Harlem Renaissance
The Blossoming of African American Culture in the 1920s

The Issue

The issue: Should Harlem Renaissance writers and artists primarily seek to integrate with mainstream culture and advance the political goals of the civil rights establishment through their works? Or should Renaissance artists be free to express authentic and distinctly African American themes?

- **Arguments for cultural integration:** In order to counter more than a century of racist stereotypes of blacks in American pop culture, Renaissance artists have an obligation to convey "respectable" images of African Americans to white society. In other words, art should be used as a political means, not for its own sake. Once black culture is accepted and integrated into mainstream culture, then political, social and economic equality will follow. Furthermore, the whole notion of "black art" is stereotypical in its own right; artists should express a wide array of themes and subject matter that aims to transcend racial identity.

- **Arguments against cultural integration:** Countering racist portrayals in popular culture is crucial to achieving equality for African Americans, but not at the cost of sacrificing authentic and realistic forms of black artistry. A Renaissance artist should capture the unique voice of the black masses, not the whitewashed, "proper" portrayals that cater to the elite tastes of the black bourgeoisie and white society. The melting pot of cultural integration should be rejected in favor of the mosaic of cultural harmony, in which many cultures coexist apart from one another. Only when African Americans are accepted and respected for their own unique culture can genuine equality...
Background

The Harlem Renaissance was a cultural movement in the 1920s in which there was an unprecedented explosion of literature, music and other artistic forms created and inspired by African Americans. Centered on the Harlem district of New York City, the Harlem Renaissance was part of a nationwide urban revolution sparked by World War I (1914-18). The cultural outburst, which followed the dramatic influx of Southern blacks into Northern cities during and after the war (the so-called Great Migration), brought the debate over racial identity and the future of black America to the forefront of the national consciousness.

For nearly a century before the Harlem Renaissance, the image of African Americans in popular culture had mainly been shaped by the minstrel show—a wildly popular form of theater that depicted blacks in a stereotypically comical manner. Even when African Americans were portrayed sympathetically, they were nevertheless made to seem weak and submissive. On the other hand, for black writers themselves, the overriding theme was the movement of black characters from the oppression of the South to the freedom and opportunity of the North—an empowering theme of risk and self-determination.

During the Great Migration, millions of black Southerners finally got a chance to escape that oppression in real life. When World War I broke out in Europe in late 1914, European immigration to the U.S. was interrupted, which created a labor shortage in Northern U.S. industrial centers. Sensing a rare employment opportunity, poor black farmers in the South flocked north to cities such as Chicago, New York and Detroit, Michigan.

The cultural phenomenon of the Harlem Renaissance—namely the arrival of jazz music and its accompanying nightlife, and the black literary movement that followed—occurred in Harlem for a number of reasons. The sheer size of its African American population made for an abundance of black artists and audiences, leading many to refer to Harlem as the "Negro capital of the world." Also, Harlem's location in New York City, the epicenter of most American culture enterprises, permitted close interaction between black artists, white artists, wealthy patrons and established professionals. Thirdly, due to a housing boom in the early 1900s that gave impoverished blacks access to what had been an attractive white neighborhood, Harlem became a symbol of African American optimism. And because a significant number of Renaissance artists and patrons were homosexual—which further alienated them from the social mainstream—they formed a tight-knit community whose atmosphere was conducive to artistic achievement.

As united as Harlem Renaissance figures were about countering traditional black stereotypes, however, they disagreed over exactly how African Americans should be represented in their art. That debate—generally between those who sought to integrate with mainstream culture and those who did not—essentially centered on one fundamental question: How could one be both black and American without sacrificing either aspect of one's identity? In other words, how could one maintain one's racial heritage while integrating into mainstream society? And how should "black" and "American" be defined in the first place?

Proponents of cultural integration argued that Harlem Renaissance artists had a duty to convey certain positive, refined representations of African Americans to society at large. Such "proper" images of blacks, they insisted, were crucial to countering more than a century of racist black stereotypes in American pop culture. Art could not be divorced from politics, integration supporters said; blacks must use their art to gain recognition as cultural equals. Once blacks were recognized as cultural equals, they reasoned, political and social equality would follow.
Other integrationists argued that the notion of "black art" itself was harmful and misleading. While certain art forms originated among dark-skinned people, they argued, that art was the product not of skin pigmentation but of a variety of geographic and socioeconomic factors. Therefore, to group all artists of a darker hue into a single category, and then expect them to create one form of art, they insisted, was just as insulting as the stereotypes perpetuated by white society. Art must transcend racial identity by expressing universal themes that anyone—black or white—could relate to in some way, proponents asserted.

On the other hand, opponents of cultural integration insisted that African Americans had a unique voice that could be expressed only through distinctly black art. Only by focusing on the everyday lives and heritage of the ordinary black folk—through their speech and music, for instance—could Renaissance artists truly capture the black experience, they argued. The central purpose of literature, opponents concluded, was authentic self-expression on the part of the writers.

