The Harlem Renaissance and the Fine Art of Failure

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Abstract

This essay discusses the notion of "failure" as it relates to the Harlem Renaissance and *ALH's* 100th anniversary special issue. First, I turn to the letters and writing of Dorothy West as she develops *Challenge*, the little magazine published during the 1930s intended to reignite and remedy the literary spirit of the 1920s' New Negro Movement. While West and her contemporaries argue the merits of the New Negro period, I use *Fire!!* magazine (1926) to suggest that "failure" might have been a productive political and aesthetic strategy intended to challenge the racial, sexual, and gender norms of the New Negro Movement. Then, I explore the special issue essays written by Michelle Stephens, Cherene Sherrard-Johnson, and John K. Young, as they each examine the Harlem Renaissance's impact on Black Studies and Literary Studies in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Overall, I argue for the productivity of "failure" as a mode of inquiry for those interested in the art and writing of the New Negro period.

In February of 1934, James Weldon Johnson sent Dorothy West a congratulatory letter for the inaugural issue of her magazine, *Challenge*. In the letter, he praises the magazine as "way and beyond superior to any Little Magazine that we have yet launched" (Johnson to West). Writing from his teaching position at Fisk University, Johnson also mentions a few students he has recently taught as future magazine issue contributors. His suggestion of young writers aligns with West's

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vision for *Challenge*, which aimed to continue the work of the Harlem Renaissance by providing "an organ for the new voice" (39). In her inaugural editorial statement, West cites a letter from Countee Cullen expressing his hope that she can "recapture the spirit of '26" (39). She writes further in this same editorial that "it is our plan to bring out the prose and poetry of the newer Negroes. We who were the New Negros challenge them to better our achievements. For we did not altogether live up to our fine promise" (39). Echoing West, Johnson's "Foreword" to *Challenge* reflects "a degree of disillusionment and disappointment for those who a decade ago hailed with loud huzzas the dawn of a Negro literary millennium" (2). And perhaps no close contemporary to those writing during the 1920s so clearly articulates the end and the inadequacies of the Harlem Renaissance than Richard Wright in his canonical essay, "Blueprint for Negro Writing." Published in 1937 under Dorothy West's coeditorship of the *New Challenge*, a short-lived revival of her *Challenge* magazine, Wright offers a veiled description of the Harlem Renaissance as either a joke or "the fruits of that foul soil which was the result of a liaison between inferiority-complexed Negro 'geniuses' and burnt-out white Bohemians with money" (53). Disappointment in the previous decade's lack of longevity undergirds the excitement for the future of Black writing. Though the temporal limits of the Harlem Renaissance remain in flux well into the twenty-first century, by the mid-1930s, Johnson, West, Cullen, and Wright all express a sense that whatever the New Negro movement was, it was no more.

Although Nathan Huggins ends his 1971 watershed study *Harlem Renaissance* suggesting that the period failed in the "creation of the 'New Negro,'" in 2025, it is difficult to deny that the Harlem Renaissance has grown to be a fertile artistic and cultural period of study for Black literary studies (303). For the rest of the twentieth century, scholars like Houston Baker, Akasha-Gloria Hull, and Cheryl Wall, among others, resisted claims of the period's failure by returning to the Harlem Renaissance to recover texts and broaden our understanding of the period.[1] Yet I think there is potential in reconceiving failure not as botched potential but instead as a space within which writers of the Harlem Renaissance worked to discover possibilities and generate new identities. Rather than assess the period, I propose that we sit in the richness of failure as a thematic and a politic that animates much of the more forward-thinking New Negro writing and the scholarship that has been produced in its aftermath. In this way, I'm thinking of failure in the vein of queer studies scholars like Jack Halberstam, who, in *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), suggests that "failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world" (2). Halberstam's conceptualization of failure's possibilities creates

individual and communal openings that may produce vitalizing cultural shifts.

