



CHARLOTTE OSGOOD MASON: POLITICS OF MISREPRESENTATION

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In Harlem Renaissance studies, the mention of Charlotte Osgood Mason incites suspicion of the wealthy widow who plunged herself into the world of black culture and art during the late 1920's. Fascinated by the elevated spirituality she attributed to "primitive" peoples like Native Americans and African Americans, Mason invested her considerable monetary and social resources in the research, writing, music and art of blacks during the Harlem Renaissance—the age of "Harlemaniacs," and "Negrotarians," when white interest in black artistic and popular culture skyrocketed. Mason forged relationships (personal, financial, or both) with poet Langston Hughes, author Zora Neale Hurston, and that power broker of black culture, Alain Locke. Preferring to remain an anonymous voice, Mason insisted that the artists she patronized refer to her only as "Godmother."

Very few first-hand accounts of the influential patron exist—exactly how, it appears, she would have wanted it. Hailed as "one of the mysteries of the Harlem Renaissance," Mason's presence in modern Harlem Renaissance scholarship consists of correspondences, legal contracts and social lore cobbled together (Hemenway 104). Biographers and critics

traditionally fault Mason for her essentialist fascination with a primitiveness unspoiled by Western society. However, resistance to Mason as a white patron of black artists proves troublesome in light of a simultaneous racial uplift movement that was at times largely dependent on allegedly essential, redemptive “black” qualities. Her confidante, scholar Alain Locke, adhered to a political agenda determined to advance “the Negro in his essential traits, in the full perspective of his achievement and possibilities” (Locke ix).

Mason selected the artists she funded based on their potential to artistically express the primitivism she believed to be inextricably linked to the African race. She provided stipends for the travels and lifestyle of writers Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes, and she frequently edited their work. Both Hurston and Hughes broach the subject of patronage and Godmother in their autobiographies, *Dust Tracks on a Road* and *The Big Sea*. Hurston and Hughes biographers Robert Hemenway and Arnold Rampersad, respectively, weigh in on the conditions and effects of Mason’s involvement as white patron. In this paper I will explore how portrayals of Mason by modern scholars like Hemenway, Rampersad, and other Harlem Renaissance anthologists and critics reflect the conflicting agendas that exist in Harlem Renaissance studies when compared to the autobiographical works of Hurston and Hughes.

In her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Zora Neale Hurston writes simply that her “relations with Godmother were curious” (175). Although she devotes relatively little space to the patron-artist relationship with Mason, Hurston offers a brief glimpse at their unique bond. The vivacious young author and the elderly, white heiress might seem to have little in common, but Hurston claims the “extremely human” Mason was “just as pagan as I. She had lived for years among the Plains Indians and had collected a beautiful book of Indian lore” (176). (Mason’s interest in so-called primitive peoples uncorrupted by western culture began with Native Americans and extended to African Americans.) “She is altogether in sympa-

thy with [the Negroes],” Hurston claims, “because she says truthfully they are utterly sincere in living” (177).

This notion of sincerity became the yardstick against which Mason judged all of Hurston’s work:

Godmother could be as tender as mother-love when she felt that you had been right spiritually. But anything in you, however clever, that felt like insincerity to her, called forth her well-known “This is nothing! It has no soul in it. You have broken the law!” (177)

Hurston quickly learned Mason was capable of “cutting off your outer pretenses, and bleeding your vanity like a rusty nail” when she sensed “a lie, spoken, acted or insinuated.” Godmother could be a harsh critic, but to Hurston she remained “an earnest patron of the arts” (177). Although she had “a great deal to talk about,” with Mason and her assistants Cornelia Chapin (a sculptor) and Katherine Biddle (a poet), Hurston admits to sometimes feeling “like a rabbit at a dog convention.” Only after a “proper straightening,” and assurance that she “saw the light,” did the three women lavish praise and attention on Hurston (176).

