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Modernism, Mass Culture, and the Harlem Renaissance: The Case of Countee Cullen

Jane Kuenz

The biggest mistake we make in discussions of “authenticity” and African American modernism is also generally the first mistake we make: the assumption that the term means something for black writers and artists qualitatively different from what it means for everyone else at the time, rather than simply meaning more, and, even then, simply more of the same. It is not that race plays no role in how “the authentic” is defined and deployed; clearly it does, as it always has for African Americans, where authenticity functions as a measure of success or as a stick with which to enforce the black artist’s right relation to black people or to blackness itself. Yet the discourse of racial identity and of the authenticity of both the racial self and the art that it produces exists within and takes meaning from broader discussions about authentic identity and culture and the relative ability of anyone to create or maintain either in the kind of world taking shape in the 1910s and 1920s. This world included Harlem, New York, as well as those other U.S. cities—Philadelphia, Washington, and Chicago especially—where New Negro artists and intellectuals gathered to articulate a modern Black aesthetic.

Though self-described as a rebirth of African American arts, the Harlem Renaissance fits squarely in a very American tradition that defines the authentic first as authentically American, by which is meant, most specifically, not British. The call for a real American literature, where “real” connotes the same qualities of natural roughness (later primitivism) and lack of popular or material success David Shumway identifies with authentic rock music, was heard loudly in the early nineteenth century and then again in the early twentieth, when it was propelled by
the twin terrors of late nineteenth-century gentility and the movement of commodity
capitalism into the realm of art and literature. On both counts, African Americans had
special issues. While I agree with Vincent Sherry that, even in the U.S., the difference
between modernists and their 1890s predecessors “may be more willed and rhetorical
than substantive or imaginative,” it’s worth remembering what the precedent actually
was if one were a black American. With lynching at its peak, those African Americans
appearing in the public arena who were not Booker T. Washington were likely instead
to be either already dead or reduced to racist caricature in the service of entertainment
and advertising. Most prior literary work was simply invisible, and too much of it suf-
fered from “bombast, bathos and artificiality,” as Alain Locke put it, especially when
compared to the era’s genuine contributions in popular music, the growing commercial
success of which threatened to reveal, in the same “loser wins” logic Shumway borrows
from Bourdieu, its essential inauthenticity, both racially and aesthetically. The studied
conventionality and sheer badness of much late nineteenth-century African American
writing, poetry in particular, while similar in kind to the worst output of the most popular
white writers at the time, was also a direct consequence of the self-censorship imposed
in response to the racism of post-Reconstruction American culture (e.g., where racist
notions about black women’s sexuality led inexorably to the unassailable virtue of fic-
tional heroines). The need to make a clean break with this literary and historical past
was quite real for African Americans; indeed, the nostalgia Katherine Lynes identifies
in Helene Johnson’s “Bottled” for a past never actually experienced in a fictional Africa
known largely through racist popular culture reflects the same need to blot out one’s
immediate past in favor of a history and identity prior to the experience of slavery and
the institutionalized humiliation put into place after Reconstruction. As Lynes’ analysis
of the poem indicates, while this move may have been politically disadvantageous in
the long run, it was not made casually or naïvely.

Yet the terms of the break were distressingly familiar. One of the striking aspects
of the modernist reaction to both the genteel past and the prospect of a future over-
determined by the commodity form is the central role of women as markers of what
is wrong in the world. As with their white counterparts, black women were figured
either as the black Aunt Hepsys of a past generation, puritanically resisting anything
new in the name of a middlebrow aesthetic they didn’t actually understand, or as the
primitive brown “girls” of the current one, compulsively if passively consuming and
reproducing the worst of mass culture’s racial stereotypes. My own analysis of modernist
authenticity concentrates on this intersection of gender, mass culture, and the discourse
of the “literary” that takes shape in relation to them. The heroic and gendered refusal
of socially defined conventions that animates so much modernist writing as well as the
fear of falseness Roger Rothman describes—i.e., the suspicion that one or one’s work
is always or inevitably fake, superficial, or inauthentic—are all implicit, and sometimes
ruthlessly explicit, in even the most optimistic New Negro literature (see Hughes’s
“The Negro Artist, and the Racial Mountain” and almost anything written by Wallace
Thurman). Moreover, the double negation identified by John Paul Riquelme, where
supposedly true alternatives are subsequently rejected as inauthentic, is a familiar
feature of Harlem Renaissance criticism and commentary. Indeed, the suspicion that the “new” in “New Negro” threatens always to mean merely “the latest” fully registers African American awareness of the brutal efficiency of mass culture in appropriating oppositional cultural forms and recycling them back to a public increasingly characterized by its short memory and eagerness for the new.

