Voices from the Gaps

Helene Johnson

> ***Ah my race,***
> ***Hungry race,***
> ***Throbbing and young-***
> ***Ah, my race,***
> ***Wonder race,***
> ***Sobbing with song,***
> ***Ah, my race,***
> ***Careless in mirth***
> ***Ah, my veiled race,***
> ***Fumbling in birth***
>
> — "My Race"

Quick Facts

* 1906-1995
* African-American poet, and a key participant in the Harlem Renaissance

Biography

Helen (Helene) Johnson was born to William and Ella Johnson in Boston, Massachusetts, on July 7, 1906. Her father left shortly after her birth, leaving her to be raised by her mother and her grandfather, Benjamin Benson. Benson and his wife were born into slavery in Camden, South Carolina, and had three daughters together, Ella, Minnie, and Rachel. Johnson grew up with her two aunts, Minnie and Rachel (one of whom gave her the nickname Helene), along with their children, in a four-story house in the Brookline section of Boston. She grew up surrounded by strong women, the influence of which shows up in her poetry. While living in Brookline, Johnson participated in the Saturday Evening Quill Club and won a short story contest sponsored by the Boston Chronicle. She also attended classes at Boston University, though she never earned a degree.

This page was researched and submitted by Crystal Esparza, Caroline Klohs, and Camille Cyprian on 12/16/05.

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Biography continued

During the Harlem Renaissance, Helene Johnson's primary sources for publication were magazines and journals. Having not published a book, she published her poetry in African American magazines such as the NAACP's *Crisis*, founded in 1910 and edited by W.E.B. DuBois. She gained most of her exposure from publishing in the Urban League's *Opportunity*, founded in 1923 and edited by Charles S. Johnson. Her recognition as a poet is primarily due to her numerous submissions of poetry to *Opportunity*. In 1925, 19 year-old Johnson won an honorable mention in *Opportunity*'s first literary contest, and in 1926 the journal published six of her poems. Her work was in the first and only issue of *Fire!!*, edited by the novelist Wallace Thurman, poet Langston Hughes and artist Richard Bruce Nugent. *Fire!!* was an influential publication that served to strengthen the barriers that separated the first generation of black artists — C. Johnson, Du Bois and others—from the next generation of innovative, angry, talented younger artists — Hughes, [Zora Neale Hurston], Aaron Douglas and others.

Johnson and her cousin Dorothy West, who would become a successful Harlem Renaissance novelist, were drawn to the vibrancy of Harlem and moved to New York in 1927. The two women enrolled in Columbia University where they took classes to develop their writing skills. Johnson was once praised as one of the most-talented voices of the Harlem Renaissance and was compared in form and style to Langston Hughes. However, her dreams of motherhood and family became her priority when she married William Hubbell in 1933. In 1935, Johnson's last published poems appeared in *Challenge: A Literary Quarterly*. Once she completed her courses at Columbia, her life consisted of focusing on her marriage and family. Johnson's contribution to published poetry declined, and her presence was practically erased from the public's eye. Johnson died in 1995.

Helene Johnson, an extremely brilliant but underappreciated woman poet of the Harlem Renaissance, truly defies the dominant conventions that governed women's writing. She was an African-American woman who celebrated and embraced her form of expression by writing challenging and innovative poetry that went against social norms. At this time, women found their voice, their culture was blossoming, and Johnson went out on a limb to embrace this opportunity. Johnson valued the working class and took pride in their accomplishments, capturing in her poetry the voice and rhythms of the streets of Harlem.

Voices from the Gaps

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Biography continued

Johnson's poetry focuses primarily on inspiring the masses. This was a familiar theme seen through the expression in jazz and blues. Johnson's talent is proclaimed in the ease with which she moves among various verse forms. She moves from the severity of the sonnet to the improvisational creativity of African American vernacular. Very few women of her time wrote and succeeded in this format. Johnson's creativity shines through writing in dialect. She truly proves herself to be as innovative as Hughes, Claude McKay and other great poets of the period. Her published legacy is a handful of widely anthologized poems that capture the "youthful spirit of urgency and discovery" that "animated jazz-age Harlem in the decade before the Depression" (aaregistry.com).

Regardless of her fading presence in the Harlem Renaissance, Johnson's work is being rediscovered and revived by several scholars today. Verner Mitchell, Nina Miller, and Maureen Honey have acknowledged Johnson's inventiveness and said that poetry of this ability from of woman of Johnson's time was unique. Because she experienced much independence and sovereignty as a child and young adult, Johnson conveys in her poems an extremely powerful female perspective and image. Johnson is described as having been painfully shy while growing up. Her discretion is not displayed in her poetry, however, in which she speaks boldly about her race and her gender. Her 1925 poem, "My Race" challenges the feminine themes of love and motherhood through bold and aggressive stances. Johnson, when writing about race, is brave and empowering.

Poem Analysis

The themes of Helene Johnson's poems are erotic and result in engaging the aesthetic, gender, and racial politics of the 1920's Harlem Renaissance. "Bottled" is one of Johnson's most famous poems. In this poem, she captures the voice of Harlem and the rhythm of jasz. Johnson proclaims and celebrates the excellence of her race and identity through this poem and ultimately puts forth the aspects of her race that Caucasian people purposefully ignored. The speaker compares a dancing man on Seventh Avenue to a bottle of brown sand collected from the Sahara Desert.

