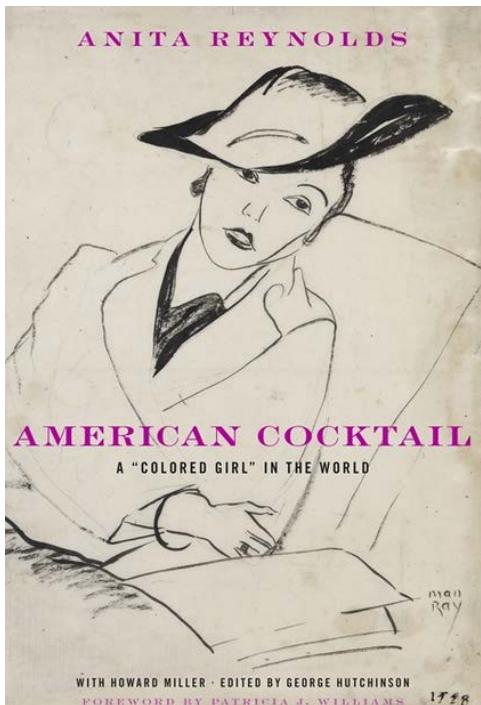


Book Review

A “Colored Girl” in the World

“American Cocktail” by Anita Reynolds with Howard M. Miller

By Eric Martone



American Cocktail is the memoir of Anita Reynolds (1901-1980) emphasizing her life during the 1930s. Since the era was one of limited opportunities and inequality for African-Americans in general (not to mention women), Reynolds’ life rubbing elbows with many of the era’s celebrated cultural figures—including James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, E.E. Cummings, Claude McKay, Gertrude Stein, Charlie Chaplin, Douglas Fairbanks, Picasso, Matisse, Man Ray, and Coco Chanel—was certainly unique. Despite such associations, Reynolds’ name vanished into obscurity as she

assumed her *ordinary* life as the century progressed. The book’s title stemmed from a phrase Reynolds’ frequently employed to describe herself due to her mixed racial ancestry, but she also applied it to a short story collection by F. Scott Fitzgerald in a 1922 book review included among the appendices.

The book includes over 50 pages of introductory material from Patricia Williams and George Hutchinson focusing on the memoir’s value within American history. Of particular interest was “A Note on the Text,” in which we learn that Reynolds composed her memoir during the 1970s while married to a hotel owner and working as a psychologist and professor in the Caribbean. Hutchinson details the extraordinary story of the manuscript’s development, including Reynolds’ eventual collaboration with Howard Miller (then a young teacher and tenant). The forgotten manuscript came to be stored at Howard University, where it remained buried until Hutchinson stumbled upon it while researching Harlem Renaissance writer Nella Larsen.

The first part of the memoir, set primarily during Reynolds’ early years in Los Angeles, presents much information about the complexities surrounding the early twentieth-century middle-class African-American experience. Much of this information stemmed from her family’s role as private hosts for visiting African-American intellectuals, since many hotels refused to serve them. Through

these interactions, Reynolds noted the divisions amongst such intellectuals at the time, as African Americans struggled to be treated equally, as represented by W.E.B. Du Bois (a family guest) and Booker T. Washington. Further, since Reynolds' relatives lived across the United States, family visits provided her ample opportunity for fascinating comparative commentary on African-American experiences in the West Coast, Midwest, and East Coast.

Growing up, Reynolds demonstrated her desire to live life to its fullest and on her own terms. Not only did she have her first orgasm with another woman and some early love affairs with the likes of Ralph Bunche, she also began a short acting career that illuminates early African-Americans' contributions to film, including the limited and subservient Hollywood roles they were expected to play, and she danced on Broadway.

