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978-0-521-85699-7 - The Cambridge Companion to the Harlem Renaissance

Edited by George Hutchinson

Excerpt

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GEORGE HUTCHINSON

Introduction

The Harlem Renaissance – what a complex and conflicted aura the term evokes! People can scarcely agree on what it means. A vogue. A blossoming. A failure. A foundation. A few stars. A movement of black self-assertion against white supremacy, connected with anticolonial movements worldwide, or a local phenomenon gradually co-opted and destroyed by white voyeurs, cultural colonialists taking advantage of black naifs, opportunists, or weak-kneed bourgeois artists. A post hoc invention of cultural historians, now abundantly exploited by publishers, New York tour guides, and even, of late, real estate investors.

What is commonly called the Harlem Renaissance today was known as the Negro Renaissance in its own time. “Negro”: a word of pride, of strong vowels and a capital N. The thick diagonal strode forward and put its foot down. “Negro” no longer signifies to most people what it did in the early to mid-twentieth century. A Spanish derivative, it did not exactly mean “Black” in American English – it was *sui generis*, a word only used to indicate persons of the slightest (non-“white”) sub-Saharan African descent, regardless of color, but it seized on the essential meaning of the metaphor of the one mighty “drop [of blood]” that made one “black.” Racial segregation was racing toward its apogee. Race was the word of the hour. Race suicide. Race purity. Race man. Race woman. The Passing of the Great Race. “Arise, O Mighty Race!” Enter the New Negro.

The Harlem Renaissance in literature was never a cohesive movement. It was, rather, a product of overlapping social and intellectual circles, parallel developments, intersecting groups, and competing visions – yet all loosely bound together by a desire for racial self-assertion and self-definition in the face of white supremacy. The interplay between intense conflict and a sense of being part of a collective project identified by race energized the movement and helps account for our enduring fascination with it.

Scholarship on the movement has itself been conflicted, contradictory, and passionate, for the issues with which the “renaissance” authors struggled

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have remained. The field of Harlem Renaissance studies is all competing interpretations, from its inception to the present. What role should or did Marxism play in black political and intellectual culture? How important is the fact that many of the important writers were gay or bisexual? What are the political obligations of the black artist, and do they carry formal, thematic, or technical implications for the practice of art? How should or does or did African American culture articulate with American culture more generally? What should be made of the extensive involvement of black with white authors and patrons of the time, given the imbalances of power between them and the whites' inherited prejudices or blindnesses? How might one reconcile the "mixed" nature of African American (or Anglo-African, or Afro-Caribbean) cultural expression with the claims of racial solidarity and autonomy? What does it mean to be "Negro"? What is race? Harlem Renaissance writers, like many people today, disagreed with each other over the answers to these questions. A "companion" to the Harlem Renaissance must allow dissonance, overlap, and multiplicity to inform its very structure.

Some of the confusion and disagreement about what has come to be known as the "Harlem Renaissance" derives from a conflation of several overlapping phenomena. The term "Negro Renaissance" arose in the early to mid-1920s to signify a general cultural awakening and moment of recognition – both self-recognition (for it was a very self-conscious phenomenon) and recognition from "without." The Negro Renaissance, at this time, signified primarily a blossoming of literary arts.

Associated with the renaissance was a New Negro movement, which is more amorphous and difficult to define. It was not specifically identified with literature and the arts. The authors of the Harlem Renaissance were considered "New Negroes," but they were not the first or the only "New Negroes." The term "New Negro" in something like its twentieth-century meaning went back to the 1890s at least. (Indeed, it can be traced to the late eighteenth century.) Booker T. Washington was a "New Negro" in those years, author of *A New Negro for a New Century* (1900), and his followers thought of New Negroes as those who were building up all-black institutions without questioning the dominant western notions of "progress" and capitalist economics. By the 1920s, Booker T. Washington (who had died in 1915) seemed like an "Old Negro" to many because of his accommodation to white power. In the early twentieth century, and particularly in the immediate aftermath of World War I, the term New Negro tended to signify militant self-defense against white supremacy, intellectual aspiration, and quite often political radicalism. After 1925 and the publication of Alain Locke's anthology *The New Negro*, the term often carried less overt "political" reference,

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and signified more a cultural affirmation of Negro identity expressed in poetry, fiction, drama, and the fine arts. In the course of the 1930s, this “culturalist” emphasis was often criticized, but, as Jeffrey Stewart argues in the first chapter of this book, the New Negro movement could be said to have extended to the late 1940s and beyond, setting the groundwork for the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s.