Art should be created for art's sake, opponents argued, and not used as political propaganda. Supporters of cultural integration were largely middle-class elitists, they charged, who were willing to sacrifice black authenticity for proper forms of "high art" that would grant them access to white society. Artists who followed traditional European models were simply trying to be white themselves, many critics insisted. Every culture was inherently valuable and unique, they argued, and it should be the role of the artists to convey that unique identity to other cultures.

Early Cultural Representations of African Americans

During the 19th century, the most pervasive image of African Americans in popular culture was conveyed through the minstrel show. Minstrelsy—the first uniquely American form of theater—was a variety show of musical and comical skits that typically featured white actors playing black characters. They did so by wearing "blackface"—black makeup to darken the skin and exaggerate the lips, eyes and teeth. The actor often wore woolly wigs, gloves, coattails or ragged clothes to complete the transformation.

As a whole, minstrel shows portrayed African Americans as buffoonish, lazy, cowardly and superstitious characters who often stole, lied and lusted after white women. For many white Americans—particularly those in the North who were exposed to few, if any, black people—the minstrel show provided their entire knowledge of black Americans. While such entertainment did expose whites to certain aspects of black folk culture, it was mostly portrayed in a grotesque, stereotypical and inaccurate manner.

The cultural impact of minstrel shows was such that they provided the blanket term —"Jim Crow"—for segregation laws that oppressed Southern blacks in the decades following Reconstruction. Jim Crow was the name of a popular character on the minstrel circuit, originally mentioned in an 1828 song called "Jump Jim Crow," written and first performed by white comedian Thomas Dartmouth (Daddy) Rice. The immense success of "Jump Jim Crow" contributed greatly to the American minstrelsy boom of the 1840s. At the height of the minstrel show's popularity, The Boston Post wrote, "The two most popular characters in the world at the present are [Britain's Queen] Victoria and Jim Crow."

Racist black caricatures continued to saturate American pop culture even as the minstrel show waned in the late 19th century. Two particular archetypes—Uncle Tom and Aunt Jemima—were especially visible. Uncle Tom was the title character of the best-selling novel of the 19th century, Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852), written by abolitionist author Harriet Beecher Stowe. Although the book was a harsh condemnation of slavery, the image of Uncle Tom—a slave who humbly submitted to his abusive master—came to represent black men as servile and passive in many people's minds.

Uncle Tom's Cabin sparked outrage in the South, compelling many Southern writers
to publish so-called Anti-Tom literature. Also called plantation literature, it was a
popular genre that depicted slavery as a benevolent and idyllic institution of
patriarchal whites looking after dependent, childlike blacks. In 1852 alone, eight anti-
Tom novels were published.

The female equivalent to Uncle Tom was Aunt Jemima. A character that originated on
the minstrel circuit in the mid-19th century, Aunt Jemima became a household name in
1889 when a U.S. company began selling pancake mix under her name and likeness
—a domesticated, heavy-set black woman seen as good-natured but highly
subservient. (Aunt Jemima products continue to be sold, but her likeness has shed
many of the characteristics reminiscent of slavery, such as the trademark kerchief on
her head.)

Prior to the 20th century, because of endemic racism there were few widely
recognized cultural works by African Americans themselves. Although slave culture
was vibrant and musically innovative, it was usually confined to the plantation. Black
musical-comedy troupes—called "jubilees" to distinguish them from minstrelsy—loured
the country with limited success. Ragtime performers like Scott Joplin gained national
renown, but only towards the end of the century (ragtime was a direct precursor of
jazz).

In the literary field, recognized black accomplishments were also few and far between.
As a general rule, slaves were forbidden to learn how to read or write, while freed
blacks were given very little schooling; those fortunate few who actually did manage to
obtain an education and become writers were rarely given any consideration by
mainstream publishers. Nevertheless, several black writers prevailed, creating a
marginal but influential genre of African American literature. [See Early Black
Literature (sidebar)]

At the turn of the 20th century, two African American intellectuals achieved national
Washington had become a symbol of self-help and determination after he climbed out
of poverty to become a celebrated educator and public speaker. In 1881, he helped
found the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute (later renamed the Tuskegee
Institute) in Alabama, which emphasized vocational training for blacks. [See The 'Old
Negro' of Booker T. Washington versus the 'New Negro' of W.E.B. Du Bois (sidebar)]

In marked contrast to Washington, Du Bois—the first African American to receive a
doctorate from Harvard University—emphasized college preparation in the liberal arts
and the classics. He represented an emerging class of highly educated, black urban
professionals within the U.S., a group he referred to as the "Talented Tenth" in a
seminal 1903 essay of the same name. "The Negro race, like all other races," he
wrote, "is going to be saved by its exceptional men." [See 'The Talented Tenth' by
W.E.B. Du Bois (Excerpts) (primary document)]

The Great Migration

The chief catalyst for the Great Migration, and subsequently for the Harlem
Renaissance, was World War I. When war broke out in 1914, cheap immigrant labor
from Europe was suddenly cut off. Therefore, as the country geared up its war
production to supply the Allied armies, U.S. industry experienced a severe labor
shortage. To compensate for the lack of new immigrants, Northern businesses turned
to a large group of previously unwanted and untapped workers: black Southerners.