The bulk of the memoir documents Reynolds' time abroad (mostly France, North Africa, and England, with sojourns to Spain and Italy). In 1928, she used the money her father intended for support of her studies to go to Paris. There, Louise Bryant, who had chronicled the Russian Revolution with husband John Reed, became her "fairy godmother," introducing her to many Americans in Paris. She soon met artist Man Ray, her "Dutch uncle" (115, 127). Her life abroad was largely impacted by her series of three (relatively) steady significant others. Consequently, this section of her memoir can be informally divided into three parts: the Kristians Tonny years, the Charles Seller years, and the Guy de Chateaubriant years.

It was primarily through her relationship with artist Tonny that she met notable artists working in Paris, as well Gertrude Stein, who in turn introduced her to prominent literary figures. Through such associations, Reynolds contemplated becoming a writer and traveled to Morocco to get her creative juices flowing. In Morocco, Reynolds superficially identified

brewing colonial tensions and Westerners' exploitation of the local population. What she found most striking and enjoyable, however, was Tangier's cosmopolitanism.

Reynolds subsequently moved to England with new beau, Charles Seller, an English military officer. Although *married*, their union lacked legal validity since Seller's first wife had never consented to a divorce. Reynolds eventually left Charles to head to Spain at the onset of its Civil War. She then returned to France. She later fled France during the German invasion by entering Spain, where she boarded a boat to America. The memoir essentially ends in the early 1940s with her flight from German-controlled France. Supplementing the memoir are background notes and two appendices containing selections of Reynolds' publications and family correspondence.

Throughout her account, Reynolds seems incredulously to be in the right place, at the right time. The memoir runs similar to the adventures of young Indiana Jones, the future fictitious adventurer-archaeologist, chronicled in a 1990s television series. Set in the early twentieth century, Indiana Jones just happened to meet nearly every important global political and cultural figure that existed. Reynolds' memoir is, of course, not a fictional account, but many of the prominent names she drops within her memoir were at best acquaintances or individuals she met passingly at a social event. Consequently, it was likely hindsight that has ascribed significance to these encounters. Yet, name-dropping may have been a family habit as dubious filial traditions connected her and her family to historical figures like Anita Garibaldi and Napoleon.¹ Nevertheless, Reynolds' observations about her encounters with celebrated individuals, partially because of her background, are interesting.

Reynolds' memoir reflects the party-going, carefree attitude she then espoused. As a young adult experiencing continued freedom from

parental supervision, she experimented with her identity and enjoyed what life had to offer her. She was *sowing her wild oats*, although the fact that she was a woman—rather a man—doing this during the 1930s (and an African-American one to boot) made her actions exceptional. Her refusal to wed a specific racial identity or political ideology contributed to her experiences' uniqueness by allowing her to move amongst different social circles. However, she traveled and lived in her *own world*, inconsistently demonstrating interest in what was going on around her. As Reynolds admitted, “I leave it to the historians to record the exterior events of the time” (229). Her memoir can thus sometimes appear shallow or artificial. What Reynolds did have, however, was a penchant for describing places and locations. While these details come at the expense of historical contextual information, they nevertheless help recapture a bygone era. Therefore, the memoir is a valuable piece of social history, “a study of manners” (8).

American Cocktail, while an engaging memoir, is also a potentially useful supplemental source for educators seeking to incorporate a human perspective to courses focusing on twentieth-century global events and transformations. Shifts in scholarly focus since the memoir’s composition have made it highly relevant to current humanities and social science courses. During the 1990s, for example, Paul Gilroy’s monumental *The Black Atlantic* popularized notions of an Atlantic region—forged by the social, cultural, and economic links established through the Atlantic slave trade and New World empires—that could be studied historically by way of various disciplines. As the front matter asserts, Reynolds associated with the likes of her cousin, Langston Hughes, and Claude McKay, “whose forms of intellectual vagabondage have been at the center of many constructions of black transnational experience” (18). Reynolds’ memoir thus illuminates connections between black intellectuals within the Atlantic region and some of her opinions

