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The Fluid Pastoral

African American Spiritual Waterways in the Urban Landscapes of Harlem Renaissance Poetry

Maren E. Loveland

In his poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” Langston Hughes penned the phrase, “My soul has grown deep like rivers” (1254). Weaving the profound pain of the African American experience with the symbolism of the primordial river, Hughes recognized the inherent power of water as a means of spiritual communication and religious significance. Branching off from the traditional notion of the American pastoral as typified by poets such as Robert Frost and Walt Whitman, African American poets emerging from the Harlem Renaissance established a more nuanced pastoral landscape embedded within urban cultures, utilizing water in particular as a reflection of African American spirituality, identity, and experience. In drawing upon writers such as Countee Cullen, Gwendolyn B. Bennett, Langston Hughes, and Arna Bontemps, the fluid pastoral is revealed as a mechanism of spiritual, cultural, and physical renewal, even in the midst of the Harlem Renaissance’s urban landscapes. Through a discussion of Harlem’s collective reinterpretation of the American pastoral, this paper conjectures that the literary landscapes of the Harlem Renaissance not only evolve American poetics and modern natural aesthetics to be increasingly inclusive of multiple understandings

of the pastoral, but also widen the understanding and scope of nature to include transatlantic and urban environments through the ideas of rebirth, survival, and conservation.

From violent thunderstorms to crashing waves, water is an ever-moving element that mirrors the constant flow of African Americans during the Harlem Renaissance era and America's Great Migration. As floods of African Americans traversed from the Black South to urban centers like New York City, Harlem became the heart of Black culture—what civil rights leader and prominent writer James Weldon Johnson called "the Negro capital of the world" (Gates and Smith 930). Accordingly, Johnson's poetry anthology, *Book of American Negro Verse*, seeks a divergence from dialect verse and encourages a more modernist approach to poetry, instigating an increasingly unstructured form within African American poetry: a movement from tradition into modernity (931).

Along with heavily influencing the form of poetry within the Harlem Renaissance, Johnson promotes engagement with African heritage as one of the pivotal movements of this era, transitioning the African American literary tradition through his close association of water and religion in his poem, "The Creation (A Negro Sermon)." He writes, "The lakes cuddled down in the hollows of the ground / And the rivers ran to the sea; / And God smiled again" (Johnson 77). The personification of the water intermingled with joyful religious overtones reveals water as a source of happiness and a connection to a higher power. The rivers and lakes inherent to creation, as Johnson intimates, are thus intertwined with the birth of humanity. In braiding African American religious values with the nature of water in Johnson's poetry, this literature reflects a broader shift in America's evolving understanding of the pastoral to include fluidity.

Johnson's union between American ideologies of religion and the pastoral, specifically the pastoral images of water, is further echoed in Countee Cullen's poem, "The Shroud of Color." In this poem, Cullen melds physical and spiritual realms when he describes his experience as a colored individual, writing:

For whom the sea has strained her honeyed throat
Till all the world was sea, and I a boat
Unmoored, on what strange quest I willed to float;
Who wore a many-colored coat of dreams,
Thy gift, O Lord—I whom sun-dabbled streams
Have washed. (1307)

Cullen draws on the iconic images of biblical narratives, including allusions to Joseph and Noah in particular, in order to stress the sincerity of his religious beliefs and the spiritual cleansing he feels. Additionally, envisioning a future where land no longer exists, he implies the inevitable apocalypse and the equivocal nature of water, signifying a recognition of spiritual purpose and the necessity of an ascetic, almost monastic, lifestyle. The “sun-dabbled streams” have a purifying, baptismal effect on the narrator, adding another facet to his relationship with water and deity as an uplifting, edifying influence. Water is thus utilized by Cullen to illuminate his theological impetus in finding isolation and purpose in life, communicated through the spiritual and biblical symbolism inherent to water.

Cullen’s state of uneasiness toward water is not atypical in the historical sense because of the double meaning of the ocean as a source of terror and solace within African American history. The genesis of hardships for African Americans on the North American continent lies in the travel of Africans across the Middle Passage, where Black hostages suffered “psychological terror and torture at the hands of whites” as they crossed the Atlantic Ocean (Glave 21). Yet simultaneously, the ocean could provide a place of solace for Black seamen, as a place of racial equality with everyone equally subject to the overpowering force of nature. Scholar Dianne Glave conjectures that “from ancient Africa to the modern-day United States, people of African descent have continued the legacy of their relationship with the land,” revealing that despite facing unbearable circumstances crossing the waves of the Atlantic, the contemporary African American community interprets the ocean as a means of inspiration and a transatlantic connection to a longstanding natural heritage and tradition (3).

