

College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University

DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU

Communication Faculty Publications

Communication

7-2015

Review of "Hearing the Hurt: Rhetoric, Aesthetics, and Politics of the New Negro Movement"

Aric Putnam

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, aputnam@csbsju.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/comm_pubs



Part of the [Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons](#), and the [Rhetoric Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Putnam, Aric, "Review of "Hearing the Hurt: Rhetoric, Aesthetics, and Politics of the New Negro Movement"" (2015). *Communication Faculty Publications*. 25.

https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/comm_pubs/25

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Communication Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@csbsju.edu.

Eric King Watts, *Hearing the Hurt: Rhetoric, Aesthetics, and Politics of the New Negro Movement* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2012) ix + 245 pp. (cloth).

Beginnings are often anxious times, composed of equal parts hopeful anticipation and powerful dread, each likely accompanied by a sense of dislocation. As the 19th Century came to a close, populations in the United States were presented with epic alternatives for how to make a new home in the new century. People of African descent, however, faced specific constraints as they looked to the future. The last of the generation to experience slavery gradually passed away, immigration to and from the African Diaspora increased, and African Americans moved from the rural south to urban areas in the north and west of the United States. As the population changed, blackness itself became an object of increased scrutiny, and with this attention came a dramatic increase in the intensity and frequency of racist violence. “Blackness” was a “problem” for those who would work to move beyond the racist practices of the 19th century and for those who would seek to perpetuate these practices in new forms.

In *Hearing the Hurt: Rhetoric, Aesthetics, and the Politics of the New Negro* Eric King Watts traces one strategic response to the challenge of creating a black voice within the dynamic yet profoundly racist context of the early years of the 20th century, the trope of the New Negro. Scholars in diverse fields employ the term “New Negro Movement” in order to demarcate a period of assertiveness and self-consciousness in black life and letters after Reconstruction and the Redemption of the South through the First World War, sometimes extending the period to the stock market crash of 1929 or the beginning of the Second World War. As a scholar of rhetoric, Watts eschews a chronological definition of the New Negro Movement and instead characterizes the New Negro as a “loosely organized and conflicting set of cultural institutions” (4). This framework allows Watts to explore the “pliability and mobility” of the trope of the New Negro as it “evoked the capacity to bring forth artistic and aesthetic practices and institutions” (2). Watt’s thorough and insightful study argues that that trope of the New Negro facilitated and constrained new black public voices that grew from the vicissitudes of raced, black experience.

The book opens with treatment of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois’ distinct prescriptions for black life in the new century. Watts identifies subtle points of commonality between these towering figures often only considered in opposition. In this analysis, Washington’s disposition of the trope of the New Negro offered “triage” for the “hemorrhaging black social body” while Du Bois’ use of the trope diagnosed a “national moral emergency.” For both, the trope of the New Negro captured the “affective dimensions of a racial ‘crisis’” (12). Although these two men are often remembered for the contrast in their political agendas and rhetorical styles, in Watts’ argument, they were joined in their effort to articulate a new space for black subjectivity and affect in a context of gratuitous racist violence. The discussion of Washington and Du Bois allows Watts gracefully to clarify his theoretical assumptions and develop the concept of “voice,” an issue that has animated much of his earlier work. Voice, Watts argues, is “the audible projection of persons” that “announces the felt experience of one’s immediate relation to and inseparability from the world and others” (16). While being the

product of an individual body, voice is fundamentally a social process that emerges through recognition by a social body. Voice is a call to recognition. Voice thus operates as a variety of “identification” (17). By grounding his work in this sense of voice, Watts distances aesthetics from its traditional “pet” territory of art toward the “coordination and competition among institutions, groups, and persons as forms of life are produced and circulated” (19) and allows for the treatment of novels, poetry, painting, texts often considered growths of an individual inspiration, as embodiments of experience, shared. As the chapter comes to a close, Watts explains how, with the creation of the NAACP and the founding of its journal, *The Crisis*, Du Bois transformed Booker T. Washington’s “New Negro” into an opportunity for a new more politically active voice, a “New Negro cultural expression capable of resisting and redirecting circulations of power” (21). Du Bois’ vision produced new aesthetic practices and artifacts that appealed for a new way of being black in the world. Du Bois made available the rhetorical space of the agitator.

