



## Harlem Renaissance, Vol. 1

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In 1950, Alain Locke offered several reflective comments on the significance of the Harlem Renaissance. He considered it a movement that never surpassed the “gawky” and “pimply” stage of adolescence, one that had essentially failed in its attempt to achieve universal, objective approaches in its creations. Overall, he concluded that perhaps he and others had “expected too much of the Negro Renaissance” (*Phylon* 11 : 391). Locke, who had been one of the key supporters of and inspirational figures in the lives of several of the writers who came to prominence during that period, was perhaps more critical of what the movement had achieved than his contemporaries during the Renaissance or in the 1950s. He was certainly more disparaging than literary evaluations have proven to be in the past five decades. The period of the 1920s has become one of the most written about in African American literary history and one in which numerous scholars specialize. And not undeservedly so. By most standards of measurement, especially ones that might take into consideration a before and after effect, the Harlem Renaissance, or the New Negro Movement as some prefer to call it, is arguably *the* defining moment in African American literary creativity.

That moment occurred because of the confluence of historical and social forces. The devastation the boll weevil wrought on southern crops and the ensuing economic chaos led many Blacks

to migrate from the South to northern cities as a part of what became known as the Great Migration, a mass movement that noted artist Jacob Lawrence captures vividly and colorfully in his Migration Series. Economic opportunity the North represented was appealing not only because of the decline in the southern farm economy but because the mythical presentations by relatives of Black people who had migrated north made it equally glamorous. The legendary promise of the North and particularly New York City, as Rudolph Fisher depicts in “The City of Refuge” (1925) and about which Langston Hughes rhapsodizes in several poems as well as his autobiographies, drew Black people from the southern United States, the Caribbean, and Africa. Harlem thus more than tripled its Black population between 1900 and 1930. Word of mouth was powerful, but determined efforts to gather a critical mass of young Black creative artists were also factors in bringing about the literary production known as the Harlem Renaissance. Charles Spurgeon Johnson, who became editor of *Opportunity*, the official organ of the National Urban League, directed his secretary, Ethel Nance, to write to aspiring young writers and artists and encourage their migration to New York. While many responded eagerly, it was only with repeated coaxing that Aaron Douglas, who became the foremost artist of the period, was persuaded to leave his position as an art teacher in Kansas and head to

New York. Of the writers who are now prominently identified with the movement, Hughes came from Kansas and Ohio, Zora Neale Hurston from Florida, Wallace Thurman from Idaho, Claude McKay from Jamaica, Eric Walrond from British Guiana, Jean Toomer from Washington, D.C., Dorothy West from Boston, and Countee Cullen from Kentucky (although he always claimed New York as his point of origin).

From its beginnings, therefore, the Harlem Renaissance was spawned by a mixture of happenstance and deliberate planning. This was the first time in African American literary history that editors and writers saw the possibilities of collaborative creative efforts—or at least creative efforts expended in the midst of others who were also about literary production. Such concerted effort distinguished the 1920s from what had gone before, distinguished the New Negro with a self-directed cultural purpose from the Old Negro who was often driven by circumstance. Awareness of themselves as artists in a variety of media was one of the distinguishing characteristics of the editors, writers, visual artists, and musicians who became the most well-known figures of the Harlem Renaissance and about whom Hughes wrote in his first autobiography, *The Big Sea* (1940), and whom Thurman fictionalized in *Infants of the Spring* (1932).

The movement thus marks the period in African American literary development during which Black writers could *claim* their creativity in ways that were not previously available to them. The tradition of slave—or *freedom*—narratives was the most productive group effort prior to the Harlem Renaissance (the grouping, however, was not something the writers themselves orchestrated); the productivity was frequently cast in a white envelope/Black message mold. Abolitionists and other persons who identified potential writers as well as those who published their works often had their own agendas for what Black narrators could or should put forth in their own so-called individualized works. Black writers did not control the means of production of their words or the editorial prerogatives that sometimes shaped their final form. Black literary dependency on white cultural philanthropy was the order of the day. While it would be rash to suggest that such limitations completely disappeared during the 1920s, it is nonetheless reasonable to argue that persons of African descent had a stronger say in what they published, where, and under what circumstances. Of course we are familiar with the stories of how Carl Van Vechten, guru and midwife extraordinaire of the Renaissance, read, revised, and sug-

gested further revisions to *The Weary Blues* (1926), Hughes's first volume of poetry. And the tales of Mrs. Charlotte Osgood Mason's attempts to interfere in the creativity of Hughes and Hurston are equally well known. More to the point, however, are the instances in which African American writers were mostly in charge of what they produced and the manner of its production.