The rekindling of connection between a common African ancestry, the pastoral ideal, and the modern African American through water is a common motif in the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance, a notion revealed in exploration of the image of the river as a symbol of African heritage. Hughes heavily emphasizes the significance of rivers in providing the poetic transatlantic connection between Africa and the United States in his deliberate use of this heavily signified image. His rhythmic, musical words provide insight into the challenging nature of a dual heritage, a heritage from both Africa and America. He captures the depth and the wide, transatlantic scope of the river in juxtaposing his “My soul has grown deep like the rivers” with a literary exploration of rivers both in Africa and America. He writes, “I looked upon the Nile,” and follows this with “I heard the singing of the Mississippi” (Hughes 1254). Positioning these rivers in such

close proximity to the narrator and to each other within the poem diminishes the physical distance between these bodies of water, successfully connecting the two continents and conveying the challenges of dual pasts.

As Hughes reveals, the modern African American struggles to maintain a sense of identity with fluctuating definitions of ancestry and Americanism and the tension between balancing these cultural influences in the face of modernity. Gwendolyn B. Bennett's aptly titled poem "Heritage," continues to invite these ideas into the collective African American cultural consciousness, drawing on images of water similar to those of Hughes. She describes a scene, saying, "I want to breathe the lotus flow'r . . . With tendrils drinking at the Nile" (Bennett 1228). The personification of the flower and river's relationship heightens the spirituality eminent within the poem, giving the pastoral a spiritual consciousness. Her inclusion of the Nile represents her yearning for her African American heritage, a longing for the past in an attempt to connect to a sense of home. Countee Cullen's poem of the same name reiterates these feelings by relating images of water and Africa with religious symbolism, evident when he begins his poem with, "What is Africa to me: / Copper sun or scarlet sea." In the culminating stanza he writes, "Quench my pride and cool my blood, / Lest I perish in the flood," implying the didactic relationship between nature and God (Cullen 1314). "Perish in the flood" refers to the biblical story of the prophet Noah while the "scarlet sea" alludes to the Red Sea nestled between Africa and Asia and can also connote Moses' turning of water into blood. In their delineations between religion and water, both Cullen and Bennett effectively portray the spirituality attributed to African heritage and fluid nature.

The transatlantic connections between Africa and America are further intensified by the use of water as a mystical property, endowing it with an ambiguous, yet effective spirituality. James D. Corrothers develops this image in his poem "The Negro Singer," where he illustrates the African setting through water-filled descriptions, "Fetch water, dripping, over desert miles, / From clear Nyanzas and mysterious Niles" (29). The use of the Bantu word for river in the plural form, "nyanzas," alongside the "mysterious" Nile, a river imbued with a longstanding tradition of religious significance, incites within the reader an awareness of the plentitude of these bodies of water not only in Africa but within America as well, connecting these two fragmented continents through water and poetry. The mythology often associated with rivers only strengthens their efficacy within Harlem Renaissance poetry as symbols of ancient cleansing, and in some cases, the afterlife. Alongside Corrothers's transcendent use of

water, esteemed poet Fenton Johnson similarly mentions, "Gin is better than all the water in Lethe" as the concluding line in his poem titled "The Scarlet Woman" (123). Lethe refers to the Greek mythological river of the underworld, associated most closely with oblivion and truth (Robinson 79). The motif of the arcane nature of rivers, so intimately related with the longstanding tradition of African American spirituality, thus only intensifies water's symbolic significance.

The rejuvenating, mystic properties of water and religion are native to notions of untouched nature, but certainly not to be separated from the modern environments of urban settings where they retain their inherent magic. Contemporary African American and environmental scholar Kimberly A. Smith writes that, "the writers of the Harlem Renaissance portrayed the city as a potential reservoir of energy and creativity that could revitalize American society" (164). Smith describes the aesthetic climate of the Harlem Renaissance with language that is associated with water, namely "reservoir" and "revitalize," to demonstrate the spiritually rejuvenating qualities of the urban landscape that Harlem provided to the African American communities of New York. While early representations of cities in relation to the African American are often associated with corruption and bleakness, the Harlem neighborhood effloresced into a center of African American culture and life. Smith elaborates in saying, "Thus the city landscape, perhaps even more than the rural landscape, is a field for the play of human creativity: it is an opportunity for humans to fulfill their co-partnerships with God in finishing Creation" (185). Engaging in this transcendent act of creation, the poets of the Harlem Renaissance entertain both spirituality and the rejuvenating and life-giving effects of the city, particularly Harlem, in their presentations of water. As water gives life to creation, so too does the city of Harlem give life to the African American communities and cultural rebirth.

