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The Social Contributions of The Harlem Renaissance

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by Henry Rhodes

The Harlem Renaissance was the first period in the history of the United States in which a group of black poets, authors, and essayists seized the opportunity to express themselves. There are two basic conditions which fostered this unique situation: the American Negro's contact with other blacks from different parts of the world which gave him a renewed sense of self-respect, and mass migration of Negroes from the South to major northern industrial areas—one of them being Harlem. It is my intention to examine the social contributions of Harlem intellectuals during the decade from 1918-29 and also to explore the relationship between the Harlem Renaissance writers and the "American Dream."

The Harlem Renaissance began in 1918 with the publication of Claude McKay's "Harlem Dancer" and ended in 1929. During this period, there was a wave of literary works by and about Negroes. Despite this productivity, the Harlem Renaissance was not a renaissance in the literal sense of the word. The *New Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines a "renaissance" as a rebirth or revival of literary ideas. Thus, the period 1918-29 does not qualify as a renaissance because at no prior time in American history had a group of Negro intellectuals attempted to make any major literary contribution. The Harlem Renaissance can be more accurately described as a period of vigorous artistic and intellectual activity on the part of the Negro intellectual.

One of the main goals of the black writers and intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance was to show the Negro as a capable individual. Providing a positive self-image for the Negro was not an easy task. The Harlem Renaissance succeeded in depicting the Negro as an individual who was capable of making great achievements if given the opportunity. However, continued injustices against Negroes forced black intellectuals into the harsh realization that prejudice against Negroes was deeply rooted in American society. It was useless trying to show white America that the Negro had "worth" and could become a contributing individual.

Before discussing the role of the American Negro in the Harlem Renaissance, we must examine the lifestyles and the contributions to the movement of the West Indian population. Because West Indians differed from American Negroes in many ways, intraracial prejudice arose. American Negroes categorized all Negro immigrants from the Caribbean islands into one group, West Indian, even though these immigrants represented a diverse group from islands as different as Jamaica, Trinidad, St. Vincent, and St. Lucia. It is true, though, that the West Indians shared general experiences, desires, and mores which set them apart from the American Negro.

Most West Indians came from a society in which class distinction played a more important role in one's life than the color line. Thus the West Indian immigrant was constantly trying to improve his economic position. He was also unlikely to accept racial slurs without protest, for the West Indian believed a man should be judged more by his talents than his color. Out of this heightened class consciousness came a small group of political and economic radicals. Many of Harlem's street corner orators in the 1920's were West Indian immigrants. Among the most prominent was a Virgin Islander named Hubert H. Harrison. He was a Socialist, an expert on African history, a militant critic of American society, and a staunch defender of the Negro's racial heritage. Harrison conducted formal lectures in what he called the Harlem School of Social Sciences. He also conducted lectures on street corners, which he referred to as his "outdoor university."

Other West Indian radicals presented talks on "Socialism vs. Capitalism" organized tenants' leagues, published Marxist journals, and tried to make the Harlem Negro labor-conscious. Richard B. Moore, Frank R. Crosswaith, and Reverend Ethred Brown (all West Indian) were prominent local candidates for the Board of Aldermen, Assembly, and Congress, running on Socialist and Communist tickets. They failed, however, to obtain a significant percentage of the vote.

While just a small portion of the West Indian population were political and economic activists, the majority of West Indians were trying to better their own economic positions. Menial labor was considered a sign of racial degradation and was looked upon with disgust. Most Negro immigrants accepted menial jobs but were motivated by their traditions and beliefs to improve their lot in life. As a group, the West Indians became noted for their ambition, thrift, and business acumen. Some of the American Negroes resented the economic success that West Indians achieved.

Another distinction between the American and foreign-born Negro was in their attitudes toward family life. Slavery had separated many American Negro families, whereas West Indian family ties were still fairly intact. The West Indian family was patriarchal in structure in contrast with the typically matriarchal American Negro home. It was beneath the father to help out with household chores. West Indian children were supposed to obey their parents without question. American Negroes considered the West Indian strait-laced and looked at the father with disdain because of his sternness.

Religion, too, distinguished the American Negro from the Negro immigrant. The majority of American Negroes were either Baptists or Methodists, whereas the Negro immigrants from the West Indies were predominantly Roman Catholic or Episcopalian. West Indian church services were generally quiet in contrast to the emotionalism demonstrated in a typical Harlem service.

