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An Era of Creative Establishment

“Like men we’ll face the murderous, cowardly pack, pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!” The veracity and boldness of the line from Claude McKay’s poem, “If We Must Die” (1917) encapsulates in many senses, the attitude of African American creativity during the Harlem Renaissance. While artistic eloquence and beauty ruled a time period in which burgeoning individuality earned it the title of ‘Renaissance,’ a deeper meaning to the movement could be discovered within the hearts and minds of African Americans. The expression that found itself within this artistic wave was more than what could be shown for surface value. All of the art, music, and literature represented a growing class of people that fiercely desired more from their nation and more for themselves. The Harlem Renaissance acted as a manifestation of African American social identity, as they established their creative freedom and individuality via poetry, literature, and music.

A strong and lasting facet of the Harlem Renaissance is represented by the literature and poetry created at the time. In most cases, authors depicted a counter-cultural view of African American livelihood, taking the form of anti-discriminatory ballads or personal and communal successes when facing adversity. These themes seemed to reverberate through the growing minority, reinforcing its free and equal place in modern American society. Author, Claude McKay, embodied the aggressive, nearly ferocious stance that certain individuals took in their representation of African American oppression. In his poem, “If We Must Die,” McKay used a great deal of symbolism and imagery in order to portray idealistic African American sentiment towards

discrimination. He began with, “If we must die, let it not be like hogs,”¹ in order to confront the imposed and inhuman classification given to African Americans by their oppressors, who according to the poem, consider them as a lesser kind to be “hunted and penned.” McKay continued to an interaction with the religious motif; “O let us die nobly,” evoking a sense of pride and righteousness as African Americans “defy...the monsters” of oppression. Furthermore, in the line, “O Kinsmen! Let us meet the common foe”² McKay illustrated the absolutely crucial aspect of community during the Harlem Renaissance. This sense of brotherhood, coupled with a passionate exhibition of entitlement and freedom, was reinforced by Claude McKay’s creative contributions to the movement as the “outnumbered...brave...face[d] the murderous pack.”³

This idea of community and camaraderie, proved to be a driving aspect behind African American social assertion during the Harlem Renaissance. Similar to Claude McKay, poets such as Langston Hughes utilized the theme of fellowship as means of bettering and progressing the minority to equality. In his poem, “The Ballad of Booker T.,” Hughes provides commentary on race relations as a whole in the early to mid-1900s. Alluding to the influential speech of Booker T. Washington, Hughes includes, “let down your bucket where you are,”⁴ in order to encourage society to work together in lifting up the rest of the minority, strengthening themselves from the bottom-up. Hughes comments on the pivotal necessity for Negroes to become peaceful, well-rounded citizens in their attempt to protest injustices, by urging to “train your head, your heart, and your hand.” By doing so, Hughes insisted, African Americans would “help [them]selves and [their] fellow man.” Also, Hughes continued reinforce the idea of unity by the analogy; “the tallest tower can tumble down if it be not rooted in solid ground,”⁵ comparing the

structural integrity of a tower to the unified efforts of Negroes to support a cause. The camaraderie idealized by Langston Hughes could be effective if African Americans attained, again, a certain degree of level-headedness and humility, much like Booker T. who “had compromise in his talk for a man must crawl before he can walk.”⁶ Hughes’ writings seemed to call for measured wisdom in conjunction with fierce alliance among African Americans during the Harlem Renaissance.

Literature from authors during this time period often times depicted the African American struggle, a topic that cannot be mentioned without Zora Neale Hurston, an author praised for illustrating the experiences of black women during the years to follow Reconstruction. In many ways, Hurston provided insight into the ‘double-discrimination’ of African American females, drawing from not only her personal experiences as a colored woman but also from her creative literary prowess.⁷ During the Harlem Renaissance Hurston contributed to starting the journal ‘Fire!!’ which sought to foster the creativity of young Negro artists. Hurston’s writings in the journal and outside of the publication in many instances took a light-hearted, borderline comedic stance on the discrimination of African American women, a view that proved to be an effective avenue of approach.⁸ In her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston creates an intriguing commentary on gender roles in African American society. Hurston, unlike many feminists of the time, depicted the inherent difference between sexes rather than the typically idealized gender equality. She does so by comparing the folly of men as “ships at a distance...forever on the horizon,” to the conviction of women, acting purposefully and recognizing that “the dream is the truth.”⁹ While Zora Neale Hurston depicted the counter-cultural theme of gender roles experienced by a black woman, she also

highlighted a glorified sense of hope for societal betterment in her novel *Dust Tracks on a Road*. Although published after the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston's involvement in the movement is emulated throughout this novel, culminating with the famous quote; "Mama exhorted her children at every opportunity to 'jump at the sun.' We might not land on the sun, but at least we would get off the ground."¹⁰ Hurston provided in some ways, a summary of the sentiment shared by those oppressed by discrimination, all while interacting with the reoccurring theme of fellowship. Zora Neale Hurston, like many other Harlem Renaissance authors, encouraged African Americans to reach higher and establish themselves above injustice in post-Reconstruction America.

