

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: "WE SEEK WHAT WE FIND; WE SEE WHAT WE LOOK FOR": LOOKING FOR LITERARY PRODUCTION IN WASHINGTON, D.C. 1921-1928

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Though acknowledged as the intellectual and cultural hub of African American enlightenment, many artists' experiences attest that the reputation of Harlem as an artistic haven has in many ways, been overestimated. The promotion of Harlem's dominant characteristics has led many historians to overlook other culturally productive locations like Washington, D.C., which was also a major center for literary and artistic development during the twenties.

My project explores Georgia Douglass Johnson as D.C.'s agent of cultural and literary production through her hostess-ship of Saturday-night literary salons held in her 1461 S. Street Northwest D.C home from 1921-1928. The discussion of this literary salon is original because it includes theories of cultural production and cultural studies submerged within a traditional literary context. Allowing room to cross interdisciplinary lines, this paper involves an investigation of members of the salons as well as the internal and external dynamics of the literary community itself.

“WE SEEK WHAT WE FIND – WE SEE WHAT WE LOOK FOR”: LOOKING FOR  
LITERARY PRODUCTION IN WASHINGTON, D.C. 1921-1928

By

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Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Maryland, College Park in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
2006

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

“I thought it amazing too, that a young playwright of ability and three or four poets of promise were living in Washington unknown to the best society. At least, I saw nothing being done to encourage these young writers, for the leading women’s clubs appeared to be founded solely for the purpose of playing cards, and the cultured doctors and lawyers and caterers and butlers and government messengers had little concern for poets or playwrights. In supposedly intellectual gatherings I listened to conversations as arid as the sides of the Washington monument”<sup>1</sup>

In his 1927 essay entitled, “Our Wonderful Society: Washington,” Langston Hughes expressed his dissatisfaction with Washington D.C.’s “cultured” Negro community. In the above passage, Hughes recognized the literary genius of Washington natives such as Jean Toomer and Rudolph Fisher. Despite their talent, Hughes suggested that the nation’s capitol in the 1920s did not possess the necessary social structures that provided the encouragement and support to produce a thriving Black literary community.

With the advantage of hindsight, one has to wonder whether Hughes’ judgment was correct. Although Hughes and other members of the “New Negro Movement” felt that Harlem was the most conducive location for Black literary prosperity and cultural production, others did not. He in particular, was critical of Black Washingtonian’s lack of focus on literature that appealed to ordinary people. This attitude may have led him to dismiss literature in Black Washington more fully than was warranted. This study explores a site for literary production and the people involved in it. It establishes that Georgia Douglas Johnson and her literary salons were more significant than Hughes acknowledged.

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<sup>1</sup> Langston Hughes, *Opportunity Magazine* “Washington: Our Wonderful Society” (August, 1927) pg. 226

My thesis recognizes that a “Harlem Renaissance” did exist; however, it aims to demonstrate that Harlem was not the only site for Black cultural and literary flowering in the 1920s. This project establishes that both Harlem and Washington were members of the larger New Negro Renaissance, and also recognizes the variables specific to each city’s movement. Class is one of the many variables that deserve consideration. The acknowledgment of class is central to the exploration of cultural and literary production among African Americans nation-wide and especially within D.C. during the early twentieth century. This study unfortunately was not able to carry out an in-depth analysis of class. Instead, the focus of the study is to create a comprehensive yet informative narrative of cultural production via Georgia Douglas Johnson and her Saturday-Night literary salons. Though a heavy discussion of class is not available, it is essential to consistently keep in mind that Johnson and her counterparts mainly consisted of middle-class Blacks.

While generally critical of pretentious “snobs, and the high yellows, and the lovers of fur coats and automobiles and fraternity pins and A.B. degrees,” Hughes’ *Opportunity* essay would have been barren without acknowledging the activity of literary culture in Washington largely promoted by Georgia Douglas Johnson. Hughes’ essay paints Washington as a non-conducive literary atmosphere and subscribes to a limited perspective of the New Negro Renaissance that scholars such as Sterling Brown have attempted to discourage. My project picks up where Hughes’ left off in the last paragraph of his essay: “Georgia Douglas Johnson conversed with charm and poured tea

on Saturday nights for young writers and artists and intellectuals.”<sup>2</sup> Hughes’s description of Johnson is rather simplified and focuses more on Johnson as a socialite; however, my study is designed to complicate her role and recognize her as a pivotal force who essentially acted as the link to Washington’s Black literary chain and provided literary salons that served as venues in which many artists gained access to publication opportunities in journals and magazines such as the NAACP’s *Crisis* and the Urban League’s *Opportunity*.

The Urban League’s *Opportunity* often featured essays like Langston Hughes’ “Our Wonderful Society: Washington” which explored the more conventional and materialistic side of D.C.’s Black middle class. The journal also published opposing perspectives by incorporating essays like Brenda Ray Moryck’s “I, Too, Have Lived in Washington.” Written in response to Hughes’ argument, Moryck informed readers with a more well-rounded perception of Black literary and cultural conduciveness in D.C. While Hughes denounced literary productiveness among Black writers in Washington, Moryck responded to his criticism with the phrase “We seek what we find- we see what we look for.”<sup>3</sup> This ancient oriental saying spoke to the preconceived notions and predispositions harbored by individuals like Hughes about Black literary productivity in D.C.

Journalists and authors interested in showcasing the lavish standards of living and material achievements of the Blacks in their community desired to represent Black culture in a way that did not seem inferior to white lifestyles. The depiction of Black

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<sup>2</sup> Langston Hughes. *Opportunity Magazine* “Washington: Our Wonderful Society” (August, 1927) pg. 226

<sup>3</sup> Brenda Ray Moryck. *Opportunity Magazine* “I Too Have Lived in Washington” (August 1927) pg 228



Washingtonians in such an extravagant way was one method of racial uplift. Nonetheless, this particular method was not favored by Langston Hughes. Rather than showcasing exceptional examples of Black prosperity and romanticizing Black life, Hughes chose to illustrate and express the ordinary voice of the Black masses.

In his willingness to stand back and record, with minimal intervention, aspects of the drama of black religion (and, later, music and dance), Hughes clearly showed that he had begun to see his own learned poetic art, even with his individual talent, as inferior to that of “ordinary” blacks—inferior, for example to an old black woman who cries Jesus, “Glory! Hallelujah!” At the heart of his sense of inferiority—which empowered rather than debilitated Hughes—was the knowledge that he (and other would-be poets) stood to a great extent outside the culture he worshipped. Perhaps Hughes stood at a greater distance from the masses than did most other black poets.<sup>4</sup>

Although Moryck’s essay as well as the cultural evidence present in D.C. in the 1920s showed a less pretentious side of Black Washingtonian life, Hughes like many others, seemed to have subscribed to popular opinion and was dismayed by the elitist reputations of Blacks in Washington. Hughes’ perspectives on Black life were layered and complex; however, in a project that was essentially inspired by his disapproving commentary, it is important to attempt to understand his basic arguments and reasoning.

The judgmental voice in Hughes’ “Washington: Our Wonderful Society” was expected especially when viewing him as a young aspiring artist visiting from New York who carried with him preconceived expectations of Black life. Conversely, Brenda Moryck, a long-standing resident, but not a native of Washington, reveals a more optimistic and well-rounded view of Black Washington. Moryck’s essay illustrated that the District of Columbia was more than a favorite place where Black aristocrats could

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<sup>4</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K.A Appiah, *Langston Hughes: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, (New York: Amistad Press, Inc., 1993) pg. 56.

dwell and shine. Rather than boasting, Moryck acknowledged the achievements Black Washingtonians with pride and showed appreciation towards intimate and informal spaces such as Georgia Douglas Johnson's home on Saturday evenings. Moryck's essay suggested that the less superficial and culturally productive aspects of Black life could not be veiled by the pretentiousness of D.C.'s Black upper-class. If sought out, a sincere dedication to literature and the arts could be found.

Both essays are critical because they help to communicate my premise. The drowning out of Moryck's lesser known voice exemplifies how dominant voices like Langston Hughes' gain authority and essentially begin to narrow the view of a movement. Despite other formal literary organizations operating around the country and in D.C. at this time, Georgia Douglas Johnson's weekly home-based literary salons on Saturday nights from 1921 -1928 were impressive endeavors that deserve to be highlighted and examined further as part of a reevaluation of what is called the Harlem Renaissance.

This project aims to address many questions. "How do people make culture?" Essentially trying to pinpoint the process of cultural production within Georgia Douglas Johnson's literary salons, I will present this society as a residual organization that has already existed, but showcase the ways in which this cultural formation altered to fit its member's experiences and identities. By making use of Raymond Williams' discourse, I am indicating that the construction of Johnson's salons was not an original or emergent concept. However, Johnson's ability to build upon literary organizations that were already established and repackage original formal literary institutions into informal and more intimate spaces is most significant.

### Research Questions

An initial fascination with the New Negro Arts Movement coupled with a special interest in the District's unique yet often criticized Black community, led to the formation of several key questions. These beginning curiosities help to form the underlying questions of the project: Was Washington, D.C. conducive for Black literary and cultural production during the 1920s? Furthermore, what were some examples of Black literary and cultural production? Addressing these primary questions enables one to seek out the ways in which African American literature and culture were produced. An extensive analysis of culturally flourishing Black communities like the Greater U Street Historic District and The Strivers' Historic District that were in close proximity to Georgia Johnson's literary salons will provide evidence and insight into the process of cultural and literary production among Blacks in D.C. An exploration of the geographical makeup of the salons will essentially help to answer the next fundamental question. What is the relationship between location and institution?

After identifying connections between the physical positioning and the proposed characteristics of the salons, one is then prompted to describe the internal less tangible facets of this organized literary space. This discussion requires that one recognize the level of formality within the literary institution. Distinguishing between the formal and informal nature of the salons then allows one to consider: What makes an organization formal or informal? Moreover, in what ways did Johnson's salon's informal nature strengthen or weaken the potential of the organization? Considering the informal nature of the salons leads one to reflect on the internal dynamics and interaction within the salons. Taking into account the informal disposition allows one to formulate thoughts

about the personalities of the salon's participants. Who participated in Johnson's salons? What unique characteristics did these individuals possess in order to catalyze and fuel D.C.'s literary and cultural engine?

The identification of key members of Johnson's Saturday night literary gatherings brings about the final set of inquiries. Despite the Saturday-Nighters seven-year endurance and the organization's involvement with many prominent figures of the New Negro Renaissance, why has the narrative of literary productivity in D.C. been overlooked and disregarded? Addressing this question while considering D.C.'s Black culture as a whole, enables me to acknowledge that documentation does not mean truth; and that emphasis on a particular group or movement does not necessarily indicate importance. Compared to the other more extravagant and lavish ordeals, Johnson's informal Saturday-Nighters may not have been the most largely popular events to highlight in D.C. during the 1920s. Instances of cultural and literary enlightenment among Blacks in D.C. in the 20s are rarely included into the dominant narrative of the New Negro Renaissance. How does Johnson's literary salon add to our understanding of Black intellectual life in Washington, D.C. and Black intellectual life in the 20s as a whole?

Similar to the way in which Brenda Moryck expressed an alternate view of Washington's Black middle-class culture, the following literature review incorporates revisionist voices that give more gender-inclusive and geographically-correct representations of the New Negro Renaissance as whole. Some examples of this type of gender-accurate and geographically representative literature include: Venetria Patton and Maureen Honey's *Double Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology*, Gloria

Hull's *Color, Sex, and Poetry* and Amritjit Singh, William Shiver, and Stanley Brodwin's *The Harlem Renaissance: Revaluations*. Because Georgia Johnson is the central character of the project and a lesser-known female New Negro Renaissance figure, literature geared towards gender-inclusiveness is beneficial to include.

The review is organized in way that initially emphasizes the concept of re-examining and taking a second look at the New Negro Movement and secondly, those works that specifically discuss Georgia Johnson's literary salons. After discussing works that provide information on the development of Black literary institutions it is then necessary to explore literature that speaks to the external characteristics and cultural scene of D.C.'s Black middle class. These publications help to demonstrate how Johnson's informal literary institution effectively fit into the framework of revisionist scholarship. This literature review will refer specifically to Washington, D.C. and reveal evidence of literary productivity and Black middle class cultivation outside of Harlem. Elizabeth McHenry's chapter "Georgia Douglas Johnson and the Saturday Night Literary Salons" in her book *Forgotten Readers* and Edward Christopher Williams' novel *When Washington Was in Vogue*, are two of the more critical pieces that document a strong New Negro Renaissance literary presence in Washington.

The consideration of early and contemporary revisionist perspectives combined with material and evidence of a Black Renaissance in D.C. exemplifies an attempt to battle against omission. Outlining and emphasizing literary works that aim to present more inclusive views is a step towards a more comprehensive and consciousness outlook of the New Negro Renaissance. The transition from scholars like Sterling Brown who actually lived through the New Negro movement to present-day intellectuals like

Elizabeth McHenry and Maureen Honey who write in retrospect reveals the significant shift in the “sands” or in the conversations that aim to expand the movement’s image beyond a male-dominated Harlem.

### Shifting Sands: A Review of Revisionist New Negro Renaissance Literature

One of the dangers of characterizing any cultural, political, or social movement throughout history is omission. While laying out any major narrative it is difficult, much less impossible, to accurately represent every individual, every organization, and every element that was significant to the cause. The process of recapturing a sequence of events is much like shifting sands in which dominant images tend wash over less-engraved footprints<sup>5</sup>. Like every other periods of progressiveness, scholars of the New Negro Renaissance are too, guilty of omission. This literature review is designed to trace literature that has helped to fill in the gaps and bring to the forefront lesser-known facets of the New Negro Renaissance such as Georgia Douglas Johnson’s “Saturday-Nighters.” Rather than referring to the cultural flowering that flourished among African Americans in the 1920s as the “Harlem Renaissance” and acknowledging New York City as the more dominant and conducive setting for the New Negro Arts Movement, this literature is less localized and more comprehensive.

An outpour of recent scholarship in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has provoked a more inquisitive investigation of the New Negro Renaissance.

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<sup>5</sup> Bernice Johnson Reagon, “My Black Mothers and Sisters or on the Beginning of Cultural Autobiography” *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 1. (Spring, 1982), pg. 82. Discussing the role that Black women have played in making a Black space in the U.S., she says: “Waves go out. When they come in there is always a rock-back. It is not the same wave in the same place and the sands have shifted to never again be the same.”

More recent works such as Victor Kramer's *The Harlem Renaissance Re-examined* have been revised and reprinted to portray a more critical and well versed representation of the era. Despite the fairly recent surge of reanalysis, scholar Sterling Brown is an individual who is long-noted for dispelling some of the dominant and conventional images of the period. Sterling Brown was dedicated his career to promoting a more inclusive characterization of the New Negro Renaissance and served as one of the major avant-garde voices that have contributed a revisionist perspective. Because Brown was a native of Washington and had direct experience with Black middle-class culture, his perspective is extremely valuable when discussing the central focus of my research: Georgia Johnson and the Saturday-Night literary salons that she hosted in her home in Northwest Washington, D.C.

Participating in the cultural enlightening of the 1920's first-hand, Brown was so adamant in his disapproval of conventional misconceptions that he chose not to support the movement's coined name: "The Harlem Renaissance." Brown clearly articulates his sentiments in his 1955 essay, "The New Negro in Literature (1925-1955)."

"I have hesitated to use the term Negro Renaissance for several reasons: one is that the five or eight years generally allotted are short for the life-span of any "renaissance." The New Negro is not to me a group of writers centered in Harlem during the second half of the twenties. Most of the writers were not Harlemites; much of the best writing was not about Harlem, which was a show-window, the cashier's till, but no more Negro America than New York is America."<sup>6</sup>

Showing dissatisfaction with the term "renaissance" and the notion of crediting Harlem for a mass of Black literary efficiency; Brown's essay serves as a fundamental starting point for identifying New Negro Renaissance revisionist literature.

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<sup>6</sup> Sterling A. Brown, "The New Negro in Literature 1925-1955" from *A Son's Return: Selected Essays of Sterling A. Brown* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996) pg. 185. Brown presents and delivers this essay at Howard University at a conference that commemorates Alain Leroy Locke.

Brown suggests that the phrase “Harlem Renaissance” was a publicity device used to capitalize on Black exoticism and primitivism. The popularity of Victorian delicacy and confinement declined in the twenties and resulted in a new interest in the mysteries of Negro culture and character. Criticizing the sincere interest of white patrons, Brown’s essay explains his reason for disassociating himself with the umbrella term: “The Harlem Renaissance.” Whether or not the modification of the term has been agreed upon, Brown’s essay is significant because it voices an opinion that does not jump on the conventional bandwagon. Robert B. Stepto’s essay, “Sterling Brown: Outsider in the Harlem Renaissance” demonstrates Brown’s influence and expresses the importance of paying attention to names, titles, and identification markers during analysis.

In deciding whether to call the Renaissance the “Harlem,” “Negro,” “New Negro,” or Black” Renaissance, or “Movement,” historians are making major decisions about the Renaissance’s literal and symbolic geographical siting. “Harlem” denotes a community, a city that can be alternately referred to, largely for rhetorical purposes, as a “metropolis” or a “mecca.” “Negro” and “New Negro” expand the geographical limits further, suggesting something of a national scale, perhaps the Negro nation within the American nation, a nation that is paradoxically as substantial demographically as it is elusive geographically.<sup>7</sup>

This excerpt exemplifies Brown’s ability to take things apart and develop meaning out of fragments. Intellectuals like Sterling Brown show that analyzing the New Negro Renaissance is an ongoing process rather than a fixed project. Brown’s essays as well as works written about his reaction to hegemonic images in the twenties have paved the way and have acted as catalysts for other scholars to employ deeper examinations.

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Stepto, “Sterling Brown: Outsider in the Harlem Renaissance” from, *Harlem Renaissance: Revaluations*. Ed. Amirtjit Singh (New York: Garland, 1989) pg.73



Acknowledging Sterling Brown's revisionist voice opens up an opportunity to introduce other scholars who have made an effort to take a more investigative look at the New Negro Renaissance. Referring specifically to gender and geography, I will initially explore literary works that have made attempts to bring less visible New Negro Renaissance women to the light. Secondly, I will then discuss written materials that have intended to include narratives of New Negro Renaissance locations that existed outside of Harlem. Beginning with gender and keeping the concept of revisionism in mind, it is important to first like to take notice of the titles of the books. Five out of seven of the works discussed are labeled with titles that signify an author's desire to revise and contribute a more careful interpretation. For example, Venetria Patton's *Double Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology*, Victor Kramer's *The Harlem Renaissance Re-examined*, and Eloise Johnson's *Rediscovering the Harlem Renaissance: Politics of Exclusion* are all titles that indicate the writer's intention to "revisit" and "take a second look."

Another pattern found within these bodies of literature is the image of "shadowing" women within the Renaissance. Maureen Honey's *Shadowed Dreams: Women's Poetry of the Harlem Renaissance* and Hiroko Sato's essay "**Under the Shadow: A Study of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen**" both connote the ways in which women's voices and contributions were neglected and discredited. Using the term shadow is essential because it implies that though in the dark, women were indeed present and active during the New Negro Renaissance. The implementation of such titles not only indicates a growing awareness and attentiveness among scholars within African American literature, but also connects to the overall theme of this project: We seek what

we find – we see what we look for.” Scholars have expressed that if they consciously seek a more inclusive perception of the New Negro Renaissance they will eventually be able to “shift the sands” within future scholarship.

One of the title-significant works mentioned previously, “Under the Harlem Shadow: A Study of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen” by Hiroko Sato serves as one of the first in-depth analyses of two prominent, but lesser-known figures of the New Negro Renaissance.<sup>8</sup> Sato’s essay is published in Arna Bontemps’ 1972 compilation of essays entitled *Harlem Renaissance Remembered*. Sato individually explores the significance of both women’s work. Sato acknowledges that Fauset’s four novels published between 1924 and 1934 were not the best quality and points out that Larsen’s literary activity is significantly more short-lived than Fauset’s career. Regardless of each writer’s imperfections, Sato’s essay is one of the earliest of its kind. This essay succeeds in shining light on two prominent women who have historically been shadowed, but it also provides a context in which Georgia Johnson can be placed. Although Johnson is central to this specific study, Sato informs readers that she was not the only woman that contributed to the New Negro Renaissance.

Victor Kramer’s 1987 edition of *The Harlem Renaissance Re-examined* is another body of literature that deserves recognition. In an *American Literature* journal review, William J. Maxwell states: “Nearly as handy in the present climate of intensive Renaissance reexaminations are chapters that continue to illuminate slighted aspects of

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<sup>8</sup> Hiroko Sato, “Under the Harlem Shadow: A Study of Jessie Faset and Nella Larsen” from. *The Harem Renaissance Remembered*, edited by Arna Bontemps.(New York Dodd, Mead, 1972).

individual figures.”<sup>9</sup> Exemplar chapters that Maxwell alludes to and includes within the book are “What Were They Saying?": A Selected Overview of Black Women Playwrights of the Harlem Renaissance” by Nellie Y. Mckay, “ A Lack Somewhere”: Nella Larsen’s Quicksand and the Harlem Renaissance” by Lillie P. Howard, and “Conversations with Dorothy West” by Deborah E. McDowell. All of these essays represent and analyze the writings of three different overlooked female voices. Though Kramer’s compilation includes many other well-known voices, this book is reputable because it’s reprinting shows efforts to complicate the Renaissance and highlight uncelebrated figures.

Solely dedicated to acknowledging Black female writers, *Harlem Renaissance and Beyond* consists of one hundred literary biographies of Black women authors’ between 1900-1945. *Harlem Renaissance and Beyond* is vital because it is the first integrated master work on Black women writers of the first half of the twentieth century. Deriving from various backgrounds and locations, Black female writers included within this book share a similar historical experience.

“These Black women, though many united in club movements, organizations, and battles against racism and sexism, did not belong to a single coherent literary movement, nor did they share a common regional origins. They did however, share a historical experience of discrimination and exclusion and a determination to create an expression of their own, a place of their own, and in a society that had consistently rejected them.”<sup>10</sup>

This passage located within the book’s introduction expresses the way in which the authors intend to portray and represent Black women writers who were active during

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<sup>9</sup> William J. Maxwell, Review of *The Harlem Renaissance Re-examined* edited by Victor Kramer *American Literature*, Vol. 71, No. 1 (March, 1999), pp.190-191

<sup>10</sup> Lorraine E. Roses and Elizabeth Randolph, *Harlem Renaissance and Beyond: Literary Biographies of 100 Black Women Writers 1900-1945*, (Boston:G.K. Hall & Co., 1990) pg. xxx.