Beginning with their first meeting in New York in September 1927, Hurston and Mason forged an intimate friendship. Hurston believed “there was and is a psychic bond between us. She could read my mind, not only when I was in her presence, but thousands of miles away” (175). Many miles did indeed test their bond when, in 1928, the arthritic Mason offered to fund Hurston’s return to the south for an anthropological study of black folklore and culture on her behalf. Godmother provided a car, a two hundred dollar per month stipend, and a camera; Zora signed a contractual agreement that all her research was Mason’s property (Hemenway 105).

Mason’s insistence that Hurston “tell the tales, sing the songs, do the dances, and repeat the raucous sayings and doings of the Negro farthest down” allowed Hurston to redeem herself from past failures in her anthropological studies but clearly limited the extent to which she might celebrate her

newfound success (Hurston 177). Godmother owned the rights to her research and directed it from afar. At times, Hurston felt “that she ought not to exert herself to supervise every little detail. It destroys my self respect.” However, she quickly followed this complaint to Hughes with a reminder that “I do care for her deeply, don’t forget that” (Kaplan 157).

Hurston may have played into Mason’s vision of herself as spiritual guide, as when she addresses her in a letter as “dearest, little mother of the primitive world” (Kaplan 123). Gratitude bordering on groveling peppers her missives to Godmother in New York while she traveled the south:

I am afraid that I am helplessly crude, Godmother darling. Please don’t let my clumsiness distress you too keenly. My wish is not to shorten your years and make miserable your days. Just the opposite. Don’t pay me no mind. In your magnificence, shut your eyes and ears to my crudities, and focus your glasses on my tiny goodnesses. That is the inner courtesy, of which you are the high priestess. I mean to give you pleasure always. (Kaplan 242)

Although the two women remained close during Hurston’s travels, Alain Locke often acted as intermediary between Mason and Hurston. Hurston herself saw both Locke and close friend and fellow godchild Langston Hughes as parts to an artistic whole. In one letter to Locke, Hurston notes, “I was very happy to hear from you. I had just had a letter from both Godmother and Langston so the circuit is complete” (Kaplan 118). The overlapping, and eventually undercutting, relationships of these four individuals impact modern portrayals of Mason’s role in the Harlem Renaissance.

Robert Hemenway, writing in *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*, extrapolates on Hurston’s letters, autobiography and secondary sources, vividly portraying Mason’s influence on the author’s career. The contract that paid for Hurston’s journey south and provided for Mason’s sole ownership of the resulting research “reveals much about the nature of white patronage for black artists during the twenties” (105). He grants

that it allowed Hurston to reassert herself as an anthropologist, but argues, “it also eventually led to dependency and bitterness” (105). Emphasizing the extent to which she was beholden to Mason, Hemenway relieves Hurston of much responsibility at all for her choice to cooperate with the wealthy patron. After all, “Hurston can hardly be blamed for pursuing the one source of funding open to her” (108). She needed Mason’s support, a need that was “quite material, and Hurston knew it, whether she admitted it to herself or not” (108). Financial entanglements, for Hemenway, defined Mason’s relationships with the artists she supported. “The problem with Mrs. Mason, as perhaps with all patrons,” he sweepingly proclaims, “was that she expected some return on her money. In Hurston’s case it was a report on the aboriginal sincerity of rural southern black folk; in Hughes’s, it was the beating of tom-tom’s in the breast of the urban black poet” (107).

Indeed, Langston Hughes provides further material for Hemenway’s rendering of Mason. “When a rich woman is interested in a person’s work,” he writes, referring to their first meeting on Park Avenue, “pressing fifty-dollar bills into his hands without asking anything in return, it is not easy to see the self-satisfaction she needs” (107). While Hemenway doubts Hughes’s ability to grasp Mason’s motives in the moment, he posits, “it is from the vantage of history that Mrs. Mason’s kindnesses take on their clearest pattern” (107). Here he seems to claim for himself an ahistorical clarity on the roots and results of Mason’s “kindnesses.”

