

The Harlem Renaissance and Race Relations

“It is difficult not to recognize the signs that African Americans are in the midst of a cultural renaissance”—Henry Louis Gates Jr. (born 1950), an American literary critic, professor, director of the Hutchins Center for African and African American Research at Harvard University (1997).

The Harlem Renaissance began during the Progressive Era, a period spanning from the 1890s to the 1920s in which the White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs) were predominant and considered as ideal in the United States. The Progressive Era was characterized by increased awareness of societal issues and calls for greater equality and fairness for all Americans. However, slightly preceding that time period, the first African American senator, Hiram Revels, had been elected in 1870, while Blanche K. Bruce, another African American had served as a senator from 1875 to 1881. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that segregation was in place since 1896—with the creation of "separate but equal" facilities in *Plessy v. Ferguson*—allowing for racial segregation in public facilities. This law persisted until the 1960s with the passing of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, prohibiting discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin in various areas, including employment and education.

Moreover, the early 20th century was also characterized by a significant phenomenon known as the Great Migration. The event saw record numbers of Black individuals leaving the South to escape the oppression of the Jim Crow Laws and to take advantage of urban economic opportunities. Many settled in large cities, such as New York, Detroit and Chicago, where they could find jobs in industries like automobile manufacturing, steel, and meatpacking. This migration led to a significant increase in literacy rates among African Americans and the creation of national civil rights organizations, such as the NAACP, founded in 1909 by W.E.B. Dubois.

The 1920s were also characterized by economic prosperity and a great artistic and cultural dynamism: The Roaring Twenties. The American economy experienced a period of rapid growth and expansion, partly due to the euphoria following World War I. Europe also experienced this feeling of novelty and similar growth, with the “*années folles*” in France. However, the Wall Street Crash of October 1929 sparked the Great Depression and put an end to this period of flourishing. It marked the beginning of a decade of poverty, high unemployment, and hardship. Due to the lack of financial support for artistic and cultural programs, the Harlem Renaissance experienced a major setback, resulting in many artists and

writers seeking alternative means of income. Furthermore, the economic downturn contributed to a reduction in the number of publications willing to showcase the works of African American writers and artists. Despite the challenges, the Harlem Renaissance continued to have a lasting impact on American culture. The objectives of the movement also changed: Prior to the economic downturn, the Harlem Renaissance aimed at celebrating African American culture and promoting racial pride, but after the Great Depression, many artists and writers started to explore more political themes, such as poverty, inequality, and social justice.

Finally, it is crucial to acknowledge that while the 1920s were a time of modernity, they were also a period of racial unrest, with the rise of the second Ku Klux Klan (1915-1944), as well as white supremacist leagues. These groups were celebrated in popular novels or films, such as *Birth of a Nation*, perpetuating racist ideologies and contributing to the oppression of African Americans.

The Harlem neighborhood gained from this migration and from these carefreeness years, transitioning from an upper-middle-class white neighborhood to a predominantly Black neighborhood. Sugar Hill, located in the northern part of Harlem, was a wealthy neighborhood where numerous prominent figures of the Harlem Renaissance settled, including WEB Dubois, Duke Ellington—and later Thurgood Marshall. The convergence of the white and black populations contributed to the growth of the area and set the stage for a major cultural movement known as the “Harlem Renaissance”, that lasted from 1917 to 1936. At the time, the Harlem Renaissance was known as the "New Negro Movement", named after *The New Negro*, a 1925 anthology edited by Alain Locke. Some of the key figures of the movement included writers like Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Countee Cullen, and musicians like Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong.

Given the prevailing social and cultural climate of the time, it is not surprising that the Harlem Renaissance emerged during a period of significant social progress and reforms, ushering in a new spirit of self-determination and pride, a new social consciousness, and a new commitment to political activism for African American all across the country, challenging the racist stereotypes of the Jim Crow South. Therefore, it is worth considering whether the Harlem Renaissance had an impact on the perception of African Americans by the predominantly white audience and whether it had any effect on ethnic relations in the United States.

To what extent were race relations impacted by the Harlem Renaissance?

