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Questioning the Question: Review of MODERNISM AND THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

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BOOK REVIEW

Houston A. Baker, Jr. *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987. 122 pages.

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Houston A. Baker, Jr.'s *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* reframes the discussion surrounding the Harlem Renaissance. Baker counteracts the common notion that the Harlem Renaissance was a failure by arguing that the structure of the current question allows for no other conclusion. The question of "Why did the Harlem Renaissance fail?" cuts off the conversation before it can start. Therefore, the new question must rather be "How did the Harlem Renaissance marshal black aesthetic tradition to develop a form of modernism for the New Negro?" Though Baker does not define modernism clearly in his essay, he asserts that it generally deals with breaking away from past structures. Therefore, white and Afro-American art cannot be deemed modernist by the same measuring tape because modernism is relative to each group's history and experiences.

The issue of whether or not artists of the Harlem Renaissance were modern is examined in a new way in this book. Topics that may seem provincial if written about by the white elite can be modern for Afro-American artists because they are "popular, economic, and liberating" for a people whose history is "a universe of enslavement" (101). It is unfair to judge whether or not an Afro-American's work is modern by comparing it to white modernists' work because the questions of what life looks like and how to break away from the past have completely different historical answers for whites and Afro-Americans. Baker effectively points out that modern literature cannot mean the same thing to the two people groups because Afro-Americans' history was at a different stage of development. How can someone, Baker argues, care about questions of happiness when he or she is fighting for the basic necessities of existence (7). By pointing out the differences between these, Baker makes it clear early on why a different scale is needed for the two modernisms and why conclusions that have been drawn thus far are inaccurate. Again,

however, it would have perhaps been helpful for Baker to define his interpretation of modernism a little more directly in order to best help this argument get across.

By pointing out the need for a different measuring tape, Baker opens up a new discussion and an entire new realm of possibility in regards to historic Afro-American artistic efforts. He designates significant figures such as Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois as adept at either mastery of form or deformation of mastery, the former concept being perfect control over an existing artistic form and the latter being purposeful destruction of the same. These techniques are “fluid and always interdependent,” working together to create a cohesive voice for artists who are systematically oppressed for being different from the majority (68). Without the acknowledgement that the Harlem Renaissance might have been modernist in a relative way, this avenue of thought would have remained unpursued.

The subject matter is not the only unique aspect of the essay. Baker uses a personable narrative style in order to draw his reader in. He often uses first person point of view and adds italics or all-capitalized words to add emphasis throughout. This effectively invites the reader to be an active part of the discussion rather than a distant observer. This closeness cleverly predisposes the reader to be more interested in the discussion. Since Baker is dealing with such complex and non-standardly defined concepts as modernism, the personal touches to the narrative serve to put the reader at ease as connections are revealed across the span of one hundred plus pages.

However, because of the fluidity of the concepts discussed, it would be an effective addition to include slightly more direct topic sentences (or paragraphs) in each chapter. While the background information and processes are relevant and necessary, it feels somewhat misleading to introduce the question of the Harlem Renaissance early on and then not return to it until chapter eight, which is seventy-one pages into the book. In addition, since the title of the book is *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, it is misleading to actually discuss the latter for the most part just in the second half. The argument remains connected all the way through, but tenuously at times, so it would assist the reader in remaining better attuned if the over fifty-page gap between the introduction of the issue and its second mention contained more signal posts to keep the reader aware of the direction. In addition, modernism itself is never really defined. Baker discusses how

people have always struggled to define the elusive concept, but then he himself also falls into this pitfall. After a few paragraphs spent dancing on the edge of a definition, Baker subtly moves on without concretely tying together his own musings.

Another slight inconsistency in the essay is that Baker says “we must reconceptualize the questions we will ask in order to locate the efforts of the 1920s,” meaning we must avoid the constriction of considering the Harlem Renaissance a success in yes or no terms, but he still answers the question whose framework he attempts to destroy by giving a yes or no answer to its successfulness (14). However, despite this, the overall argument of the essay wonderfully restructures the discussion surrounding the Harlem Renaissance as a whole. Baker begins by undermining current established thought effectively in order to shed new light on important angles of the movement that have as yet remained undiscussed due to the discussion’s structure.

While he does fall into certain pitfalls as discussed above, in other areas Baker is very aware of where his argument might potentially be considered weak and addresses the issue beforehand. For example, Baker successfully counteracts potential critics when he adds a parenthetical note that he is “conscious that I have limited my essay by leaving Continental modernism out of account” in his preface (xvi). By clearly defining the scope of his argument, he circumvents the potential of someone calling the book incomplete. This directness is effective and helpful to the reader.

While he may leave out Continental modernism, Baker is certainly not short on sources. He draws from a wide range to compliment and supplement his argument. One of the first that he introduces is a personal anecdote of his father. As mentioned earlier, rather than making the paper informal, personal touches invigorate the readers’ interest in the issue and assure them that this argument has practical, real-world applications. This practice also makes his statement towards the end of the paper that this is all, in essence, a family matter full of solidarity and progress echo all the more: “The family signature is always a renewing Renaissancism that ensures generation, generations, the mastery of form and the deformation of mastery” (106). Echo is indeed a strong suit of Baker’s narrative structure. Key ideas are brought to bear repeatedly throughout, adding emphasis and importing importance with each repetition.

Outside of his personal family, Baker certainly does not skimp on case-studies and examples. He draws readily from voices such as Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Dubois, Langston Hughes, and more. By using examples like Dubois, who opposed Washington, Baker creates a fairly full picture of the artistic and social movements in, and leading up to, the 1920s. Though he is clearly well-researched, drawing in a few more potentially adverse sources and counteracting them ahead of time, like he did with his parenthetical aside about the scope of modernism he is comparing, could strengthen his points. Overall, however, Baker makes a well-reasoned and original argument about the Harlem Renaissance. His innovative attack of the structure of the question itself reminds current readers and scholars that asking a question about a subject is not enough. Rather, one must ask *why* a question exists and determine for him/herself if it is even worth answering.