Cary Nelson: On "The Harlem Dancer"

An objectifying look or verbal representation does not preclude a variety of other perspectives; indeed it is both a form of celebratory play and a form of concentration that can be empathic. That may be the case, for example, in Claude McKay's 1917 "The Harlem Dancer". . . Of course there is no guarantee that the speaker in the poem reads the dancer's feelings accurately, facial expressions being notoriously open to multiple interpretation. Gender here is caught up in other systems of value—as it necessarily always is—and here those other values include the moral system that frames the poem and prejudges the prostitutes and the night club or brothel setting. Nonetheless, McKay does insist that the dancer is both an admirable symbolic figure and an individual, dual recognitions crucial to the other context that energizes this text—race. The phrase "grown lovelier for passing through a storm" reaches beyond her skilled triumph over the dance hall setting to reverberate throughout black history, or so the poem urges us to believe, and the dancer's pride and beauty stand for everything black Americans have won from adversity. Yet her mastery of the dance—along with its suggestions of materially constrained and compromised transcendence—is also specified and limited in a crucial way, for she has triumphed at the historical intersection of gender and race. Indeed, gender and race here are inseparable from history; they are social values, not unchanging essences.

If McKay's poem is somewhat compromised by its unselfconsciously judgmental opening and closing lines (and by a formalism that does not altogether serve this subject well), one finds few compromising elements in Langston Hughes's poems about women.