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“Black Renaissance”: A Brief History of the Concept

ERNEST JULIUS MITCHELL II

ABSTRACT

The phrase “Harlem Renaissance” has captured the popular and scholarly imagination. Evoking a burst of black creativity in 1920s Manhattan, the term enjoys almost unchallenged acceptance today. Yet the term did not originate in the era it claims to describe; “Harlem Renaissance” did not appear in print before 1940, and it only gained widespread appeal in the 1960s. During the four preceding decades, writers had mostly referred to a “Negro Renaissance.” The present essay tracks this shift in terminology from 1919 through the early 1970s, contending that this was not a change in name only. The “Negro Renaissance,” as conceived by Alain Locke, was to be international in scope, interracial in character, and intergenerational in duration. The transformation of the “Negro Renaissance” into the “Harlem Renaissance” restricted the movement to black artists in the 1920s. The notion that the “Harlem Renaissance” was an historical era (rather than an ongoing event) has led critics of varying persuasions to claim that the Renaissance “failed.” In the face of such failure narratives, this essay traces a more optimistic history and proposes that the short “Harlem Renaissance” be reconceived as a long “Black Renaissance” that was both international and interracial.

O God, I cried, give me new birth,
And put me back upon the earth!
--Edna St. Vincent Millay

The flowering of black art in the early twentieth century has long been regarded as a renaissance.¹ Many have questioned the aptness of the term. Some contend that the “Renaissance” never existed; others concede its reality, but favor such names as “New Negro Movement” or “black modernism.” Yet no term has better captured the collective imagination than “Harlem Renaissance.” Even within African American Studies, the term enjoys unrivalled stature. The subject of countless courses and conferences, it spawns an outburst of retrospective essays every decade. Despite the self-evidence it enjoys today, however, the term “Harlem Renaissance” became common only recently. Not used in print until 1940, the term did not gain popularity until the 1960s. Its allure continues unabated, but its dominance was not inevitable. The triumph of “Harlem Renaissance” over the once-prevalent “Negro Renaissance” was not only a shift in terminology; it also reflected a lengthy struggle over the nature of “black” art and its relationship to America and the world at large. This essay reconstructs the forgotten history

¹ An early version of this paper was presented at the Nathan I. Huggins Symposium at Harvard University, convened by Prof. Werner Sollors on Saturday, December 5, 2009, the twentieth anniversary of Prof. Huggins’s death. Special thanks to my co-presenters at the Symposium and to Nicholas Kean Tabor, whose patient questions improved my thinking.

of that struggle and probes the implications of the term “Harlem Renaissance.” This now-pervasive concept does not merely describe an historical era, but actively shapes how we conceptualize race, art, and culture in the twentieth century. This term emerged at a specific historical moment to tell a compelling, yet mythical, story. Countless variations exist, but the underlying narrative remains the same: the “Harlem Renaissance” was a movement of black artists that began in the 1920s and “failed” shortly thereafter. These tales of fleeting success and sudden failure have long held sway, but other stories have been told about a black renaissance that was international, interracial, and intergenerational in scope. To understand how this long “Black Renaissance” gave way to a short “Harlem Renaissance” requires a careful excavation of a ninety-year debate.

Inventing the Renaissance (1919-1925)

One of the earliest references to a “Negro renaissance” came not from Harlem, but from Chicago.² Born and raised in the Midwest, Fenton Johnson had attended the University of Chicago, taught in the South, and lived in New York City before returning to Chicago to publish *The Favorite Magazine* (Wagner, *Black Poets* 179n83). A published author of poetry, fiction, and drama, Johnson had a keen sense of belonging to a broad artistic movement surrounding black cultural production. In his editorial for *The Favorite Magazine* in December 1919, entitled “Credit is Due the West Indian,” he offered an unusual perspective on the breadth and diversity of what he called a “Negro renaissance”:

We of America owe much to the West Indian. We owe much to the intellectuality and the indomitable will of these Islanders.

First of all, the blood of the West Indian has given us William Stanley Braithwaite, the foremost living American critic. It has given us Bert Williams, the world’s greatest blackface comedian. It has given us Marcus Garvey, who has presented the world the magnificent plan of a Black Star Line, which though it should meet with loss, would still be a source of inspiration to the black millions for generations to come.

In every field of our American life we find the West Indian pushing ahead and doing all in his power to uphold the dignity of the Negro race. In every industry, in every profession, in every trade, we find this son of the islands holding aloft the banner of Ethiopia.

