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Literary Retrospection in the Harlem Renaissance

CLAUDIA STOKES

In 1925, book collector and Harlem Renaissance patron Arthur A. Schomburg began the essay “The Negro Digs Up His Past,” published in Alain Locke’s landmark anthology *The New Negro* (1925), by proclaiming that the “American Negro must remake his past in order to make his future. ... So among the rising democratic millions we find the Negro thinking more collectively, more retrospectively than the rest, and opt out of the very pressure of the present to become the most enthusiastic antiquarian of them all” (231). These words might be surprising to the beginning student of the Harlem Renaissance, seduced by the period’s ebullience and transgressive energies into perceiving the period as heralding a decisive, refreshing break from the past rather than as the product of revitalized retrospection. However, as any introductory discussion of the definition and connotations of the word “renaissance” must inevitably reveal, a renaissance typically entails the return to and reengagement with the texts of the past as a way of inspiring fresh considerations of the present and the future. The Harlem Renaissance is no exception to this paradigm, as visible not only in the frequency with which Harlem Renaissance writers directly discussed their literary forebears, among them Frederick Douglass and Paul Laurence Dunbar, but also in the publication of such works as *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922), edited by James Weldon Johnson, which made the black literary past newly available to interested readers. Just as courses in literary modernism cause students to reconsider the basis of the modern in the less-than-modern, classroom pedagogy of the Harlem Renaissance

must also negotiate the period's avant-garde innovations with its "antiquarian" impulses, whether in its frequent use of the literary past as source material or in its adaptation to the conditions of the Harlem Renaissance present.

Some of these products of literary retrospection are more immediately recognizable as such, as with Langston Hughes's celebrated poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (1921), whose black persona ruminates on ancient civilizations and rivers "ancient as the world and older than the / flow of human blood in human veins." Harlem Renaissance writers often turned to the more recent past with the frequent recruitment of oral narrative and blues lyrics. For example, Sterling Brown's 1927 poem "Odyssey of Big Boy" took this conscription as its starting point, as with its opening identification with black folk heroes—"Lemme be wid Casey Jones, / Lemme be wid Stagolee"—to craft a black American riff on Homer's *Odyssey*, albeit one traveling the migratory trajectory of North-bound blacks. Similarly, Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men* (1935) may (and probably should) be construed as an anthropological revisitation of the same narrative terrain mined by Joel Chandler Harris to such acclaim in the late nineteenth century, a derivation made explicit by Franz Boas in the introduction to his former student's work.¹ However, in narrative texts that elect a less vernacular voice, this engagement with the African American literary past may be less readily visible to beginning students of literature, though the influences on such texts are no less powerful and important. By way of explication, I turn to two autobiographies central to the Harlem Renaissance, despite the fact that both texts were published at the historical periphery of the period: James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) and Langston Hughes's *The Big Sea* (1940).² Both works demonstrate the necessity of reading texts of the Harlem Renaissance with an eye toward the black literary past, a practice especially germane in the study of autobiography of the period, which often references its generic antecedents in the slave narrative.

At first glance, the slave narrative genre might seem too historically remote, too staid and scripted to have exerted much influence on the heady, improvisatory modernism of the Harlem Renaissance. However, Johnson's 1912 novel—despite its foray into the glittering world of popular music, nightclubs, and crossings, both racial and geographical, that we typically associate with the Harlem Renaissance—tells another story. Even students lacking a working knowledge of the basic conventions of the slave narrative genre quickly alight upon the novel's curious style: its flat, matter-of-fact tone; its emotional detachment, despite its claim to be an intimate chronicle of a man's painful journey through racial socialization and resocialization; its episodic organization; its quick, shallow depictions of character; its projection outward toward a social panorama at the expense of the narrator's interiority and consciousness. All of these stylistic features can make for a productive class discussion of the emotional and even narratological

consequences of the white supremacy the novel's narrator endures, and yet these features also identify to the trained eye and ear the stylistic fingerprint of the slave narrative, the nineteenth-century (and even earlier) literary organ of abolition that employed one person's experience solely as a window onto a wider culture of race-based oppression and whose obsessive emphasis on the evidentiary produced a near-robotic authorial voice.