To satisfy the new labor demand, Northern companies hired recruiting agents to travel
south and entice African Americans to migrate to industrial cities in the Northeast and
Midwest. Northern newspapers like the Chicago Defender—the most widely read black
newspaper in the South—published glowing personal accounts of the experiences of
new black migrants to the North to lure other blacks northward. They also wrote
scathing editorials that condemned the South for its inequality and lack of opportunity
for blacks.
The biggest draw for migrating black Southerners was economic opportunity. Industrial work—whether in a Chicago meatpacking plant or on a Detroit car assembly line—generally paid more than twice as much as agricultural work like sharecropping, a system that closely resembled slavery. (Even black women working as domestics in the North could make double what they could for the same work in the South.) Sharecropping was further undermined in the 1910s by several terrible growing seasons in the South caused by boll weevil blights and severe flooding. Moreover, the price of cotton—the South’s main crop—dropped sharply in the world market during that decade.

The pull of economic opportunity in the North was combined with the push of widespread racism in the South. Segregation had been a mainstay of Southern life throughout the Jim Crow era and lynchings a frequent occurrence, but racial oppression reached new heights in the 1910s. Much of that increase was attributed to the revival of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) following the 1915 release of D.W. Griffith’s film *The Birth of a Nation.* (The original KKK, which had formed in opposition to Reconstruction and greater rights for blacks, had been extinguished by federal force in the 1870s.) An immensely popular Civil War epic, the film portrayed the Klan as heroic saviors of the South and portrayed blacks as ungovernable troublemakers. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), founded in 1909, organized a public campaign against the film, which was banned in several states for its racist overtones.

The resurgence of the KKK and increased racial tensions were not confined to the South, however. In fact, the organization’s greatest growth occurred in the Midwest. The KKK of the 20th century was much less extreme—but far more mainstream—than the original terrorist organization of the Reconstruction era. Advocating white supremacist views that included anti-Semitism and anti-Catholicism as well as racism against blacks, the second KKK was a formal membership organization with a national and state structure that funded thousands of local chapters across the country. (At its peak in the 1920s, the organization included between four million and five million members.)

When the U.S. finally entered World War I in 1917, the dual effect of white workers going off to war and escalated war production created an even higher demand for black workers. Although mostly confined to the domestic front, African Americans also served in the military. Although segregated into all-black units commanded by white officers and assigned mostly noncombat duties, thousands of African American soldiers ended up fighting on the Western Front. Many volunteered in the belief that their participation in the fight against the Germans would reflect favorably on the black community and thus advance the civil rights movement. [See *World War I*]

Most notably, four black regiments were seconded to the French army and received several unit citations for bravery. (In fact, the equal treatment black soldiers received from French soldiers and civilians would profoundly affect many figures of the Harlem Renaissance.) Nevertheless, the poor record of one regiment that fought in the Meuse-Argonne offensive—the final and largest offensive of the war, fought in Northeastern France—received more attention in the U.S. press, thereby cementing widespread racist perceptions that blacks were unfit for combat. Furthermore, the U.S. government barred African Americans from a July 1919 victory parade in Paris, even as black soldiers from European colonies participated.

Hopes for equality through military service were further dampened as black soldiers returned home to a society more racially divided than ever; the so-called Red Summer of 1919 saw some of the worst race riots in U.S. history. Sparked by tensions over increased inflation and unemployment that forced working-class whites and blacks to compete for the same jobs, racially motivated violence against African Americans erupted in more than 20 cities throughout the North and South (the national economy would rebound by 1923 and thrive through the end of the decade, easing such tensions). The civil unrest was intensified by the Red Scare—a general fear of communist influence sparked by the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia—that branded unionized blacks as political radicals. [See ‘If We Must Die’ by Claude McKay]
The Red Summer of 1919 also triggered some of the first organized black protests in U.S. history, led mostly by leaders from the NAACP and the Committee on Urban Conditions Among Negroes—later renamed the National Urban League (NUL)—which had been founded in 1910. No black leader, however, harnessed the popular frustration and outrage of African Americans more than Marcus Garvey. A charismatic figure from Jamaica, Garvey had moved to New York City in 1916 and organized the Universal Negro Improvement Association (which he had founded in Jamaica in 1914).

As the first prominent black nationalist, Garvey rejected integration and preached racial pride, instructing his followers to glorify their African heritage and love their black skin. He, like Washington, put a strong emphasis on black self-help and solidarity, which Garvey wanted to extend on a global scale.