The notion of a “New Negro” suggested the need to disengage from and overcome an “Old Negro” stereotype; yet the renaissance included a reevaluation of and pride in black history and heritage. Negro History Week – later Black History Month – was born during the renaissance. Arthur Schomburg assembled his important collection of manuscripts and books concerning black culture worldwide and sold it to the New York Public Library (NYPL) during the peak of the renaissance. Even before acquiring Schomburg’s collection, the 135th Street branch of the NYPL (a major incubator and forum for the renaissance) had already started a “Negro” department, and a Society for the Study of Negro History and Literature had been founded there by the likes of James Weldon Johnson, Schomburg, and W. E. B. Du Bois. Carter G. Woodson had earlier founded a similar organization in Washington, DC.

Alongside and often intertwined with the Negro renaissance was the phenomenon of Harlem, and the Harlem “Vogue” that Langston Hughes indelibly scripted into the historical imagination of later generations by way of his first autobiography, *The Big Sea* (1940). But Hughes did not collapse what he termed the “Black Renaissance” into the Harlem, or Negro, Vogue. There was a Harlem Vogue, and more broadly a Negro Vogue of international dimensions, but there was also a “Black Renaissance.” The “Vogue” referred to the interest some whites took in black arts and culture, popular music, Broadway shows featuring black performers, and the nightlife entertainment during Prohibition, when Harlem became a popular nightlife destination. The end of this vogue (which had a Parisian analogue centered in Montmartre) coincided less with Black Monday in 1929 than with the end of Prohibition in 1933. For different reasons, the timing was approximately the same in Paris.

A critique of the “Vogue” was an essential aspect of the renaissance itself (as several chapters in this volume reveal) and infused much of its literature as well as popular performance. Similarly, left-wing radicalism was not a “post-renaissance” phenomenon but a significant aspect of the movement, which was always energized by the contestation between different schools of thought, different disciplinary perspectives, and different social circles. This fact is epitomized in the oft-forgotten subtitle of Alain Locke’s famous anthology *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (1925). Locke overtly

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attempted to steer African American intellectual and artistic work in a certain direction – toward a cultural self-reconstruction and a New Negro aesthetic building on what he called “folk values.” (It was a shift of emphasis not atypical of intellectual culture in the twenties generally.) But plenty of people refused to go along. Points of view waxed and waned in influence, but there was no single “New Negro” cultural politics.

The renaissance also overlapped with or was part of a much broader, international Negro movement expressed in Pan-African congresses, Marcus Garvey’s United Negro Improvement Association, and black intellectual communities outside the United States.¹ Other anticolonial and cultural nationalist movements were also occurring at the time, of which black intellectuals were very aware – in Ireland especially, in India, in South America, in Mexico, in China. Seen from an international perspective the Harlem Renaissance was part of a global phenomenon in which cultural nationalisms (sometimes crossing the boundaries of nation-states) were mobilized against imperialisms economic, political, and cultural. Marxism also provided an intellectual matrix of international dimensions in which not a few “New Negroes” participated.²

Attention to the international dimensions of black intellectual culture between the World Wars has sometimes put in question the emphasis on Harlem and on American cultural politics in scholarship on the movement, which for many years ignored its international aspects. But these are and were overlapping (and sometimes competing) phenomena. Langston Hughes was a black internationalist, but much of his work was explicitly concerned with the struggle for black citizenship in the United States, as well as with articulating the meaning and power of black cultural expression in the context of “Americanism.” He placed this struggle within an international frame (variously so in the course of his long career), but one viewed from an American point of view. Discovering in Africa that people there “would not believe that [he] was a Negro,” Hughes did not assimilate the African notions of racial identity; instead he would continue to understand Africa through a black internationalist lens that was definitively “American.”³

