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Karen Kossie-Chernyshev

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What Is Africa To Me?:
Visions of Africa in Lillian Bertha Jones’s Five Generations Hence (1916):
A Gendered Means to a Political End

BY KAREN KOSSTE-CHERNYSHEV

“If history is the raw material of literature, literature is an artifact of history. And as an artifact, it becomes a source, and a way of knowing.” 1 Tiffany Ruby Patterson

By the time Harlem Renaissance Poet Countee Cullen asked “What is Africa to me?” in his famous poem “Heritage,” 30-year-old Lillian Bertha Jones, an East Texas native and black woman intellectual had already proposed a creative political answer. Jones, eventually surnamed “Horace” after her second marriage to J. Gentry Horace of Groveton, Texas, engaged in many professional and social endeavors over the course of her life, one that spanned from 1886 to 1965. She served professionally as a teacher, principal, pioneering librarian, journalist, telephone operator, and social worker. She was a devout Baptist churchwoman and a member of various fraternal, social, and civic organizations, including the Women’s Council of Mt. Gilead Baptist Church, Zeta Phi Beta Sorority (Psi Zeta Chapter); Heroines of Jericho (Viola Court. #250); Order of the Eastern Star, Prince Hall Affiliation (Eula Elizabeth Chapter No. 2000); Alphine Charity and Art Club, Progressive Woman’s Club, National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs, as well as the Texas Commission on Interracial Equality. Her many

Karen Kossie-Chernyshev is an associate professor of history at Texas Southern University. She has published articles on African American history and religion and selected topics in the African Diaspora. Her current research focuses on the Lillian B. Horace Papers, held by the Tarrant County Black Genealogical and Historical Society, Fort Worth, Texas.
involvements notwithstanding, her greatest aspiration "more than any tangible thing" was "to write a book worth reading by an intelligent person, not necessarily [her] friend."¹ Jones realized her dream in part with *Five Generations Hence*, a 122-page novel written as she taught in rural East Texas schools. In the absence of sponsorship from white patrons that selected artists and writers of the Harlem Renaissance later enjoyed or a cohort of supporters from the black middle class, Jones, using her secondary teacher's pay, established a printing company with J. Dotson to publish her own work; she also received an undisclosed amount from a friend.

Similar to her southern contemporary Zora Neale Hurston, Jones and her novel were buried in obscurity for the greater part of the twentieth century until an excerpt of her novel appeared in Carol Kessler's *Daring to Dream* (1996) and my fortuitous encounter with the Lillian Bertha Horace Papers allowed reuniting "Horace" with her earlier identity as "Jones."² Research confirms *Five Generations Hence* (1916) as the only utopian novel by a black woman before 1950 and the earliest novel on record by a black woman from Texas.

Scholars now have the interpretive tools to appreciate Jones and the breadth and scope of her contribution thanks to the maturation of black and women's history and of feminist methodologies.³ A substantial body of historical literature examines black women's labor and political history, and offers detailed accounts of their involvement in the club movement and nascent civil rights movement of the early twentieth century. Historians have also begun to investigate black professional women, including nurses and teachers, who along with black preachers helped set the social and political agenda for African Americans at the turn of the century. An increasing number of studies aims to ferret out regional differences and developments that affirmed the shared and distinguishing characteristics of black women's experiences. Works treating black women's involvement in watershed historical developments like the Harlem and Chicago Renaissances began to welcome interdisciplinary approaches

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and the use of non-conventional historical artifacts, particularly creative literature.

Tiffany Patterson has argued that historians can use literature to reconstruct "past presents," or "spoken and written documents that embodied, for their producers, a real present, but that necessarily belongs to our own real past." Scholars of Afro-Texas history have begun to recover and examine "past presents" in Afro-Texas creative literature, particularly those fitting the chronological framework of the Harlem Renaissance (1920s-1940s). Five Generations Hence (1916), a new window into a significant "past present," permits revisiting the past ideas and philosophies engaging black women intellectuals from the Reconstruction to 1916, the year Jones published her work. Their commitment to racial uplift meshed with discussions about racial destiny and ultimately about Africa, the focus of the ensuing investigation.

