

Culture, Economies and Media: The Change of African American rights during the Harlem Renaissance

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ABSTRACT

The Great Migration, an influx of African American movement from the South to the North, signifies the birth of Harlem. This New York City district provided unique opportunities to all of its residents. The Harlem Renaissance has been known to have had positive effects by popularizing black culture and music and providing ample chance for interracial interaction. Conversely, African Americans were also dependent on gaining financial aid to support artistic endeavors. The following paper explores advantages and drawbacks to the Harlem Renaissance regarding its residents and the overall Civil Rights movement. Harlem District was successful in advancing African American culture and serving as an inspiration for the progression of additional rights.

Introduction

Since the birth of the United States of America, a system of oppression towards African Americans began. The Great Migration prompted the Harlem Renaissance, a period of cultural bloom between the 1920s and 1930s. Harlem's uniqueness stems from the variety of classes that immigrated to New York City. Some migrants were contract workers, looking for work in the North, others were professionals in their particular fields. Many of the African Americans had the same mutual understanding. This includes hardships of institutional racism, such as Jim Crow, and the need to find their own culture.¹ Although the Harlem Renaissance strengthened African Americans' rights, various cases reveal continual drawbacks to any progress. Yet from its inception to its decay, the renaissance altered people's perception, positively, of Black people and their culture.

Because Jim Crow-laws permitting segregation between White and Black people-were not abolished until the 1960s, many of those affected by such laws migrated to northern cities, known as the Great Migration For example, New York City, Chicago, Pittsburgh and Detroit.² Many African Americans found themselves moving into Harlem district, originally made for the wealthy white majority. Fast and over-expansion into the area created monetary issues with the developers. Furthermore, the vacancy exacerbated the lack of funds. Anxious to fill their establishments, landlords started renting the place to African Americans, typically refused for their race. While current residents attempted to keep out Black people, their plan failed due to the influx of migrating people. As such, the Harlem district became known as a 'Black' area of neighborhood. The district's nickname later transformed into a "Black Mecca"³

¹ "A New African American Identity: The Harlem Renaissance." National Museum of African American History and Culture, March 14, 2018. <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/new-african-american-identity-harlem-renaissance#:~:text=Most%20importantly%2C%20the%20Harlem%20Renaissance,of%20the%201950s%20and%201960s.>

² "Jim Crow Laws." Jim Crow Laws | Iowa Department of Human Rights. Accessed May 28, 2023. [https://humanrights.iowa.gov/saa/jim-crow-laws.](https://humanrights.iowa.gov/saa/jim-crow-laws)

³ Robertson, Stephen. "Putting Harlem on the Map." *Writing History in the Digital Age*, 2013, 186–97. [https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv65sx57.20.](https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv65sx57.20)

Interracial Interactions

Despite previous civil rights efforts, many African Americans still found the south to be a more racially prejudiced region than the north, thus began the Great Migration. According to Charles Farrington, nearly six million African Americans relocated from South to North.⁴ It is argued that this is one of the biggest and most significant resettlements in American History.⁵ One of the main settlement points was New York City. Unwilling to leave their communities, African Americans remained together. Most landlords were reluctant to rent land, consequently leading to the expansion into Harlem, a NYC district with desperate proprietors. Urban cities flooded with African Americans brewed opportunities for cultural shifts. Evident in the change of vernacular, the African American Language (AAL), has been modified in each region, as a result of acculturation. The interaction of AAL with an amalgam of other ethnicities slowly modified the culture through the language.⁶ Each zone developed a different dialect, separate from the south, reflecting cultural development in Harlem. The development of a specific vernacular for African Americans suggests the growth of individuality and a change in the continuous patterns of African American history in which they were forced to conform to main society.

Opportunities for Harlem's artists to create is partially due to patronage, which is defined as an advocate of a creator, through financial support.⁷ John Wesley Stewart III states that patronage is one of the leading causes of Harlem's success: "This is especially true during the Harlem Renaissance when black artists and writers were receiving support to an unprecedented degree thanks to the *en vogue* status of Harlem at the time."⁸ Support creators received was a result of increasing acceptance into the mainstream 'American' community. Rather than forsaking their culture, African Americans brought it with them through patronage. Additionally, benefactors of the Harlem Renaissance were crucial to the modernization of African American culture. Such change from patronage created a moving, diminutive economy allowing Harlem to prosper. Whilst African Americans sought financial assistance as well as literary prospects as a cause of prejudice, despite the negatives, without the relationship of patronage, Harlem would never have maintained continuous growth-if not for the circulating finance system.⁹ In comparison to other artists not all were able to find a benefactor, some forged their own path. In any case, this was progression for the African American community.

