

Iulian Boldea, Dumitru-Mircea Buda (Editors)

**CONVERGENT DISCOURSES. Exploring the Contexts of Communication**

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*Section: Literature*

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## THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

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*Abstract: The centrality and the undeniable pivotal position of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s in the development of African American literature and culture has long been recognized. It was the most exciting and important cultural movement which African Americans had ever experienced. In fact, it was the first period during which a significant number of Americans actually examined African American culture closely and encouraged increased productivity for artistic reasons.*

*Keywords: racism, slavery, culture, conservation, renaissance*

The terms *race* and *culture* cannot be easily separated either. The first definition of race was in the late 18th century and used to talk about specific peoples who were as readily identifiable by their behavior as by their physical appearance. Observers did not find so much correlation between the physical and the moral; they saw or thought they saw only peoples who looked, acted and perhaps even thought differently from themselves.

It was as if all the Americans – white and black alike – suddenly became aware of the originality of black life, and enthusiastically took part in the vibrant nightlife of the Harlem clubs and cabarets, attended African American musicals, and acknowledge and read a wealth of literature written by black authors. As Langston Hughes mentioned in his autobiographical volume *The Big Sea*, the Negro was, quite unexpectedly, “in vogue”:

“It was a period when, at almost every Harlem upper-crust dance or party, one would be introduced to various distinguished white celebrities there as guests. It was a period when almost any Harlem Negro of any social importance at all would be likely to say casually: “As I was remarking the other day to Heywood –,” meaning Heywood Broun. Or: “As I said to George –,” referring to George Gershwin. It was a period when local and visiting royalty were not at all uncommon in Harlem. And when the parties of A’Lelia Walker, the Negro heiress, were filled with guests whose names would turn any Nordic social climber green with envy. It was a period when Harold Jackman, a handsome young Harlem schoolteacher of modest means, calmly announced one day that he was sailing for the Riviera for a fortnight, to attend Princess Murat’s yachting party. It was a period when Charleston preachers opened up shouting churches as sideshows for white tourists. It was a period when at least one

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charming colored chorus girl, amber enough to pass for a Latin American, was living in a penthouse, with all her bills paid by a gentleman whose name was banker's magic on Wall Street. It was a period when every season there was at least one hit play on Broadway acted by a Negro cast. And when books by Negro authors were being published with much greater frequency and much more publicity than ever before or since in history. It was a period when white writers wrote about Negroes more successfully (commercially speaking) than Negroes did about themselves. It was the period (God help us!) when Ethel Barrymore appeared in blackface in *Scarlet Sister Mary!* It was the period when the Negro was in vogue" (from Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea: An Autobiography* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1940)

Langston Hughes' words cover almost all aspects of the period, both social and cultural. Indeed, artists, writers, composers, actors and musicians could now earn an honest living by exercising their talent and benefit the acknowledgement of critics and the general audience. America was witnessing the rise of a new African American intelligentsia, vibrant with what Alain Locke called "a new psychology" which meant the black artists' freedom of expression, and the whites' favorable reception of their artistic end products.

The writers and artists addressed the African American cultural heritage, which they rendered visible, which added to the overall picture of the 'Jazz Age' – as the period was also called and which accounts for the predominant influence of African American culture, and explains the rejection of traditional moral values which can be found in the works of prestigious white writers of the 'lost generation', such as Hemingway and Fitzgerald.

The change in attitude may be attributed to events and ideas which coincided during World War I. First, during the Jazz Age, Americans developed respect for the music – especially the jazz and the blues of black Americans. Performers and listeners alike learned to seek out such black jazz artists as the aging King Oliver or the young and exciting Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington, who were forming their first bands. The interest in music may have stimulated a desire to learn more about other creative endeavors of African Americans.

Second, rebelling against the mores of what seemed to be a conservative society, many young white Americans saw in black people the models for the kind of freedom they wanted. Not knowing the Harlemit who worked from 8 A.M. to 6 P.M., but inferring racial character from the free improvisations of jazz, many whites imposed on African Americans the image of an amoral, unrepressed individual, happy because he was not burdened by the inhibitions of civilized white society.

