To Me It's Wonderful

The Harlem Renaissance, or the New Negro Movement as it was called, was one of the richest and most complex artistic eras in American history. Characterized by an explosive energy, the artistic, literary, and philosophical movements taking place among African Americans during the 1920s took Harlem as a center. The neighborhood, consisting of some two square miles in Manhattan, was both a literal and metaphoric African-American national capital, the hub of political, social, creative, and intellectual activities. The unprecedented numbers of men and women who migrated to Harlem from all over the country in the first decades of the twentieth century included artists and writers, musicians and dancers, intellectuals and activists. The New Negro Movement, however, was not confined to Harlem; rather, it flourished in many parts of the country, especially in Washington, Chicago, and in the American South. Some might even argue that the Harlem Renaissance blossomed, too, among American expatriates in Europe. The Harlem Renaissance was a sweeping intellectual and social movement that, though it may have radiated from uptown Manhattan, affected the whole of American culture.

In Harlem and in other cities, women artists, writers, and hostesses helped to define the Renaissance, playing major roles in creating, supporting, and promoting African-American arts and letters. Women of this period were especially important in building centers of the New Negro Movement outside of New York City, because women were more likely than men to be tied to home and family by obligation, social mores, or economic dependence, and so were often unable to find their way to Harlem. Georgia Douglas Johnson, for example, a wife and mother as well as a poet, hosted a Saturday evening salon in her Washington home that was, for several decades, a regular meeting place for African-American writers. Fiction writer Marita Bonner grew up in Boston, worked as a schoolteacher in Washington, and married and raised a family in Chicago. Artist Mary Bell spent the 1920s working as a domestic servant in Boston. Eslanda Robeson, writer and wife of entertainer Paul Robeson, acted as her husband's agent and manager and so followed his career from Harlem to London and Switzerland.

Of course, many women artists and thinkers did join the artistic and intellectual community in Harlem. Augusta Savage, perhaps the most important sculptor of the Renaissance, moved to Harlem from Florida in 1922. Writer and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston also relocated from Florida to New York; sponsored by Charlotte Osgood Mason, a wealthy white patron, Hurston was to spend nearly as much time on research trips in the American South, Haiti, and Jamaica as she did in Harlem. Novelist Nella Larsen and Jessie Redmon Fauset, literary editor of *The Crisis*, were both central figures of the 1920s Harlem literary scene. Singer and actress Ethel Waters became a star in Harlem's popular clubs and on Broadway in the late 1920s. Heiress A'Lelia Walker was perhaps Harlem's most celebrated hostess of the day, entertaining the African-American elite along with influential whites and even European royalty in her Harlem mansion at 108-110 West 136th Street. Grace Nail Johnson, wife of writer and civil-rights activist James Weldon Johnson, was a hostess in her own right, referred to by many as the "grand dame" of Harlem.

Grace Nail was a member of one of Harlem's wealthiest and most influential families; her father and brother were among the first blacks to own real estate in Harlem and to help develop the formerly white neighborhood into the center of black life in New York City. Her brother, John E. Nail, introduced her to her future husband, his friend James Weldon Johnson, when she was a teenager. At the time of their first meeting, Johnson, who was fifteen years older than Grace Nail, was the United States consul in Puerto Cabello, Venezuela. The couple courted long-distance while Johnson lived in Puerto Cabello and, later, in Corinto, Nicaragua, where he became consul in 1908. They were married in New York in 1910 and Grace Johnson returned with her husband to Corinto.

When the Johnsons moved back to New York, he wanted to live in midtown Manhattan, but his wife convinced him to move to Harlem; in the coming years, they were to become central figures of the Harlem Renaissance. He was already an accomplished poet and songwriter; he would become the executive secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and a leading civil-rights advocate. As one of Harlem's most renowned hostesses, she was also involved in the artistic and political discussions of the day. They were well known in their community and admired as powerful and effective activists. Grace Johnson became an important mentor for young women who shared her dedication to the African-American community.

A steadfast supporter of the battle to increase civil liberties, Mrs. Johnson lent her famous name to organizations campaigning for fair wages and increased job opportunities for African Americans. After her husband's death in 1938, she continued to work for causes he had championed and to keep his name and spirit alive in the African-American community; the many schools, community centers, and housing complexes that now bear James Weldon Johnson's name are evidence of the couple's lifelong commitment to the betterment of the lives of their fellow African Americans.

Among her most significant contributions to the arts was her part in founding the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection of American Negro Arts and Letters at Yale University. After his sudden death in a car accident, Johnson's many friends hoped to erect a monument dedicated to him in Harlem. As World War II approached and the necessary raw materials became scarce, it seemed the project would be abandoned. Then their dear friend Carl Van Vechten suggested an alternative, the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection. She embraced the idea and made the remarkable gift of her husband's manuscripts, books, and correspondence in the hope that his archive would become the centerpiece of a collection that would both celebrate and document the literary, intellectual, and artistic contributions of African Americans. Along with Van Vechten, she actively sought contributions for the collection from her friends and acquaintances. Today, the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection at the Beinecke Library is world-renowned for its rich collections, which include the archives of Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and many others.