Clearly, Mason impressed Hughes at their first meeting in much the same way that she entranced Hurston. In his autobiography *The Big Sea*, he describes their first meeting in her spacious Park Avenue apartment, “with attendants in livery at the door and a private elevator landing” (234). Dazzled by the sprawling view of New York below and the display of wealth within, Hughes recounts his initial impressions of Mason:

I found her instantly one of the most delightful women I had ever met, witty and charming, kind and sympathetic,

very old and white-haired, but amazingly modern in her ideas, in her knowledge of books and theater, of Harlem, and of everything then taking place in the world. (234)

At the end of that meeting, “she pressed something into my hand. . . . It was a fifty-dollar bill” (234). Mutually charmed, Mason saw in Hughes a poet capable of expressing the precious primitiveness of his people, and Hughes “was fascinated by her, and . . . loved her” (236).

In Mason Hughes found a towering philanthropic figure, creating and supporting “imposing institutions and important new trends in thought and art” (236). As a young woman, “she had been a power . . . in many movements adding freedom and splendor to life in American” (235). Awed by the scope of her influence, Hughes told Mason that he wanted to write a novel and, not surprisingly, “she told me she would make it possible for me to write that novel” (235). And so Mason became Hughes’s patron. In 1927, she paid his summer expenses during vacation from Lincoln University, so Hughes could pen a draft of *Not Without Laughter*. Grudgingly he refers to Mason as “my patron (a word neither of us liked)” (235).

After publishing *Not Without Laughter*, Hughes lost interest in writing, without realizing that “my not writing a while mattered so much to the kind and generous woman who was caring for my welfare” (237). Unlike Hurston, Hughes never entered into a formal legal agreement with Mason; as a result, the terms of their relationship were murky. “She hadn’t told me that I must always write and write,” he protests, “and I felt sure she knew that sometimes . . . a writer does not feel like writing” (235). Once Mason began to support him, Hughes entered a charmed world unlike anything he had ever experienced. “Happy and amused,” he frequented venues such as the Metropolitan Opera House and Carnegie Hall to attend “the hit plays and latest musicals, often with my patron” (237). Mason supervised not only his professional life as purveyor of pure Negro art, but dictated the social comings and goings that influenced it. Ironically enough, when she removed

Hughes's worries over his next paycheck, she took with it his need to write. For the first time, he was ready "really to enjoy life" instead of focusing so intensely on his poetry (237).

As Mason heaped comfort and wealth upon him, however, Hughes's guilt grew. In the face of the Depression, "I got so I didn't like to go to dinner on luxurious Park Avenue—and come out and see people hungry on the streets" (Hughes 239). In the poem "Advertisement for the Waldorf-Astoria," he attacks gaudy wealth in the face of black urban suffering. Mason, he recalls, conceded, "It's a powerful poem! But it's not you" (Hughes 242). It detracted from her goal for him "to be primitive and know and feel the institutions of the primitive" (Hughes 243). Black but American, devoted but torn, Hughes could not deliver.

In *The Big Sea*, Hughes elaborates on Mason's motives for her patronage of black artists. As "America's great link with the primitive," Negroes "had something very precious to give to the Western World." The artists she funded, Hurston and Hughes included, captivated Mason with their potential to give this precious gift of spirituality:

She felt that there was mystery and mysticism and spontaneous harmony in their souls, but that many of them had let the white world pollute and contaminate that mystery and harmony, and make of it something cheap and ugly commercial and, as she said, 'white.' She felt that we had a deep well of the spirit within us and that we should keep it pure and deep. (Hughes 236)

Mason's narrow vision for Hughes's writing slowly and painfully constricted him, and their relationship began to disintegrate. Privileging his American citizenship above primitive ties to Africa, he pleads, "I was only an American Negro—who had loved the surface of Africa and the rhythms of Africa—but I was not Africa" (243). Hughes conflates their multiple quarrels and protracted parting into one excruciating "last half-hour in the big bright drawing room high above Park Avenue one morning." When Hughes "asked kindly to be released

from any further obligation to her,” but begged to retain Mason’s friendship, she rebuffed him and “in the end it all came back very near to the old impasse of white and Negro again . . . as do most relationships in America” (243).

