
The Significance of the Harlem Literary Renaissance

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Abstract

The Harlem Renaissance was an intellectual explosion of creative thinking and writing by African Americans - known at that time as “Negro Writers” - that began in 1917 with the publication of Jean Toomer's *Cane* and ended in 1937 with the publication of Zora Neale Hurston's novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. After the publication of Alain Locke's anthology *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (1925), the period became known as the *New Negro Movement*. In this period of group expression and self-determination, the writers and artists explored themes such as assimilation, alienation, racism, and pride in their novels, plays, poetry, sculpture, paintings, and photography. This article will explore the magnitude of this literary renaissance, its peculiar manifestations, and the conjuncture of its formation which opened up discursive and intellectual space for African Americans and their literary descendants.

Key Words: Harlem; Negro; African American; Renaissance; Black; Culture.

Introduction

According to Lewis (2018), the Harlem Renaissance was a flowering of African American literature and art. Little fiction or poetry had been produced by African Americans in the years before this period, so the many new poets, novelists and essayists portrayed a bewildering variety of innovative artistic expressions which nurtured and cultivated the identity of the African American. While many laud this rich creative complexity as a significant landmark that marked an apex of black print, some think that its success was unduly magnified.

This article will assess the significant legacy of this literary renaissance and highlight critically, the barriers to which it was subjected. The theoretical frameworks of Pierre Bourdieu, Gérard Genette, John Carey and T.S. Eliot amongst others will form the backdrop for this analysis which will show that from Harlem there was a literary rebirth which created a rich, vibrant print culture that transcended its limited base and became the bedrock of African American political movements and black artistic expression.

Background to the Renaissance

The National Museum of African American History and Culture states that the Harlem Renaissance grew out of national and racial resistance which was motivated amongst other things by the dreams and desire of newly freed slaves for equal economic opportunity and fuller participation in American society. However, by the late 1870s, strict racial segregation laws, known as “Jim Crow laws” made African Americans second-class citizens, fermenting the seeds of racial consciousness.

By the turn of the 20th century, many African Americans had relocated to cities in the North such as the Harlem section of Manhattan, which was only three square-miles, but drew nearly 175,000 African Americans (National Museum of African American History and Culture, n.d.). Kaestle & Radway (2009) suggest that the rise and reach of northern black newspapers also boosted this demographic shift by touting job opportunities and the blessings of a new life. Thus Harlem became a destination for African Americans of all backgrounds. Alain Locke asserts that the renaissance became a spiritual coming of age in which African Americans transformed social disillusionment into race pride (National Museum of African American History and Culture, n.d) and significantly disrupted the traditional landscape of publishing in America.

Significance of the Literary Renaissance

There was a rapid increase in the number and circulation of black publications as the neighbourhood bustled with African American-owned and run publishing houses, which gave African Americans visibility and opportunity. Four notable publications, *The Crisis* (1910), *Opportunity* (1923), *The Messenger* (1917), and Marcus Garvey's *Negro World* (1914) printed the work of many African American artists and writers (Lewis, 2018). Lewis (2018) affirms that *The Crisis*, a social and political magazine for African Americans had an estimated monthly circulation of 100,000, while *the Negro World* had a weekly circulation of two hundred thousand copies at its peak. The African American Registry (n.d.) notes that for a nickel, readers of the *Negro World* received a front-page editorial along with poetry and articles of international interest published in English, French, and Spanish and circulated throughout the United States, Africa, and the Caribbean.

In line with the above, Kaestle & Radway (2009), confirm that these presses offered a powerful counter-narrative to the dominant press and limited white interference which allowed journalists to communicate the richness and complexity of African American life while promoting the work of African American writers such as Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, and Nella Larsen. In fact, *The Opportunity* was instrumental in discovering and launching new talent and in 1927, it anthologised the best pieces of writing in a collection entitled *Ebony and Topaz: A Collectanea* which featured contributions from members of the Harlem Renaissance (Lewis, 2018), thus celebrating their artistic voices.

Furthermore, the renaissance came at a time of massive transformation led by new publishers in New York like Boni and Liveright, Knopf, Harcourt and Brace, and Ben Huebsch (Hutchinson & Young, 2013) who began publishing black writing fairly early in their existence and provided opportunities for black writers to be exposed to a larger audience. Such firms, Hutchinson (1996) explains, were founded and largely staffed by Jewish editors, outsiders to the established industry, who had been excluded from mainstream firms and were largely unable to sign mainstream Anglo-Saxon writers. These new firms capitalised on their exclusion and the lack of industry interest by exploiting their niche position. They acquired newcomers like themselves - particularly African Americans, Jewish, Irish, and

avant-garde modernists (Hutchinson & Young 2013) - and answered the needs of a growing market by supplying books outside the conventional Anglo-American sphere. For example, when Walter White's antiracist novel *The Fire in the Flint* (1922) was rejected by Doran because it wasn't in line with what readers expected, Knopf published it instead (Hutchinson, 1996). These firms created networks and in breaking away from the Victorian point of view they shook the old tenets of the publishing business. Their institutional recognition facilitated the conversion of African American cultural capital to economic capital.