1900-1945. Editors Lorraine Elena Roses and Ruth Elizabeth Randolph have helped to make information on the female pioneers of the first half of the twentieth century more accessible and more comprehensible. It is only fitting that their work be implemented into an overview of this sort.

Coming into print six years after *Harlem Renaissance and Beyond* in 1996, Lorraine Roses and Elizabeth Randolph collaborate again to produce another comprehensive collection of Black women's work in the first half of the twentieth century. Although similar in its purpose to create a more gender-inclusive representation of the New Negro Renaissance, *Harlem's Glory: Black Women Writing 1900-1905* differs from *Harlem Renaissance and Beyond* in that it extends its timeline to cover five more critical years of Black women's literary contributions. More thematically and theoretically organized in this book, Roses and Randolph use Peggy McIntosh's theoretical context of curricular "revision." By basing their anthology on McIntosh's five "phases" of awareness, Roses and Randolph articulate that the "experiences of African American women are shaped by a complex web of race, gender, culture, and class."<sup>11</sup> The theoretical framework enhances Roses and Randolph's work even more and enables the reader to have a more formal and structured understanding of Black women's writing.

An attentive look at evolving gender-focused New Negro Renaissance literature shows a significant shift in the content. *Shadowed Dreams: Women's Poetry of the Harlem Renaissance*, edited by Maureen Honey in 1999 is an example of this shift. Whereas other literature dedicated to Black women writers in the Renaissance speaks

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<sup>11</sup> Lorraine E. Roses and Elizabeth Randolph, *Harlem's Glory: Black Women Writing 1900-1950*, (Harvard University Press, 1996).

about mostly novelists, essayist, and dramatists, *Shadowed Dreams* is a collection consisting purely of Black female poets.<sup>12</sup> During the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, academics have shown a greater interest in literary contributions made by Black women in the New Negro Renaissance. As a result of this interest, they have begun to delve deeper into each contributor's work and categorize the literature into specific genres. Carefully analyzing Esther Popel, Marjorie Marshall, Isabel Neill, Helene Johnson, Georgia Douglas Johnson and other lesser-known female's poetry, *Shadowed Dreams* highlights and mentions many individuals for the first time. Honey's *Shadowed Dreams* is yet another example of revisionist work that continues to re-write the script of the New Negro Renaissance.

The final more gender-focused book reviewed is Venetria Patton and Maureen Honey's *Double-Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology*. Opposite of what was stated before about scholars taking a more specific look at genres, *Double-Take* is an example of scholar's abilities to take what they've learned from individual genres and incorporate it into an anthology. Editors Patton and Honey include both genders within the anthology and are cognizant of their variety of literary genres as well. My reason for implementing this piece within the outline is to make reference to a substantial model of a genuinely comprehensive New Negro Renaissance body of literature. This set of collected works equally represents both sexes and demonstrates the ways in which both males and females worked simultaneously and adjacently to advance the race. A compilation such as *Double Take* recognizes relationships built between both sexes as

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<sup>12</sup> Maureen Honey, *Shadowed Dreams Women's Poetry of the Harlem Renaissance*, (Rutgers University Press, 1999).

well as illustrates relationships that were developed within a literary environment like Georgia Johnson's literary salons. Published in the twenty-first century, this gender-balanced anthology can be used effectively in the classroom or even as a personal reference to the New Negro Renaissance.

Devoting attention to gender accuracy is crucial when investigating Georgia Douglas Johnson's role in the Negro Renaissance; yet, being considerate of geographically-representative work that helps to inclusively locate the movement is just as pertinent. Similar to the other gender-conscious works that have been discussed *Color, Sex, & Poetry: Three Women Writers in the Harlem Renaissance* by Gloria Hull is an intimate exploration of Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Angelina Grimké, and Georgia Douglas Johnson. Though this selection would have been fitting and appropriate for the previous section on gender, it is appropriate to involve when discussing evidence of New Negro Renaissance representation outside of its dominant geographical space; Harlem. In chapter one, Hull informs readers of poet Anne Spencer's Renaissance salon sponsorship.

Even as unlikely a place as Lynchburg, Virginia, another female poet, Anne Spencer, was helping to "unpretentiously initiate a cultural and intellectual awakening." James Weldon Johnson had discovered Spencer shortly before the 1920's and first published her poems in his *Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922). She had also established a local chapter of the NAACP in her southern city. Brought thus into the political and artistic ferment of age Spencer's home at 1313 Pierce Street became a popular stopover point for Black leaders and artists traveling between the North and the south, as well as a Renaissance ate. Drawn to her doors were the likes of Roland Hayes, Marian Anderson, W.E.B. DuBois, Walter White, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Georgia Douglas Johnson.<sup>13</sup>

Setting the foundation for the remainder of the book, Hull's introductory chapter initially locates and identifies a place outside of Harlem as a New Negro Renaissance space.

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<sup>13</sup> Gloria Hull. *Color, Sex & Poetry in the Harlem Renaissance*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987) p.6.

While Anne Spencer is not one of the major figures explored in detail within this book, Hull's mentioning of her demonstrates geographical consciousness. The mentioning of Georgia Johnson as one of Spencer's salon guests demonstrates that the New Negro Renaissance presence was not confined to Harlem or for that matter the North. Instead, this passage indicates the importance of networking amongst individuals like Spencer and Johnson that was needed to sustain this movement of enlightenment. Though brief, this description of Anne Spencer's hostess-ship creates a more national and geographically-inclusive perception of the New Negro Renaissance.

Because formal documentation of active Black literary societies is rare, every reference to literary networking within a particular space is essential. The earliest attempt to identify formal and informal instances of Black literary organizing is demonstrated within Dorothy Porter's 1936 essay written in the *Journal of Negro Education*. "The Organized Educational Activities of Negro Literary Societies, 1828-1846" is a scholarly investigation of Black literary societies throughout the United States. Porter not only recognizes organizations located in New York and Pennsylvania, her overview extends to cover literary societies in New Jersey, Ohio, Maryland, Michigan and more. Focused on literary institutions during the early nineteenth century, the Porter essay indicates that Blacks prior to emancipation, had interest in gaining knowledge and creating literary institutions. By chronologically discussing each group and its internal and external characteristics, Porter establishes a foundation for other scholars to follow.<sup>14</sup> More

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<sup>14</sup> Porter, Dorothy. "The Organized Educational Activities of Negro Literary Societies, 1828-1846" *The Journal of Negro Education*. Vol. 5, No. 4 (Oct., 1936), 555-576.

than 30 years later, Daniel Perlman continued Porter's work by concentrating on more of the interests of Negroes who chose to create close-knit educational and social societies in the early to mid nineteenth century. Unlike Porter's more geographically-diverse essay, Perlman's "Organizations of the Free Negro in New York City, 1800-1860" is devoted to societies only located in New York.

Scholars have talked about literary activity outside of Harlem in places like Baltimore, Los Angeles, Boston, and Topeka Kansas; however, very little has actually been written or formally documented to describe Renaissance interest within these places. Therefore, Vincent Jubilee's essay "Philadelphia's Literary Circle and the Harlem Renaissance" is a critical body of work. Jubilee's ability to depict the cultural and social dynamics among Blacks in Philadelphia is one of the most principal aspects of the essay. Jubilee identifies Philadelphia's Black literary circle as "descendants of "Old Philadelphians." Recognizing upper class status among Black literary circle participants is significant when considering reasons why the endeavor may not have been supported and promoted. Considering that the upper-class Black population was only a small percentage of Blacks in Philadelphia, Jubilee indicates:

The wider Afro-American community in Philadelphia gave little or no recognition and support to its aspirants. It did not provide the para-literary mechanisms—book celebrations, literary salons, charismatic leadership figures—that usually give the needed visibility to the culture of book production and add vitality and a personal I identity to the hard facts of the business, making it attractive and newsworthy to the average public.<sup>15</sup>

Jubilee brings Philadelphia to the forefront of New Negro Renaissance participation.

This brief ten-paged essay is massive in its significance to expanding geographical

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<sup>15</sup> Vincent Jubilee, "Philadelphia's Literary Circle and the Harlem Renaissance" in *The Harlem Renaissance: Revaluations*, edited by Amrijit Singh, (New York: Garland Publishing, 1989).



images of New Negro Arts Movement. A broadened investigation of Black intellectual interest in locations outside of Harlem will assist in the formation of a more accurate Black literary and social history.

Porter, Perlman, and Jubilee's essay are all critical when mapping out the history and legacies of Black literary organizing; however, because they are essays and somewhat condensed, they fail to contribute a truly comprehensive investigation. Elizabeth McHenry's *Forgotten Readers: Rediscovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* is the first wide-ranging book that delves into the actual sustenance and characterizations of Black literary societies. McHenry's dedication to societies in Washington, D.C. such as Bethel Literary Society and Georgia Douglas Johnson's Saturday Night Literary salons makes her work a vital component of this study. Written in 2002, *Forgotten Readers* is first scholarly work to allocate an entire chapter to Johnson's "Saturday-Nighters." While preceding historians had accentuated more formally organized literary groups, McHenry recognized that although informal and not backed with a formal constitution, literary salons were as influential and in many cases, more effective than formal literary societies.<sup>16</sup> In addition to supplying a detailed exploration of Georgia Douglas Johnson's literary salons, *Forgotten Readers* assists me in my mission to dismantle the hegemonic regional images of the New Negro Arts Movement. By exploring Johnson's salons in Washington, D.C., I am able to question dominant perceptions that label Harlem as the only location for Black literary flourishing in the twenties.

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<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth McHenry *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (Duke university Press, 2002).

Though McHenry's book provides the most detailed information about Johnson's "Saturday-Nighters," other works serve as fillers that help to round-off and complete the narrative. McHenry's chapter is an example of what has been gathered about Georgia Johnson's literary gatherings thus far, but the following publications are substantial pieces that have been put together to gather elements that have not been explored. Material that characterizes the cultural ambience of the Johnson's community will prevent me from recreating McHenry's interpretation of the salons and permit me to construct my own story. William Henry Jones' *Recreation and Amusement Among Negroes in Washington, D.C.* originally published in 1927, assisted me in my construction. Jones's exploration of Black leisure life in Washington ranges from popular games and sports to pathological forms of recreation. His exhibition of the various types of activities shows the varying interests of Blacks in D.C.

While other dominant images of D.C.'s Black community are filled with formal affairs and extravagant social gatherings, Williams' book is also successful at pointing out the more informal characteristics of leisure activity mainly among middle-class Black Washingtonians. His chapter "Informal Recreation" is critical because it provided a concrete definition of informality and allowed me to label Johnson's salons as informal activities. Williams' sub-section on "Recreation in the Home" is also specific to Johnson's salons which held in her 1461 S. N.W. D.C. row-house. Similar to my portrayal of Johnson's Saturday-Nighters, Williams shows that Black life in D.C. during the twenties is full of excitement, culture, and stimulation. His book assists me in articulating the importance of Black leisure time and demonstrates the multifaceted nature of Black life in Washington. Without publications like Jones' that were written

during the time of the salons, many gaps and holes would still exist within the narrative. His work not only illustrates cultural engagement among Blacks in D.C.; but more significantly, it shows that Black Washingtonians were involved and actively writing about their lifestyles.

*Recreation and Amusement Among Negroes* is not the only work that discusses Black social and cultural dynamics in Washington during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Gatewood's chapter entitled "Washington: The Capitol of the Colored Aristocracy" in his book *Aristocrats of Color: The Black Elite, 1880-1920* explores the exclusiveness of Black Washingtonian elitists. Gatewood pays close attention to the genealogy of Black native Washingtonians and demonstrates the ways in which they strive to pass down standards of refinement, education, and civility. Focusing on a select 400 out of 75,000 Blacks in Washington during 1900, Gatewood notes that many of D.C.'s Black population migrated from near areas such as Virginia and Maryland, as well as places all over the country. While exploring the relationships between the District's "new citizens" versus "old citizens," Gatewood reveals varying motivations among the Black aristocracy, but emphasizes that both groups' common goals were to maintain an exclusive and cultivated social atmosphere for elite Blacks in Washington.<sup>17</sup>

By providing conversations from local newspapers such as Washington's *The People's Advocate* and *The Bee* as well as national newspapers such as the *New York Age*, *Indianapolis Freeman*, and *Detroit Plaindealer* who dedicated special sections to the

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<sup>17</sup> Willard Gatewood. "Washington: Capitol of the Colored Aristocracy." *Aristocrats of Color: The Black Elite, 1880-1920*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

capital's aristocrats of color, Gatewood highlights social activities among D.C.'s Black upper class, and essentially labels the city as the headquarters of the Black aristocracy. Although not focusing on years specific to my study, *Aristocrats of Color* is particularly helpful because its discussion of D.C. in many ways ends where my research begins. Gatewood's work reveals somewhat of a decline of Black aristocracy due to the election of Woodrow Wilson in 1913, lack of white collar jobs for Blacks, and a heightened presence of Jim Crow. His book allows me to formulate an understanding of the reputations of Black aristocrats in D.C. from 1880-1920 and leaves me develop a representation of the cultural and social dynamics that proceed during the peak of Georgia Douglas Johnson's "Saturday-Nighters 1921-1928.

Aware that Johnson's salons were located in the same Northwestern neighborhood that Gatewood associated with "well-to-do" Blacks enables me to gain more insight into concepts of "membership" and acceptance. Gatewood's examination of the District's Black elite identifies two distinct groups: "the social society" and the "civic-minded" and "educated elite." Similar to many newspaper articles and essays written about Washington, Gatewood, for the most part, limits his discussion to the snobbish Black social crowd in D.C. rather than paying attention to members of the upper class who chose to associate themselves with more modest and less pretentious endeavors.<sup>18</sup> Of the two groups, Georgia Douglas Johnson's literary salons fall under the more civic-minded and educationally motivated category. Given the relatively small attention paid to these types of groups, contemporary observations in journals and newspapers such as The Urban League's *Opportunity* are quite valuable.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid. pg. 47

The final primary source within this discussion of Washington –oriented Renaissance literature is unique and extraordinary. Because it is the only novel and fictionally-based work included in this review, I choose to employ the term unique. Because it was originally published in serial form in an African American journal called *The Messenger* and has recently been rediscovered and converted into book form, I choose to use the term extraordinary. Edward Christopher Williams’ book *When Washington Was in Vogue” A Love Story {A Lost Novel of the Harlem Renaissance}* is an exemplary case of New Negro Renaissance liveliness in Washington. The book’s fall and winter of 1922-1923 setting is significant because it is representative of the time period in which Johnson’s salons were the most productive. The main character, Davy Carr, has relocated to Washington, D.C. after serving in the United States army in France. The story is told through Davy’s correspondence with best friend Bob Fletcher. In his letters, Davy shares his experiences living in D.C.’s Black middle-class community and expresses his love for his landlady’s daughter Caroline Rhodes.

Not only does Williams’ book reflect the social and cultural atmosphere of Washington, but it also reveals publication activity. Williams’ ability to publish his original work: *The Letters of Davy Carr* in the January 1925 - June 1926 issue of *The Messenger*, attests to prosperity within Washington’s literary circle, which was heavily inspired and sustained by Georgia Douglas Johnson’s Saturday Night Literary salons. An actual product of Washington Renaissance literature as well as a sneak peek into the city’s Black middle-class, *When Washington was in Vogue*, is a classic example of literature that assists in broadening and expanding the confined boundaries and dominant images of the New Negro Renaissance. Adam Mckible’s introduction of the novel

articulates embraces many of the notions that are highlighted within my study of Johnson's salons.

When Washington Was In Vogue is also a tale of the Harlem Renaissance, but it may well be the book that contributes to the disuse of that particular term. But these are issues that readers will have to decide for themselves. One thing is certain: Edward Christopher Williams has captured a time, a place, and a psyche previously undocumented by authors of his era, and he has preserved for us a part of our shared history. *When Washington Was in Vogue* is indeed an American novel of the first order.<sup>19</sup>

William's novel is the ideal source needed to fulfill the goals of my investigation. His fictional representation of Washington consists of weekly literary gatherings at the home of character Lillian Barton, who closely resembles Georgia Douglas Johnson. Although fictional, William's incorporates realistic conversations and scenes that reflect the mood and cultural scene of D.C.'s Black community during the New Negro Renaissance.

Tracing literature that is more gender-accurate and geographically representative, and highlighting direct examples that clearly show national literary interest amongst Blacks in the twenties are all integral steps in creating a revisionist perspective of the New Negro Renaissance. The works included within this historiography are stepping stones that have led to new thoughts, new ideologies, and new discoveries of other unexplored aspects of the Black culture and literary production in the twenties. Footnoted and referenced in the opening paragraph, Bernice Johnson Reagon's essay "My Black Mothers and Sisters or Beginning a Cultural "states:

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<sup>19</sup> Edward Christopher Williams. *When Washington Was in Vogue* (New York: Harper-Collins Publishers, 2003) pg. xxxiv.

Waves go in and out. When they come in there is always a rock-back. It is not the same wave in the same place and the sands have shifted to never be the same again...I am in fact doing the same thing that my mother did and that my sisters did. The sands have shifted, but the motion I carry is from them.<sup>20</sup>

In this passage, Johnson specifically alludes to the struggle of African American women; however, her statement coincides with the discussion of New Negro Renaissance literature. The sands of New Negro Renaissance literature have shifted, but inspiration from former scholars and intellectuals has allowed them to sustain. The shifting of sands within the literature displayed in this historiography brings about more interpretations of the New Negro Renaissance, which leads to a more thorough understanding of African American culture, history, and life.

The presented literature acknowledges that Johnson's *Saturday-Nighters* actively existed during 1921-1928 and identifies cultural and literary thriving among D.C.'s Black community. These publications are not necessarily the sources that are most frequently cited throughout the thesis. They are, however, the sources that have been enmeshed together to reveal information about the salons that has not been disclosed. Individually, these publications reflect the thoughts and ideas of their authors; but combined, they define, position, and locate Georgia Douglas Johnson's Saturday-Night literary salons and create the thematic framework of the project. Together, the revisionist voice of Sterling Brown; the gender-focused voices of scholars like Mauren Honey and Gloria Hull; the geographically-representative voice of Vincent Jubilee; and even the fictional voices of E.C. Williams' characters within *When Washington Was in Vogue* help to shift

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<sup>20</sup> Bernice Johnson Reagon, "My Black Mothers and Sisters or on the Beginning of Cultural Autobiography" *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Spring, 1982), pg. 82.

the sands and expand the New Negro Renaissance's image beyond a male-dominated Harlem.

### Research Focus & Framework

Prior scholarship has been successful at acknowledging Johnson's "Saturday-Nighters" primarily as social structures and leisure activities that Blacks participated in during the New Negro Renaissance. Entertainment is indeed an element of culture; however, greater concern should be placed on the actual process of culture making within the salons. Raymond Williams, an early pioneer in the field of cultural studies, was one of the first to recognize this concept as it is expressed in his 1958 essay "Culture is Ordinary."

"Culture is ordinary: that is the first fact. Every human society has its own purposes, its own meanings. Every human society expresses these, in institutions, and in arts and learning. The making of a society is finding common meanings and directions, and its growth is an active debate and amendment under the pressures of experience, contact, and discovery, writing themselves into the land. The growing society is there, yet it is also made and remade in every individual mind.<sup>21</sup>

As Williams explains, culture within Johnson's salon is ordinary; and before understanding the process of culture within the salons, it is necessary to acknowledge that like all others, this society is residual and has already existed in some form. Nonetheless, the key to this investigation is to delve into the interior of the salons and highlight the ways in which this cultural formation has altered to fit its member's experiences and identities. The exploration of residual organizations involves one to "think in circles" and refer past institutions. The implementation of a circular pattern will allow for a more encompassing

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<sup>21</sup> Raymond Williams, "Culture is Ordinary" *Convictions* (N. McKenzie, 1958)



view and demonstrate that Johnson's salons were not original or emergent models, but products of preconceived social structures.

Within his book *The Sociology of Culture*, Williams further exemplifies his theoretical positioning in terms of "institutions" and "formations." Williams recognizes that institutions and formations may overlap, but emphasizes the fundamental difference between the two. According to Williams, institutions are comprised of relationships between 'cultural producers' and recognizable organizations or foundations and formations consist of variable relations in which 'cultural producers' have been organized or have organized themselves.<sup>22</sup> The application of Williams' theory to my study introduces Georgia Johnson's salons as formations in which 'cultural producers' or New Negro Renaissance writers have formed to foster literary growth and activity. Williams' emphasis on formations intends to increase inclusiveness of organizations such as "Saturday-Nighters" that have been overshadowed because of their informality. He suggests that limiting investigation to only institutions will cause one to miss important instances of cultural organization, is not typically institutional.<sup>23</sup> The organization of Johnson's literary salons is an example of the important instances that William references. The Saturday-Nighters were not the results of formal educational systems; instead they were inspired by an informal group of African Americans, known as "New Negroes" who chose to seek knowledge and create a space for literary and cultural growth. Williams recognizes that formally established or not; formations are significant constructions of culture.

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<sup>22</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Sociology of Culture* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1981) pg 35.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

Circularly speaking, Georgia Johnson and her Saturday night literary gatherings together serve as the hub of a wheel; therefore, she and the salons are positioned at center of the project. The individual spokes that radiate from the hub to the rim of the wheel and back again represent the active participants and members who regularly contributed to “Saturday-Nighters.” The rim represents the products of Black literary culture in Washington. By using this model, my goal is to demonstrate the significance of the Saturday-Nighters at Johnson’s home, which served as a literary haven where aspiring writers could be nurtured Johnson herself acted as the powerful engine that kept D.C.’s Black literary wheel rolling.

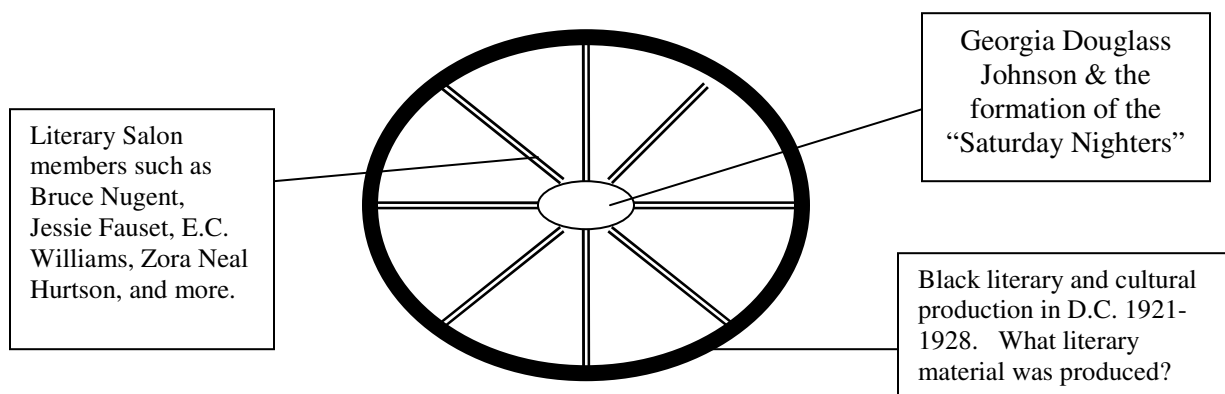


Fig. 1. Wheel Model of Literary Production in Washington, D.C.