Though they disagreed about a lot, New Negroes were profoundly invested in positioning African American culture squarely within the discursive space of “the modern,” in being, as Alain Locke put it in 1927, “modernists among the moderns.” By this reasoning, it would be possible for African Americans to argue that if an authentic American literature were still possible (Native American culture having become “extinct”), it was theirs.

If the rhetorical advantages of such an argument were immediately obvious, less so were the dangers, most of which are now evident in the strange career of Countee Cullen, whose meteoric rise and subsequent fall as poet laureate of the Harlem Renaissance might be seen as an object lesson in how not to be modern and black. Though he benefited at an early age from more and more positive attention than his peers, Cullen was replaced relatively quickly in literary history, first by Langston Hughes, then by Sterling Brown, as the dominant poets of the era and the most authentic or truly representative of New Negro aesthetics and goals. This fall from grace was due in part to false periodization and, more specifically, a narrative of aesthetic development that moved away from conventional lyrics associated with a degraded and feminized genteel past and toward authentically realized folk forms linked with the present and future. This narrative had even profounder effects for black women poets, who, though they accounted for roughly half of the poems published in the periodical press, disappeared almost entirely under the weight of an emergent literary culture that broadly characterized their work, as it has Cullen’s, as bourgeois, racially empty, and feminine. Moreover, though the terms used to signal Cullen’s failure as a modern poet referred to what some saw as his uncritical reproduction of the sterile, canonical Anglo-American literary tradition he inherited—the basis of what came to be seen as inauthentic in his work—the same charges of bourgeois and feminine racelessness reappeared with only slight modification in the widespread critiques of the “standardization” of culture and consciousness said to be a consequence of the leveling influence of mass culture on both the culturally bereft middle-class consumers it targeted and the proletarian masses they feared.
As this discussion suggests, much of the debate about the character of New Negro poetry was colored by the role of class in the construction of literary and aesthetic taste. This was particularly true in the 1920s, when mass culture shaped, if not entirely co-opted, that discussion for its own ends. As literature increasingly became a professional enterprise—the work of academics or avant-garde writers—the qualities in Cullen’s poetry that had formerly marked it as compelling came to be seen by many as either dated or merely popular or both. Either of these would have marked Cullen and his work in turn as fundamentally inauthentic, both racially and as art, particularly among people whose growing investment in defining and policing authenticity was perhaps in direct proportion to their awareness of the impossibility of achieving it. If nothing else, the modernist emphasis on authenticity bespoke a concern with the profound inauthenticity of mass-produced cultural forms. Almost everything written in the 1910s and 1920s about “authentic” art was shaped by an unstated, because so broadly presumed, understanding of the determinant relation between mass culture and inauthenticity. Indeed, the belief that popularity guarantees the inauthenticity of art was often the one precondition for recognizing art as modernist at all.

This was the lesson Cullen learned the hard way, when, eleven years after his celebrated wedding to Yolanda DuBois—an event heralded in the pages of the *Crisis* by the bride’s own father as “the symbolic march of young and black America”—he was derided in language that clearly signaled the gendered and racial terms of his particular failure. As Saunders Redding put it, the poetry is “effete and bloodless” and Cullen himself “a schoolroom poet whose vision of life is interestingly distorted by too much of the vicarious . . . . [His] gifts are delicate, better suited to bon mots, epigrams, and the delightfully personal love lyrics for which a large circle admire him.”

Like the *Messenger* headline lamenting “‘Old Maids’ Make Art Backward” or the *New Yorker*’s purported “old lady in Dubuque,” Redding’s assessment was typical of the tone and content of much modernist criticism and indicative of the language that will characterize Cullen ever after: “effete,” “lisping,” and generally lacking the “virility” believed to inhere in more masculine poets such as Claude McKay.

This reception must have been quite a shock for the poet whose early efforts in the craft prompted Alain Locke to proclaim him “A genius!” Such pronouncements were more common earlier in the century when writing a poem, almost any poem, was prima facie evidence of New Negro credentials in a culture as yet unconvinced of the existence, much less the worth, of African American poetry. As Floyd J. Calvin wrote in his review of James Weldon Johnson’s 1921 *Book of American Negro Poetry*, because of “the tendency of the great ‘I Ams’ to subtract credit from us,” Johnson is stuck “laboriously proving” what everyone already knows: that African Americans have already produced a body of poetry extending back to Phillis Wheatley. Unfortunately, Johnson’s plan to demonstrate “intellectual parity by the Negro through the production of literature and art” came at a time when literature itself was turning into a mass market industry.
works in opposition to this mass market, devaluing in the process most books and the
people, especially women living in places like Dubuque, who read them. "Making No
Compromise with the Public Taste" read the masthead of Margaret Anderson's Little
Review, as though to emphasize this very point.³ In other words, at the very moment
when African American writers invested seriously in the production of black litera-
ture and the cultivation of an audience sympathetic to it, the creators of "literature,"
understood as an elite art capable of influencing anyone, self-consciously distanced
themselves from that wide audience for whom they cultivated a studied contempt.
That such an attitude itself betrayed a similarly utilitarian stance toward art seems not
to have occurred to most of them.

