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‘LIFTING AS WE CLIMB’: BLACK WOMEN, ‘RACE,’ AND THE MODERN MOMENT

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INTRODUCTION¹

In July of 1895, the British Anti-Lynching Committee received an offensive letter from John W. Jacks, president of the Missouri Press Association. The letter was defamatory of all blacks, but, in an attempt to discredit the successful anti-lynching activities of journalist and social reformer Ida B. Wells-Barnett, reserved its most vituperative comment for black women. Denouncing blacks in general as lacking in morality, the letter singled out black women as not only ‘prostitutes,’ but ‘natural thieves and liars.’² The British Anti-Lynching Committee forwarded this letter to Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, who was then president of the Woman’s Era Club of Boston. In response, Ruffin sent copies of the letter to the black women leaders of other clubs around the U.S., and called for a meeting whose purpose would be to form a national organization of black women with the goal of fighting such calumny, among other activities directed at improving social and material conditions for blacks. The one hundred women who attended the meeting later that year from all parts of the United States founded the National Federation of Afro-American Women, or NACW. Taking as its motto ‘Lifting As We Climb,’ this group was prescient in its highlighting of the role of women in the work of racial uplift inaugurated by many blacks after Emancipation and the failure of Reconstruction (Jones, 21–23).

The founding of the NACW was also, however, a pivotal (though unacknowledged) moment in the literary historical construction of the early twentieth-century movement which came to be known as the Harlem Renaissance, and a banner event in its

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² March Church Terrell, ‘Colored Women’s League,’ Mary Church Terrell Papers, Box 102–3, Folder 60, Moorland Spingarn Research Center.

articulation of modernity. That the efforts of these women both pre-date and coincide with the rise of the Niagara movement in 1905 (which culminated in the founding in 1909 of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) and the early twentieth-century Pan-African Congresses organized by W.E.B. DuBois, yet have disappeared from the public record of both Pan-Africanism and the Harlem Renaissance, attests to the importance of seeking to reconsider the movement through the lens of gender, as the present investigation, within the current essay, of the work of black female writers and social reformers, such as Frances Harper and Anna Julia Cooper, would suggest. In addition, while it has been established (through the work of such scholars as Cheryl Wall, Deborah McDowell and Claudia Tate) that thinking about the significance of gender in the Harlem Renaissance marks an important and necessary shift in attitudes toward the movement, none of these critics describe or emphasize the exact nature of this change. Coming into being 33 years after the Emancipation Proclamation, and 24 years before the accepted beginnings of the Harlem Renaissance, the NACW was created in opposition to a vicious attack against the character of black women—the same kind of damaging representation that lay at the heart of the social reformer Ida B. Wells-Barnett's crusade against lynching, which, when it concerned black men, occurred more often than not due to false allegations that they had raped white women³.

Through the NACW, black women worked to counter this problem of false and negative representation, and, by 1920, its leaders had also begun to push their efforts into a Pan-Africanist frame through the founding of the International Council of Women of the Darker Races, whose goal was to fight the problem of racial representation worldwide⁴. This critical juncture, then, between the representation of the black woman as immoral and that of the black man as a sexual threat, locates the voices of these black female authors and social reformers at the heart of Harlem Renaissance concerns, bringing the problem of gender face-to-face with that of race, and revealing, through the movement's central focus on racial representation, how the two are also inextricably intertwined. By filtering their articulations of race through the perspective of gender, the work of these black women forms, as Hazel Carby suggests, an earlier and 'politically resonant renaissance' (Carby, 7) which, despite referring solely to a number of black women, yet signals a crucial, largely unrecognized, alternative movement within conventional understandings of the Harlem Renaissance. Although Harper and Cooper both published their work at the end of the 19th century,

³ For a more detailed understanding of the circumstances surrounding the problem of lynching in the 19th and early 20th centuries, see Ida B. Wells, *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells (Negro American Biographies and Autobiographies)*, New Edition, Ed. Alfreda M. Duster, 1970 (U of Chicago P., 1991) and Sandra Gunning, *Race, Rape and Lynching: The Red Record of American Literature, 1890–1912* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001).