Points of contact between the *Autobiography* and the slave narrative abound. Johnson's novel quickly situates itself in relation to this genre with the first words of the third paragraph, "I was born in a little town of Georgia" (5), words that echo the signature slave narrative opening, repeated in the opening of Henry Bibb's 1849 narrative, "I was born May 1815, of a slave mother, in Shelby County, Kentucky" (441). Typical of the slave narrative, the narrator of Johnson's novel is the product of an illegitimate union between a black mother and a white father he hardly knows and recollects with shadowy imprecision. The narrator's recollection of his childhood cleverness in helping an obtuse student cheat in a spelling bee right under the teacher's nose revises a conventional scene of the slave narrative, in which the author typically recounts her or his resourcefulness in acquiring literacy despite the legal injunction against it; one has only to recall Douglass's 1845 account of his learning the alphabet from maritime shipping notations and the white children he'd transformed into unwitting pedagogues to see the antecedents of this episode in Johnson's novel. The tense scene in which the narrator passes for white while onboard a train evokes Douglass's own escape from slavery by passing as a white sailor traveling north by train, recounted in *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1893). And like the slave narrative, Johnson's novel commences with a prefatory letter of endorsement, simply signed "The Publishers," vouching for its authenticity and importance, and rapidly closes upon the narrator's escape from the culture of racial oppression he has painstakingly documented.

Despite these many similarities, teachers of the Harlem Renaissance may also find it productive to invite students to consider the equally numerous points at which Johnson's novel seems to diverge from the slave narrative, to subvert, invert, and revise the conventions of the genre. This is particularly apparent in the novel's refusal to do the work of the slave narrative in allaying many common apprehensions of white readers; instead, the novel only seems to exploit prevalent anxieties—among them, the fears of race suicide and black male sexual predation of white women—exhorted in the white supremacist press and to dramatize the fulfillment of those fears. So, too, does the novel refrain from combating widespread anxieties about the black work ethic with an industrious, morally unimpeachable protagonist. Instead, Johnson's *Ex-Colored Man* is an indolent, itinerant spendthrift gambler and nightclub habitué whose election of stable employment coincides with his decision to suppress his racial heritage, a concurrence that throws

into question the promises of a reliable black workforce offered in the nineteenth century by the slave narrative and in the early twentieth century by Booker T. Washington. The conservative ethical core of the slave narrative is nowhere visible in Johnson's novel and is replaced by a detachment and malaise that speak more to modernist sensibilities than to the fervent political evangelism of abolition. What to make, too, of the novel's foggy vagueness and lack of detail (names, places, and dates), which seem to be at odds with the evidentiary responsibilities of the slave narrative genre? Though Johnson's novel no doubt deviates from this generic convention, it may be productive to consider whether Johnson employs what Robert Stepto has termed the "rhetoric of omission" that he deems characteristic of Douglass's 1845 narrative, in which Douglass, like Johnson's narrator, claims to withhold identifying data to avoid incriminating others (105).³ In this respect, Johnson may be imitating one slave narrative while diverging from others, and these other generic deviations at once reference and modernize the narrative and ideological conventions of the earliest forms of African American self-expression.

Johnson's enlistment of the slave narrative genre shouldn't come as much of a surprise. Though the viability and political utility of the slave narrative ended with Emancipation, the genre saw somewhat of a revival in the first years of the twentieth century with the publication of *Up from Slavery* (1901), the first autobiography of Johnson's early sponsor, Booker T. Washington, and a text that adhered to many of the conventions of the genre.⁴ Indeed, in his introduction to the 1927 reissue of the *Autobiography*, Carl Van Vechten, impresario of the Harlem Renaissance, remarked upon the similarities of Johnson's novel to Washington's autobiography, presuming this more recent example of the genre to be Johnson's primary source of influence (26). Attentive readers can also detect references to Douglass scattered throughout the novel, as with the protagonist's boyhood adoration of Douglass and the portrait of Douglass that hangs in the nightclub that occupies a central role in the novel. It is worth mentioning, too, that Johnson's own genuine autobiography, *Along This Way* (1933), not only elaborates at length on the "worshipful awe" he felt for Douglass and his reading of Douglass's narratives (201) but also begins with a kind of slave narrative itself, recounting his family origins in the slave trade in Haiti and Nassau during the early nineteenth century. Though the book eventually comes to discuss his involvement in the Harlem Renaissance and the writing of such works as the *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and *Black Manhattan* (1930), its commencement with Johnson's own family's origin in slavery suggests that the history of the black present must necessarily begin with a discussion of slavery, an organizational premise that may be useful for teachers and students attempting to gloss his earlier adaptation of the slave narrative genre in 1912.