Perhaps no Harlem Renaissance text exemplifies the opportunity inherent in failure better than the little magazine *Fire!!* Dedicated by its editor, Wallace Thurman, to "the Younger Negro Artists," *Fire!!* published only one issue in the fall of 1926 but featured the works of many movement luminaries: Gwendolyn Bennett, Countee Cullen, Aaron Douglas, Arthur Fauset, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Richard Bruce Nugent whose short story "Smoke, Lilies, and Jade" exemplifies the queer art of failure. Told in the third person, Nugent's story follows the stream-of-consciousness reflections of the protagonist Alex as he navigates the recent loss of his father and his mother's expectation for him to become the male head of the household, his lack of suitable employment, his desire to be part of a community of artists despite lacking an artistic practice, and his sexual desire for a non-Black man. The ellipses punctuating the story represent and convey Alex's "short disconnected thoughts" (Nugent 33). A dilettante, as one scholar describes him, Nugent creates in "Smoke, Lilies, and Jade" the possibility of queer Black sexuality that resists respectability politics.[2] The story neither provides the reader with a definitive ending nor does it resolve the issues presented from its story's outset. Instead, the narrative closes with more ellipses and a "To Be Continued." Of course, the story remained unfinished because *Fire!!* was not financially viable. Still, notions of hope and failure intertwine—the hope for another issue and the failure to render a conclusive ending combine to create the possibility of a different, unfinished future through Black artistic expression. The works of *Fire!!* illustrate how failure was baked into the most racially, gender, and sexually progressive work of the Harlem Renaissance, and suggest that many of the writers and artists understood inconclusiveness as the hallmark of honest reckoning and resistance in the US.

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The ongoing nature of hope and failure that Nugent's story evokes speaks to this special issue of *American Literary History* on "The Harlem Renaissance at 100," urging us to consider the period from various temporal and conceptual perspectives. The essays are diverse, encompassing the print culture of modernism, the afterlife of the Harlem Renaissance through posthumously published works, the trauma of colonial modernity, and Black feminist interventions in Harlem Renaissance studies. Much like the dialogue between West and Johnson, Cullen, and Wright, however, a common theme that many of these essays share is the tension between the hope and failure of the Harlem Renaissance. Concerning that tension, Michelle Stephens's "Worlds of Color, World of Shadows: On the New Negro Movement of the Early Twentieth Century" provocatively asks: "How were the seeds of today's Black social and intellectual movements, such as

Black Lives Matter and Afropessimism, with their sharp focus on anti-Blackness and models of justice centered on repairing the human, planted in the heyday of the New Negro and the Harlem Renaissance, when the future was uncertain and both hope and dread prevailed?" Stephens identifies W.E.B. Du Bois's idea of a "world of shadows" as a potential third term alongside "double consciousness" and "the color line." By doing so, she encourages readers to reflect on how the New Negro movement sought to reframe the problem of race as a human issue. By placing the New Negro movement in dialogue with a twenty-first-century concept like Afropessimism, Stephens reminds us of the far-reaching impact of early twentieth-century Black thinkers and cultural producers, even as she also highlights the constraints placed on their most radical aspirations for freedom. Ultimately, in this issue as elsewhere, we acknowledge the global failure to recognize and confront the "shadow world" of race and the American "problem" of Blackness. In other words, the radical potential of the New Negro movement remains connected to the reality of the nation's lasting inability (its *failure*) to address the global anti-Blackness established by colonial modernity. We continue to grapple with such hope and dread one hundred years later.