If Grace Nail Johnson represented the moneyed elite of Harlem's upper class, the old-fashioned—some might go so far as to say Victorian—manners she shared with many women of the African-American middle and upper class tell only part of the story. Another of Harlem's hostesses, the millionaire A'Lelia Walker, stands in stark contrast to Johnson. Like Johnson, she was a central figure in Harlem during the height of the Renaissance period. That may be all that Johnson and the sometimes controversial Walker had in common. One of the richest members of Harlem society, A'Lelia Walker inherited her fortune from her mother. Madame C. J. Walker, the child of former slaves and a longtime domestic servant, earned her incredible fortune selling hair-care and other beauty products to African-American women. She was one of the most successful business people of her time and one of the first African-American millionaires.

A'Lelia Walker helped to run her mother's company, which included a factory in Indianapolis and a beauty school in Harlem, from the time she was a young woman. Her primary interest, however, was not the family business but Harlem's social life. Wearing a uniform of silk dresses, sable coats, and turbans encrusted with jewels, she dressed every bit the part of a high-society maven. Nearly six feet tall and often carrying a riding crop, Walker was unmistakable even among the extravagant crowds at her legendary parties. She was famous—perhaps notorious—for her flashy lifestyle and for the elegant and lavish parties she threw at her twin Harlem brownstones and at the Villa Lewaro, the palatial mansion her mother had built in Irvington-on-Hudson. "She would usually issue several hundred invitations to each party," Langston Hughes wrote of A'Lelia Walker. "Unless you went early there was no possible way of getting in. Her parties were as crowded as the New York Subway at the rush hour—entrance, lobby, steps, hallway, and apartment a milling crush of guests with everybody seeming to enjoy the crowding."[1]

The Villa Lewaro, which took its name from the first syllables of A'Lelia Walker's name (including Robinson, from a brief marriage), was where she hosted the most luxurious of her parties. She invited guests for long, decadent weekends among the villa's precious furnishings, including a piano plated in twenty-four carat gold. Some guests received personal invitations written in purple ink on lavender stationary with the shield and insignia of the Villa Lewaro engraved in gold. Walker's guests included not only Harlem's writers and artists, but also representatives of all strata of society, from bootleggers and numbers runners to members of European royalty and Manhattan's white high society. For all her considerable flair for entertaining, she rarely spent much time in the throngs of guests at her affairs; once her parties were underway, Walker usually retired to a quiet part of the house to play cards with a few close friends. Though she was one of the period's most recognizable characters, A'Lelia Walker "spent the Renaissance playing bridge."[2]

Though the day's finest writers and artists joined her soirees, by and large, Walker was not a patron of the arts; her mother had willed some two-thirds of her company's profits to charity, but A'Lelia Walker wasn't interested in philanthropy. Nevertheless, in the late 1920s, she recognized Harlem's need for a place where artists and intellectuals could meet to discuss their work; she ventured to meet this need by opening a salon in her 136th Street brownstone. Called The Dark Tower after Countee Cullen's newspaper column, Walker's salon did "for the Renaissance what Mabel Dodge had done before the war for the artists and intellectuals in Greenwich Village."[3]

Some of Harlem's upper class, including Grace Nail Johnson, who was known to be something of a "social dictator," looked down on Walker in spite of her great wealth. Behind her back, Walker was referred to as the "dekink heiress" in reference to the hair straightening products her mother manufactured, or as the "Mahogany Millionairess," because of her dark skin. Harlem at this time was deeply preoccupied with shades of black skin. Social status was commonly tied to fair skin; those with darker skin were often viewed as lower-class, no matter their financial status. Thus, fair-skinned and refined Grace Johnson "would as soon have done the Black Bottom on Lenox Avenue as cross A'Lelia's threshold."[4]

As the end of the 1920s drew near, Walker's fortune began to dwindle. In 1930, she was forced to sell the Villa Lewaro and to auction the mansion's furnishings, selling her rare and expensive pieces for a fraction of their worth. The auction drew considerable attention from the white as well as the African-American press. In 1931, Walker died in her sleep during a weekend trip to the New Jersey shore. Some four thousand people attended her Harlem funeral; as the church seated only four hundred guests, the vast majority mourned A'Lelia Walker's death from the street outside. According to her friend Langston Hughes, whose poem "To A'Lelia" was read at her funeral, her death marked the end of the Harlem Renaissance.

The culture's fascination with shades of black skin, evident in its mixed feelings about A'Lelia Walker, was a frequently explored topic in the writing of the period; it was, in fact, the central subject of novelist Nella Larsen's work. Larsen's interest in the vagaries and complexities of racial identification and personal identity is plain in her semi-autobiographical fiction. The daughter of a white Danish mother and a black West Indian father, in her work she examined the lives of women of mixed racial heritage and explored the highly charged subject of light-skinned African Americans "passing" for white. She considered, too, the complicated social structure of middle-class African-American society and the social pressures African-American women felt from their own communities and from white America.

There is some dispute over the details of Larsen's early life. She was born in Chicago; her father died when she was a little girl, and her mother was remarried to a white Dane. At this point, things become less certain. Though Larsen said she lived in Denmark for a few years as a teenager and that she later returned to her mother's native country to attend the University of Copenhagen, some scholars contend that there is no evidence to support this. It is known, however, that Larsen attended Fisk University and that she studied nursing and librarianship at training programs in New York City. During the height of the Harlem Renaissance, Larsen worked as a children's librarian at the 135th Street Branch of the New York Public Library, an informal meeting place for Renaissance literary figures.

