The Passing of Hettie Jones: Transition of the Harlem Renaissance into the Beat Generation

The Harlem Renaissance, also known as the New Negro Movement, materialized in the era following the end of World War I. Living with shaken spirits after the first major international conflict, the atmosphere of Phoenix-like reemergence equipped the survivors with an opportunity to present their heritage with newfound dedication. This period had New York City populated with African-American actors, writers, artists, musicians, and advocates of the black cultural motion; prominent icons of the time include Langston Hughes, Louis Armstrong, W. E. B. Du Bois, Zora Neale Hurston, and Alain LeRoy Locke. The emerging visionaries pushed for opportunity to represent their culture artistically, free and proud—its “hope for black uplift and interracial empathy that it embodied” (Aberjhani and West) drove spirits onward after the bloodshed that had recently occurred. Because “there is a certain element of romanticism associated with the era’s creativity” (Aberjhani and West), the period elevates itself from history’s dehumanizing pages to declare triumph of a new voice.

Similarly structured, the Beat generation of the 1950’s and 60’s rose from the dust of World War II, promoting a philosophy of transcendentalism via “primitivism, instinct, energy, ‘blood’” (Prothero 206). Pioneered by Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William Burroughs, further radicalization was sparked by writers Neal Cassady, Herbert Hunke, John Clellon Holmes, and Gary Snyder. Mostly distributed between the two cities of San Francisco and New
York City, the Bohemian scene found its sparks fanned easily because of the vivacity and diversity of the areas.

Both artistic revolutions promoted expression and exploration of culture, self, and psychological exploration to passionately create a soulful collective. In times which cried for enhanced humanities to counteract the governmental restrictions enforced to prevent future violent fights. Due to these similarities, the Beat movement is a likely reincarnate of the Harlem Renaissance, and this made evident through comparison of their authors, origins, values, and products.

Though praised for her auspicious initial contribution to the New Negro Movement, Nella Larsen faded out in just an inauspicious manner. Her first two books, Quicksand and Passing, were met with encouragement for further production and critical acclaim, the former work also placing second in the Harmon foundation’s literature contest of 1928, an achievement solidifying her contribution to Negro literary culture. Larsen is “one of several women writers of the Harlem renaissance relegated to the back pages of that movement’s literary history, a curious fate” (Larsen ix) defying reconciliation with beginning popularity. However, after being accused of plagiarism in her third work, Sanctuary, Larsen was appropriately devastated and fell from the social eye to die inconspicuously.

Larsen’s second book, Passing, is a story about two families: Irene (light skinned African American) and Brian (dark skinned African American) with their two children (one light and one dark), and Clare (light skinned African American) and John (white) with one daughter (light skinned mulatto). The novel narrates Clare’s transitional process of appropriating white culture, replacing her own black heritage. Disgusted with her once friend’s selfish behavior, Irene constantly struggles with allegiance to her own race—which Clare so carelessly discards to
desire to pick back up again—and female solidarity against male oppression and racism. Irene desired security paramountly, as it “was the most important and desired thing in life” (235). The protagonist bemoans that “it was…enough to suffer as a woman, an individual, on one’s own account, without having to suffer for the race as well” (225). Burdened with a double weight, Irene and Clare explore what their innate identities say according to white male society.

Popular since the late 1920’s, the sociological concept of ‘passing’ was most established by Larsen. Described as “breaking away from all that was familiar and friendly to take one’s chances in another environment, not entirely strange, perhaps, but certainly not entirely friendly” (Larsen 157), the act involved transcending one’s categorical placement—the rank born into racially, politically, economically, socially, and culturally—to absorb that of the dyadic superior. Doing this may absolve the passer of stigma, award the individual with the privileges previously denied, and provide financial, communal, and psychological security. However, discarding one’s racial identity for another can be detrimental to personal well-being—where will one’s alliances lie if both the former and current group disown a false and loose identifier who changes culture like a cloak? Assuming that one may choose their culture at will— it not being an irrevocable, inherent aspect to character—then human kind has yet one more trait to confine and objectify them, another simple label like that of gender association. If the process of cultural alliance is as matter of fact, one’s historical and philosophical upbringing has no more value than a hat donned with the mood, and thus people have no arching, distinguishing to separate one from another.

