

The Harlem Renaissance

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Merriam-Webster defines Renaissance as a “movement or period of vigorous artistic and intellectual activity- this definition certainly applies to that period of time in the early 20th century when an incredible confluence of forces resulted in the Harlem District of Manhattan becoming a major center for urban black culture.

The influential author, Alain Locke, America’s first black Rhodes Scholar described Harlem as “not merely the largest Negro community in the world, but the first concentration in history of so many diverse elements of Negro Life.”

This diversity and concentration gave many African American writers, artists and musicians an opportunity to explore their creative gifts. The proximity of Harlem to New York’s publishing companies, theater owners, and wealthy patrons of the arts provided an unprecedented opportunity to showcase their talents and become recognized as world class creative artists.

In addition to this explosion of creative art, there were also profound and competing political and philosophical dialogs underway that were attempting to define a new cultural identify for African Americans based on renewed self-respect and self dependence.

The scope and detail of the activities during this period is vast, and it is certainly not my intention to attempt to give a comprehensive account of all of them, but in this paper I

hope to communicate at least some small sense of the major forces I perceived to be at work, and their consequences.

To understand the “roots” of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920’s, it is necessary to look back two decades to the early 1900’s and understand the changing attitudes of influential black leaders.

Booker T. Washington was the most prominent black figure at that time. Washington had been born into slavery and after the emancipation of slaves in 1863; he had migrated to Virginia, eventually enrolled at the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute, now Hampton University. He attended college at Wayland Seminary in Washington D.C., and returned to teach at Hampton. In 1881, he became the first leader of the Tuskegee Institute a new teachers college in Alabama, which also offered vocational training for maids, carpenters and various manual trades.

Washington was a strong supporter of the principle of no confrontation with whites, and received national recognition after an influential speech he presented at the Atlanta Exposition in 1895. He was quoted as having said “the wisest among my race understands that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremest folly”

One rising critic of the principle of nonconfrontation was William Edward Burghdt Du Bois. Du Bois was born after the end of slavery and was a gifted student. In 1888 he received a degree from Fisk University, a black college in Nashville, Tennessee, enrolled

at Harvard College in the fall of 1888, having received a scholarship. He graduated from Harvard with a bachelor's degree, cum laude, in 1890.

In 1892, he received a fellowship to attend the University of Berlin for graduate work. He traveled throughout Europe and studied with some of Germany's most prominent social scientists.

In 1895, Du Bois became the first African American to earn a P.h. D from Harvard University.

Du Bois was offended by Booker T. Washington's' principle of nonconfrontation. He was quoted as saying it "wasn't enough to teach Negroes trades, the Negro had to have some voice in their government, and had to have protection in the courts, and he had to have men to lead them."

In his famous essay "The Talented Tenth", he referred to the 10 percent of the black population who were educated and relatively affluent, and argued "Education must not simply teach work – it must teach life. The Talented Tenth of the Negro Race must be made leaders of thought and missionaries of culture among their people."

Other black intellectuals began to support this view, and several black newspaper publishers, William Monro Trotter of the Boston "Guardian" and Robert S. Abbott of the Chicago "Defender" took on the theme of equality in their newspapers and regularly criticized Booker T. Washington as having "surrendered" to whites.

Influential blacks decided to create their own organizations, free of white expectations and control.

One source documents that from 1900 to 1905:

- Twenty eight black owned banks were formed.
- The National League for the Protection of Colored Women was organized to combat unethical practices by Northern Employment Agencies.
- The Atlanta Life Insurance Company, the first black insurance business was founded.
- The National Liberty Party, an all-black political organization was formed.
- Numerous black newspapers, including Boston's "Guardian" and Chicago's "defender" were founded.

In 1905, Du Bois helped found what became known as the "Niagra Movement", so called because the first meeting took place in Fort Erie, Canada, near Niagra Falls. Thirty two influential black intellectuals attended the first meeting, and pledged to fight for African American rights. During the years from 1905 to 1909, the group was active in challenging through the U.S. courts the "Jim Crow" laws, which had been created to limit blacks' civil rights, and they were very active in working to register Black voters.

The Niagara Movement was able to attract large numbers of black supporters on a national level. Later however, internal conflicts regarding certain issues, including the

question of whether or not white people should be included in the organization, the Movement was disbanded.

Du Bois, who did believe that white people could be included in the struggle for civil rights, helped found the National Association for the Advancement of colored people in 1909. The NAACP, as it was known, was an organization with a far more diverse and influential group of founders than the Niagara Movement. The leadership was largely white, and heavily Jewish American. Jewish leaders had noted that both the Jewish and the Black Communities would benefit the more America became a society of merit, free of religious, ethnic, and racial restrictions.

Du Bois left his professorship at Atlanta University in 1910, and moved to New York to take a full time position as the Publications Director at the NAACP. He was also the editor-in-chief of the NAACP publication, "THE CRISIS", and the journal's circulation started at 1000 in 1910 and rose to more than 100,000 by 1920. Du Bois was instrumental in providing an outlet for Harlem Renaissance writers and poets, and "THE CRISIS" became of the most influential black publications in America.

