for a restaurant in a northern city. But her job entails more than she had counted on: she learns that the other staff is to call her by her first name, instead of "Mrs. Jackson"; she is to do her cooking in the front of the restaurant behind a large display window; she is to wear a purple skirt, a big white apron, a green shawl and a red bandanna; she is not permitted to wear a corset; and she is asked to smile. Mrs. Jackson, although "verbally not quite equal to the unexpected" (11), labors to express her dissatisfaction. She recognizes that she is being racially and sexually objectified, stereotyped, and used as a marketing tool. Her hesitancy causes the proprietor to raise her salary from fifteen dollars a week to eighteen and finally to twenty. The narrator reports that

Mrs. Jackson did not take long to consider. A family that had to be supported, when jobs were scarce and poor-paying, made duty triumph over pride...[she] had a conscience quickened by four little children who had to be clothed and fed and who belonged to her. (12)
Mrs. Jackson chooses to “realistically fac[e]...facts” by accepting the indignities of the stereotypical Aunt Jemima caricature in order to fulfill her motherly role of providing for the needs of her family.

Another characteristic of African American women’s writing is that the women characters often conduct their quests for self-affirmation within physically limited spaces (Tate xx). They do not, for instance, journey across the Northeast like Richard Wright’s Cross Damon in The Outsider, nor do they explore the underground regions of urban civilization like Ralph Ellison’s invisible man. These male protagonists are not generally encumbered with the weight of dependents or with strong ties to the community. As a result, they are either free to begin with or they free themselves so as to travel light. The female protagonist, by contrast, is usually literally tied down to her children and connected to a particular place. Because of the restrictions placed on the African American character’s physical movement, she must conduct her quest within close boundaries, often within a room as in the case of Sula Peace in Toni Morrison’s Sula, or within the borders of two nearby towns as is the case of Ursa Corregidora in Gayl Jones’s novel Corregidora.

Women writing short stories during the Harlem Renaissance were also very aware of the physical boundaries which imprison their female characters. Especially for those women living in urban areas, the crowded confines of inner-city apartments, the tall buildings and sooty windows which prevent the light of the sun from penetrating into these apartments, and the constant need to stand over a hot stove in order to feed the family all imprison the woman both physically and emotionally. The narrator in the short story “Condemned House” by Lucille Boehm describes the decaying house that she lives in: “Suddenly you hated the old house as you would loathe a person who slowly, coolly plotted murder. You wanted to claw it to pieces. You wanted to dig your nails into the cement and tear it brick from brick” (169). The speaker is fighting against the evil of poverty that has confined her in a dying home in the middle of Harlem. In fact, all the houses on the street are in ruins, “sagging against each other like tired women in a subway jam” (168). The houses (figuratively feminized), the women who live in them, and even the reader who is drawn into the despair through the consistent reference to “you” by the narrator, are physically and psychologically bound together. Another example of the prison-like life of a woman living in a city is found in one of Marita Bonner’s earliest short stories, “The Prison-Bound.” The woman lives in Chicago in a small apartment within a physically and psychologically destructive kitchen that is constantly greasy, sooty and dingy. The sharp edges of her stove literally tear
her skirt. The “iron walls,” like prison bars, are repeatedly mentioned. Her husband is free to escape the apartment, whereas she is left “prison-bound” and choking on her tears.

Confinement, however, does not only occur in city tenements. Zora L. Barnes portrays a woman confined to her bed in an insane asylum in a small rural Southern town. Outside her window she can see the top branches of an ancient oak tree which stands alone in a field surrounding the hospital, but she is prevented from reaching this tree. Her physical imprisonment (she has guards at her door and is carried around on her bed) is a direct result of her inability to cope with the restrictions she has experienced throughout her life. Her life-story is one of disappointment because of the injustices of racism—she had first hoped to be an artist, then a librarian, then a saleswoman, but was refused or rejected because of her color. Finally, she is sexually harassed while working as a cleaning girl. Her only escape is through death, “because [it] is blind and knows not of race or creed or color” (Barnes 76). She is imprisoned in a hospital for repeated attempts at suicide. Alice Walker, in a speech given at Radcliffe College in May 1972, named women who try to escape their imprisonment through suicide “suspended women” (qtd. in Washington “Teaching” 212). Because the pressures against them are so great that they cannot move anywhere, these women are suspended in time and place. They are women whose life choices are so severely limited that they either kill themselves, retreat into insanity, or submit to defeat in the face of external circumstances of their lives. The speaker in Barnes’s story concludes, “I lie here shrouded in white against that time and rimmed in by the gloom” (76 emphasis added). This condition is recurrent in African American women’s fiction. Washington cites two examples of this “suspended” cycle (“Teaching” 213), one as far back as one of the first novels written by an African American woman, Iola Leroy, to the contemporary work of Gayle Jones’s Eva’s Man. Women of the Harlem Renaissance act as a bridge to more recent African American women’s writing in their treatment of confinement and suspension.