Chapter two situates Du Bois’ aesthetic theory within the work of his teacher, George Santayana. According to Watts’ reading of *Darkwater: Voices beyond the Veil*, Du Bois’ aesthetic theory deviated from Santayana’s in important ways. Santayana’s theory of beauty reflected an ontology of whiteness in that it articulated beauty to feeling without investigating the disposition of the body that feels. In contrast, the aesthetic theory found in *Darkwater* “blurred a popular distinction between aesthetics and ethics” by grounding aesthetic judgment in “everyday living with others” (27). Watts then argues that Du Bois’ graphic depiction of racial hatred in *Darkwater* precipitates shock, an aesthetic disorientation that opens new, potential forms of beauty that emanate from raced experience.

Chapter three continues the focus on Du Bois. In this chapter Watts argues that Du Bois appropriated and configured pragmatist aesthetics to develop a theory of specifically black aesthetic practices, practices that grow from and reflect the everyday experience of black people but that also have the potential to transform American civic culture more generally. Du Bois embraced Dewey’s formulation of aesthetic experience, the generative potential of which allowed him to open up new formulations of collectivity, new publics. For Du Bois, the “primitive” African village served as an example of the habits that could constitute an alternative, more humane modern public. In positing the African village as an origin and model for a distinctly modern public, Du Bois proposed a “marriage” of sorts between the civilized and the primitive.

Chapter four argues that Alain Locke’s use of the trope of the New Negro dramatized a transition from the “old” Negro, a political problem to be solved or an object to be represented, to the New Negro who was not only a producer of art, but also a source of value judgments about aesthetic practices. Central to this move is Locke’s theory of value and valuation. In Locke’s calculus, particular aesthetic artifacts can speak to universal values to the extent that they embody “appropriate responses to certain kinds of situations.” Locke’s valorization of African aesthetic practices, Watts argues, served not as a response to “European hegemony” (92), but as a call to

cultivate a classical tradition which would respect black experience and provide a sound cultural foundation so that people of African descent could participate in a reformed modern public built on the blueprint of cultural pluralism.

In subsequent chapters, Watts traces how the trope of the New Negro both enabled and constricted black voice. In chapter five Watts studies the debate about black art staged between George S. Schuyler and Langston Hughes in *The Nation* in 1926. Watts argues that this debate performed an epideictic ritual in which the tenets of primitivism were configured in the service of black identity. Skillfully, Watts finds in these mobilizations of primitivist assumptions a commonality in two texts too often read as diametrically opposed. Schuyler's "savage" satire shared with Hughes' blues aesthetic its origin in the painful experiences of racism. Each also expressed antipathy toward racial orthodoxy.

Chapter six returns to Du Bois and surveys the debate over the function of black art, its capacity to serve as "propaganda" to forward specific interests. Du Bois argued that an affirming black voice was constricted by the myth of pure art, or aesthetic theory that divorced aesthetic practices from the lived political contexts that produced art, artists, and the values by which both were judged. To Du Bois, the argument for "pure art" limited black voice by denying the affective and ethical dimensions of speech.

The final two chapters treat Wallace Thurman's novel *Infants of the Spring* and Nella Larsen's novel *Passing* as efforts to carve freer spaces within the increasingly stultifying contexts of racist fascination with blackness and an emerging New Negro orthodoxy. Thurman's novel attempted to celebrate dynamic sexual identities but was frustrated by fascination with black and urban sexuality. Harlem's traffic in black bodily practices constructed an environment inhospitable to black queer voices. Nella Larsen's *Passing* attempted a similar reconfiguration of the borders between social groups and norms. In Larsen's novel "passing" dramatized both a mechanism for making new black social worlds and an "intense performative act that undermines the law of racial and sexual order" (169), resisting the possibility of fixity or closure such new worlds would require. Larsen's novel is emblematic of the paradoxes that constituted the New Negro Movement and illustrates the tensions between new and old ever present in beginnings.