A discussion of the generic sources of Johnson's novel may also help teachers address the common misconception among students that the novel is in fact

Johnson's own autobiography. Johnson himself orchestrated this mistaken belief in 1912 by suppressing his authorship and passing the novel off as an authentic autobiography, a ploy designed to stimulate sales by generating speculation about the identity of the incognito author (Levy 126–27). This generic confusion between autobiography and novel, between fact and fiction, plays on the preoccupations and devices of the very earliest examples of black narrative and self-expression in the American nineteenth century. Johnson's calculated entanglement of fact with fiction would have bedeviled authors and publishers of slave narratives, for whom nothing could have been worse than the allegation of similar confusion. To rebut these accusations from slavery's defenders, slave narrative authors and publishers bent over backwards to evince their texts' total facticity by providing a wealth of verifiable data and corroborating documents. What's more, the first black-authored published novel, William Wells Brown's *Clotel, or The President's Daughter* (1853), plaited together fact and fiction by prefacing the novel with an abbreviated account of Brown's previously published autobiographical slave narrative, *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave, Written by Himself* (1847). Though clearly indebted to its own generic antecedents—Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1851), for instance—Brown's novel imaginatively elaborates upon the enduring rumor of Thomas Jefferson's sexual relationship with his slave Sally Hemming, thereby further entwining the fictional with the factual. In deliberately exploiting his readers' confusion, Johnson's novel, then, may be construed as paying homage to the form and reception history of black-authored narrative in the United States.

Renowned for its lively portraits of many of the central figures of the Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes's 1940 autobiography, *The Big Sea*, however, begins by announcing its denunciation of such literary history. Rather than starting with the conventional "I was born" opening that threads through black autobiography well into the twentieth century or even with the familial slave prehistory that opens Johnson's own 1933 autobiography, Hughes begins by relating an anecdote in which he, at age twenty-one, tossed overboard the *S.S. Malone* "all the books [he] had had at Columbia [where he'd briefly been a student], and all the books [he] had lately bought to read" (3). "It was like throwing a million bricks out of my heart," he wrote, "for it wasn't only the books that I wanted to throw away, but everything unpleasant out of my past. . . . I wanted to be a man on my own, control of my own life, and go on my own way. I was twenty-one. So I threw the books in the sea" (98). A supreme gesture of anti-antiquarianism, as it were, this stunning opening scene prepares the reader for an unconventional narrative that at once documents a writer's struggle to find his own way outside the literary tradition he dramatically ejects and itself employs unconventional technique to tell that story. To a degree, *The Big Sea* fulfills both expectations, as with Hughes's unlikely career

as a seaman and his employment of some unconventional literary devices, such as his beginning paragraphs with the exclamation, "Listen, everybody!" (201).

As such, Hughes's autobiography would seem a far cry from the historicist sensibility Schomburg imputed to the Harlem Renaissance as well as the highly conventional, formulaic slave narrative, which required authors to demonstrate at every turn their familiarity with and adherence to literary custom. However, this opening gesture can be construed as deriving from the very literary traditions that the twenty-one-year-old Hughes claimed to eschew. His explanation for jettisoning his library—"I wanted to be a man on my own, control of my own life, and go on my own way"—equates manhood and self-determination with literary control and independence, a long-standing formulation also espoused by writers and publishers of slave narratives in the nineteenth century. Abolitionist presses famously wielded an iron editorial grip to prevent fugitive slave authors from exerting too much independence in their narratives or from emphasizing their own private experiences at the expense of the wider panoramic commitments of the genre. In this way, the struggle for literary control and the literary expression of selfhood underwrites the genre of the slave narrative, a struggle that found its most celebrated articulation in Douglass's 1845 narrative, as he resisted the conventions of the genre—either through his silences or through generically irregular poetic flights such as the famous apostrophe to the ships on the Chesapeake—to stake out a highly individualized voice among the hordes of nearly identical narratives. That is, Douglass experienced the same intertwined struggle for literary and personal independence as Hughes, but was more successful than most of his fellow slave authors in resisting editorial control for the expression of selfhood. Moreover, Hughes's equation of manhood with literary independence revises Douglass's 1845 renowned remark, "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man" (60), a transformation enabled by Douglass's resistance to supervisory authority, both immediate (in the figure of Mr. Covey) and literary. For both men, the assumption of manhood is contingent on the assumption of literary control and self-determination, and Hughes's autobiography communicates the endurance of this struggle for black writers well into the twentieth century.