toward these developments. At the same time, growing public awareness of globalization, expressed after the Cold War’s demise, encouraged scholars to think in broader regional or transnational terms. The Atlantic region as a topic of study became popular among academics, and is now a widely accepted unit of analysis. Reynolds’ story, a self-described “distillation of my memories of growing up a ‘colored girl’ in the United States, Europe and North Africa” (57), thus encompasses the Atlantic region and makes various transnational connections and observations. Reynolds’ views also reflect global (or cosmopolitan) sensibilities and burgeoning conceptions of global citizenship, that “the world’s getting smaller and smaller, all people are being mixed up—whether they want to be or not” and that the world needs to “get together” and form “one big family” (20, 35).

Some examples of the type of material educators could use to incorporate global connections within their humanities and social science curricula can be found by examining Reynolds’ controversial views on racism, non-western peoples and cultures, and Ottoman slavery. The positions she upholds do not correlate with those some might expect of her on the basis of her racial background, revealing how gender and/or class complicate matters.

Reynolds’ notion of racism was based on her American experiences. In relation to the United States, western Europe, devoid of institutionalized racism, seemed a land of equality. As a result, she claimed that in Paris she “had been accepted,” for there was “no discrimination” (113-114, 129). She was able to forget about “the disagreeable facets of American life...I was not reminded [daily] of the horrors of American lynchings” (128). Thus, she felt “embarrassed” when the wife of African-American actor Paul Robeson—who enjoyed a successful career in England—criticized British race relations. As Reynolds wrote, “She kept intimating that the British had the same color prejudice” as Americans, but “she surely would

never have been invited to an American bridge party with women of that class" (174). Nevertheless, in England, Reynolds is called a racial slur and she encountered the idea that "people who live in hot countries have thickened skulls and can't think as well"—a notion she light-heartedly dismissed as English quirkiness, rather than a reflection of wide-held erroneous western beliefs about why Africans and people of black descent were intellectually inferior (172, 193).

Reynolds enjoyed defying convention and deploying her mixed racial *exoticness* to her advantage, but she was nevertheless frequently subjected to forms of racism from acquaintances and lovers in which she was perceived as an object possessing certain exotic and sexual traits based on her appearance. These countless incidents are described in her memoir without identifying them as such. For example, her lover Guy de Chateaubriant told her that she "was his dream of the island child come true, the creole, the exotic girl of the [Caribbean] islands who could live with him in France in a civilized world and yet retain all the charm of the jungle" (224).

One would never guess, based on her memoir, that western Europe, particularly England and France, witnessed numerous race riots in the decades to come. Reynolds' perception about her treatment abroad was, however, commonplace amongst other African Americans then visiting Europe. Primitivism and African art/culture became fashionable as a reaction against the modernism that had led to the devastation of the First World War. African-Americans, linked to these *primitive* and *African* stereotypes, were often welcomed as exotic guests. This was why the French in particular were more ready to accept Reynolds' "being part Cherokee or Negro or Métisse than they were an American" (129). Only after World War II, when increased numbers of Caribbean, African, and Asian migrants began pouring into western European countries on a permanent

basis did a more recognizable form of racism reveal itself. African-American writer James Baldwin, for one, was quick to observe this in France during the 1960s.²

Reynolds' opinions toward African and non-western cultures and peoples are equally controversial. Although her English *husband* became a staunch anti-colonialist, Reynolds maintained the notion that despite how "evil the colonialists might be, they had something to offer [technology and "modern" civilization] (177). At a party, Reynolds castigated a "colonial" criticizing the hypocrisies of France, the United States, and England, responding: "I told him he didn't know what he talking about, that he didn't even know what the rights of men were, having experienced the enlightenment of the Europeans only secondhand, until they had taught him. Now he was using that enlightenment as a stick with which to beat his teachers" (217). Such beliefs suggest a prejudiced conviction in western culture's superiority and, consequently, the inferiority (i.e., backwardness, or primitiveness) of non-western peoples and cultures.