Two significant outlets for “in charge” production were *Opportunity* magazine and its counterpart, the *Crisis*, the official publication of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The latter was developed by the eminent W. E. B. Du Bois, who served as general editor; Jessie Fauset served as literary editor, a position from which she would encourage many of the younger writers. For these two publications, Black writers did not go, hat in hand, to white editors requesting publication of their work. As African Americans, both Charles S. Johnson and Du Bois were acutely aware of the need for as much African American control of publishing outlets as possible. This position, combined with their general notions of mission and service, led both editors to sponsor contests to encourage Black writing even as they regularly published what came to them voluntarily. By establishing the outlets for publication, determining the criteria, and passing judgment on the works, these editors and their staffs moved dramatically away from the censorship that had defined cross-racial publication by writers such as Paul Laurence Dunbar and Charles W. Chesnutt prior to this period. Again, an assessment of the Harlem Renaissance in this area is not to suggest that all was sweetness and light, for both Johnson and Du Bois had rather specific notions of what they believed should be published. The point is that African Americans, whatever their criteria, were making the decisions that they had not previously made except for newspapers, white-owned/Black-edited small magazines (*Voice of the Negro*), and denominational outlets (the *Christian Recorder*, the *A.M.E. Church Review*).

The claiming of creativity was even history-making in the anthologies that appeared during this period. Two of the most important were *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, edited and published by James Weldon Johnson in 1922, and *The New Negro*, edited and published by Alain Locke in 1925 (expanded from a special issue of *Survey Graphic*). Black writers had appeared in yearbooks such as William Stanley Braithwaite's *Anthology of Magazine Verse* (beginning in 1913), but Johnson's and Locke's were volumes devoted almost exclusively to African American writers. Johnson was

careful to include as many up-and-coming poets as he could locate, and he expanded his original inclusions when the volume was revised and republished in 1931. Locke's volume, of course, served as the defining statement for the Renaissance, just as Hughes's "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926) served as the defining manifesto for younger Black writers. Locke wanted to assure his readers that the Old Negro was dead, that this was an age of unparalleled creativity by African American writers. While it has become clear that Locke, even in his seeming expansiveness, gave preferential treatment to certain kinds of writers and subjects, it is nonetheless more significant that he was doing the choosing, that an African American scholar, researcher, and writer was in charge of shaping a volume that showcased the richness of African American cultural creativity. The bountifulness of that creativity could not be constrained by the mind that offered it for public consumption. Thus the legacy of the Renaissance was measurable from even that single volume of claimed creativity.

An even more proper appreciation of the claiming of African American creativity during the Harlem Renaissance might begin in the middle of the 1920s, with the publication of the little magazine called *Fire!!* (1926). The work of Hughes, Hurston, Thurman, Richard Bruce Nugent, Gwendolyn Bennett, and a few others, it represented the efforts of younger African American writers to claim their creativity from their elders, all members of Du Bois's "talented tenth" of well-educated Blacks with leadership potential (and often "high yaller"), as well as from potential white exploiters. *Fire!!* was in bas relief against the backdrop of prevailing elder wisdom represented by the likes of Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, and Braithwaite, all of whom espoused best-foot-forward, universalized portrayals of Black experience that could serve to bridge the gaps between Blacks and whites. *Fire!!* represented the first time a group of young African American writers consciously sought to define themselves against a larger tradition, which means that it was the first time that there were measurable *layerings* of African American literary creativity. When Nugent and Thurman flipped a coin to see who would write a story on prostitution and who on drugs, they were claiming their creativity as young writers breaking away from their elders: "If black people are pleased, it doesn't matter."

The fact that *Fire!!* exists would be reason enough to label the 1920s a noteworthy period of African American creativity. Here were several young Black writers bent upon cultural produc-

tion at a time when it was not yet historically established that they indeed had a culture. That independence of spirit is no less remarkable than that exhibited by Frederick Douglass and others who escaped from slavery in the South and went on to produce narratives about their experiences. The difference is one of orchestration, not one of kind. Whereas Douglass was manipulated—though his genius nonetheless showed through that manipulation—these young writers made their own decisions about who and what to publish. They may have failed to sustain the magazine, but what they sought to accomplish is the guiding motivation for scholarly focus on the Harlem Renaissance: the documentation of African American creative genius as widespread, diverse, and ever evolving.