Still other Americans, inspired by the democratic slogans preached during "the war to end all wars," may have considered it their humanitarian responsibility to examine more closely the American citizens who had not reaped the full benefits of democracy. Furthermore, white artists – not merely musicians but also writers – became interested in black Americans, although primarily as representatives of a primitive culture. In 1917, Ridgely Torrence wrote *Three Plays for a Negro Theater*. Three years later Eugene O'Neill produced *The Emperor Jones*, in which he dramatized the thesis that savagery lurks beneath the civilized veneer of the African

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American. Within ten years, these writers were followed by Mary Wiborg (*Taboo*), Em Jo Basshe (*Earth*), DuBose Heyward (*Porgy*), Waldo Frank (*Holiday*), Sherwood Anderson (*Dark Laughter*), Paul Green (with numerous plays), Julia Peterkin (*Black April*), Carl van Vechten (*Nigger Heaven*), William Faulkner (*The Sound and the Fury*), and Marc Connelly (*Green Pastures*), to name only some of the better known.

One feature that distinguishes the Jazz Age is the extended patronage of the whites and the support they provided to young African American writers and artists. Nevertheless, the uppermost characteristic of this decade is the spiritual and cultural awakening of the African American nation. Historians have questioned the reasons for the choice of New York and Harlem as the center of this complex phenomenon. We have already referred to the great migration to the Northern states of the southern runaway slaves, which continued after the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 well into the 20th century. With New York as the cultural capital of America, and an increasing African American population (200,000 by the end of the Harlem Renaissance), it was only normal that the city would become the center of the African American culture, and Harlem the Mecca of all colored people, not only American, but also blacks from the Caribbeans. One interesting explanation to the peculiar position of Harlem is given by James Weldon Johnson, in his essay *Harlem: The Culture Capital* (1925), published in John Locke's famous anthology, *The New Negro*:

“In the make-up of New York, *Harlem is not merely a Negro colony or community, it is a city within a city, the greatest Negro city in the world. It is not a slum or a fringe, it is located in the heart of Manhattan and occupies one of the most beautiful and healthful sections of the city.* It is not a “quarter” of dilapidated tenements, but is made up of new-law apartments and handsome dwellings, with well-paved and well-lighted streets. It has its own churches, social and civic centers, shops, theaters and other places of amusement. And it contains more Negroes to the square mile than any other spot on earth.

[...] *Harlem is a Negro community, well defined and stable; anchored to its fixed homes, churches, institutions, business and amusement places; having its own working, business and professional classes. It is experiencing a constant growth of group consciousness and community feeling. Harlem is, therefore, in many respects, typically Negro.* It has many unique characteristics. It has movement, color, gayety, singing, dancing, boisterous laughter and loud talk. [...] In many of these characteristics it is similar to the Italian colony. But withal, Harlem grows more metropolitan and more a part of New York all the while. Why is it then that its tendency is not to become a mere “quarter”?

I shall give three reasons that seem to me to be important in their order. First, the language of Harlem is not alien; it is not Italian or Yiddish; it is English. Harlem talks American, reads American, thinks American. Second, Harlem is not physically a “quarter.” It is not a section cut off. It is merely a zone through which four main arteries of the city run. Third, the fact that there is little or no gang labor gives Harlem Negroes the opportunity for individual expansion and

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individual contacts with the life and spirit of New York.” (Locke, Alain, *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925) .

This is perhaps the most comprehensive description of Harlem written by an insider. In the same anthology, African American sociologist Charles S. Johnson, in his essay “The New Frontage on American Life”, reaches the following conclusion:

“A new type of Negro is evolving – a city Negro. He is being evolved out of those strangely divergent elements of the general background. And this is a fact overlooked by those students of human behavior, who with such quick comprehension detect the influence of the city in the nervousness of the Jew, the growing nervous disorders of city dwellers in general to the tension of city life. In ten years, Negroes have been actually transplanted from one culture to another.” (Locke, Alain, *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925)

By 1920, African Americans had been publishing literary works for more than one hundred and fifty years: Lucy Terry, a slave in Deerfield, Massachusetts, is known to have composed a poem as early as 1746; Brutus and Jupiter Hammon wrote poetry and essays in the 1760s; and Phillis Wheatley, born in Africa and enslaved in Boston, had a collection of poems published in 1773. In the first half of the nineteenth century, while America debated the issue of slavery with intensifying fervor, additional African Americans earned modest reputations in literature – in particular, William Wells Brown for fiction and essays, Frances Harper for poetry, and Frederick Douglass for nonfiction. Nevertheless, during the first half of the century Americans generally turned to black writers for pathetic recitations of the agonies of slavery rather than for artistic literature.