First (I), “The New Negro Movement”, as creating a new African American identity will be studied, with a focus on the flourishing of African American culture and the fight against racial prejudices. Then (II), black culture as part of the mainstream American society will be analyzed,

and questions such as “how to break down between the two communities?” and “what was the role of white patronage?” will be tackled. Lastly (III), the social, political and cultural legacy that the Harlem Renaissance left to the following decades, and what is left of it today, a hundred years later will be considered.

I. The New Negro Movement: creating a new African American identity

1) A flourishing of African American culture

The Harlem Renaissance was an intellectual and cultural revival of African American music, dance, poetry, art, fashion, literature, theater centered in Harlem, New York City, that emerged in the early 20th century (1920s and 1930s). The period ushered in a feeling of pride in African-American-ness.

The term "visual arts" encompasses various art forms such as painting, drawing, photography, sculpture, architecture, and video. An important personality of this genre, the painter Archibald Motley, a prominent figure during the jazz age—a term coined by in 1922 F. Scott Fitzgerald—sought to improve race relations by dispelling stereotypes through his art, skillfully creating sensitive, elegant and nuanced portraits of African Americans, stylized street scenes, and jazz cabarets that visually embodied the spirit of the Harlem Renaissance. In addition, Motley felt a strong urge to introduce his fellow African Americans to the fine arts, and therefore chose to portray a positive image of black businessmen, cultured women, workers, and family members that were part of his immediate surroundings. He wrote: “I sincerely hope that with the progress the Negro has made, he is deserving to be represented in his true perspective, with dignity, honesty, integrity, intelligence, and understanding.” Motley was fascinated by skin tones and went against the stereotype, showing that there were many different skin tones in black skin, and that everybody was different and unique. Therefore, skin tone does not mean anything as there is a wide spectrum of hues. In the painting *Nightlife*, Motley depicts sophisticated upper class city dwellers out on the town having fun. There is fluidity in their movements and he portrays African Americans as educated and affluent individuals capable of enjoying life. This challenges the notion of difference based on socioeconomic status and invites acceptance of equality among all races.

In literature, the poem *I look at the world* by Langston Hughes focuses on racial segregation and aims to bring change. This poem basically centers on racial segregation and hope to bring change. The speaker shows us how African-Americans were being treated in a racist America.

He realizes that he, with the help of all other Black Americans can change things and improve their lives. Thus, the poem gives us a beautiful message that the power to make the society better lies within. It is our hands that can make the world that's in our minds. More generally, African American writers centered on the African American experience or on different aspects of black life. They tackled issues of race, class, religion and gender. Some chose to write only about black characters, while others addressed relationships among people of different races. Some attacked racism, while others tackled issues within black communities. Some of the common themes were: the experience of slavery, the effect of institutionalized racism and the emerging new black identity.

As for photography, James Van Der Zee was an African American photographer best known for his portraits of black New Yorkers. Van Der Zee's *Harlem* is composed of attractive, prosperous people brimming with vitality and optimism. He "allowed his sitters or clients to dream", taking photos of them dressed in their finest clothes and posing comfortably before his camera. In addition to the studio portraits, Van Der Zee also took pictures of streetscapes, nightclubs, community associations and parades. He also took pictures of white people, often featuring them alongside black people, reflecting the diversity of Harlem's community at the time.

Another crucial aspect of the Harlem Renaissance is that non-black people also took part in the movement. Indeed, white patronage—which defines the financial support or influence of a patron provided to an artist—was very common during the time as white philanthropists such as Carl Van Vechten, writer, photographer, and patron of the arts, played a significant role in promoting the work of African American artists. Van Vechten wrote several books on the movement and was a close friend and supporter of many prominent black writers and musicians. In Harlem, he often attended opera and cabarets and contributed to stimulating white interest in Harlem culture and nightlife, while being additionally involved in helping well-respected writers such as Langston Hughes and Nella Larsen to find publishers for their early works.