Arnold Rampersad, in *The Life of Langston Hughes*, traces in great detail the development of Hughes’s relationship with Mason by filling in the historical details that *The Big Sea* either glosses over or omits. Consistent with *The Big Sea*, he illustrates the irony of Hughes’s comfortable financial situation under Mason’s care.

Entering college, Langston had given up much of his haunting sense of loneliness and isolation for the benefits of community. He was being tamed. Although she wanted exactly the opposite, Godmother’s nurturing love was lulling her boy into a sweet drowse from which he only fitfully started. (161)

When he did start from his dreamy state, Hughes grew weary of the pressure to produce. “Both contented and oppressed,” he adjusted well to his new lifestyle of parties, plays and travel (167). “The need to write, to perform for Mrs. Mason, began to tax Hughes” but he remained “suppliant to her wishes” (167). Here, Rampersad recounts Hughes’s own descriptions of literary malaise in terms of primitiveness, implied by his very “taming.”

Curiously, Rampersad believes “only one thing suggests that Godmother’s patronage stirred feelings of guilt in Hughes: he sometimes complained about feeling vaguely ill, undernourished, and weak in the blood” (159). In fact, Hughes expresses feelings of guilt in *The Big Sea* not once, but three separate times, writing that he felt “bad”—for not sharing more of his newfound wealth with his mother (237), for riding in a town car with Mason when most blacks *and* whites were walking (238), and for the exclusion of “Negroes” from the luxurious new Waldorf-Astoria hotel (240). Rampersad, meanwhile, suggests that Hughes’s illness might belie another motive. “Since Langston enjoyed Godmother’s maternal atten-

tion,” he speculates, “perhaps he unconsciously tried to arouse it” (159). Rampersad’s vaguely psychoanalytical musings complicate Hughes’s experiences as he records them in his autobiography.

Rampersad’s caustic descriptions of Mason’s controlling behavior hint at his condemnation of the demands she placed on Hughes. “Godmother reasserted her authority with a firm tug at her golden hook in Langston’s mouth,” when she demanded repeated accounts of how Hughes spent money she sent him (167). He depicts Mason “snapping her whip” at Hughes and alleges that *Not Without Laughter* was “wrung from him by Godmother” (175). Characterizations like this, of course, are not unfounded. Rampersad points out that Louise Thompson, typist for Hughes and Hurston during their collaborative stay at Westfield, noted Mason’s demanding ways. Hughes relayed a particularly bitter falling-out with Mason, after Locke alleged a lack of productivity in the house: “The way she talked to Langston,’ Louise Thompson would remember from Hughes’s account later that day, ‘is the way a woman talks when she’s keeping a pimp” (Rampersad 185).

Hughes could not easily keep up with Mason’s constant demand for new material; she “would not be satisfied forever with selections from his fan mail, which he sent to her as proof of his effectiveness, or with bits of trees, sheaves of corn, valentines, or honeyed letters.” Rather, as Rampersad indelicately puts it, “Godmother wanted Langston to put out, but her intensity often made him weak and tense” (167). Rampersad’s characterization of the artist/patron relationship as “Hughes’s pathetic enslavement by Mrs. Mason” leaves relatively little doubt as to his position as Hughes’s biographer (200). He cannot resist a dig at Mason’s alleged telepathic communication with her godchildren, explaining that while she stayed in Europe, “Mason provided \$92 for certain special expenses such as trans-Atlantic cables to her when telepathy proved inadequate” (163).

