

Reflections on the Harlem Renaissance

According to historian Nathan Irvin Huggins, the Harlem Renaissance was a failure as both a cultural movement and even as a literary phenomenon. For him the truism "There is nothing new under the sun" was inspired by the Renaissance, which in his view produced nothing new, inspiring or enduring.

On a superficial level and in the short run, this could be seen as the case. The movement certainly did not gain all or even many of the benefits of citizenship it sought for African Americans either in the North or in the South. The elites and leadership of the Harlem Renaissance, while widely respected both inside and outside the movement, were not politically potent. They were infrequently consulted and almost never heeded in their recommendations or demands.

Individually and collectively, the artists of the Renaissance clearly did not fare well after its heyday, when the white avant garde focused its limited attention span -- and its money -- elsewhere. The Works Projects Administration (WPA) became the new patron of several Renaissance artists, including Claude McKay, Arna Bontemps and Aaron Douglas.

Two writers of the Renaissance period, Wallace Thurman and Rudolph Fisher, were cut down in the prime of life, each in 1934. James Weldon Johnson was killed in an automobile accident in 1938. Other Renaissance authors such as Nella Larsen and Jean Toomer simply fell into obscurity. Zora Neale Hurston, a full decade older than she claimed (in *Dust Tracks on a Road* she listed her birthdate as 1901 while official records showed the true date to be 1891), peaked in the early 1940's. Lingering long after her prime, she was finally reduced to working as a maid and died in poverty in her native Florida. Her grave site was unmarked until author Alice Walker, posing as Hurston's niece, purchased a headstone at her own expense.

A clear sign of the decline of the Renaissance was the dissipation away from Harlem of its previously concentrated presence of writers. Langston Hughes, after bitter disputes with Hurston and his white patron, left Harlem altogether, seldom to return. Jessie Fauset, author of the provocative novel *There is Confusion*, reluctantly moved with her husband to New Jersey in 1936.

The withdrawal of white interest and the subsequent decline of the Renaissance largely caught those within it by surprise. Even Alain Locke displayed an amazing naiveté when, at the movement's peak, he breathlessly dubbed it "Our Little Renaissance," and declared that the saplings of artists still in their twenties would surely yield productive creative fruits for decades to come. Yet the last of the *Opportunity* award dinners was held in 1934, with scarcely 100 entries, less than a tenth the number for the first year of awards.

Hair straightening heiress A'Lelia Walker died in 1931, and the dream of establishing a Harlem literary salon had died with her. Ultimately only Langston Hughes would fulfill Locke's promise, although Countée Cullen enjoyed some continued, yet greatly diminished popularity after 1930.

Yet the Harlem Renaissance did not vanish without a trace. Although time proved him wrong on the promise of several of the Renaissance artists, Locke showed the perceptive insight that art could not appear amongst a people without a measure of cultural maturity. This maturity, rather than mere force of will, would channel itself into unique expression, whatever the media or genre.

According to Locke, "in art, it is color, not the color-line that counts; and not so much the hue of the author as the complexion of the idiom." Writers such as Richard Wright, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker have been the direct beneficiaries of the battles that earlier generations of African American writers had waged.