

***The Walls of Jericho* : a portrait of more than Harlem**

Hugh Nicoll

W. E. B. DuBois famously observed in *The Souls of Black Folk* that “the problem of the Twentieth century is the problem of the color line.” Almost exactly one hundred years later, the problem of the color line remains a significant one in the interpretation of American literature. The 1990s witnessed a number of revisionist studies of the Harlem Renaissance but it is clear that there is still a great deal of work to be done in charting new approaches to the study of modernism and the contexts in which African American literary texts have been produced, read, and studied. This essay is a study of Rudolph Fisher’s *The Walls of Jericho* (1928) in the context of American modernism. It argues that the erasure of the full dimensions of our early twentieth century African American literary traditions impoverishes all readers, and preserves grammars of ignorance, which obscure our view of a common culture, which exists before and beyond the constructs of separate white and black spheres.

Key Words : Rudolph Fisher, Harlem Renaissance, African American modernism, multi-cultural aspects of American literature, African American literature, criticism

Introduction

Demographic trends in the United States suggest that in the not so distant future, the “browning” of America will continue, and at least statistically, the United States will become a more multi-cultural, multiethnic society. Crossover art and identity have long been an aspect of American society; the recent popularity of rap and hip-hop music among white youth is only the latest example of the importance of the African American contributions to American culture. This is V. F. Calverton’s core argument in “The Growth of Negro Literature,” the introduction to the *Anthology of American Negro Literature* he edited and published in 1929.

Indeed, we may say that the contributions of the Negro to American culture are as indigenous to our soil as the legendary cowboy or gold-seeking frontiersman... In fact, they constitute America's chief claim to originality in its cultural history (3-4).

Calverton goes on to single out African American music—the spirituals, blues, and jazz—with the addition of folklore, as the most important of these African American aspects of the America's cultural identity. A cursory survey of the history of American literature and literary criticism since Calverton's anthology was published, however, suggests that in American literature the integration of the canon is not yet.

Despite all the efforts to broaden and deepen the canon since the 1920s, including the work of Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin to set standards by example, the legacies of slavery continue to influence the ways American literature, not to mention the society as a whole, contends with the so-called "race problem." My students are shocked to discover how overwhelming the evidence often seems to be. The critiques of the continuing dominance of the white, male view made by Toni Morrison in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992) still ring true: study of black or African American literature remains marginalized, or according to critics such as George Hutchinson, focused too much on difference, and not enough on the strategies and studies with which a revised canon may be constructed. Several important new studies of the Harlem Renaissance have been published in recent years, however, and there are some signs that new approaches looking across disciplinary, geographical and racial lines may yet prove useful to students and general readers of American literature. These works include Hutchinson's *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*, Maria Balshaw's *Looking for Harlem: Urban Aesthetics in African-American Literature*, and a fascinating set of conference proceedings from The University of Cape Town, South Africa—*Juxtapositions: The Harlem Renaissance and The Lost Generation*.

The challenge in re-interpreting Harlem Renaissance writers, as taken up by Hutchinson and Balshaw among others, is to get out from under the structures imposed upon the study of African American writing by its two most dominant critics of the immediate post-Black Arts era, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Houston Baker. While Gates' and Baker's positions are certainly not identical, they have commanded a shared theoretical ground

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emphasizing textuality and form, and have expended considerable energy on maintaining the authenticity of a black experience separate and distinct from white, western, euro-centric positions. The emphasis on orality and the vernacular which Gates concluded “Canon-Formation, Literary History, and the Afro-American Tradition: From the Seen to the Told” was challenged at the time by Barbara Johnson. The binary separation of American literature into “black” and “white” domains is based on the fallacies “of pure, unified and separate traditions” and “of spacialization,” she argued, claiming that “Cultures are not containable within boundaries” (42). This essay takes its cue from the works of Hutchinson and Balshaw, and will focus on aspects of modernity in Fisher’s *The Walls of Jericho*. In presenting arguments for a revised modernism as a component of a broader, integrated view of American literature, I do not propose taking Fisher’s novel out of the context of black Harlem. I will, however, argue that the erasure of the full dimensions of our early twentieth century African American literary traditions impoverishes all readers, and preserves grammars of ignorance, which obscure our view of our common culture.

Rudolf Fisher – Too Short a Time on Earth

Rudolf Fisher, the son of a Baptist preacher, was born in Washington, D.C. in 1897. He went on to become a prize-winning student in high school and at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island. Even as an undergraduate at Brown he had embraced a dual approach to his encounter with the world and the articulation of his intelligence, taking honors in both science and humanities courses. After completing his medical studies at Howard University in Washington, D.C. he established himself in New York City as a writer and as a physician. Sadly, Fisher died at the age of thirty-seven, but in his brief career published two novels and fifteen short stories. His two best-known stories, “City of Refuge” (1925) – published in the *Atlantic Monthly* while Fisher was still a medical researcher, and “Miss Cynthie” – originally published in *Story Magazine* (1933), were both included in *The Best American Short Stories* in their years of publication. Often mentioned as one of the best of the Harlem Renaissance writers, Fisher, however, remains mostly unknown to the wider public and even among many professional readers of American literature. This relative neglect led McCluskey to claim that Fisher “deserves better” (xii) and Maria Balshaw to describe Fisher as “the most unjustly neglected of the contributors” to Alain Locke’s 1925 anthology, *The New Negro*, the celebrated collection

announcing the arrival of modern black consciousness.

The Walls of Jericho

The Walls of Jericho (1928), has been described by David Levering Lewis as “one of the most thematically successful and enduring works of the Harlem Renaissance” (229). McCluskey calls it a “panorama” of Harlem life in the late 1920s, and celebrates its humor and style quoting from the 1928 review in *Opportunity* by B. A. Botkin.

His [Fisher’s] is a frankly hedonistic attitude, eschewing protest, poetry, and pity alike. Here are the suave aplomb and easy assurance of one at home in his subject, the self possession of self-understanding, the adroit irony and clever banter of, if not exactly the light, at least the lighter touch. (xxviii)

The Walls of Jericho, in combination with Fisher’s short stories, bring Harlem in the 1920s alive, its depictions of class and ideological divisions within the African American community resonant with those still to be found in our turn into the twenty-first century. Fisher’s debut novel was not, naturally enough, universally celebrated in the New Negro Harlem. His witty portraits, meditations on class conflict, acknowledgment of the difficulties faced by the disparate citizens in forming a community, and his clearly stated sympathies for the “rats” – the ordinary working-class Harlemites – led W. E. B. DuBois to ask why Fisher couldn’t pay more attention to his own kind, a pointed reflection of his own “talented tenth” and “uplift” prejudices (McCluskey xxix).

The Walls of Jericho opens, like a number of Fisher’s stories, with a meditation on place that is at once geographical and sociological. He is charting the new Harlem. In the kaleidoscope of new urban spaces and voices, the new nation is literally and metaphorically creating itself. Here is the roving eye of the camera, the jump-cuts of cinema editing, an almost bebop-like montage of speakers and tones, perhaps a harbinger of the digital recording and re-ordering of experience that modernism has bequeathed to our time. The opening sentence –

Despite the objections of the Dicties, who prefer to ignore the existence of so-called rats, it is of interest to consider Henry Patmore’s Pool Parlor on Fifth

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Avenue in New York (3).

– could be read as Fisher’s shrewd anticipation of DuBois’ discomfort with his empathetic treatment of the black working class.

McCluskey’s introduction to Fisher’s work is praised on the RFN website as a “must read” and “the single most important and comprehensive general essay written about Fisher to date” (“Resources” RFN News). McCluskey’s treatment of Fisher is so thorough that it is almost impossible to conceive of anyone offering a better or more succinct synopsis of *The Walls of Jericho*. In working toward my conclusion, I will summarize Professor McCluskey’s points (xxviii-xxxi), and discuss ways in which reading Fisher might help students of American literature work toward the construction of an integrated audience for American writing, taking cues from the conclusion of James Weldon Johnson’s “The Dilemma of the Negro Author” (1928), Hanson (1994) and Hutchinson (1995).

The novel presents comic renderings of conflicts within the new black Harlem, and across the color lines – both intra-racial and inter-racial, including the sharp satirical portraits of Langston Hughes’ “godmother” Mrs. R. Osgood Mason and professional uplifters, black and white. In the most quoted passage from the novel, Fisher creates a deliciously ironic reading of the social hierarchies revealed at the General Improvement Association Costume Ball.

So swept the scene from black to white through all the shadows and shades. Ordinary Negroes and rats below, dicties and fays above, the floor beneath the feet of one constituting the roof over the heads of the other. Somehow, undeniably, a predominance of darker skins below, and just as undeniably, of fairer skins above. Between them, stairways to climb. One might have read in that distribution a complete philosophy of skin color, and from it deduced the past, present, and future of this people Out on the dance floor everyone, dicty and rat, rubbed joyous elbows, laughing, mingling, forgetting differences. But whenever the music stopped everyone immediately sought his own level.

One great common fellowship in one great common cause (74).

These portraits provide the background for the interrelated narratives of a love story, replete with rivalries actual and imagined, and the saga of a light-skinned, blond-haired black lawyer's determined quest to cross a real estate color line and move into an all-white neighborhood. The central narrative is that of moving man Joshua Jones, nicknamed "Shine," and the development of his increasingly mature relationship with Linda Young, an ambitious young maid, employed at the outset of the novel by Mrs. Agatha Cramp, the fictional counterpart of Mrs. Mason. The various strands of the novel are held together through the exploration of self-delusion and the efforts required for attaining self-knowledge. This quest for self-realization is not fully articulated until Chapter XVI, in a church sermon on the Old Testament story of Joshua (McCluskey, xxviii).

The chapter opens with the explicit comparison of the service with the cabaret shows Shine already knows how to read. He has not yet, however, been initiated into the rituals of church, a "performance... which one might attend, but on which one may not gaze." (178). Shine later reports his church adventure to his work partners, Jinx and Bubber. In the re-telling he adds an interpretation, linking the Biblical Jericho to contemporary New York, revealing how firmly rooted the idea of modern urbanity as promised land was in the emerging community. The most significant part of the minister's homily is striking in its embrace of progressive arguments. He confesses to his congregation that he doesn't care whether they literally believe the Hebrew myth or not. The parable is important, he argues, because of its spiritual truths, locating the source of "self-illusion" in the wall(s) "circumstance has thrown around a man's own self." (184) Here then is Harlem – simultaneously city of refuge and inscrutable challenge, the challenge of modernity made manifest in urbanity, analog to the modern self, which the minister identifies as everyman's Jericho (185).

It would be hyperbolic to suggest that *The Walls of Jericho* is a candidate for a place in the pantheon of lost great American novels, but there are lessons as well as good humor here pertaining usefully to the stubborn issue of racial and cultural identity in America. Following on the calls, by Hutchinson and others, for African American literary works to be explored as part and parcel of the American cultural landscape, several potentially useful directions can be suggested.

A first step would include the contemplation of correlations between readings of

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Rudolph Fisher, and other marginalized Harlem Renaissance figures, with the popular fiction of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Models that may prove useful include Carol Nackenoff's approach to the study of Horatio Alger. In *The Fictional Republic*, for example, she draws on contemporary literary theory to investigate what she calls "a narrative—and a grammar of American politics" in the development of "new ways of seeing the production and struggle over culture" (4).

Another rich source of juxtaposed approaches may be found in Matthew Pratt Guterl's *The Color of Race in America, 1900-1940* (2001), which focuses on race-consciousness in four 20th century New Yorkers: Daniel Colhahan – Irish American nationalist, Madison Grant – eugenicist and white supremacist, W. E. B. DuBois, and Jean Toomer – mixed-race author of *Cane*, a key modernist text of the early New Negro, Harlem Renaissance years.

And finally, to undertake comparative studies of Harlem Renaissance authors with their counterparts from across the full spectrum of American writing in an effort to discover resonances future, contemporary, and past.

Reading Nackenoff's introductory chapter I was struck by the need, as part of a general rereading of African American works in the context of the general culture, to investigate how the myth of success plays out in the work of African American writers. Consider, for example, the concluding scene of *The Walls of Jericho*, as Merrit meditates on all that's transpired as he watches Shine and Linda drive off in the moving van.

Bright boogy, Patmore, figuring it all out like that – bright jig-walker-knew how to do things. Perfect alibi – perfect.... Jigs had a future, really – jigs were inherently smart....

He stood and watched and smiled. The road led up and over a crest beyond which spread sunrise like a promise. Away for a time, then up moved Bess, straight into the kindling sky. With distance the engine roar grew dim and the van seemed to stand and shrink. Against that far background of light he saw it hang black and still a moment – then drop abruptly out of vision, into another land (293).

Lewis describes the ending of *The Walls of Jericho* as "perfect": "working class integrity survives; the best elements of the upper and lower classes ally to oppose an internal foe, symbolized by organized gambling; and lessons in demolishing the walls of

class and race are taught" (230). It may also be useful to note that the standard pulp-hero-rides-off-into-the-sunset tableaux has been inverted, and that the loving couple, marriage clearly on the horizon, is driving together into a new dawn. In this setting, it is tempting to read Shine as more than working class hero, perhaps a new democratic man in the tradition of Whitman and his descendants. To embrace this reading is to embrace more than a perfect, happy and sentimental ending: it is, I believe, a step toward the "breaking up and remodeling of most of white America's traditional stereotypes" (Johnson, 97), and it is a step toward what Werner describes as our duty "to honor the sources of our being and to accept responsibility for passing our traditions on to the children, our next generation" (Werner, xvi). It is above all an essential step, long overdue, because we find ourselves at the beginning of the twenty-first century still struggling to build the basis for literary criticism that will help us build bridges across the color line.

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