As a kind of conclusion to Hughes’s relationship with Mason after their last falling out, Rampersad passes final judg-

ment on all involved parties. Zora Neale Hurston attempted to publish her collaborative effort with Hughes, a play titled *Mule Bone*, and in the dispute Mason and Locke turned on him as well.

Nor was Hurston's self-deception less excusable than Mrs. Mason's abuse of her wealth, race, age, and intelligence in so torturing the lives of her blacks. In her case, the mitigating factors were that she exhibited a mental power so volatile, and cherished notions about Africa so novel for her class and race, that her inability to control herself was perhaps finally excusable. Only Locke's behavior was almost entirely reprehensible. For all his great learning he was a slippery character, too fond of intrigue and of the pleasures that Mrs. Mason's money assured. (200)

Rampersad dismisses Hurston as delusional and Mason as a heartless tyrant; he reserves his harshest condemnation for Locke, who he views as representative of the worst of the patronage power struggle in his ability to pander to both sides of the patron dynamic. A Rhodes Scholar and professor of philosophy at Howard University, Locke agreed with Mason on the value of black art in racial uplift. As editor of the Harlem issue of the *Survey Graphic* magazine, he sifted through contributions looking for "highly polished stuff, preferably about polished people, but certainly untainted by racial stereotypes or embarrassing vulgarity" (Lewis 95).

Although they served slightly different agendas—Mason demanded from Hurston the very "nitty-gritty music, prose, and verse" Locke rejected—the two maintained their close partnership until Mason's death in 1946 (Lewis 95). Rampersad seizes on this ability of Locke to foster profitable relationships with Mason, Hughes, and Hurston—only to cast Hughes aside during the *Mule Bone* rift to maintain his comfortable position with Mason. This quality did not go unnoticed by Hurston, who decided "the trouble with Locke . . . is that he is intellectually dishonest. He is too eager to be with the winner" (Rampersad 183).

Drawing from autobiographical materials as well as biographies like Hemenway's and Rampersad's, modern scholars of the Harlem Renaissance attempt to encapsulate and characterize Mason's complicated relationships with Locke, Hurston and Hughes. David Levering Lewis admits in *When Harlem Was In Vogue* that "so little is known today about Mrs. R. Osgood Mason . . . that she seems almost a composite of some of the characters in Renaissance fiction" (151). Seemingly intent to draw his own Mason-like character, Lewis builds on Hughes's description of her imposing, elevated chair resembling a royal throne. Mason's "votive primitives" would gather to share their work, show their art, and receive glowing praise or sharp criticism from the "regal husk, seated in a large, ornate chair" (Lewis 151). Locke's role as adviser and mediator for Mason lands him the title of "chamberlain in the Park Avenue court of Charlotte Osgood Mason" (Lewis 151).

For their part, the wealthy and influential society types, "Chapins and Biddles bustled about the old lady like courtiers," and Mason's "penthouse as 399 Park Avenue was so vast as to match" (Lewis 151). Members of her "collection," like Hurston and Hughes, were of course forbidden from calling her by name—a rule Hughes follows in *The Big Sea* and Hurston flaunts in *Dust Tracks on a Road*. "Godmother demanded that her subjects never mention her name to others without permission," and violators faced certain "banishment" from the metaphorical kingdom Lewis creates (151).

Lewis commits to the image of Mason as a royal drunk on her own power, portraying artist Aaron Douglas as a "retainer in Mason's court," Miguel Covarrubias accepting "her summons" and Hurston transferring "her allegiance" from Fannie Hurst to Mason (152). Meanwhile, Alain Locke's "bondage to Charlotte Mason, despite patronizing lectures and occasional acts of rank tyranny, was more apparent than real" (154). Mason's "power to command could be awesome," and one of her dreams was to open a Harlem museum, "a temple to the glories of Africa's past" (152).