When the great day of our liberation comes, we will find the West Indian foremost in the ranks of those fighting with his armor on and his sword raised aloft. In fact, this Negro renaissance is due largely to the aggressive mind of our brother from the islands, and for it we thank him and his Creator. (209-10)

This assessment seems surprising today for a variety of reasons. Most obviously, his “renaissance” is a global phenomenon: Johnson himself was African Ameri-

² It is difficult to state with certainty the date of the “first” reference to a black renaissance. In 1901, William Stanley Braithwaite wrote, “we are at the commencement of a ‘negroid’ renaissance [...] that will have in time as much importance in literary history as the much spoken of and much praised Celtic and Canadian renaissance” (*Colored American Magazine* 4 [Nov. 1901]: 73, qtd. in Johnson and Johnson 6, 208n11). In his article “Harlem on Our Minds,” Henry Louis Gates, Jr., cites this quotation as the earliest, along with Anna Julia Cooper’s declaration of “The New Negro Literary Movement,” which she also likens to the Celtic renaissance (164).

can, Braithwaite’s father hailed from British Guyana, Williams was raised in the Bahamas, and Garvey had newly arrived from Jamaica. Under the banner of Africa (symbolized by Ethiopia), these four “Negro renaissance” men were active across the United States: Williams had long worked in San Francisco, Johnson was in Chicago, while Braithwaite lived in Boston; only Garvey was closely linked to Harlem. While current accounts of the black “renaissance” tend to date from the 1920s, Johnson casts his eye backwards: Braithwaite had been the poetry critic of the prestigious *Boston Evening Transcript* since 1906, Bert Williams had been on Broadway since 1910, and Garvey had founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association in 1918, announcing the Black Star Line in June of 1919.³ In this early incarnation, the “Negro renaissance” appears as an international awakening of art and thought created by blacks.

The next year, the very idea of a black “renaissance” was hotly contested by two prominent thinkers across the color line. In his infamous and widely-read endorsement of white supremacy, *The Rising Tide of Color* (1920), Harvard-trained eugenicist Lothrop Stoddard warned of “Asiatic” and “Arab” renaissances, cultural resurgences of the “yellow” and “brown” races worldwide. “None of this,” he wrote, “applies to Africa”:

The black race has never shown real constructive power. It has never built up a native civilization. Such progress as certain negro groups have made has been due to external pressure and has never long outlived that pressure’s removal, for the negro, when left to himself, as in Haiti and Liberia, rapidly reverts to his ancestral ways. The negro is a facile, even eager, imitator; but there he stops. He adopts; but he does not adapt, assimilate, and give forth creatively again [...]. No black ‘renaissance’ impends [...]. (100-02)

Fenton Johnson had envisioned a black renaissance stretching back to the nineteenth century, but according to Stoddard such a renaissance would have failed before it began because of black inferiority. Meanwhile, the most famous black intellectual in the world was forecasting a black renaissance. W. E. B. Du Bois had earned his Ph. D. in history at Harvard in 1895 (nearly twenty years before Stoddard took the same degree) and was editor of *The Crisis*, the official magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). He read *The Rising Tide* as soon as it was published and engaged in frequent public debates with Stoddard.⁴ In a 1920 editorial for *The Crisis*, Du Bois listed a dozen artists and authors that the magazine had featured over the years (Fenton Johnson among them), then reiterated “the need of encouraging Negro writers”:

We have today all too few writers, for the reason that there is small market for their ideas among whites, and their energies are being called to other and more lucrative ways of earning a living. Nevertheless, we have literary ability and the race needs it. A renaissance of American Negro literature is due; the material about us in the strange, heart-rending race tangle is rich beyond dream and only we can tell the tale and sing the song from the heart.

³ For Braithwaite, see Szefel 45; for Williams, see Huggins 283; for Garvey, see Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* 37.

⁴ For a lengthy discussion of Du Bois’s interactions with Stoddard, see Guterl, ch. 1 and 3.