### Primary Sources

This study is mainly comprised of three major types of primary sources. The bulk of the research derives from Georgia Douglas Johnson's manuscripts located at the Moorland Spingarn Research Center at Howard University. The correspondence and personal documents found in Johnson's manuscripts are heavily cited and implemented throughout the content of the thesis. Johnson's voice is available in first person through her letters as well as third person through journal articles, interviews, and literature written about her and the salons during the early twentieth century.

The remaining primary materials help to situate Johnson's 1461 S. Street residence in N.W. Washington. William Henry Jones's *The Housing of Negroes in Washington, D.C.: A Study of Human Ecology*, written in 1929 is a crucial resource when characterizing the personality of Johnson's neighborhood and unfolding the Black experience as it relates to housing in D.C. in the twenties. I discovered that William Henry Jones, a Howard University professor and former head of the Department of Sociology provided information that was more useful and critical than the Census Bureau records and city directories that were originally sought out for this project. The purpose for creating Jones' investigation is articulated below:

The purpose of this study is to investigate the Negro population of Washington, Dc, in its relations to housing conditions and community organization. It is in a certain sense, primarily a regional study of the Negro in the ecological organization of the city, but much of the data which it contains is that of social psychology and statistics. It aims to place the principal emphasis on human nature, rather than on the impersonal factors.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> William Henry Jones, *The Housing of Negroes in Washington, D.C. A Study of Human Ecology*, (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1929) pg. 25.

Jones' book not only identifies the physical characteristics of Negro homes and the occupations and lifestyles of their residents through surveys; but he also identifies reading interests that were common among Black households. Jones' research ultimately fulfills one of the key objectives of this study: to represent Washington's Black community as a cultural, functional and operative society.

Brochures and maps created by the D.C. Preservation Office are also beneficial. They locate, characterize, and describe Johnson's booming Greater U Street neighborhood; which was known to be the center of D.C.'s African American community. These resources are fundamental because they physically situate Johnson's home and express the importance of the cultural positioning. The concepts of place and institution are interchangeable throughout the project. Before understanding the importance Johnson's literary salons and cultural production among Black Washingtonians, the significance of the location of Johnson's home must be acknowledged and understood.

### Structure of Thesis

- Chapter I. Introduction
- Chapter II. Locating Place & Defining Personality: Washington's Greater U Street Historic District
- Chapter III. It Takes Three Two Tango: The Formation of the Saturday-Nighters
- Chapter IV. An Informal Community: Exploring the Composition of Georgia Douglas Johnson's Literary Salons
- Chapter V. Conclusion

After presenting work that indicates what is already known about the topic in the literature review and outlining the main points articulated in study, it is then necessary to explore what has already been established about Washington, D.C black community. The second chapter “Locating Place & Defining Personality: Washington’s Greater U Street Historic District I will expound upon the external characteristics of Black Washingtonian society. I will delve into social and cultural dynamics of D.C. which will essentially explain the definition of “membership” within the community. This section will describe the social and visual composition of the community in which Johnson’s salons were held and present Washington in a way that is different from the aristocratic lens in which it is typically portrayed. Although my goal is to bring to the forefront Washington’s ability to be culturally accommodating, one must tell the whole story and provide discourse on dominant images that existed in the city. Conveying the dominant narrative gives space and opportunity to then reveal narratives of Georgia Johnson’s salons, which are often left out and untold.

Chapter three, “It Takes Three to Tango: The Formation of the Saturday-Nighters” is dedicated to showing ways in which Georgia Douglas Johnson was able to provide a comfortable and conducive literary community regardless of the pretentious reputations that were heavily associated with the upper class Blacks in Washington. Whereas chapter two highlights the external elements of the salon’s physical surroundings, this chapter will delve into the internal elements that helped to form and sustain the salons. Emphasizing the inseparable link between the Saturday-Nighters and Georgia Douglas Johnson, this section will provide a biographical sketch of Johnson’s life as well as explore Johnson’s relationships with Jean Toomer and Alain Locke.

Essentially, the goal of Chapter three is to identify Locke, Toomer, and Johnson as the three original agents of the salons. Johnson is noted for her role as hostess and sustainer of the salons, but this section will recognize contributions from Locke and Toomer that helped her to obtain her position.

Establishing Johnson as the centerpiece in the third chapter, the following chapter will characterize Johnson as mentor, explore her relationships with salon participants and explain how her interactions with them were able to substitute common relationships between patron and protégé that often existed in Harlem. Johnson's authority, influence, and professionalism are shown through her relationships with salon attendees like Bruce Nugent, Jessie Fauset, and Edward Christopher Williams. This section will illustrate how a solid and consistent literary support circle resulted in professional advancement through publishing opportunities in Negro journals such as *Crisis*, *Opportunity*, *The Messenger*, and *Fire*.

As the central organizer of the literary salons, Johnson was able to free herself from norms of conventional forms of femininity while simultaneously, creating a literary community that enabled her to freely express her thoughts and improve her own craft in poetry and drama. Ultimately, a chapter dedicated to the roles and functions of the salon members demonstrates that Johnson could not make culture alone. This chapter will show that with participation and input from dedicated salon members a community within the greater Washington community was created. The collectivity present within Johnson's literary gatherings went beyond the extravagant purely social events that are often accentuated by those scholars who have represented Washington's Black community. By serving as the supporting agent of "Saturday-Nighters" Johnson not only displayed her

ability to help others, but also her ability to take advantage of the circle she created to advance herself and Black literary production in Washington, D.C. at large.

### Significance to American Studies

An analysis of “Saturday Nighters” in D.C. requires an expansion of the dominant images within popular culture and cultural studies discourse in American Studies. While many investigations of popular culture and cultural studies concentrate on media and place heavy influence on music and performing arts, my study broadens the scope by representing less publicized remnants of cultural production. This historical rather than contemporary investigation from 1921-1928 provides a space to discover current trends that have taken the place of preceding literary societies. Essentially developing research on Georgia Douglas Johnson’s literary salons will draw connections that cross timelines and show how Black literary organizations have emerged and transformed in American culture. Making these associations will rearticulate the point that cultural production is a process of reinvention.

In addition to expanding perceptions of what is labeled as popular culture, this project strives to broaden the regional portrayals of African American literary interest in America. Americanist traditions that heavily associate and limit Black cultural production to New York in general and specifically Black cultural production to Harlem; tend to overshadow the accomplishments of many African Americans in other of regions of the country. Reevaluating these dominant narratives and writing places like Washington, D.C. into the script will contribute a much more comprehensive perspective that portrays the process of Black organizing in an intentional and purposeful way. An

exploration of Georgia Douglas Johnson's salons will show that culture can be produced in all geographical regions with three P's: a thriving *Place* like Washington, an enthusiastic *Person* like Johnson, and committed *Participants* like those who attended the Saturday-Nighters.



## Chapter 2

### Locating Place & Defining Personality: Washington's Greater U Street Historic District

#### Introduction

A community has personality-determined by the status of the people who compose it. Hence, some communities have more personality than others, and, as a consequence, there is a ceaseless endeavor to pass from communities of inferior to those of superior personality. The social milieu which people create are the indexes of their lives. The music, conversation, and general public decorum, which constitute the tone of a community, differ widely with different localities.<sup>1</sup>

In his book *The Negro Housing in Washington*, William Henry Jones declares that the Negro community is one of the most fundamental “natural areas” of the city. Jones specifically discusses the significance of Negro communities in Washington and explains the ways in which elements of human nature; i.e. “social attitudes, affinities, and the processes of competition, conflict, segregation, etc,” have all contributed to the structural, sociological, and racial dispersal of both Black and White populations in the District of Columbia. In the above excerpt, Jones illustrates that rudiments of such human behavior whether fallible or ideal, have played a major role in branding Washington's reputation and distinct personality. Johnson's Saturday-Night literary salons serve as one form of social milieu that Jones references in the quote above. Jones's commentary enable one not only to understand the importance of the African American community but also recognize that homes like Johnson's which was located in culturally rich areas like the Greater U Street District

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<sup>1</sup> William Henry Jones, *The Housing of Negroes in Washington, D.C. A Study of Human Ecology*, (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1929) pg.85

were more than localized groups with specific geographical boundaries; but they were “bodies of integrated interests and sentiments.”<sup>2</sup>

The distinctive location of Georgia Douglas Johnson’s N.W. D.C. home and the social and historical dynamics that have developed it characterize the community as well as provide insight into the up-close and personal characteristics of the salons. The tangible delineations of the place, neighborhood, and culture that were developed by Black middle-class residents in Northwest Washington, D.C. are located within this chapter. It is understood that Black literary and artistic production stretched beyond Harlem and existed within other locations of the United States. I will examine the universities, nightclubs, Black businesses, and civic organizations that exuded this sense of productivity and confirm that D.C.’s cultural and historical character deserves acknowledgement and inclusion within the New Negro Renaissance’s dominant narrative. The emphasis placed on the symbiotic relationship between the location and the institution adds to the originality and uniqueness of traditional literary research. The distinct personality and the unique composition of Washington D.C.’s Black community in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century are the two most important elements I identify and use within this chapter to validate the significance of Johnson’s literary salons.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. pg.85

### Greater U Street Historic

Along with thousands of other Blacks migrating to D.C. to embark upon new economic, educational, and social opportunities, Georgia Douglas Johnson moved to Washington with her husband Henry Lincoln Johnson and two sons in 1910. At the time of her arrival to D.C., the total population of the District of Columbia was 331,069; 236,128 were White residents, and 94, 446 were Black.<sup>3</sup> Although eager to start a new life in Washington, Johnson was oblivious to what would develop in her home and within her local community years later. The family's 1461 S. Street N.W. D.C. row home would a decade later become one of Washington's most thriving spaces for literary and cultural production and her neighborhood would soon gain a reputation for being one of most historical Black landmarks of Washington. During the first quarter of the twentieth century Johnson's home was engulfed and sheltered by the flourishing Black owned Greater U Street Historic District. Bruce Yarnall, the Education Outreach Program Manager for the Government of D.C.'s Historic Preservation Office, provided a map of the district which is displayed on the following page. Although created recently in 2004, the supplied map clearly illustrates that Johnson's home; highlighted with a circle, was only two blocks away from U Street; which is identified with a yellow rectangle. After walking straight up 14<sup>th</sup> Street and passing through T Street, the Johnson family had access to what at that time, was essentially the center for African American life in the nation.

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<sup>3</sup> Constance McLaughlin Green, "The White Community" in *Washington: A History of the Capital 1800-1950*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1962) pg. The population numbers were extracted from Table III labeled "population of the District of Columbia , 1870-1950.

# Greater U Street Historic District

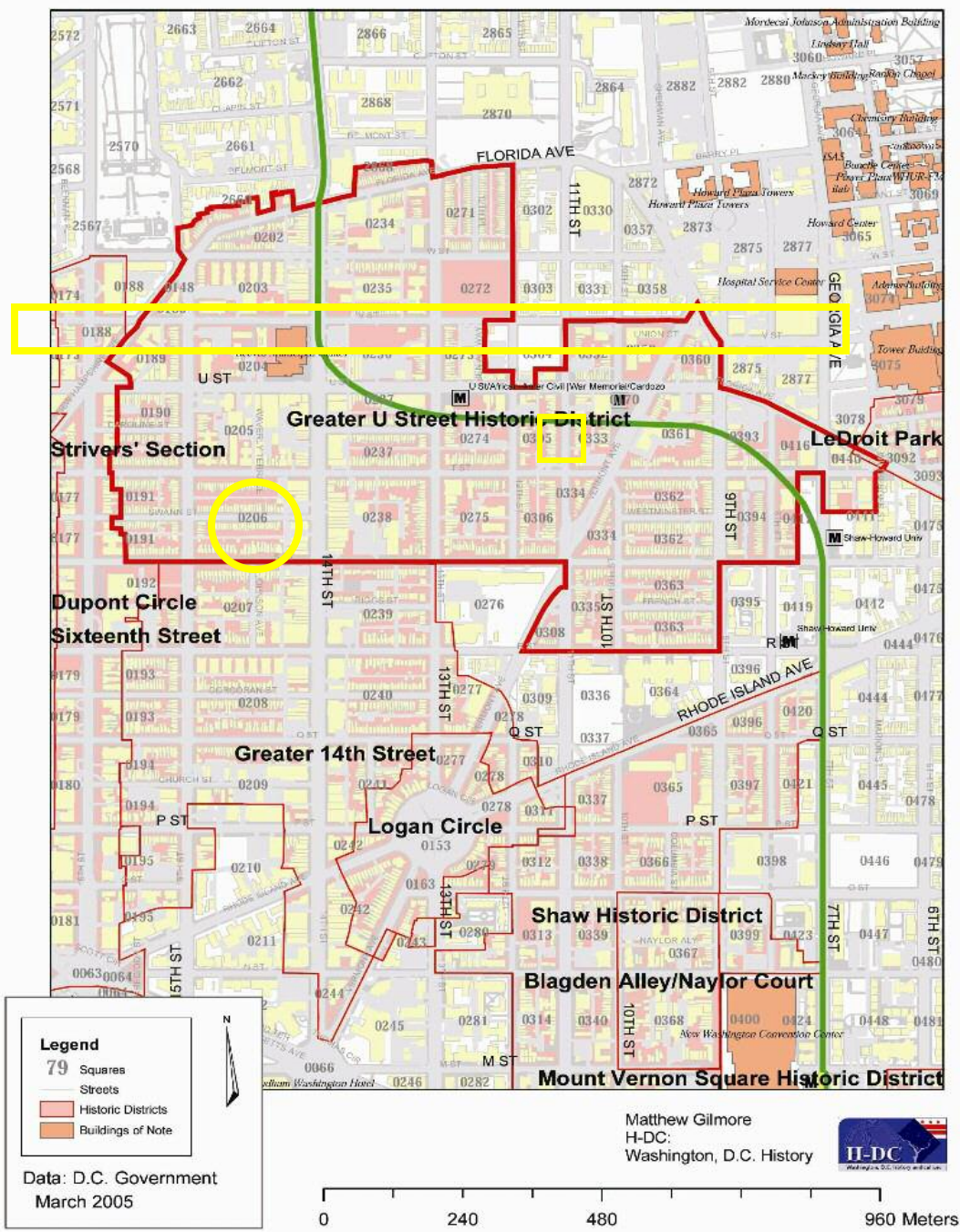


Fig. 2. Map of Greater U Street Historic; Government of D.C.'s Historic Preservation Office, 2004.

Because of its reputation for being separate and independent from D.C.'s larger white society, the U Street district has often been characterized as a "city within a city." The booming businesses that were built, designed, financed, and managed by Black Washingtonians allowed the community to be complete within itself. A major part of this sense of self-sufficiency can be attributed to the influence of Howard University which was founded in 1867. Howard's founding only two years after the end Civil War in 1865 attracted Blacks from all over and demonstrated the Black community's efforts to quickly assert and advance themselves through education. Howard stood adjacent to the Johnson family's neighborhood between 10<sup>th</sup>, T, and Vermont Avenue. This historically Black institution was extremely accessible to the Johnson family considering they would only need to walk four blocks down on S Street onto 10<sup>th</sup> Street and walk one block up to T Street to arrive at the university (refer to small highlighted box indicated on map). It is important to stress the positioning of Howard not only because of its provision of educational resources, but also to emphasize how it's standards affected the general tone and mood of the U Street district as a whole.

The highest value was placed on educational achievement in this historic neighborhood. Divisions 10 through 13 of the D.C. Public Schools, the "colored schools" as they were known in pre-1954 segregated Washington, were considered the best in the nation. Teachers were looked up to as community leaders, mentors, and role models.<sup>4</sup>

The pride and dignity exuded by Howard University trickled down into the surrounding community and set a standard of excellence for other Black educational systems and informal institutions like Georgia Johnson's literary salons to follow.

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<sup>4</sup> Paul K. Williams and Kathryn S. Smith, "Howard University Sets the Standard" in *City Within a City: Greater U Street Heritage Trail*, (Washington, D.C: The Historical Society of Washington, D.C. and the D.C. Heritage Tourism Coalition, 2001).

Blacks within the U Street District not only mentally armed themselves with education to be less dependent on the dominant culture, but they also aesthetically adorned themselves with the finest clothing and the most scenic housing. Interviewees from the film *Duke Ellington's Washington: The Rise, the Fall, and Rebirth of a Neighborhood* described the well-dressed and well-mannered residents of the U Street District in the 1920's. Despite the various class differences ranging among Blacks in the area, participants explained citizens of U Street were expected to conduct themselves in a respectful way and be dressed fashionably at all times; even if the destination was simply to the barbershop or to a movie theatre.<sup>5</sup> The attractiveness of the U Street District's legendary Victorian-era styled homes corresponded with the refined African Americans that inhabited them. The majority of these 1500 historic buildings were built largely between 1862 and 1900 expanded roughly from 16<sup>th</sup> Street on the west to 7<sup>th</sup> Street on the east and from S Street on the south to Florida Avenue on the north. The portion of the map outlined in a bold red roughly indicates the boundaries of the area.<sup>6</sup>

While many Blacks in the early nineteenth century sought to achieve racial equality by means of civil rights advocacy, African Americans in the U Street District preferred to use business entrepreneurship as a means of advancement. The Black business directories published in 1892, 1894, and 1895 by the Union League of the District of Columbia initiated a collective effort among residents to attain solidarity by only patronizing Black owned businesses. Prominent leaders advocated this effort

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<sup>5</sup> Stanely Nelson, *Duke Ellington's Washington: The Rise, Fall, and Rebirth of a Neighborhood* [video recording], a production of Hedrick Smith Productions, Inc., produced in association with South Carolina Educational Television, (Princeton, N.J.: Films for Humanities & Science), 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Kimberly Prothro Williams/EHT Traceries, "Introduction," *The Greater U Street Historic District*, sponsored by the D.C. Preservation League, Brochure Designed by Hennessey, Ink, 2003.

through newspaper articles and public speeches on the streets, at local churches, and at schools. During 1886-1920 the number of Black businesses in Washington D.C. sharply increased as a result of the communities collective efforts to only patronize Black establishments. The number of Black businesses in the Greater U Street area “rose from fifteen to 300, with the bulk of new businesses coming between 1910 and 1920.”<sup>7</sup> The influx of Black business ownership that began specifically in 1910 is relevant considering that it is the same time in which Georgia Douglas Johnson and her family moved to Washington. The Johnson family’s Greater U Street District residence allowed them to have access to everything that they needed and more.

Washington’s key Black publications like the *Washington Afro-American Tribune*, *The Washington Bee* and the *People’s Advocate* were products of successful 920-922 block U Street printing corporations like the Murray Brothers Printing Company in Northwest, D.C. In 1908, brothers Raymond and Norman Morris opened Murray Brothers Printing with help from their father Freeman Henry Morris Murray. At the peak of the *Tribune’s* distribution, Murray Printing managed 30,000 copies a day on their modern Goss printing press.<sup>8</sup> In addition to newspapers, the Murray brothers also published brochures, programs, and books. These reading materials served as vehicles of expression that addressed issues facing the community. Social and political communication through circulating publications show the U Street neighborhood’s familiarity to scholarship and its affinity for economic development, dialogue, and cultural exchange.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. “Rise of a City Within the City”

<sup>8</sup> African American Heritage Trail, “Murray Brothers Printing Company Building” Cultural Tourism D.C.

In *The Housing of Negroes in Washington (1929)*, William Henry Jones compiled a table labeled “Newspapers in Negro Homes” which included stats regarding the common reading habits of Negro families with special reference to newspapers and magazines. Because of reliable publishing companies like the Murray Brothers, Black D.C. residents, particularly those living in the U Street District were able to have access to a plethora of reading materials. The eleven newspapers documented consisted of both African American and white American newspapers and magazines such as *The Evening Star*, *The Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Washington Tribune*, *The Eagle*, and *The Chicago Defender*. The total number of Black family’s subscribing to magazines and newspapers was 3,319. This information not only shows Black Washingtonians’ interest in reading, but it also signifies their concern with learning about issues that only affected the Black community but also keeping up with current events and news that affected the world as a whole.

The information within the discussed chart exposes subscriptions of general magazines and newspapers; however, it does not reflect the varying interests of African Americans living in D.C. during the mid to late twenties. Jones expanded his study beyond general subscriptions and provided information on interest-focused publications found in Black households. Jones’ data on these types of newspapers and magazines is especially valuable to this study since Georgia Johnson and several of the salon members have published in many of the sited journals. Out of three hundred and thirty eight families, the most frequently read New Negro Renaissance magazine, the *Crisis*, was found in seventeen homes, and the least read was the *Messenger*, *Opportunity*, and *Vanity Fair* in which less than ten copies were found in each home. These three magazines are



extremely significant to the study when considering Georgia Johnson's literary salons. The avid readership of these publications shows that Johnson's salon members were not the only individuals paying attention to the trends and literary contributions of New Negro writers in the beginning of the century. The "New Negro" attitude often exhibited in poems and prose was a result of the collective consciousness swept through the Greater U Street neighborhood. Other magazines that demonstrate interest in literature among Negroes in Washington included the *Journal of Negro History*, *Scribner's* and *Literary Digest*.<sup>9</sup>

The documentation of reading materials amongst Negroes during the time of Johnson's salons signifies that interest in Black literary production did indeed exist within Washington. Nonetheless, reading and keeping abreast of literature and scholarship was only half of what it took to produce a thriving Black literary network. U Street businesses managers worked together to ensure that residents in the community were informed and had access to a variety of reading materials. I imagine that many of the discussed publications were accessible within various establishments in the area. In addition to printing companies, other common Black-owned businesses included: offices of Black lawyers, doctors, dentists, banks, druggists, barbershops, restaurants, convenient stores, beauty shops, department stores and more. Black establishments were in such great supply that individuals looking back claimed that they had everything they needed on U Street.

