

## The Harlem Renaissance: A Celebration of the Black Race

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**ABSTRACT:** *The interwar period was a watershed decade in black history due to the development of an international discourse and vehicle that focuses on a transnational solidarity and commonness of the African diaspora known as the Harlem Renaissance. Harlem Renaissance has been detrimental in the celebration of the black race and in redefining the notion of being Black in America in a more positive way. Harlem Renaissance has influenced other revolutionary movements within the black diasporic community such as the negritude movement. This paper summarizes the main events and publications that helped shape the Harlem Renaissance with the role of Black women in this cultural, philosophical and literary movement created in Harlem in the 1920s. Through this movement, transnational exchanges helped shape the black community's worldwide experiences, and specifically formed a strong feeling of belonging, self-determination, and cultural celebration of the black race. Black writers, activists, and scholars celebrate their African heritages and call for solidarity in the black community. Thus, they challenged colonization, oppression and white supremacy, helping the black community gain independence and self-awareness.*

**KEYWORDS:** Harlem renaissance; identity; diaspora; self-determination; women; African heritages

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### INTRODUCTION

The 1920s was a watershed decade in black history. The Harlem Renaissance, also known as the New Negro Renaissance was a cultural, philosophical, and intellectual movement that gathered black artists and writers in Harlem between the end of World War I and the late 1930s. During those years, there was an artistic explosion with the publication of beautiful and daring photographs, books, essays, poems, drawings, music from many black artists. Ranging from already established artists such as W.E.B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, Alain Locke, to young new artists such as Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, Gwendolyn Bennett, Jessie Redmond Fauset, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay among others, the Harlem Renaissance focused on a development of topics related to the black experience. The Harlem Renaissance writers and young artists understood early on that the ability to see and identify

issues and black experiences could help solve the problem of the twentieth century, which according to Du Bois was ‘the color line.’ The Great Migration North with soldiers coming back from World War I, marked an important shift black cultural expression in the United States of America. Black writers and artists created journals and magazines, including *Opportunity*, *A Journal of Negro Life*, first issued in 1923 by the National Urban League, with Charles S. Johnson as its editor, to fight against segregation. Moreover, with the creation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People’s (NAACP) *The Crisis* magazine, Du Bois, the editor, and his team were writing about issues that black people experienced in America including exclusion, segregation, the need for a black elite to show the black community that it was possible to define themselves in a positive way with education, and self-determination. This new awareness can be traced in the discussion of the inner struggle that black people faced with the “veil” as Du Bois puts it in his book *The Souls of Black Folk*. In fact, Du Bois, one of the African American writers who travelled internationally, discussed the idea that African Americans, with two different heritages: African and American, have always suffered from a lack of clarity when defining themselves because they have been seeing themselves through the eyes of white America. I look at the different phases of the movement through books by David Levering Lewis and Cary D. Wintz before moving to a close examination of some of the books published during the Harlem Renaissance to track the themes of Black celebration, race consciousness, racial solidarity, mobility, gender and sexuality. Black women including Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen and Josephine Baker experienced both race relations and gender issues in their writings and performances.

### **Different phases of the movement**

Harlem Renaissance is a recognition and reclamation of the economic, cultural, political and historical participation of the black community in the development of the world. David Levering Lewis focuses on the different phases of the Harlem Renaissance by offering a historical background of the movement in an organized way. He opens *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader* published in 1994 by saying

The Harlem Renaissance was a somewhat forced phenomenon, a cultural nationalism of the parlor, institutionally encouraged and directed by leaders of the national civil rights establishment for the paramount purpose of improving race relations in a time of extreme national backlash, cause in large part by the economic gains won by Afro-Americans during the Great War (xv).