Larsen, whose cultivated manners made her seem somewhat unfriendly, was a highly visible if not entirely popular member of the Harlem literary set. She was an award-winning writer and the first African-American woman to receive a Guggenheim Fellowship for creative writing. Her novels received mixed reviews, but they were popular with both black and white readers. Published in 1927, Larsen's first novel, *Quicksand*, is the story of Helga Crane, the daughter of a white mother and black father, and the struggles she faces because of her mixed racial heritage. As Larsen herself claimed to, Helga lives variously in Harlem, the South, and Europe, trying to find a community she can live comfortably in but finding, instead, hypocrisy and prejudice from both white and black people she encounters. *Quicksand* won the Harmon Foundation Prize the year it was published. Racial identity is also the topic of *Passing* (1928), Larsen's second novel. The central character of the novel is Clare Kendry, a mixed race woman who passes for white and marries a white man, forsaking the African-American community. But Clare is unable to give up the company of other African Americans; she begins to sneak off to Harlem, risking her husband's discovery of her secret identity. The novel ends in tragedy when her double life and her conflicting identities are revealed to those around her.

In her life as in her writing, Larsen seems to have been ambivalent about passing for white, though it is evident that she could "pass" if she were so inclined. While living in Nashville, where her husband was a professor at Fisk University, Larsen wrote to her friend Carl Van Vechten:

> You will be amused that I who have never tried this "passing" stunt have waited until I reached the deep south to put it over. Grace Johnson and I drove about fifty miles south of here the other day and then walked into the best restaurant in a rather conservative town called [Murfreesboro] and demanded lunch and *got* it, plus all the service in the world and an invitation to return. Everyone here seems to think that quite a stunt.[5]

Though she began a third novel, Larsen never completed the book. She ultimately moved away from Harlem and concealed her whereabouts from former friends by moving frequently. Larsen spent the rest of her life working as a nurse; she seems to have given up writing completely.

Novelist and editor Jessie Redmon Fauset took the theme of passing as a central element in her fiction and she shared Nella Larsen's interest in the significance of color differences among members of the African-American middle class. Fauset has been categorized as a "minor" writer; as the author of four novels, however, she was published more during her lifetime than most of her peers in Harlem's literary community.

One of seven children, Fauset was born near Philadelphia and was raised in a middle-class community that "did not permit its women to breathe in public."[6] In response to negative stereotypes, many middle-class African Americans, including Fauset's family, adhered to the strictest of social rules for respectable behavior; young women, especially, were expected to abide by the most conservative of conventions regarding dress and conduct. For the rest of her life, Fauset upheld the old-fashioned manners of her upbringing; as a result, she was preoccupied with "respectability." She was perceived as ridiculously proper, and thus Fauset was the butt of many private jokes among Harlem's high-living literary elite. Regular get-togethers at her home were the opposite extreme to A'Lelia Walker's; "At Miss Fauset's," Langston Hughes wrote, "a good time was shared by talking literature and reading poetry and perhaps enjoying some conversation in French."[7] There was not likely to be any drinking or dancing at Miss Fauset's home.

By the time she arrived in Harlem in 1919, the twenty-eight-year-old Fauset had earned a bachelor's degree (and a Phi Beta Kappa key) at Cornell University, studied French and Latin at the Sorbonne in Paris, and received a master's degree from the University of Pennsylvania. She had taught French at Washington's well-respected Dunbar High School for several years. In Washington, she was a regular visitor to Georgia Douglas Johnson's Saturday evening salon.

In New York, Fauset was to become a well-known figure in Harlem's literary scene and one of its most influential editors. Working first as W. E. B. DuBois's assistant at the NAACP, Fauset soon became the literary editor of *The Crisis,* the organization's primary publication. Under her direction, *The Crisis* was a shaping force in the literature of the Harlem Renaissance. If her writing was as restrained and conservative as her lifestyle, as an editor Fauset took risks, regularly printing the work of never before published writers, many of whom were women. Even if one sets Fauset's own writing aside, as one of the first editors to publish and encourage Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, and others, her contribution to the Renaissance and its literary record was considerable.

Her conservative writing about the preoccupations of the African-American privileged class was designed, in part, to convince white readers that "except for superficial differences of color,... upper class Negroes are just like the better-class whites."[8] Though it is sometimes dismissed as irrelevant to the Harlem Renaissance project of discovering and defining an African-American art uninhibited by the standards and expectations of white America, Fauset's approach to African-American literature was at the center of the Renaissance's most lively and contentious debates about what kinds of art African Americans should make and how they should portray their communities in their work. Fauset's novels, particularly *There is Confusion* (1924), her first, and *Comedy: American Style* (1933), her last, met with critical praise and enjoyed a wide readership. In spite of the fact that some white critics were not convinced that the upper-crust African-American communities depicted in her novels even existed, Fauset faithfully represented the world she grew up in and, thus, her novels provide an accurate portrait of that segment of the African-American population.

The aristocratic set that inspired the characters in Fauset's novels, known in her home city as "Old Philadelphia" or "O. P.," represented only a small fraction of the African-American community in that and other cities. Not far from Philadelphia, in Chester, Pennsylvania, performer Ethel Waters grew up in a world quite different from Fauset's. Waters's early life was profoundly difficult; she was conceived as a result of a violent rape and her mother, who was just twelve at the time, could not care for her. Waters was sent to live with physically abusive relatives. As a result of crushing poverty, she was forced to steal food and to leave school to work as a domestic servant. When she was thirteen, her mother arranged her marriage, against her will, to an older man who beat her brutally. The couple broke up after only a year.

