

A White Girl's Prayer

By EDNA MARGARET JOHNSON

I WRITHE in self-contempt, O God—
My Nordic flesh is but a curse:
The Black girl loaths to clasp my hand;
She doubts my love, because I'm white.
An Oriental shrinks from me,
While flashing Hindu eyes disdain
My pallid cheek, my Saxon hair,
And Jewess lips rebuke my smile.
Shy "senorita" apprehends
The sneering crowd, were she my guest.
Old Indian squaws perplexed will stare,
When I but praise their basketry.

O, bitter age. I'm ostracized
By my own proud Caucasian clan,
Since I, among my friends would have
The youths of every race and caste.

O God of Life, remove this curse—
The cords of shame are strangling me.
Remorse is mine. I would atone
For white superiority—
Sheer carnal pride of my own race.

Tonight on bended knees I pray:
Free me from my despised flesh
And make me yellow . . . bronze . . .
or black.

THE CRISIS

Toward the end of the 1920s, the NAACP journal, The Crisis, began to transform its "Poet's Page" into a forum for white views of race, ranging from verses in the minstrel tradition to radical antiracist odes, often printed on the same page and without editorial comment. Although extreme, "A White Girl's Prayer" spoke for many who longed for the exotic utopia they imagined Harlem could offer, just as Nancy Cunard's "1930" voiced the belief of some white women that they could speak for, or as, blacks.

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There were many white faces at the 1925 Opportunity awards dinner. So far they have been merely walk-ons in the story of the New Negro, but they became instrumental forces in the Harlem Renaissance.

—Steven Watson, *The Harlem Renaissance*

You know it won't be easy to explain the white girl's attitude, that is, so that her actions will seem credible.

—Carl Van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven*



Fania Marinoff in Harlem.

I did not set out to write this book. Some years back, in the course of writing *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters*, I needed, but could not find, information on the many white women Hurston knew and

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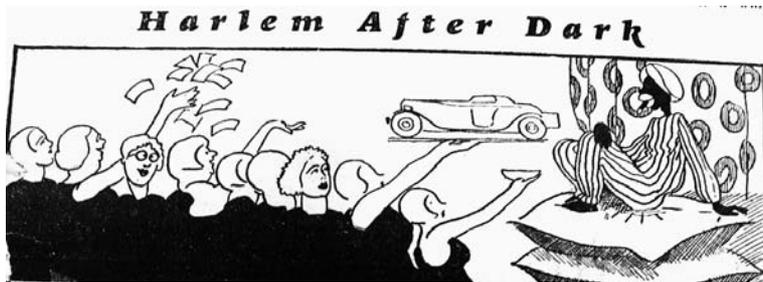
befriended in Harlem: hostesses, editors, activists, philanthropists, patrons, writers, and others. There was ample material about her black Harlem Renaissance contemporaries: “midwife” Alain Locke; leading intellectual W. E. B. Du Bois; educator Mary McLeod Bethune; activists Walter White and Charles S. Johnson; actors Paul Robeson, Charles Gilpin, and Rose McClendon; and the array of Harlem Renaissance writers and artists from the cohort with whom she edited the radical journal *Fire!!*—Wallace Thurman, Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Bennett, Richard Bruce Nugent, Aaron Douglas, and John Davis—as well as satirist George Schuyler, novelists Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen, and poets Claude McKay and Countée Cullen, among others. The white *men* associated with the Harlem Renaissance—writer and honorary insider Carl Van Vechten; writers Sherwood Anderson and Waldo Frank; playwrights Eugene O’Neill, Paul Green, and Marc Connelly; editor/satirist H. L. Mencken; activist Max Eastman; folklorists Roark Bradford and John Lomax; German artist Winold Reiss; anthropologists Franz Boas and Melville Herskovits; philanthropists Arthur and Joel Spingarn and Edwin Embree—also proved easy to research. But the white women were a problem. It seemed that there was virtually no information available about some of them. Many, such as Charlotte Osgood Mason, a wealthy patron known as the “dragon lady” of Harlem, were described with the same few sentences in every source on the Harlem Renaissance, sentences that I eventually learned were wrong (although not before I too had committed some of them to print).

We have documented every other imaginable form of female identity in the Jazz Age—the New Woman, the spinster, the flapper, the Gibson Girl, the bachelor girl, the bohemian, the twenties “mannish” lesbian, the suffragist, the invert, and so on. But until now, the full story of the white women of black Harlem, the women collectively referred to as “Miss Anne,” has never been told. White women who wrote impassioned pleas such as “A White Girl’s Prayer” (see frontispiece) about their longings to escape the “curse” of whiteness have rarely been regarded seriously.