Indeed, alongside the diasporic aspect of the renaissance was an investment in some versions of American cultural nationalism through which the “Americanness” of African American culture seemed a central and potentially powerful resource. In the NAACP’s *Crisis* magazine, for example, W. E. B. Du Bois and literary editor Jessie Fauset assailed the hypocrisy of white America while claiming, in the words of one of Fauset’s fictional heroines, “There is nothing more supremely American than the colored American, nothing more made-in-America, so to speak.” African Americans, the New Negroes often asserted, had given the United States its

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most distinctive cultural forms and were the truest believers in its democratic dreams. Links between American cultural nationalism and African American modernism were crucial features of the movement across other intellectual divides.

In the 1920s and 1930s, New York was the chief point of entry and exit for black culture between the United States and other parts of the world. The vast majority of publishers who took an interest in black writing were based in New York, and they were helping transform the face of modern and American literatures. The Garvey movement was headquartered in Harlem, not Lagos or Dakar or Paris, not in Kingston or Marseilles. Could one have seen, anywhere else in the world, the kind of spectacles Garvey was able to stage in Harlem? And would the words and images have gotten out to other places?

France was also a vibrant crossroads of black culture and intellect. Claude McKay's *Banjo*, set in Marseilles, gives one of the best accounts of the black diasporic cross-referencing that went on in France, and the novel deeply impressed Francophone black intellectuals associated with *négritude*. Yet at the heart of that novel is an argument (by the Haitian stand-in for McKay himself) that working-class Negroes in the United States (but not exclusively American Negroes) are the most powerful and avant-garde of all black groups because they inhabit the most vital, rough-and-tumble, powerful capitalist and quasi-democratic nation in the world, while American-style racism helps bind them into a cohesive, racially conscious group. The transnational romance of race, for McKay, centers in the United States, and its most important material as well as intellectual and even cultural resources emanate from there, ineluctably shaped by the race-producing disciplines of America's one-drop rule.

Our very notion of who counts as a "Negro" in the world in the 1920s and 1930s privileges the racial discourse of the United States. Just as Africans did not take Langston Hughes to be a Negro when he visited there as a young sailor, neither did Mexicans when, before starting college, he stayed with his "*muy Americano*" (very American, in the Mexicans' view) father near Mexico City. His later friend and collaborator Nicolás Guillén in Cuba was proud to think of himself and Cuban culture as "mulatto." Had Nella Larsen been raised in the Danish West Indies, her father's birthplace, she would not have been a Negro. The mulatto elite of Claude McKay's Jamaica did not consider themselves "black," but he came to embrace the meaning of Negro as the United States institutionalized it. Even when we speak of "transnational" aspects of the Negro renaissance, we are speaking of something profoundly shaped by American racial culture and American power.

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In the United States itself, the phenomenon had roots, and routes, outside New York City. Harlem, however, provided the movement with its symbolic capital and its institutional center of gravity, despite (and because of) the fact that very few of the “New Negro” writers were actually from Harlem. There one found a complex and culturally productive concentration of peoples of African descent: recent migrants from the rural South, immigrants from the Caribbean and Latin America (and even from Africa), native New Yorkers, and a burgeoning black professional class hailing from all sections of the United States. Moreover, black Harlem was a new community that seethed with energy, ensconced in the great communications as well as financial capital of the Western Hemisphere. The vast majority of important magazines and publishing houses for black writers were headquartered in New York.

Harlem was a kind of switchyard of black cultural “renaissancism” (to borrow a term from Houston Baker, Jr.).⁴ If few of the artists and writers came from Harlem (or even New York), many of them first met each other there. At the height of the renaissance, many of the New York participants lived in other areas of the city. Even James P. Johnson, the “King of Harlem stride piano,” lived in Queens. It is precisely the liminal, or betwixt-and-between, aspects of Harlem in the interwar period, combined with its concentrated “blackness,” that made it so important to the renaissance. Harlem was too diverse, had too many new migrants and immigrants, too much intellectual dissensus, for any one group to establish cultural dominance. The 135th Street Branch of the New York Public Library became a major site for all sorts of intellectual and artistic cross-fertilization, in part because no one group could claim it as their own. That point holds more generally for Harlem in the 1920s and 1930s.

