Gwendolyn Bennett's "Heritage" and "To A Dark Girl:" How Poetry Bridges the Gap Between the Old and New Negro

During the Harlem Renaissance, black artists had to contend with what it means to be black in America and how their art could be the most authentic portrayal of their race despite existing in a space dominated by white people. Fighting against stereotypes, colorism, and reductive interpretations of primitivism, black artists were often tasked with developing characters and stories that capture what the New Negro represents. While the 1920s was a transformative time for the black identity, the aftershocks of slavery and the continuations of racial discrimination were ever-present; these tensions resulted in what W.E.B. DuBoise called the double-bind. The white gaze—or how white people characterize blacks as "other"— is the driving force for this double-consciousness, and black artists often feel pressured to appease white audiences. Despite these persisting obstacles, poets like Gwendolyn Bennett (b. 1902) create honest art that depicts the narratives of black Americans. Specifically, her poems "Heritage" and "To A Dark Girl" reclaim primitivism and propose a creative solution to this double-bind as she celebrates the "soul beauty of a race" (Marx 80). In using an empowered voice and nostalgic tone, Bennett's poetry bridges the gap between the Old and New Negro, for the poetic form allows her to mediate between the past and present. Ultimately, her visceral images and tonal shifts define the black in a way that reckons with past suffering and honors an enduring beauty.

In response to the social pressure to put on a facade and create art that met the "'primitive' demands of a potentially much larger white audience," Bennet creates poems that subvert this expectation (Marx 81). In both "Heritage" and "To A Dark Girl," Bennett addresses a black audience; for in "Heritage," a first-person voice asserts their desire to be immersed in the

black race, and in “To A Dark Girl,” the speaker explicitly addresses a black girl. In each of these poems, Bennett contrasts romantic desires and beautiful imagery with the underlying sorrows that black Americans face. The lyricism creates a tonal uplift and makes the reader feel hopeful, heard, and comforted, but the poem also mourns “the surging / Of my sad people’s soul” (16-17). Her poems denote feelings of race pride and race consciousness, yet they do so reflectively and retrospectively. Best described by Edward Marx in his essay, “Forgotten Jungle Songs: Primitivist Strategies of the Harlem Renaissance,” race pride is defined by a reclamation of African roots that encourages black Americans to claim African and exotic images as “a heritage rather than a curse” (83). This notion, in conjunction with literary theorist Terry Eagleton’s idea that “‘modernity has allowed art to become for the first time autonomous,’” is embodied in Bennett’s poetry as she claims primitivism as a part of her heritage and as a part of the African American experience (qt. in Kemp 793).

In “Heritage,” Bennett recalls images associated with primitivism, such as “the slim palm-trees,” “the Sphinx-still face,” and “tendrils drinking at the Nile,” using a lyrical rhythm and appreciative tone, thus claiming autonomy over these common stereotypes (1, 9, 15). The monosyllabic rhythm of “slim palm-trees,” the sibilance of “Sphinx-still face,” and the consonance and assonance of “tendrils drinking at the Nile” all add movement to the poem (1, 9, 15). These sounds not only make for a more immersive reading experience, but their complexity is a testament to Bennett’s skill. She mediates the lyrical movement within each line with the structured anaphora of “I want,” thus contrasting fluidity with directness (1, 4, 7, 10, 13 16). It is possible that this contrast alludes to tensions between the Old and New Negro in which the structured anaphora recalls the past and the fluid sounds represent the New Negro Movement. During a time when black writers were expected to write “the kind of dialect poetry that the

white audience had come to understand as an authentic and non-threatening form of black cultural production," Bennett's craft rebels against these restricting expectations (Marx 80). She uses the poetic form to define the New Negro as a fluid entity that claims the past as its own, and she allows the past and present to coexist. Melissa Kemp's essay on African American poets addresses this reflection; she writes that modernity is "a reaction to realism," and it is clear that Bennett practices modernism in her poems (789). "Heritage" reflects upon the past and corrects false interpretations of primitivism perpetrated by white Americans; in doing so, Bennett claims both the poetic artform and the black experience as her own (789).

While Bennett's use of sound expresses racial uplift, "Heritage" is also a poem that mourns "a lost African identity," for Bennett enacts a wistful tone to express the desire to recover what it lost (Marx 89). This balance between positive imagery and realistic emotion is further explored in Gary Smith's essay "Gwendolyn Brooks's A Street in Bronzeville, the Harlem Renaissance and the Mythologies of Black Women." He writes that many black poets juggle "the pessimism of Modernist poetry with the general optimism of the Harlem Renaissance" (35). Bennett juxtaposes romanticism with realism to define the black identity as a paradox. Throughout "Heritage," the speaker expresses their desire to "see," "hear," "breathe," and "feel" the images of her heritage, yet the dream-like tone implies that the speaker's connection to the past is distant and out of reach (1, 4, 7, 10, 13 16). Although the speaker states their desires, the reality is that their heritage is abstracted into a series of metaphorical and paradoxical images, like wanting "to hear the silent sands" (7). Here, Bennett addresses the double bind that black Americans face: celebrating their heritage while also recognizing the suffering their people endured. The poetic form seems to demystify this double bind; using tonal and imagistic shifts, Bennett contrasts the first five stanzas with the last to transform a romanticized portrayal of

primitivism to the reality of "my sad people's soul, / Hidden by a minstrel-smile" (17-18). Whereas the first five stanzas use positive diction—such as "pulling," "etched," "singing," "around," and "sighing"—that connote inclusivity, comfort, and celebration, the last stanza breaks this pattern and depicts how the racism imposed by white people forces her people to wear a mask. Bennett purposefully makes this reflective shift to show how racism obstructs her idealized images of primitivism, but her control over these shifts ultimately empowers black artists to create narratives that allow realistic sorrows to coexist with imagined realities.