Garvey was a highly controversial figure, however, even among black leaders. Rejecting the NAACP’s goal of integration and the Talented Tenth’s middle-class elitism, he was firmly at odds with Du Bois, who considered Garvey a militant demagogue who threatened the campaign for civil rights. Garvey similarly disliked Du Bois, calling him and his NAACP colleagues “light-skinned Negroes” who were “not really black” and who wanted only to intermarry with white people. His most controversial comments centered on his association with other segregationist groups. “Between the [KKK] and the [NAACP],” Garvey wrote, “give me the Klan for their honesty of purpose towards the Negro.”

The integrationist Du Bois and the separatist Garvey were at opposite ends of the spectrum that sought to define black identity in the early 20th century. They and others—namely Renaissance literary figures—would struggle over how to characterize what was widely referred to as the “New Negro.” That archetype rejected the stereotypes of blacks perpetuated under slavery and segregation—the “Old Negro”—for the new, assertive racial consciousness that emerged from the personal determination displayed in the Great Migration, the sacrifices made in World War I and the resistance mounted in the race riots of 1919.

The Emergence of the Harlem Renaissance

The explosion of African American culture that followed the Great Migration brought black society and white society face to face for the first time in the North. The most influential aspect of the Harlem Renaissance was its literary movement, which scholars generally divide into three phases. The first, stretching from about 1917 to 1923, saw black writers overshadowed by white bohemian writers infused with political radicalism and fascinated by the struggle of African Americans artists. The second phase, lasting until about 1926, was led by the civil rights establishment of the NAACP and NUL through a collaborative effort between black civil rights leaders and wealthy white patrons. The third and most definitive phase, ending around 1934, was increasingly dominated by the black artists themselves.

In the late 1910s, mainstream society became captivated by African American culture, specifically its music. The centerpiece of that so-called Negro Vogue was jazz, a form of music that developed in the latter part of the 19th century from black work songs, hymns and spirituals whose elements were distinctly African in origin. Jazz had originally flourished in New Orleans, Louisiana, but was eventually transported to Northern cities such as Chicago and New York during the Great Migration. Jazz became so popular during the 1920s that the decade itself is commonly referred to as the Jazz Age, a period marked by the exuberance of a booming national economy and a general pursuit of individualism in the wake of World War I. (The period is also referred to as the Roaring Twenties.)

Blues music—a somber variant of jazz that typically expressed worry or sadness—developed alongside jazz as a distinctly African American art form, most notably by artists such as Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith. However, blues was more of a passing fad for white audiences and was embraced more exclusively by African Americans and
Renaissance artists. (Langston Hughes, arguably the foremost writer of the Harlem Renaissance, was particularly influenced by blues music, with that influence peaking in the groundbreaking poems in his collection Weary Blues.) Because jazz was absorbed by the white mainstream, it came to be regarded as the quintessential American art form of the 20th century.

Jazz was at the heart of the energetic nightlife of Harlem, incorporated into popular dances from the twenties like the Lindy Hop and musicals like Shuffle Along. White patrons would flock to Harlem's jazz clubs and speakeasies—Prohibition-era drinking establishments—where they would mingle with black locals. While such tourism was essential to the dissemination of Harlem's culture to society at large for the first time, many residents resented the exploitative voyeurism it entailed; curious whites went “slumming” for a night of entertainment and adventure, only to return to the comfort of their middle- and upper-class homes the next morning. Whites were given “ringside tables to sit and stare at the Negro customers—like amusing animals in a zoo,” Hughes wrote in his 1940 autobiography The Big Sea. (In fact, many Harlem establishments, such as the famous Cotton Club, were off-limits to black patrons.)

The white literary community was also drawn to Harlem. The so-called Lost Generation bohemian writers were generally disillusioned by the devastation wrought by World War I and the political decay it represented to them. Accordingly, they found inspiration in African American culture that was seemingly untainted by the conventional ruling establishment and Victorian Era repressiveness. Thus a vibrant cultural exchange occurred between emerging black writers in Harlem and established white writers in Greenwich Village—a bohemian neighborhood in downtown New York—that laid a firm foundation for the Harlem Renaissance.

Before 1922, however, only a handful of African Americans published significant works of fiction or verse. Notable among such works was The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man (1912), by James Weldon Johnson (who would later become secretary of the NAACP). Only after the breakthrough publication of Claude McKay’s book of poems Harlem Shadows (1922) and Jean Toomer’s novel Cane (1923) did black writers begin to attract close attention from mainstream publishers.

The bohemian white writers who dominated American literature at that time tried desperately to take up themes of the black experience; but because they could never do so firsthand, those writers had to rely on inauthentic, preconceived notions of what it meant to be black in America. A June 1922 letter from Sherwood Anderson to H. L. Mencken—two prominent white writers—captured much of the frustration among the Lost Generation: “Damn it, man, if I could really get inside the niggers and write about them with some intelligence, I'd be willing to be hanged later and perhaps would be,” Anderson wrote.