That contempt was evident in the mounting disdain for poetry anthologies, which
came under increasing attack in the very years when editors were compiling all those
collections of Negro verse. Denigrated as the "second-hand clothes shop of poetry,"
literary anthologies were assailed by Laura Riding and Robert Graves in A Pamphlet
Against Anthologies (1928), where they castigated publishers for turning poetry "into an
industrial packet-commodity" and treating what should be high art like "a commodity
destined for instructional, narcotic, patriotic, religious, humorous and other household
uses."⁹ For Riding and Graves, the offense was twofold: anthologies were not art at
all, but commercial ventures conceived, like other mass market schemes, in terms of
the interests of possible buyers rather than the peculiar talents of individual authors.
Their net effect was to homogenize the poems included or sentimentalize them for
general readers. Separated from their authors, poems were read with little or no con-
nection to a particular poet. Instead, anthologies catered to a public accustomed to
"commodities of lyric sameness" of the kind they had learned to read and recognize
from other anthologies, particularly Palgrave's, an overwhelming bestseller and coffee
table staple from 1860–1920.¹⁰ Worse, anthologies cheapened poetry by making poems
easily available to readers who would never encounter them in the little magazines
and literary reviews where they had originally appeared, much less a poet's published
book. These people were, in other words, not real readers at all, whose posture be-
fore poetry was paradoxically both serious and disinterested, but cultural fakes, who
consumed it lightly, like any other confection, in the course of other reading or daily
activities. Finally, Little Review's refusal to "compromise with the public taste" was a
refusal to cater to these people whose very desire to read poetry unwittingly betrayed
their unfitness for it.

This is the point at which Cullen's early status as boy wonder of the Harlem Re-
naissance starts to work against him both inside and outside the race. His dismissal by
Riding and Graves as "the youngest and most sentimentally advertised of contemporary
negro poets [who] writes just a little worse than the usual versifying white undergraduate" is a fair indication of how Cullen's promotion in New Negro circles was beginning
to look to some outside Harlem and the mainstream press. This would include most
specifically those such as Johnson and Locke who understood that the thrust of the
insult lay not so much in the trivialization embedded in the patronizing "versifying,"
but in the image of an appreciative public that cannot distinguish aesthetic judgment
from sentimental advertisement. Rather than producing evidence of the race’s “greatness,” then, as Johnson predicted would happen, the Harlem Renaissance emphasis on black writing and publishing risked being seen as merely the ludicrous pretension of a people whose very hopes for the political efficacy of their poetry was the surest sign it would fail.  

If anything, black poets in the 1920s suffered from wanting to have it both ways, to be both popularly accepted and avant-garde. As they were designed to do, treatises like *A Pamphlet Against Anthologies* cultivated an aesthetic hostile to mainstream readers and valued precisely for the fact that the kind of poetry promoted by people like Riding and Graves would rarely sell in the national magazines that actually paid for verse. The emphasis on the popular as an inverse measure of worth is key. Unfortunately for Cullen, the “large circle” that admired his work probably did so for the very qualities that came to mark it as “backward” in relation to the creation of a modern black aesthetic. Indeed, Redding’s remark about the size of Cullen’s readership discredits his poetry and him by associating both with this mass of presumably uncritical readers who not only had not read the little magazines, but probably would not understand them if they had and certainly would not like them. His assertion that Cullen’s work is “interestingly distorted by too much of the vicarious” similarly recalls those gendered critiques that claimed popular culture, especially the movies, replaced authentic experience and emotions with the vicarious, ultimately empty pleasures of passive consumption.  

Of course, the digs at Cullen’s “vicarious” relation to his subjects are intended also to imply what is racially inauthentic about his poetry: it comes out of a book rather than from anything an “actual” black man might “actually” do. That Cullen’s manhood might itself be in question, rather than just his blackness, suggests the critical basis of this complaint may be both misogyny and homophobia. While homophobia may go a long way toward explaining the persistent denigration as mere exploitative patronage of Carl Van Vechten’s considerable and enabling influence in the Harlem Renaissance, it would not explain why other reputedly homosexual male participants in the movement (Hughes, Locke, Thurman, Nugent, and McKay, among others) were not treated as Cullen was even though (or perhaps because) they were, if anything, more closeted.  

