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### “The New Negro”: Center of the Harlem Stage

Amidst a tragically long-standing history of oppression, the Harlem Renaissance was arguably the pinnacle of African American prosperity in the United States during the early twentieth century. The Harlem Renaissance, being a period of cultural and spiritual revival, spanned the years between the 1920s and mid-1930s distinctly following the end of the first World War in 1918. Centralized in Harlem, New York, the infamous Harlem Renaissance illustrated the explosion of intellectual, social, and artistic reconstruction of the previously stigmatized African American race that in turn kindled a new cultural identity. Its essence can be interpreted as a collective and holistic “rebirth” of literary and artistic expression, a vision of the African American individual no longer tainted by the despotism of the past also known as the “New Negro.” In fact, African Americans of Harlem represented a sense of “black pride” in the form of the “New Negro” ideology described by their affluence, literature, and artistic expression, all of which reflected the rise of African American social sophistication.

One important facet of the Harlem Renaissance was the unprecedented commercial and entrepreneurial savvy demonstrated by the African American race that contributed to Harlem’s rise in economic affluence. The nation benefitted tremendously following the conclusion of the first World War as increased employment opportunities and wage-earning establishments were open to the public. The people of Harlem were equally as quick to offer similar services to the African American population in order to encourage such market efficiency. In the urban community of Harlem, African Americans developed large-scale commercial networks and organizations such as the National Association of Wage Earners, National Negro Business

League, National Urban league, and the Universal Negro Improvement Association.<sup>1</sup> The very purpose of these organizations was to offer a foundation in which the African American individual could express personal autonomy regarding his or her financial endeavors. As the flurry in economic activity continued to intensify, exhibitions across New York were being planned to bring attention to the progress being made by the black business men and women of Harlem. In a special written to the *Pittsburgh Courier* advertising a business show being planned in New York City in the summer of 1923, the coordinators of this display asserted that “this exhibition and business show promises to be the most healthy demonstration of the integrity of our colored businessmen and women.”<sup>2</sup> Not only were African Americans of Harlem pursuing a more fruitful life, but they were also keen on making it known to the rest of America that their pursuits of financial success were as credible as those of white Americans. The proprietor of the Renaissance Casino later commented “the businessmen and women...feel confident that for the first time in their business career, the opportunity will be given them such as is given the white businessmen by the various shows given at the Grand Central Palace.”<sup>3</sup> With the post-war increase in economic health, the restriction of immigrants allowed into the country in the 1920s resulted in a decrease of competition for employment positions across the nation. This reduction in population size granted more African Americans to be able to work for an income, overall escalating the standard of living in Harlem. As it was being recognized that the average wage earned in Harlem in the early twentieth century was swelling, the cost of living in the developing town was also on the rise. According to a newspaper feature titled “Harlem’s ‘Renaissance’ Produced ‘New Negro’” in the *New York Amsterdam Star-News* in January of 1942, the

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<sup>1</sup> "African Americans And Consumerism". 1999. *American Memory*.

<sup>2</sup> "Business show being Planned in New York City." *The Pittsburgh Courier (1911-1950)*, Jul 07 1923, pp. 3. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Pittsburgh Courier*.

<sup>3</sup> “Business show being Planned in New York City.”, 3.

emphasis placed on living in lavish homes as African Americans invested greater funds to create standards far above normal was described by the “unlimited demand on one side and carefully measured supply on the other...brought a strong upwards trend in rents which has kept the average in the community above that of the rest of the city to this day.”<sup>4</sup> The escalation in the standard of living meant that the citizens of Harlem were in pursuit of a more esteemed form of residence, one in which could be viewed by the rest of America as reverential and admirable. The New Negro ideology that was beginning to form encompassed the idea of an African American individual who was economically independent and financially sustainable for his or her own elevated conditions of living.

One element of the Harlem Renaissance was the ascent of social affluence among the people. People of color in Harlem were beginning to create a more sophisticated society where a new emphasis was being placed on social gatherings and flashy spectacles. As seen in a flyer promoted in *The New York Amsterdam News* in December of 1922, the grand opening of the Renaissance Casino claimed to be “one of the most brilliant spectacles of fascinating grandeur...something never seen before in Colored Harlem.”<sup>5</sup> The city of Harlem was essentially reinventing the structure of its society to one deemed as posh and elegant. This was a product of the personal autonomy the people of Harlem were exercising. The syntax used within the advertisement pointed to a celebration comprised of class and elegance, as the flyer would later state “a dazzling queen of beauty...what will be the most beautiful and handsome place of its kind in New York City for our people.”<sup>6</sup> The citizens of Harlem were capitalizing upon their increased income by indulging in dazzling affairs like those of their white counterparts, an

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<sup>4</sup> Bourne, St Clair. "Harlem's 'Renaissance' Produced 'New Negro'." *New York Amsterdam Star-News (1941-1943)*, Jan 24, 1942. 7.

<sup>5</sup> "Display Ad 3 -- no Title." *The New York Amsterdam News (1922-1938)*, Dec 20 1922, pp. 1. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers: New York Amsterdam News*.

<sup>6</sup> "Display Ad 3 -- no Title.", 1.

activity they hadn't been able to participate in before then. It was evident that the people of Harlem were intent on decimating the past misfortune of the African American race by creating a culture that was forging their own success.