Modern interpretations of the Harlem Renaissance have greatly simplified all aspects of its artistic culture. According to George Hutchinson, this is mainly attributed to modern African American writers. For example, Chidi Ikonne and Langston Hughes. Such writers have failed in including the interracial contact that white and black people alike have to take part in, in modern evaluations.¹⁰ Because many authors succeeding the Harlem Renaissance left out negative and positive correspondence between Black and White American, it can be assumed that the Harlem Renaissance's culture scene has been greatly reduced. Positive interactions may have possibly influenced works of art, and negative interactions may have prompted the civil rights movement that followed the renaissance. Thus asserting the importance of the lack of lawful segregation in the district. It is critical to note that the district itself contained a

⁴ Farrington, Charles Ryan. "Language Variation and the Great Migration: Regionality and African American Language." PhD diss., University of Oregon Graduate School, 2019. <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/language-variation-great-migration-regionality/docview/2302690718/se-2>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Stewart III, John Wesley. "Benevolent economies: An exploration of literary patronage during the Harlem Renaissance." PhD diss., The University of Southern Mississippi, 2003. ProQuest Social Science Journals.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ McLaren, Joseph. "The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White, by George Hutchinson." *Research in African Literature* 31, no. 3 (March 15, 2022): 1-195. <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/harlem-renaissance-black-white-george-hutchinson/docview/207648504/se-2?accountid=201365>.

majority of African Americans due to the closely associated community; this does not imply a lack of interracial interactions. Therefore, when there was such interaction, it was significant in inspiring art,

Growth of Media

Much of the culture in Harlem revolved around writing. This is an accepted notion addressed in the book *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* by George Hutchinson—Harlem’s success is attributed to the popularization of publishing.¹¹ This is further agreed upon by Professor Joseph McLaren. “. . .the Harlem Renaissance occurred during the growth in corporate capital, the expansion of the publishing industry, and the rise in American cultural nationalism.”¹² Opinions and writings no longer stayed within the community. Thus, amplifying the interaction between African Americans in Harlem and the white population. This occurred because the extension of the literature industry in America, and its utilization by the minority in Harlem established circumstances that called for interracial communication. Increased exchange led to a more open and accepted culture and an increased quantity in the number of Black Americans asserting themselves as professionals in their respective fields. Multiple acknowledged writers, such as W.E.B Du Bois, were swayed by philosophers prior to their time.¹³ Families typically followed the mainstream media, or print culture, unlike the people in the Harlem districts who focused on reasserting their culture through literature and art using the same method of print. Many influential people of the Renaissance were influenced by early philosophers of the Enlightenment. Furthermore, the media pushed for the integration of Black writers in a society beyond Harlem.

James Van Der Zee is widely known as the scribe of Harlem. His extensive works of photography chronicles a dynamic, and vibrant culture. His photographs vary in location and capture multiple aspects of Harlem. The desire to capture life in Harlem speaks to the growing artistic culture. Additionally, he fought to present Harlem in a positive light to establish that there was more to the neighborhood than speakeasies and bars.; the presence of family and church and culture was also prevalent.¹⁴ For example, the Alpha Phi Alpha basketball team and fraternity was first established in Harlem. It was the first Black fraternity.¹⁵ Essentially, his works put on display the long-hidden African American culture. By recording the communal areas of Harlem-church, athletics, politics-Der Zee provided a window in the hub of what has become so pivotal in improving African American rights. Moreover, it allowed the spread of cultural bloom occurring in New York City to grow beyond the city.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Harlem Renaissance. Accessed February 15, 2023. <https://www.nga.gov/learn/teachers/lessons-activities/uncovering-america/harlem-renaissance.html>.

¹⁵ James Van der Zee’s photographs: A portrait of harlem. Accessed May 29, 2023.

<https://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/2021/james-van-der-zee-photographs-portrait-harlem.html>.