A careful look at Johnson's *Book of Negro Poetry* will reveal that several of the figures Johnson singled out for greatness did not make it. Of those who did, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, and Claude McKay have garnered critical attention worthy of their talent, and that attention continues. In 2002, when the Academy of American Poets conducted a survey to determine who was the most well-known American poet, Langston Hughes won by a landslide. It would have been difficult in the 1920s, however, for literary observers to conclude that Hughes's reputation would exceed Cullen's, for Cullen was the darling of critics and critical readers. His imitation of Keatsian poetic forms undoubtedly informed those judgments, whereas Hughes's focus on the Black masses was a bit more to the left than some elitists in the "talented tenth" tradition might have wished. Ensuing decades, especially the Black-centered 1960s, coupled with Hughes's own longevity and interaction with later writers, probably influenced ultimate scholarly and popular preference for Hughes.

Hughes and McKay, whose strong emotional sentiments overshadowed his Shakespearean sonnets, make clear the importance of audience as an ongoing, shaping force in Harlem Renaissance successes. The increase in Black audiences during the 1920s, which found their parallels in the 1960s, spurred acceptance by some of sentiments that were slightly more militant than many of Cullen's sugar-coated creations. Publication in outlets aimed primarily at Black people during the 1920s was a marked contrast to the outlets in which Dunbar and Chesnutt had published their early works, such as the *Atlantic Monthly*. Talented poets such as Hughes and McKay, along with a host of other writers during the 1920s, thus facili-

tated the institutionalization of African American literary arts within Black communities.

The anthologies, volumes of poetry, novels, dramas, and newspaper columns that the Harlem Renaissance has yielded make the claim more than anything else for the period having been substantive and of greater import than Locke allowed. We can certainly measure individual accomplishment, as with Hughes's focus on the blues as a source for literary creativity in *The Weary Blues*, or Jean Toomer's experimentation in *Cane* (1923), or Hurston's concern with colorphobia in *Color Struck* (1926). Of greater import is the stage-setting or path-breaking that these accomplishments pointed toward. *Fire!!* easily leads to *Black World/Negro Digest* and on to *Callaloo*. *Cane* anticipates works such as Ntozake Shange's *Sassafras, Cypress and Indigo* (1982), Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), and practically all of Toni Morrison's novels. Hurston is godmother to a host of African American women writers, including Walker, Tina McElroy Ansa, and Gloria Naylor. Thus institution-building and midwifing a literary tradition were functions Harlem Renaissance writers served for ensuing generations as assuredly as Alain Locke and Jessie Fauset midwifed them.

Godmothering, however, is not always altruistic, as was the case with Mrs. Mason's impact on Hurston as well as on Hughes. The issue of patronage for African American writers remains a central concern in the twenty-first century. What does a writer owe to the providers of fellowships and leisure time to write? At what point does a writer who receives such aid give up his or her autonomy to his or her work? The issue is relevant not only to isolated writers trying to find the funds for a semester's leave from teaching, but also to the choreographer or the dramatist or the musician whose creative space can be provided by funders who may or may not be sympathetic to the total direction of the project. The Harlem Renaissance gave us models for thinking through these crucial issues and for weighing the shackles as well as the opportunities of patronage across racial lines.

That continues to be a source of exploration in contemporary scholars' understanding of the factors that influenced how successful some of the most important writers of the Harlem Renaissance were—or were not—in claiming their creativity.

In the early years of the twenty-first century, the Harlem Renaissance is a scholarly industry. It became institutionalized with the advent of Black studies courses and programs in American academies in the 1960s and 1970s. No scholar of African American literary studies could be taken seriously without in-depth knowledge of the Harlem Renaissance. No doctoral candidate studying for written and oral examinations could expect to be taken seriously without detailed knowledge of the Harlem Renaissance. In contrast to the 1960s, when a single survey course might have sufficed to introduce students to African American literature, today there are two and three courses designed to provide that coverage. Specialized courses focusing exclusively on the Harlem Renaissance are offered routinely. Equally as significant, graduate students in African American literary studies remain engrossed enough by the Renaissance to select writers and topics relevant to it for the subjects of their masters theses and doctoral dissertations. Their interest, in turn, has been guided in large part by the numerous scholarly studies of the Harlem Renaissance that have been published in the past thirty years. In striking contrast to Alain Locke's assessment, the Harlem Renaissance is alive and well in every college and university in the United States where students explore the multi-faceted meanings and ramifications of the literature, its producers, and its production. These three volumes are welcome additions to those ongoing dialogues and will undoubtedly provide invaluable insights that will continue to illustrate the undying significance of the Harlem Renaissance.