Some believed they should not be. The press sexualized and sen-

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sationalized Miss Anne, often portraying her as either monstrous or insane. To blacks she was unpredictable, as likely to sentimentalize a “gleeful,” “trusting,” eye-rolling “pickaninny,” as Edna Barrett did on “The Poet’s Page,” or to claim that she could speak for black desires to murder “Crackers,” as Nancy Cunard did there also (see frontispiece), as she was to question or criticize her own status. And so, blacks did not necessarily welcome her presence either, although they often sidestepped saying so publicly or in print. Miss Anne crops up in Harlem Renaissance literature as a minor character—a befuddled dilettante or overbearing patron whose presence in cabarets or political meetings spawns outbreaks of racial violence. Occasionally, she is caricatured in black newspapers, as in this cartoon image of white women flocking to throw



A bevy of sex-starved white women showering riches on one lone “sheik” (Harlem slang for a hip black man).

gold, jewels, and cars at one sexy young black man, known in those days as a “sheik.” Relying on these stock characters, we might believe that she was found only in cabarets, drinking and “jig-chasing” (pursuing black lovers), or enthroned on New York’s Upper East Side, bankrolling black writers. Historians and critics such as Kevin Mumford, Susan Gubar, and Ann Douglas dismiss these women as “slummers” guilty of “sinister . . . vampirism” and pronounce their incursions into Harlem undeserving of serious inquiry. Even Baz Dreisinger’s recent *Near Black: White-to-Black Passing in American Culture*, the only book of its kind on this subject, mentions just one woman, the journalist Grace Halsell.

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There are a few individual biographies of these women. These biographies typically dispense with their time in Harlem in a few pages, although it was often the most important and exciting period of their lives.

Some still believe that Miss Anne's story should remain untold. Often dismissed as a sexual adventurer or a lunatic, Miss Anne may be one of the most reviled but least explored figures in American culture. *Miss Anne in Harlem* aims to see what can be understood now about this figure's unlikely, often misunderstood, choices. What can we resurrect about her lived experience of "identity politics," and how might that be relevant today? What context gave her choices meaning? Why have so few questions been asked about her actions? Could we reconstruct her own view of what she was doing in Harlem without first imposing judgment? One problem with dismissing these women out of hand is that so many of the principal engineers of the Harlem Renaissance sincerely loved them, even if their efforts to become "voluntary Negroes" and speak for blacks also made them nervous.

Sometimes it seems as if Miss Anne engineered her own erasure from the historical record. Some of the most influential white women in Harlem—such as NAACP founder Mary White Ovington, Harlem librarian Ernestine Rose, and philanthropist Amy Spingarn—believed that they were most effective when they drew the least attention to themselves. Some of Harlem's white women destroyed their own papers. Laboring still under the dictum that a lady's name should appear in public only upon her birth, marriage, and death and that all other notice of her was unseemly, many of them went to great lengths not to be mentioned. Some of their papers were destroyed by disapproving family members. Some were thrown in with those of their husbands or the famous men with whom they worked. Some of their records remain unprocessed to this day. This lack of materials reflects both the history of gender and the gendered history of Harlem.

It was one thing for white men to go "slumming" in Harlem, where they could enjoy a few hours of "exotic" dancers and "hot" jazz, then grab a cab downtown. But it was another thing altogether for white *women* to embrace life on West 125th Street. Epitomizing everything

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that was unrespectable at a time when social respectability meant a great deal more than it does now, a white woman who embraced Harlem risked extraordinary disapproval, even ostracism. In the 1920s, short of becoming a prostitute, there was no surer way for a white woman to invite derision than to eschew her whiteness or be intimate with a black man. The ease with which Miss Anne's embrace of black Harlem has been dismissed as either degeneracy or lunacy, rather than explored as a pioneering gesture worthy of attention, indicates how fundamentally she challenged her era's cherished axioms of racial identity, axioms often held on both sides of the color line, and still valued in many circles today.

The "race spirit" of the Harlem Renaissance was militant rebellion, born from the galvanizing return of Harlem's triumphant 369th Regiment of the American Expeditionary Forces (also known as the "Harlem Hellfighters"), at the end of World War I. Du Bois's best-known essay, "Returning Soldiers," calls on other "New Negroes" to "return from fighting" and "return fighting" the enemy at home. It echoed Claude McKay's often-reprinted poem "If We Must Die," admonishing "far outnumbered" black men that however "pressed to the wall" they might be, they should die "fighting back." That spirit was echoed in such essays as W. A. Domingo's "If We Must Die," published in *The Messenger* in 1919, which noted that "The New Negro has arrived with stiffened back bone, dauntless manhood, defiant eye, steady hand and a will of iron." This fighting spirit buttressed the "race pride" that Alain Locke called "the mainspring of Negro life." And it largely precluded the white Negrotarians flooding Harlem. To some extent, white male philanthropists could fight their way in—if insider status was their goal—by modeling themselves after white abolitionist militants such as John Brown and William Lloyd Garrison. But with the rare exception of a few antilynching activists, white women could do no such thing. While it seemed to some Harlemites that "Negrotarians . . . came in almost infinite variety," many of the most devoted white female activists found themselves at sea.

Caught between a militancy they could not model and a desire not to seem like primitivist interlopers, white women philanthropists had

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to tread carefully to get their bearings in Harlem. The most effective among them, especially in the early years of the New Negro movement, tended to build on such foremothers as the female abolitionists or the New England schoolteachers in southern freedmen's schools. For the most part, though, Miss Anne was a singular figure who kept other white women at bay and struggled to make a place for herself in Harlem alone.

Often, they went to remarkable lengths to draw attention away from themselves. Amy Spingarn, daughter of a wealthy manufacturer, always allowed her husband, Joel, and his brother, Arthur, to take credit for her civil rights work, though it was her money that paid for all the prizes and philanthropy given in their names.



Amy Spingarn.

Sometimes Miss Anne was asked what she was doing. "I have found since I have become known in radical Negro work," Mary White Ovington wrote, "that colored people, under their pleasant greetings, are thinking, 'Why did you take up the Negro cause?' . . . I try to answer, but it takes a long time to explain."