Lewis identifies three phases of the Harlem Renaissance. The first phase starts with the Red Summer of 1919 and ends with the publication of Jean Toomer’s *Cane* of 1923, he claims that this phase was mainly influenced by the bohemians and revolutionaries who were mostly whites. The second phase starts in early 1924 to mid-1926 Civil Rights Establishment, where the National Urban League and the NAACP were promoting a racial collaboration within the black community through art as a propaganda to celebrate young black writers by giving awards, prizes and fellowships. The second phase saw the publications of Jessie Fauset’s *There Is Confusion* 1924, Walter White’s *Fire in the Flint* 1924, Claude McKay’s *Harlem Shadows*

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1922, Countee Cullen's *Color* 1924, Langston Hughes's *The Weary Blues* 1926 (poetry volume), and Eric Walrond's *Tropic Death* (as significant as *Cane* in the Antilles according to Lewis) among others. . It is important to note redefine what it means to be Black through journal publications in the first phase.

The third and most important phase starts in mid-1926 to the Harlem Riot of March 1935 with the publication of books, articles, essays, poems, music, and drawings that defy the hegemonic convention and focus on black experiences. Some examples of the works published in the third phase include Langston Hughes's "The New Negro and the Racial Mountain" published in June 1926 in *The Nation* (portraying the negro as they are, without fear or shame), Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven*, *The Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man* reissued with the name of James Weldon Johnson<sup>1</sup> in 1927, Du Bois's *Dark Princess* of 1928, Nella Larsen's 1928 *Quicksand* and *Passing* of 1929, Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* of 1929, Claude McKay's *Banjo* 1929, Bessie Smith's promotion of Negro Jazz among others. Each of these publications celebrate blackness and reposition black people at the center of American civilization.

### **Re-defining being Black**

One of the main objectives of the Harlem Renaissance was to re-visit the notion of being black in America and to give it a more positive definition. Alain Locke's *The New Negro: An Anthology* published in 1925 was one of the key books that handled the job of redefining being Black. In fact, Locke develops a new approach to what it means to be black by portraying race awareness and black people fighting against oppression. When Locke says "the days of 'aunties,' 'uncles' and 'mammies' is equally gone"(Locke 5), he demonstrates that there is a new version of the "old negro" that uses his voice to fight against oppression and segregation. He states "for generations in the mind of America, black has been more a formula than a human being, a something to be argued about, condemned or defend, to be kept down, or in his place, or helped up, to be worried with worried over, harassed or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden" (Locke 3) Promoting self-appreciation, self-determination, and the elimination of self-hatred that has been forced upon the Negro, is at the heart of Locke's intention. However, it seems like Locke's New Negro is masculine: he only cites male writers. So, it is important to bear in mind the limitations of such an approach that is strictly masculine.

Another important publication that takes the discussion of being Black in a new direction of travel, mobility, camaraderie, and solidarity of the common man is Claude McKay's *Banjo: A Story Without A Plot*. This 1929 novel addresses the experience of black people when presenting the daily experience of black seamen in the Vieux Port of Marseille who, through companionship and conviviality, challenge the idea of race relations, racial boundaries and racism as a whole. The presence of black people in Marseille informs us about the movements of people from Africa, America and the Caribbean to France during the interwar period. To pinpoint the solidarity and exchange of experiences between these black people from all over the world, Claude McKay mentions that "the way America treated Blacks was disgusting, but

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<sup>1</sup> *The Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man* was first published in 1912 and was anonymous

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the French too, even if they did it more politely, concealed a fundamental contempt for black people quite as pronounced as in the Anglo-Saxon land....” He then adds: “the French are never tired of proclaiming themselves the most civilized people in the world. They think they understand Negroes, because they don’t discriminate against us in their borders. They imagine that Negroes like them. But Senghor, the Senegalese, told me that the French were the most calculatingly cruel of all Europeans in Africa” (McKay 275). Let’s analyze the first part of McKay’s statement. He is stressing the fact that African Americans may feel welcome in France but should be aware of the way France treats its colonies. He is comparing the way the French were treating black people and the situation of blacks in America to show that the struggle should be worldwide. The second part of his message highlights his relationship with African students such as Senghor who shares with him the hypocrisy of the French administration in Africa. This comparison is made possible due to his travel to France, and the solidarity and connection between black people in Paris.