In literature, Zitkala-Ša, one of the most influential Native American activist of the 20th century, was particularly interested in exploring the connections between African American and Native American experiences. She was an accomplished musician and writer who contributed to several publications during the Harlem Renaissance. In fact, during the 1910s and 1920s, Zitkala-Ša contributed to *The Crisis*, the magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

Chronologically, the artists of the Harlem Renaissance coexisted with white writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, T. S. Eliot, Eugene O'Neill, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and

Hart Crane adopted the dictum “make it new,” and worked to separate contemporary American literature from the stultifying influence of late-nineteenth-century American culture. For instance, the white middle-class matriarch, who privileged reserve and formality over directness was the embodiment of the Victorian values that modernists condemned. This shows that white and black artists vilified the same enemy being the nineteenth-century American matriarch. On top of that, there is a noticeable difference in tone between the black and white canons of the period. While white writers depicted mostly grim portraits like the landscape of Hemingway's *Big Two-Hearted River* or Eliot's *Waste Land*. On the other hand, black writers of the period focused on a pervasive optimism—which might seem surprising, given the racial oppression that African Americans faced then. The painter Aaron Douglas asserts that this hopeful attitude was not naive, but was in fact the result of the existence of Harlem as a safe haven for black artists and the appreciation of their work.

2) Fighting against predominant stereotypes and racial prejudices

One of the aim of the “New Negro Movement” was to challenge the prevailing stereotypes and racial prejudice of black people as inferior and uneducated and thus to achieve recognition. In fact, many African American artists and intellectuals were critical of white society and its treatment of African Americans and used their literature, art and music to express their pride in their heritage and their desire for equality and civil rights.

The poem *I too sing America* by Langston Hughes expresses this desire for racial justice. Hughes makes a distinction between the whites and the blacks, but he wants to be associated with them “brother”. We see one aspect of the Harlem Renaissance: it provided a sense of community and solidarity among African Americans. The cultural events and gatherings in Harlem created a space where black people could come together to celebrate their culture and achievements, and to support each other in the face of discrimination and prejudice. It also helped to foster a sense of belonging and identity that had been denied to them for centuries by mainstream American society. Langston Hughes speaks for black people but still says “I”, keeping his individuality. The use of the term “grow strong” refers to his anger and his power to defend himself. One day he will ultimately be accepted in society. In the second stanza, the speaker has become so strong that no one can contradict him; white people respect him and black people are no longer in the kitchen. It is a very hopeful and positive poem, showing that white people will admire African Americans too, which is the aim and a metaphor for the

Harlem Renaissance itself: See that we—African Americans— exist and beautifully through our arts. Hughes is America, he is part of it and he praises it.

Another prominent figure is the African American writer and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston who wrote about African Americans' experiences in the United States. One of her most famous essays, *How It Feels to Be Colored Me*, was first published in 1928.

In this essay, Hurston describes her experiences growing up in an all-black town in Florida and her encounters with white people. She acknowledges that there are differences between black and white people, but she argues that these differences should be celebrated rather than feared or resented. She writes: *"I do not always feel colored. I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background. For instance, at Barnard. There are only two Negro students in the class of 1924 at Barnard this year. To the best of my knowledge, I am the first colored girl to attend Barnard. I do not feel any too self-conscious about it; but I realize that it is a great responsibility because I am the 'opening of the door.'"* She speaks of feeling “surged upon, and overswept” when she was alone in a sea of whites at school. She informs her readers about the fear that the inhabitants of her black hometown constantly felt, so much so as simply sitting on the front porch while white people rode by was seen as “daring”. She also recounts how she first became aware of her racial identity—and how that identity could replace her identity as an individual—when she was sent to school in Jacksonville at thirteen years old: *"[...] I had suffered a sea change. I was not Zora of Orange County any more, I was now a little colored girl."*

In the field of visual arts, the painter Aaron Douglas, originally from Kansas, moved to New York City in 1925 and became a part of the exciting New Negro Movement. In one of his murals, *The Negro in an African Setting*, he uses several African styles, including an African carving in the center and profiles inspired by the Egyptian style. There are traditional African drums, which were obliterated when found the American South in the hands of slaves in the South. The mural represents all of the things that were lost when the African nation was enslaved: the ruling nobility, the creative expression, and the liberty to create art.