Similar to most black writers of the post-reconstruction era, Jones used Five Generations Hence (1916) for a sociopolitical purpose. She and her contemporaries critiqued the exclusion of blacks from American life and argued for their inclusion by creating characters that were upwardly mobile, pious, and productive. Her novel is nonetheless unique in its pre-Harlem Renaissance, pre-Marcus-Garvey call for a transcontinental dialogue between Africa and America, one that hinged on economic self-sufficiency and most particularly on the noble ideas and deeds of intelligent women. Jones initiated her project by creating "Miss Grace Noble," the heroine teacher and leader in a backwoods community, who responds to an awesome sense of social responsibility to educate the young black masses about her. When the novel opens, she is taking a stroll in the woods with her students, whose educational and social welfare is always on her mind. Their plight weighs so heavily upon her that she takes to her natural refuge, the woods, where she has a messianic wilderness experience. She looses consciousness during an agonizing dialogue with self, soul, and the divine. The vision she has ultimately leaves her full of hope for the future. Seven
chapters later, the reader learns what that vision is: American blacks will return to Africa *Five Generations Hence*.

Like many young black women born in "the golden age of black nationalism," Jones the writer, much like the character she created, was driven by an intense desire to help "her people" overcome the prejudice and discrimination permeating their world in the post-reconstruction South. By 1916, when Jones published her novel, unemployment, disenfranchisement, and vigilante violence were on the rise throughout the South. Race riots ensued as blacks determined to challenge their subjugation. The racial hostility saturating the region and Jones's firsthand knowledge that African Americans struggled everywhere in the U.S., not just the South, no doubt fueled her Africa-centered musings and separatist leanings. Africa held the economic and political answer to African Americans' grand existential question particularly given that blacks faced opposition as they migrated to other regions of the country as well. The fact that Jones never migrated permanently out of the South except to follow her second husband to a ministerial post in Evanston, Illinois, reaffirms her realization that leaving the South for another region in the U.S. did not necessarily guarantee upward mobility, particularly for black teachers from the south. As Jacqueline Jones has shown, job opportunities in the Midwest and North were in factories and steel mills, not necessarily in educational institutions. Chicago in the 1920s counted only 138 black women schoolteachers.9 Similarly, as Sarah Delany, one of the famous Delany sisters recalled, black teachers in New York city were often refused employment on the grounds that their "Southern accent...would be damaging to the children."10 Despite the unconstitutionality of "separate but equal," the segregationist system in the South guaranteed employment for black teachers in the South in way that made some black southerners resistant to the dissolution of the system during the wake of the civil rights movement.

Jones's novel reflected a renewed and revised vision of Africa among African Americans during the post-Reconstruction era. It was published six years after the first Pan African Congress
convened in Niagara Falls and one year after Carter G. Woodson founded the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (1915) and the same year Marcus Garvey left Jamaica for New York, where he founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association and eventually launched the “Back to Africa” movement, the largest of its kind in U.S. History. Garvey had been inspired by Booker T. Washington’s *Up From Slavery*, which along with his travels in the Caribbean and Central America had made him keenly aware of the transnational suffering of black people. Eleven years later, when Garvey was deported, Laura Adorkor Kofey, “a prophetess of black pride, self-help, and African repatriation” founded the African Universal Church, a rival organization to the UNIA, and named herself “Warrior Mother of Africa’s Warriors” of God. Kofey concentrated her efforts in the US South and Southwest. Though her and Garvey’s efforts were treated as the fringe movements of demagogues, their followings suggested that their ideas found resonance among blacks throughout the country. Jones’s work affirms in an important way that Africa as a place to pursue the unfulfilled dreams of African Americans was engaged before Garvey or Kofey attempted to organize a mass physical exodus of American blacks to Africa.