This need for water to sustain human life parallels the necessity of Harlem's culture as one that provides a creative outlet for twentieth-century African American poetics. As lakes, oceans, and rivers are vital to the health of ecosystems and humanity, literary portrayals of rain and storms similarly sustain poetry through their symbolism. The deep sense of spirituality imbued in water that descends from the sky to the human level has significant implications in that rain saturates all it touches without bias or motivation, affecting the bucolic as well as the urban landscape. Poet Joseph S. Cotter Jr. connects rain directly to God in his rhythmic verse featured in "Rain Song," which begins, "On the dusty earth-drum / Beats the falling rain" and ends with "God, the Great Musician / Calling life anew" (156). The burgeoning of life and water in relation to God

directly designates rebirth and new life within nature as connected to spirituality, a notion not unnoticed or forgotten within Harlem's urban communities. Rain's musical qualities are emphasized alongside religion, a particularly meaningful notion in the context of the intense musicality that defines African American Christian tradition. Cotter's steady beat of rain serves to celebrate the power and reliability of God, a joyous reminder of heavenly awareness and creation. Another perception of rain is one of spiritual warning, as expressed in Alex Rogers's "The Rain Song." In this poem, rain is repeatedly used as a signal for the Christian idea of the Second Coming, a symbolic cleansing of the Earth, and is thus associated with spirituality as both a baptismal and life-giving symbol within Harlem Renaissance poetics.

While rain can symbolically represent the crying of the Earth, bodily tears present another form of water within Harlem Renaissance poetry as vessels of spirituality, inextricably connected to the aesthetics of the somatic. Ecocritic Anissa Wardi notes that "Bodies of water articulate a double registry of meaning, referring to oceans, rivers, lakes, and swamps and simultaneously to the human body, which is comprised primarily of water" (4). Harlem Renaissance poets consistently place images of tears alongside representations of religious fervor, and these personal waterways are the most intimate and individual of all. Jessie Faust writes "prayers and tears" (166) and "Oh little Christ, why do you weep / Why flow your tears so sore" (162) in the poems "Oblivion" and "Christmas Eve in France," respectively. W. E. B. Du Bois places "the tears of our mothers" in the middle of his poem, "A Litany of Atlanta," which acts as a prayer addressed to God (49). Similarly, Arna Bontemps's "Golgotha Is a Mountain," a poem revered for its contemplative spirituality, portrays water as spiritual in saying "Some women wept heavily that night; / Their tears are flowing still. They have made a river" (1240). Here, a body of water, the river, takes upon itself a more literal interpretation of "body" in the formation of a river from the tears of women. The consistent pairing of tears with praying and religion is a recognition of the spirituality inherent to the human body. The human body is dependent on water physically, and as witnessed in these poetic examples, spiritually as well.

The human body's dependency on water mirrors the human reliance on global pollution, an ever-present force manipulating the natural landscape. While pollution is global in its influence, it permanently resides within the constructs of urban areas that have the highest populations of poor people of color, affecting them disproportionately (Thomas and Ritzdorf 220).

Illustrations of water by Harlem Renaissance writers, who would have intimately faced this pollution firsthand, present an early spiritual recognition of the importance of preservation in the midst of urban modernity. Nature writer Wendell Berry outlines two forms of environmentalism: the preservation of wild spaces and the conservation of limited natural resources. (28). Defining conservation as “good work,” Berry writes that “it cannot ignore either the nature of individual places or the differences between places, and it always involves a sort of religious humility, for not everything is known” (36). The essence of nature is largely ambiguous, rapidly evolving and unknown, as Berry describes. However, in a literary fashion, the poets of the Harlem Renaissance strive to make the spirituality of nature, African American history, and the beauty of the urban environment known through honoring it. As Berry informs, this is the “good work” inherent to conservation.

Like ancient rivers shaping the deep canyons of America, the alterations of Harlem Renaissance literature upon the cultural consciousness of America alter the modern conceptions of landscape and the American understanding of nature. The cyclical, connected patterns of water’s movement in nature reflect the interconnectedness of the Harlem Renaissance poets and their poetry. Thus, this interrelated literature mirrors the rivers, oceans, and lakes of the terrestrial sphere in an ideological one. Contemporary novelist and essayist Toni Morrison clarifies the connection of literature to water in writing:

All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was. Writers are like that: remembering where we were, what valley we ran through, what the banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to our original place. It is emotional memory—what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared. And a rush of imagination is our “flooding.” (qtd. in Zinsser 89)

Morrison’s words echo the poetry and the rhetoric of memory found in Langston Hughes’ “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” where Hughes says that he knows “rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human veins” (1254). Indeed, there is something inexplicably transcendent and ahistorical about water, a force that makes up the majority of the human body, the element that covers the majority of the world. Ever-present and surrounding, water is the spiritual nourishment that enlivens the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance, perpetually suffused into the literary memory and pastoral identity of America.

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