Waters soon began singing in local clubs; before long, she was invited to join a stage show in Baltimore. She performed with the singing group known as the "Hill Sisters," and was billed as "Sweet Mama Stringbean." She outshone the other sisters, however, and had great success singing solo throughout the

South. For Waters, traveling in the Jim Crow South was often thorny and complicated, as it was for all African-American performers of the period. Touring was also dangerous. The difficulty of life on the road was compounded by the practical problems of finding hotels and restaurants that would serve African Americans, and travelers were susceptible to poor treatment and even violence. In her case, the shoddy medical treatment she received after a car accident in Alabama almost cost her the use of her legs.

After a prolonged recovery, Waters began singing in Harlem clubs, where she quickly developed a loyal following among both the white patrons of the upscale clubs and other African-American performers. Her style differed dramatically from that of the popular blues singers of the day, including Ma Rainey, the "Mother of the Blues," and Bessie Smith, the "Empress of the Blues." Unlike these and other well-known singers who performed in a full-voiced style, her vocal style was more controlled and restrained.

Her particular method and character were as well suited to the stage as they were to southern tent shows and Harlem nightclubs. Her stage shows were both universally loved by critics and tremendously successful financially. At the height of her career, Waters was the best-paid woman performing on Broadway. Audiences loved her energetic performances, her distinctive smile, and, of course, her singing. "The vibrant depth of Ethel Waters's voice," one reviewer wrote of her appearance in a Berlin and Hart production of *As Thousands Cheer,* and "the perfection of her slow, poised singing, lift her scenes a notch above the comedy."[9] Of her role in *Mamba's Daughters, New York Times* critic Brooks Atkinson wrote, "give her at any time a gusty song and she could melt a frigid audience into complete malleability. Now... she proves that she can carry over into a play that same power of reducing an audience to a state of fervent admiration."[10]

Though she was a successful singer who recorded more than 200 songs during her career, Waters became equally popular as an actress. In 1949, her performance in the film *Pinky* earned her an Academy Award nomination; she received a second nomination for her role in *Member of the Wedding* in 1952. She had perfected her performance for this film playing the same role on Broadway in 1950. Though the film was highly praised, many of her fans felt that the Broadway production was far superior, perhaps the best performance of her career. After decades of performing professionally, Waters joined the Billy Graham Crusade, using her celebrated singing voice to express her deep spirituality.

Waters also wrote two autobiographical books about her life and career: *His Eye Is On the Sparrow* (1951) and *To Me It's Wonderful* (1972). A true groundbreaker—she was the first African American to perform live on radio, to star with an all-white cast in a Broadway show, and to perform in the Deep

South with white co-stars—Waters was also an innovator; the vocal style she perfected set the standard for those who followed her, from Billie Holiday to contemporary jazz singers.

Performers like Waters and writers like Larsen are often considered to be the most significant and influential artists of the Renaissance period, to the neglect of fine artists, such as sculptor Augusta Savage. Raised in rural Florida, Savage began working with her hands as a child, molding animals and other figures from the clay found in the soil near her home. Her father, a religious man, discouraged her sculpture, fearing that she was making graven images. Savage is said to have claimed that he nearly "beat the art out of me."

In spite of this, the attention her work received at a county fair encouraged Savage to move to New York and enroll in an arts program at Cooper Union. This was to be her first formal training as an artist. Though the program was tuitionless, Savage struggled to support herself in the city until, in recognition of her achievement and potential, Cooper Union offered her a grant to pay her living expenses. Relief from financial pressure enabled Savage to spend time studying art history at the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library. The librarians there introduced Savage to influential writers and intellectuals in the community. They also commissioned the sculptor to make a bust of W. E. B. DuBois for the library. This commission brought attention to her work and led to additional commissions; throughout her career, Savage made sculptures of some of Harlem's most influential people, including James Weldon Johnson and Marcus Garvey. She became a well-respected figure in Harlem arts circles and was praised for her realistic depictions of African Americans.

In hopes of studying sculpture in Europe, Savage applied to a program at the palace of Fontainebleau, sponsored by the French government. She was rejected without being considered because the American administrators of the program felt that the presence of an African-American woman would be likely to make the other students, especially those from the South, uncomfortable. When news of her unfair treatment at the hands of the program overseers reached the public, Savage became something of a media sensation. Many well-known figures in New York, including Franz Boas, the Columbia University anthropologist, and many artists came to her aid, lobbying for her admittance into the program. A debate in the newspapers ensued, but in the end Savage was not admitted. In lieu of the Fontainebleau program, Hermon MacNeil, then president of the National Sculpture Society, invited Savage to spend several months studying with him at his studio. In 1929, Savage finally realized her goal of studying sculpture in Paris. While in Europe, she exhibited her work and traveled extensively in France, Belgium, and Germany.

When she returned to New York, she founded the Savage Studio of Arts and Crafts. Both studio and school, it became a gathering place for artists and intellectuals, including Claude McKay and Aaron Douglas. Savage worked extensively with students, some of whom became successful artists themselves, including Norman Lewis and Gwendolyn Knight. She was considered a powerful and generous teacher; some felt, in fact, that the attention she lavished on students cut into time she might otherwise have spent on her own work. Savage, however, did not think that her art was more important than her teaching. She believed strongly in educating and supporting other African-American artists and throughout her life she was committed to encouraging the development of African-American art.