The people trivialize that which should be most sacred to personal value, making it unattractively transitory. Because “no one who passed confused politics with prophecy” (Jones 127), the bona fide enlightenment which comes from the bohemian philosophical meditation distinguishes those who understand the cause from those fooled.
The practice of passing existed exclusively for blacks who appear white, and the latter never had to face the dilemma—to pass or pass not—because “they are secure and so don’t have to bother” (Larsen 158). After the Civil Rights Movement, passing bore weight no more since the disparity between black and white privilege significantly decreased. Despite the advancements, though, African Americans continue as the Other, especially stereotyped by violence, lack of intelligence, and sexual objects of intense passion. In a conversation in Passing contemplating the proponents of interracial lust, the narrator describes the eating of ‘forbidden fruit’ as “a kind of emotional excitement…the sort of thing you feel in the presence of something strange, and even, perhaps, a bit repugnant to you: something so different that it’s really at the opposite end of the pole from all your accustomed notions of beauty” (205). Both passing as an African American into white culture, and the reverse for its sexual dabbling, brought feelings of thrilling adventure as one group treated the other as a drastic difference to their own person.

Black women artists suffered particularly in their attempt to pursue an expressive lifestyle—dominated by white culture—like that which was being opened to visionary black males. Prior to the influx of art which the renaissance made possible, black art matter had seldom appeared in public work, due to white patrons’ mixed disregard and contempt (Kirschke 14). As the market for artistic creation began to find an audience and thus communal promotion, women still “found very little support in this endeavor” (Kirschke 13); when “attempting to create while balancing the sole responsibility…for the home life as well” (13), society preached an imbalance to how women discarded normative constructs. Despite the resistance, black women artists “assumed this burden and forged ahead, shut out from the artistic world by a white-controlled society, often shunned by their male counterparts, excluded from the creative world by “a vast veil” (Kirschke 17)—W. E. B. Du Bois’s veil of double consciousness through which African
Americans peer (12). That portal through which one passes, where identity is “spun out between the poles of two distinct racial groups—black and white—and two dissimilar social classes—lower and upper—to form the double consciousness of being” (Kirschke 12), according to David Levering Lewis, is the place where self-actualization is founded. African Americans have more pressure to represent their race than dominant groups; thus, one must untangle heritage and worth from the societal yarns characterizing them unfavorably, uncalled for.

Besides the attempt to insert black arts into white history, the collusion bled over into interracial relations as well, to forge an environment of equality. Perennially, hardship and resistance have met interracial couples in their endeavor to protest arbitrary rules of relationships and human connection. Struck violently, spat at mentally, and targeted as Other, these pairs ran risk because of their unions. Whether the purpose for such fusion of skins was love, political, or economic, the consequences stung the binary couple with the same hot iron of social discontent formed in fiery kiln of small minds. Exacerbated by the civil rights movement of the 1960’s, racial tension reddened with heat at the beginnings of black and white blending, and Hettie Jones describes this in her novel as “blurring the we/they line” (107). The dilution of either race into a hybrid threatened each side’s culture, self-perception, and evolutionary worth, and so progress, seemingly rational, met this wall of subconscious preservation. Although “everything can’t be explained by some general biological phrase” (Larsen 186), the opposition to interracial coupling saw no positive concept but a starkly unfavorable image of contrasting colors. Her lament tinged with anticipation, Jones relates that “there was pressure in all black people to end their interracial relationships” (226)—the two halves of the dyadic pair were urged to breakup in order to solidify with their respective races in preparation for revolution. Race “matters…every minute all the time” (Jones 233), and so the war and its fighters must be aware of their affiliation
always, for action every is an irrevocable statement. Jones, after announcing the institutionalism of racism, remarks that “the most “enlightened” were complicit” (108); this may be an attempt to excuse the illegal activity her and her Beat cronies partook, but the passive sarcasm of the quoted word suggests an inherent inability to become enlightened, for the enlightenment in this case is just propaganda marketed by the media, targeting liberal minds with artistic endeavors. Whatever results from the social discontent aroused by such enlightenment, then, keeps the class striations as is, preventing those of the poor lower rung from ascending because of an utter distaste for the system.

Hettie Jones, in her memoir How I Became Hettie Jones, divulges her experiences as a female Beat, a white woman in the midst of the civil rights movement, a Jew post-Holocaust, and a pawn of interracial relationships. As the ex-wife of LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka), Jones’s sense of never belonging was exacerbated by her marriage to a man who deemed her part of the enemy he loathed. Besides this psychological and historical bildungsroman, Jones published twenty children's books and three poetry collections, worked clerical positions, taught upper-level education, and started the literary magazine Yugen.