These differences led to friction. The Negro immigrant was ridiculed for his tropical clothing; he was mocked and taunted with names such as "monkey chaser," "ringtale," "kin Mon," and "cockney." The hostility of the American Negro forced the West Indians to form defense organizations to ease the tension. Three of these defense organizations were the West Indian Committee on America, the Foreign-Born Citizens Alliance, and the West Indian Reform Association. These organizations had little success; anti-immigrant prejudice remained strong until the West Indian Negroes stopped migrating to Harlem.

The influence of West Indian Negroes was to be felt throughout the Harlem Renaissance. Their idea of class consciousness gave a boost to the Harlem Negro, who was beginning to take up the Negro as a literary subject. Even though the small West Indian group of political radicals were not very successful at the polls, they did provide a starting point for others to follow. There were Negroes now who had some sort of political experience from which others could learn.

How did Harlem become the capital of the “Black world”, and why did so many articulate Negroes happen to live in Harlem? There are four basic reasons for the importance of Harlem. 1) As a few articulate Negroes and Negro professionals (for example, barbers, lawyers, and doctors) moved to Harlem and became successful, others followed. These Negro professionals followed the mass migration of Negroes from the South during World War I which had helped fill New York’s industrial needs. (This movement is sometimes referred to as the “Great Migration.”) Thus, the Negro barber, lawyer, and doctor were assured of a large clientele. 2) The formation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in New York attracted many Negro intellectuals who were upset with the rise in violence against Negroes in the United States. These black leaders saw the NAACP as a vehicle for changing the situation of the Negro. The NAACP also attracted those (specifically the participants in the Niagara Movement) who were dissatisfied with Booker T. Washington’s policy of accommodation. 3) When DuBois moved to New York, many black intellectuals followed his lead, for they shared similar ideas about ameliorating the Negro’s condition. Harlem was the perfect place for black writers to voice their opinions on how the “New Negro” was going to be militant and self assured, partly because there was a large population of Negroes in Harlem at the time. 4) Marcus Garvey was another reason for articulate Negroes to move to Harlem. Garvey attracted Negro intellectuals not only from the United States but from all parts of the world. They were called to Harlem to attend the Universal Negro Improvement Association conventions held at times in Madison Square Garden. Some of these intellectuals remained in Harlem afterwards.

Harlem was a place where blacks could develop an independent spirit. The assumption among black intellectuals was that once the evils and injustices of discrimination were exposed, things would get better for the Negro. Three magazines attempted to reveal the evils of discrimination: *Crisis* , an NAACP magazine edited by W. E. B. DuBois; *The Messenger* , run by A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen; and *Opportunity* , the magazine published by the National Urban League and edited by Charles S. Johnson.

Negroes looked to these magazines for leadership. *Crisis* focused on violence against Negroes in America, giving to its readership accurate and appalling accounts of lynchings and anti-Negro riots. *The Messenger* (whose editors were Socialists) suggested to its readers that the solution for the Negro’s problems was supporting the Socialist Party. *Opportunity* examined discrimination against Negroes in a series of studies written by social scientists.

These Negro magazines had differing views on black participation in World War I. W. E. B. DuBois and the *Crisis* saw the war as an opportunity for blacks to use their participation in the war to bargain for social justice for the Negro in the United States. *The Messenger* and its editors were against Negro involvement because they felt that the United States didn’t deserve the Negro’s loyalty.

Crisis, *The Messenger* , and *Opportunity* realized that part of their role was to encourage the Negro’s work in the arts by publishing his works. In 1921 Langston Hughes’ poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” appeared in *Crisis* . Claude McKay’s “If We Must Die” was published in *The Messenger* after it had appeared in the *Liberator* in 1919. *Opportunity* supported the Negro writer, a fact made evident by its motto, “Not Alms but Opportunity.”

The editors of these magazines and other black intellectuals of the period were familiar with traditional middle-class reform tactics. They employed “muckraking,” publicly exposing misconduct of prominent individuals (with the notable exception of Marcus Garvey). These Negro intellectuals wrote articles about the Negro’s dilemma, hoping not only to excite the Negro population into coming together but also to put pressure on the conscience of white Americans. By concentrating on writing articles, they completely ignored the

political clout which they could have gained in the local wards. In order to stop the injustices against Negroes the political system would eventually have to change.