In 1939, Savage received a commission for the New York World's Fair; she made a sixteen-foot-tall painted plaster harp, the strings of which were represented by an African-American choir. Though Savage titled the piece *Lift Every Voice and Sing,* borrowing the title from the Rosamund and James Weldon Johnson song many considered to be sacred among African Americans, the sculpture was renamed *The Harp* by Fair representatives and the press. She, and others, were upset that her original title was replaced with this nickname; in a letter to Grace Nail Johnson she wrote, "I resent the name as much as you do . . . and I am going tomorrow to see Mr. Rubin of the Fair to protest the use of [it]." She went on to describe the Fair's rationale in dropping *Lift Every Voice and Sing:* "On the day that the design was accepted they even had me sing the 'The National Negro Anthem' for them; but they seem to feel that the title is too long and so they call it 'The Harp.'"[11] Though Savage hoped to have the sculpture cast after the fair ended, she could not afford to do so, nor did she have the money to store the big piece and so it was destroyed; only a few photographs and small reproductions of this important piece of art exist today.

Many more of Savage's sculptures were lost or destroyed not long after when a traveling exhibition fell through, stranding much of her work in Chicago. Because she could not afford to ship the pieces back to New York, they were abandoned. Considering this, and the small number of sculptures Savage made relative to other artists—largely because throughout her life she was forced to take work as a domestic servant and laundress to support herself and her art—it is not surprising that few of Savage's sculptures are known today.

Like Augusta Savage, Boston artist Mary Bell also worked as a domestic servant. Bell took some of the tools of women's domestic work as the tools of her art as well; she made her drawings, most of which take fantastic and imaginatively depicted women as their subjects, with wax crayons on the thin and flimsy paper dressmakers use to make dress patterns. A largely unknown "outsider" artist even during the Renaissance, Bell's work would likely have been lost entirely if her employer had not been a friend of Carl Van Vechten, a fervent collector of African-American art. Over a period of several years, Van Vechten not only bought Bell's drawings for his own collection, he introduced others to her work; in a letter to Van Vechten dated 18 August 1938, Bell assures him that she has sent the drawings he requested to his friend, the painter Florine Stettheimer.

In letters to her benefactor—letters written in an elegant, old-fashioned script, bearing the greeting, "Gentleman, Dear Sir"—Bell writes lightheartedly about her work, sometimes noting with pleasure that viewers have found one or another of her drawings amusing. "I am sending one extra" drawing, she wrote on one occasion, "because the lady with the dog got her head cracked and I had to make her another head; it was a warm day and the wax softened which made her face look wrinkled and of course that would not do for a society lady."[12] "Now here is a joke," she wrote in September 1937, "I have just drawn a Duchess that makes all who look at [her] laugh."[13] A month later, she wrote, "you will soon see what I am sure will be amusing, the Autumn Queen you will not soon forget also the Jungle Belle."[14]

Like Bell and so many other African-American women in the arts, writer and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston was also forced to work as a domestic servant to support herself when she was no longer able to make a living by her writing. The author of fiction, scholarly studies of African-American folklore, and autobiographical writing, Hurston was one of the most important writers of the Harlem Renaissance. Though she was well known in Harlem, Hurston spent much of the 1920s traveling through the American South, Jamaica, and Haiti doing anthropological research that resulted in several studies of folklore from these regions. She published many short pieces during this period, but her books were published in the 1930s and 1940s, when by some accounts the Renaissance was already over.

Throughout her life, Hurston used a variety of birth dates, claiming in some cases to be ten or more years younger than she actually was. Because of this, little can be said with certainty about the circumstances of her earliest years. Born and raised in the South, she spent much of her early life in the all-black town of Eatonville, Florida. As a young woman, she moved north to pursue an education. She lived briefly in Washington and studied with African-American scholar Alain Locke at Howard University; her first published stories appeared in the university's literary magazine. Hurston encountered other members of Washington's literary community at Georgia Douglas Johnson's literary salon, where she was a guest.

Hurston left Howard after a year and traveled to New York where she became one of the first African-American women to study at Barnard College. There she met Franz Boas, who was to become her mentor as an anthropologist. After completing her bachelor's degree, Hurston received a grant to travel throughout the American South studying African-American folk traditions. This research would lead to numerous scholarly articles and the book *Mules and Men* (1935). It also provided rich material for the novels Hurston would later write, enabling her to create more realistic settings and supply more precise details than other writers who took southern African-American culture as a subject.

Hurston was a regular at Harlem parties and she was very popular among the literary set. People talked about her vibrant personality and sometimes unusual appearance only slightly less than they did her writing. Her good friend Carl Van Vechten commented that Hurston "once appeared at a party we were giving attired in a wide Seminole Indian skirt, contrived of a thousand patches; still another time in a Norwegian skiing outfit, with a cap over her ears."[15] Her one-time friend Langston Hughes wrote, "only to reach a wider audience, need she ever write books—because she is a perfect book of entertainment in herself . . . she was full of side-splitting anecdotes, humorous tales, and tragicomic stories. . . . She could make you laugh one minute and cry the next."[16] Though she was both charming and funny, she could also be inconsiderate—she was known to arrive late, or not at all, for appointments. Friends often overlooked this characteristic. Fanny Hurst, the white writer who hired Hurston to act as her assistant and whom Hurston claimed as a close friend, "discharged her as a secretary because she typed poorly, filed illogically, wrote an indecipherable shorthand, and was habitually late. But Miss Hurst permitted her to remain as a guest in the apartment for more than a year because she was an amusing companion."[17]