Acknowledging the scholarly work that renews and incites hope, Cherene Sherrard-Johnson provides a powerful remembrance and review of Cheryl Wall's cutting-edge influence on establishing the Black feminist line of inquiry within Harlem Renaissance scholarship. More particularly, Sherrard-Johnson comments on the gender-race dynamics that failed to confer on Wall's *Women of the Harlem Renaissance* (1995) the same privilege of revision and expansion that may occur through multiple editions often afforded male writers, citing David Levering Lewis's *When Harlem Was In Vogue* (1981) as a prime example. Using a bit of critical speculation, Sherrard-Johnson imagines an "updated edition of *Women*," one that would have allowed Wall's analysis to flourish in light of the increasing number of titles published in the wake of her book. Beyond the speculative, Sherrard-Johnson's essay eloquently illuminates Wall's long reach in contemporary studies of the Harlem Renaissance. Starting with Sherrard-Johnson's own first monograph, *Portraits of the New Negro Woman: Visual and Literary Culture in the Harlem Renaissance* (2007), we see how Wall shapes Sherrard-Johnson's sense of the reparative work needed within Harlem Renaissance studies to include the study of multimedia representations of Black womanhood. The essay further explores Wall's impact by featuring contemporary scholarship that ranges from Autumn Womack's study of early experimental forms of Black data in *The Matter of Black Living: The Aesthetic Experiment of Racial Data, 1880–1930* (2022) to Imani Owens's *Turn the World Upside Down: Empire and Unruly Forms for Black Folk Culture in the U.S. and Caribbean* (2023), which

places Caribbean and Black American writers in dialogue during the Harlem Renaissance. Returning to Wall's work as we celebrate the anniversary of the Harlem Renaissance feels like a gift. It's a reminder that there is always more work to be done, and it speaks to the enduring power of scholarly innovation as it flourishes, encouraging us to continue filling in the gaps in our knowledge. One hopes that Cheryl Wall would be delighted by all the excellent work her work continues to engender.

Finally, resisting a narrative that renders Black writing and writers as failing to connect to the literary movement of modernism, John K. Young's "Thinking Bibliographically about Periodical Networks in the 'Harlem' Renaissance" elucidates the dialectical relationship between white and Black modernist movements. While there is a tendency to view these movements as segregated, Young's essay offers a theoretical and material introduction to the Harlem Renaissance as it is represented in print across both Black and non-Black periodicals. Expanding on Elizabeth McHenry's provocation to "think bibliographically" when reading and analyzing nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Black literature, Young traces Black literature within and beyond Black-published magazines and newspapers, advocating for a more dynamic and contextual understanding of the literary networks among Black Harlem Renaissance writers.

Beyond helping me understand why West may have chosen to start a little magazine to revive the spirit of the New Negro Renaissance, Young's essay urges us to explore the material context from which some of the most beloved literature of the Harlem Renaissance emerged. He suggests that "thinking about the visual dynamics of the magazine as a material object" involves considering where a poem or short story is placed in relation to other texts and the visual media within a periodical's layout. Furthermore, the essay connects Harlem Renaissance writing more explicitly to Euro-American modernism than may be apparent if one assumes Black writers exclusively published in Black-run periodicals and newspapers. More than merely indicating modernist influences on Black writers, Young contends that Black authors publishing in non-Black modernist contexts reconfigured these outlets and compelled them to "take account of the fact of modern Blackness." One might expand Young's argument and propose that these Black modernists continue to write, and be read, beyond the Harlem Renaissance because reconfiguring the American context for understanding Blackness is an ongoing project.

Only a few years removed from what Cullen called the "spirit of '26," West sought to recapture what felt possible for those New Negro writers of the 1920s. While she imagined the writers of the previous decade as not having lived up to their potential, she continued to be encouraged by them, publishing many of these same writers in future

issues of *Challenge*. So, returning to one possible end of the Harlem Renaissance seems fitting as we contemplate the period's impact one hundred years later. I believe the essays in this special issue illustrate that the hope and failure of Black artistic production from the Harlem Renaissance continues to inspire scholarly work well into the twenty-first century. Failure creates fine art and may well be essential to the iterative processes of Black intellectual and artistic production.

Notes

1. See Houston Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (1987); Cheryl Wall, *Women of the Harlem Renaissance* (1995); Gloria T. Hull, *Color, Sex, and Poetry: Three Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance* (1987).

2. See St Clair, Cody C. "A Dilettante Unto Death: Richard Bruce Nugent's Dilettante Aesthetic and Unambitious Failure." *African American Review* 50, no. 3 (2017): 273–89.

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