As Jones could not have relied on Garvey or Kofey for inspiration, Jones’s Africa-centered reflections most readily mirrored the professional interests and spiritual aspirations of black women in the post-reconstruction south from various religious denominations. Black women of the African Methodist Episcopal Church could easily have imagined working in Africa, as the AME’s thirteenth and fourteenth districts included conferences in Sierra Leone, Liberia, South Africa, Transvaal, Cape Colony, and Orange Free State. Pioneering Pentecostal evangelist and Houston resident Lucy Farrow, Frederick Douglass’s niece, also conducted missionary work in Africa in the early 1900s. Jones’s attention to Africa may have been further nurtured by the collective missionary efforts of black southern women, including Emma B. Delaney of Fernandina Beach,
Florida; Susie M. Taylor of Camden, South Carolina; and Elisa L. Davis of Texas, whose efforts spanned from 1901 to 1920 and included stages in Grand Bassa and Monrovia, Liberia, and in the African interior. All were trained at Northern Baptist-affiliated colleges with active missions programs, including Shaw (Raleigh, NC), Virginia Union (Richmond, VA), Spelman (Atlanta, GA) and Morehouse (Atlanta, GA).

Jones's most immediate exposure probably came from her education at Bishop College, established by the American Baptist Home Mission Society, and by her involvement in the National Baptist Convention, a predominantly black Baptist organization. Her involvement in the two institutions also made her awareness of the politics of race and the role that Africa played in this conundrum. Bishop College had been a site of racial strife among white Baptists of the American Baptist Home Mission Society and the Texas black Baptist convention. The American Baptist Home Mission Society supported Bishop College, established in Marshall, Texas, in 1881 by the philanthropic efforts of Carolina Caldwell Bishop, wife of Nathan Bishop, the New York native, and superintendent of the Providence, Rhode Island, and Boston, Massachusetts, school systems who envisioned the college’s establishment. But the society denied support to Guadalupe College, established by the black Baptist convention in Seguin, Texas. The American Baptist Home Mission Society argued that it supported only one school per state. Their position did not sit well with black Baptists in Texas since they supported both schools. Though the American Baptist supported missions to Africa, the Southern Baptist Convention did not at this early date. Based on the Texas Constitution of 1866, black Texans had never ceased being “Africans.” There was little need to cross the Atlantic with so many “Africans and their descendants” already in the midst.

The perception of the black south at a “Little Africa” persisted throughout the Jim Crow era and was shared by many African Americans as well. As late as the 1950s, Arenia C. Mallory of the Church of God in Christ admitted that she wanted to do
missionary work in Africa but was reminded by her mother that she had a "Little Africa" down South that could use her services. Dr. Mallory then used her abilities to help establish an educational institution, All Saints Junior College, an offshoot of which still exists in Mississippi. Similarly, Mary McCloud Bethune (1875-1955) had a revelation also that she would become a missionary in Africa a year before she completed her studies at Maysville Institute, a school established for black children in Maysville, South Carolina, at Trinity Presbyterian Church, a black congregation affiliated with the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. Bethune's hopes were quickly dashed when the Presbyterian Church refused to send her. After counseling and much soul-searching, she concluded that she had misinterpreted her vision and redirected her energies to establish a college for southern black girls, a dream realized in Bethune-Cookman College. Africa, then, was on the minds of African American women even when their efforts unfolded in the continental U.S., suggesting the perceived tension between Africa here or abroad that Jones attempted to flesh out in her creative work.

In the world Jones created, African American women played significant roles as mothers, missionaries, teachers, and visionaries in the intergenerational transference of hope and intent. Visions of Africa were a spiritual inheritance and legacy passed down from mother to daughter. For example, Missionary Violet Gray, the daughter of a single mother and white father, journeyed to Africa because her mother simply could not go, and Miss Noble, now resigned to helping "Africans" in Texas, nevertheless hopes her daughters will grow up to emulate Missionary Violet Gray and make literal purposeful trips to the continent of Africa. Visions of Africa were also divinely inspired and confirmed or interpreted by spiritual black women within the community. After Grace Noble shared her dream with Missionary Violet Gray, the latter convinced Noble that her immediate purpose was to liberate the African American masses first through her writings. Noble felt that her own efforts paled when compared to Gray's, but the missionary reassured Grace
that everyone had a place and contribution to make, with Noble’s contribution being her ability to write. Noble eventually shared her dream, making it clear at the outset that the contemporary trials of African Americans had induced her despair. Noble’s dream echoed both Christ’s iconic wilderness journey as well as the spiritual journeys to Africa that were prevalent in African American folklore. Noble’s vision fell shy of the imperialist bent that often predominated black male discourse on Africa. But it nonetheless affirmed just how removed Jones the writer and the characters she created were from Africa, as well as the degree to which the “white man’s” civilization had become the model to which American blacks and Africans should aspire:

I saw a people, a black people, tilling the soil with a song of real joy on their lips. I saw a civilization like the white man’s about us today but in his place stood another of a different hue. I beheld beautifully paved streets, handsome homes beautified and adorned, and before the doors sported dusky boys and girls. I seemed to be able to penetrate the very walls of business establishments and see that men and women of color were commercially engaged one with the other.