Despite his focus on texts thoroughly treated by scholars in a number of disciplines, Watts manages to develop new insights into these texts, convincingly demonstrating the particular value and insight of a rhetorical perspective. Watt's skillfully contextualizes literary texts in material and political contexts and reads these works as indexes of power and performance. Watts' work also contributes an important corrective to scholarship in rhetorical studies that has in recent years valorized pragmatist theories of aesthetics and publicity without acknowledging their growth in and debt to the racial politics of their time. The visions of Horace Kallen and John Dewey, for example, were produced in and by a matrix of shifting populations and vicious racial politics. Moreover, this book illuminates the rhetorical significance of a field of texts often neglected by scholars in Communication Studies who tend to focus on the short (or

“modern”) Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, and draws attention to the complexity of black rhetorical history and the diversity of texts and moments which constitute it. The protest of the 1960’s sounds different when we also listen to the 1920s.

However, Watts’s focus on established figures, canonical texts, and the literary “Harlem Renaissance” is also a slight limitation of the study. Four of the book’s eight chapters are about W.E.B. Du Bois. Clearly few figures exerted as much influence on black public voice in the 20th century as did Du Bois. Still, during the period of this book’s focus, a number of other figures were as effectual, if not more, in shaping black public voice and how experiences of blackness came to be expressed and shared. Marcus Garvey, for example, through his newspaper *Negro World*, published more aesthetic artifacts, more poetry and art and criticism, than Du Bois and the NAACP’s *The Crisis* and The Urban League’s *Opportunity* combined. Although Garvey himself appears not to have devoted an entire essay or speech specifically to addressing the role of art in racial uplift, many of his assumptions about how aesthetic artifacts could embody black experience and shape black public life were made clear in his 1928 review of Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem*. In this essay Garvey criticized McKay and other black artists who “prostituted” themselves for white publishers, capitalizing on white stereotypes of black vernacular experience and inadvertently promoting the agenda of white supremacy. Garvey, in many ways a direct descendant of Booker T. Washington, had no qualms with the pursuit of self-interest. But in Garvey’s vision black voice grew from the common experiences of people of African descent suffering imperialism around the globe. Accordingly, black aesthetic practices had a responsibility to nurture black sociality, to engage in the care of the black collective self. Watts need not include treatment of Marcus Garvey to make his argument about black voice in the 20th century, but its absence suggests that the voice he studies has an American accent, perhaps most clearly heard in Du Bois’s reductive celebration of a simple, feminized “African” village.

In a similar vein, in the past thirty years “Harlem Renaissance” studies have adopted an increasingly revisionist perspective. What scholars count as the “Harlem Renaissance” as an era, as an activity, and as a body of texts is being tested by discoveries like Claude McKay’s 1941 novel, *Amiable With Big Teeth: A Novel of the Love Affair Between the Communists and the Poor Black Sheep of Harlem* and by studies that focus on non-literary and non-verbal artifacts. Increasingly, scholars are less interested in how music, for example, influenced Langston Hughes or how the spirituals shaped the thought and theory of W.E.B. Du Bois, than they are by how performances of music themselves shaped and expressed black ethos during the period. In *The Big Sea*, Langston Hughes recalls the era and implies that what we call the New Negro Movement today had its apotheosis in the musical theater, in Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake’s play “Shuffle Along.” Indeed “Shuffle Along” provides an apt metaphor for the cultural and rhetorical production of this period; it was an aesthetic artifact produced by collaboration between artists working in diverse media, for profit and for collective pleasure, and composed in the notes of the black vernacular. Watt’s brilliant examination of voice in literary texts opens the

intriguing possibility of listening for voice in these other varieties of text, even the visual. If we listen carefully, we can also hear the hurt in the New Negro films of Oscar Micheaux and photos of James Van Der Zee.

Eric King Watts's *Hearing the Hurt: Rhetoric, Aesthetics, and Politics of the New Negro* comes at a fortuitous time. As the discourse around the Obama presidency evolves, diagnoses of a "post-racial" America continue to ring loudly and be countered with exclamations that assert the tenacity of race. Clearly the election of a black president, among other social and technological changes, points to significant shifts in how identity can be felt. Eric Watt's excellent and often brilliant work reminds us of the challenges inherent in beginning, of the anxiety of being a body in flux, of the necessity not just to be able to speak but, more importantly, the need to have one's humanity heard.