The “American Dream” holds that if a man is industrious, self-reliant, and talented he can achieve almost anything his heart desires. The “Dream” posed a dilemma for the Negro writer. If he chose to believe that the “American Dream” included the Negro, then he would have to believe that an end to discrimination was in the future. If not, the only option that the Negro had was to escape—either join Garvey’s Back to Africa movement or leave the country.

Those writers who accepted the “American Dream” became image-builders. They used all the individual achievements of the Negro in the arts as evidence that the Negro was ready for integration into American society. These same writers were faced with two major problems. One was that they had to cope with the stereotype of the Negro as lazy and oversexed. The black writer could not present too radical a portrayal of the Negro for fear of incurring white reprisal. Some whites wanted only to be assured that the Negro was loyal and docile. Second, the image-builders had to deal with the stereotyped Negro created by the theater. The theater depicted the Negro as childish and ignorant in roles such as Jim Crow and Jim Dandy. In black-face minstrel shows the Negro was portrayed, by both black and white performers, with grotesque features—enormous lips and a coal-black face. It was difficult, if not impossible, for some whites not to associate characteristics or mannerisms of the Negro represented on the stage with the Negro in real life.

The only way to counter the image portrayed in the white theater was to establish a Negro theater. DuBois stated that a black theater should have four fundamental principles: it should be “About Us, By Us, For Us, and Near Us.” For a short time, the Krigwa Players’ Little Negro Theater seemed to fulfill DuBois’ four fundamental principles. However, this group foundered for three reasons. Plays written by Negroes were scarce, thus Negroes were tempted to borrow or adapt white plays. It was nearly impossible to keep good Negro actors from being drawn to “white theaters” which paid more money. Finally there was little support from the black community.

W. A. Domingo, a Socialist, asserted more forcibly than the “image-builders” the Negro’s right to a “slice of the American pie” He stated in *The Messenger* in August, 1920, that the Negro wanted social equality. He believed that the Negro had already proved his capability and that it was needless to undergo an image-building process. Some historians credit W. A. Domingo with first stating the “New Negro” philosophy.

Alain Locke in *The New Negro* states that the appearance of the “New Negro” (militant, self-assertive, proud of his race) seemed sudden and shocking to people who considered the Negro inferior and docile. This was only because the “Old Negro” had lived so long under the shadow of stereotypes and cliches. The New Negro rejected these demeaning images for two reasons. One was that the New Negro’s contact with other blacks from different parts of the world gave him a renewed sense of self-respect. Second, city life brought Negroes into closer contact with one another, thus fostering racial pride.

Locke states that the New Negro’s task was to define his culture, a difficult job because there was very little presented in the schools about Negroes. Except for references to Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and Frederick Douglass, Negro history was left out of many, if not all, school systems.

The Harlem Renaissance writers portrayed the New Negro as self-assured in a variety of ways. For instance, in Countee Cullen’s poem “Yet Do I Marvel,” self-doubt on the part of a Negro poet is used to register a mild protest against the treatment of Negroes in the United States. Claude McKay chose to depict the militant, self-assured Negro in his poem “If We Must Die.” Although many intellectuals (both black and white) assert that

McKay's poem was written solely with the Negro in mind, McKay claims that the poem is not just restricted to the Negro but also includes all downtrodden people of the world.

Some writers of the Harlem Renaissance felt it was necessary to conduct research into the Negro's heritage in order to explain the New Negro. There was a wealth of material available in folktales, sermons, slave songs, and spirituals. Only now were researchers beginning to discover the richness and beauty of these resources. In 1925, Arthur Huff Fauset, a teacher in the Philadelphia public school system, began gathering folklore in the lower South. Fauset felt that it was the job of the folklore recorder to give an accurate account of the folktales without interjecting personal opinions. (Joel Chandler Harris had felt differently; in the Uncle Remus tales, Harris gives his own views about the ante-bellum Southern Negro.) Another writer, Zora Neale Hurston, who had more formal training than Fauset, went further than just collecting folktales, using her imagination to create a portrait of the common Negro character.

It is impossible to talk about the Harlem Renaissance without examining the contributions of the white intellectuals and patrons. Many black writers of the Harlem Renaissance would not have been able to complete their works of art had it not been for the financial support of whites. It was also through white connections with publishers that many black writers were able to get their works into print. The Negro writer also received financial support from other sources, one of which must be noted. In 1928, A'Leilia Walker, daughter of the Madame Walker who made millions in the hair-dressing industry, decided to become a patron of the Negro cultural movement. A'Leilia dedicated a floor of her mansion, the "Dark Tower," to Negro artists for planning and discussing their works.

