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Professor credits women for Harlem Renaissance

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• Black History

Professor credits women for Harlem Renaissance

By Svetlana Popova
Staff Writer

Black women writers had an important place in the Harlem Renaissance although literary scholars typically deny them proper recognition, an English professor and researcher said Wednesday.

"The standard definition of the Harlem Renaissance is limited because it marginalizes black women writers," said Judith Musser, associate professor of English at Husson College.

Musser spoke about the engendering of the Harlem Renaissance and the contribution of black women writers to it. The lecture was part of the Women in the Curriculum Lunch Series and the Black History Celebration Month.

The Harlem Renaissance is defined as a primarily literary movement of the 1920s and '30s producing the best black writing up to that time.

"The Harlem Renaissance raised black people's national consciousness and earned them respect," Musser said.

However, even major black authors excluded black women from the movement: "Women's literary matters and social matters do not mix," W. E. B. DuBois wrote.

Musser disagreed. Quoting a literary critic's description of black feminine writing as 'volcanic,' 'smashing,' and 'shattering,' she said, "The women writers of the Harlem Renaissance need to be included in this tradition."

According to Musser, literary scholars based their conclusions about the characteristics of the Harlem Renaissance only on

men's stories.

"Eighty-three black women wrote during this period," Musser remarked, "and 60 percent of the short stories published in the black magazines *Opportunity* and *Crisis* were written by women."

Moreover, one of the primary criticisms to the Harlem Renaissance is that it and its effects were short-lived. According to Musser, this view completely disregards black women's literary contribution, which continued to flourish long after the 1930s.

"I would say the Harlem Renaissance ended in 1948 when *Crisis* stopped publishing literary material and *Opportunity* stopped publishing at all," Musser said.

Female writers' short stories did not fit the standard definition of the Harlem Renaissance short story either, according to Musser.

Contrary to the perception that the Harlem Renaissance short fiction relied on earlier models of the black person provided by white writers. Black women's stories did not portray black people as the Mammy, Uncle Tom or Hot Mamma stereotypes. Also, according to Musser, black women writers such as Marita Bonner, Ann Petry and Zora Neale Hurston did very little philosophizing about general issues like black people's place in America.

"The characters [of their stories] are more concerned with their daily personal and family problems," Musser said. "They are not confined with national identity."

According to Musser, a major strength of the female short stories published in *Opportunity* and *Crisis* is their realistic portrayal of black women's social and econom-

ic plight.

"Marita Bonner's fiction is infested with social realism," Musser said.

Black women writers also discussed the

attempt of black women to escape from their binding racial heritage. According to Musser, much of the power of their writing derived from their use of authentic black dialects.



Judith Musser speaks of women's role in the Harlem Renaissance as part of Black History Celebration month. (Bailey Photo.)