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<sup>9</sup> William Henry Jones, *The Housing of Negroes in Washington, D.C. A Study of Human Ecology*, (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1929) pgs.123- 124

Daily interaction among the residents in the Greater U Street vicinity cannot be discussed without mentioning the key roles and functions of several institutions. Similar to the growth of Black-owned businesses, African Americans in the late to early twentieth century also increasingly formed formal and informal organizations and societies. Some of the most popular groups in Washington consisted of civic and social societies, fraternal organizations, clubs, and school alumni associations. When the time came for these groups to mingle and hold events, they utilized the True Reformer Building. The lavish five-story Italianate building was completed in 1903 and was and still is located at the southwest corner of 12<sup>th</sup> and U Street. Based out of Richmond Virginia, the United True Reformers offered insurance and other forms of assistance to its members.

“The organization built this building, at a cost of \$100,000 to symbolize the achievements of African Americans in a prominent place in the nation’s capital. It was designed by John A. Lankford, the city’s first registered African American architect. Who went on to national prominence.”<sup>10</sup>

The excerpt taken from a Greater U Street Heritage Trail tour manual, indicates that the True Reformer building not only accommodated the most distinguished Blacks but it was also constructed and designed by one of Washington’s most recognized Black architects. Duke Ellington, a native of Washington and one of the most celebrated jazz musicians of his time, played his first gig at the True Reformers Hall with his group “The Duke Serenaders.” The True Reformer Building provided individuals of the community with the opportunities to display their talents in many capacities as well as enjoy themselves. Like all other establishments within the U Street area, the success of this institution

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<sup>10</sup> Paul K. Williams and Kathryn S. Smith, “The True Reformer Building” in *City Within a City: Greater U Street Heritage Trail*, (Washington, D.C: The Historical Society of Washington, D.C. and the D.C. Heritage Tourism Coalition, 2001).

consisted of a unification and collectivity amongst Blacks in the community. Consistent participation and involvement from surrounding residents like Georgia Johnson enabled the institution to prosper.

The 12<sup>th</sup> Street YMCA built between 1907 and 1912 was another institution that was vital within the community. Before its opening, this YMCA met in various locations around the city until it collected the \$100,000 needed for construction. Anthony Bowen, a former slave and a local civic leader formed the institution in 1853 and established the first Black YMCA in the country. Similar to the True Reformer Building, the YMCA was also designed by one of Washington's Black architects named W. Sidney Pittman, who was the son-in-law of the pioneer Booker T. Washington. Black Washingtonians who lived within and outside of the Greater U Street area relied on the YMCA as their source for civic, leisure, and recreational activities. Not only was the place to play basketball, learn to swim, and meet friends, it was also a space used to develop mobilization strategies and provide housing for individuals. Langston Hughes, a Harlem Renaissance poet, traveled from his YMCA residence on 12<sup>th</sup> Street to regularly attend Georgia Johnson's salons on 14<sup>th</sup> and U Street.<sup>11</sup> Regardless of class structures that separated middle and working class Blacks, institutions like the YMCA brought about unity and provided an outlet where people from all backgrounds could unwind and relax.

In the beginning of the twentieth century, the Greater U Street District was filled with places where Blacks could turn to for resources and assistance without stretching out into the larger white society. Not only were social and recreational needs met for Blacks on U Street but entertainment venues were also available. The famous Pearl Bailey once referred to U Street as the "Black Broadway" because of its abundant entertainment

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. "A Home Away from Home"

venues. Living minutes from the Howard Theatre, Dunbar Theatre, Lincoln Theatre, and the Republic and Booker T. Theatre, nightclubs, dance halls, and other entertaining facilities Johnson's literary salon was immersed within a lively environment. Right along the same street as Johnson's home, was the popular Club Bali located at the northeast corner of 14<sup>th</sup> and T Streets.

“Club Bali was one of the many nightclubs that made the U Street area a mecca for music lovers from the jazz era of the 1920's to the Motown sound of the 1960's. The magic often continued late into the night, as named entertainers, winding down after formal engagements played to intimate gatherings into the wee hours of the morning in the many tucked away, after-hours clubs located throughout the neighborhood.”

The Johnson home's close proximity to these various entertainment venues illustrates the salon member's exposure to arts and nightlife. Edward Christopher Williams, who was a member of the Saturday-Night literary salons, utilized his exposure to D.C.'s Black social and cultural scene by implementing its images into his writing. William used his familiarity with D.C.'s Black middle class to capture the Greater U Street setting within his book *When Washington Was in Vogue* that was originally published in a January 1925 and June 1926 issue of the *Messenger*. Though a love story and not a book based on the New Negro Renaissance in D.C., Williams' work is essential because it confirms instances of literary production within the salons and captures Washington's Black cultural and social scene in the 1920s.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to the being able to provide leisure and economic development for its residents, the Greater U Street District was also capable of assisting its residents with their spiritual growth through its many churches and places of worship. As with many other African American communities across the United States, the church was deeply rooted in

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<sup>12</sup> Edward Christopher Williams, *When Washington Was in Vogue: a love story (a lost novel of the Harlem Renaissance)*, (New York: N.Y.: Amistad, 2003).

the life and existence of the Greater U Street District. The hostile racial climate in the early twentieth century inclined pastors, ministers, and church leaders to stand at the forefront of civil rights activism. Often church basements would be the gathering places for strategy meetings, lectures, and rallies.<sup>13</sup> Although many churches within this area could be found in random places like storefronts, in grand buildings with nineteenth century towers and spire, and modern structures, some of the more recognized houses of worship included Lincoln Temple United Church of Christ and Vermont Avenue Baptist Church; both which were located around 10<sup>th</sup> and R Streets. The utilization of one building for multiple purposes was one of the U Street Districts most common characteristics. This adaptable trend influenced residents like Georgia Douglas Johnson to open up her home and transform her private sitting room into a welcoming and communal literary space.

U Street was the central location; but its businesses, institutions, and entertainment venues were not the only popular attractions in the neighborhood. The prominent and accomplished individuals who resided in the area were also contributed to the neighborhood's appeal. Georgia Douglas Johnson was not the only avid and gifted writer who lived in the area. Other notable New Negro Renaissance writers who occupied the area during the twenties included: Francis Grimke, a writer and orator who championed constitutional rights for Blacks; Jean Toomer, a young aspiring writer who published his most renowned work *Cane* in 1923; and Langston Hughes, a well-known poet and playwright that eventually made his way to Harlem. Notable politicians and community leaders like Charles Hamilton Houston, a lawyer and a Howard University professor who's most

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<sup>13</sup> Paul K. Williams and Kathryn S. Smith, "Like a Village" in *City Within a City: Greater U Street Heritage Trail*, (Washington, D.C: The Historical Society of Washington, D.C. and the D.C. Heritage Tourism Coalition, 2001).

famous student was Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall; William L. Houston who served as dean of the Howard University's Law school; and Robert and Mary Church Terrell, lawyer and civil rights activist; all made history through their accomplishments and helped to develop prestige within the U Street community. Furthermore, U Street's reputation for entertainment was due to the talent of its numerous musically-inclined residents like Edward "Duke" Ellington, jazz musician; and Lillian Evans Tibbs (Madame Evanti), a famous opera singer. The Black-owned establishments and community members shared a collaborative relationship. Members of the community fed off U Street's prosperous environment. As a result, their exposure to Black independence and self-sufficiency was seen within their success.

#### Strivers' Section Historic District

Although the Greater U Historic District was the leading commercial area for African American advancement in D.C. during the beginning of the twentieth century, other nearby communities were also important. The map presented on page four not only outlines the Greater U Street Historic District in bold red in the center, but it also focuses attention on the Strivers' Section to the left. The map clearly shows the intersecting of each district near 12<sup>th</sup> and T Streets and illustrates that both communities are in close proximity to one another. In order to get to the Strivers' Section from Johnson's 1461 S. Street home, Johnson would simply need to continue left down S Street for two blocks, make a right at 12<sup>th</sup> Street, and walk up two blocks to T Street. Similar to the U Street community, the makeup and structure of the Strivers' section consisted of unique characteristics that gave it personality and allowed it to stand out from other neighborhoods in Washington.

William Henry Jones' *The Housing of Negroes in Washington* describes the ways in which the increasing Black population eventually resulted in Black "invasion" and occupancy of white neighborhoods. Under his section *Typical Expansion Areas* Jones identifies sections of North West D.C. that experienced a sudden surge of Blacks migrating mostly from the surrounding Southern States like Maryland and Virginia. "Certain residential streets, such as Willard, Corcoran, Kalorama Road, Seaton Place, Thomas, Quincy, Flagler, New Jersey, Randolph, R, S, W, and T have figured largely in the recent expansions of the Negro Population<sup>14</sup>". Several of the streets Jones mentioned encompass the well-known Strivers Section Historic District located between 15<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> streets and R and Florida Avenue in N.W. D.C.

The name, Striver's section was coined to generally represent the community's longstanding connection with leading Black pioneers who were determined to strive beyond expectations placed upon them. In particular, the term directly relates to the 1700 block of U Street called Strivers' Row where African Americans were met with an accusation from fellow Blacks that they "were striving to get beyond the members of their race, when they have invaded white neighborhoods.<sup>15</sup>" It can be speculated that the "cultured" and pompous Negroes that Langston Hughes described in his 1927 essay "Washington: Our Wonderful Society" most likely resided in areas like the Strivers' Section or Ledroit Park and Logan Circle; which were other wealthy upper class Black neighborhoods. Though some "strivers'" motives were simply to obtain better living

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<sup>14</sup> Willaim Henry Jones, *The Housing of Negroes In Washington, D.C.: A Study of Human Ecology* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1929) pg. 65

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 70

conditions and newly equipped modern homes, a significant number of them showed evidence of snobbery that gave critics like Langston Hughes justification for his attitude.

The section was developed in the 1870's and mainly consisted of row houses and small apartment buildings. Of the many significant residents, the most prominent was Frederick Douglass. Often referred to as the "Father of the Civil rights Movement," Douglass, a run away slave, was known for being a leading abolitionist, orator, writer, and civil servant. Douglass added to the prominence of the Striver's Section and became owner of three extravagant dwellings located on the Second-Empire style row on the corner of 17<sup>th</sup> and U Street in 1877. The money Douglass grossed from renting out his 2000-2004 homes on 17<sup>th</sup> Street as well as money he earned from lectures and royalties allowed him to live comfortably at his estate in Anacostia for the last two decades of his life. Douglass' son inherited the homes and lived in the middle home from 1877 until his death in 1908. Lewis Douglass worked as a printer for the U.S. government and also partnered with his father in publishing the *New National Era* newspaper from 1869 to 1897.

In addition to living in close proximity to pioneer Striver Section residents like Douglasses, Georgia Johnson other Strivers' Section neighbors included James E. Storum, the educator and entrepreneur who founded the Capital Savings Bank, which was the first African American owned banking institution in D.C.; Calvin T.S Brent, a well-known Black architect; Todd Duncan, a vocal instructor at Howard University who played a leading role in George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* on Broadway; Dutton Ferguson, a nationally recognized leader known for challenging segregation in the 1930's; and many more notable figures as well as equally dignified working-class Black



families.<sup>16</sup> The Saturday-Nighters close distance to distinguished Blacks living in the Striver's Section permits one to assume that its members were of a similar distinguished class. Although Johnson's home is not technically considered a part of this historic district its close relation to it illustrates diversity and prominence among Blacks living N.W. Washington. The middle-class members of the Saturday-Nighters found comfort in looking up to their accomplished and educated upper-class peers and knowing that they could be equally as industrious in their literary careers.

The Black population especially soared in the Striver's Section during the 1920's; however, the white population remained steady. Historically a mixed-raced neighborhood, the Striver's Historic District had not fully flourished until the fourth quarter of the nineteenth century. Between 1890 and 1910; the time of Johnson's arrival to the area; the neighborhood consisted of mixed-classed white and Black professionals. The first structures built in the 1870's comprised of basic one and two story to more elaborate three and four story brick dwellings. The cost of the less lavish homes ranged from \$50 to \$1,000 and the more extravagant properties (some which were executed in the avant-garde Empire style, such as those at the corners of 17<sup>th</sup> and U Streets and 17<sup>th</sup> and V Streets) appraised for as much as \$3,000. In addition to being attracted to the residential aesthetics, Blacks were also drawn to the areas' access to transportation and its close proximity to the prominent Howard University. In such close relation to the nation's leading Black institution, many African American businessmen, educators, politicians,

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<sup>16</sup> Kimberly Prothro Williams, *The Striver's Section Historic District Brochure*, Sponsored by the D.C. (Washington: D.C. Preservation League, D.C. Historic Preservation Office D.C. Government, 1999).

artists, religious leaders, scientists and government employees occupied the Striver's Section.

“This “community of Negro aristocracy” has grown to be a focal point within research concerning D.C.’s Black Renaissance. Works like Constance Green’s “Colored Washington” in *Washington: A History of the Capital*<sup>17</sup> and Willard Gatewood’s “Washington: Capital of the Colored Aristocracy” in *Aristocrats of Color* are dedicated to exploring the major characteristics of Washington’s Black elite lifestyle. Whether labeled the “upper tens,” a term coined by sociologist W.E. B Dubois in his 1903 essay, “The Talented Tenth;” or identified as the “Black 400,” a name that described the members of the less than one hundred elite families in Washington, those living in the neighborhoods like the Strivers Section exhibited common interests in “family background, good breeding, occupation, respectability, and color that bound them into an exclusive, self-consciously elitist group.<sup>18</sup>” Elite Blacks’ pigmentation and common interests brought them together as a collective group; however, their exclusiveness increased resentment and animosity among the race as a whole.

By the end of the 1800’s Negroes in the District were adhering to the social pattern common in the deep South: conflict within the caste and compliance with or carefully concealed hostility toward the white group outside.<sup>19</sup>

Elite groups of African American’s intentional seclusion to areas like Striver’s Row ultimately caused Washington’s Black populace to be divided into three distinct groups: “the

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<sup>17</sup> Constance McLaughlin Green, “Colored Washington 1879-1901” in *Washington: Capital City 1879-1950*, (Princeton New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1962)

<sup>18</sup> Willard Gatewood, “Washington: Capital of the Colored Aristocracy” in *Aristocrats of Color: The Black Elite, 1800-1920*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) pg. 39.

<sup>19</sup> John Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*; Allison Davis and G. and M. Gardener, *Deep South*; and W. Lloyd Warner, “American Caste and Class,” *American Journal of Sociology*, XLII, 234-371.

upper- class group composed of people of predominantly white blood, the middle class mulattoes, and the Blacks.”<sup>20</sup> While this separation existed, it is important to remain time sensitive and acknowledge that the height of this Black aristocracy and separation occurred during 1879-1901. Much of this intra-racism can be seen as a response to the psychological effects of slavery and discrimination. Because any person known to be “tainted” by so much as one drop of Negro blood found himself denied of incentives to self improvement, many upper and middle class Negroes attempted to “pass” and blend in with the larger white society. Though this type of community did exist, in reality, Black elites consisted of fewer than a hundred families out of a Black population of 75,000 in 1900.<sup>21</sup> Prior to Georgia Douglas Johnson’s arrival to D.C. during 1879-1901, this type of aristocracy was most prevalent. The social dynamics and characteristics of Washington’s Black elite are important to recognize because they are factors that help to form and shape the Black community’s personality. It was not until after the turn of the century when Blacks in Washington discovered that collectivity was more promising than exclusivity. This sense of unity was demonstrated in the teens and twenties during the development of U Street

Scholars and critics often focus only on the small portion of Washington’s Black elite without conducting any type of historical or contextual analysis. The result of this narrow focus is articulated in scathing essays like Langston Hughes’ “Our Wonderful Society: Washington.” Although some upper-class Blacks remained exclusive, others chose to work collectively with middle and working class Blacks in the community. These

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<sup>20</sup> Constance McLaughlin Green, “Colored Washington 1879-1901” in *Washington: Capital City 1879-1950*, (Princeton New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1962) pg. 101

<sup>21</sup> Willard Gatewood, “Washington: Capital of the Colored Aristocracy” in *Aristocrats of Color: The Black Elite, 1800-1920*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) pg. 39.

collective efforts can be seen through the development of businesses, organizations, and institutions in the Greater U Street District.

Emphasizing Johnson's home's centrality and flexibility is much more valuable to the entirety of the study, than the confining the location to one particular site. The Saturday-Nighter's close distance to distinguished Blacks living in the Strivers' Section permits one to assume that some of the salon members were of a similar distinguished class. Highlighting the interconnecting relationships between the booming Greater U Street District and the affluent Strivers' Section makes the study of Saturday Night literary salons all the more interesting. An analysis of the actual literary formation and the place in which the formation is surrounded allows one to determine how the community connects with the institution.

The unique community trends and characteristics uncovered in this section help to determine what occurred in the daily lives of the salon attendees. The descriptions of the neighborhoods and the caliber of people who resided within them, reflect the positive effects of community consciousness and collectivity. The film *Duke Ellington's Washington* aimed to express similar sentiments about the U Street area. The film explains how jazz musician Duke Ellington was not college-educated, yet "the city was his tutor." While developing himself mentally, socially, and musically, Duke claimed, "I am going to let the city form me."

Ellington's determination to allow the city of Washington to shape, mold, and form him resulted in great musical success. Duke's upbringing in the Greater U Street District and his exposure to the neighborhood's resourcefulness and inventiveness can be seen through his versatile and complex jazz compositions. Although Ellington moved to Harlem

in 1923, to expand his network and further pursue his music career; he held on to his personal history by naming his band “The Washingtonians.” In addition to carrying on the name, Duke most importantly carried with him the pride and decorum that was instilled within in him by his native community. A similar sense of pride was developed in Georgia Douglas Johnson’s literary salons. Like Duke, the members of Johnson’s salons created a support circle that reflected the unified operations within the Greater U Street District. Although literature, and not jazz music, both Johnson and Ellington’s craft could to have prospered without the support of a culturally thriving community.

### Chapter III

#### **It Takes Three to Tango: The Formation of the Saturday-Nighters**

Amongst the grand Black middle class settings in Washington during the roaring twenties, there dwelled Georgia Douglass Johnson. Involved, active, and an integral cultural and literary agent of the community, Johnson's life is representative of a well-rounded and less pretentious portrayal of what one might consider the "New Negro" experience in D.C. While the first chapter provided peripheral exploration of the social, economical, and cultural dynamics of the city, the remainder of the study aims to explore the intimate and informal aspects of the Black Washingtonian lifestyle that have not been expounded upon. Johnson's central placement within this project does not intend to paint her as the all-knowing hegemonic force behind cultural and literary production in D.C. Rather, it aims to position her as the major point of contact that provided a literary space where artists were given the opportunity to access, produce, and engage in New Negro Renaissance literature.

Before discussing the creation of the literary circle, it is necessary to investigate how Johnson initially went about developing her network. The relationships explored within this section demonstrate Johnson's establishment of key contacts with Alain Locke and Jean Toomer, who were instrumental in helping her to become established within the District's literary industry. A close examination of initial relationships helps to set a historical foundation for the salons and provides insight into how and why culture is made. Interaction among these three figures suggests that culture cannot be made alone. The title "It Takes Three to Tango" correlates a form of dance to a literary formation.

Johnson serves as this project's spotlighted dancer; however, she took the necessary steps and made critical moves in order to engage with partners like Locke and Toomer. The development of exchange within a network was the beginning of Johnson's literary circle. Johnson was fastened at the center of this cultural movement; however, constant shifting and exchanging of ideas allowed her to build a network that would be transformed into one of the most recognized literary salons in history.

### Biographical Sketch

Georgia Blanche Douglas Camp Johnson was born on September 10, 1877, in Atlanta Georgia to Laura (Jackson) Camp and George Camp. Considering the mixed heritages of her half Black and Native American mother and half Black and white father, Johnson's 1932 poem titled "Interracial" was a living testimony. Throughout the poem Johnson encourages her readers to build bridges with one another and find a common ground regardless of their interracial makeup. Similar to her efforts in organizing the Saturday-Nighters, she expresses the importance of community building. "Oh lets build bridges everywhere/And span the gulf of challenge there".<sup>1</sup> Johnson's racially accepting thoughts are not unexpected, being that she grew up in Rome, Georgia; a city sixty miles away from Atlanta known for heavily inhabiting diverse population of Creek and Cherokee Indians up until the 1820's. Laura Camp separated from her husband along the way and she and Georgia relocated to Atlanta where she used her maiden name Douglas, remarried, and became Laura Spaulding around 1887.

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<sup>1</sup> Georgia Douglas Johnson Papers, Unknown Box and Folder; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University

A letter written in January, 1962, from Johnson to Reverend William Holmes Borders of Wheat Street Baptist Church reveals that her mother and half sister Willie Spaulding Gholston were active members in the church choir. Within the letter Johnson also recalls that her family lived next to Peter Eskridge who was a deacon of the church and one of the community's well-known property owners. "Across from the store was, was the Gate City Drugstore, later managed by Moses Amos...My mother was baptized by Brother Tillman and I watched the baptismal from the red banks of the Chattahoochee.

<sup>2</sup> Johnson's reference to property ownership and management indicates that her surroundings exposed her to a Black middle-class life style. Taking this exposure into consideration is significant especially when comparing her upbringing in Georgia to her standard of living in Washington D.C. It can be assumed that Johnson's exposure to Black middle-class life and self-sufficiency made her transition to Washington smooth and comforting.

The physical and social setting of Johnson's southern upbringing can easily obtainable; however, the internal dynamics of her family and personal life are mainly left to the imagination. Nonetheless, the little information disclosed about Johnson's childhood reveals somewhat of a disconnected relationship with her mother. In a biographical sketch Johnson reveals her lonely childhood and suggests that her mother was rather "resentful to her daughters." It was only until her enrollment at Atlanta University's Normal School that Johnson felt a sense of belonging. In a 1931 conversation with Theresa Scott Davis and Charles Y. Freeman Johnson said that she

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<sup>2</sup> Georgia Douglas Johnson Papers Box 162-1 Folder 24; Manuscripts Division, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.



“experienced the first real homey sympathetic atmosphere” yet still feeling a sense of loneliness Johnson also noted “There were girls in school whom I would have liked to associate with but I was too proud to seek them and I had no material offerings to make to attract superior girls.”<sup>3</sup> In 1893, Johnson graduated from the Atlanta University Normal School and went on to study harmony, piano, and at Oberlin College in Cleveland, Ohio from 1902-1903. Music was a venue in which she could express her feelings of isolation. At this time Johnson dreamed of becoming a famous composer, but little did she know that her genius was soon to be transformed into another genre of written creativity.