After the Civil War, collections of spirituals and Joel Chandler Harris’s collections of folktales familiarized some Americans with African American talent for song and tale. Others, however, continued to doubt the educability and the artistic creativity of Afro-Americans. The first sponsors of Paul Laurence Dunbar rejoiced to discover his poetic talent, not so much because they considered it a possible source for significant contributions to American literature, but because it gave them opportunity to demonstrate the creative potential of a black American. Even the respected critic William Dean Howells, who praised Dunbar enthusiastically in 1896, revealed ignorance of black writers, an ignorance which persuaded Howells and other critics to underestimate the literary potential of Africa’s descendants. In the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1896, Howells praised Dunbar as the first individual of African ancestry to show innate literary talent; when reminded, or informed, that the very popular French writer, Alexandre Dumas, was of African descent, Howells modified his statement to describe Dunbar as the first African American to show innate talent for literature. Howells did not know or had forgotten the African ancestry of Alexander Pushkin, one of the greatest of all Russian authors; and in 1896 he apparently knew nothing about the African American Charles W. Chesnutt, who had published his first short story in the *Atlantic Monthly* more than ten years before Howells became acquainted with Dunbar’s work.

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A few talented writers earned national attention at the end of the nineteenth century and in the first years of the twentieth. Dunbar became one of America's most popular poets. The less popular Charles Chesnutt evoked critics' respect as a writer of fiction, and W. E. B. DuBois delighted academicians with his scholarly historical and sociological studies and his brilliant essays. Nevertheless, America, in general, continued to judge such writers as exceptions rather than as examples of the creative potential of African Americans.

Ironically, interest in and respect for African American culture developed to a peak during the same decade in which the Ku Klux Klan revived its membership and organized klans farther north than ever before. Ironically, also, this decade of the twenties followed one in which few publishers, editors, or producers permitted African Americans opportunity to demonstrate their talent.

Undoubtedly, blacks themselves helped to win respect for their culture. Such African American scholars as Carter G. Woodson and Benjamin Brawley searched for achievements which they could praise and publicize. Philosopher Alain Locke, of Howard University in Washington D.C., and Charles S. Johnson, editor of *Opportunity* magazine, joined white Carl van Vechten in a search for black talent. Experiences in Europe had developed among black soldiers a pride in themselves and their race. Availability of jobs had encouraged blacks to migrate north to a dignity and a freedom which, though limited, were greater than they had experienced previously.

No matter what the cause or causes, the fact is that during the 1920s white Americans became interested in the culture of African Americans, and the blacks gave them something to see. It was the decade of the "Harlem Renaissance," so-called because many of the young, productive artists migrated to Harlem; or it was the decade of the "Negro Renaissance," or, simply, the era of the "New Negro." And writers abounded. Claude McKay, a West Indian, demonstrated versatility in poetry and fiction in re-creating the tender and the bitter moods of the New Negro. Wallace Thurman and George Schuyler wrote brilliant satires. Rudolph Fisher mixed satire and realism into faithful depictions of Harlem, and Jessie Fauset tried to depict the aspects of Negro life not continually affected by interracial conflicts. Young Langston Hughes earned respect for happy and loving poems and stories about Northern blacks, and his friend Arna Bontemps sympathetically revealed Southern blacks. James Weldon Johnson not only wrote poetry himself but even edited an anthology of African American poetry. In 1925 Alain Locke's critical anthology *The New Negro* was published, to be followed – two years later – by *Four Negro Poets*, and *Plays of Negro Life* by the same author.

It was truly an era of African American artistic exuberance exemplified by black writers who sentimentally or realistically reproduced black primitives; who satirized their black social, economic, and intellectual peers; who laughed at themselves and their white neighbors; who searched for their heritage; and who found pride in themselves and their ancestors. The writers and their works sang a hymn to blackness, written in a major key. But a melancholy minor chord was sounded by a triad – Jean Toomer, generally acknowledged to be the most artistic black craftsman of those who wrote before 1950; Countee Cullen, the precocious poet laureate

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of the Renaissance; and Zora Neale Hurston, the most competent black female novelist before 1950.

At first glance, one might assume that these three patterned after their contemporaries. They wrote about primitives; they satirized their peers; and they searched for their heritage. But they found scant satisfaction in their search. Upon closer examination, they seem to be wanderers – talented artists, perhaps the most talented African American writers of the decade, who searched in creativity and in life for some intangible satisfaction which they failed to find.