To counter the stereotypes of African American sensuality and depravity conveyed by white visitors to Harlem, and to harness an authentic black voice that bohemian writers could not convey, civil rights activists tried to take the reins of the Renaissance literary movement in 1924. The Talented Tenth and the Lost Generation writers, although allies, differed in one crucial respect: the former wished to integrate into mainstream America while the latter focused on the unique black experience. Integrationists like Du Bois considered art a means of gaining recognition and respectability for blacks in the U.S., so he wanted to craft the Harlem Renaissance to meet the political ends of civil rights and “racial uplift.” “[U]ntil the art of the black folk compels recognition they will not be rated as human,” Du Bois wrote.

To cultivate and disseminate positive representations of black America, Du Bois and his followers recruited, organized and directed a dispersed group of emerging Renaissance writers, many of whom would have likely remained obscure otherwise. Drawing on a wide spectrum of artistic and intellectual themes, and rejecting “low culture” influences like jazz and blues then in vogue, the Talented Tenth set its artistic sights very high. Strict literary standards, for example, were imposed on submissions.
to prominent civil rights magazines such as *The Crisis* and *Opportunity*. With the financial support of sympathetic, wealthy white patrons (whom Renaissance luminary Zora Neale Hurston dubbed the "Negrotarians"—a play on "Negro" and "humanitarians"), Du Bois aimed to heal the socioeconomic and racial wounds of African Americans from the top downward.

**Rebellion of the 'Niggerati'**

In 1925, Alain Locke, a black professor and leading promoter of Renaissance artists, published an anthology called *The New Negro, An Interpretation*. Including works by writers such as Hughes, McKay, Hurston, Toomer and Countee Cullen, Locke's volume came to define the purpose and character of the Harlem Renaissance up to that point and launched the careers of many black artists. In his book, Locke proclaimed Renaissance writers as the spokesmen for the New Negro, writing: [See *The New Negro by Alain Locke (Excerpt) (primary document)*]

> Of all the voluminous literature on the Negro, so much is mere external view and commentary that we may warrantably say that nine-tenths of it is about the Negro rather than of him.... [We] discover in the artistic self-expression of the Negro to-day a new figure on the national canvas and a new force in the foreground of affairs. In these pages...we have nevertheless concentrated upon self-expression and the forces and motives of self-determination. So far as he is culturally articulate, we shall let the Negro speak for himself.

Central to Locke's thesis was the distinction he made between an older generation that treated art as a form of racial self-defense and a new generation that no longer allowed such an attitude to limit its artistic expression. Thus, the third phase of the Harlem Renaissance began even before the second had established a strong foothold. While Du Bois was promoting his own vision of the New Negro, a growing number of Renaissance writers started to rebel against the expectations placed upon them by the civil rights establishment and the arbiters of the white literary community. Using a term coined by Hurston, such writers referred to themselves as the "Niggerati"—a play on the epithet "nigger" and the term "literati," or literary elite.

That new period was heralded by the release of Hughes’s famous essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" in June 1926. A call to other black artists to break from the party line set by the Talented Tenth, the essay argued that the constraints put upon the artist to refrain from certain depictions of black life was stifling and disingenuous. In his manifesto, Hughes wrote: [See 'The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain' by Langston Hughes (Excerpt) (primary document)]

> 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. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too.... If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn’t matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.

Later that year, several writers heeded Hughes’s call for a more authentic voice in Renaissance literature. Carl Van Vechten—perhaps the most revered white Negrotarian in Harlem—published the highly controversial novel *Nigger Heaven*. The novel (whose title was an ironic reference to theater balconies) was written as a realistic portrayal of Harlem, and was well received by both mainstream audiences and Niggerati figures such as Hughes, who praised Van Vechten's focus on working-class blacks. The Talented Tenth, on the other hand, criticized the book for its violence and sex, which they claimed perpetuated the most negative stereotypes of blacks.

The second landmark publication of that year, the short-lived literary magazine *Fire!!*, featured a wide variety of controversial subject matter penned by the Niggerati; a short story about prostitution ("Cordelia the Crude") by editor Wallace Thurman; a
piece about gender conflict among poor blacks ("Sweat") by Hurston; a gay-themed short story ("Smoke, Lilies, and Jade") by Richard Nugent; poems seemingly addressed to an elevator boy by Hughes; and a short play about discrimination by light-skinned blacks against dark-skinned blacks (Color Struck) by Hurston. Reaction from the Talented Tenth—most of whose members were from an older, more conservative generation—was harsh. "Vulgarity has been mistaken for art," proclaimed black educator Benjamin Brawley after reading Fire!!

Despite the disapproval of the civil rights establishment and the black bourgeoisie, Renaissance writers continued to produce a flurry of provocative works over the next several years. Chief among them was McKay's Home to Harlem (1928), the first best-selling novel by a Renaissance author. Shattering the literary code of the Talented Tenth, the book's frank depictions of sexuality and Harlem street life caused Du Bois to comment, "Home to Harlem...for the most part nauseates me, and after the dirtier parts of its filth I feel distinctly like taking a bath." McKay's work, he added, portrayed the "debauched tenth."