⁴ Mary Church Terrell Papers, Box 238, Moorland Spingarn Research Center.



the legacy of their social reform and literary efforts may yet be seen to herald, and, simultaneously, to signal, a modern moment within the Harlem Renaissance, emphasizing a significant rearticulation of its central tenets and goals in an insistence not only on what they considered a specifically female high moral temper and discourse, but on its use of such language, as what Todd Vogel calls 'cultural capital,' to disrupt, contradict and invalidate damaging and stereotypical racial representations⁵. Rather than the adherence to what has been called an out-dated, overly bourgeois depiction of black experience that denies the possibility of black authenticity because imbued too deeply with white (i.e. Euro-American) values—an accusation by which their work has been consistently devalued—these women used such language to combat the pejorative stereotypes of blacks prevalent during the time in which they wrote, and which overdetermined public perceptions of black reality⁶. Through such language, they focused their work on 'race' as a concept, as opposed to articulating it as an essential and essentialized physical characteristic, thus separating the notion of 'race' from African-Americans and the black diaspora, and presenting it instead as a late nineteenth-, early twentieth-century social reality to be considered from multiple vantage points, and setting the stage for the investigation of its meaning within multiple communities of the Americas.

In her path-breaking analysis mentioned above, Hazel Carby describes the unrecognized significance of these nineteenth-century black women's writing as itself representative of the work of uplift:

The novels of black women, like the slave and free narratives that preceded them, did not just reflect or 'mirror' a society; they attempted to change it. Viewing novels as weapons for social change, literary and cultural criticism needs to consider how these novels actively structure and shape Afro-

⁵ This notion is very much related to the idea of the 'cult of true womanhood,' and its relation to the work of 19th-century black women writers in the U.S. See bell hooks *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End, 1981) 167–68; Beverly Guy-Sheftall, *Daughters of Sorrow: Attitudes Toward Black Women, 1880–1920*. Vol. 11, *Black Women in United States History*, ed. Darlene Clark Hine (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1990) 34; Claudia Tate, *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire* (New York: Oxford UP, 1992) 132; Charles Lemert, Anna Julia Cooper: 'The Colored Woman's Office,' in *The Voice of Anna Julia Cooper*, eds. Charles Lemert and Esme Bhan (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998) 3; and Mary Helen Washington, 'Introduction,' in *Anna Julia Cooper's A Voice from the South by a Black Woman of the South* (New York: Oxford UP, 1988) xlvii.

⁶ See Karen Baker-Fletcher, *A Singing Something: Womanist Reflections on Anna Julia Cooper* (New York: Crossroads Press, 1994) 247; Elizabeth Alexander, 'We must be about our father's business': Anna Julia Cooper and the Incorporation of the Nineteenth-Century African-American Woman Intellectual,' *Signs* (1995) 20.2: 336–56; Joy James, 'The Profeminist Politics of W.E.B. Du Bois with Respect to Anna Julia Cooper and Ida B. Wells Barnett,' in *W.E.B. Du Bois on Race and Culture: Philosophy, Politics and Poetics*, eds. Bernard Bell, Emily Grosholz, and James B. Stewart (New York: Routledge, 1996) 149–50; and Mary Helen Washington, 'Introduction,' in *Anna Julia Cooper's A Voice from the South by a Black Woman of the South*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) xxi, xlvii, xlix

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American culture and political struggles. The novels [of these women] became loci of political and social interest, forming intellectual constituencies, not merely reflecting the interests of a preexisting intellectual elite. (Carby, 96)