Figure 1: Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity¹⁶

Culture and Exposure

Paradoxically, during the notorious racial bigotry of the Jim Crow laws, many white people appreciated Harlem clubs, specifically the music. “The literature, music, and fashion they created defined culture and “cool” for blacks and white alike...”¹⁷ The enjoyment of all aspects of the Renaissance placed a foothold for African American rights. Previously drawn political cartoons were no longer relevant because the stereotypes used were considered “cool”. This reflects an atmosphere of acceptance towards a decades-long rejected culture. As reported by the Iowa Human Rights department, any traction Harlem gained was because of its “trendiness” which aided in popularizing jazz music and black artists.¹⁸ With the popularization of various arts, a movement for expunging racial inequality began, a major change in American life. Prior to the aforementioned events, the US did not provide adequate exposure, education and opportunities for any African Americans. The abrupt trend-growth- of African American creations, specifically creations from Harlem, was a break in the continual line of prejudice where all history and Black culture was kept out of the public eye.

One prominent way of spreading Harlem culture was through the famous clubs. According to Kelly Abdou-Richman, the clubs and performers were the primary ways that the district was popularized. “During this time, jazz greats like Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, and Louis Armstrong rose to prominence, thanks in part to performances at Harlem's Cotton Club.”¹⁹ The areas were typically segregated, crudely allowing white guests to enjoy black performers without other black guests. The Cotton Club and other segregated areas brought a population that did not want to interact with Black people, yet enjoy music they created.²⁰ Despite the hypocrisy on behalf of the white

¹⁶ James Van der Zee, *Alpha Phi Alpha Basketball Team*, 1926, Gelatin Silver Print, <https://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/2021/james-van-der-zee-photographs-portrait-harlem.html>.

¹⁷ “A New African American Identity”, 2018

¹⁸ “Harlem Renaissance: Iowa Department of Human Rights.” Harlem Renaissance | Iowa Department of Human Rights. Accessed February 22, 2023. <https://humanrights.iowa.gov/saa/harlem-renaissance>.

¹⁹ “Harlem Renaissance” Accessed February 15, 2023

²⁰ Ibid.

population, segregated clubs ensured the spread of Jazz music and therefore, the spread of Black rights. Enough customers guaranteed occupations for singers such as Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong. Therefore, it pushed for the integration of Black artists in a society beyond Harlem.

The Harlem Artists Guild and the NAACP

Neither culture, nor location truly create Harlem. The people who migrated into the district are what define the Renaissance of Black culture. Notable figures of the Harlem Renaissance include Langston Hughes, Duke Ellington, and James Van Der Zee, celebrated for writings or music, but other noteworthy talents involve sculpture and dancing.²¹ Many figures of the renaissance became known as founders of their respective crafts, a prominent shift in the acceptance of the African American culture. Some significant examples of Black changemakers are Augusta Savage and Charles Alston. Together, they founded the Harlem Artists Guild. "...the Harlem Artists Guild was an organization intended to advocate for the neighborhood's African American artists."²² The organization's founding signified two important steps in the progression of African American rights. The first was that African Americans were no longer dependent on the white population in receiving support. Like Savage, they could take action and be more independent. The second being that the younger African American generation was provided the encouragement that was absent for their predecessors. Essentially, Harlem's cultural explosion allowed the people to take control of their own lives and give younger groups support that they did not receive. The people of Harlem and their crafts pushed towards exploring expression through arts in times when prejudice snuffed any Black opinion.



Figure 2: A page of The Crisis²³

Many well-regarded organizations began in New York, a prime for the Great Migration. One of these organizations is the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, otherwise known as the NAACP. The same organization utilized its power to begin publishing The Crisis, printed media that reflected the hardships of African Americans.²⁴ The primary way to reach a crowd in the 1920s was through written media. For a long time in

²¹ Harlem Renaissance. Accessed February 15, 2023. <https://www.nga.gov/learn/teachers/lessons-activities/uncovering-america/harlem-renaissance.html>.

²² Richman-Abdou, Kelly. "How African American Art and Culture Blossomed during the Harlem Renaissance." New World Symphony, January 25, 2022. <https://www.nws.edu/news/how-african-american-art-and-culture-blossomed-during-the-harlem-renaissance/>.

²³ W.E.B. Du Boi, NAACP: The Crisis, 1910, <https://archive.org/details/crisis0506dubo/page/n13/mode/2up>

²⁴ Ibid.

history, the newspapers were censored of the Black experience. Editors were not impartial to what appeared to the public. Thus, the creation of *The Crisis* ensured that the African American voice would be heard. One notable entrepreneur was W.E.B. Du Bois. He campaigned for change through his works in *The Crisis*, a publishing by the NAACP. The impact of *The Crisis* is comparable to Hutchinson's opinion of the importance of the "publishing industry." The dissemination of neutral facts by a diverse writing body is likely one of the main reasons for the flourishing Renaissance.

