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HARLEM RENAISSANCE (1919–1929). In the first decades of the twentieth century, a number of important national and international political events and social conditions helped bring about the birth of the New Negro movement, with its marked determination that the old narrative in which black people in the United States had been situated must be challenged in new ways. There also arose a New

Negro movement in arts and letters, which has been regularly referred to as the Harlem Renaissance—especially after John Hope Franklin, in his seminal history *From Slavery to Freedom*, used the term in 1947 to describe the arts and literary activities of the New Negroes. Harlem, with its intense cultural and artistic production, certainly operated as the representative cultural space of the New Negro. However, the aptness of the term “Harlem Renaissance” has been contested, notably in 1955 by Sterling A. Brown, who was in fact a member of this New Negro literary movement.

The peak activity of the movement occurred in the 1920s, when many of the significant writers of the era received their first recognition or publication: Sterling Brown, “When de Saints Go Ma’ching Home” (1927); Jean Toomer, *Cane* (1923); Dorothy West, “The Typewriter” (1926); Countee Cullen, *Color* (1925); Nella Larsen, *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929); Georgia Douglas Johnson, *The Heart of a Woman* (1918) and *Bronze* (1922). Some New Negro/Harlem Renaissance writers used modernist as well as traditional literary forms to showcase new content, while others employed music, colloquial language, and folk traditions in sophisticated ways, demonstrating a literary **modernism** situated in a New Negro political, social, and aesthetic consciousness. In so doing, they transformed the American and African American literary terrain.

Langston Hughes, a key New Negro era writer, discusses the period as a time “when the Negro was in vogue” because of the wealthy white patrons supporting black writers as well as the large numbers of white customers who frequented clubs and cabarets in Harlem. Hughes, whose interest in ordinary black people was expanded in the 1930s as he became involved in leftist politics, also observed that among the ordinary people in Harlem, the Harlem Renaissance as a literary and arts movement did not exist.

For many, the literature of the New Negro is situated at the turning point into the 1920s with **Max Eastman**’s publication of **Claude McKay**’s poem “If We Must Die” in the July 1919 issue of *Liberator* magazine. Although McKay, who was active in communist and socialist politics during the early part of the twentieth century, later disavowed any connection between this poem and the political events associated with the New Negro in 1919, his poem is consistent with the attitudes of the burgeoning New Negro movement, as black people were beginning to revolt actively against inequitable treatment. This poem and the sentiments that McKay presents in it represent an aspect of the New Negro attitude of resistance, which rejected the old posture of servility and submission.

At the other end of the New Negro literary spectrum is uplift literature, designed to replace negative images of black people with positive representations of black life for white audiences and positive models of black life for their New Negro audiences. Among the prominent advocates of uplift literature was Alain Locke, editor of *The New Negro*, an anthology of writings by and about black people. Locke’s anthology, published in 1925, repeats the title from a short-lived (August–October 1919) monthly magazine edited by the radical founder of the New Negro manhood movement, Hubert Henry Harrison. The literary pieces in Locke’s book raised the profile of the aspiring New Negro artists and writers, while a number of the essays, includ-

ing those by Locke and others, argued for a New Negro artistic and literary culture based on African and African American folk culture.

W.E.B. Du Bois also was, in the 1920s, a proponent of uplift, although in the 1930s he, as did Hughes, aligned himself even more strongly with left-wing politics. Du Bois and the New Negro novelist and editor Jessie Fauset were the primary editorial team at the *Crisis*, the official publication of the NAACP, which was begun by Du Bois in 1910. In 1920, James Weldon Johnson, author of *God's Trombones* (1927), became the general secretary of the NAACP and contributed his literary knowledge to its official publishing organ.

The editors of the *Crisis* and *Opportunity*—the official publication vehicle of the Urban League, edited and founded in 1923 by Charles Spurgeon Johnson with Eric Walrond as his associate—sponsored literary contests during the years 1924–1934. The aforementioned publications, along with Marcus Garvey's *Negro World* (1918–1933) and A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen's *The Messenger* (1917–1928)—which its labor- and left-influenced founders early on promoted as both the “Only Radical Negro Magazine” and the “Journal of Scientific Radicalism”—were the principal publishing outlets for the New Negro writers, although many of the writers were published in *Liberator*, *New Masses*, *The Nation*, *American Mercury*, *Atlantic Monthly*, and other periodicals, as well as in various local newspapers—primarily those operated or owned by African Americans.

In 1926, responding to the impetus toward uplift among the prominent New Negroes, Wallace Thurman, Zora Neale Hurston, Hughes, and others among the younger participants of the era established their own literary magazine, *Fire!!* These writers sought a level of literary freedom that was not afforded them within the confines of uplift. This literary magazine lasted only one issue, but its contents included a story by Hurston on domestic abuse and a story by Bruce Nugent that presents homoerotic themes. These writers sought to present black people as each individual writer saw them rather than as others wished black people to be or as they wished the dominant society to view black people.

The literary activities of the New Negro era were curtailed by the crash of the stock market in 1929 and by the Depression of the 1930s, yet the attitudes and many of the varied aesthetic ideals of the New Negro literary movement continued to influence African American literature throughout the century.

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