Another groundbreaking Renaissance work was Thurman's The Blacker the Berry (1929), which was the first significant work of fiction to focus on interracial prejudice within the black community based on skin color. The novel was hailed as a masterpiece within literary circles, but many in the black community criticized Thurman for airing their "dirty laundry." Thurman rebuked such criticism, declaring, "The time has now come when the Negro artist can be his true self and pander to the stupidities of no one, either white or black."

The Case for Cultural Integration

Talented Tenth figures such as Du Bois saw the spontaneous artistic expression of the Harlem Renaissance and the mainstream fascination with Negro Vogue as the perfect opportunity to bolster the civil rights movement; cultural recognition would beget racial equality, they said. "A number of approaches to the heart of the race problem have been tried: religious, educational, political, industrial, ethical, economic, sociological," NAACP Secretary Johnson wrote. "Today a newer approach is being tried...and may be called the art approach to the Negro problem."

Therefore, proponents of cultural integration maintained, since the goal of the civil rights movement was the assimilation of the two races, black art had to convey a certain respectability that whites would embrace. Accordingly, they insisted, black artists were needed more for political utility than artistic merit; art was a means for political gain, the Talented Tenth said, not an end unto itself. Du Bois put that belief most succinctly when he famously declared that "all art is propaganda and ever must be." Because of the socioeconomic and political disadvantages that African Americans faced, he argued, the time was not yet right to produce art for art's sake.

If the Renaissance artist was to have any role, proponents of integration insisted, it should be an activist role. Specifically, they said, black artists had to convey positive, refined portrayals of African Americans in order to counter more than a century of negative stereotypes of blacks within American pop culture. The current fascination with Negro Vogue, they maintained, only perpetuated notions of black sensuality and primalism. George Schuyler, a Renaissance satirist and famed journalist, denounced the persistent white portrayal of blacks in which "it is only necessary to beat a tom-tom or wave a rabbit's foot and he is ready to strip off his Hart, Schaffner & Marx [business] suit, grab a spear and ride off wild-eyed on the back of a crocodile."

Contemporary black art forms like jazz and blues, although embraced by the white mainstream, sent the wrong messages about black people, supporters of integration maintained. Such music, they said, was "unrespectable" because it represented a "low culture" associated with Harlem's seedy nightlife of clubs and speakeasies. Female performers like sex icon Josephine Baker were particularly worrisome, many argued, because their erotic personas were crude and denigrating to the African American image.
According to the Talented Tenth, racial progress had to come from the top down; "racial uplift" could be achieved only by such as themselves and the cream of the Renaissance artists, they contended. Elevated forms of art created by the black intelligentsia, they contended, would enable African Americans to meet whites on equal terms. As black art gained general acceptance, they reasoned, blacks would be poised to gain political, social and economic equality.

In an influential 1926 essay entitled "The Negro-Art Hokum," Schuyler ridiculed the notion—commonly held by both whites and blacks—that "white art" was essentially different from "black art." While he acknowledged that certain forms of music like spirituals, blues and jazz originated from "dark-skinned sources," he insisted they had far more to do with unique regional differences than with racial differences. [See 'The Negro Art Hokum' by George Schuyler (Excerpt) (primary document)]

Throughout American history, Schuyler argued, white art borrowed aspects of African-derived culture in the same way black art "shows more or less evidence of European influence." Therefore, he maintained, black artists were as diverse in style and subject matter as white artists. The only reason the American public perceived essential differences between white and black culture, Schuyler contended, was because of decades of exposure to exaggerated and unrealistic depictions of black Americans. "Because a few writers with a paucity of themes have seized upon imbecilities of the Negro rustics and clowns and palmed them off as authentic and characteristic Aframerican behavior," he wrote, "the common notion that the black American is so 'different' from his white neighbor has gained wide currency."

Instead of relying solely on African and black themes in their work, critics of cultural integration insisted, Renaissance artists should emphasize American themes, themes that were not exclusively white or black but a seamless combination of the two. Renaissance writers who perpetuated false constructions like "white art" and "black art," critics argued, were simply reinforcing the myth that the races were essentially different—the premise used for centuries by white supremacists to argue for the essential inferiority of blacks.

Cullen, like Schuyler, rejected the notion of the distinctiveness of "black art." Heavily influenced by traditional English poetry, Cullen resisted any suggestion that such influence was inappropriate for black poets such as himself. The new, experimental styles of Renaissance artists that emphasized blackness, he argued, played directly into the long-standing tendency of whites to ghettoize black artists. That form of self-segregation, Cullen insisted, kept black artists from expressing universal truths. Cullen explained:

Must [black poets], willy-nilly, be forced into writing of nothing but the old atavistic urges, the more savage and none too beautiful aspects of our lives? May we not chant a hymn to the Sun God if we will, create a bit of phantasy in which not a spiritual or blues appears, write a tract defending Christianity though its practitioners aid us so little in our argument; in short do, write, create, what we will, our only concern being that we do it well and with all the power that is within us?