Lewis lingers on Locke's relationship to Mason, postulat-

ing that “chamberlain was probably alternately amused and bored stiff by Mason’s nostrums; and he was frankly irritated by the old lady’s anti-Semitism, going so far as to remind her once that Afro-Americans suffered because of similar prejudices” (Lewis 155). He planned to “use Mason’s money to prove how like well-bred, intelligent whites well-bred intelligent Afro-Americans were,” however “Mason’s expectations of her chamberlain were quite different” (Lewis 154). In fact, she urged him to “slough off white culture,” although it was the “last thing Locke could or would have done” (Lewis 154). Mason’s and Locke’s agendas seem to have intersected at one critical point—a desire to filter through the Harlem Renaissance’s cultural offerings until they found examples of essential black traits capable of redeeming an entire population of oppressed people.

Steven Watson, in *The Harlem Renaissance: Hub of African-American Culture, 1920-1930*, locates a craving for control in both Mason’s and Locke’s dealing with Hurston and Hughes. Both “thrived on exercising their covert power to pilot the course of African-American culture.” Mason believed that the “further down on the ladder of class . . . the greater an individual’s chance of attaining virtue,” untainted by white society and in touch with their inherent primitiveness. Locke, however, sought racial uplift in empowering, propagandistic rhetoric that was representative of essential black qualities. Ironically, Mason “sometimes considered his manners too much like those of white people” (Watson 146).

Mason, along with the controversial Carl Van Vechten, tops Watson’s list as “simply the most prominent within the small army that Zora Neale Hurston dubbed the ‘Negrotarians’” (95). In many ways this 1995 publication takes its cues from Lewis’s *When Harlem Was in Vogue*. Watson summarizes the culture of white patronage, noting “only a small minority of this group contributed money to Negro causes; historian David Levering Lewis described them as ‘Salon Negrotarians’” (95). However, while Mason and Van Vechten shared an intense interest in black culture, Mason’s motives and methods were dis-

tinct. In fact, Watson reports that she felt she was saving her godchildren “from the spurious, commercial temptations of white society—for Van Vechten, Jews, and Harlemaniacs represented to her something very like the devil and his court of satyrs” (147). Hughes, too, viewed his Mason as unique among white patrons. Rampersad cites a letter to Van Vechten in which Hughes refers to Lincoln University as “‘a charming winter resort and country club, but not much of a college,’ a place ‘dominated by white philanthropy, well-meaning but dumb’” (170).

Watson’s literary tour of Harlem Renaissance patronage lingers on Mason’s patronage, promising a “mixture of support and dependency” self-evident in “her symbiotic relations with her two most promising protégés, Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston” (147). Instead of these purportedly “symbiotic” relationships, Watson delivers an account of patronage that “exact[ed] the more debilitating tolls of dependency, control, and infantilization” (146). Like Lewis, he focuses on Mason’s interest in the primitive and the manipulative struggle for artistic control with Hughes and Hurston. “Inseparable from her tyranny,” he writes, “was her warm encouragement and material nourishment” (148).

Critical treatments of patronage like Ralph Story’s “Patronage and the Harlem Renaissance: You Get What You Pay For,” seem also to take their cues from the widely accepted literary tradition of Mason as a flat character easily recognizable by her distorted views on blacks and tyrannical control of black artists. Story’s article ties together two critical threads: a suspicion of white interference in black art (like Mason’s), and a call to right the wrongs of white Harlem Renaissance patronage by establishing black financial and literary support for black artists as the only means to create *representative* black art.

Story addresses the encroachment of white interlopers on black art in terms of Harlem Renaissance patronage. “As David Levering Lewis contends in his informative and entertaining *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (1981),” he begins, “patronage was widespread but rarely if ever admitted” (286). Although “it is

impossible to say that the art produced by black Americans between 1920 and 1932 would have ever made it into print without the support of rich whites,” he follows a familiar line of questioning (285). What drove wealthy white people to become financially involved in black culture, art and racial uplift? Story supplies writer Claude McKay’s answer: “I don’t think it ever occurred to them that perhaps such white individuals were searching for a social and artistic significance in Negro art which they could not find in their own society” (287). Indeed Mason’s search “was just as much a matter of Lost Generation sentiment for things primitive and ‘natural’ . . . as it was an open acknowledgement of black creativity” (286). For Story, self-serving motives temper any genuine interest in black culture and social justice on Mason’s part.