After leaving Ohio, Johnson returned to Georgia where she held a position as a teacher as well as the assistant principal in a school in Marietta. Gifted, beautiful, and independent, Johnson was a “good catch,” and it was not long until she fell in love with Henry Lincoln Johnson, an Atlanta attorney and distinguished member of the Republican party who had served as delegate-at-large to the Republican National Convention since 1896. At the age of twenty-six, Georgia married Henry and her interest in writing began to flourish.<sup>4</sup> In a letter addressed to pastor of First Congregational Baptist Church in Atlanta Georgia, Johnson mentions that she was an organist at the church and indicates that her and husband lived in close proximity to Morris Brown College. “I lived across the street from this school when I married Henry Lincoln Johnson and was a neighbor to

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<sup>3</sup> Undated letter to Theresa Scott Davis and Charles Y. Freeman at Fisk University Special Collections. Davis and Freeman wrote “A Biographical Sketch of Georgia Douglas Johnson and Some of Her Works” (Nashville, TN: Y.M.C.A. Graduate Schools, 1931).

<sup>4</sup> Jessie Carney Smith, *Notable Black American Women* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1992) pg.579

Rev. Fountain and knew Rev. Flipper the president and taught his son at Summerhill School”.<sup>5</sup>

The mentioning of various notable Black leaders again illustrates Johnson’s Black upper-middle class background. Already well-known in her community, Johnson’s name began to become just as popular when her first published work of June Poems called “Omnipresence” appeared in a 1905 periodical called *The Voice of the Negro*. Not only did Johnson begin to produce and conceive valuable and creative literature, but in 1906 she gave birth to her first son, Henry Lincoln Johnson Jr. and her second in 1907; Peter Douglass Johnson. Soon after, Johnson’s husband was appointed recorder of deeds by Robert Taft who served as the United States president from 1909-1913. Eagerly accepting the position, Johnson’s husband agreed to relocate and the family moved to Washington, D.C. in 1910.

Johnson’s experience in the prosperous Black community of Atlanta, as well as her marriage to a prominent Black lawyer and politician somewhat prepared her for the Black aristocracy that she would encounter in Washington. The family moved into a row house located on 1461 S. Street Northwest, Washington D.C. where Johnson would reside up until her death in 1966. For the next five years she settled her and family into the community, acted as a stay-at-home mother and embraced the domestic role. These years were quite different from later years when Johnson served as hostess of the Saturday-Nighters, worked full-time as a Commissioner of Conciliation for the Department of Labor<sup>6</sup>, actively pursued her writing career. Johnson’s management of the

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<sup>5</sup> Georgia Douglas Johnson Papers Box 1 Folder 24; Manuscript Division, MSRC Howard University: Georgia Douglas Johnson to reverend William Holmes, January 1962.

<sup>6</sup> Legesse Tessema, Biographical Sketch, March 1994, Georgia Douglas Johnson Papers.

salons seemed to bring on an inner confidence that motivated her to maintain a new multifaceted lifestyle.

Johnson's relocation was a critical moment in her life. Not only did it involve a geographical move, but it also served as the catalyst for Johnson to develop her writing. Publishing her first three poems in 1916 in the notable Black journal *The Crisis* and publishing her first book of poetry entitled *The Heart of a Woman* in 1918, Johnson's writing career was off to a great start.<sup>7</sup> Soon after in 1922, Johnson published her second volume of poetry *Bronze: A Book of Verse* and in the meantime wrote columns such as the "Homely Philosophy," "Wise Sayings" and "Beauty Hints" for several African American newspapers.<sup>8</sup> William Stanley Braithwaite made an accurate presumption when he inquired about Johnson's success in a letter in January 1926. "How goes your own literary work? Somehow I feel 1926 ought to be a banner year for you."<sup>9</sup> Johnson's play "Blue Blood" won the first place Opportunity award months later. In 1928, the last heavily attended year of the Saturday-Nighters, Johnson published her third book *The Autumn Love Cycle* and over thirty-four years later she published her last book of poems *Share My World* four years before her death in 1965. Johnson's consistency and constant publishing demonstrates that D.C. was conducive for Black literary production

Despite her publication success, Johnson was certain that without the necessary contacts, her career could not really takeoff in the way that she imagined. The forming of close ties and connections with literary greats Alain Locke and Jean Toomer were two of

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<sup>7</sup> Gloria T. Hull, *Color, Sex, and Poetry: Three women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance* (Indiana University Press, 1987) pg. 156.

<sup>8</sup> Legesse Tessema, Biographical Sketch, March 1994, Georgia Douglas Johnson Papers.

<sup>9</sup> Georgia Douglas Johnson Papers Box 162-1(Folder 25); Manuscript Division, MSRC, Howard University: William Stanley Braithwaite to Johnson, January 1926.

Johnson's most critical undertakings. Toomer's role as the original developer of the salons is often emphasized more than Locke's role as Johnson's main literary point of contact in D.C. Both roles are essential; however, it is necessary to realize that in order for Johnson to form and sustain a literary space, she first had to link with well-rounded and well-known individuals like Alain Locke who could expand her pool of contacts as well as shed light on her writing career.

#### Alain Locke: The Catalyst of the New Negro Renaissance

Along with pioneers like W.E.B. Dubois, James Weldon Johnson, Claude McKay, and Jean Toomer, Alain Locke is one of the most critical figures in the development of the New Negro Renaissance. As indicated by Arthur P. Davis in *From The Dark Tower*, "All of the Planters, obviously, had a hand in shaping the Harlem Renaissance, but Locke was more of a direct catalyst than any of the others."<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth McHenry provides the only fairly detailed account of the formation of the Saturday-Nighters. McHenry's description of the organization of salons heavily acknowledges contributions from Jean Toomer and downplays Alain Locke's role. While taking a second look, my explanation aims to equally recognize Johnson's relationships with both Toomer and Locke.

Locke's status as a Harvard PhD., his title as Oxford's first Black Rhodes scholar, and his multifaceted background in criticism, philosophy, and teaching at the elite Howard University strengthened his influence and enabled him to shape the thinking of the younger generation of artists like Georgia Douglass Johnson. Johnson's relationship with Locke cannot be undervalued. With the guidance of an established mentor like

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<sup>10</sup> Arthur P. Davis, *From the Dark Tower* (Howard University Press, 1974) pg. 51

Locke, Johnson was able to acquire the skills needed to serve as the cultural and literary mediator for D.C.'s Black literary community. Watching Locke travel consistently between D.C. and Harlem, where he served as the "press agent" in what Charles S. Johnson called the Negro Renaissance, Johnson was able to gain knowledge and be informed of the new trends in publication.<sup>11</sup> Locke's role was so vital that he was acknowledged for contributing and implementing three major elements in the Renaissance.

Dr. Locke really played a triple role in the Renaissance. First, he crystallized and dramatized the movement through the editing of the "Harlem Issue" of the *Survey Graphic*, which enlarged his editing of the *New Negro* (1925), a landmark in Black literature. Second, he articulated the critical tenets of the period, adding of course, his own interpretations and justifications. And third, he made it his business to know and encourage and advise younger writers, editing, and placing their manuscripts.<sup>12</sup>

The third contribution mentioned in the passage is greatly associated with Locke's influence on Johnson's career. Although in her thirties, Johnson was relatively new within the literary world in general, and especially new to the literary scene in Washington. Her exposure to literary experts like Alain Locke opened up opportunities for publications and exposed her to an honest opinion and critical eye that was able to carefully analyze and enhance her work.

Correspondence dated as early as 1916 suggests the beginnings Locke and Johnson's professional and personal relationship. A letter written on April 12, 1916 to Mr. Locke from Georgia Douglas Johnson reads: "I asked Mr. Braithwaite to ask you and Mr. Gregory here this evening, but fearing he had not made the matter plain to you, I am

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<sup>11</sup> Valerie Boyd. *Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston* (New York: Scribner, 2002)

<sup>12</sup> Arthur P. Davis, *From the Dark Tower* (Howard University Press, 1974) pg. 51

pending this note to remind you that I am expecting you and Mr. Gregory at my home this evening.”<sup>13</sup> Referring to soldier, educator, dramatist, and author Thomas M. Gregory, and poet, critic, editor, and anthologist William Stanley Braithwaite, Johnson exhibits her ability to engage with established figures within the profession. Her informal and rather demanding tone suggests that her relationship with Locke was not only professional, but intimate as well. Another letter written on March 14, 1919 indicates Johnson’s intentions to separate her and Locke’s personal matters from their professional endeavors. Consistently addressing Alain as “Mr. Locke”, Johnson exudes professionalism within her written approach and style.

I want some one to go over some manuscripts with me in a critical way. I wish to do this as a strictly business transaction. – and knows he can’t /won’t do it unless I would make this worthwhile... Also ask him whether he has any interest in a collection. I am gathering for Carter Woodson-but ask him specifically what about the collection is unknown<sup>14</sup>

Despite her personal relationship with Locke, she stresses the importance of their transaction being “business” and even seeks an additional recommendation if Locke were not able to handle the matter. Establishing a strong affiliation with Locke enabled Johnson to build a reputation, and gain access to historical icons like Carter G. Woodson. This correspondence expresses Johnson’s desire to be taken seriously as a writer at a time when women were expected to be docile and domestic.

Johnson’s relationship with Locke was not only significant because of its success in networking, but it was also important because it was one of the few positive relationships Locke shared with women. Described as “foppish and homosexual” by

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<sup>13</sup> Alain Locke Papers Box 164-40 Folder 35; Manuscript Division, MSRC, Howard University: From Georgia Douglas to Alain Locke, April, 1916.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

Valerie Boyd in *Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston*, Locke gained a reputation for devoting special attention to young and handsome aspiring artists such as Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes. However, when it came to opposite sex, Locke was known for warning his female students at Howard that they would probably receive a C in his class despite their capability. Zora Neale Hurston has been noted to be one of the few women that Locke accepted and recognized their potential. Locke recommended her work to Charles S. Johnson, and in 1924 Hurston's story "The Drenched Light" appeared in *Opportunity*, one the most notable Black journals of the era.<sup>15</sup> Similar to the welcoming attitude he showed towards Hurston, Locke expressed acceptance towards Georgia Douglas Johnson.

Regardless of Locke's apparent gender bias, he recognized talent when reading Georgia Johnson's work. Correspondence between the two exemplifies their close-knit relationship and Johnson's ability to surpass gender discrimination in a literary industry that was dominated by male voices. Without revealing what the review actually reads, Johnson thanks Locke for his affirming review of her books. Written on August 20<sup>th</sup>, 1920, Johnson writes:

I intended writing to you immediately upon receiving the very magnificent review you gave my books, but was hindered by having to go immediately to Chicago to Mr. Johnson in his illness ...I cannot say in a few words how much I appreciate your wonderful pronouncements.<sup>16</sup>

Johnson ends the letter informing Locke that Jean Toomer will paying her a visit and she invites him to come over as well. The communication displayed in this letter indicates a

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<sup>15</sup> Valerie Boyd. *Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston* ( New York: Scribner, 2002) pg. 91

<sup>16</sup> Alain Locke Papers Box 164-40 Folder 35; Manuscript Division, MSRC, Howard University: From Georgia Douglas Johnson to Alain Locke, August, 1920.

gradual growth in Johnson's pool of contacts as well as in her writing. Two years later, another letter reveals even more of Johnson's gratification towards Locke. "I cannot express the strange elation I feel when reading the foreword you have written for me."<sup>17</sup> Locke's obvious endorsement of Johnson's work through reviews and forewords exhibits his willingness to conspire with Johnson and take her under his wing. Selective in his acquaintances, Locke respected Johnson's determination to separate herself from the limited and fixed roles of middle class women in her day. The connection built between the two marks the beginning stages of Johnson's role as a cultural and literary agent. Learning from top notch innovators like Alain LeRoy Locke, Georgia Douglas Johnson was on her way to establishing the most enduring, productive, and relaxed literary space of the New Negro Renaissance in D.C.

Unlike Locke and Johnson's less noted relationship, interaction between Johnson and Toomer is heavily affirmed in Elizabeth McHenry's *Forgotten Readers*. According to McHenry's chapter entitled "Georgia Douglas Johnson and the Saturday Nighters," the weekly salons "had not only one but two beginnings."<sup>18</sup> Basing her claim on correspondence between Johnson and Toomer, McHenry contends that the Saturday- night literary salons were originally contrived and coordinated by Toomer in 1921. Johnson's relationship with Jean Toomer differs substantially from her companionship with Locke. Ten years Johnson's senior and firmly grounded in the academic and literary world, Locke served to some extent as a mentor to Johnson; whereas Toomer, who was about ten years younger than Johnson and not as known in the community, played the role as

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Elizabeth McHenry. *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (Duke University Press, 2002) pg. 251



Johnson's mentee. This section will explore several details of Toomer's life as well as reveal the ways in which Toomer and Johnson's needs mutually worked together. As a result of their constant interaction, both individual's needs were met. Toomer succeeded in finding a supportive literary space to begin his work on his famous work *Cane* and Johnson's succeeded in illustrating her ability to nurture others while at the same time developing her own career.

### Jean Toomer: The Original Creator of the Saturday-Nighters

Also categorized as one the five "Planters" in Davis' *From the Dark Tower*, Jean Toomer is noted for having one of the most well-known, yet short-lived careers in the Negro Renaissance. Toomer differed from the rest of the "planters" in that he only produced one critical work and separated himself from the race soon after the volume's publication. Nonetheless, visibility and quantity could not distract attention and praise from Toomer's acclaimed *Cane*.

Appearing in 1923, *Cane* exemplified an objectivity, an artistry, and a stylistic Approach entirely new to Negro writing. It made a cleaner break with Negro literary tradition than any other work published before 1923, and for a long time thereafter.<sup>19</sup>

The considerable praise and positive feedback towards *Cane* cannot account for the immeasurable amount of time and effort Toomer invested in the work. The complicated mélange of poems, prose sketches, short stories, and drama included within *Cane* corresponded with the complicated details of Toomer's real life experiences and complex racial ancestry. Toomer was born the son of Nathan Toomer, a planter, and Nina

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<sup>19</sup> Arthur P. Davis *From the Dark Tower* (Howard University Press, 1974) pg. 45

Pinchback, the daughter of Pinckney Benton Stewart Pinchback, governor of Louisiana during Reconstruction and the first U.S. governor of African-American descent. In addition to being the product of a distinguished family, Toomer was also the offspring of a heritage comprised of a variation of European and African blood. He lived alternately as white and as African American until age eighteen.<sup>20</sup> Toomer's continuous struggle to assert his racial identity and find a progressive literary space was evident in his consistent relocation and communication with Georgia Douglas Johnson.

Unlike Alain Locke's stable and prestigious educational history at Harvard, Toomer attended various institutions: including the University of Wisconsin (1914-1915), the Massachusetts College of Agriculture (1915), the American College of Physical Training at Chicago (1916), the University of Chicago (1916), the City College of New York (1917), and New York University (1917) however; he never earned a degree.<sup>21</sup> The mental and emotional inconsistency illustrated by Toomer's constant shifting in locations exemplifies his desire to seek knowledge, yet not necessarily knowledge that had to be acquired in a structured institutional setting. Instead, it seems that Toomer yearned for a more spontaneous lifestyle in which he would be able to build his own literary network and become a highly acclaimed writer.

As an up and coming Black artist, Jean Toomer felt drawn to "City of Refuge;" the name coined to describe Harlem's fast-paced living, appealing ambience, and exotic images. Toomer not only enjoyed Harlem for its alluring atmosphere, and the city's wealthy patrons were known to be generous and sponsor to aspiring artists. Correspond-

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<sup>20</sup> Robert B. Jones, *American National Biography*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999)

<sup>21</sup> Robert B. Jones, From *American National Biography*.(New York: Oxford University Press, 1999)

ence between Toomer and Johnson reveals Toomer's earlier attempts to secure patronage. One of his initial efforts involved him seeking a \$5000 dollar loan from "a man of means who was supposed to be kindly disposed toward men of talent;" however, despite his ability, Toomer was denied.

"What he seemingly desires," Toomer said of one potential patron, "is that a man already have achieved some recognition from critics and public. He is unwilling to trust his own judgment in the matter in the matter... " I made it plain to him that a man of my taste and judgment could not possibly give to the public anything until a certain proficiency in technic [sic], for this and no other reason, that I desired and needed the money." <sup>22</sup>

The noted experience above describes a common dilemma that many hopeful artists were faced with. Toomer acknowledge his youth and newness to the literary scene; however, he also recognized his ability and was certain that he would not allow any outside force the opportunity to hinder his "aesthetic sensibility" and take complete control over his work.

Dialogues between Toomer and Johnson not only illustrate the struggles of an aspiring New Negro artist, but also they display the level of comfort and closeness that Toomer felt sharing his experiences with Johnson. Another discomfoting experience Toomer shared with Johnson was his encounter with the reputable W.E.B. Dubois. In a letter written in January 1920 Toomer wrote Johnson and expressed his disappointment about contacting the renowned intellectual. "At first he didn't even remember me, even after mentioning the fact that you had talked of me." <sup>23</sup> Toomer confided to Johnson in a

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<sup>22</sup> Georgia Douglas Johnson Papers Box 162-1 Folder 9; Manuscript Division, MSRC, Howard University: Toomer to Johnson, 4 June 1920.

<sup>23</sup> Elizabeth McHenry. *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (Duke University Press, 2002) pg. 256

letter. Dubois' response to Toomer was not at all what he anticipated. Rather than taking special interest and initiating a mentorship as Toomer hoped, Dubois generically ended the conversation by suggesting that Toomer send him samples of his work; which was a typical gesture for someone of Dubois status and profession. Toomer soon learned that the exciting and attractive aspects of Harlem were also coupled with instances of disappointment and failure.

It...is indicative of my approaching strength and maturity that whereas formely the vital but divergent activities of [New York City] did but pull me in their wake and leave me dizzy and bewildered, I can now somewhat master them and turn them to my own purposes.<sup>24</sup>

Toomer was able to transform many of his discouraging experiences into hopeful life lessons. His encounter with Dubois hampered his confidence, but it did not stop him from seeking the literary sustenance that he desired. Toomer regained optimism and opportunely stumbled upon a literary gathering in New York City.

It was not until Toomer's encounter with this group that he began to see the light. "Here was the first gathering of people I had ever seen in my life—people who were of my own kind," he wrote to Johnson in 1920. Correspondence with Johnson during the first six months of 1920 reveals a determining transformation in Toomer's attitude and outlook. After a financially difficult and emotionally straining time in New York, Toomer made his way back to his hometown Washington, DC and decided to apply the literary enthusiasm and productivity that discovered in the gathering to his personal and professional life. Past experiences and acquired knowledge taught him that becoming a writer was a process that required much patience and support. Toomer's unsuccessful

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid. pg. 257

attempts to secure patronage as well guidance from his family and established figures like Dubois provoked him to find support elsewhere. As soon as Toomer settled himself in D.C., he was determined to form a consistent literary network that would fuel his intellectual needs.

Toomer not only expressed his desire to form a literary circle to Johnson, but he shared his vision with Alain Locke as well. After returning to D.C. and organizing participants Mary Burrill, Georgia Johnson, E.C. Williams, and Henry Kennedy, Toomer informed Locke via letter of the group's beginnings and invited him to join the next meeting.<sup>25</sup> Correspondence does not indicate whether Locke was in attendance; however, regardless of physical presence, Alain Locke's active participation in both Toomer and Johnson's lives is extremely critical when discussing the development of the salons. Interaction amongst of this trio of individuals demonstrates the ways in which each person contributed to developing an informal institution. All of these characteristics contributed to the formation of the "Saturday Nighthers:" Locke, the esteemed Howard University professor, acted as the more seasoned and established figure, who was available give references; Toomer, the creative but distracted aspiring artist, catalyzed the concept of an informal network with a devotion to form a non-pretentious literary comradery; and Johnson, new to the D.C. community and eager to begin her writing career, served as the passionate force that sustained the salons after Toomer's sudden relocation to Georgia.

Georgia Johnson's takeover brought about several changes in the salons' goals, missions, and atmosphere. Under Jean Toomer's management, the major objectives of the

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid. pg 259

salons were to discuss the historical context of slavery and the conditions of mixed-blood people. In a letter to Alain Locke Toomer states: “I have managed to hold two meetings of a group...whose purpose is an historical study of slavery and the Negro, emphasizing the great economic and cultural forces which have largely determined them. The aim is twofold...first to arrive at a sound and just criticism of the actual place and condition of the mixed-blood group in this country, and second, to formulate an ideal that will be both workable and inclusive.”<sup>26</sup> Whereas Toomer’s mixed heritage and personal struggle with racial identification were clearly revealed in his aspirations for the group, Johnson’s partialities did not seem to be as obvious.

The lack of confirmation of set goals and initiatives under Johnson’s supervision leaves one to assume that her discussions covered a universal range of topics. Rather than embracing racial exclusivity among mulatto people, Johnson’s group seemed to have accepted differences, but encouraged unification among Black people as a whole.

The group of writers and intellectuals they brought together would have otherwise have remained isolated, both from larger Washington society and from one another. In Johnson’s living room they read their writing aloud, exchanged criticisms, talked about the latest books they had read and argues their views on literature.<sup>27</sup>

Toomer’s desire to form a group was ultimately subject to his personal growth, insecurities, and internal battle with his mixed heritage. Johnson was indeed attracted to an opportunity to develop professionally and enhance her writing career, but her intentions extended far beyond personal growth. Whether documented or undocumented,

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<sup>26</sup> Alain Locke Papers Box 164-90 Folder 12; Manuscript Division, MSRC, Howard University: From Jean Toomer to Alain Locke, 26 January 1921.

<sup>27</sup> Elizabeth McHenry. *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (Duke University Press, 2002) pg. 269

the relationships that Johnson made with others and the reputation she established for herself within Washington's Black literary and cultural circles exhibit her leadership and passion for nurturing, guiding, and interacting with young people in particular.

Johnson's years of hosting the Saturday-Nighters not only generated interest and increased participation in the salons, but her management also brought about the most essential foundation that a group of people can possess: a sense of community and belonging. "In the context of Saturday Nighters, they discovered what often seemed elusive elsewhere: encouragement, community, and the ever-accepting nature of Georgia Douglas Johnson herself."<sup>28</sup> Johnson's life is a true example of the successful results of a strong community. Her initial connections with key figures such as Alain Locke and Jean Toomer enabled her to build a network that helped her to stay in the literary loop, successfully manage weekly literary gatherings, and mentor young aspiring writers.