Hurston's primary white patron was an elderly and aristocratic woman named Charlotte Osgood Mason. By her own insistence, Mason was called "Godmother" by Hurston and the other Renaissance artists and thinkers she supported, a group that included Langston Hughes, Alain Locke, Miguel Covarrubias, Aaron Douglas, and Claude McKay. During the Renaissance, Mason's lifelong interest in primitivism developed into an interest in African-American art. Her belief in a particular, innate primitive spiritualism determined her narrowly defined view of what African-American art should be. Using her wealth and her formidable personality, Mason attempted to control and direct the work of her protégés. Her ideas about primitivism did not confine themselves to art; Godmother also sought to control the lives and behavior of her "godchildren." By all accounts, her relationships with those in her charge were intense, complex, and, in some cases, deeply conflicted. As a result of her heavy hand and unyielding commitment to her ideas about primitive art, these relationships rarely lasted very long and regularly broke apart with dramatic and painful force. Though one may deplore her methods and lament the loss of projects that artists refused or abandoned under her direction, there can be no doubt that the financial assistance Mason gave to African-American artists and the freedom to travel, study, and make art that came with that money had a profound, if not entirely positive, effect on the Harlem Renaissance and its artistic and literary record.

Zora Neale Hurston's relationship with Godmother was especially close and the two women shared such a strong and immediate bond that they claimed to have a psychic connection that allowed them to read one another's minds, even from a great distance. For her part, Hurston met Godmother's expectations about African Americans by playing the "primitive" with gusto. She animatedly told her patron African-American folktales and "coon" stories in an exaggerated southern accent and often signed her adoring letters with such signatures as "your little pickaninny."

In December 1927, Hurston entered into a contract with Mason; she was to receive a car and camera and $200 a month in exchange for collecting poems, songs, stories, and other pieces of African-American folklore throughout the South. All of Hurston's work became Godmother's property and she retained the right to prevent Hurston from publishing any of her findings. This contract enabled Hurston to do anthropological research—in a participatory style that included taking part in voodoo rituals, associating with bootleggers, and hanging around rowdy bars—for two years.

Today, Hurston is a widely respected writer and her work is a central component of any study of African-American literature. But her writing was not always so well known. After the publication of her last book, *Seraph on the Swannee* (1948), Hurston was publicly accused of a sensational crime—the sexual assault of a ten-year-old boy. Though the charge was patently false—Hurston was away on an extended trip when the abuse was said to have taken place—her reputation suffered and she felt abandoned by former friends. Her career as a writer faltered (meaning only that she was unable to support herself by her pen; her work continued to appear sporadically in magazines until her death), and Hurston returned to Eatonville, where she took a job as a domestic servant. Alone and impoverished when she died, Hurston was buried in an unmarked grave. She left behind a number of unpublished books, including *The Golden Bench of God,* a novel about the life of Madame C. J. Walker. Some years after Hurston's death, Alice Walker, the writer and scholar who was largely responsible for creating a new audience for Hurston's work and for securing her position in the African-American canon, located her burial site and marked it with a small gravestone.

Like Zora Neale Hurston, poet and salonist Georgia Douglas Johnson was also from the South, having been born and raised not far from Atlanta. Johnson, who once described herself as "a little yellow girl,"[18] was from a racially mixed family that included white, black, and Native American ancestors. As a young woman, Johnson studied at Atlanta University and the Oberlin Conservatory of Music. Her interest and early training in music would play a significant role in her later writing. After moving with her husband, a politically active lawyer, to Washington, Johnson became an important artistic and intellectual figure in the city's African-American community.

In spite of being the author of many books and plays, Johnson is best remembered as the hostess of the influential Washington literary salon known as the Halfway House. She coined the name in part because she commonly welcomed "strays," writers and artists who had no money or no place to stay. More importantly, she chose the name Halfway House because of her commitment to bringing together people whom she knew to have different points of view. Her salon, she hoped, would be a "halfway" point where diverse aesthetic and political arguments could be heard, debated, refined, developed, and exchanged toward the development of a rich, complex, lively, and politically relevant artistic community. "You may find the young writers gathered together almost any Saturday night," she wrote of the Halfway House, "exchanging ideas, reciting new poems or discussing plans for new creations."[19] For decades, Johnson's home was a regular meeting place for artists and intellectuals. Her salon helped to give Washington a reputation as the next best thing to Harlem for African-American thinkers. Like A'Lelia Walker's parties, Johnson's salon has been compared to that of Mabel Dodge in Greenwich Village because of its lively exchanges, its promotion of new ideas, and the important relationships that developed as a result of the meetings that took place there.