While scholars have debated the beginning and ending dates of the movement or its “phases,” a general consensus remains that it took form after World War I and continued well into the 1930s. World War I was a serious blow to the prestige of “white” civilization and its discourse of rationality and progress. Black soldiers, experiencing relative freedom in Europe and battling to make the world “safe for democracy” returned to Jim Crow America ready to fight for their rights, buoyed by a growing black nationalist consciousness among the migrating masses. The Soviet Union, born of the Russian Revolution in the midst of the Great War, represented to many writers a more truly egalitarian social and political model than the capitalism of the western so-called “democracies,” and it seemed more committed to ending racism.

The Great War also contributed to the Great Migration of blacks in the southern United States to northern cities and new opportunities for work and

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education. The American publishing industry exploded after World War I, and new firms (often founded by Jews) turned to new kinds of literature, including literature by African Americans. The Blues and Jazz took off as popular musical forms in the wake of the war and, aided by the new recording industry, appealed across lines of class, race, region, and nation. Conventions of gender and sexuality came under intense pressure. Prohibition provided the context for an enormous increase in illicit social activity, and the age of the nightclub bloomed. New black periodicals provided support and exposure for young authors, while the more liberal and radical “white” periodicals became interested in black talent as never before. Organizations like the NAACP and the National Urban League took advantage of the interest in black culture, featured literature and art in their “house” magazines, and staged literary banquets and great glittering balls with impressive floor shows for integrated crowds.

The Great Depression clamped down on the optimism of the late 1920s. The balls of the NAACP began losing money about 1931 and finally stopped. The nightclubs of Harlem were devastated by the end of Prohibition in 1933. David Levering Lewis has persuasively used the Harlem Riot of 1935 to mark the end of the movement from a social historian’s perspective. From a literary point of view, Richard Wright’s “Blueprint for Negro Writing” of 1937 and the publication of his novellas in *Uncle Tom’s Children* (1938) seem to mark an emphatic turning point, while Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) – a novel Wright attacked – is generally considered one of the crowning achievements of the Harlem Renaissance. James Weldon Johnson, a key precursor, participant, and historian of the movement died in 1938, and soon thereafter Carl Van Vechten began accumulating manuscripts from “renaissance” participants for the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection housed at Yale, the most important archive of the movement. We therefore take the period 1918 to 1937 to reasonably encompass the Harlem Renaissance, while recognizing that periodization is always artificial and approximate.

By the early to mid-1930s, several writers were identifying the renaissance with tendencies they wished to put behind them. Thus began an attempt to identify the movement with a particular ideology or set of naive assumptions, a “school” of thought or a particular class bias. As Lawrence Jackson points out in this volume, the Negro Renaissance, increasingly identified specifically with Harlem and the “Negro Vogue” of the 1920s, became the “whipping boy” of later generations seeking to establish their own authority over what black literature could or should be and do. Yet their own visions, literary assumptions, affiliations, and techniques were rarely as distinct from various strains of the renaissance as they liked to believe.

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One of the most tenacious myths about the Harlem Renaissance has been that interest in black literature and arts died in 1929 or 1930 because of the stock market crash. By almost any measure, as a literary and more broadly artistic phenomenon, one can find more happening in the arts and letters in the 1930s than in the 1920s. Considerably more black fiction was published in the 1930s than in the 1920s, by a broader range of publishers and magazines, despite a shrinkage in fiction publication overall. More Guggenheim Fellowships went to African Americans in the 1930s than in the 1920s. The Harmon Foundation became more active in supporting black arts in the 1930s than in the 1920s. Support provided by the Federal Writers Project, Federal Theater Project, and Federal Arts Project put to shame the piecemeal patronage of the late 1920s. Visual artists returning to Harlem in the 1930s opened up schools and workshops with a concentration of talent, experience, and youthful ambition far beyond anything known earlier, to the benefit of people like Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, and Norman Lewis. Ethel Waters was one of the greatest stars on Broadway, and James Weldon Johnson was hired to teach creative writing at New York University. If the *Vogue* had ended, black “renaissancism” had endured.