The New Negro Movement also helped to bridge the gap between African American culture and mainstream American culture, as white Americans began to appreciate and embrace aspects of African American culture.

II. Mainstream recognition of Harlem culture as part of the American society

1) Breaking down barriers between the black and white communities

Through their work, African American artists of the Harlem Renaissance gained visibility both in black and white audiences, and shaped a new cultural identity that was distinctly black and uniquely American that became in vogue.

As they played to mixed audiences, they helped to break down racial barriers and to promote greater understanding and appreciation between different racial and ethnic groups.

Harlem's cabarets attracted both Harlem residents and White New Yorkers seeking out Harlem nightlife. Harlem's famous Cotton Club carried this to an extreme, by providing black entertainment for exclusively White audiences.

Socially, many artists of the intellectual society made interracial marriages—which was legalized in every state on June 12, 1967 ("Loving Day"). One example is the painter Archibald Motley, who married Edith Granzo, a white woman. They will both experience racism. Another figure can be the American concert pianist and composer Philippa Schuyler, daughter of George Schuyler, an African American writer and politician, and Josephine Cogdell, a white Texan heiress.

In the book *Darkwater*, Du Bois explores themes of race, racism, and the African American experience in the United States. He discusses the ways in which white supremacy has shaped American society and culture, and he argues for greater understanding and empathy between different racial and ethnic groups. One of the most famous essays in *Darkwater* is *The Souls of White Folk*, in which Du Bois argues that white Americans have been blinded by their own racial prejudices and are unable to fully understand or appreciate the experiences of African Americans. He also explores the concept of "double consciousness," which refers to the psychological toll of living as a black person in a white-dominated society. In some of these stories, the author suggests that breaking taboos against miscegenation might have a positive effect on social relations.

The stories within *Darkwater* also revolve around discontent with the way that democracy was viewed and handled among people of different ethnic, racial, and social groups—for instance, the passing of the 15th Amendment in 1870, supposedly prohibiting the denial of voting rights on the basis of race and color, and yet, black suffrage was still challenged with poll taxes, literacy tests, etc.

The Harlem Renaissance was a time of great creativity and artistic expression, but it was also a time of political and social activism. One of the most famous activists associated with the Harlem Renaissance was W.E.B. Du Bois, who was a scholar, writer, and civil rights activist. Du Bois was a key figure in the Niagara Movement, which advocated for full political, civil, and social rights for Black Americans. It is noteworthy that he, along with Mary White Ovington, a prominent white American suffragist and journalist, co-founded the National

Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Along with this, the magazine *The Crisis* which featured the work of many Black writers and artists was created and edited in 1910 by W.E.B. Du Bois.

In addition to that, the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), was a black nationalist fraternal organization founded in 1921 by Marcus Garvey. The Pan-African organization, that was founded to work for the advancement of people of African ancestry around the world, had a strong influence on African American history and development. The UNIA was said to be "unquestionably, the most influential anticolonial organization in Jamaica prior to 1938." Marcus Garvey, a Jamaican-born Black nationalist and leader of the Pan-Africanism movement, wanted to unify and foster solidarity among people of African descent across the globe. He sought to establish independent Black states around the world, notably in Liberia on the west coast of Africa. In *The Philosophy and Opinions* he says: "*At no time in the history of the world, for the last five hundred years, was there ever a serious attempt made to free Negroes. We have been camouflaged into believing that we were made free by Abraham Lincoln. That we were made free by Victoria of England, but up to now we are still slaves, we are industrial slaves, we are social slaves, we are political slaves, and the new Negro desires a freedom that has no boundary, no limit. We desire a freedom that will lift us to the common standard of all its men, whether they be white men of Europe or yellow men of Asia, therefore, in our desire to lift ourselves to that standard we shall stop at nothing until there is a free and redeemed Africa.*"

Another crucial point is Jazz music that became popular throughout the whole United States, especially during the Jazz Age (1918-1929). Jazz music, a genre mixing African American musical traditions (blues, ragtime, and spirituals) with European music styles (marching band music, classical music), emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in New Orleans, Louisiana.