Story extends his interrogation of patron/artist relations even further when he begins to wonder about the fate of black artists if not for white patronage.

For the Harlem Renaissance writers and painters, once they agreed to a patron-artist relationship—especially a financial one—it seemed to obligate them to produce a certain kind of a product that would meet the patron(s)’ approval. Hence, it is difficult to imagine just what kind of art might have been produced had not the artists been under such covert pressure to please their supporters. (289)

Calling for “art and artists” to become “independent and autonomous,” Story attempts to elucidate the lessons to be learned from white patronage during the Harlem Renaissance. He acknowledges that artists without “financial ties to white patrons” faced obscurity with the onset of the Great Depression, but insinuates that white influences somehow tainted the art produced by luminaries like Hughes and Hurston. “If their work is to be inspirational and truly representative . . . and if they desire art about themselves that is uplifting and seeks to deliver the ‘truth,’” he posits that black people today must financially support and publish “their people” (294–5).

Story's indignation at white appropriation of black art seeks a clear division of black and white cultural property as its resolution. Only black writing, containing essential black "truth," supported by blacks can "be honest and uplifting" (295). Such essentializing and potentially divisive language subtly undermines Story's critique of Mason's and other white patrons' interest in inherent, primitive qualities of black people.

The *American National Biography* provides a more even-handed rendering of Mason than the biographers, historians and scholars discussed above. Charlotte and her husband Rufus Osgood Mason, it states, "shared views that were somewhat unorthodox for the time." Mr. Mason published several books on his experiments "in the use of hypnosis and telepathy for medical treatment," which were "influenced in part by his wife's interest in mystical and psychic phenomena" (Deutsch 640). Here *Biography* takes pains to provide a clearer understanding of Mason's lifelong fascination with all people and things mystical and spiritual—a fascination including, but not limited to, African Americans and the Harlem Renaissance.

Perhaps most significantly, Mason's *Biography* entry labels assumptions perpetuated by David Levering Lewis and his successors, as such:

Although Mason has been praised for sharing her wealth, her motives and her obsession with the primitive have been criticized by some as essentially racist. . . . However it should be noted that mason's interest in Native Americans and African Americans seems consistent with her earlier beliefs in the mystical world. . . . Mason genuinely sought spiritual nourishment and inspiration from the "native harmony" of American Indians and blacks. (Deutsch 641)

While this disclaimer was probably not intended as a critical intervention on behalf of Mason, it does identify a circumscribed understanding of her role in Harlem Renaissance scholarship.

Ever ready to vilify Mason and dismiss her as delusional tyrant, scholars have attacked her essentialist views—glossing over the fact that not only other whites, but prominent black leaders like Alain Locke and even modern scholars like Story, share the wealthy patron’s tendency toward essentialist thinking.

A concluding footnote to Mason’s biography confirms that “the most detailed information on her life is in the autobiographies and biographies of the major Harlem Renaissance figures she patronized” (Deutsch 641). And although “Mason achieved much of the anonymity and obscurity that she seems to have sought, even avoiding a published obituary in the *New York Times*,” tracing her portrayal through autobiographical, biographical and other scholarly accounts reveals a loss of the nuances of complex human relationships and the evolution of an immediately recognizable caricature—a white-haired, racist tyrant perched high atop her throne. Inseparable in Harlem Renaissance studies from her search for spiritual illumination through the art of primitive peoples, Mason has come to typify the evils of white patronage in the face of essentialist agendas for racial uplift that extend from Harlem Renaissance leaders like Alain Locke to modern scholarship on the age of the New Negro.

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