Here Carby identifies what has been not only a central misreading of the writing of nineteenth-century black women, but also a major cause of the lack of consideration given to their legacy in relation to the Harlem Renaissance. For these women, writing, whether it be fiction or non-fiction, novel or essay, was first and foremost a tool, not only to contradict unsavory ideas regarding blacks and black experience, but also to guide U.S. American white cultural perspectives toward a greater consideration of the social and political wrongs perpetrated against U.S. American blacks, and to active effort to ensure that these were put to an end. Often viewed as texts meant to 'prove' black equality through the imitation of 'white' forms and a choice of subject matter that necessarily denies 'black' experience and subjectivity by emphasizing middle- to upper middle-class black reality, closer examination of the work of Harper, Cooper and other nineteenth-, early twentieth-century black female authors, reveals that such readings entirely miss the true meaning of their rhetorical significance. By using an elevated, moral discourse that simultaneously articulates and describes black reality, these women create a new, figurative world within which to extend the frame of racial expression and, thereby, work to achieve their goal of racial uplift. Through language, they create a separate, racially non-distinct, rhetorical space, while also creating the possibility both to reveal black experience and to consider its larger significance. In other words, through their use of moral discourse and its relation to the discourse of Christianity, these women reveal the question of 'race,' as it pertains to black Americans in the U.S. in the late nineteenth, early twentieth centuries, as a social problem facing all of humanity, not one which should describe only those of a certain hue, class, caste or physical appearance. Through such language, then, they treat the difficulties faced by black Americans in the U.S. of this time period as a moral problem through which they also introduce the much larger issue of social responsibility. As such, they show how questions concerning the meaning of race, racial experience, and racial constructs in the late nineteenth, early twentieth centuries consider, but ultimately—as Ross Posnock, in his seminal work *Color & Culture* (1998), so brilliantly illustrates—move far beyond the problem of color. Anna Julia Cooper and Frances Harper each make a contribution along these lines through a different genre—the prose essay and the novel—but they speak in unison in their attempt to transcend the problem of color through language—not by denying or obfuscating the fact of color, but rather, by seeking to change how that color is perceived by others.

In her collection of essays, *A Voice From the South by a Black Woman of the South* (1892) Anna Julia Cooper asserts that it is only through the voice of black women that the proper measure of racial progress may be taken. That is, only through a consid-



eration of the position and influence of its women can the level to which a civilization has risen be ascertained. With florid language, she considers the role and status of women, as well as the major difficulties and questions concerning the problem of race in great detail, from a number of vantage points. In the interests of space, I will consider only one of these essays, the first, entitled 'Our Raison D'Être.' Already in its title, by making use of another language, that of French, Cooper takes command of a rhetorical space not normally accorded the black woman in the U.S. in 1892. Through her choice of language, Cooper makes clear that the voice of the black woman of the South whom she represents is that of an *educated* black woman, in contradistinction to that of the black woman in general, whom she identifies as the 'sadly expectant Black Woman,' who has '*no language—but a cry.*' (Cooper, 1). How she transforms that unintelligible cry into coherent language is evidence of the degree to which Cooper extends the frame of racial expression through discourse. Beginning with a consideration of the silence of the South, she uses the metaphor of music to bring to the fore her subject—that of the Negro:

One muffled strain in the Silent South, a jarring chord and a vague and uncomprehended cadenza has been and still is the Negro. And of that muffled chord, the one mute and voiceless note has been the sadly expectant black Woman ... (Cooper, 1)

Using the notions of voice and voicelessness, sound and silence, and playing these against each other, Cooper brings the black woman forward, transforming her own single voice into that of a collective black female experience in the U.S. Bringing this mute and powerless voice out of its deep silence is not, however, without its challenges, as it is yet the voice of a woman, and, as such, in the U.S. in 1892, lacking the authority to speak. It is here, then, that Cooper makes her most important gesture toward modernity, in drawing upon the assistance of moral discourse to provide the ground from which to sound that voice. Beginning with the accepted articulation of the problem of race in late nineteenth-century America as primarily that of the black man, she subtly, and suddenly, turns the tables, using a moral discourse that speaks to the highest ideals of the nation through the allegorical description of a trial:

The colored man's inheritance and apportionment is still the somber crux, the perplexing *cul de sac* of the nation,—the dumb skeleton in the closet provoking ceaseless harangues ... Attorneys for the plaintiff and attorneys for the defendant, with bungling *gaucherie* have analyzed and dissected, theorized and synthesized with sublime ignorance or pathetic misapprehension of counsel from the black client. One important witness has not yet been heard from. The summing up of the evidence deposed, and the charge to the jury have been made—but no word from the Black Woman.

It is because I believe the American people to be conscientiously committed to a fair trial and ungarbled evidence, and because I feel it essential to a perfect understanding and an equitable verdict that truth from *each* standpoint be presented at the bar,—that this little Voice has been added to the already full chorus (Cooper, ii).

Here, again, Cooper suggests the notion of moral responsibility, in her insistence that no trial can be fair and just, and no jury can come to an honest and true verdict unless all important voices bearing on the case have been heard. By using the allegory of a trial, she transcends the barrier of color in suggesting that without the possibility of fair trial, there is also no possibility of true democracy, and without this, one of the most important foundations of U.S. American culture must necessarily falter and fall. In beginning her collection of essays from this vantage point, Cooper places the voice of the black woman and the problems it addresses at the heart of U.S. American national identity, seeking thereby not only to ground it with a powerful authority, but also to give it resonance far beyond the bounds of color.

In her novel, *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted* (1893, 1990), Frances Harper seeks the same ground, through the story of her protagonist, Iola Leroy, and her pre- and post-Civil War experiences. Iola Leroy is a young mulatta, whose white father educated, manumitted and married her mother, who was also a mulatta, then enjoined his wife to keep their racial origins a secret from the children. Thus Iola, her brother Harry and her sister Gracie grew up believing that they were white. At the school in the North where she was sent to be educated, Iola even defended the system of slavery, saying that slavery

can't be wrong ... for my father is a slave-holder, and my mother is as good to our servants as she can be ... Our slaves do not want their freedom. They would not take it if we gave it to them ... My father says the slaves would be very well contented if no one put wrong notions in their heads ... He thinks slavery is not wrong if you treat them well and don't sell them from their families (*Iola*, 98).

All too soon after this speech, Iola finds herself in a completely different position *vis a vis* the institution of slavery. Her father has died of the yellow fever, and her father's cousin, a committed supporter of slavery, has taken over her father's estate and remanded Iola and her family to slavery. Iola must come to terms with this new knowledge, and find a way undamaged out of the depths of slavery. The subtitle of the novel, 'Shadows Uplifted,' refers to this journey—Iola's successful trajectory from vulnerable and unprotected slave to young independent womanhood and the rejoining of family ties severed during slavery by the heartless sales of various family members. By the end of the novel, Iola has rediscovered her uncle, her mother, grandmother and brother (her younger sister has died), has refused an offer of marriage to a white man, cast her lot with blacks, committed herself to the heroic work of racial uplift, and is living with her family in newfound happiness, before meeting and marrying a young mulatto doctor who has also heroically committed himself to race work.

Harper's use of moral discourse, unlike that of Anna Julia Cooper, is intertwined with the voices of her characters, who also themselves are representations of moral-