Johnson's desire to build community not only existed within her overseeing of the salons, but it can also be seen through her leadership numerous local and national organizations. Regular participation in the Saturday-Nighters declined during the late 1920s, but Johnson's efforts to build community only progressed. Despite the harsh effects of the Great Depression, Johnson organized her own correspondence club called "One World" in 1930 and actively participated in the Washington Social Letter Club until 1965.<sup>29</sup> Johnson's involvement in such organizations demonstrates her dedication to community building even in the through written communication.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Legesse Tessema, Biographical Sketch, March 1994, Georgia Douglas Johnson Papers.

Unlike many other leaders who are often spotlighted and showcased because of their self-importance, Johnson may have been overshadowed because of her commitment to the community and her ability to blend in within a group. Her group-thinking mentality helped to boost self-esteems, enhance careers, and change many lives. In a time when white patronage and exploitation was more common, Johnson served as a mentor to her fellow African American artists and took a sincere interest in their professional and personal growth. Johnson's involvement within Washington's Black enriching community, shows that culture cannot be produced individually. The title of this chapter, "It Takes Three to Tango" communicates that any progressive movement requires a stable and solid network. The constant shifting and movement among the trio (Locke, Toomer, and Johnson) helped to produce culture; but without a doubt, Georgia Douglas Johnson had the last dance.



## Chapter 4

### **An Informal Community: Exploring the Composition of Georgia Douglas Johnson's Literary Salons**

#### Introduction

As shown in chapter one, collective organization was historically a very common custom within the Black community. The intense racial climate of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries made everyday activities such as shopping or eating lunch trying experiences; even for the capital's most prominent Black leaders. Black Washingtonians reacted to this discrimination by "turning to themselves for the creation of cultural institutions".<sup>1</sup> Blacks in Washington's U Street and Strivers Section Districts organized their own city within a city and invested in their own businesses and entertainment venues. Despite their success, the concept of group organizing occurred long before the creation of U Street and Striver's Row. As early as the eighteenth century, records have shown ways in which free Blacks across the United States responded collectively to the harsh discriminatory conditions they faced by forming various types of groups and societies.

Known to be "the first organized society in Negro life," the Philadelphia beneficial society was formed in 1787.<sup>2</sup> Unlike Georgia Douglas Johnson's salon, this first society, like many of the other initial organizations, was not dedicated to literary purposes. Many of the first groups focused on developing anti-slavery agendas, religious

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<sup>1</sup> Jacqueline M. Moore. *Leading the Race: The Transformation of the Black Elite in the Nation's Capital, 1880-1920*, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999) pg. 52.

<sup>2</sup> Dorothy B. Porter, "The Organized Educational Activities of Negro Literary Societies, 1828-1846" *The Journal of Negro Education*, Vol. 5 no. 4 (Oct., 1936), 555

consciousness, temperance, and social values. After organizing around these subjects, free Negroes mainly in Northern cities realized that mental and moral improvement was equally important. As a result of this awareness, they then formed literary organizations which were often described as reading-room and debating societies. The main purpose for forming literary institutions was to provide educational development. Libraries and reading rooms helped to spread to make reading enjoyable stimulating. Those who sought to advance their literary careers were exposed to audiences and literary critics who acted as channels of publication for their literary productions. Literary societies served as training grounds where future orators and leaders could gain experience by means of debates.<sup>3</sup> The development of literary societies allowed Blacks to gain something that no one could physically take away; knowledge. Having access to educational resources and exposure to intellectual conversation enabled free Blacks to create the balance that was needed to survive in times of racial hostility and injustice.

Dorothy Porter's "The Organized Educational Activities of Negro Literary Societies, 1828-1846" acknowledges the emergence of free Negro organizations between the 1830 and 1840 and specifically identifies the establishment of literary groups throughout northern areas within the United States. According to Porter's research, free Negroes in Philadelphia instituted a lead in the formation of literary societies. Although Philadelphia was historically the most active and popular location, other cities like Washington, D.C. were also recognized for their interest in literary development. Porter includes the following organizations in her list of Washington's literary organizations: The Debating Society, created before 1837; The Literary Society, also created prior to

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. pg. 557

1837; and The Washington Conventional Society, which was organized in 1834. Unlike the more complete documentations of literary society activity in New York, Philadelphia, and Massachusetts, records of organizations in the border cities of Baltimore and Washington, D.C. were fragmented and scattered. Because both states were considered slave territory, the formation of literary organizations was not as achievable or as favorable. The 6,200 freedmen within Washington during 1837 felt that greater concern should be placed on economics and efforts to free slaves.

Many of Washington's early literary societies gained a reputation for their aristocratic and exclusive ways. Calvin Chase, a columnist of Washington's African American newspaper, *The Bee*, expressed his sentiments about the elitist literary circles. "The Monday Night Literary is a cast organization...there is more intelligence excluded than there is in the association...there are few holding clerkships who belong."<sup>4</sup> It was not until the formation of the Bethel Literary and Historical Society in 1881 that Washington's Black intelligentsia began to get over their discriminatory ways and sincerely focus on literary development. Bishop Payne of the Metropolitan Methodist Episcopal Church held these gatherings, explored literature and philosophy, and most significantly, "supplied the principal forum for enlightened discussion of race problems."<sup>5</sup> Beginning with prejudiced intentions, Washington's Black literary circles gradually became more inclusive and implemented critical dialogues on race on class into their conversations. Although very different in structure and organization, Bethel Literary

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<sup>4</sup> Calvin Chase, *Bee*, 10 May 1884.

<sup>5</sup> Constance McLaughlin Green, "Colored Washington" in *Washington: A History of the Capital 1800-1950*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1962) pg. 186.

Society was probably one of the only early Black Washingtonian organizations that helped to set the stage for Johnson's salons to follow.

The first instances of organized literary production within Washington are valuable to highlight not only because they helped to enlighten and educate, but also because they gave the Negro an opportunity to take advantage of leisure time. The adjustment to urban life along with the burdens of constant race prejudice and limitations made setting aside leisure time a very difficult task. When they were not fighting for freedom or battling against injustice, Blacks sought out to achieve effective organization and control of their spare time.

Those who have studied seriously the social life of Negroes, realize something of a significant role which pleasure and relaxation play among them. Exhibiting strong artistic traits of temperament, the Negro tends to achieve his most creative forms of expression in free spontaneous activity.<sup>6</sup>

The conscious decision to meet in literary groups during limited leisure time exhibits the great interest and passion that Blacks had for education. A proper assessment of literary institutions cannot be achieved without considering choice. Even in the mist of racial turmoil, Blacks voluntarily chose to form these types of educational organizations. As a result of this collective choice, groups like Georgia Douglass Johnson's salons that operated inside the home allowed its members to relax and learn at the same time; creating a comfortable space where they could express themselves freely.

Similar to some of the earlier groups throughout D.C. and Baltimore, Georgia Johnson's Saturday-night literary salons possessed very little evidence and little had been discovered about the internal particulars of the organization. The informal nature of the

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<sup>6</sup> William Henry Jones, *Recreation and Amusement Among Negroes in Washington, D.C.: A Sociological Analysis of the Negro in an Urban Environment*, (Westport Connecticut: Negro Universities Press, 1927) pg. 25.

salon has contributed to the lack of records and documentation left behind. Unlike the formal literary institutions that wrote constitutions, by-laws, and took formal minutes during meetings, Johnson's salons were loosely structured seemed to abide by no strict procedures. Informal types of recreation were usually carried on for the most part in face-to-face or direct contact groups, and organized chiefly on the basis of suggestion, or other non-rational forms of interaction. Many instances of informal association involved inconsistent membership and sometimes appeared to be superficial.

“This transitory character of the membership of such groups can be accounted for in terms of their lack of definite organization. They are, however, natural groupings which organize themselves about a few strong personalities. They are prevalent in every community, and take the form of cliques, social sets, rings, etc.”<sup>7</sup>

The existence of such informal institutions can result in speculation. Because there were no defined guidelines, scholars like me are left to carefully gather information from sources, piece things together, and create a convincing narrative. In this sense, informality within literary institutions may seem like a weakness; however, there are many positive outlooks to consider.

As far as we know, participants were not bound to any strict guidelines; therefore, their active participation exhibited a sincere dedication and appreciation for Johnson and the salons. Though some correspondence and documentation refers Johnson's salons to Sunday nights rather than Saturday nights, it is evident that these gatherings mainly took place during the weekends. “In the living room of her S Street house behind the flourishing rose bushes, a freewheeling jumble of the gifted, famous, and odd came

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid pg. 87.

together on Saturday nights.”<sup>8</sup> The initial trio Alain Locke, Jean Toomer, and Georgia Douglas Johnson discussed in the previous chapter eventually matured into a houseful.

There were poets Warring Cuney, Mae Miller, Sterling Brown, Angelina Grimke, and Albert Rice. There were the artists Richard Bruce Nugent and Mae Howard Jackson...Langston Hughes used to bring Vachel Lindsay; Edna St. Vincent Millay and Walso Frank came because of Toomer; James Weldon Johnson and W.E.B. DuBois enjoyed their senior sage role there; occasionally, Countee Cullen and, more often, the suave Eric Walrond accompanied Locke. Rebecca West came once to encourage Georgia Johnson’s poetry.<sup>9</sup>

Johnson’s Saturday Nighters became so popular that she began to identify her home as the “Half-way House.” Elizabeth McHenry articulates, “It served as a refuge from the interracial hostility that marked the post-World War I landscape, the heady chaos of New York City’s Harlem, and the elaborate social and cultural traditions of “colored Washington.”<sup>10</sup> Johnson’s home served many purposes. Not only did it promote literacy and intellectual exchange, but it also provided a safe space for aspiring scholars and artists to free themselves from the racial tension and intimidation of the outside world.

Unlike Johnson’s salons, the early formal literary societies contained structured formats and provided a variety of lecture topics in literature as well as science. Clarence Taylor’s description of Brooklyn Literary Union, a literary organization that was formed in 1866 in New York, sheds insight into what may have taken place in Washington’s earlier formal literary gatherings. Based on Taylor’s depiction, Black literary societies in the nineteenth century maintained a high degree of orderliness, refinement, and sophistication. Like many other organizations, the Brooklyn Literary Union held scheduled meetings on the first and third Tuesday of each month from eight to ten in the

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<sup>8</sup> David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981) pg. 127.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002) pg. 252.

evening. Similar to the Washington's Bethel Literary Society in D.C., The Brooklyn Literary Union's meetings followed the general protocol for formal business meetings and involved the reading and sharing of literary works.<sup>11</sup> While giving lectures, reading papers, and engaging in debates or general business, each speaker was required to adhere to the following procedures:

- “1. No paper read before the Union shall exceed twenty minutes, except by special vote.
2. In stated debates there shall be four disputants, each of whom shall be limited to ten minutes and there shall be no transfer to time.
3. All papers and stated debates shall be followed by general discussion, which shall not exceed forty-five minutes: and stated debates shall be decided in the affirmative or negative by vote of the Union”.<sup>12</sup>

Participating rhetoricians and debaters were expected to articulate and express their points in the same meticulous manner that the meetings were organized. Those who could not read were encouraged to learn and literate Blacks in the group were challenged to expand their minds and read further.

Located in New York and not Washington; the Brooklyn Literary Union's format was common within Black literary groups throughout America's northern cities. Black literary organizations that preceded the twentieth century helped to set the stage for other informal organizations like Georgia Douglass Johnson's salons to develop. Although informal and held within her home, her salons possessed many fundamental traditions that derived from Washington's first Black literary institutions. Evidence of such literary leisure interest in D.C. during the nineteenth century dispels the city's reputation for

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<sup>11</sup> Clarence Taylor, *The Black Churches of Brooklyn*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) pgs. 28-29.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* pg. 29

lacking Black literary culture and production and shows literary activity well before emancipation. Washington's Black elite had made a name for themselves by exposing their race to fine arts with their formation of popular musical and artistic organizations; but it was the city's Black literary institutions that ultimately made the difference.

“The black elite recognized literary societies as important cultural institutions. They also realized that discussion of issues of importance to the race could be made more palatable to white society if it were conducted under the guise of a genteel literary or debating society...The black literary societies of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were the first cultural organizations to address the issue of race pride and solidarity directly.”<sup>13</sup>

The formation of literary societies assisted in the development and advancement of their race as a whole. Within a comfortable literary space Blacks felt free to discuss what W.E.B. Dubois referred to as “the race problem” of the twentieth century. The opportunity to speak openly and freely about issues that faced the Black community brought about understanding and unity. Many of the successes within the community were results of the strides and efforts that were initially developed in modest literary gatherings. Improving Negro education as a whole, literary organizations were often the background for the start of schools. Regardless how many members they had or how long they lasted, these organizations “were supporters of educative life among Negroes in a day when there were few formal instruments of education in existence for their use.”<sup>14</sup> Therefore, a close investigation of Georgia Johnson's salons between 1921 and 1928 not only writes Washington, D.C. into the New Negro Renaissance narrative, but also shows how Black educational societies have evolved over time.

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<sup>13</sup> Jacqueline M. Moore. *Leading the Race: The Transformation of the Black Elite in the Nation's Capital, 1880-1920*, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999) pg. 65

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* Pg. 576



There were many other literary groups in D.C. to investigate, but Johnson's independent spearheading of the Saturday-Nighters and the organization's informal in-house setting were two main aspects that demanded my attention. One of the major goals of this study is to capture the essence of Black life in D.C. during the New Negro Renaissance. In the passage below, William Jones articulates that informal settings result in the most genuine types of recreation. Essentially, the only way to truly gauge the spirit of D.C.'s Negro community is to examine informal interaction.

“The major portion of the amusement life of the Negro population in Washington, as is true of every other racial group is carried on through the medium of the more informal aspects of association. In fact, these are the most genuine forms of play because they involve participation on the part of the individual. He is not, in such instances, a mere *spectator*, but a *participator*.”<sup>15</sup>

Studying informal settings like Johnson's home enables one to look at the real individual rather than the role that that person may have played or portrayed. In intimate settings like the home where there were no strict formalities, literary group members were allowed to be themselves without having to worry about putting on airs or subscribing to conventional rules. As the passage states, those who were involved with Johnson's salons exhibited a genuine interest in literature because they were participators and not mere spectators. At their own will, they gathered on Saturday nights at Johnson's home, enjoyed social interaction, and actively engaged in meaningful discussions.

The loose structure of Johnson's salons categorizes them as informal, but the fact that they were held in her home distinguishes them from other literary societies and makes them especially unique institutions. Chapter one aimed to cover the social and

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<sup>15</sup> William Henry Jones, *Recreation and Amusement Among Negroes in Washington, D.C.: A Sociological Analysis of the Negro in an Urban Environment*, (Westport Connecticut: Negro Universities Press, 1927) pg. 87.

external dynamics that surrounded Johnson's N.W. D.C. home, but a symbolic analysis of her home has not been accomplished. Because Johnson's salons were held in-house, the connotation of home has dual meanings. Not only is home the physical residence of the Johnson family, but it is also the place where salon attendees felt welcomed and "at home" during their literary gatherings. William Henry Jones' explanation acknowledges the symbolic nature of home and recognizes that literary groups like Georgia Johnson's salons are examples of ideal centers of informal recreation.

"It symbolizes relaxation and spontaneity. It is the one place where the individual can shake off his formality, free himself, more or less, from conventionality and become natural. This release from the tension required in adjusting oneself to formal and social life, and the return to free spontaneous behavior, is what makes the home the most unique recreational agency in society."<sup>16</sup>

Conducting a study on informal institutions requires one to equally consider positive and negative consequences. Informal institutions may tend to leave little physical evidence behind, but physical evidence does not make or break the narrative. An investigation of an informal literary society should not be conducted in an informal manner. A formal and comprehensive analysis of the institutions' environment, characteristics, and internal makeup can make the narrative complete.

Joellen El Bashir, the Curator of Manuscripts at the Moorland Spingarn Research Center at Howard University reflected on her experience when she and another curator attempted to recover the remains in Georgia Douglass Johnson's dug-out 1461 N.W, Washington, D.C. home. Most of the materials concerning the salons were destroyed; however, one attendance sheet was found and archived in Johnson's manuscripts. With no indication of date or time, the list of attendees was ordered in the following manner:

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid. pg. 101.

“Mollie Gibson Brewer- French teacher, Grant Lucas, Effie Lee Newsome, Bruce Nugent, Rebekah West, Wright Cuney, E.C. Williams, B.K. Bruce, Glen Carrington, Jessie Fauset, Adella Parks, Frank Horne, and Zora Neale Hurston.”<sup>17</sup> On the surface, this list may seem insignificant, but this list of thirteen attendees has essentially enabled me to find the missing pieces to the puzzle. This list is by far the most critical remaining article because it prepared me to gather information on those who experienced Johnson’s salon’s first-hand. A close look at the characteristics and literary achievements of various individuals within the group is just as convincing and valuable as written documents and records.

It is unnecessary to extensively cover each individual listed; therefore, the goals of the study and availability of information on each participant call for an examination of those individuals on the list who have contributed significantly to Johnson’s salons. This chapter will focus on several of the thirteen listed Saturday-Nighter attendees. The salon participant’s unique literary contributions, varying personalities, lifestyles, and roles all create an encompassing representation of Georgia Johnson’s literary salons. Through brief explorations of each selected participant, I am able to provide insight into the internal aspects of the salons and compensate for the lack of available documents and records. Previous sections have addressed the *when* and the *where* by inspecting the Greater U Street community and identifying the twenties as the salon’s era; however, this section aims to identify the *who* and the *what*. Not only will this section identify individuals who participated in Johnson’s salon, it will also explain what those persons contributed. Answers to all of these questions ultimately lead to the conclusion of the study.

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<sup>17</sup> Georgia Douglas Johnson Papers Box 162-1 Folder 4; Manuscript Division, MSRC, Howard University.

Salon Members: Bruce Nugent, Jessie Fauset, and E.C. Williams

The informal nature of Johnson's salons created a relaxed environment and compelled participants to let their guards down and express themselves freely. Within this space, personalities flourished and identities developed. Maria Balshaw's *Looking for Harlem* articulated that even though information concerning the salons may have appeared ambiguous; it was however, clear that these gatherings brought about an opportunity for attendees to reveal their lifestyles with certainty.

“The informality of these meetings means that our subsequent knowledge of them comes from letters and autobiographical accounts and is inevitably sketchy and speculative, but it is clear that as well as fostering literary exchange this space functioned as a meeting place for writers whose homosexuality was as certain as the closeted nature of it.”<sup>18</sup>

One of the writers that Balshaw alluded to was Richard Bruce Nugent. Nugent, one of Johnson's most impressive attendees, especially appreciated this unrestricted space because it allowed him to openly embrace his homosexuality. Nugent's modest-sized publication record is not his most impressive attribute. Nonetheless, the content of his material and his inimitable personality distinguished him from the rest of the New Negro Renaissance figures.

Nugent was the first African American to write from a “self-declared homosexual perspective.”<sup>19</sup> Unlike many of the other artists who only focused on one area of creativity, Nugent's rare talent and versatility enabled him to be well a versed artist, writer, and raconteur. At the tender age of nineteen, Nugent published his first poem “Shadow” in *Opportunity* in 1925 and his first published work of art appeared on the

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<sup>18</sup> Maria Balshaw, *Looking for Harlem: Urban Aesthetics in African American Literature*, (London: Pluto Press, 2000) pg. 73.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas H. Wirth, *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance: Selections From The Work of Richard Bruce Nugent*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002) pg. 1.

cover of *Opportunity* in 1926. Nugent's youthfulness did not cause him to naively follow conventional themes and trends. Instead, Nugent was categorized with cutting edge writers like Jean Toomer and noted for his lack of focus on race. In his essay, "Langston Hughes and Approaches to Modernism" Arnold Rampersad posed "Is it significant that Toomer and Nugent, the most modernist of the black writers, were also probably the least racial either personally or in their writing?"<sup>20</sup> Rather than focusing on prejudice and racial uplift, Nugent chose to center his writing on self-assured characters that were not afraid to openly embrace their homosexuality. Some of Nugent's most notable works in which he explored same-sex relationships included "Sahdji" a prose piece first published in *The New Negro* edited by Alain Locke in 1925; "Smoke, Lillies and Jade" published in the collaborative young New Negro journal "FIRE!!" in 1926; and "Geisha Man" later excerpted in Thomas Wirth's book *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance*. The rise in interest in gay black male literature has recently brought much attention to his work.

Richard Bruce Nugent was born in Washington, D.C., on 2 July 1906. His mother Pauline Minerva Bruce descended Scottish and Native American ancestry, thus passing on to her a very light-skinned complexion. The Bruces had been free since the early eighteenth century. Pauline Bruce married the good-looking but fairly darker complexioned Richard Henry Nugent Jr. and caused her family concern because of his skin tone and far removed bloodline. Because of their upper middle class background and their membership to Washington's black aristocracy, it was common for them to invite the most affluent people of arts into their home. Bruce's parents not only exposed him and his brother to influential figures in D.C., but they also exposed their sons to regular

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<sup>20</sup> Amritjit Singh, *The Harlem Renaissance Evaluations*, (New York:Garland Publishing, Inc. 1989) pg. 57.

trips to Black theater shows, and provided them with access to an extensive library of books. Bruce was educated at the famous Dunbar High School and had the opportunity to be taught by prominent individuals like Angelina Grimké. Bruce Nugent's well-informed upbringing and wide-ranging experiences clearly contributed to his self-assurance and ability embrace his eccentricity.

Before moving to Harlem with his friend Langston Hughes in 1925, Nugent regularly attended Georgia Douglass Johnson's literary gatherings. Nugent was only a teenager at the time of his participation, but his wisdom and intuition compensated for his young age and naivety. "To Georgia Douglas Johnson, Nugent was more than just another habitu   of her salon. She saw in him a kindred spirit—a young, eccentric genius struggling for recognition—and took him under her wing."<sup>21</sup> Johnson and Nugent built such a rapport with one another they collaborated on a short play called *Paupaulekejo*, which was later performed in one Washington's theaters in late 1926. Like many others Johnson was drawn to Nugent's striking personality.

He was a brilliant conversationalist, specializing in charm, and shock. A true bohemian, he often had no place to sleep. Although his demeanor was not all effeminate, in conversation he expressed a flagrantly ambiguous sexuality and made no secret of his erotic interest in men.<sup>22</sup>

Nugent's position as an openly gay black male youth during a time when homosexual relationships were closeted and rarely acknowledged publicly is significant when considering the atmosphere at Georgia Johnson's Saturday Night salons. Johnson's gatherings not only gave Bruce an opportunity to build a professional network, but they

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid. pg. 3.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. pg. 6

also led him to gain valuable guidance from Georgia Johnson and a priceless friendship with individuals like Langston Hughes.