There was something to be gained in Harlem for both the Negro and the white intellectual. Harlem served as a place of relief for whites, a place where they could get away from the Puritan ethic and just have fun. The moral code in Harlem wasn't too restrictive; sex and alcohol were readily available. The exciting night life appealed to bored affluent whites. One such white was the writer Carl Van Vechten, whose contributions to the Harlem Renaissance were invaluable. He helped many black writers get their works published, Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen among others. Van Vechten's most controversial book was *Nigger Heaven*, shocking primarily because of its title. The book tried to demonstrate that there was a wide range of Negroes varying in talent and sophistication, and tended to glorify the exotic side of black life.

Van Vechten had become so well acquainted with Harlem and its black intellectuals that after a while it became a privilege to get a tour of Harlem from Vechten. Even more popular were his parties, where several Negroes would be in attendance. Other affluent whites followed Van Vechten's lead and Negro parties became the "in thing."

By the 1920's a wave of white authors were ready to take up the Negro as an artistic subject. Among them were Eugene O'Neill (*Emperor Jones* and *All God's Chillun Got Wings*), E.E. Cummings (*The Enormous Room*), Waldo Frank (*Holiday*), Sherwood Anderson (*Dark Laughter*), and Du Bose Hayward (*Porgy* , later made into the musical *Porgy and Bess* , and *Mamba's Daughters*).

Since white Americans were ready to accept the Negro as a subject for works of art, it would seem only natural that they were also ready to patronize the Negro's art and literature. Two works of literature by black writers which met with a great deal of success were Rudolph Fisher's *Walls of Jericho* and Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* .

It was hard, however, for the Negro writer to keep his racial and artistic integrity while writing under a white patron. Artistic integrity is always a problem for a writer under the influence of a literary patron. In some

cases, when the white patron and the Negro writer differed, their literary relationship came to an end. In Langston Hughes' case, with the publication of his poem "Advertisement for the Waldorf-Astoria," not only did his literary relationship with his patron cease but their friendship as well. However, many Negro writers were not under the influence of patrons.

The Renaissance came to an end in 1929 with the start of the Great Depression, which brought poverty and violence to Harlem. It was this violence which chased away the affluent whites and white intellectuals to a safer environment on the island paradises of the Caribbean. Before departing, however, this group left its mark on Harlem. Without their financial and literary support, the renaissance would have been slower in developing.

The main features of the Harlem Renaissance can be summarized under three headings. 1) Even though the Harlem Renaissance was not a "true" renaissance, the period did serve to stimulate much Negro writing. The New Negro philosophy laid the basis for many Negro works which came afterwards. The idea that the New Negro was self-assertive, which existed throughout the Harlem Renaissance, encouraged new Negro writers to express themselves in ways once thought too radical. 2) The influence of the West Indian population had a great effect on how the American Negro perceived himself economically and politically. The West Indians' heightened class consciousness led him to improve his economic position. Even though this created intraracial prejudice between the American Negro and the West Indian, it also served as an inspiration for the American black. The West Indians' involvement in politics also gave the American Negro valuable experience. 3) The influence of the Negro writers who accepted the idea that the "American Dream" included the Negro was twofold. Their major contribution was the role they played as image-builders. By constantly writing about Negro achievements, they fostered racial pride. At the same time, these writers served as examples for promising young black writers.

Sequence of Lessons

(This unit is intended for middle-school students, preferably 7th and 8th grade students, with average ability. Prior to beginning this unit, the students should be given a homework assignment in which they have to define the word "renaissance")

Weeks 1 and 2 Introduction: West Indian Influence on the Harlem Renaissance

1. Definition of "renaissance"
 - a. It is suggested the teacher show the filmstrip *Rebirth of Learning Renaissance* which is available at Winchester School, Audio-Visual Center.
2. The location of Harlem
3. When the Harlem Renaissance began
4. One of the main goals of the Harlem Renaissance writers
5. Discussion of origins of West Indian population
6. The importance of West Indian class consciousness
7. How the West Indians were viewed as a group
8. West Indian attitudes toward family life and religion

9. Development of intraracial prejudice
10. Contributions of West Indians to Harlem Renaissance

Week 3 The Importance of Harlem

1. Reasons why articulate Negroes and Negro professionals moved to Harlem.
2. Basic assumptions among black intellectuals about how to better the Negro's situation.
3. The role and attitudes of the Negro magazines, *Crisis* , *The Messenger* , and *Opportunity* , concerning the Harlem Renaissance.