Music during the Harlem Renaissance embodied the vibrancy and excitement of the Roaring Twenties while influencing the rise in African American social establishment throughout the decade to follow. The song "Black and Tan Fantasy" by both Duke Ellington and Bubber Miley, served to set the tone for racial discord that dominated the era, making it a very important piece in Harlem Renaissance history. Ellington and Miley produced this song as a synthesis of two major styles, weaving in and out of refined, orchestral tunes and animal-like, growling brass accompaniment, clearly representing the dichotomy of whites and blacks respectively. The song as a whole was a dramatic piece, almost show-like, spawning a film that depicted the disparity between races along with the struggles of African American musicians of the time.¹¹ The song idealized an artistic environment in which African Americans and Whites can enjoy music together; a rarity at the time, given most clubs of the Harlem Renaissance were still segregated. Beyond the scope of music, Ellington and Miley wrote and performed this song as desired vision of race and social conditions during the era. However, the song finished with a somber

quote of Chopin's "Funeral March" symbolically suggesting the death of a possibility for Whites to accept African Americans as equals.¹² The efforts of Duke Ellington and Bubber Miley, initiated a great deal of positive racial agitation, as they musically created a future that may not be entirely dead, but certainly difficult to achieve.

Social responses to the music of the Harlem Renaissance varied from absolute adoration of the exciting new tones, to ardent denunciation of the frivolous and immoral new style. Namely, jazz, the dominant genre of the Harlem renaissance, underwent this sort of dichotomy of reception. Paul Whiteman, a Caucasian musician, known for his adaptation of Harlem music, which he considered 'Symphonic Jazz,' sought to refine the genre. While Whiteman generally did not express himself maliciously towards jazz or African American music, he negatively influenced not only the music itself, but also white American sentiment by stating he would "make a lady" out of jazz.¹³ Whiteman essentially tried to reshape or fix a genre that did not need to be changed, therefore granting himself a great deal of controversy. Moreover, this view was reinforced by middle to upper class whites of the time for they considered jazz as 'dirty' music, preferring the sweet tones and precise composition of European influenced style. This notion, naturally, carried on to envelope the people who listen to this new vivacious genre, typically young African Americans, further widening the gap of race relations. However, this style of music eventually became vastly popular, drawing the concertgoers of both races together to enjoy music that "white America could not look away" from.¹⁴

The successes of black musicians during the Harlem Renaissance reached their epitome at the Cotton Club, a venue for jazz and blues musicians during the 1920s and 1930s. Specifically, Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway enjoyed very successful tenures as

lead performers at the nightclub. The club catered to an all-white crowd, with a stereotypical jungle theme to suit the 'exotic' environment of African American jazz music. Granted, this did not provide for the social equality that was envisioned in "Black and Tan Fantasy," but it did speak volumes for the white reception of black music. The unique existence of the Cotton Club, in terms of African American social history, found its significance in the prosperity it provided for black musicians. Cab Calloway pushed the successes of all-African American bands by breaking a number of records in his path to sell over one million records, featuring his unique scat style.¹⁵ The club attracted a multitude of white people, namely "the cream of New York society,"¹⁶ which is important to keep in mind considering how the sentiment of the white populous changed from disgust to admiration for the music. The performers during this stage of history, also including Louis Armstrong and the Nicholas Brothers, created an avenue by which African American creative expression could step to the forefront of the music industry. Ultimately, the Cotton Club gave an opportunity for black musicians to establish themselves as the most talented performers of the era, granting themselves a coveted position in American society.

Creativity is not typically considered a monolithic force for social change when in the shadow of the overbearing themes of political movements, race riots, and protesting. However, the results of the Harlem Renaissance prove that artistic expression deserves consideration as a key factor for racial betterment. The effects of the movement continue today, with literature and poetry made during that time still being read and studied in a multitude of schools across the nation. Additionally, the musical styles of jazz and blues exist as renown and cherished mediums of expression in modern society. However, the

importance of the Harlem Renaissance is not in the monetary gain or glory of African American musicians or authors, rather it's in how their works bettered an oppressed black minority. The movement encouraged African Americans to express themselves freely and to be creatively bold, to not stand for discrimination and to be proactive in their fight for social equality.

¹ Claude McKay, "If We Must Die," in *Harlem Shadows: The Poems of Claude McKay* (New York:

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Drafts of Langston Hughes's poem "Ballad of Booker T.," 30 May-1 June 1941. (Langston Hughes Collection).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Rollins College. "Zora Neale Hurston and the Harlem Renaissance: Searching for Identity."

⁸ Patterson, Tiffany. "Hurston, Zora Neale (1891-1960)." *The Black Past: Remembered and Reclaimed*.

⁹ Hurston, Zora Neale. *Their Eyes Were Watching God: A Novel*. New York: Perennial Library, 1990. Print.

¹⁰ Hurston, Zora Neale. *Dust Tracks on a Road*. N.p.: J.B. Lippincott, 1942. Print.

¹¹ Pierpont, Claudia R. "Duke Ellington and Race in America." *Black, Brown, and Beige*. The New Yorker, 17 May 2010.

¹² Duke Ellington and Bubber Miley. *Black and Tan Fantasy*. Rec. 7 Apr. 1927. RCA Victor and Brunswick, 1927. Vinyl recording.

¹³ Louis Armstrong and Paul Whiteman: "Two Kings Of Jazz" by Joshua Berrett, Yale University Press, 2004

¹⁴ USHistory.org. "46e. The Harlem Renaissance." *The Harlem Renaissance [ushistory.org]*.

¹⁵ Suer, Kinsley. "Cab Calloway and The Cotton Club." *Portland Center Stage*. N.p., 3 May 2012.

¹⁶ Burns, Ken. "Cotton Club." *PBS*. PBS, 2001. Web. 21 Nov. 2013.