Finally, in Morocco, Reynolds naively accepted what her "Arab friends" told her, namely that slavery there was "different from that of slavery in the West...[Slaves'] treatment and their lives were governed by Islamic law. Unlike slavery in the West, the Koran dictated that these slaves were to be part of the home." Yet, these slaves were still purchased against their will from Sub-Saharan Africa, viewed as property, forced to work against their will, and harshly punished for disobedience. Further, Reynolds noted that when grown up, the girls "became concubines of the male members of the family" against their will or without recourse to resist (144-145). Reynolds emphasized the existence of law codes as evidence of a more *humane* form of slavery, but codes had existed to govern Western colonial slavery since the 1600s and slaves smuggled into Europe could often

petition for their freedom.³ Reynolds' acceptance of these local arguments was perhaps in part based on a need to justify her own possession of a slave, a "gift" she accepted while living there (149). Like her life, which defied expectations, Reynolds' views defy easy classification. In the real world, things are rarely black and white, and Reynolds symbolizes the complexity and contradictions inherent in the human experience in which gender, race, and class play key overlapping roles in shaping our identities in the social era in which we live.

As such passages suggest, Reynolds' memoir provides educators with a wealth of material that teachers can use to supplement global or transnational topics in their humanities and social sciences courses. As a result of this flexibility and uniqueness, *American Cocktail* is highly recommended for educators seeking to invigorate their curricula with a personal primary account of the early twentieth century.

Notes

1 Reynolds retells a family story about how she was named after Anita Garibaldi (wife of Italian revolutionary Giuseppe Garibaldi), who had allegedly befriended her grandmother in Boston (75-76). Anita Garibaldi died in 1849; Reynolds' grandmother was born in 1850 (22). Although the couple's granddaughter, also named Anita Garibaldi, lectured in Boston, it was after Reynolds' birth. Family lore also linked her to Napoleon Bonaparte, emperor of the French (58, 60). Napoleon I's brother, Jerome, spent time in America during his youth and married. The marriage was later annulled to allow a more advantageous match. According to Reynolds' family tradition, her grandfather was the illegitimate child of Jerome's American son or grandson from his first marriage (304).

2 See: Tyler Stovall, *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light* (New York: Mariner Books, 1996); Michel Fabre, *From*

Harlem to Paris: Black American Writers in France, 1840-1980 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press/Illini Books, 1993); Eric Martone, ed., *Blacks in European History and Culture* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2009); James Baldwin, *The Pride of the Ticket: Collected Non-fiction, 1948-1985* (London: Michael Joseph, 1985), 174-175.

3 See: Sue Peabody and Sheila Grinberg, eds., *Slavery, Freedom, and the Law in the Atlantic World: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 2007).

"American Cocktail: A 'Colored Girl' in the World"

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About the Authors and Editor

Anita Reynolds was an actress, dancer, model, and psychologist.

Howard M. Miller is professor of education at Mercy College, Dobbs Ferry, New York. He was working as a teacher on St. Croix in the 1970s when he met and befriended Anita Reynolds, from whom he rented a cottage. Using his skills as a former journalist, he assisted her in shaping her memoir into a book, but broad public interest in the African-American experience was confined largely to stories of triumph over adversity, or those of well-known figures. It is only recently that the varied experiences of middle- and upper-class African Americans have come to the fore. He is still fascinated by Reynolds' story because—at a time when racial segregation was the norm—she was most comfortable with a lifestyle that allowed her to live and move about freely among both races.

George Hutchinson is professor of English and Newton C. Farr professor of American culture at Cornell University.

About the Reviewer

Eric Martone is assistant professor of history/social studies education at Mercy College, Dobbs Ferry, New York. He received his PhD in history from Stony Brook University. His books include the *Encyclopedia of Blacks in European History and Culture* (2009), *The Black Musketeer* (2011), and *Mercy College: Yesterday and Today* (2013).