In Jessie Fauset’s *Plum Bun: A Novel without a Moral* (1928), Angela Murray passes for white because she looks lighter while her sister Virginia deals with her darker skin color by accepting her identity. So, Angela is moving in imagination and fact as she is aware of racial inequalities. Jessie Fauset, in the early pages of the book, focuses on Angela’s awareness of inequalities due to race and writes:

At a very early age she had observed that the good things of life are unevenly distributed; merit is not always rewarded; hard labour does not necessarily entail adequate recompense. Certain fortuitous endowments, great physical beauty, unusual strength, a certain unswerving singleness of mind, —gifts bestowed quite blindly and disproportionately by the forces which control life,—these were the qualities which contributed toward a glowing and pleasant existence (Fauset 13).

Angela always tries to hide or cover her ethnicity and race because she is aware of the inequalities in this life. In the search for a better life and recognition, after the death of her parents, Angela moves to New York City where she makes white friends and becomes part of the elite. Fauset’s representation of a female character that travels in search of acceptance is powerful in two ways. First, it raises the question of racism and sexism through Angela’s experience and second it traces the impossibility for her to find peace and recognition. Through Angela’s story, Fauset highlights the complex and precarious future for people of mixed race as they were so close to privilege depending on their skin color, but in many ways, so far away because the African ancestry complicates their lives and experiences.

Similarly, Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* (1928) portrays the life of Helga Crane who tries to find freedom, equality and tranquility that seem impossible to obtain because of her race and gender. The first page of *Quicksand* opens with Helga sitting alone in her room to emphasize the loneliness of Helga, a mixed-raced woman growing up in a white step family. Larsen focuses on the struggle and anxiety that goes through the head of Helga Crane when she recalls what the preacher said about the Naxos Negroes having "good sense" and "good taste" because they

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knew what was expected of them and that if all the Negroes did the same then "there would be no race problem" (5). The reader gets the sense of how intelligent and engaging in the themes and topics of the Negroes Helga is. It is also important to note that the early pages set up the personality of Helga as being a smart and strong girl in the quest of tranquility, freedom and happiness. Tranquility, freedom, belonging that she cannot find anywhere (Chicago, Harlem, Denmark,) consistently questioning and feeling unsatisfied with her companionship with whites or blacks or her role as a wife and a mother. Similar to Fauset's protagonist, travelling, the quest for tranquility, transcending race, gender and sexuality, have failed for Helga, she suffers from depression, loneliness, and deception.

### **Women of the Harlem Renaissance**

An important book that discusses the Harlem Renaissance focusing exclusively on the writings of women of the movement is Cheryl A. Wall's *Women of the Harlem Renaissance* (1995). In the prologue, Wall mentions "metaphors of travel recur in writing by Harlem Renaissance women. Despite the restrictions of it, they traveled widely in fact and imagination" (xiv). The chapters of the book: "Jessie Redmond Fauset Travelling in Place," "Nella Larsen Passing for what?" and "Zora Neale Hurston's Travelling Blues" highlight the place of women in the Harlem Renaissance mentioning the limits of being a black woman during the Harlem Renaissance and include also a group picture that shows solidarity and networking of these women. Moreover, she focuses on Marita Bonner through the title "On Being Young --A Woman --and Colored,"<sup>2</sup> that addresses female readers. Wall also mentions the international dimension of the Harlem Renaissance that helped connecting Africa and the African diaspora when she writes "Harlem was, or would be, the race capital, drawing blacks from throughout the African diaspora: from the American North and South, the West Indies, and even Africa itself" (3). Wall introduces a new approach by looking at women writers of the movement and their everyday life and experiences due to their gender and race challenging the masculine aspect or perspective and the direction of the Harlem Renaissance. She also demonstrates that women writers of the Harlem Renaissance develop themes of mobility, travel and the transcendence of race, gender and sexuality.