Cullen never exempted himself from the category of the modern. Nor was he averse to elitist condescension. Though it is difficult to imagine two people less alike than he and Thurman, the “strangely brilliant black boy who had read everything” and “wanted to be a great writer, like Gorki or Thomas Mann,” the two shared some ideas about poets and the black public. Riding and Graves’s contempt for general readers can be heard in Thurman’s attack in “Negro Artists and the Negro” on “the mass of Negroes [who], like the mass of whites, seem unable to differentiate between sincere art and insincere art.” Thurman is especially irritated that black readers are “unable to fathom the innate differences between a dialect farce committed by Octavus Roy Cohen to increase the gaiety of Babbitts, and a dialect interpretation done by a Negro writer to express some abstract something that burns within his people and sears him.” This condescension can also be heard in Cullen’s review of Hughes’s *The Weary Blues*, where
his comparison of jazz poetry to “the frenzy and electric heat of a Methodist or Baptist
revival meeting” depends on figuring the participants as passive and unthinking. His
language explicitly conceives of poetic production and consumption in elitist terms:
“in the light of reflection, I wonder if jazz poems really belong to that dignified com-
pany, that select and austere circle of high literary expression which we call poetry.”
Similar notions about the artist infect his feigned disdain for monetary compensation:
noting in a letter to Idella Purnell that “Palms does not pay for contributions,” he asks
rhetorically, “but what poet is ever concerned about money?”

Thurman, of course, was always concerned about money; he went into debt to
produce Fire!! and supported himself and other literary ventures in part by writing
hard-boiled tales for True Story under assorted pseudonyms. That he and Cullen
actually disagreed profoundly about the proper character of the black writer, his or her
work, and its readers is clear from the differences both in the tone of their critiques
and, more tellingly, the focus of their condescension. Though he refers to “the mass
of Negroes,” Thurman’s attack is directed not at the common people Cullen refers
to, those who balance the “electric heat of a . . . revival meeting” with the pleasure of
the juke joint or nightclub, but those bourgeois readers, the black Babbitts, for whom
poetry is not meaningful at all, but merely the expression of “some abstract something”
that doesn’t even have to be named, much less adequately expressed, to trigger a rote
response. More importantly, Thurman’s redesignation of middle-class readers as the
new black “mass” signals his understanding that modernism’s villain was neither the
masses per se, whose folk traditions were reimagined after Arnold as the basis of the
authentic culture that had been lost through modernization, nor the canonical British
literary tradition, which could at least claim, as Leavis maintained, an organic relation
to the culture that had produced it, but the expanding culture of the middle-class itself
in its definitive role as the new mass subject of contemporary commodity culture. In
this liminal and transitional space between an authentic, if idealized, folk past and an
avant-garde future lies the true cultural wasteland, a world cut off from any organic
relation to the art it consumes, which, as a result, consists largely of popularized ren-
ditions of high-cultural staples and sanitized immigrant and ethnic expressive forms.
Though they take shots at the left, Riding and Graves’s scorn is reserved primarily for
this middle-class readership and the various “household” uses to which it puts poetry,
specifically as ready-made vehicles for expressing canned emotions and all the other
“abstract somethings” Thurman mocks.

If after only a decade Cullen no longer enjoyed the high regard he did as Harlem’s
poet laureate, it is because he got ensnared in this dynamic and the contradictions it
engendered for black poets. Caught between a modernist reaction against traditional
poetic conventions and a bourgeois desire to win cultural legitimacy by demonstrating
competence in them, Cullen eventually became “the symbol of a fast disappearing
generation of Negro writers” Thurman predicted and his work dismissed as just the
kind of “third-hand Keats” Pound lamented: effeminate and raceless because it is tra-
ditional and popular and vice versa. Meanwhile, though they claimed that their genteel
forebears (and eventually even poets like Cullen) had sacrificed racial authenticity for
cultural legitimacy, some of those “younger Negro artists” like Thurman who consistently defended African American poetry in non-utilitarian terms and vehemently rejected any bourgeois mission for art ended up aligning themselves rhetorically with a new and largely white cultural elite determined to protect its own status and authority in large part by defining the poetic against the growing industry in mass produced literature. The final irony of this stance is that the Harlem Renaissance writers who found themselves on the side of those trying to rescue real literature from the masses and mass culture were the same people most likely to be associated in their work with both.

Notes
8. One of the worst of the avant-garde little magazines in terms of its lack of interest in general readers, Little Review published such articles as Pound’s “Imaginary Letters, IV: The Nonsense about Art for the Many” (September 1917), Anderson’s “What the Public Doesn’t Want” (August 1917), and Mary Widney’s “The Public Taste” (July-August 1920). Little Review’s motto was chosen in pointed contradistinction to the one adapted from Whitman for Harriet Monroe’s Poetry—“TO HAVE GREAT
POETS THERE MUST BE GREAT AUDIENCES TOO”—which at least left open the possibility that such readers could be cultivated. See Pound and Monroe’s exchange about this motto in “The Audience,” *Poetry* (October 1914): 29–32.


16. Countee Cullen to Idella Purrell (Stone) (6 May 1924), Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center (ALS).