Upon hearing Miss Noble’s dream, Missionary Gray posed a question underscoring another contemporary concern among black intellectuals of the era—black survival and “amalgamation”. Noble assured Gray that her worries were unfounded and then proceeded to outline the psychological damage exacted by a system, one that ultimately undermined the self-esteem of black children. The argument Jones’s fictional character forwarded presaged one Kenneth Clark later used in Brown v. the Board of Education (1954) to help dismantle Jim Crow:

[T]he very laws and the amalgamation so abhorred are our safeguards that the perpetuation of race is
assured....As a separate and distinct people we have a destiny to weave and no force, oppression or amalgamation can deter that edict of God....Side by side the contrast is too great, the Negro ejects little originality in his dress, manner or custom because his training has ever been, that all that is lovely and desiring belong to the white man and being an easy going people he chooses to mimic rather than originate. This brings him into the contempt of his white neighbor and with it a feeling of superiority and monopoly.22

But away from these influences, where the little Negro maiden needs not to compare her little blue-eyed blonde doll baby with her “nigger boy”; divorced from the cry that our correct temperature must be taken by a physician of the opposite race; a few less bosses to advance us money for food and to bury our dead, yes away, from these conditions Negroes can see each others virtues. gain self-respect and learn the great lesson of self-reliance as a race.23

The political core of Noble’s dream and interpretation affirms that a black woman’s assessment of the “Negro Problem” could be as insightful as those of Jones’s male contemporaries, although she had to “create” a male to test her theory. Lemuel, a black farmer laden with debt who simply could not find his way in the segregationist South, was among the first to read Miss Noble’s political piece and embrace its vision for repatriation to Africa. Reaffirming the author’s call for self-sufficiency, he paid his debt with Grace Noble’s help, became a landowner, and then made his journey to Africa. Lemuel’s decision to leave may have seemed far-fetched, but it too had historical precedent. In the 1870s, for example, 274 African American men, women, and children from Georgia set sail for Africa, with 256 surviving the journey. Of the more than 57 male heads of household landing in Liberia, 40 were farmers,24 and most cited racial discrimination and disenfranchisement and the opportunity to experience greater political and social freedom as motivations for their journeys.
That Jones expressed her ideas through fiction as opposed to nonfiction, however, reaffirms that conventional social standards deemed political philosophy to be men's business and therefore outside women's sphere of influence. After all, women could not vote when Jones's novel was published. Jones nonetheless found a creative way to try; she used her intellectual power and position as a teacher to suggest Africa as a place possibility for individuals if not for the masses. The political crux of the heart-to-heart conversation she created between two black women intellectuals affirmed that what Africa was to them merited a multi-generational answer that they were capable of providing.

Endnotes


2 Lillian Bertha Horace, Diary, 36.

3 I have presented on the Lillian B. Horace Papers at conferences sponsored by the East Texas Historical Association (Fall 2003, 2004); Texas State Historical Association (2004), Modern and Ethnic Literature of the United States (2004), and Association of African American Life and History (2004, 2006), and at “Celebrating Lillian B. Jones Horace and Other Extraordinary Women of the Jim Crow Era,” a symposium held at Texas Southern University, March 6-7, 2009. I have also published a biographical sketch on Horace for Harvard University’s *African American National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2008). The Lillian B. Horace Papers are held by the Tarrant County Black Genealogical and Historical Society, Fort Worth, TX.


6 The following papers were presented at the annual meeting of


13 See Sandy D. Martin in This Far by Faith, 225.


21 Lillian B. Jones, Five Generations Hence, 49.

22 Lillian B. Jones, Five Generations Hence, 50.

23 Lillian B. Jones, Five Generations Hence, 51.