A problem for African American writers is that invariably those who become well-known are condemned or praised for non-aesthetic reasons. If they have written about black Americans, some white critics have expressed hope that, in the future, they would write about the human race. If they have written about human beings who are not black, other critics have condemned them for failing to write about people whom they understood; i.e., Negroes. Sometimes black writers have been castigated merely because they failed to establish themselves as social crusaders or because they removed themselves from the United States. At the other extreme, some black writers have been praised by white critics and readers primarily because they presented literary images which faithfully resembled the images of blacks already fixed in the minds of these white readers.

These practices have not abated. Richard Wright has been derided for using Existentialism, a non-American literary tradition, for choosing to write a novel about white people and for writing about blacks who are not middle-class. Not long ago, white critics denounced James Baldwin for subverting art to the promotion of social crusades for blacks; now, black critics denounce him for betraying his race by seeming to reveal love for white people. One well-known literary figure who could find little to berate in the artistic technique of Pulitzer Prize poet Gwendolyn Brooks concluded his critique by observing that she would remain a minor poet until she selected a broader subject than her present one – the lives and emotions of Afro-Americans. Ralph Ellison, who wrote about blacks, has been castigated by blacks for failing to participate in Civil Rights marches, whereas Frank Yerby, who writes about whites, has been criticized by whites for failing to use his talents to write histories about blacks.

The practice of evaluating African Americans' literary work according to nonliterary criteria is so common that its absurdity becomes apparent only when one considers applying similar criteria to non-Negro authors. Suppose, for instance, that a critic chastized William Faulkner or DuBose Heyward for sometimes writing novels about blacks instead of about their own people. Or that a critic derided Tennessee Williams and Nathaniel Hawthorne as minor and provincial authors because they wrote about Southerners and New Englanders. Or that T. S. Eliot's worth was estimated on the basis of whether or not he was justified in renouncing his American citizenship to become a British subject.

It is regrettable that such absurdity continues today when the literary talent of African Americans has been demonstrated convincingly. The award of the Pulitzer Prize for poetry to Gwendolyn Brooks' *Annie Allen* (1949); the selection of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) as the most distinguished American novel published from 1939 to 1964; the drama awards to Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) and LeRoi Jones's *Dutchman* (1964), and the

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Pulitzer Prize for drama to Charles Gordone's *No Place To Be Somebody*, all these attest general respect for the ability of black writers, who today are less likely to be destroyed by social criticism.

The situation was more precarious for earlier black writers, who understood not only that whatever they selected as subject matter would be criticized but also that their works would be evaluated primarily by white readers, who often doubted black writers' ability to create art and who measured verisimilitude according to their own preconceptions of African American character and black-white relationships.

Both Jean Toomer and Zora Neale Hurston have suffered from aesthetically unsound appraisals of their merits as artists and from myths about their racial stances. Because the talent of Toomer has been highly respected, critics have been somewhat subdued in their objections to his decision to live as a white man rather than as a black; but, knowing little about his life or work, critics have interpreted his stories and sketches to fit their conceptions of what a black man should have thought about black people. Zora Neale Hurston alleged that, for several years, she refused to write a novel because she did not want to write about the race question but feared that she would be permitted to write about nothing else. A major objection to her work has been her silence about issues significant to African Americans, but an unanswered critical question is the authenticity of her portrayal of Southern blacks.

My reason for choosing to further write about two voices of the Harlem Renaissance is to rectify the need for more complete and more objective studies of the works of these two writers. It is, however, impossible to segregate a study of their works from an examination of their lives. Living during a time when most black artists publicly rejoiced in their heritage, each of these three, in his own way, reacted consciously to his existence – or, more appropriately, his identification – as a Negro, and each colored his writing by the nature of his reaction. In order to analyze and evaluate the works perceptively, therefore, one must examine them in relation to the writer's struggle to be whatever he chose – as an artist and as a human being.

It is not easy to understand and explain the sudden decline of such effervescent period in the history of African American art and culture. The main reason is socio-economical, having been triggered by the famous crash of the stock market in 1929, which marked the beginning of the Great Depression, and made the population less and less interested in matters cultural. It is interesting to note that the Harlem Renaissance did not die out all of a sudden, and surviving authors and artists continued to create during the thirties and even later: Nella Larsen's novel *Passing* was published in 1929, and Claude McKay published his novel *Banjo*, in 1929, and Langston Hughes published his novel *Not Without Laughter* (1930). Both Wallace Thurman and Rudolph Fischer died 1934, but others continued their work: Zora Neale Hurston, with *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934) and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Arna Bontemps, with *God Sends Sunday* (1931) and *Drums at Dusk* (1939), to end with Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), whose naturalism marked a definite departure from the romanticism of the Harlem Renaissance.

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