Guests at Johnson's Halfway House were often a combination of locals, Howard University students and faculty, faculty from the elite Paul Dunbar High School, and others who were passing though the city. This "freewheeling jumble of the gifted, the famous, and odd"[20] met in Johnson's house on S Street each Saturday; in her living room, one might encounter Jessie Fauset, Langston Hughes, Grace and James Weldon Johnson, W. E. B. DuBois, Alain Locke, Richard Bruce Nugent, Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, Angelina Grimké, Anne Spencer, and Zora Neale Hurston. Georgia Johnson endeavored to include not only those involved actively in the arts, but also editors, publishers, educators, and political activists. They would get together, as Langston Hughes wrote, "to eat Mrs. Johnson's cake and drink her wine and talk poetry and books and plays."[21]

Johnson often highlighted the work of women writers at her salon, including that of her friends Jessie Fauset and Angelina Grimké, both of whom were teachers at Dunbar High School. Another friend, fiction writer Marita Bonner, was also a well-regarded writer whom Johnson promoted by featuring her work on Saturday evenings. Born in Boston, Bonner graduated from Radcliffe, where she studied literature and sang with musical clubs, before moving to Washington and taking a job as a teacher at a city high school. Her first published essay was the notable "On Being Young—a Woman—and Colored," which

Jessie Fauset published in *The Crisis* in 1925. The essay was awarded *The Crisis* Prize for Best Essay that year. In this piece, Bonner explores racism and sexism, the difficulty women of the African-American middle class faced as a result of their community's expectations; suggesting an overwhelming sense of paralysis, Bonner writes:

> So—being a woman—you can wait. You must sit quietly. . . . Not sodden—and weighted as if your feet were cast in the iron of your soul. Not wasting strength in enervating gestures as if two hundred years of bonds and whips had really tricked you into nervous uncertainty.
>
> But quiet; quiet. Like Buddha who—brown like I am—sat entirely at ease, entirely sure of himself, motionless and knowing, a thousand years before the white man knew there was so very much difference between feet and hands.
>
> Motionless on the outside. But inside?
>
> Silent.[22]

Two years later, Bonner earned another *Crisis* Prize for her short story, "Drab Rambles." That year, 1927, she was also awarded the Wanamaker Prize for Negro Music. Also a playwright, Bonner's dramatic work is often praised as her most innovative writing. Her 1928 play *The Purple Flower* is thought by some critics to be the first Surrealist play written by an African-American woman. After getting married in 1930, Marita Bonner moved with her husband to Chicago; the couple had three children. She continued teaching and writing; her work from this period explores Chicago and the lives of its residents, especially the interactions between white and African-American communities. Bonner's daughter collected her unpublished work and published it posthumously in the volume *Frye Street and Environs* in 1987.

Like Bonner, Georgia Johnson wrote in various genres, including plays and short stories as well as poetry. Her work, some of which was published under the pen names Mary Strong and Paul Tremaine, appeared widely in African-American magazines during the Renaissance period and she won numerous awards. Though she had several plays produced, Johnson was primarily thought of as a poet. Her first book, *The Heart of a Woman* (1918), was complied and arranged with the help of friend Jessie Fauset. The collection included poems written in a style sometimes called "raceless" or "integrationist" because it purposefully avoided racial themes in favor of "universal" topics explored in traditional, European forms. As Jessie Fauset put it in her review of *The Heart of a Woman,* "In this work, Mrs. Johnson, although a woman of color, is dealing with life as it is regardless of the part that she may play in the great drama. Here she is a woman of that imagination that characterizes any literary person choosing this field as a means of directing the thought of the world."[23]

If she sometimes chose not to explore race, Johnson did not shy away from discussing the difficulty of being an artist and a woman. Throughout her adult life, Johnson struggled to find time and energy to write while satisfying her responsibilities as a wife and mother. Johnson's husband, who felt her writing might distract her from her first duty, caring for her family, had long discouraged her creativity. After his death, she went to work so that she could support her sons and send both to college and then to graduate school. In the title poem of *Heart of a Woman*, Johnson addresses the conflict she faced in trying to balance the writer's life with the mother's obligations:

> The heart of a woman falls back with the night,
> And enters some alien cage in its plight,
> And tries to forget it has dreamed of the stars
> While it breaks, breaks, breaks on the sheltering bars.[24]

Johnson's work was praised by her contemporaries. Of her book *Autumn Love Cycle* (1928), Marita Bonner wrote, "you feel there glows before you, a life that has leapt eagerly to embrace all living, all loving. . . . Truly it is a fire that has burned steadily, bravely, unflinchingly. Surely here is a life lived steadily, a life lived whole."[25] In spite of her considerable success as a writer, however, it is impossible to study the development of Johnson's work through the course of her writing life because much of her late writing was lost after her death. Though she left a great deal of unpublished work when she died—perhaps as many as three collections of poetry, a novel, some twenty short stories, and a number of plays—much of this work was discarded. Thus, there is no literary record of her later years and no way to judge her artistic development as she matured as a writer.

Though her family's circumstances were dramatically different from Johnson's, Eslanda Robeson also struggled to create a balance between her own creative work and her unique familial obligations. Today, Eslanda Robeson, or Essie as she was known among friends, is remembered as the wife of Paul Robeson, undoubtedly one of the most talented American actors and singers of all time and one of the most highly praised and widely recognized African Americans of the twentieth century. Her husband's phenomenal success, some might argue, was in no small part due to the skill and savvy with which she managed his career. Though Eslanda Robeson had a remarkable career as her husband's manager and agent, she was also a skilled writer, anthropologist, and ethnographer.

She was descended from a highly accomplished and racially diverse family. One of her greatgrandfathers was a member of a wealthy Spanish-Jewish family who immigrated to Charleston, South Carolina, where he married an octoroon slave. Her grandfather was the founder of the first secondary school for black students in Charleston, before he became a congregational minister in New Haven, Connecticut. When she was widowed as a young mother of three, Eslanda Robeson's mother opened what was to become a successful beauty salon in New York City.