ity in their burning desire to do good, and to seek truth and right above all else⁷. In several scenes depicting the lives of her characters after the close of the Civil War, Harper describes the problem of race in terms of its relation to slavery and its aftermath, through the vision of her protagonist, *Iola*, who attests that slavery 'was a fearful cancer eating into the nation's heart, sapping its vitality, and undermining its life.' (*Iola*, 216), and Dr. Gresham, the white man whose offer of marriage she refused, who agrees, saying that 'war ... was the dreadful surgery by which the disease was eradicated.' *Iola* takes this one step further, however, in saying 'that there is but one remedy by which our nation can recover from the evil entailed upon her by slavery ...' That being a 'fuller comprehension of the claims of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and their application to our national life.' (*Iola*, 216). In this way, Harper sets the stage for a discussion of the problem of race from the larger perspective of its effect on the U.S. American nation as a whole. The end result of her discourse, then, is to remove the discussion of race from a concentration specifically on black life and experience and to transfer it to a focus on law and order—in other words, shifting its emphasis from black people as its object to the consideration of its significance within a much larger frame of reference dependent not on the issue of color but on those of democracy, humanity, morality and dignity—principles by which everyone, regardless of color, might seek to live. In keeping with this larger frame, then, she writes, through the vision of Dr. Gresham:

The problem of the nation ... is not what men will do with the negro, but what will they do with the reckless, lawless white men who murder, lynch, and burn their fellow citizens ... The great distinction between savagery and civilization is the creation and maintenance of law. A people cannot habitually trample on law and justice without retrograding toward barbarism ... I hope that the time will speedily come when the best members of both races will unite for the maintenance of law and order and the progress and prosperity of the country ... (*Iola*, 218)

Here Harper completely transforms the discourse on race. At this juncture, it is not so much about black life and experience as it is about 'lawless' whites, who, in this case, attack their 'fellow citizens' without compunction. In this way, she broadens the discourse of race by discussing the black experience of white violence from the larger perspective of those moral imperatives that must govern all who belong to a common humanity. Then, in another important shift, she contrasts civilization and savagery in relation to the existence or non-existence of law. And law, if it is to be considered law in the full force of the word, must be something that applies to all regardless of class, cultural, racial or whatever other difference. Finally, in her articulation of the importance and necessity of law, in addition to the breadth of its applicability, Harper implies that without the establishment of such law, and without measures

⁷ For an analysis of Harper's didactic interests in novel writing, see Sarah Robbins, *Managing Literacy, Mothering America: Women's Narratives on Reading and Writing* (Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P., 2004).

to ensure its protection, there can be no progress and, more importantly, no prosperity for whatever country that suffers this lack. Thus, by expanding her discourse on 'race' into the broader realm of morality, Harper empties it of its conventional meaning, replacing it with a consideration of its importance to the moral fibre of the nation, and a sense of civic and moral responsibility that must precede any possibility of valuable, fruitful, just and honorable national development.

In their focus on moral discourse, and their consideration of the problem and significance of 'race' in this context, Cooper and Harper each in their own way provide an alternative understanding of 'race' entirely overlooked by accepted critical analysis of their work⁸. Dismissed as pandering to the ideals and assumptions of a larger, more powerful and hostile cultural group, these women's efforts were much more complicated than they may have seemed at first glance, and much more subtly political in their thrust. Through their examination of 'race' as a moral problem, rather than one affixed solely to one group alone, these women help to reveal the roots of the troubled indeterminacy of race and racial constructs in early twentieth-century modern culture. As a result, while their legacy to the Harlem Renaissance remains a neglected strain in studies of the movement, it bears much reexamination. By viewing it from the perspective of gender, we gain a larger, more profound vision of the Harlem Renaissance, not just through the inclusion of previously excluded women's voices, but through the gendered tension created between female voices unrecognized in this context and accepted understandings of the movement and its significance. Filtering the Harlem Renaissance through this tension, we gain a new and more profound vision of its variousness, its conflicts, its interracial dynamics, its questions about race, heritage, ethnicity, class, the parameters of black identity and, most importantly, the representation of racial experience, all of which reveal to us an African-American modernity not readily apparent, yet crucial to an understanding of U.S. American culture—black, white and beyond.

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⁸ For a more complicated investigation of this issue, see Michele Birnbaum, 'Racial Hysteria: Female Pathology and Race Politics in Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy* and W.D. Howells's *An Imperative Duty*,' *African-American Review* 33.1 (1999) 7–23.



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