An undated manuscript included in Thomas Wirth's *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance* provides a memoir written by Nugent describing his first encounter with Langston Hughes. After traveling to Africa and Paris, Hughes had returned to Washington to live with his mother in D.C. Nugent attended Johnson's literary gathering on a Friday night unaware that he would meet one of the most legendary figures of the New Negro Renaissance.

That evening there was an instant rapport between us, and when we decided to leave at the same time, he walked me down S Street to Thirteenth (where I was living with my grandmother), where we turned around, and I walked him back up S Street to near Seventeenth (where he was staying at his mother's), only to realize that were in the middle of a thought and exchange was still not finished, so we walked back to my house, then to his, and so on through the night. It was a preview of how our relationship was to be.<sup>23</sup>

The summer night in 1925 described in Nugent's manuscript is only a precursor to the many experiences that Langston and Nugent shared. This passage again weakens the stereotype that literary production in D.C. did not exist during the twenties. Not only did they make unforgettable memories while attending plays, theatres, and vaudevilles together, but during one of their late night walks in D.C., they also made professional milestones when they collectively developed the idea to create an "art quarterly" specifically dedicated to younger Black artists. Together, Hughes and Nugent teamed up with other great minds like Wallace Thurman, Aaron Douglas, Zora Neale Hurston, Gwendolyn Bennett, and John P. Davis to create the uncensored and unconventional

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid. pg. 5

publication *FIRE!!! in 1926*. No one knew that a casual gathering at Georgia Johnson's home in D.C. would have sparked such a fortuitous relationship.

Nugent's friendship with Hughes was strong, but the bond between him and Georgia Johnson was of a different type. Both Hughes and Nugent were categorized within the younger generation of "New Negroes," only four years apart in age, and lived similar unsteady lifestyles; however Johnson was considerably older and lived a stable lifestyle. Despite their differences, the two immediately formed a close relationship. Even scholars like David Levering Lewis in *When Harlem Was in Vogue* acknowledged the special relationship between Nugent and Johnson. "Georgia Douglas Johnson believed in Nugent's promise and mothered his neuroses when he returned to Washington in 1924."<sup>24</sup> The same welcoming and warm atmosphere that Johnson provided within her literary gatherings, was the same nature of her friendship with Nugent. Correspondence between Johnson and Nugent illustrates the extent of their companionship. Nugent turns to Johnson for professional advice and criticism and shares with her his lowest and highest points of Harlem life. In addition to his usual address to Johnson with her full name, Nugent's letters stood out because he was not so consumed and caught up in the glitz of Harlem that he forgot about the his place of origin.

Bruce often mentioned the Saturday night literary salons and often ended his letters with "Regards to the Circle."<sup>25</sup> Nugent's references to the "circle" showed his appreciation for Johnson and the support network that was provided in her home. In the

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<sup>24</sup> David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1981) pg. 196

<sup>25</sup> Georgia Douglass Johnson Papers Box 162-1 Folder 46; Manuscript Division, MRSC, Howard University.



following undated letter, Nugent displayed his witty personality and showed his regard towards Johnson and the “circle” in several ways.

Please do not be surprised when you receive this. I wrote you a most marvelous letter from New Bedford, describing the place. A letter which you apparently placed in your file of poems and promptly lost, serving tea to the remnants of the old and plantlings of the new “circle.” Yes, I am afraid that my greatest work of literature, genius, beauty, psychology, and ego, was laid away so that you (and the circle) could eat delightful fish with your fingers. Oh those fish. Or may hope that it was laid on your shelf of poems, still wet from the fingers of budding geniuses, while you searched for your glasses, which after perched on the end of your nose, failed even to disclose...<sup>26</sup>

While writing from New York, Nugent recalled the comfortable gatherings that he once participated in while living in Washington. In a sarcastic manner, Nugent mentioned a letter that he had previously written to Johnson and assumed that it had been misplaced due to her engagement with the salon members. Nugent described a typical night at Johnson’s salons and reminisced about the gathering’s delightful refreshments. Not only did he muse over the tea and fish, but he also he also called attention to the “budding geniuses” who were a part of the “circle.” His identification of them as geniuses showed that he recognized the group’s brilliance and potential. Furthermore, Nugent’s portrayal of Johnson and her glasses displayed his familiarity with her habits and idiosyncrasies. Although physically distanced and displaced from the salons, Nugent’s correspondence with Johnson served as an outlet where he could look back on old times and still like a part of the group. The overall mood of this letter definitely shows that he missed being there.

The introductory portion of Nugent’s letter to Johnson is a little less personal. Without directly asking about the salon members, he indirectly inquired about them by

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

creating a typical scenario and describing what most likely occurred during their meetings. As the letter continued, Nugent became more personal. Bruce knew that it would be long before he would be able to come to Washington. He enjoyed being in New York but he recognized that the lifestyle of the struggling artist could be quite challenging. “God only knows when I will get to D.C. In New York here I am truly leading the life of a fiction artist. Going to all the amusements, cabarets, parties, dinners etc; and starving quite frequently. Seriously. I don’t mind starving tho, because after all one’s biography should be interesting and entertaining...”<sup>27</sup> Nugent understood that being an artist in the city required sacrifice. This passage expressed his unique personality and his ability to bring out positive aspects in negative situations. He saw his challenging experiences and hardships as events that helped to build character and make his life story all the more dramatic and exciting.

Towards the beginning of the letter Nugent introduced Johnson as a salon hostess, but as the letter progressed he exposed other ways in which Johnson contributed to his life. The section below establishes somewhat of a mother/son relationship between Johnson and Nugent. In addition to providing Nugent with a literary support circle, Johnson also took him in and treated him as if he were a child of her own.

When you write please don’t scold. Don’t tell me I should put aside my meager pennies (when I have them) and allot myself only so much a day, and that for food. I know I should but at least I am living a life entirely on my own. I refuse to be the coward most people are and so as I am told (unless I want to) merely so that if I fail I can say “now see I this what you told me to. If I had done as I wanted to do I would have achieved something.” No! Should I fail and I won’t and will be forced to say “Well my own fault. But I did have a good time finding it out.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Georgia Douglas Johnson’s Papers Box 2 Folder 46; Manuscript Division, MSRC, Howard University: Bruce Nugent to Georgia Douglas Johnson, Unknown Date.

As if he were speaking with his mother or a guardian Nugent asks for Johnson to refrain from scolding and reprimanding him. He knew that Johnson would be concerned with his bad eating habits and lack of stability. In so many words, Nugent says “don’t worry, I’ll be fine;” a common statement that is expressed to a distressed parent. This segment revealed his stubborn personality and his capacity to think independently regardless of what others told him. Despite his bull-headedness, this passage shows that even in the mist of Harlem’s fast-paced living and many amusements, Nugent recognized without the foundation that was planted in him by Johnson and other members Washington’s literary circle, he could not have survived.

Another capacity of Johnson that was showcased within this note was Johnson’s professional role. After discussing his personal life and daily struggles, Nugent shared news about his professional endeavors and recent literary collaborations. The project idea that he and Langston Hughes conceptualized while roaming the streets of D.C. had come to reality.

The young ‘Niggerati’ are getting out a folio named ‘FIRE’ Editors: Langston Hughes-Zora Neale Hurston-Wallace Thurman, John Davis-Gwendolyn Bennett-Aaron Douglas -Bruce Nugent. Incidentally it will probably carry the first installment of a novellitt by Bruce Nugent. Also incidently—Knopps has asked me to let him see it and Boni has done like wise. Nothing may come of it, but I’m afraid it will. I have met most of the people you told me to meet... I saw Mrs. Carson and Carrol when they were here. TellClark I’m very sorry I didn’t see him. Received a letter from Miss Baner... Wish you could get us a few subscriptions to ‘FIRE’ as we are in it heart and soul and want it to float. Is there anything new on the Rialto? <sup>29</sup>

Nugent expressed his excitement about his partnership with other young New Negro artists and asked for Johnson’s support. The statement, “I have met most of the people

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

you told me to meet” clearly exhibits Johnson’s professional agency. Johnson’s publication record and connections with contacts in New York and around the world made her very influential within the literary community. Her service as the main Black literary agent in D.C. enabled her to refer Nugent to important contacts in New York who could help him to further his career. Despite age differences, Johnson had a lot in common with Nugent especially when considering that she had experienced what it felt like to be new to a town and without a support network. Her reaching out to Nugent was very similar to the way in which Alain Locke guided her when she initially moved to D.C. in 1910.

The themes that have been broken apart and highlighted within this letter occur all throughout Johnson and Nugent’s correspondence. This single letter demonstrated Johnson’s ability to wear many hats at once. Nugent’s relationship with Johnson provoked her to reveal various personas and act as salon hostess, a mother figure, and a professional mentor. His unique personality, openly expressed homosexuality, and true presentation of himself drew Johnson to have the same sense of freedom. Johnson served Nugent in many ways, but their investment to one another was reciprocal. Bruce Nugent provided Johnson with a youthful, rich, and brilliant presence that enabled her to stay abreast with new ideas and concepts and stay connected with younger members of Renaissance. When considering why Nugent is key figure in Johnson’s salons, the content of his work stands out more than the amount of work that he produced. The city that had been reduced to Black elite pretentiousness and criticized for being unfavorable of literary productivity, was in many ways, in fact, ahead of the literary haven “Harlem” because Washington’s Saturday-night literary salons raised the first Black male writer to

ever that write from a candidly homosexual point of view. Possibly in the twenties, the significance of Nugent's contributions were not celebrated; nonetheless, when thinking them in this day in age, it is obvious that he was a pioneer of literary growth and production, not only in D.C., but within African American literature as a whole.

Unlike many institutions in which members are accepted on the basis of their commonalities, it seemed as if Johnson and her salon attendees appreciated those who were not afraid to be individuals. Every person who participated in the Saturday-Night literary salons brought something different and distinct to the table. Bruce Nugent's flamboyant character, open sexual orientation, and remarkable talent made him a key figure in Johnson's gatherings even when he participated in them from a distance.

Whereas Bruce's personal style may have stuck out the most, other participants possessed their own unique qualities and served in special roles that helped to further develop Johnson's salons. Jessie Fauset is another distinctive figure that was listed as one Johnson's salon attendees. Fauset published many works and contributed many trends to Black literature, but her publication history is exclusively not the factor that made her presence so critical within Johnson's Saturday-Nighters.

For the purposes of this study, it is important to shed light upon Fauset's role as the literary editor of the prominent Negro journal *Crisis*. Fauset's participation in Georgia Johnson's salons exhibited her interest and confidence in Washingtonian writers. The reputation and power that she acquired while serving as the literary editor of *Crisis* from November of 1919 to May of 1926 allowed her the opportunity to reach out to young aspiring writers who chose to venture beyond conventional barriers that were set for African American writers. Racial uplift continued to be major theme during the Black

Renaissance; however, many New Negro artists felt that there was no longer a need to be “overassertive and over-appealing”<sup>30</sup> They believed that they should not only be recognized on the basis of their race, but that their overall contributions to the world of art should be celebrated and acknowledged. Through her editorship at *The Crisis*, Jessie Fauset was able to assist such artists. In *The Big Sea* Langston Hughes acknowledged Fauset’s support of writers like himself who embraced less limited visions for Black artists.

Jessie Fauset at *The Crisis*, Charles Johnson at *Opportunity*, and Alain Locke in Washington, were the three people who midwived the so-called New Negro literature into being. Kind and critical-but not too critical for the young--they nursed us along until our books were born.<sup>31</sup>

Such recognition was appropriate when considering the numerous times that Fauset put herself out on a limb in order to give young Negro artists and writers a chance to develop their careers. Hughes’ reference to Fauset as the midwife of New Negro literature illustrated the way in which she embraced artists, many of which attended Georgia Johnson’s salons, under her wing and helped give birth to their budding careers.

Fauset’s editorship at *The Crisis* was only one of her many accomplishments. Jessie Redmond Fauset was born on April 26, 1882 to Reverend Redmon Fauset, an African Methodist Episcopal Church minister and Anna Seamon who died when Jessie was young. The Fauset family had been free since the eighteenth century and had obtained a fairly privileged status within the Philadelphia community. Her father’s reputable character, encouragement, and support led her to be the first black woman to be elected into Phi Beta Kappa and to graduate from Cornell University in 1905. After

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<sup>30</sup> Alain Locke, *A Negro Youth Speaks The New Negro* (New York: Atheneum 1969), pg. 48.

<sup>31</sup> Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea* (New York: Hill and Wang ,1963) pg. 218.

graduating, Fauset moved to Washington D.C. and taught at the prestigious M Street High School (later Dunbar High School) for fourteen years. During that time, she began to publish articles in NAACP's *Crisis*. Fauset taught at M Street until W.E.B. Dubois offered her a literary editor position with the publication and convinced her to move to New York in 1919.<sup>32</sup>

During her time at *The Crisis*, Fauset served in many capacities. In addition to writing biographies and articles on current events for *Crisis* she broadened the African American cannon and contributed four major works: *There is Confusion* (1924), *Plum Bun* (1929), *The Chinaberry Tree* (1931), and *Comedy, American Style* (1933). Fauset's influence and authority within *The Crisis* permitted her to offer young aspiring New Negro Renaissance writers an opportunity to showcase their work. Fauset was responsible for choosing and placing the journal's poetry and fiction. This duty enabled her to give budding artists a chance to be featured in one of the most reputable African American publications in history. Despite her outreach towards rather liberal and radical artists, Fauset's own novels and poetry were quite conservative.

She pictured structured and elite black communities, modeled after old Philadelphia, and She portrayed black professionals—industrious physicians, teachers, engineers, and businessmen and women. She wrote of people who live on the borderline of two races and who flirt with the idea of passing. These were not the concerns of many younger writers who valued Fauset nonetheless.<sup>33</sup>

Whereas other writers centered their work on the Black masses and explored stereotypical Black characters and plots that would be more acceptable to white audiences, Fauset's work gained a reputation for focusing on the "Americanness" of Black

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<sup>32</sup> Loraine Elena Roses, *Harlem Renaissance and Beyond: Literary Biographies of 100 Black Women Writers 1900-1945*, (Boston: G.K. Hall & CO., 1990) pgs. 102-105

<sup>33</sup> Abby Arthur Johnson, *Propoganda & Aesthetics: The Literary Politics of Afro-American Magazines in the Twentieth Centuries*, (Amerherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1979) pg. 43.

middle class professionals.<sup>34</sup> Her work failed to include scenes from the bars or cabarets, fights or racial uprisings and no wretched poverty. Fauset's position subjected her to much criticism and objection. Nonetheless, her significance within the advancement of twentieth century literature cannot be denied.

It is clear that Fauset's social viewpoint differed from her novices; however, her ability to appreciate and support younger artists and their encompassing images of Black life was truly valuable. Fauset's Black upper-middle class background coupled with her appreciation for hopeful revolutionary writers both lead one to assume that she blended in well with members of Georgia Johnson's fairly affluent and talented Washingtonian literary circle. It can be easily suspected that Jessie Fauset's efforts and participation in the gatherings resulted in the frequent appearance of Georgia Johnson and her salon member's work in *The Crisis*. Although many of the Saturday-Night salon participants have not been traced through Johnson's manuscripts, the single attendee list left behind indicated Fauset's connection with Georgia Johnson and her salon members.

Sondra Wilson's compilation of literary works called *The Crisis Reader* includes four out of the thirteen participants present on that particular night. Not only were Fauset's works included in the collection, essays, short stories, poems by Georgia Douglass Johnson, Effie Lee Newsome, and Frank Horne were also featured.

Fauset cannot be given all of the credit for connecting Johnson and her salon attendees with publication opportunities; but her role is essential to the narrative when considering her impressive writing style, high-rank within the literary industry, and

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<sup>34</sup> George Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*, "The Crisis and the Nation's Conscience" (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995) pg. 152.



constant support of young promising artists. Fauset's influence and prominence is often overshadowed by the contributions of the *The Crisis*' dominating figure W.E.B. Dubois. However, many scholars have made efforts to acknowledge her importance. "The establishment of *The Crisis* as a unique and powerful voice for Black people from 1910 on was Dubois' doing. The credit for the magazine's important role in Black American literature must go primarily to Jessie Fauset."<sup>35</sup>

Scholar Carolyn Sylvander insists that it is time to give Fauset the credit that she deserves.

Now it is time to weigh all the evidence of the office correspondence, autobiography, personal letters, and *The Crisis* pages, and to say that it was Jessie Redmon Fauset who for ten years discovered, nurtured, encouraged, and published the writers who gave new birth to Black American literature.<sup>36</sup>

Fauset's name listed on the attendance sheet of one of Georgia Johnson's literary gatherings is a prime example of the correspondence and evidence that Sylvander mentions in the passage above. Johnson and her literary salon members served as Fauset's number one clientele. Fauset's presence at Johnson's salons allowed her to make literary transactions with writers who would eventually change the face of African American literature. Her participation in Johnson's salons can be seen through documentation, but more importantly, her role as a great supporter of underrepresented Black writers can be seen through her exposure of many writers who under different circumstances, may not have had the opportunity to shine.

Although Bruce Nugent and Jessie Fauset's literary works are especially significant contributions to the New Negro Renaissance as a whole; they are not however,

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<sup>35</sup> Carolyn Wedin Sylvander, *Jessie Fauset, Black American Writer*, (Troy, New York: The Whitston Publishing Company, 1981) pg. 65.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

the most essential when considering their indication of Georgia Douglass Johnson's salons. Bruce Nugent's one of a kind character and his openly homosexual lifestyle as well as Fasuet's editorship at *Crisis* and participation within the salons are more valuable to highlight when attempting to identify the functions and characters of those who participated in the Saturday-Nighters. Their roles are important to mention due to their relationships with Johnson. Through correspondence we see Johnson in the light of a friendly salon hostess, a concerned mother, and an adept business woman. Fasuet's function as a leading editor of *The Crisis* and passion for artistic radicals leaves room to suspect a strong professional relationship between her, Johnson, and the salon members. Both of these relationships are critical when trying to understand the process and culture of literary production. Nonetheless, Edward Christopher Williams is also worthy of emphasis specifically because of the literature that he produced.

As mentioned previously, this chapter aims to address the *who* and the *what*. Background information about Nugent and Fasuet has been provided in order to explain *who* they were and the significant functions of each person has been discussed to demonstrate *what* their most essential characteristics were in relation to Georgia Johnson's salons. In the case of E.C. Williams, the *who* remains the same; however, but the *what* is modified. It is assumed that individuals who were active within the Saturday-Nighters produced literature, but the content of the literature was not necessarily expected to exude the culture of salons. E. C. Williams' literature deserves accentuation because it reflected the mores of Johnson's salons and customs of Washington's Black middle-class society. His work is vital to this project because it not only shows literature being produced in an environment that was labeled uncondusive for literary development; but

most importantly because it represents Washington during its time of vogue. The content of Williams' literature enabled one to realize that Harlem was not the only thriving location conducive for Black artistry in the twenties.

Edward Christopher Williams, the African American librarian, teacher, scholar and writer, was born in Cleveland, Ohio on February 11, 1871. He was married to the notable Black novelist Charles Waddell Chesnut's daughter, Ethel Chesnut. Ethel and Edward Christopher had one son, Charles Williams, who like his father, accomplished great things. Williams was the valedictorian of his class when he earned his bachelor's degree from Adelbert College in Cleveland Ohio in 1892. Soon after in 1894, he became an assistant librarian at his alma mater. Williams did not stop there; he went on to pursue a higher degree from New York State Library School in 1900 and became the first professionally trained Black librarian in the United States and the first Black person to earn a living in the field of librarianship.<sup>37</sup> Williams was most successful when he served as librarian at Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio where he "more than doubled the size of the collection, moved the collection into a new building, and within ten years, had obtained (through gifts and donations) a collection that outgrew it."<sup>38</sup>

Williams left his successful position at Western Reserve University 1909 and became principal of the M Street School (now the Paul Lawrence Dunbar High School) in Washington, D.C. Reason for his sudden transition has not been determined; but after working there for many years, it is easy to assume that Williams may have wanted change of scenery. In 1916, Williams decided to make yet another career change. He

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<sup>37</sup> Library System, Howard University, Our History: Edward Christopher Williams 1871-1929. <<http://www.howard.edu/library/About/history/EC-Williams.htm>>.

<sup>38</sup> E.J. Josey, *Dictionary of American Library Biography* (1978) pgs. 552-553

accepted a head librarian position at Howard University and instructed several courses in library sciences and foreign languages. While living in D.C., Williams' greatest accomplishments did not rest in his librarianship; but they can be seen through his growing interest and sharpened skills in creative writing. Three of his plays were performed during his residence in D.C.: *The Chasm*, *The Exile* (a drama about Renaissance Italy), and *The Sheriff's Children*. Nonetheless, Williams' *When Washington Was in Vogue* was his most significant publication. In 1929, Williams' decided to refocus his attention to his librarian career. He moved from Washington in order to pursue a PH.D. in library sciences at Columbia University. While in New York, Williams suddenly fell ill. He died on December 24, 1929 at the age of fifty-eight.

Williams' fictional narratives are critical to this study because the majority of them are based on Black middle-class life in Washington, D.C. during the twenties. Williams' portrayal of Washington as a culturally thriving location can be spotted within unpublished short stories like "The Colonel" and "The Incomparable Dolly;" which are included in his brief manuscripts at the Moorland Spingarn Research Center. Nonetheless, these short stories merely provide a glimpse of the Black Washingtonian setting that Williams intended to embrace. In *When Washington Was in Vogue* Williams covered both the exaggerated and materialistic, and the artistic and sensible sides of Black middle class life in D.C. The book was originally published anonymously under the title *The Letters of Davy Carr: A True Story of Colored Vanity Fair* in the popular African American journal *The Messenger*, from January 1925 to June 1926.

The story consists of a series of letters, which make it the presumably the first example of an epistolary novel in African American literature. The main character, Davy

Carr, a former Army captain and veteran of World War I corresponded with his best friend Bob Fletcher between October 1922 and February 1923. The plot mainly consisted of activity that took place in the Rhodes residence, where Davy rented a room. Davy Carr was captivated by Caroline, one of his landlady's enticing daughters. Amongst the love story painted within the novel, Williams also successfully illustrated Washington's black social and cultural scene, which largely entailed depictions of scenes that were very similar to Georgia Douglas Johnson's Saturday-Night literary salons. The striking contextual resemblance between the fictional Lillian Barton and the real-life Georgia Johnson led me to assume that Williams characterized his participation in Georgia Johnson's salons through weekly gatherings at Ms. Lillian Barton's parlor. An exploration of Williams' *When Washington Was in Vogue* is absolutely essential when trying to understand the happenings of Georgia Johnson's salons. Not only did Williams contribute to the expansion of New Negro Renaissance literature beyond Harlem, but his work is an example of Black literary production and intellectual enlightenment in a location that has normally been recognized only for its haughty Black bourgeois.