The period's cultural heart was nurtured by figures such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps, Zora Neale Hurston, and James Weldon Johnson amongst others. Moving away from the slave narrative tradition, these writers explored diverse literary themes. They focused on promoting racial pride and produced a rich and complicated union of progressive ideals with traditional African American customs and folklore. While Claude McKay praised the instinctive unassimilated black man in *Banjo* (1929), Langston Hughes spoke of the common working-class man in his prose and poetry (Hutchinson, 1996), and Zora Neale Hurston celebrated African American heritage and culture. Johnston (2015) adds that, while some authors continued to use traditional English literary forms like Countee Cullen who desired to be a poet rather than a Negro poet, others explored black vernacular and lyrical forms in expressing themselves and inspired an authentic insurgency of black self-expression.

In the same vein, this outburst of literary creativity fostered a cadre of African American readers or a "reading folk" which before this was almost non-existent. Black newspapers featured columns that reviewed the latest African American fiction and magazines like *The Opportunity* held writing contests to urge black readers to participate in their literary culture (Christian, 2016). Consequently, there was a major shift in the consumption of a reading public that had associated literature with white, largely European poets, playwrights, and fiction writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Kaestle & Radway, 2009); writers such as Jessie Fauset and Gwendolyn Bennett spoke directly to their fellow African Americans. Reading at meetings, barbershops, work breaks, church socials, and similar

informal gatherings provided critical community information, interpretation, and a collective education for African Americans (Kaestle & Radway, 2009). Literacy became a crucial foundation for African American print culture, as a whole group of African Americans went from enslaved and illiterate to free and literate, craving materials that contained the everyday lives of ordinary people which mirrored their own experiences (James, 2016).

Suggs (2017) posits that the Renaissance helped to redefine African Americans as educated, sophisticated, and urbane. It was imperative, as Kaestle & Radway (2009) assert that black people mount their defence and tell their own stories and this required, ideally, that they control all stages of production such as writing, printing, shipping, selling, and reading. It was not surprising therefore, that in addition to being published authors, many writers were poets, playwrights, journalists, and editors (Johnston, 2015). Robert Kerlin (1919) believes that:

“Those who would honestly seek to know the Negro must read his papers, it is in them that the Negro speaks out with freedom, with sincerity [...] for there he speaks as a Negro to Negroes, and he is aware that the white people do not so much as know of the existence of this” (Kaestle & Radway, 2009)

Carey would agree that when a huge literate public comes into being, every aspect of production and dissemination of the printed text becomes subject to revolution (Carey, 2002).

Finally, the intellectual diversity of the Harlem renaissance became a navigational guide for a diverse range of black writers outside America. At the World Festival of Negro Arts, held in Dakar in April 1966, Langston Hughes noted that in France and Germany, Harlem's poets were already being translated (Chapman, 1967). Leopold Sedar Senghor and Aimé Césaire, the great poets of *négritude*, attested to the inspiration the Harlem poets had on them and Black poets from the Portuguese colonies in Africa cited the influence of the Literary Renaissance on the flowering of African poetry in Portuguese (Chapman, 1967). Peter

Abraham from South Africa notes that he became a colour nationalist due to the influence of the works of Du Bois, Mckay, and Georgia Douglas (Chapman, 1967).

However, while many lauded the significance of the renaissance, other critics considered it a failure due to some underlying factors. As Karl Marx succinctly notes, "Men make their history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past" (Thompson, 2011). In this regard, it is important to evaluate the challenges faced by the renaissance.

Assessment of the Harlem Renaissance

One challenge to the literary movement came from the institutionalised gatekeepers within American publishing, specifically old-line companies like Harper's, Appleton's, Charles Scribner's Sons and E. P. Dutton in New York. These were led by successive generations of native-born Protestants educated at elite colleges, who shaped the nation's literary standard (Boyer, 2009). This dominant class took pride in its conservatism and steadfastly devised a system with specific rules and values for the publishing world, confirming that "the values which a society holds and the institutions it creates are not an accident" (Spender quoted in Davis, 2019). The breakthrough made by the Harlem writers was their endorsement by the gatekeepers in these literary institutions who exercised the monopoly of power.

This monopoly of power corresponds with Bourdieu's position that "the fundamental literary struggle is the monopoly of literary legitimacy, the monopoly of power to say with authority who is authorised to call themselves writers and the power to consecrate producers or product" (Bourdieu, 1993). For the African American, symbolic production was as valuable as material production because it created belief in the value of their creative writing. One may infer that the non-admittance of the Negro writer who aspires to domination within the fields of power and cultural production reflects Eliot's proposition that the dominant class maintains the culture of the society to which it belongs (Eliot, 1948);

art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately (Bourdieu & Randal, 2016).