Contrary to social norm, but in accordance to bohemian thought, she mentions a worry concerning the “catastrophe” would would send her back with packed bags to conformity—rather than that same event causing fall from the ‘perfection’ of 50’s conformity (26)—and therefore this lifestyle and its consequences are her fault for her deviance. Distinct from typical Beat philosophy glamorizing poverty for the artistic atmospheric and the destitute rush it brought, though, Jones regards such practices as impractical and unnecessary: “I refused to link hard life with art; at least I wasn’t convinced that the latter required the former” (23). The “self-indulgence of life-as-art” (Jones 60) sometimes wearied her, as an inessential hindrance taxes
more than the burden which must be dealt with. As if “poverty rendered you undeserving of history” (Jones 9), the Jewish author creates a Beat life which seeks to obtain and scrutinizingly manage money, rather than revel in having nothing. At the time, this air of impenetrability may have been a defense mechanism to hide the horror known to come with her chosen lifestyle; reviewing stories of women and race, Jones admits her small truth: “poverty, it seemed, looked just like me” (233). Eventually, Jones realizes that sheer will would not carry a family of four, remarking the state of her vitality simplified to one crux: “my own life was reduced to economics…I’d have to cross the border” (139). Jones’s eventual triumph as a female writer happens despite immense social obstacles, as she strives to develop her character outside of labels of race and gender.

Undoubtedly, children growing up in racial turmoil experience more difficulty than a more easily classified person. Faced with twice the pressure to find oneself through soul searching and careful analysis, double the expectations are heaped on the children of interracial couples. Besides personal actualization—the coming of age—and familial environment, reconciling the disparity between two races proves hard when neither one may necessarily claim the offspring of an undesired welding. Lisa Jones Brown, daughter of Jones and Amiri Baraka, delivered a grueling message on the ignorance of present mistaking mixed children as forever socially unacceptable on a panel at New York’s New Museum of Contemporary Art: “The myth of the American mulatto as perpetual outsider, cast helplessly between two bloodlines, forever conflicted with no allegiances, only denies the authority of black culture and the empowering sense of black identity in an American and world community” (Jones 237). Lisa, when asked if the Beat generation impacted her much, answered, “the writers of the Harlem Renaissance had a much greater influence on me. I guess I was trying to divorce myself from that history, from my
parents’ story” (George-Warren 388). In a Beat household, the Harlem history had more sway, for the true roots of black artistic creations can be traced most to that era.

*Passing* and *How I Became Hettie Jones* similarly speak about a light skinned woman married to a dark skinned man who wants to connect with his cultural roots more than participate in the norms of mainstream society. Both stories also have the ‘other woman’ character, Clare in *Passing* and Diane di Prima in *How I Became Hettie Jones*. Irene feels her marriage disintegrate timely, shading over with each of her husband’s disconsolate mood swings as he disconnects from the remnants of their union. Raw, she reveals that “because…the bond of flesh and spirit between them was so strong, she knew…that his dissatisfaction had continued, as had his dislike and disgust for his profession and his country” (Larsen 187). Jones speaks about LeRoi’s growing tension and malice when watching him watch the riots of the Civil Rights Movement’s birth, and later when experiencing the violence himself; she feels the spite hit her as well, as one of his newfound Target. Furthermore, Jones, bombarded with race in every aspect of her life, began to take all comments more offensively than they were intended, since “suspicion had been a reflex action, a *mis*perception, a paranoia” (91). Prevalent in both eras, “nobody wants a dark child” (Larsen 168), whether it belong to a black couple oppressed for their bodily shades or a mixed couple in a testy time abhorring the evidence of blended offspring. Irene’s Brian “was fond of her, loved her, in his slightly undemonstrative way” (Larsen 190). LeRoi’s representation of Jones evolved from that of initial love to utter detestation, calling her weird and declaring that she would be nothing without him (Jones 98). Brian forever sought to escape to Brazil, reclaiming cultural heritage from its earthly origins, and Amiri Baraka, also detesting his current country, writes in his poem “Notes for a Speech:” “you are / as any other sad man here / american” (39-41). Clare and Diane di Prima present sexual threats to the both novels’ main
characters, the latter having an affair and child with Jones’s husband; as neither woman deserts her respective husband, they share the common resolution spoken by Irene that it was “better, far better, to share him than to lose his completely” (Larsen 235). The legitimacy of race and its implications put the minorities in a rut; Irene is subjected to terror of the moment when bigot Brian should discover Clare’s and her acquaintances’ true race, and Jones waits to see how the next census will classify her family. The female protagonists of each piece ponder over heritage, particularly how it pertains to them individually and whether that culture may be subjugated or substituted with another.

The Beat generation, pulling from and enhancing the search and representation of black culture in an oppressive post-war environment, mirrors the Harlem Renaissance, from which the former’s roots are evidently grounded. The aim of these movements was to “ease the possible past the expected” (Jones 27), to push the limits of the time’s social constructs. Because each time period promoted freedom of expression in all artistic mediums feasible—creating new genres such as Jazz (prominent in both generations for its improvisational easiness and soothing of troubled souls) to put their endeavors in euphonic composition. Overall, black culture flourished because of the encouragement of the 20’s and 50’s, propelling African American heritage to the most difficult test of the 60’s, on which true liberation hung.
Works Cited