The literary thinkers of the early twentieth century contributed to the idealized "New Negro" by portraying African Americans as a newly revived race. Many prolific writers during the 1920s and 1930s published literary works that added momentum to the Harlem Renaissance; one such writer was Alain Locke, a Harvard alumnus as well as the author of "The New Negro." Lynda Sampson, in her essay analyzing the contributions of several prominent figures to the "New Negro" during the Harlem Renaissance, describes the purpose of "The New Negro" essays by linking the "development of the 'New Negro' to the historical dismantling of the 'Old Negro.'" <sup>7</sup> The "Old Negro" was the image of African Americans depicted during the late nineteenth century that resembled a savage, uneducated, and unrefined race. The work of Locke as well as numerous other Renaissance writers utilized poetry, fiction, and drama to distance African Americans now from the previously held ideas of a defeated race. Because the Harlem Renaissance was partially seen as an artistic revival, writers during this period abandoned the traditional styles of writing and produced pieces that emphasized the authentic voice of the New Negroes: ambition and prosperity. The work of another prolific writer during the Harlem Renaissance resonated with much of the public. Langston Hughes, a famous poet during the 1930s, wrote an influential piece titled "I, Too" that exemplified the "New Negro" ideology. It reads "I am the darker brother./They send me to eat in the kitchen/When company comes,/But I laugh...Tomorrow,/I'll be at the table./When company comes...Besides,/They'll see how

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<sup>7</sup> Sampson, Lynda Marie. "Harlem Renaissance: The Concept of the "New Negro" as Revealed in Philosophy, Art and Literature." 1994. No. 1378307, California State University, Dominguez Hills.

beautiful I am/And be ashamed-/I, too, am America.”<sup>8</sup> Hughes asserted a vision of the African American man that no longer adhered to the will of others but governed himself. Between the works of Alain Locke, Langston Hughes, and many other writers, the combined efforts of these individuals assembled a newly idealized version of the African American race. It was the intent of “New Negro” literature not only to depict a new vision of the African American person but also to receive public recognition and acceptance of these works. In order for the writers of the Harlem Renaissance to have received public acclaim for their pieces, they diminished the language typically used among African Americans and instead used more realistic expressions. In the essay written by Lynda Sampson, she examines the simplified speech and replacement of dialectical language with colloquial expressions as the “ultimate objective of the New Negro artist, which was to create a culturally distinctive art to enrich American art in general.”<sup>9</sup> By doing so, the rehabilitation of the African American identity also included one that reflected white American style language and speech. The writers of the Harlem Renaissance displayed their exceptional literacy by using prose in their writing that was intelligent and informed. In this sense, the Harlem Renaissance was evoking a sense of cultural pride while also generating respect and appreciation from the rest of the United States.

The musical expression experienced during the Harlem Renaissance attests to the rise in social sophistication of the African American population because of its widely celebrated nature by the public. Instead of solely producing music representative of African American culture, the Harlem Renaissance gave way to forms of musical expression that could be relevant across the United States. In an article highlighted in the February 1923 edition of *The Chicago Defender*, a review of several operatic events were being noted across Harlem, and the critique of one Miss

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<sup>8</sup> Hughes, Langston. "I, Too". *Poetry Foundation*. 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Sampson, “Harlem Renaissance: The Concept of the “New Negro”, 26.

Macbeth acknowledged that “the moment Miss Macbeth sings, one knows she has a beautiful voice trained to the highest degree. Every tone is produced with delicate precision...she is most certainly one of the main reasons music lovers go to concerts.”<sup>10</sup> Miss Macbeth, a revered singer during the Harlem Renaissance, is being portrayed as an elegant, reverential artist whose talents could rival those of other singers. She is applauded for her ability to entertain the audience while simultaneously performing to the elevated standards of classical compositions. As the artists of the Harlem Renaissance were performing professional pieces also inclusive of their culture, the public showed their appreciation by becoming increasingly supportive of these musical renditions. The article featured in *The Chicago Defender* goes on to disclose that the “most cultured people of today know the upstanding features of various composers and schools of music as well as they can give an analyzation of schools and periods of literature.”<sup>11</sup> The author insinuates that the wealth of knowledge Harlem artists have acquired has led to the production of splendid melodic pieces. The modern audience is illustrated as wanting a refined and cultivated form of music which is what the Harlem Renaissance was bringing forth.

The cinematic industry was also experiencing a resurgence in the quality of production for the critically acclaimed film “Harlem is Heaven” was being showcased in cities across America. As reported by *The Pittsburgh Courier* on June 18, 1932, “Harlem is Heaven” was heavily revered and described as the best all-negro film ever produced. It was stated in the article that this was the “best and finest piece of cinema ever produced” and it “will be heartily accepted in all sections of this country.”<sup>12</sup> Because the cast executed their performances comparable to those seen on Broadway, the film received an immense amount of praise. Aspects

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<sup>10</sup> Holt, Nora D. "News of the Music World." *The Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967)*, Feb 24 1923, pp. 5. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender*.

<sup>11</sup> Holt, “News of the Music World.”, 5.

<sup>12</sup> Snelson, Floyd G. ""Harlem is Heaven" Best all-Negro Film Ever Produced." *The Pittsburgh Courier (1911-1950)*, Jun 18, 1932. 1.

of the film such as the directing, musical numbers, and acting were commended, and the overall quality of the film was equally appreciated across America. One central motif in the film was the “Tree of Hope” which represented the root motivation behind the “New Negro” movement. This recurring symbol was reflective of the continued artistic advancement of the Harlem Renaissance. The film depicts Harlem as a place where people can go in pursuit of riches and fame, a motif that attests to the growing status of the “New Negro.”

The Harlem Renaissance was a period of tremendous prosperity in many facets of the African American way of life in Harlem. Although race-related tensions between white Americans and African Americans was still prevalent during the 1920s and 1930s, the African American race was making numerous advancements in many areas thus changing the perception of their culture to other races. These talented individuals were able to rekindle a new public image of their race by producing literary, artistic, and social expressions of themselves. Evidence of the “New Negro” ideology can be found in all aspects of the African American lifestyle during the early twentieth century, and dynamic versions of the African American individual are still being created to this day.

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