Adam McKible was in graduate school at the University of North Carolina around 1994 or 1995 when he first stumbled upon *When Washington Was in Vogue*. McKible and I shared similar sentiments when discovering this remarkable piece of work "From its opening pages I realized I had discovered an important but lost voice of the Harlem Renaissance."<sup>39</sup> Williams' work is truly unique because it is presumably the one of only novels that specifically evokes African American life in Washington during the twenties.

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<sup>39</sup> Edward Christopher Williams, *When Washington Was in Vogue*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2003) xiii.

Prior to the discovery of *When Washington Was in Vogue*, the middle section of Jean Toomer's (initial organizer of Johnson's Saturday- Night literary salons) *Cane* (1923), was the only fictional representation of Black life Washington. Toomer's presents a limited portrayal because he mainly focused on the pretentious and snobbish aspects of the District's Black community. Nevertheless, Williams' novel provides a more encompassing view of the city; he recognizes the negative aspects, but does not fail to highlight the capital's Black intelligence, artistry, and formal and informal affairs.

The cultural effervescence captured within *When Washington Was in Vogue* combined with Williams' own personal undertakings and accomplishments both indicate the artistic flowering that took place among Blacks within the nation's capital in the twenties.

Williams' novel offers a definitive challenge to the idea that the explosion of African American creativity in the first decades of the twentieth century can be accurately called the "Harlem" Renaissance at all. When Williams was writing, terms such as "New Negro Movement" were used to describe the cultural phenomenon that was, perhaps, centered in Harlem but had pockets of black creative and intellectual activity throughout the African Diaspora. The literary ferment in Washington, D.C., that encouraged Williams to write plays and fiction had important links to the Negritude movement of the Francophone world, to developments in Pan-Africanism, as well as to the vibrant culture of Harlem.<sup>40</sup>

Even the title of the work, *When Washington Was in Vogue* suggests a direct attempt to dispel the localized and condensed image the Harlem Renaissance. Although changed from its original title and not a confirmed conscious effort on William's behalf; the title candidly responds to David Levering Lewis's book *When Harlem Was in Vogue* written in 1981. Not only does this work help to advance the exploration of Georgia Douglass

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid. pg. xxxii

Johnson's literary salons in D.C., but it also assists us in expanding notions of the New Negro Renaissance as a whole. Although fictional, this novel is based on the realistic trends, mores, and conventions of Black life in D.C. that deserve to be embraced and added to the cannon of African American literature.

The importance of Williams' work has been articulated on many different levels, but the actual passages within the text which illustrate the varying aspects of D.C.'s Black middle-class culture have not been identified. Throughout the novel, Davy Carr frequently writes to his friend Bob about the range of social gatherings that he attended. It is important to reiterate that he discusses events of all types and essentially paints his friend a rather balanced picture of D.C.'s Black middle-class.

I have been to three dances within the past two weeks, two of them small private affairs, the other semipublic, given for the benefit of the NAACP. Perhaps one comment which might interest you is the rather general observation that there are a great many good-looking people in this town, and that your folks, Old Fellow have emerged from the barrel.<sup>41</sup>

The passage above demonstrates the way in which Williams inserted names of active organizations like the NAACP to make his depiction more realistic and factual. The NAACP was not the only active organization within the community, but Williams emphasized the group's presence in order to show how politically-charged groups were able to use social functions to raise money and rally individuals within the community. Davy boasts about all the good looking people in Washington and pronounces that Blacks in D.C. have "emerged from the barrel" and have advanced socially and economically. Davy refers to the self-sufficient U Street community that was discussed in the pervious

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid. pg. 63

chapter. By creating a self-supporting community, Black Washingtonians in the early twentieth century, were able to climb the ladder and progress.

Throughout the novel, Davy continues to describe various social experiences with his pen pal. He informs his friend about D.C.'s conservative crowd by describing events with important organizations like the NAACP and he also shares his experiences within rowdy and rambunctious masses. Even still, Davy expected a level of etiquette and manners should to be upheld in all settings.

This particular group—the women, I mean—seem to strive to make themselves noticed through sheer noise, and they lacked the social restraint visible in other circles I have had the pleasure of knowing. The note of gaiety seemed rather feverish, and with some of them, even forced. One woman, whom I have seen in gatherings of both kinds, has evidently decided that being in Rome, one must copy the Romans, and she was shouting and “carrying on” like the rest, though in other surroundings she exhibits the most perfect poise.<sup>42</sup>

Davy may have been referring to gatherings like intimate literary salons and meeting groups when he mentioned “the other circles” that he enjoyed. The home of the “socially minded younger set” that Davy describes is very different from quaint gatherings like Georgia Douglass Johnson’s intimate salons. This passage demonstrates the ways in which members of the Black middle-class were able to adjust and adapt to their environments. The woman who exuded such elegance and refinement at a previous affair acclimated to her surroundings and behaved in an uncouth manner. Although Johnson’s Saturday-Nighters were rather informal, it is assumed that as within this group, women and men were expected to adapt to the mood and abide by implicit social graces and formalities.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid. pgs. 91-92



Passages that reflect Georgia Johnson's salons are especially significant within this study. The lack of information left behind about Johnson's salons, places a more intense microscope on Williams' fictional, but reality-based characters. The actions and characteristics of these figures are valuable because they are able to articulate those internal aspects that have been sought but not found. Davy Carr speaks enthusiastically about his frequent Sunday-evening gatherings at Miss Lillian Barton's house. He is so excited about his experiences at Miss Barton's that he makes them the focal point of his letter to Bob.

But the real purpose of this letter was to tell you about my Sunday-evening tea at Barton's. I wish I might show you Lillian Barton's parlor, for I am sure I cannot describe it adequately. I am like the actor who made you laugh so hard that last wild night on Broadway, and who sang—don't you remember it?—a silly song with the refrain: *I cannot sing the old songs,/ For I do not know the words!*<sup>43</sup>

The gatherings pleased Davy so much that he was lost for words. Characterizing himself as the main character, and Johnson as Lillian Barton, Williams revealed his sentiments through Davy and expressed his appreciation for Georgia Johnson's Saturday-night literary salons.

Although fictional, Williams' novel provides realistic descriptions of the interior of Lillian Barton's home which allows one to formulate their own image of Georgia Johnson's salons. "It's an old house, a rich man's house, made over, and redecorated on modern lines—some ultra-modern, I should say. Dark walls with a few good paintings; heavy furniture in keeping with the size of the room; a wonderful rug; and a big fireplace

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid. pg. 37

with a real fire.”<sup>44</sup> The description below may not exactly mirror the Georgia Johnson’s home, but it provides a visual idea of how Johnson’s home may have looked.

Altogether it is the most attractive room I have been in—as a guest—and you know I have seen our most handsome houses between New Orleans and Boston, and as far west as Chicago. Most of our pretentious residences are too ornate, or too luxurious, and the element of conspicuous expenditure is somewhat too pronounced. But here there were evidences of intelligent planning coupled with a cultivated individual taste.<sup>45</sup>

Miss Barton’s imaginary Washington home is comparable to Georgia Johnson’s old row house on 1461 S. Street in N.W. Washington. The furniture may not have been an exact replica, but the relaxed disposition created within the passage clearly resembles the mood in Georgia Johnson’s Saturday-night literary salons. Like the main character Davy, E.C. Williams had traveled the United States and still had not encountered a room so impressive or as inviting. Her home was not like the other “pretentious residences” that he previously visited. The line “evidences of intelligent planning coupled with a cultivated individual taste” speaks to the exceptionality of his surroundings and the intelligent, sophisticated, and yet down to earth nature present in Georgia Johnson’s Saturday-Nighters.

*When Washington Was in Vogue* provides a more insightful and detailed description of Johnson’s salons. Davy’s letters to Bob clearly uncover nuances and particulars that help to develop a comprehensive narrative. The following passage gives us a general idea of the physical arrangement, attendance and refreshments served at these weekly gatherings.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. pg. 38

There were including out hostess, just six of us, the others being the Hales, Reese, of course and Verney. We had a most delightful tea served in a sort of library-dining room, which was quite attractive in its way as the parlor, but we spent most of the evening seated in a semicircle around the most hospitable hearth, in the glow and warmth of a fine wood fire. It was perfect! <sup>46</sup>

It is evident that Georgia Douglass Johnson's salons in some ways, serve as purely social needs. The mentioning of delightful tea is frequently shown within authentic correspondence between Bruce Nugent and Georgia Johnson earlier on within the chapter. The identification of six participants confirms the private and informal nature of Johnson's salons. This fictional depiction conveys intimacy and allows one to understand the process of informal cultural production.

Williams' portrayal of Johnson through Lillian Barton is vital when attempting to fill in the missing pieces of the Saturday-Nighter narrative. Davy's letters to Bob not only refer to the exterior characteristics of Georgia Johnson's salons, but they also provide information that has otherwise, been missing from available documentation. The types of conversations and intellectual exchanges that took place within Johnson's salons are echoed in Williams' novel. "We were all at Lillian Barton's last Sunday evening, and the talk turned on great men, and the springs and motives of action. Dr. Morrow, who is a worshiper of Napoleon, spoke interestingly upon his career, and then Lincoln, and George Washington, and Cromwell were discussed."<sup>47</sup> The range of topics discussed within Lillian Barton's home demonstrates the variety of matters addressed during Johnson's gatherings. Activity was not merely limited to discussions on African American issues, or a specific genre of literature; but there were other common pastimes

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. pg.83

and prevalent subject matters that consistently concluded the conversation. “We told stories, sang songs, and discussed everything in this mundane sphere, ending of course, where we always do, with the race question.”<sup>48</sup> Even in the mist of their entertainment and enjoyment, like Georgia Johnson, Lillian Barton’s gatherings encouraged education, enlightenment, and the racial uplift.

Williams consciously stresses the importance of both perspectives of D.C.’s Black middle-class. Davy, the main character, as well as E.C. Williams, the author appear to hold D.C.’s Black community in very high esteem; however, characters like Verney are strategically placed in the novel to articulate the opposing standpoint. During one of Lillian Barton’s salon discussions, Verney expresses his sentiments on the plight of African Americans in Washington.

Verney made one of two statements which stimulated debate. He contended that this generation is not going forward, except in the conspicuous, showy ways; that our progress is more apparent than real, except in the matter, perhaps, of mere intellectual training; and that even there we are vastly out pointed by the Jews and the Japanese.<sup>49</sup>

Verney’s comments are analogous to the criticisms ingrained in passages from Langston Hughes’ essay “Our Wonderful Society Washington” which was highlighted in the introduction chapter. Similar to the fictional character Verney, Hughes articulates, “I met many men and women who had been to colleges,--and seemed not to have recovered from it.”<sup>50</sup> Both men acknowledge the generations’ formal educational training, but feel that their flashy and conceited ways have essentially impeded their growth. Williams’ ensures that his characters’ opinions accurately express the outlooks of many individuals

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid. pg. 38

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Langston Hughes, *Our Wonderful Society Washington*, *Opportunity* (August, 1927)

who experienced Washington's Black society. Such attitudes and positions increase the authenticity of the novel and in some ways; they enable it to be a work of historical fiction.

Before encountering the novel, I was apprehensive about the lack of tangible evidence that clearly showcased the culturally productive characteristics of Washington's Black middle class. *When Washington Was in Vogue* was essentially the missing piece to the puzzle that provided me with the substance that I needed to complete the project. It is a work that comprehensively exudes, expresses, and embraces the major themes and concepts that I set out to explore. Chapter one analyzed the geographical context and peripheral features of Georgia Douglas Johnson's community and externally described the surrounding aspects of the Saturday-Nighters. The next chapter explained when the salons were formed and how Toomer, Locke, and Johnson organized them. After having background information established in previous sections, this chapter aims to uncover the essence of the salons themselves. Johnson's management of the salons for a consecutive seven years is impressive; but the lives and accomplishments of the individuals explored within this chapter illustrate that she alone, could not be credited for the literary productiveness of the salons.

It is important to recognize Johnson for serving as the primary agent of Black literary production in D.C., but it is even more critical to emphasize the relationships and community building that materialized due to Johnson's management. A letter written to Johnson from Paul Breman on March 13, 1958 expressed the significance of community building within Johnson's salons.

I had read about your Saturday Evening Salon – could it have been in Langston Hughes’ autobiography *The Big Sea*? I have tried to find the chapter, but the book is such a disorderly mess that I couldn’t possibly find it. It is a pity that the younger generation does not have a meeting –place any more, it would mean so much just now. Some of the poets now in their early twenties show some talent, yes, but most of their work is made up of a sort of uncorrelated frustration which harms their poetry more than anything.<sup>51</sup>

Johnson’s Saturday-Night salons were so influential that thirty years later, they still received praise. Mr. Breman suggested that the nonexistence of informal institutions like Johnson’s salons resulted in a disconnection among young aspiring writers. Georgia Johnson’s salons were able to transform feelings of “uncorrelated frustration” to a correlated and integrated community.

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<sup>51</sup> Georgia Douglas Johnson Papers, Box 162-1 Unknown Folder, Manuscript Division, (MRSC), Howard University, Correspondence from Paul Breman, 1958.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

#### Summary

This comprehensive exploration of agent (Georgia Douglas Johnson), location (Washington, D.C.), and institution (Saturday-Night literary salons) reminds us that Black cultural production of the twenties and even as a whole cannot be localized or categorized under one umbrella. This study did not directly distinguish the characteristics of Washington from Harlem and other major Black cities, but the information revealed allows one to gain an independent perspective of D.C. as a major site for Black cultural production separate from Harlem. Regardless of each sites' distinctiveness, it is important to admit that Harlem, though not the only site, was and still is the model city that continues to be the brander of Black cultural production. Acknowledging this point does not detract from the significance of Black literary and cultural production in Washington. Instead, it helps to answer one of my initial questions: Was Washington conducive for Black literary and cultural production during the 1920s?

This study demonstrates that yes, D.C. was conducive and did in fact possess productive literary and cultural spaces. However, the key to effectively addressing this question is to consider, for whom were these spaces conducive? The exploration of Georgia Douglas Johnson and her literary salon members shows that Washington was more so a location conducive for the Black middle-class cultural production. Acknowledging class is one of the first steps in finding out the missing pieces to Black

Washington's puzzle. The city's distinctive class factor may have been one of the elements that disabled the city from becoming the ultimate Black urban aesthetic.

This study not only allows its readers to recognize the differences between cities that possess a strong cultural affinity, but more importantly, it allows them to identify similarities and draw connections. This study ultimately highlights the key characteristic that is required for any cultural movement to be successful. Whether it be Washington, Philadelphia, Boston, Richmond, or Harlem, the presence of community determines the survival of any cultural institution. The sense of community displayed in Georgia Douglas Johnson's coordination of the Saturday-Night literary salons is a universal characteristic that existed throughout all New Negro Renaissance activities.

Georgia Johnson happened to be that central agent that kept D.C.'s Black literary community together. Johnson offered so much of herself to her salon attendees that a dependency was created. Her role was vital to the development of her contemporaries. Salon attendee Zora Neal Hurston felt the need to express her appreciation in words. "I was mighty pleased to get a letter from you. This is my chance to say what a wonderful poet I think you are. No, what a soulful poet I know you are...Please let me be a friend of yours always. I need you."<sup>1</sup> Hurston's need for Johnson's friendship speaks to her need for community. Although an individual, Georgia Johnson was a representative for Black literary productivity in D.C. in its entirety. Johnson's ability to galvanize D.C.'s talented Black literary scholars and visiting artists from all over the country and the world made her a key point of contact that Hurston desired to befriend. Hurston's reliance on Johnson

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<sup>1</sup> From Zora N. Hurston to Georgia Johnson, July 1925, Georgia Douglas Johnson Papers, box 1, folder 37.



illustrates the criticalness of her role not only in Washington, but in Black literary culture as a whole.

### Weaknesses

The goal of this investigation was to take a more comprehensive and detailed look at the interior and exterior characteristics of Johnson and her Saturday-Nighters. This goal was accomplished; however, it is important to consider that comprehensive studies are more likely to have loopholes and gaps. The major gap in the study is one that is often inevitable when conducting research on historical figures. Furthermore, Johnson's lesser-known status limits available evidence. Her manuscripts at the Moorland Spingarn Research Center at Howard University were generous, but hardly contained documents that were specific to her salons. Because Johnson's salons were informal in nature, little documentation of attendance is available and no minutes from the gatherings exist. Therefore, my efforts to piece together the narrative primarily using correspondence can be looked at in a positive light or interpreted as too much reliance on one source. As a result, there is a lack of Johnson's first-person voice. Letters written to Johnson often reveal the feelings and outlooks of the authors and rarely illustrate Johnson's personal sentiments and point of view.

In addition to the lack of evidence and documentation, there were also critical issues and topics that deserve to be discussed in further detail. For example, although mentioned throughout the investigation, more attention should be granted to concepts of race, class, gender, and ethnicity. Conducting an intersectional analysis of the Greater U

Street District in comparison to the Washington's larger white community can add to the depth and strength of the arguments made in the study.

Moreover, the literature written and produced by those who were involved in the salons is another aspect that deserved more attention. Although mentioned here and there, Johnson's work especially merits more of an extensive analysis. A closer look at her poetry may bring about more insight and understanding to her lifestyle and her management of the salons.

#### Call for Future Research

Rather than weakening the strength of the study, the acknowledgment of gaps and loopholes adds to its potential. It is nearly impossible to cover everything in detail when conducting research on a topic as engaging as Georgia Johnson and the Saturday-Nighters. Recognizing the weaknesses of the study permits one to think of ways in which more examinations can be carried out in future research. Infinite possibilities within a research project essentially demonstrate that the topic is promising and worth exploring. The combined investigation of the salon and its vicinity conducted in this study is only one way of studying Georgia Johnson and her Saturday-Nighters.

The endless potential of this topic leads to endless attempts to take deeper and closer looks at the development of Black literary salons and Black cultural production outside of Harlem in the 1920s. Scholars and artists in Washington have recently made efforts to reexamine the Black Renaissance in Washington, D.C. through the production of the stage play *Where Eagles Fly*. Washingtonian playwright Carole Mumin conveys

the importance of preserving cultural legacies within the Shaw community; a neighborhood adjacent to the Greater U Street Historic District discussed in chapter two.

The play uses music, dance, and verse to tell the story of the incredibly rich legacy of Shaw, a neighborhood that was/is integral to the modern development of African American culture. The story unfolds through the eyes of Ma Brown, a mainstay in the Shaw community. When her granddaughter stays with her while attending Howard University and insists that Ma Brown move to a safer part of town, Ma Brown imparts the history of the neighborhood that has always been a vibrant and supportive community for African Americans.<sup>2</sup>

*Where Eagles Fly* provides its audience with entertainment and amusement; however, most importantly, the play offers valuable educational lessons about the D.C.'s Black community that are often neglected in the classrooms. The community consciousness and awareness promoted in this play helps to shine light on the positive aspects of Black life in D.C. that are commonly overshadowed with negative stereotypes. An examination of the play in conjunction with Georgia Johnson's literary salons is certainly fitting. Future investigators may be able to draw connections between the play and the salons and essentially display the cultural conduciveness that is often disregarded by critics of Washington D.C.'s Black community.

Connecting Johnson's salons to more contemporary instances of cultural production in D.C. can help to reduce the challenge of gathering substantial evidence and documentation. An examination of present-day salons, societies, book clubs, and other forms of formal and informal Black literary activity is also worth inspecting. The comparison and contrast of contemporary verses historical literary organizations will show the ways in which literary production among African Americans has evolved or

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<sup>2</sup> *Where Eagles Fly* (Washington, D.C.: DeviantPixels, 2006, accessed 17 May 2006); available from <http://www.whereaglesflyllc.com/index.php>; Internet.

regressed during the twentieth-first century. There are infinite possibilities to further develop the research of Georgia Douglas Johnson and the Saturday-Nighters. The primary goals of this investigation have been met, but this is only the beginning. There is still so much more to explore.

### Conclusion

When concluding, it is necessary to refer back to the conceptual framework of the study as well as to revisit the initial estimations and sentiments that essentially sparked interest and inspired the investigation. Since the first chapter begins with a Hughes quote that denounces the sincerity of cultural invention among D.C.'s Black community, it is only fitting that his claims and generalizations be reevaluated. The constant discoveries and findings of Black literary and cultural production in Washington, dispel the accusations made by Langston Hughes in his essay "Our Wonderful Society Washington" and support the sentiments shared by Brenda Moryck in her response essay, "I, Too, Have Lived in Washington." The information revealed while studying Georgia Douglas Johnson and her salon members is substantial enough to invalidate Hughes' attitude.

In addition to inspiring the title of my project, "We seek what we find, we see what we look for," Moryck's essay shows the absurdity of Hughes' judging the entire city of Washington by a small population its large Black community.

I nevertheless take delight in setting down the text by means of which I begin my response to Mr. Langston Hughes, youthful and sometimes charming poet, for the moment turned critic of the world in general, (for all the world lives in Washington—at least through some representative), while resting from his opportunism.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Brenda Ray Moryck. *Opportunity Magazine* "I Too Have Lived in Washington" (August 1927) pg 228

Moryck acknowledges the pretentiousness of those members of D.C.'s Black aristocratic community, but she equally recognizes that snobs, in some capacity, exist in every location. The investigation of Johnson and her salons not only denounces Hughes' minimal criticism, but more significantly, it helps to shine light on a culturally thriving community that has often been depreciated especially when considering New Negro Renaissance activity. Hughes criticism should be looked upon in a constructive manner. If I had not discovered his essay and his unsympathetic and critical opinions of Washington's Black community in the 1920s, I may not have had acquired the insight needed to counter my argument.

If intentionally sought after, a pompous and arrogant crowd can be identified anywhere in the world; not just in Washington. Therefore, similar to Moryck, I too, take delight in responding to the outlook expressed in Hughes' article and also like the title of Moryck's essay, "I too, have lived in Washington." I have not responded to Hughes' criticism with resentment nor offense. Instead, my response consists of a comprehensive exploration of one America's greatest examples of cultural production: Georgia Douglas Johnson and the Saturday-Nighters.

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