Behind the negative use of the renaissance was a sense of the movement’s “failure” aesthetically – it had, many felt, produced no weighty masterpieces – connected with disappointment that it had not done more to advance the black freedom movement. Certainly some renaissance participants had expected greater social efficacy for the movement than it was able to produce. Others never expected the arts to be able to transform the position of the mass of black people except through a long-term cumulative effect connected with other forms of endeavor. Literature had its place in the broad front of Negro advance, however. Speaking to an interviewer in 1929, at the very height of the *Vogue*, Nella Larsen stated, “Even if the fad for our writings passes presently, as it is bound to do I suppose, we will in the meantime have laid the foundation for our permanent contribution to American culture.”⁵ That judgment is now indisputable. But, of course, making a contribution to a culture is not the same as radically transforming an entrenched social structure.

Beginning in the 1980s, understandings and evaluations of the Harlem Renaissance began to shift. Black feminist interventions brought critical attention to the narrowing effects of prior criticism that tended to demote or screen out the contributions of black women to African American culture and their challenges to white women’s feminism. Critics began questioning the assumptions behind narratives of the movement’s “failure” and developed new methods of reading its authors’ engagements with modernism and modernity. Reconsiderations of the meaning of “Modernism” – previously defined as a movement in which black writers played no part – coincided

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with a questioning of the segregation of “black” from “white” literature and growing dissatisfaction with prescriptive approaches to black writing that used racial “authenticity” as a standard of judgment. Post-structuralist theory also tended to undermine faith in notions of “authentic blackness” and brought increasing attention to the performative dimensions of “race” as well as its historical contingency. Postcolonial theory stressed the “hybridity” of expressions of formerly colonized peoples. Near the turn of the twenty-first century, growing interest in globalization and transnationalism helped inspire interest in those aspects of the renaissance that exceeded the ideological and geographical boundaries of the nation-state. New methods and theories of African American literature inevitably developed in relation to (while often challenging or transforming) such broad intellectual movements as second-wave feminism, post-structuralism, and psychoanalytic criticism. And in the rise of Queer Theory, as well as recuperation of the history of sexuality, the Harlem Renaissance became a site of intense critical interest.

As a result of these major shifts in the realm of literary scholarship the “canon” of the Harlem Renaissance has been under continuous contention and reconstruction since the late 1970s. Just as the movement’s positioning at the intersection of wide-ranging and crucial historical developments has come to seem inarguable, today its literary achievement appears considerably more substantial than it did when Nathan Huggins published his path-breaking study, *Harlem Renaissance* (1971).

The middle section of this book provides an investigation of that canon as it appears to us today in relationship to the varied concerns and forms explored by the New Negro authors of the 1920s and 1930s. While we have tried to cover a broad range, we could hardly be comprehensive. While seeking clarity of analysis and expression, this book tries not to reduce key issues – the meaning of race, the relationship between race and writing, chronology, relations between white and black, sexuality, internationalism and nationalism – to a misleading consensus. We have attempted to put authors in conversation with each other in often new ways that both make sense historically and draw attention to major developments in form, theme, and technique, and that highlight key nodes of the network in which the literature emerged even as “Negro literature” developed into a semi-autonomous field. In keeping with the format of the Cambridge Companion series, this book (except in the Chronology) largely restricts its attention to the literary realm, but we encourage our readers to think beyond such boundaries, as the literary interacted profoundly with, and was shaped in relation to, other forms of expression that were also integral to the broader movement. Within our limitations, we have tried to present the best of current wisdom but also to offer a highly readable provocation to new formulations, new readings, and archival exploration.

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NOTES

1. Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).
2. See especially William J. Maxwell, *New Negro, Old Left: African American Writing and Communism between the Wars* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); and Barbara Foley, *Spectres of 1919: Class and Nation in the Making of the New Negro* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2003).
3. Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea* (1940; New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), p. 11.
4. See Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
5. Marion L. Starkey, "Negro Writers Come Into Their Own," unpublished manuscript, in Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas.