

Project Reflection

I may never write a paper like this again. I am undoubtedly sure that my writing and research skills will grow and improve, but I do not know if I will ever again have the chance to write on something as unique as the *mulatta's* positionality and its effect on her psychological and transcendental being. As the culmination of our Honors Seminar HONR248T: "Re-examining the Harlem Renaissance", Dr. Ater assigned our class to write a research paper about anything related to the Harlem Renaissance. At first, I knew immediately what I wanted to research. I would study Josephine Baker, a famous dancer known for her sensual and free movements. To me, she represented the height of feminine liberation in a world where her race and gender would ordinarily burden her with a deluge of societal restrictions. As a dancer, I could see the message she represented to black women not just from her outlandish and shocking personal life, but from her dance pieces. Upon discussing my research topic with Dr. Ater, I found that the idea of researching Josephine Baker had a major flaw: she was an American expatriate who moved to France. Her relation to the Harlem Renaissance existed but was extremely diluted as she had decided to turn her back on America for most of her life. Fortunately, the next topic I chose ended up to be the one I wrote my paper on. Following the same trend of exploring black women and their relation to social constructions, I decided to examine two famous Harlem Renaissance novels, *Plum Bun* by Jesse Fauset and *Passing* by Nella Larsen, in terms of their rendering of *mulattas* who pass and whether their fiction made a contribution in softening the harsh views of *mulattas* by society. *Mulattas* are women who have mixed black and white parentage. A number of these *mulattas* phenotypically look like white women and have the option of "passing" as white. What this means for a colored women is the opportunity to reduce the number of labels ascribed to her, an opportunity to turn one of her

shackles into freedom. However, passing is not so easy when the emotional and identity baggage is considered. Perhaps, as a Family Science major interested in human development, the complexity of issues surrounding the *mulattas* of the Harlem Renaissance proposes an essential question to our society, even to today.

Dr. Ater was a huge help in starting me off on my research journey. After I proposed my new topic, she pulled off titles from her personal library to guide me and give me a starting point. The titles she presented to me were published in the 1990s. For a historical topic like mine, the publication date did not seem that relevant but I was able to find more recent resources by using the University of Maryland library. First, I went online to the WorldCat system and plugged in keywords to find books. Dr. Ater shared with me a very helpful tip, informing me that the algorithm used in WorldCat changes every so often and that searching old keywords at different times would yield different results. By following her advice, I was able to find more resources pertinent to my paper. In addition, when I would physically enter McKeldin Library to borrow my books, I would spot titles on the same shelf that would also be of great help to my research.

As I continued to attend HONR248T, I was further convinced of the importance of my research goal. My understanding from class was that the black bourgeois society, the leaders of the Harlem Renaissance movement, were very concerned with White culture and status symbols. These middle-class black folk would straighten their hair with chemicals to resemble white hair and preferred light skinned individuals over dark skinned individuals. It appeared to me that the followers of the Harlem Renaissance would have some psychological conflict from seeing the leaders of a black movement dolling up so much to look like whites. I became to see more clearly the fragile state of black people's racial identity and self-esteem given their history. For *mulattas*, their self-esteem is even more at risk since they do not feel a solid racial identity.

For my research, it was important for me to find historical sources as well as literary criticism sources. I needed to be able to understand the author's background and experience to draw connections with her lived experience and her literary work, but I also needed to be able to scrutinize the effectiveness of the author's fiction in portraying *mulattas* in a manner that lifts them from their current state of stereotyped infantilism. One important criteria was that my resources had to look specifically through the perspective of black women. Initially, I had begun perusing *Word, Image, and the New Negro: Representation and Identity in the Harlem Renaissance* by Anne Elizabeth Carroll, one of the titles that I found in Dr. Ater's library. However, Carroll's book focused mainly on men and so was not useful for my purposes because black men had considerably more freedom than black women in almost all aspects.

In my opinion conducting good research is very similar to having a good career, academic or professional. I feel that I need to be truly invested in my research question in the way that I should love my career. If the question had no importance to me, then my paper would undoubtedly be lacking. My interest in this paper stemmed from my concern for women of color's mental health in navigating our prejudiced society. My passion translated into a successful research which is also how I expect my career to unfold as well.

Admittedly, I could've improved my research by asking a librarian for help. I tend to be a more independent person. The library also holds an independent atmosphere where people study alone in silence. It did not really occur to me that the library could be a place of social interaction where I could receive help. If the library made a stronger effort to advertise librarian services or highlight the services only a librarian could perform, I might have been more likely to go to them.