

New voices in the harlem renaissance



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Despite disparities in the poetic styles of Sterling Brown and Arna Bontemps, each author was equally effective in conveying the “ new voice” of the black American during the Harlem Renaissance. The idea of a more suitable expression for African Americans repudiates the Renaissance’s fundamental ideology. Unconscious variety in interpretations of new black society represents the most defining aspect of the movement: the culmination of diverse black backgrounds in a single entity. While Brown wrote the poem “ Southern Road” in the black vernacular, Bontemps’ poem “ Golgotha Is a Mountain” uses a more standard literary style. Together, they epitomize the Harlem Renaissance as a natural progression for the coalescence of black culture.

A spark of spontaneous, intrinsic culture, the Harlem Renaissance provided a break from traditional stereotypes, ushering in a new identity for the black Americans. Following the abolition of slavery in the United States, former slaves poured out of the South and migrated to industrialized northern cities, brewing a volatile concoction of culture. This condensed mixture comprised of African Americans from distinct backgrounds and various geographies united under the pursuit of life and liberty, sculpting the new voice and identity for the modern black American. Best explained by Renaissance artist Aaron Douglas, the black man of this era “ did not actually consciously make a contribution; he made his contribution in an unconscious way” (Lewis 119). Essentially, the Renaissance was not an activist movement with a specific agenda. Rather, it represented an era of unprecedented prosperity for black culture in the United States, developed unintentionally through natural happenstance. Thus, every black man and woman equally participated in the

formation of the Renaissance, even “ the man on the streets...who would have been hard-put to explain it at all”; in fact, his “ contribution [was] greater than if he had attempted consciously to make a contribution” (Lewis 119). Simply by existing, the black American emanated his culture through life’s daily trivialities and habits, leaving a lasting imprint on the history of America.

Sterling Brown exemplifies the rise of an original black voice during the Renaissance through the use of an African-American Vernacular in his poem “ Southern Road.” By articulating the words of black Americans in a purely natural dialect, Brown instills a sense of black harmony into literary art. His style is an authentic portrayal of the black voice, yet also creates a worthy poetic composition. For example, the stanza “ doubleshackled—hunh— / guard behin’; / doubleshackled—hunh— / guard behin’; / Ball an’ chain, bebby, / on my min’,” incorporates a wide variety of turns of figurative language (Lewis 228). Repetition represents the endless toil experienced by the black man working in a chain gang, while also providing the sense of rhythm and song embodied in African tradition. Symbolic of many elements in the life of a black man, the term “ doubleshackled” not only suggests that the man is chained by both feet, but also insinuates he is figuratively bound, with no hope or desire for life beyond his bonds. The man’s physical and mental imprisonment serves as a depiction of the civil trappings of the black American. Clearly, Brown’s use of black vernacular does not diminish the literary merit of his work. He merely provides an authentic representation of the voice of the black man through the adaptation of English: despite

potential controversy over the use of such “ non-poetic” speech, Brown defined a new voice for black Americans.

A point of contention for Brown’s style is that his use of black vernacular may be interpreted as degrading, and perhaps even stereotypical. This argument possesses some merit, since the essence of the Renaissance manifests itself in abandoning former conventions and forging a new identity for the black American. Yet, it does not undermine Brown’s work. Introducing black vernacular into the literary world was certainly not a stereotype; it was in fact a revolutionary innovation, truly significant in that it marked the dawn of black sophistication and its impact on American society. Reasonably, a contemporary reader may misinterpret the lines “ po’ los’ boy, bebbby, / evahmo’...” as diminishing (Lewis 229). However, in the proper context of the Harlem Renaissance era, such an utterance would be more indicative of pride. By adopting the demeaning slurs slaves endured, such as “ boy,” the black man absorbs the negativity associated with the term, and instead redefines the connotation to his inclination. Yet while Brown’s utilization of black vernacular gives the black American an original, genuine voice in literature, other Renaissance poets chose to embrace European approaches.

Arna Bontemps’ poem “ Golgotha Is a Mountain” emulates the standard literary style of the time, exhibiting black Americans’ cultural flexibility. By expressing himself with a white style of poetry, Bontemps displays the black man’s intellectual capacity through a European lens. The first two lines of his poem, “ Golgotha is a mountain, a purple mound / almost out of sight,” reference Christianity, introduced to Africans by whites, along with the English language (Lewis 224). Bontemps uses Golgotha, the location of Jesus

Christ's crucifixion, as a symbol for a history of suffering and sacrifice, a more than familiar concept to former slaves and their descendants. He essentially synthesizes white culture with black culture, creating a bridge between whites and blacks in traditional society, redefining the role of the black American. In addition, he stresses that "there are mountains in Africa too. / treasure is buried there: gold and precious stones / and moulded glory" (Lewis 225). Even though Bontemps writes in a European style, he emphasizes the significance of African tradition, claiming Africans also possess a rich cultural history. Using a standard literary style broadens Bontemps' audience, potentially attracting white readers, and thus further cementing the black American's place in society. Consequently, Bontemps' work effectively aids the establishment of the new voice of the black American during the Renaissance, but not without inviting criticism.

Inevitably, Bontemps' standard literary style suffers criticism on the principle that it does not create a new image for the black American, but rather mirrors the techniques of whites. Supporters of this mentality fail to recognize the magnitude of the Renaissance as a beacon of diverse cultural expression. By adopting a standard literary style, Bontemps attempts to assimilate white tradition within black culture. Lines such as "I slept at the foot of Fujiyama and dreamed of legend and of death" could be easily mistaken for fragments of the white literature of the time (Lewis 225). However, the fact that this is indeed the voice of a black man completely changes the meaning behind the phrase, suggesting the black man also possesses the universal ability to philosophically wonder. Not merely mimicking White civilization, he seeks to build upon existing foundations in

society, to manipulate prevalent standards to pioneer a new voice for the black man, while avoiding alienation of the general public. Rationally, Bontemps realizes that inventing established conventions is not a prerequisite for innovation. He expresses black culture through a European style, and in doing so, contrives a novel voice for the black American.

Even though Brown's "Southern Road" and Bontemps' "Golgotha Is a Mountain," feature remarkably different poetic styles, they both equally contributed to the Harlem Renaissance through differing portrayals of new black culture. While Brown used black vernacular to provide an authentic, prideful identity for the black man, Bontemps chose to adopt a standard literary style, displaying the black man's intellectual flexibility in the advancement of history. Since the Harlem Renaissance was a largely intuitive rise of black cultural development in America, neither Brown nor Bontemps could have possibly contributed more to the new voice of the black American.