In line with the preceding argument, Kaestle & Radway (2009) reiterate that it remained extremely difficult for black writers to gain access to white publishers. The majority of publishers showed absolutely no interest in publishing the work of black authors and it was nearly impossible for African American publishers to acquire contracts with popular white authors or to enter mainstream print distribution. Black newspapers and magazines therefore provided outlets for black writers and editors. James (2016) notes that in 1900 there were two hundred black newspapers and magazines nationally and by 1921, there were nearly five hundred. The papers were passed from hand to hand and re-read until they were worn out. A survey of magazine reviews indexes, publishers' lists, and *Publisher's Weekly* issues from the 1920's show how infinitesimal the representation of and genuine interest in black writing was (Hutchinson, 1996).

Chapman (1967) also notes that there was censorship of information about African American writers from general literary histories to more specialised studies of the twenties. He adds that literary historians of the decade were silent about the *New Negro* movement such that if a student in 1967 were to come across a reference to the Harlem Renaissance, they might conclude, after checking most of the standard references, that it was all a figment of the Negro's imagination (Chapman, 1967), or as Henry Louis Gates called it a "culturally willed myth" (Roshnavand, 2013). Jansen's (1988) apt description sums this up by asserting that;

"The way the powerful say things are is the way they are or the way they usually become because the powerful control the power to name [...] for they are makers and shakers who draw the lines in language and life which others dare not cross" (Jansen, 1988).

Concerning this, Bourdieu states that in the face of defence against the unorthodox transformation of the field, polemics are themselves a form of recognition, because enemies whom one would choose to destroy by ignoring them cannot be opposed without consecrating them (Bourdieu, 1993). In other words, to suppress or denigrate elements of a culture is to admit that it exists in a significantly disruptive way.

Another bone of contention was the redefinition of the brute stereotype used to represent African Americans paratextually in mainstream print culture. Genette, quoted in Davis (2019), asserts that paratext is a fringe of the printed text which in reality controls one's whole reading of the text; the publishers of African American work had to choose either to endorse the existing stereotypes or create a new vestibule in terms of form, style, and design that offered a different image of the African American. Langston Hughes detested the cover of his first book, *Weary Blues* (1926), which depicted a grotesque caricature of a black man (Kaestle & Radway, 2009) and Lawrence Reddick was dissatisfied with Hughes for the "disgraceful" cover of *Shakespeare in Harlem*, published by Alfred Knopf, depicting an outstretched hand holding a wishing bone and the inevitable dice cubes" (Kaestle & Radway, 2009). Since paratextual elements have interpretative, commercial, and navigational functions, the outcry pointed to a ploy to maintain the dominant culture which already controlled not only the subaltern group's economic and sociopolitical world but also its cultural representations (Roshnavand, 2013).

Finally, the Harlem Renaissance revealed an inherent tension within the African American writer. As new agents in this field, they were determined to transform the stereotypical Sambo and coon images (Pilgrim, 2000), but the American literary marketplace was hostile and unreceptive to this unique Negro aesthetic. In Langston Hughes's poem "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926), he says, black authors were told "Be stereotyped, don't go too far, don't shatter our illusions about you, and don't amuse us too seriously. We will pay you" (Roshnavan, 2013). As a result, black writers developed a double consciousness: remain faithful to subject matter and standards derived from their cultural heritage but receive less commercial success, or seek recognition and material reward by

serving the interest of the dominant white audience, conforming to what the dominant society desired African American characters to be. Sterling Brown notes that the more truthfully the black writer wrote about the blacks, the more limited the market and his economic capital became (Roshnavan, 2013). Their interest in 'culture' was seemingly incompatible with wealth, so these writers yielded to the ideological and representational structure of the dominant culture. Their dependence on white patrons and white writers' artistic criteria led them to cultural negation, abandoning the spirit and philosophy of the renaissance and impeding the authenticity of black artistic voices.

Conclusion

The Harlem Renaissance was born during a time of political conservatism and economic expansion. This remarkable cultural and racial experimentation took place under intense scrutiny as it configured new racial attitudes and ideals. Critics say that despite brilliant moments, it fell short of greatness due to its preoccupation with racial identity and the absence of a well-defined ideological or aesthetic core. Nevertheless, the writers shared the consciousness of a common endeavour and an awakening of African American culture and creativity. Their fight for artistic freedom and integrity and their literary achievements set the foundation for subsequent black writers and artists like James Baldwin, Amiri Baraka, Alice Walker, and Maya Angelou. Their creativity did not yield massive financial gain nor was it accepted instantly as part of American culture, but they produced cultural capital with symbolic value for a people who were given the power and platform to truly define their history and cultural values with pride and dignity. The Harlem Renaissance as a movement effectively ended with the Great Depression, but it is right to assert that the renaissance initiated a profound awareness for black consciousness and set in motion a continuing tradition, an ongoing renaissance which is ever-renewed by new generations of African American artists and writers.

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