The Big Sea also modifies other conventions of the black-authored autobiography inaugurated by the slave narrative, among them the family structures typical of fugitive slave authors. Though Hughes's father is not the absentee white plantation owner common to such narratives, he nonetheless assumes the trappings of this role by his near-total absence throughout Hughes's life and his oft-stated contempt for people of color, having internalized the white supremacy he'd fled by moving to Mexico. Similarly, Hughes commences his autobiography, as many slave narratives had, with a scene of travel between Africa and North America. However, whereas earlier texts, among them James Albert Ukawsaw

Gronniosaw's narrative of 1772 and Olaudah Equiano's of 1789, began with the authors' memories of Africa and passage to North America, Hughes's autobiography reverses this trajectory, with his journey from North America to Africa, Dakar in particular. Hughes's joyful recounting of this trip also markedly contrasts with the grief expressed by fugitive slave authors upon recalling their own travels. His trip backtracks over the crossings of his generic forebears, only to find no homecoming among Africans who regard him purely as an American because of his family's interbreeding with Native Americans and whites.

Teachers of the Harlem Renaissance might ask their students to consider the consequences of these generic legacies and modifications. Do they communicate the ineluctability of generic history or even race history? The enduring fingerprint of slavery in African Americans' lives and narratives, despite its abolition long before? The impossibility of making a definitive rupture with one's own cultural, narrative, and political history? The pursuit of these questions should by no means be limited to a discussion of these two texts, Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and Hughes's *Big Sea*. To consider the generic customs for narrating black female experience, class analysis of such canonical novels as Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) or Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* (1929) would profit from a comparison to female-authored narratives such as Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) to examine the literary history of black women's self-expression and the ways in which Harlem Renaissance female writers employ or revise the techniques originated by female fugitive slaves. And to consider the multiple layers of generic influence on the literature of Harlem Renaissance, teachers may urge students to examine how such novels as Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry* (1929) and George Schuyler's *Black No More* (1931) display a clear debt to Johnson's 1912 novel, revising and elaborating on his thematics of color and narrative premise, a circuit of influence that renders these later texts, however improbable it may at first seem, second-generation adaptations of the slave narrative. Such a line of inquiry may cause students to awaken to the historical significance of literary genre, which brings about the interface of texts separated by time and space,⁵ and to observe that even innovations have their antecedents. In this way, students themselves may develop their own intellectual antiquarian habits.

NOTES

1. Boas wrote, "Ever since the time of Uncle Remus, Negro folklore has exerted a strong attraction upon the imagination of the American public." He differentiated Hurston's work from Harris's, however, with the qualifier that in prior collections of folklore "the intimate setting in the social life of the Negro has been given very inadequately" (xiii).

2. Though published several years before the formal commencement of the Harlem Renaissance, Johnson's novel enjoyed a second life once reissued by Carl Van Vechten in 1927, whereupon it received the critical acclaim and attention it failed to receive fifteen years earlier. Also, there is some discrepancy in the spelling of the novel's title: Though originally spelled "Ex-Colored," the novel's title changed with the 1927 Van Vechten reissue, which elected the more Anglophilic "Ex-Coloured." To honor Johnson's own orthographic choice, literary critics traditionally use the original spelling of the novel's title, a decision I have concurred with.
3. Johnson's narrator explains the omission of specifics on the grounds that "there are still people living there who would be connected with this narrative" (5).
4. According to Johnson's biographer, Eugene Levy, Johnson played Du Bois and Washington against each other to his own careerist advantage, refraining from joining Du Bois's Niagara Movement, joining the Washington-aligned National Negro Business League, and landing his ambassadorial post because of Washington's influence (103–05).
5. For a more fully elaborated discussion of this dynamic, see Dimock.

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