Weeks 4 and 5 Relationship between the “American Dream” and the Harlem Renaissance Writers: The New Negro Philosophy

1. Definition of “American Dream”
2. Problems faced by Harlem Renaissance writers who believed the “American Dream” included the Negro
3. W. A. Domingo's views about the “American Dream” and the Negro
4. Definition of Old and New Negro
5. Alain Locke's view on the New Negro
6. Renaissance writers who believed the New Negro could be explained by conducting research into the Negro's heritage

Week 6 Contributions of White Intellectuals and Patrons: Conclusions

1. White patrons' financial support
2. White intellectuals' literary support and contributions
3. Racial and literary integrity of the Negro writers under the white patron
4. Conclusions—major contributions of Harlem Renaissance

Lesson 1

Objectives:

1. Students will be able to define “renaissance.”
2. Students will be able to state the reasons why so many articulate Negroes moved to Harlem.

Materials: filmstrip *Rebirth of Learning Renaissance*

Procedure : Ask a student to look up the word “renaissance” and read the meaning to the class. Then show the filmstrip *Rebirth of Learning Renaissance* . Have a brief discussion on what a renaissance is. Then list four reasons (which are found in the narrative) why so many articulate Negroes moved to Harlem. Have students copy.

Homework : Students are to study the four reasons why so many intelligent Negroes moved to Harlem. (possible quiz)

Lesson 2

Objective:

1. Students will write their reactions to Countee Cullen’s poem “Yet Do I Marvel” and Claude McKay’s poem “If We Must Die”

Materials : mimeograph copies of Countee Cullen’s “Yet Do I Marvel” and Claude McKay’s “If We Must Die.”

Procedure : Give students copies of the two poems. Then allow them 20 minutes to write brief reactions. Have students read their reactions out loud. Comment when necessary. Explain to students that “If We Must Die” wasn’t just intended for Negroes but for all downtrodden people.

Homework : Have students check their reaction papers for grammatical errors before handing them in the next day.

Lesson 3

Objective:

1. Students will be able to state the reasons which led to intraracial prejudice between the American Negro and the West Indian Negro.

Procedure : (Lecture-Discussion) Begin by asking students “What is prejudice?” and “How does it develop?”. Have a student read the definition of prejudice from the dictionary. Ask students if prejudice exists or has ever existed among blacks. After their answers, lecture the students on how prejudice existed among the American Negro and the West Indian Negro. Write the reasons for this racial tension on the board. Be sure to differentiate between “inter-racial and “intraracial”

Homework: Have students study reasons for intraracial prejudice. (Quiz)

Teacher’s Bibliography

Bontemps, Arna, Ed. *Harlem Renaissance Remembered* . New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1972.

Huggins, Nathan. *The Harlem Renaissance* . London: Oxford University Press, 1971.

Locke, Alain. *The New Negro* . 1925; rpt. New York: Atheneum Press, 1970.

Osofsky, Gilbert. *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto* . New York: Harper and Rowe, 1963.

Ottley, Roi, and William Weatherby. *The Negro in New York* . New York: New York Public Library, 1967.

Applicable Issues of: *Crisis* , *Opportunity*, *The Messenger*

Reading List for Students

Egypt, Ophelia Settle. *James Weldon Johnson* . New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1974.

Harris, Janet, and Julius Hobson. *Black Pride: “A People’s Struggle .”* New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1969, pp. 48-102.

Sterling, Dorothy, and Benjamin Quarles. *Lift Every Voice: The Lives of W.E.B. DuBois Mary Church Terrill, Booker T. Washington, James Weldon Johnson* . Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1965.

Walker, Alice. *Langston Hughes, American Poet* . New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1974.

Materials Available for Classroom

Filmstrips: "Harlem Renaissance and Beyond" (Pt. 1)

"Philip Randolph." Available at Winchester School, Audio-Visual Center.

"Rebirth of Learning-The Renaissance." Available at Winchester School, Audio-Visual Center.

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