Although he said that he was proud of his race and frequently invoked racial themes in his poetry, Cullen insisted that great poetry must transcend racial identity. Toomer held a similar view. Although the Renaissance literary community proclaimed that his novel Cane had heralded the arrival of a new black literature, Toomer in fact himself denied any identification with the Harlem Renaissance; the "Negro" label, he maintained, was limiting and inappropriate for his work. Toomer said that he thought of himself not as a "New Negro," but rather as the first conscious member of a new race, the "American race."

The Case Against Cultural Integration

Members of the self-proclaimed Niggerati agreed with Talented Tenth figures like Du Bois that traditional black stereotypes were detestable. However, critics of cultural
integration maintained, such negative portrayals should not be countered by abandoning authentic depictions of the black experience. By expecting Renaissance writers to conform to “proper” representations of African Americans, they argued, the civil rights establishment limited artistic expression and thus hindered the introduction of distinctly black themes to mainstream culture. Common black folks “furnish a wealth of colorful, distinctive material for any artist,” Hughes wrote, “because they still hold their own individuality in the face of American standardizations.”

Albert Barnes, a white patron of black artists, discussed the distinctiveness of black art in a 1925 essay. He wrote:

That there should have developed a distinctively Negro art in America was natural and inevitable. A primitive race, transported into an Anglo-Saxon environment and held in subjection to that fundamentally alien influence, was bound to undergo the soulstirring experiences which always find their expression in great art.... The outstanding characteristics are his tremendous emotional endowment, his luxuriant and free imagination and a truly great power of individual expression. He has in superlative measure that fire and light which, coming from within, bathes his whole world, colors his images and impels him to expression. The Negro is a poet by birth.

Members of the Niggerati maintained that art should be appreciated on aesthetic—not political—grounds. Pandering to mainstream society, they said, simply reinforced low white expectations of blacks. When artists were used as propagandists, critics of cultural integration insisted, they ceased to speak for themselves and their subjects. According to Garvey, such artists “prostituted” their intelligence.

Rejecting Du Bois’s ideas on integration, Hughes sought to establish “a truly Negroid note” based on “those elements within the race which are still too potent for easy assimilation.” Thurman argued that there was “just as much a chance for the Negro author to produce great literature by writing of his own people.” When the Talented Tenth sought to tone down depictions of black life to make them more palatable for white audiences, critics argued, they were engaging in denial and racial shame. African American artists must resist the “urge within the race to whiteness,” Hughes wrote. He explained:

One of the most promising of the young Negro poets said to me once, ‘I want to be a poet—not a Negro poet,’ meaning, I believe, ‘I want to write like a white poet’; meaning subconsciously, ‘I would like to be a white poet’; meaning behind that, ‘I would like to be white.’ And I was sorry the young man said that, for no great poet has ever been afraid of being himself.... But this is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America—this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible.

When the Talented Tenth said they wished to present positive portrayals of African Americans, critics charged, what they really meant was portrayals that were acceptable by mainstream white standards in general—and by upper-class white standards in particular.

Rejecting the top-down model for racial improvement, critics of the Talented Tenth focused instead on the working class—whether the urban poor or rural peasantry—as the central inspiration for black art. The voice of the black masses, not the black bourgeoisie, was the most authentic African American voice, critics of cultural integration maintained. Let the works of black artists “cause the smug Negro middle class to turn from their white, respectable, ordinary books and papers to catch a glimmer of their own beauty,” Hughes wrote.

In music, critics of cultural integration defended blues and jazz against the black bourgeoisie that derided those forms as “low art.” Critics saw the blues as distinctly
African American, portraying the struggles and hopes of the black masses and helping to liberate them from mainstream white culture. Like the blues, "jazz to me is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America," Hughes wrote. "[T]he eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul—the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world, a world of subway trains, and work, work, work; the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile."

In literature, Neggerati writers tapped into the voice of the masses by using black vernacular in their works. Only by doing so, they argued, could artists capture the experiences, frustrations and desires of ordinary black people and their folk heritage. Countering Talented Tenth concerns that using black speech would play into long-standing racial stereotypes, Renaissance writers such as Hughes, Hurston and Sterling Brown insisted that such vernacular was, in fact, essential to revealing the rich and complex humanity that lay beneath the surface of those stereotypes. "I was first attracted by certain qualities that I thought the speech of the people had, and I wanted to get for my own writing a flavor, a color, a pungency of speech," Brown said. "Then later, I came to something more important—I wanted to get an understanding of people, to acquire an accuracy in the portrayal of their lives."

Hurston, a student of renowned cultural anthropologist Franz Boas, particularly focused on local vernacular and folk heritage in her writing. Boas and his disciples put forth the theory of cultural pluralism, which opposed the melting-pot concept of cultural integration as undemocratic and un-American. The U.S., cultural pluralists like Hurston insisted, should develop as a sort of coalition of various ethnic and racial groups harmonizing with each other but maintaining their own distinct identity and customs. Furthermore, they said, such groups could only be understood according to their own cultural frameworks, not by outside standards.