Another way Bennett defines the black identity is by creating arguments against "the minstrel stereotypes" about black women, explicitly seen in her poem "To A Dark Girl" (Smith 38). In "To A Dark Girl," Bennett relies on visceral imagery, like the girl's "wayward eye-lids" and "lithe abandon of your [her] walk," to create a participatory reading experience that urges her readers to physically feel the tension between the past and present held within the girl's body (3, 5). Whereas "Heritage" recalls famously primitive images, like the palm trees, the lotus, and the Nile, she portrays primitivism more subtly in "To A Dark Girl." Emphasizing the girl's dark complexion by repeating colored adjectives like "brownness," "darkness," "shadows," and "brown girl," Bennett moves away from old African images to transform the girl's body into a representation of the New Negro woman (1, 2, 4, 9). Compared to "Heritage's" nostalgic tone and somber ending, "To A Dark Girl" recognizes the past but focuses on defining the new woman. In an essay printed in The New Negro, Alain Locke describes this shift as an "'offshoot of the African spirit blended itself in with entirely different cultural elements and blossomed in strange new forms'" (qt. in Marx 84). Locke writes that the American Negro transforms the African spirit into something particular to the American experience. "To A Dark Girl" addresses these changes and provides insight into the challenges of establishing a black identity in

America. Urging the girl to “keep all you have of queenliness, / Forgetting that you once were slave, / And let your full lips laugh at Fate!” Bennett reveals her social vision for equality, and she places this vision quite literally in the mouth of a young dark girl (10-12). She grounds her social critique in the girl’s body, implying that “the shackled slave” that sobs “in the rhythm of your talk” can transform into laughter that changes the course of fate (7-8).

Not only does “To A Dark Girl” portray an image of the New Negro woman, but its uninhibited tone urges black women to take ownership over their stories, bodies, and histories. During the Harlem Renaissance, women were often exoticized and degraded by both black and white men. In writing this poem, Bennett addresses the intersectionality of sexism and racism during the 1920s. In "To A Dark Girl," the use of color and specification of “dark” subverts colorism and defines dark as beautiful. The poem's directness, seen in the repetition of “I love you,” creates a powerful voice that instructs the reader to see and accept this girl for all that she is (1, 3). In addressing the dark girl, Bennett creates a poem that is specifically for black women. She subverts the expectation that black artists should cater to white audiences; instead, she creates an artistic space for black women to claim. Similar to how “Heritage” combines realistic and romantic gestures to lament a lost heritage, Bennett interweaves the legacy of slavery with uplifting images of the female body to express how the new woman carries the burden of past suffering. She writes that the girl is “born for sorrow’s mate” and that “Something of old forgotten queens / Lurks in the lithe abandon of your [her] walk,” thus projecting the legacy of slavery onto the girl’s body (9, 5-6). Although this projection highlights the inevitable burden that the girl carries, Bennett depicts this embodied sorrow with love and endearment. Therefore, an adoring tone recontextualizes the past and gives black women the space to embrace their bodies even if there is sorrow attached to them. Although written much earlier than the rise of

Black feminist aesthetics in the 1970s, Bennett engages in feminist discourse and lays the groundwork for the New Negro woman.

In analyzing “Heritage” alongside “To A Dark Girl,” one could argue that “Heritage” represents the Old Negro and “To A Dark Girl” portrays Bennet’s hope for the New Negro, but the two poems both contain elements of the old and new. Her poetry interacts with the double bind that black Americans face, and this tension manifests within her writing. While “Heritage” allows the reader to desire a lost African heritage, “To A Dark Girl” boldly encourages the girl, and the reader, to forget that “you once were slave” (12). Bennett implies that the desire to both own and forget the past is part of the black identity and that each desire is justified and represents the double consciousness of race theory. In addition to emphasizing this internal conflict, Bennett contrasts the endings of “Heritage” and “To A Dark Girl.” Both poems end with an image of smiling or laughing, yet the connotations vastly differ. In “Heritage,” Bennett refers to the “minstrel-smile” that black people wear to mask their true selves from an oppressive, white audience, yet in “To A Dark Girl,” she instructs the dark to “laugh at Fate!” (18, 12). In shifting from a negative to positive connotation—the fake, pained smile to the defiant, confident laughter— Bennett explores how the black identity transforms and reclaims power over their future. While many critics have defined the New Negro as a paradox, Bennett gives this paradox a realized shape through poetry and captures a universal tension in these poetic shifts.

Bennett’s poetry seeks to demystify the complicated and conflicting emotions of black Americans; however, they do not simplify these emotions, rather they use poetic devices—such as tonal shifts, sound, and imagery—to give nuance to these intangible emotions. During the Harlem Renaissance, some critics questioned whether black artists were “being irresponsible if they simply created art,” thus implying that black art cannot be both a political statement and an

autonomous work of beauty (Kemp 793). This sentiment asks that the black artist compromise their craft to better represent their race, but Bennett proves that one does not need to compromise. In a time when literary theorists were attempting to define the New Negro, Bennett shows that poetry can have just as much social impact as a researched, critical essay. “Heritage” and “To A Dark Girl” are distinctly for a black audience, yet the sentiment and poetic lyricism transcends race and time. Her poetry weaves together style, craft, and racial relevance to better define the black identity as a dynamic, not static, entity.

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