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*Harlem Renaissance*, the inaugural set in the Gale Critical Companion Collection, consists of three volumes. Each volume includes a detailed table of contents, a foreword on the Harlem Renaissance written by noted scholar Trudier Harris-Lopez, and a descriptive chronology of key events of the movement. The main body of volume 1 consists of entries on five topics relevant to the Harlem Renaissance, including 1) Overviews and General Studies; 2) Social, Economic, and Political Factors that Influenced the Harlem Renaissance; 3) Publishing and Periodicals during the Harlem Renaissance; 4) Performing Arts during the Harlem Renaissance; and 5) Visual Arts during the Harlem Renaissance. Volumes 2 and 3 include entries on thirty-three authors and literary figures associated with the movement, including such notables as Countee Cullen, W. E. B. Du Bois, Jessie Redmon Fauset, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay, and Jean Toomer, as well as entries on individuals who have garnered less attention, but whose contributions to the Harlem Renaissance are noteworthy, such as Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Angelina Weld Grimké, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Richard Bruce Nugent, and Willis Richardson.

### **Organization of the Harlem Renaissance**

A *Harlem Renaissance* topic entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Introduction** defines the subject of the entry and provides social and historical information important to understanding the criticism.
- The list of **Representative Works** identifies writings and works by authors and figures associated with the subject. The list is divided into alphabetical sections by name; works listed under each name appear in chronological order. The genre and publication date of each work is given. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.

- Entries generally begin with a section of **Primary Sources**, which includes essays, speeches, social history, newspaper accounts and other materials that were produced during the time of the Harlem Renaissance.
- Reprinted **Criticism** in topic entries is arranged thematically. Topic entries commonly begin with general surveys of the subject or essays providing historical or background information, followed by essays that develop particular aspects of the topic. For example, the Publishing and Periodicals topic entry in volume 1 of *Harlem Renaissance* begins with a section providing an overview of the topic. This is followed by three other sections: African American Writers and Mainstream Publishers; Anthologies: *The New Negro* and Others; and African American Periodicals and the Harlem Renaissance. Each section has a separate title heading and is identified with a page number in the table of contents. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece. Unless the descriptor "excerpt" is used in the annotation, the essay is being reprinted in its entirety.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here.

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- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.
- Author entries are arranged into three sections: **Primary Sources**, **General Commentary**, and **Title Commentary**. The Primary Sources section includes letters, poems, short stories, journal entries, and essays written by the featured author. General Commentary includes overviews of the author's career and general studies; Title Commentary includes in-depth analyses of seminal works by the author. Within the Title Commentary section, the reprinted criticism is further organized by title, then by date of publication. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. However, not all boldfaced titles are included in the author and subject indexes; only substantial discussions of works are indexed. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
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## Indexes

The **Author Index** lists all of the authors featured in the *Harlem Renaissance* set, with references to the main author entries in volumes 2 and 3 as well as commentary on the featured author in other author entries and in the topic volume. Page references to substantial discussions of the authors appear in boldface. The Author Index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names, and cross references to other Gale series in which the authors have appeared. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index.

The **Title Index** alphabetically lists the titles of works written by the authors featured in volumes 2 and 3 and provides page numbers or page ranges where commentary on these titles can be found. Page references to substantial discussions of the titles appear in boldface. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in body type within quotation marks.

The **Subject Index** includes the authors and titles that appear in the Author Index and the Title Index as well as the names of other authors and figures that are discussed in the set. The Subject Index also lists hundreds of literary terms and topics covered in the criticism. The index provides page numbers or page ranges where subjects are discussed and is fully cross referenced.

## Citing Harlem Renaissance

When writing papers, students who quote directly from the *Harlem Renaissance* set may use the following general format to footnote reprinted criticism. The first example pertains to material drawn from periodicals, the second to material reprinted from books.

Alvarez, Joseph A., "The Lonesome Boy Theme as Emblem for Arna Bontemps's Children's Literature," *African American Review* 32, no. 1 (spring 1998): 23-31; reprinted in *Harlem Renaissance: A Gale Critical Companion*, vol. 2, ed. Janet Witalec (Farmington Hills, Mich: The Gale Group, 2003), 72-8.

Helbling, Mark, introduction to *The Harlem Renaissance: The One and the Many* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1999), 1-18; reprinted in *Harlem Renaissance: A Gale Critical Companion*, vol. 1, ed. Janet Witalec (Farmington Hills, Mich: The Gale Group, 2003), 27-38.

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