Voices from the Gaps

Helene Johnson

Poem Analysis continued

Upstairs on the third floor
Of the 135th Street Library
In Harlem, I saw a little
Bottle of sand, brown sand,
Just like the kids make pies
Out of down on the beach.
But the label said: "This
Sand was taken from the Sahara desert."
Imagine that! The Sahara desert!
Some bozo's been all the way to Africa to get some sand.
And yesterday on Seventh Avenue
I saw a darky dressed to kill
In yellow gloves and swallowtail coat
And swirling at him. Me too,
At first, till I saw his face
When he stopped to hear a
Organ grinder grind out some jazz.
Boy! You should a seen that darky's face!
It just shone. Gee, he was happy!
And he began to dance. No
Charleston or Black Bottom for him.
No sir. He danced just as dignified
And slow. No, not slow either.
Dignified and proud! You couldn't
Call it slow, not with all the
Cuttin' up he did. You would a died to see him.
The crowd kept yellin' but he didn't hear,
Just kept on dancin' and twirlin' that cane
And yellin' out loud every once in a while.
I know the crowd thought he was coo-coo.
But say, I was where I could see his face,

Voices from the Gaps

Helene Johnson

Poem Analysis continued

> ***And somehow, I could see him dancin' in a jungle,***
> ***A real honest-to cripe jungle, and he wouldn't leave on them***
> ***Trick clothes-those yaller shoes and yaller gloves***
> ***And swallowtail coat. He wouldn't have on nothing.***
> ***And he wouldn't be carrying no cane.***
> ***He'd be carrying a spear with a sharp fine point***
> ***Like the bayonets we had "over there."***
> ***And the end of it would be dipped in some kind of***
> ***Hoo-doo poison. And he'd be dancin' black and naked and***
> ***Gleaming.***
> ***And He'd have rings in his ears and on his nose***
> ***And bracelets and necklaces of elephants teeth.***
> ***Gee, I bet he'd be beautiful then all right.***
> ***No one would laugh at him then, I bet.***
> ***Say! That man that took that sand from the Sahara desert***
> ***And put it in a little bottle on a shelf in the library,***
> ***That's what they done to this shine, ain't it? Bottled him.***
> ***Trick shoes, trick coat, trick cane, trick everything-all glass-***
> ***But inside-***
> ***Gee, that poor shine!***
>
> (Qtd. in Honey 97-98).

The man is described as similar to the bottle because both were stolen, labeled, and put on display. Misunderstood by the onlookers, the man's dance is seem as 'primitive', strange ("coo-coo") and laughable, but by recapturing and reclaiming the image through words such as "darky" and "shine," Johnson makes the man dignified and his dance beautiful. She imagines him dancing in Africa, free from the "tricks" of mainstream culture that bottle him like an exotic artifact. The reader goes on a psychological journey through the oppressive, gloomy Harlem to an exploding, colorful life in Africa. The man in the poem is used to illustrate that her culture had been exploited through putting it on the shelf.

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Poem Analysis continued

Johnson writes about her race and gender through nature and love, but chooses a different approach than other women writers. Mitchell states in *This Waiting for Love*, "Johnson's poems defy the genteel conventions that governed many early twentieth-century writers. Her verse also offers a penetrating insight into 1920s America, particularly into the artistic community" (Mitchell 3). While the poems seem more conventional by embracing motherhood, beauty, and the brightness of life, through being pure, innocent and passive, she takes the bold risk of writing in a negative tone embracing danger, impurity and shame. She simply states the truths of oppression and racism and brings light to the negative labels and stereotypes perpetuated by mainstream culture. Johnson's decision to rejoice in the beauty of darkness was an extraordinary risk due to the racial and gender discrimination that was taking place at the time. The social norms still stated that even if women were educated they should live a domestic life. Johnson appreciated the pure, innocent lifestyle of women but also made light of and enjoyed the beauty of darkness. She looked at darkness as the truth and a part of life that must not be ignored. She was not being arrogant or rude by stating that she was a woman and enjoyed her life, she was simply being confident.

Confident and accomplished, Johnson published 28 poems, and wrote a total of 34, some of which were not published until Mitchell's *This Waiting for Love*. She is looked upon by writers and historians as a woman poet who impacted the reputations of and recreated the importance of African-American women writers. *Shadowed Dreams* written by literary historian Maureen Honey, praises Johnson as a poet. Honey writes, "The Literary fate of this promising poet is instructive, for it underscores the invisible forces operating against distinctive female voices from the twenties. Even with an excellent ear, disciplined writing, and far-reaching social connections, Helene Johnson could not survive the ear that inspired her" (Honey 29).

Speculation comes with this quote; what could Johnson have accomplished if she were to test her true ability? Regardless, she impacted the Harlem Renaissance through her unconventional and coherent writings. This Waiting for Love has allowed the overlooked poems of Helene Johnson to become alive for the entire world to appreciate through the voice and editing talents of Verner D. Mitchell. Johnson's presence in the literary world has been scarce for the past 73 years, but now she has surfaced. Her writings will remain powerful, and she will be remembered as a talented woman.

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