Against the claims of Fenton Johnson, for whom the black “renaissance” had already arrived and was an ongoing reality, Stoddard and Du Bois looked to the future, the latter claiming that a black “renaissance” was forthcoming, the former doubting it would ever appear. In the years that followed, James Weldon Johnson spoke of a “Resurgence of the Negro in Literature,” and Jean Toomer of “The Negro Emergent,” but the fullest statement of the “renaissance” did not come until 1925.⁵

Many credit Alain Locke as the theorist of the “Harlem Renaissance,” although he never used the term. As an undergraduate, Locke attended Harvard at the same time as Stoddard. He earned a Rhodes Scholarship upon graduating and later received his Ph.D. in philosophy from Harvard, in both cases the first black American to do so. He went on to teach at Howard University in Washington, DC, where he helped to found the philosophy department.⁶ Locke came to regard Harlem as “the sign and center of the renaissance of a people”⁷ and selected the title *Harlem, Mecca of the New Negro* for the March 1925 edition of *Survey Graphic* magazine, which he guest edited. But Locke carefully noted that Harlem was only the largest of many urban areas in which blacks from the American South, the Caribbean, and Africa were forging a common racial identity, including “kindred centers” in other cities of the North and Midwest.⁸ Later that year, when he expanded the issue into an anthology, Locke removed Harlem from the title, calling his work simply *The New Negro* and noting that Harlem embodied only the start of “a racial awakening on a national and perhaps even a world scale” (*New Negro* xxvii). To name this more expansive literary flowering, Locke coined the term “Negro Renaissance,” which he used in print and in speech until his death.

The “Negro Renaissance” was limited neither to Harlem nor to the decade of the 1920s. While later interpreters would conclude the “Harlem Renaissance” in the late 1930s—or even as early as 1929—, Locke took a much longer view. Just as the European Renaissance had lasted two centuries and spanned a continent, the “Negro Renaissance” would encompass a broad cultural shift of which the 1920s formed only the earliest moment. In his essay “Our Little Renaissance” (1927), Locke cautioned that the “Negro Renaissance” was meant to comprise a long process, not a fleeting fad:

If then it is really a renaissance—and I firmly believe it is, we are still in the hill-town stage, and the mellowness of maturity has not yet come upon us. [...] The Negro Renaissance is not ten years old; its earliest harbingers cannot be traced back to the beginning of the century; its representative products to date are not only the work of the last three or four years, but the work of men still in their twenties [...]. (*Critical Temper* 22)

Casting back in time like Fenton Johnson, Locke envisioned a “Negro Renaissance” already in process that would continue well into the twentieth century. Locke also avoided localizing the Renaissance in Harlem: just as the European

⁵ See Johnson, “Resurgence of the Negro in Literature” (1922); and Toomer, “The Negro Emergent” (1924).

⁶ For a full biography, see Harris and Molesworth.

⁷ Alain Locke, “Harlem,” *Survey Graphic* (Mar. 1925); in *Critical Temper of Alain Locke* 5.

⁸ Alain Locke, “Harlem,” *Survey Graphic* (Mar. 1925); in *Critical Temper of Alain Locke* 5.

Renaissance had not “stopped at the Alps,” so would the “Negro Renaissance” take root in cities far beyond Harlem and outside of America.

Most surprisingly, Locke did not confine the “Negro Renaissance” to black artists alone. While black artists had a unique role to play, Locke held that black culture had become material for *all* American artists, regardless of their race. According to Locke, the “Negro Renaissance” would infuse black subject matter and style into American culture,⁹ just as the earlier Renaissance diffused classical Greek culture throughout Europe. To explicate this idea, Locke invoked Walter Pater, the author of an influential study of fifteenth-century Europe, *The Renaissance* (1873), musing on how he might regard the “Negro Renaissance”:

I wonder what Mr. Pater would say. He might be even more sceptical, though with the scepticism of suspended judgment, I should think; but one mistake he would never make—that of confusing the spirit with the vehicle, of confounding the artistic quality which Negro life is contributing with the Negro artist. Negro artists are just the by-products of the Negro Renaissance; its main accomplishment will be to infuse new essence into the general stream of culture. The Negro Renaissance must be an integral phase of contemporary American art and literature [...].

To claim the material that Negro life and idiom have contributed to American art through the medium of the white artist may seem at first unfair and ungracious; may even be open to the imputation of trying to bolster up with reinforcements a ‘wavering thin line of talent.’ But what is the issue—sociology or art—a quality of spirit or complexions? (*Critical Temper* 21)

While modern scholars view the “Harlem Renaissance” as a black cultural movement carried out by black artists, Locke adamantly insists that the race of the author is not the central issue. Locke maintained this interest in black materials as distinct from black artists throughout his life; in his 1950 address “Frontiers of Culture,” Locke held that the Renaissance was “open to all who might be interested on the basis of collaboration and mutual understanding. Some of the most effective and welcomed spokesmen were not Negro” (*Philosophy* 232-33). The primary goal of his “Negro Renaissance” was the fertilization of American culture by Negro culture; only as a consequence of this larger cultural achievement would a class of black artists emerge.