Police Brutality and Abuse of Patronage

The first case of police brutality began in New York City, Harlem. The first ever race riot, according to historians, is the 1935 Harlem riot.²⁵ This began with false rumors that a black boy had been killed in a police station. The only truth was that he was arrested. After the riot, a committee to investigate the causes and crimes that transpired was created. The same committee suggested another multiracial committee be created to deal with police abuse.²⁶ It is crucial to note that the suggested committee did not come into fruition, but the idea was the first of its kind. This symbolized a development from the notorious segregation laws in the South. Coupled with the rise of media, the deaths of African Americans in a beloved community festered speculation about how pleasant and progressive Harlem truly was. The idea of a safe haven for everyone in Harlem is opposed by the 1935 riot. Some sources claim that underlying tension led to the riot and that it was not the single event of a crime leveled against a little boy. Harlem's admiration ended in confrontation.

Inequalities faced by African Americans required patronage for success in Harlem and its cultural flourishing, as seen in *Benevolent economies: An exploration of literary patronage during the Harlem Renaissance*. Patronage was occasionally harmful, yet Stewart III argues that one proven harmful relationship was mislabeled as patronage. "Mason's contract with Hurston legitimizes her behavior as a business deal in a market economy."²⁷ Charlotte Mason was a sponsor of Nora Zeale Hurston. Evidently, Mason was looking to maximize her investment through Hurston's works. Mason might not have been a patron, but she was a financial provider for Hurston. Thus, no matter what type of aid, labeled as patronage or not, and financial, or advocate, the need for a benefactor was in contrast to achieving equality. This is especially true during the 1920s, when African Americans struggled in achieving the same standards as White people due to social barriers, consequently causing the need for patronage. A vicious cycle repeated where Harlem residents looked to supporters, who took advantage of their creations due to surrounding stigma. It is true that without the financial circulation of patronage, Harlem might not have lasted, but creators were abused in their endeavors. Therefore, some acts of patronage must be assumed as a regressive act to the Civil Rights Movement, despite their service to other artists.

Conclusion

Harlem's beautiful legacy ends with controversial perceptions on whether or not it truly aided African Americans. Yet the beauty of Harlem did not end with the riot, it spans to modern times. Actions taken of all creators allowed the culture to flourish and live beyond its time. For example, attractions like the Apollo Theater remain popular.²⁸ Artists also uphold legacy worthy of their predecessors and utilize their platforms to spread unspoken history. The long-lasting outcomes of the Renaissance are critical to understanding African American history. Putting aside Harlem's

²⁵ "Law and the Struggle for Racial Justice: Selected Materials from the Riesenfeld Rare Books Center." [moses.law.umn.edu](http://moses.law.umn.edu/racial-justice/harlemriot010.html#:~:text=(New%20York%2C%201935),accused%20of%20stealing%20a%20penknife). Accessed February 26, 2023. [http://moses.law.umn.edu/racial-justice/harlemriot010.html#:~:text=\(New%20York%2C%201935\),accused%20of%20stealing%20a%20penknife](http://moses.law.umn.edu/racial-justice/harlemriot010.html#:~:text=(New%20York%2C%201935),accused%20of%20stealing%20a%20penknife).

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Stewart III, "Benevolent Economies"

²⁸ Abdou-Richman, "African-American Art and Culture"

importance in bringing back neglected culture, the remains serve as a reminder of how hard artists, singers, and performers fought for basic rights. Many people remember segregation only as a southern issue, but many in NYC, Harlem experienced it, within their own community.

As seen by the aforementioned events, the lifestyle of African Americans forever changed. There is no measure for whether or not this renaissance aiding in the progression of African American rights. This is especially true with new light shed on how the arts managed to flourish in the district. The patronage system, for example, was both negative and positive. While it assisted certain artists, it is evident that in some cases the benefactor took advantage of the receiver. In contrast, the concentration of African Americans spurred the beginning of the NAACP and by extension, *The Crisis*. Such growth in media placed the issues of racial bias at the forefront where they were hidden in mainstream, and more common, magazines. Despite the lack of measure of the progression of African American rights during the Renaissance, it can be acknowledged that the rediscovered culture of the Harlem community was the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement.

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