In 1910, another interracial organization was formed by the merger of 3 existing New York based groups:

- The Committee on Urban Conditions Among Negroes
- The National League for the Protection of Colored Women

- The Committee for the Improvement of Industrial Conditions Among Negroes in New York.

This new group was named The National League on Urban Conditions Among Negroes, later called the National Urban League.

According to the National Urban League's mission and history web site;

The Organization counseled black migrants from the South, helped train black Social Workers, and worked in various other ways to bring educational and employment opportunities to blacks. Its research into the problems blacks faced in employment opportunities, recreation, housing, health and sanitation, and education spurred the League's fast growth. By the end of World War I, the League had 81 staff members in 30 cities.

The National Urban League was also active in the promotion of black culture. In 1921, Charles S. Johnson, a prominent black scholar joined the New York staff of the National Urban League as the Director of Research. Johnson also founded and edited "OPPORTUNITY: A Journal of Negro Life".

The lavish dinner Johnson hosted at New York City's Civic Club to introduce the Journal "OPPORTUNITY" to prominent New York publishers and magazine editors is credited with helping to convince major "white" magazines, like Harpers and Survey Graphic, to publish the writings of the poets and writers of the Harlem Renaissance, thereby exposing these artists to a larger and diverse audience.

The efforts of the National Urban League, the NAACP, and other organizations, to improve the lives of blacks in the North began to attract significant attention in the South.

Adding to this “Southern” interest were letters from Northerners that described the conditions that they had found when they migrated from the South. The North was not portrayed as perfect, but it appeared to offer far more opportunity than the conditions in the South at that time.

The Stage was now set for the event that many historians have referred to as the “Great Migration”.

Bad weather, and the continuing Boll Weevil infestation in the South’s cotton crops, had devastated the South’s mostly agricultural economy. Over reliance on the single crop of Cotton, and the lack of other industries to “take up the slack”, had left thousands of Southern field Laborers with no work, and no near term prospects for their work to return. The black workers were especially hard hit, given the racial climate in the South, and they faced an almost impossible future.

War was spreading in Europe, and by 1914, involved most of the countries that previously had been the source of major waves of European immigrants that had brought European industrial workers to the factories in the North.

In 1900, European immigrants to the United States numbered over 1 million, by 1916, this number had dropped to less than 300,000 and continued to decrease. As the immigration rates dropped, the Northern industries faced a dramatic labor shortage for the first time. Although the United States was not yet directly involved in the war, American industries were presented with a major demand for munitions and war supplies.

This combination of huge demand and a shortage of workers forced the industries in the North to look to the South for labor. Certain industries began to actively recruit workers from the South. Companies began to actually compete to find workers quickly so that they could take maximum advantage of the revenue opportunity that supplying the war in Europe presented,

The recruitment efforts turned into a virtual frenzy, with labor agents sent from Northern companies standing on street corners in the South offering free train passes to any potential worker that met the profile of young, male, and strong.

Newspapers in the south were rapidly filled with not only advertisements, but also success stories about the good jobs that recent migrants to the North had found. The sum of all these recruitment efforts quickly led to a “migration fever” and the Southern Black began to flow North.

The most aggressive companies were the Railroads. The need to transport war related goods was huge, and in the summer of 1916, the Pennsylvania Railroad recruited 12,000

blacks from the South. The Illinois Central Railroad sent free passes through labor agents to entice workers to Chicago.

The Steel mills experienced a large backlog of demand for war related goods and they also moved quickly to attract workers.

The excitement and motivation of the Southern laborer finally reached a “tipping point” and many came without waiting for agents, so that businesses no longer had to advance tickets. It is estimated that over 400,000 workers left the south between 1916 and 1918, at the average rate for 16,000 per month.

As the workers reached their new jobs in the North, they begin to send back home first-hand accounts of their successes, and money to enable other family members to join them.

Between 1910 and 1920, New York experienced a 60 percent increase in its black population, Detroit had a 611 percent increase, and Chicago had a 148 percent surge in their black population.

In 1910, fewer than 600 of the more than 100,000 automotive workers were black. By 1929 there were more than 25,000 black autoworkers and the automotive industry was forever changed.

The migration of Southern workers to the Northern cities represented a fundamental shift in the workforce and it could be said that the 20th Century character of many of America's modern cities were forged during this migration.

The NAACP in New York and similar organizations in other cities ramped up their services to provide aid and support to the migrants, and served as vital links to the growing black communities.

Unfortunately, the arrival of cheap black labor created huge tensions with the existing white workers. These white workers were organizing labor unions to attempt to negotiate higher wages and better working conditions. It appeared to the white workers that the companies were taking advantage of this natural conflict to disrupt the unionizing efforts that have been underway in their factories. There were frequent clashes between white workers and blacks and a number of these riots resulted in a significant number of deaths.

With the end of World War I, and the return home of the soldiers, tensions increased to the breaking point and starting in the spring and summer of 1919, a series of terrible riots broke out in a number of American cities.