As African Americans moved to the north and other parts of the United States, they helped to spread jazz throughout the country. The growth of radio and the recording industry helped to spread the music to a wider audience, including white people, and jazz musicians such as Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and Benny Goodman became part of mainstream American culture. It also influenced other music styles such as rock and roll and hip hop. The most popular musicians and black entertainers of the era played at the Cotton Club, including musicians Fletcher Henderson, Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong; vocalists Adelaide Hall, Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, and dancers such as Katherine Dunham or Bill Robinson.

In fact, the Harlem Renaissance didn't stop in Harlem: The cultural revival took hold across the North and in the West. There were also many international exchanges with African American artists going to Paris—such as Josephine Baker—and foreign intellectuals going to the United

States, Harlem in particular, like the French writer and activist Nancy Cunard. In Chicago, for example, Black luminaries held public art exhibitions and gathered a groundbreaking collection of materials on Black history housed at the city's public library. Kansas City, Missouri became an influential center for jazz and blues.

During the Prohibition Era, the emergence of jazz in Harlem transformed the area into a popular destination for white pleasure-seekers. They frequented both speakeasies and "black-and-tan saloons" as part of a popular practice known as "slumming," which brought them into contact with Black cultural expression such as art and music. For them, the experience was considered exotic and titillating. Ironically, instead of participating in the Black nightlife they had come to see, many whites were not very curious and never got farther than establishments like the Cotton Club, a Southern plantation-themed nightclub that was specifically appreciated by white clientele.

2) White patronage

A complete discussion of the Harlem Renaissance must necessarily include the acknowledgement of white patrons' and intellectuals' crucial contributions made to African American artists. One could argue that the Harlem Renaissance owed a great deal of its vitality and accomplishments to its supporters, and that without their generous contributions, the movement—especially in its early years—may not have achieved the remarkable heights it did. In fact, during the 1920s and 1930s, many white collectors, publishers, and philanthropists were interested in supporting the work of African American artists and writers, and saw the cultural achievements of Harlem as a unique and valuable contribution to American art and literature.

One of the most important forms of white patronage during the Harlem Renaissance was financial support. Joel Elias Spingarn, an American educator, literary critic, and civil rights activist, was a prominent advocate for black artists and writers. Throughout his life, he worked towards promoting racial equality through a variety of measures and initiatives and even earned the reputation of being the "most selfless of white philanthropists." Together with his brother Arthur, he crafted the Spingarn Medal, a prestigious award given annually by the NAACP to recognize outstanding achievement by African Americans. W.E.B. Du Bois and Langston Hughes are among some of the Harlem writers who were awarded the Spingarn Medal. Another white patron was Charlotte Osgood Mason. Mason used her wealth to support artists such as Aaron Douglas, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston.

White philanthropists and foundations provided funding for cultural institutions such as the Harlem YMCA, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the Opportunity magazine, which provided a platform for African American writers and artists to showcase their work. But white patronage was not always filled with good intentions. Charlotte Osgood Mason forced the artists she granted to show black “primitivism”, emphasizing black and white differences. According to Langston Hughes, during the 1920s, Mason's interest in the New Negro movement was not driven by a desire to see the black community excel, but instead was rooted in her belief that African Americans represented "America's great link with the primitive." Hughes suggests that Mason viewed the New Negro as an exotic and fascinating subject rather than an individual with a genuine need for social and economic advancement. Indeed, to satisfy her fascination with primitivism, she asked Alain Locke to provide her with artists who could showcase "black primitivism" in their artwork. Zora Neale Hurston even said that if her tales did not express the desired "primitive" elements, she was denied support. Langston Hughes was also a victim of this because, as he similarly recounts, “she wanted me to be primitive and know and feel the intuitions of the primitive. But, unfortunately, I did not feel the rhythms of the primitive surging through me, and so I could not live and write as though I did. I was only an American Negro--who had loved the surface of Africa and the rhythms of Africa--but I was not Africa".