Contesting the Renaissance (1926-1939)

Locke’s striking formulation of the “Negro Renaissance” met considerable resistance from black writers who argued against the idea of a black renaissance, though for very different reasons than Stoddard. One infamous denunciation came from George S. Schuyler, whose essay “The Negro-Art Hokum” raised eyebrows and tempers when it appeared in the *Nation* in 1926. In it, Schuyler argues against the notion that blacks in America had retained a connection to Africa that distinguished them from the whites with whom they were in daily contact:

⁹ In the essay “Our Little Renaissance” (1927), Locke refers to “Negro life and idiom” (*Critical Temper* 21).

Rethinking the Renaissance

The shift from “Negro Renaissance” to “Harlem Renaissance” was more than a change in terms. For Alain Locke, the “Negro Renaissance” was a reinvigoration of American national culture through the collaboration of artists across races using black idioms and materials. This interracial dimension of the Renaissance was largely overlooked until the pathbreaking research of George Hutchinson in *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (1993). Moreover, Locke also saw the “Negro Renaissance” as a transnational phenomenon that would give rise to a class of black artists from America, the Caribbean, and Africa who had a special (though not exclusive) link to black cultural materials. This dimension of the Renaissance has been emphasized by Brent Hayes Edwards’s monograph *The Practice of Diaspora* (2003). When Langston Hughes introduced the term “Harlem Renaissance,” he emphasized a racially and spatially restricted concept denoting the gathering of *black* artists in New York. While the “Negro Renaissance” offered a long-term interracial cultural vision, the “Harlem Renaissance” described a fleeting convergence of black artists in a single place and time. Given the broad support for black separatism in the late 1960s, it is unsurprising that the “Harlem Renaissance” won out.

But why has the idea of the “Harlem Renaissance” persisted in spite of its critics? Ironically, the lasting appeal of the term may derive in part from the narratives of failure to which it gives rise. Individuals with widely diverging aims have invoked its failure in service of their own interests. Langston Hughes first used the term to describe the failure of the movement for economic reasons; claiming that the Renaissance had failed allowed him remain relevant as a living representative of a bygone era. For Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright, the failure of the bohemian 1920s underscored the need for a literature with more Marxist commitments. Literary critics like Benjamin Brawley, Nick Aaron Ford, and Robert Bone also spoke of failure; Brawley to urge a return to Southern themes, Ford to critique continuing anti-black racism, and Bone to dramatize the success of more recent black authors. Harold Cruse saw in 1920s Harlem a failure of black cultural nationalism that called for his own theories; Larry Neal felt the Black Arts Movement would create community-based art where the “Harlem Renaissance” had failed. For David Levering Lewis, the Renaissance failed in its basic “conviction that a critical mass of exemplary talent could make things better” (*When Harlem Was in Vogue* xxviii). All of these narratives share a rhetorical gambit: history told in a tragic mode lends itself to calls for change. If the “Harlem Renaissance” was a failure, there remains more work for us to do.

Still, other stories have been told about this renaissance. Since Fenton Johnson, some have envisioned a long renaissance, whose origins stretch back to the nineteenth century, and whose future extends far beyond the Great Depression. This vision was fully theorized by Alain Locke and shared by Hubert Harrison, defended by Sterling Brown, and bequeathed to Nathan Huggins. This conception is what Brown called a “continuing tradition,” an ongoing renaissance ever-renewed by new generations of artists. As Johnson foresaw, this renaissance must include blacks from around the world—African, American, Caribbean, and oth-

erwise—but it must also embrace individuals of all races who take what Locke called “the life and idiom” of blackness as the substance of their art. The mission of such a renaissance was spelled out long ago by Arturo Alfonso Schomburg: “that the full story of human collaboration and interdependence may be told and realized.”⁵¹ This renaissance is utopian, is not yet, and will never yet be in its truest sense, except as a dim hope. “The true Negro renaissance awaits,” wrote Huggins (309). Or as we might say, the true “Black Renaissance” awaits. But this “Black Renaissance” has also already begun. And perhaps it never ended.

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⁵¹ “The Negro Digs Up His Past”; in Locke, *The New Negro* 237.