Segregation was not necessarily the goal of the Harlem Renaissance, opponents of cultural integration insisted; the Niggerati were simply opposed to tailoring their work to please white audiences and the Talented Tenth. Instead of abandoning aspects of black culture traditionally tainted by negative stereotypes, they argued, the black artist had to take pride in such cultural features, study them for their underlying beauty and then convey that worth to society at large. Hopefully, Locke said, by creating art for art's sake—rather than as political propaganda—African Americans would win acceptance as the cultural equals of whites.

Legacy of the Harlem Renaissance

The Harlem Renaissance—like many cultural enterprises—began to wane after a devastating stock market crash in late October 1929, as did hopes for black equality. The decade-long economic depression that followed—the so-called Great Depression—hit black Americans especially hard. Jim Crow segregation and tolerated racial violence against blacks also continued well into the 1950s. It was not until the modern civil rights era of the late 1950s and early 1960s that African Americans finally secured legal equality and began to make significant social and economic gains.

As mainstream sponsors and audiences found their disposable income drastically reduced following the stock market crash, interest in and support for African American artists disappeared. Renaissance writers continued to produce works into the mid 1930s, however, and Hughes and Hurston were still prolific in the 1940s. Nevertheless, the Harlem Renaissance effectively ended with the Great Depression.

Historians and literary figures disagree on the extent of the Harlem Renaissance’s impact on race relations in America. While mainstream society became exposed to roughly two dozen nationally recognized artists who produced hundreds of published works, and nearly everything associated with jazz became a cultural craze, many came to consider those successes as merely part of a superficial Negro Vogue that did little to mend the racial divide.

Johnson expressed an optimistic take on the period in the following excerpt from a Harper's Magazine essay published in late 1928:
A generation ago the Negro was receiving lots of publicity, but nearly all of it was bad. There were front page stories with such headings as, ‘Negro Criminal,’ ‘Negro Brute.’ Today, one may see undesirable stories, but one may also read stories about Negro singers, Negro actors, Negro authors, Negro poets. The connotations of the very word ‘Negro’ have been changed. A generation ago many Negroes were half or wholly ashamed of the term. Today, they have every reason to be proud of it.

Hughes, in The Big Sea, had a much different take on the Harlem Renaissance:

I was there. I had a swell time while it lasted. But I thought it wouldn’t last long… For how could a large and enthusiastic number of people be crazy about Negroes forever? But some Harlemites thought the millennium had come. They thought the race problem had at last been solved through Art.... I don’t know what made any Negroes think that—except that they were mostly intellectuals doing the thinking. The ordinary Negroes hadn’t heard of the Negro Renaissance. And if they had, it hadn’t raised their wages any.

Renaissance writers soon gave way to black writers of the civil rights era, including such notables as novelists James Baldwin (Go Tell It on the Mountain), Richard Wright (Native Son) and Ralph Ellison (Invisible Man), and playwright Lorraine Hansberry (A Raisin in the Sun). By the mid 1960s, however, much of the black community deemed such writers too heavily reliant on white literary models and insufficiently militant regarding race relations. That reaction coalesced into the Black Arts Movement, a tight-knit artistic community closely associated with the Black Power Movement that looked inward for new, distinctly “black” self-expression devoid of white influence. The movement drew direct inspiration from the late Harlem Renaissance and thus closely echoed its dominant themes and beliefs. However, the Black Arts Movement was decidedly more politically militant and racially separatist. [See Black Power Movement]

Although the Black Arts Movement was alienated from mainstream society, the movement greatly influenced the next generation of black writers. By the 1970s, academia had embraced black literature as a legitimate genre and works by black authors increasingly appeared on best-seller lists. Some of the more prominent black literary figures of the last three decades have been Maya Angelou (I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings), Alice Walker (The Color Purple), Alex Haley (Roots) and Toni Morrison (Beloved). Also, with the growth of the black middle class, African American writers have become less dependent on white audiences and benefactors for support. On the other hand, cultural forces like the “Oprah Winfrey Show” have introduced many black writers to the white mainstream.

In music, African Americans continued the legacy of jazz and blues by helping to create the most influential pop cultural phenomenon of the second half of the 20th century: rock and roll. Originating in the blues of the black South and eventually fused with country music and gospel, rock and roll exploded onto the national scene when a white performer, Elvis Presley, broke through in the early 1950s. Black artists continued to be instrumental in the creation of innovative new forms through the 1960s, including soul (a secularized form of gospel), R&B and funk. Hip hop and rap music developed in the early 1970s in New York City neighborhoods like Harlem, and became hugely popular by the late 1980s with the advent of gangsta rap. By the end of the 20th century, hip hop had become one of the foremost U.S. cultural exports.

More than 70 years since the end of the Harlem Renaissance, debate revolving around the tension between cultural integration and cultural separatism continues to rage within the African American community. Although the issue is not—and may never be—fully settled, Americans both black and white have a deep well of Renaissance art and criticism to draw from in trying to help them reach a greater understanding of the racial divide.

Bibliography


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