III. The legacy of the Harlem Renaissance

1) The inheritance of social and political actions

The Black Lives Matter movement, a social movement that seeks to combat racism, racial discrimination and acts of violence experienced by black people, has its roots in previous civil rights movements, including the Harlem Renaissance, but its current iteration was sparked by the killing of George Floyd, an African American man, by a white police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota in May 2020. In politics, figures such as Barack Obama or Kamala Harris prove the ongoing—but sometimes debated—integration of black people in American politics.

The Harlem Renaissance and its opposition against racial segregation helped to lay the ground for a larger Civil Right Movement that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, with new political leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr., a Baptist minister and social rights activist who peacefully, advocated for the improvement of African Americans civil rights. At the same time, Malcom X also fought for the empowerment of African Americans but more radically and violently. Both rejected integration with white America but while King advocated for

nonviolent direct actions, Malcom X, who joined the Nation of Islam, supported the idea that African Americans should completely separate from Whites, and wanted to create a separate nation for his black followers.

2) The artistic heritage

Many artists of the Harlem Renaissance paved the way for the upcoming decades.

Personalities such as Michael Jackson, Aretha Franklin or more recently Beyoncé, are recognized as some of the greatest artists of all time as they truly made American culture shine throughout the world. African Americans also contributed to American culture through sports, with figures such as LeBron James, Michael Jordan or Carl Lewis in Athleticism, who gained 9 gold medals.

In literature, many writers and poets continued the work of their peers of the Harlem Renaissance, chronicling the experiences and struggles of the Black community in works of fiction, non-fiction, and poetry. Some of the most famous African American authors include Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, James Baldwin and Chester Himes, who in his book *PinkToes* portrays “Mamie Mason”, Harlem's most influential society matron, who receives the most famous personalities of the time in her house and hosts desegregated sexual orgies, all for the advancement of harmony between the races.

Back in the late 1960s, a new genre emerged in the musical field: the disco. With artists such as Donna Summer, Boney M, Diana Ross, Earth Wind & Fire, Tina Turner, and the influential record label Tamla Motown records, renowned for creating innovative "psychedelic soul" songs. The disco became popular among all communities at its peak in the 1970s, and continued to be widely embraced and enjoyed. Other

A movement that happened during the 70s period was the Blaxploitation, an ethnic cinematographic subgenre that aimed to redefine the status of black characters by rethinking their roles on screen. As a matter of fact, the movement wished to stop the perpetuation of offenses and stereotypes made to the black community that they were sidekicks or involved in crime and brutality. A well-known example is the movie *Shaft*, a 1971 action film by Gordon Parks. The main focus of the story centers on John Shaft, a private detective who is tasked by a Harlem mobster to rescue his daughter from the clutches of Italian mobsters who have kidnapped her.

Lastly, the Black is Beautiful movement, which originated in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s, was a cultural movement that aimed to combat racism and promote black pride and

identity. The movement sought to dispel and redefine the standards of beauty, which had long excluded Black people, stating that their natural features—such as their skin color or hair—were “ugly”. It aimed to promote pride and self-love among Black people by celebrating and affirming their natural features. The origins of the movement can be traced back to the Négritude movement, an anti-colonial cultural and political movement founded by a group of African and Caribbean students in Paris in the 1930s who sought to celebrate and reclaim the value of blackness and African culture.

Overall, the Harlem Renaissance was a complex and multifaceted movement that both celebrated African American culture and exposed the racism and discrimination that continued to exist in American society. While it encouraged a sense of community and solidarity among African Americans, it also helped to break down racial barriers and promote greater understanding and appreciation between different racial and ethnic groups, as African American artists gained wider recognition and appreciation.

The reactions of white people to the Harlem Renaissance were complex and varied, and reflected the racial tensions and inequalities of the time. While some white people were supportive of the movement, others saw it as a challenge to their power and privilege, and resisted its message of equality and cultural pride.

The Harlem Renaissance had an impact on the larger American society and paved the way for the greater Civil Rights Movements of the 1960s and gave a voice to many more African Americans in current American society.