Still, it might be said that the Southern black migrants were able to adjust to their new locations, and improve their positions compared to those that stayed behind.

In 1890, 63 percent of all black male workers were employed in agriculture. By 1930, only 42 percent still worked in agriculture. During this same period, the number of black schoolteachers doubled, and the number of black-owned businesses tripled. Black literacy increased from 39 percent to 85 percent as well.

The unfolding of this Great Migration had a profound effect on the cultural makeup of the cities involved. The recent migrants tended to form communities that were reflective of the same people from the Southern communities they left behind. In fact, researchers noted that they could find whole city blocks of people that had come from the same general area of the South.

It is perhaps reasonable to keep in mind this tendency of migrant people to cluster near the familiar as we return to our consideration of the forces that shaped the Harlem Renaissance.

One interesting question I had was to ask what was unique about the Harlem District of Manhattan, and why did it experience the growth it did. Harlem was not originally the center of black life in New York prior to the great Migration.

According to the author Laban Hill, in his excellent book, "HARLEM STOMP", between the years of 1900 to 1910, the majority of the 60,000 blacks living in New York City were located in an area referred to as Black Bohemia.

This area was roughly from Twenty-seventh to Fifty-Third Street on the west side of Manhattan. Black Bohemia was considered a ghetto. The streets were tightly packed with boarding houses and tenements. A small four-room apartment in this area would rent for about twenty dollars a month, which was almost five dollars more than in white neighborhoods. Black Bohemia had also become the prime location for the city's brothels and gambling joints. White landlords were said to prefer this sort of tenants because they were willing to pay higher rents and did not demand the same improvements that respectable workers would.

Harlem, by contrast, was a paradise of splendor. The drive to escape the squalor of midtown Manhattan was strong and blacks were willing to take risks to improve their conditions. Harlem had broad streets that were well paved and tree-lined. Its buildings were aristocratic apartment houses and beautiful brownstone homes. An advertising brochure from the time declared the area "finished in high style".

Harlem had earned its grand reputation in the 1880's and 1890's when developers envisioned this sanctuary on the northern edge of Manhattan as a white, upper-class haven from the bustle and clatter of downtown. In 1880 the elevated railroad was built along Eighth Avenue. This mass transportation project opened up the west side of Harlem. The subway was scheduled to be built under Lenox Avenue on the east side by 1904. This news caused a sudden development boom. Speculators invested an enormous amount of capital in Harlem and real estate values skyrocketed as investors anticipated huge profits. Unfortunately, too many developers believed the same thing.

Harlem quickly became overbuilt years before the completion date of the new subway. By 1902, whole buildings remained unoccupied as they waited for tenants that would not come for another two years. Facing financial ruin, developers went begging for tenants. While Black Bohemia was bursting beyond its capacity, a young twenty-four year old African American named Philip A. Payton Jr. recognized just how desperate the white owners of empty apartment buildings in Harlem were. In 1903, Payton negotiated a deal with some of the white landlords to lease a few houses on West 134th Street. He knew that the middle-class blacks would pay almost anything to get out of the over crowded tenements of midtown, so he offered landlords a rental rate above the depressed real estate price. Then he added a percentage to the rent for himself and was still able to offer apartments that seemed reasonable when compared to the high rate of Black Bohemia.

According to an account by Payton himself, his first opportunity came about as a result of a dispute between two white landlords. To “get even” one of the landlords turned his house over to Payton to fill with black tenants. He was successful in renting and managing this house, after which other landlords were willing to let him manage theirs.

With that foot in the door, Payton expanded the number of properties he managed.

Neither Payton nor the white landlords could have imagined the extent of the outrage of whites over a few black families moving into that segregated community.

A real estate war erupted between the white and black business communities, which by 1910 had reached an animosity beyond repair and the remainder of the white tenants

simply abandoned the neighborhood. Real estate prices crashed and the remaining white landlords were forced to sell at prices far below market value.

Eventually Harlem became such a popular destination for blacks that by the time of the Great Migration, real estate prices had rocketed to incredible heights and it was estimated that by the 1920s that the total black ownership of Harlem property was worth at least 200 million (that's about 1.8 billion in today's dollars).

So now we have examined most of the components of the Harlem Renaissance:

- The search by black intellectuals for a new sense of identity for black culture based on self-respect and self dependence.
- The initial framework of black services and cultural organizations such as the NAACP and National Urban League, and their professional publications that promoted black artists
- A large district of well to do homes and apartments in New York City under the ownership of black businessmen.
- The Great Migration of over 175,000 new black residents to New York City alone, all needing a place to stay and desiring of a rich social life.
- The curiosity and initial outreach of the mainstream white magazines eager to learn more about this explosion of art and fun.

Starting in 1924 and continuing until the stock market crash of 1929, Harlem virtually exploded into a never before seen period of creativity involving most all of the fine arts

and music, and the black social consciousness was forever altered. With the advent of the Great Depression, and not to mention the repeal of Prohibition which closed most of the middle class black speakeasies, many of the creative blacks moved on to other cities and Harlem was no longer the amazing destination it was at its peak.

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