Robeson's own early accomplishments were remarkable; she won a scholarship to study chemistry at the University of Illinois before transferring to Columbia. After graduating, she became the first African American employed at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital, where she was the director of the surgical pathology laboratory. She met Paul Robeson, then a law student, when he was in the hospital recovering from a football injury. They eloped in 1921 and four years later she gave up her job so that she could devote her full attention to her husband's career. She was not only his agent and manager, but also his acting coach; she carefully read his scripts, attended and studied his rehearsals and performances, and provided extensive feedback about his work, helping him to develop his skills as a performer. Under his wife's ambitious management, Paul Robeson's career flourished. They soon moved together to London, where Paul was to perform in Eugene O'Neill's play, *Emperor Jones*. The couple remained in London for several years.

In 1930, she wrote a biography of her husband, entitled *Paul Robeson, Negro.* Her depiction of her husband was not entirely favorable; she revealed, if obliquely, Paul's infidelities and implied that he did little to control his own career. The book created a great deal of tension in their marriage and ultimately led to their separation. Eslanda moved to Switzerland with her son, Paul, Jr.; her husband, who remained in England, began a serious romantic involvement with another woman. The couple nearly divorced. Though in Europe they were physically removed from the Harlem community, the Robesons remained an important and iconic African-American couple in the United States, and thus their relationship was a subject of discussion among other Renaissance figures. In the postscript to a 25 January 1932, letter to Carl Van Vechten, Nella Larsen wrote, "I am told [by a friend] that there is trouble brewing in the Robeson marriage. Is he right?"[26] The couple finally reconciled and decided to remain together, but Eslanda Robeson gave up managing her husband's career and resolved never to sacrifice her work in favor of his again.

In 1935 she began a course of study in social anthropology at London University; a year later, she went to Africa for several months of fieldwork. She wrote extensive accounts of her travels and took many photographs of the lands and peoples she encountered. Her studies were cut short when, as World War

II approached, the Robesons returned to the United States. They moved first to New York City and later to the Connecticut countryside. Paul continued to work regularly in the city; Essie enrolled in the Hartford Seminary where she completed the requirements for her Ph.D. During this time, she wrote *African Journey*, a book recounting her experiences traveling in Africa and her impression of the cultures she became acquainted with there. Because of her experiences in Africa, Essie Robeson and her husband became active in the Council on African Affairs (CAA), an organization that fought for the end of colonialism in Africa. After the war in Europe ended, their activities with the CAA brought the couple to the attention of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC); Senator Joseph McCarthy and his representatives scrutinized their friendships, travels, and political work. In 1953, when she took the stand before McCarthy's Senate committee and was asked if she was or had been a member of the communist party, Eslanda Robeson pled the Fifth Amendment. In 1957, the United States government revoked their passports.

Blacklisted in the United States and prevented from traveling to engagements overseas, the couple struggled to survive; they were forced to sell their home and neither could find work. In spite of the difficulties they faced, the couple remained politically active and worked for fair treatment and equal rights for African Americans and to free African nations from European colonialism. Both Robesons were important influences on the younger generation of civil-rights activists who were to continue the battle for equality in America in the 1960s and 1970s.

The continuing influence of Eslanda and Paul Robeson, as well as that of many of the Harlem Renaissance's most important and active participants, undermines attempts to define the New Negro Movement as a period of just ten or fifteen years that ended as the Great Depression began. After the stock market crash of 1929 and throughout the 1930s, money to support the arts, especially the artistic projects of marginal groups, became increasingly scarce. The Renaissance community may have lost its center, especially as the salon culture supported by hostesses such as A'lelia Walker and Grace Nail Johnson began to fade, but the cultural and artistic work of the Harlem Renaissance continued well into the twentieth century.

Many of the women associated with the Renaissance continued their creative work into the 1930s and the decades that followed, in spite of the drastic reduction in opportunities for publication or commission. While some, including Nella Larsen, abandoned their work, many more continued making art. Zora Neale Hurston and Augusta Savage continued to pursue their artistic work while supporting themselves by working as domestic servants; Georgia Douglas Johnson left many unpublished poems, plays, and stories when she died in 1966. While most of Johnson's unpublished manuscripts were destroyed after her death, the late twentieth-century interest in women of the Harlem Renaissance led to the recovery and publication of work by Hurston, Marita Bonner, and others. Still other women artists of the period, including Mary Bell, are just beginning to reach larger audiences. The influence of the Harlem Renaissance is evident in all areas of twentieth-century American and African-American culture, and the roles women played in shaping that influence has become more and more evident as a result of the ever-increasing interest in their work among scholars, artists, and historians.

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3 *Lewis,* When Harlem Was in Vogue*, p. 167.*

4 *Lewis,* When Harlem Was in Vogue, *p. 167.*

5 *Nella Larsen to Carl Van Vechten, 14 May 1932, Carl Van Vechten Papers.*

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19 *Johnson, biographical statement in* Caroling Dusk*, p. 75.*

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21 *Hughes,* The Big Sea, *p. 216.*

22 *Marita Bonner, "On Being Young—A Woman—and Colored,"* The Crisis *(December 1925): 65.*

23 *Jessie Redmon Fauset, Review of* The Heart of a Woman and Other Poems, Journal of Negro History, *4.4 (1919): 468.*

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26 *Nella Larsen to Carl Van Vechten, Carl Van Vechten Papers.*