According to Barbara Christian, in most African American women’s fiction “poverty and oppression resulted in violence between black men and women” (8). This theme of gender conflict and violence can be traced to Harriet Wilson, who in Our Nig tried to mute her attack against the sexism of African American men by stating in her introduction that she is afraid her story will offend her readers: “I sincerely appeal to my colored brethren universally for patronage, hoping that they will not condemn this attempt of their sister to be erudite, but rally around me a faithful band of supporters
and defenders” (Wilson xi). Contemporary writers have not been as timid and deferential, as is seen in Walker’s *The Color Purple* and Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*.

Three stories written during the Harlem Renaissance uphold this tradition by portraying the violence that can occur as a result of sexist oppression. The most familiar is Zora Neale Hurston’s story “Sweat,” which has a striking resemblance to Ethel Riley’s “Dark Laughter.” In Hurston’s story, Delia is mistreated by her husband Sykes, who eventually attempts to kill her by putting a rattlesnake in the laundry basket. The snake, however, crawls onto the bed and eventually bites Sykes, who dies crying for help, which Delia does not offer. Ethel Riley also uses a snake as the agent of violence between the sexes. Rita, the granddaughter of a slave, has been repeatedly raped by Lije Bonner. The grandmother and Rita, using both Christian and pagan incantations, train a black python to protect Rita. When Bonner comes at night and begins beating Rita, she manages to release the snake, which immediately attacks and kills the man. As opposed to Delia who runs from the house in order not to witness the death of her husband, Rita stoically watches as the python crushes the body of her rapist.

Lily’s method of retribution in the short story “The Red Dress” by Grace W. Tompkins is poison. Zeke, Lily’s abusive husband, routinely beats his wife. Lily’s only escape is to attend prayer services in the evenings. Zeke, however, finds out that the preacher is especially kind to Lily and thus he prohibits her from going out in the evening. The minister, however, manages to buy a red dress for Lily, who hides it under the house. Lily then poisons the salt pork of Zeke’s dinner, but while he is eating, the dog uncovers the paper package with the red dress. Zeke brutally attacks Lily, killing her just before the poison takes effect and kills him.

There was not a positive reception in African American editorial circles to the stories with these portraits of women. The editors of *The Crisis* magazine clearly did not approve of stories which depicted a depressing, albeit realistic, portrayal of women. Editorial comments on literary works were usually limited to brief phrases which summarized the plot; occasionally there were advertisements for another story to be published by the author in a future edition. But in the July issue of 1931, the editors broke their editorial silence and wrote the following comment concerning the story “Honor” by Lillian Beverton Mason:

*The Crisis* seeks fiction like this—clear, realistic and frank, and yet fiction which shows the possible if not actual triumph of good and true
and beautiful things. We do not want stories which picture Negro
blood as a crime calling for lynching or suicide. We are quite fed up
with filth and defeatism. Send us stories like this. (230)

The story which received this endorsement was written by a white
woman (this is revealed in another story she wrote a year later). It
tells of the life of a young mulatto woman, Magnolia, who is raised
by her grandmother. Big John, an African American man who plays
piano for a bar and house of prostitution, has been pressuring Mag-
nolia to sleep with him. Magnolia, however, has dreams of going to
college and wants to keep her “honor.” A storm hits her rural town
and her grandmother’s house is washed away in a flood. Big John
saves Magnolia’s life and Magnolia decides to show her gratitude by
offering to “be [his] girl” (230). Big John, protects the girl’s honor and
tells her to go to college. Mason’s narrator emphasizes that Magno-
lia’s integrity is not the “good and true and beautiful” aspect of this
story—it is Big John’s decision to not ruin the reputation of Magnolia.
The editor’s comments suggest a concern with the presentation of
male African American characters and the need to portray men as
honorable. The story is also not defeatist, for Magnolia escapes from
her rural prison and succeeds in college. But the story is not typical of
African American women’s writing which reveals women’s lack of
freedom and success in a sexist and racist world. In fact, the story’s
reconciliation between the sexes is atypical of African American
women’s writing.

Short stories by African American women are an integral part of a
literary tradition not usually associated with the Harlem Renais-
sance. Ignoring twenty-five years of short stories written by women
causes serious misreadings, not only of the literary history of this era,
but of the life of the African American women who lived during this
time. The Harlem Renaissance was a large and diverse movement in
African American literary history that went beyond what a small “in-
crowd” (Hurston labeled this Bohemian group of artists the “nig-
gerati”) was helping one another to do in New York City. Reviewing
the Harlem Renaissance in light of women writers requires a broad-
ening of temporal, geographical, and critical boundaries. It is clear
that women short story writers have been marginalized by peri-
odization, the hierarchy of canonical forms, critical rankings of major
and minor genres, and generalizations about literary periods. Most
importantly, these short stories provide a link between nineteenth
century and twentieth century African American women writers.
The stories notably broaden the spectrum of the New Negro artists.
Their writings are significant as notable literary responses to the de-
termining facts of race and gender as filtered through their personal artistic consciousness.