Similar to Wall's approach, Cary D. Wintz's *Harlem Speaks: A Living History of the Harlem Renaissance* (2007) is a survey of the Harlem Renaissance focusing on main events that shape the movement. However, Wintz includes images, photographs of the writers and artists and black soldiers after World War I. Having those images such as pictures of what Harlem used to be before the Renaissance, the Dunbar apartments which was built for the black elite, landscapes, streets, helps the reader have an idea of what those scholars, artist, activists, and writers looked like but also highlights their solidarity and connection that grew stronger during the movement. Wintz also includes a discussion of the poetry of Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Zora Neal Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Josephine Baker's performances while giving us a historical background of black people in America and France.

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<sup>2</sup> Published in December 1925 in the *Crisis*, Volume 31, Iss,182, page 63



### ***Fire: a new approach to being Black***

Amid the publication of such already powerful and bold works a new magazine, a group of arts created *Fire*. A group of eight young, audacious and fearless writers, founded *Fire* in the apt of Aaron Douglas, in order to explore new ways of dealing with the theme of blackness, Africa, and life in the Ghetto. Douglas, along with Bruce Nugent, Gwendolyn Bennett, Zora Neal Hurston, Langston Hughes, John P. Davis and Wallace Thurman sought to highlight the experience of the common black people such as the peasants, the workers, the prostitutes among others. In the essay "The Twenties: Harlem and Its Negritude," Langston Hughes tells the story of how *Fire* started and the main goal its creators had in mind. They wrote in *Fire* "we younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter.... If colored people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either" (19). He also adds, *Fire* was "a Negro quarterly of the arts to épater le bourgeois, to burn up a lot the old stereotyped Uncle Tom ideas of the past" it was also created "to provide us with an outlet for publishing not existing in the hospitable but limited pages of *The Crisis* and *Opportunity*" (19). It would not last more than 1 edition because they did not have the financial means to sustain it. The black elite including Du Bois did not appreciate the work undertaken by *Fire* as it got away from using art as a propaganda and showed the reality of the black community especially those who did not have college degrees. I am interested in this journal as it depicts a more complete experience by also focusing on the experience of the common people in the black community and it also enriches the discussion about blackness taking a new pathway in the fight against oppression.

### **CONCLUSION**

The Harlem Renaissance helped shape African American experiences and formed a strong feeling of belonging, self-determination, and cultural celebration in America and the African Diaspora. The black scholars, artists and activists travelled and celebrated their heritages and cultures helping revisiting and redefining the notion of being Black. Black women played a major role in the Harlem Renaissance movement through books, paintings, writings, performances and activism. The transnational level of the Harlem Renaissance comes across with the phenomenon of passing in the books of Nella Larsen and Jessie Fauset as both authors travelled to Europe and created protagonists who transcend boundaries of race and gender both physically and psychologically. Moreover, the Harlem Renaissance was an international discourse and vehicle that focused on transnational solidarities and commonness of the African diaspora reshaping and redefining the notion of being Black. It continues to inspire, and guide the generations of black people that came after as they still face capitalism, systematic racism and imperialism.

### **Notes:**

1. I define in this paper the notion of being Black as a state of being where black people embrace their black culture as they face racism and oppression.

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2. The Harlem renaissance has influenced black students from Africa and the Caribbean who studied in France in the 1920s. The Negritude movement has been created in the similar goal of redefining the notion of being Black in a more positive way. See my dissertation [negritude feminisms](#) for more information on how black women including Suzanne Césaire, Paulette Nardal, Aminata Sow Fall and Annette Mbaye d'Erneville have contributed in the definition and redefinition of the negritude movement through their personal experiences, literary productions and activism in Senegal, Martinique and France.

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