Notes

1. Other magazines were *The Messenger*, *Fire!!*, *Black Opals*, and *The Saturday Evening Quill*. The publication periods were substantially shorter and number of subscribers significantly less than that of *Opportunity* and *The Crisis*.

2. This reflects the number of stories published in both magazines from 1923-1948, years in which *The Crisis* and *Opportunity* were published simultaneously. 1948 is also a year in which *The Crisis* stopped publishing short stories, a trend that continued for four years with the exception of an occasional story by Chester Himes.

3. The number of stories written by men exceeds the number written by women (55% to 45%). These percentages may actually be closer for the following reasons: 1) names that used only initials were considered to be male authors, and 2) male pseudonyms were often adopted by women.

4. The most recent publication is a collection of stories by women entitled *The Sleeper Wakes*, edited by Marcy Knopf. In addition, Lorraine Elena Roses and Ruth Elizabeth Randolph have published a literary biography of African American women writers.

5. She also dismisses Marita Bonner: “[Bonner] cannot be included among the writers of the Renaissance [because] the spirit that pervaded the writing of the major and minor writers of the Harlem Renaissance was missing from [her] works” (14-15). Perry fails to identify what that “spirit” was.

6. For a detailed linguistic analysis of the way dialect is presented in African American literature, see the article by Patricia C. Nichols entitled “Linguistic Options and Choices for Black Women in the Rural South.”

7. One notable exception is Eloise Bibb Thompson’s story “Mademoiselle ‘Tasie—A Story” in which the title character is a Creole woman whose reported speech reflects her French accent.

8. This story, “One Blue Star” by May Miller, actually depicts the voices of all “black mother[s] of the fighters of the ages” (142)—Miller gives voice to a global list of African American mothers from Zipporah, the Egyptian wife of Moses to the mother of Nat Turner.

9. For a more thorough examination of the development of autobiographies to first-person narratives, see Richard Yarbrough’s essay “The First-Person in Afro-American Fiction.”

10. The topic of mixed blood was a controversial issue among writers during the Harlem Renaissance. W.E.B. Du Bois wrote the following statement in an editorial: “The Crisis...most emphatically advises against race intermarriage in America...because of social conditions and prejudice and not for physical reasons” (qtd. in Detweiler 145). On the other hand, writers, like Claude McKay, rhapsodized about the spectrum of shades—his catalogue in *Home to Harlem* of “chocolate, chestnut, coffee, ebony, cream [and] yellow” (qtd. in Arthur P. Davis 40) reveals a rainbow that began to be celebrated in art. Race-mixing for women, though, was a different matter, for many men still preferred to marry the paler colored women. Wallace Thurman’s Emma Lou in his 1929 novel *Thr*
Blacker the Berry embodies a theme of the "tragic mulatto." Nella Larsen's two novels Quicksand and Passing also deal with this issue; Helga is able to be both inside and outside white communities and in Passing, the protagonist pretends to be white. Hazel Carby suggests that "the figure of the mulatto is regarded as a convention of Afro-American literature that enabled the exploration in fiction of relations that were socially proscribed" (84).

11. This story also illustrates a characteristic that women's writing is considered singular and anomalous, not universal and representative. Hurston was chastised by critic Benjamin Brawley because "Her interest...is not in solving problems, the chief concern being with individuals" (258).

12. Marianne Hirsch writes in her very perceptive essay "Maternal Narratives: Cruel Enough to Stop the Blood" that mother-daughter stories are nearly always written from the daughter's point of view and the "great unwritten story" remains, the story of the mother herself told in her own voice.

13. The actual advancement of education opportunities was not as well-developed as the leaders of the Renaissance portrayed, especially for women. Marita Bonner addresses the limitations on educational opportunities in her short stories.

14. The story is very similar to the plot of Fannie Hurst's 1933 novel Imitation of Life in which Peola, an African American woman denies her African American mother and attempts to pass and actually has herself sterilized in order to marry a white man and forestall the inevitable African American baby. West's story changes the sterilization to murder. In the 1934 film version of Imitation of Life, starring Claudette Colbert, Fredi Washington's Peola does not have herself sterilized; in fact, her marriage to a white man is never raised. Presumably, passing was strong enough stuff for contemporary audiences without the threat of miscegenation made explicit.

15. Trudier Harris's volume From Mammies to Militants: Domestics in Black American Literature investigates prominent differences in how African American women have been portrayed by others in literature and how they portray themselves.

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