

A stylized black and white illustration of the Harlem Renaissance scene. It features silhouettes of the Statue of Liberty, a factory, a tree, and a woman in profile. The woman is lying down, holding a book, with a large profile of a man's face in the background. The background is white, and the foreground is black.

UPDATED EDITION

# HARLEM RENAISSANCE

NATHAN IRVIN  
HUGGINS

FOREWORD BY ARNOLD RAMPERSAD

## **Harlem Renaissance**

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# Harlem Renaissance

UPDATED EDITION

NATHAN IRVIN HUGGINS

With a new foreword by Arnold Rampersad

OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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**For Sue Bailey Thurman**

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# Acknowledgments

I was helped in this book, in one way or another, by many people. I cannot thank them all on these pages, but I shall list a few with the briefest explanation of their assistance to me.

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## Foreword to Updated Edition by Arnold Rampersad

The appearance of a new edition of Nathan I. Huggins's *Harlem Renaissance* is a welcome event. When it was first published by Oxford University Press in 1971, the impact of this book was felt immediately. Never had something quite like it—a full-bodied, eloquent, cross-disciplinary evaluation of a discrete era in African-American cultural history—been attempted and brought so successfully to fruition by an American scholar. As a piece of cultural archaeology, it unearthed a place that had previously been observed in shards and fragments. It set new standards not simply for the study of its immediate subject but also for African-American cultural history in general. Reinforcing its impact was the unusual attractiveness of its subject, and the rare challenges it had presented over the years to those who would understand it.

More than seventy years after the outermost plausible mark—1935—for the ending of the Harlem Renaissance, that special era in American and African-American history continues to fascinate us, even as some basic questions about it remain a puzzle. Unexhausted and maybe even inexhaustible,

its peculiar charm, or charisma, persists. Like the kindred if richer, more glittering, and overwhelmingly whiter social world in and around New York City that F. Scott Fitzgerald conjures up in *The Great Gatsby*, the Harlem Renaissance floats in our imagination in an aura of glamour and mystery, on the one hand, and, on the other—as is also true of the world of *The Great Gatsby*—corruption and tragedy. One reason for this persistence, at least for black Americans, is the fact that the era was probably the first in their long, hard history that could be plausibly associated with the term “glamour.” Its uniqueness in this sense has contributed to the air of mystery that surrounds it. Huggins’s *Harlem Renaissance* aimed to penetrate that air of mystery, and did so successfully even if some questions remain unanswered and unanswerable.

What happened to spark in New York City such an unprecedented outpouring among black Americans of literature, music, painting, and sculpture, along with a corresponding upsurge in political consciousness? When, more or less, did the movement begin? When, more or less, did it end? How did its main figures respond as individuals to its challenges and opportunities? Which primary factors sustained its successes, and which factors led to its demise? What did all of that glamour ultimately mean for black America? Were there implications for America as a whole? How did its success and failures affect the historic desire of blacks to lift themselves out of slavery and Jim Crow and into a permanent position of dignity, freedom, affluence, and creativity? And, looking back, do we account the era a success on the whole, or mainly an illusion of social progress that, upon closer inspection, underscores the powerlessness of blacks in white America?

For a long time the puzzles and mysteries of the Harlem Renaissance went uninvestigated in any systematic way by blacks or whites. The traditional neglect of black America as a subject had much to do with this positioning of the era on the periphery of our sense of history. Equally important was

the fact that academic scholarship in what we now call American Studies was barely developing in the decades after the movement ended. Although seldom seen as such, *Harlem Renaissance* as a volume is a product of the American Studies movement. I see American Studies as an interdisciplinary force willing and able to look at the phenomenon of race and culture in America in vital ways unavailable to distinct fields such as History and English, although both English and History were and are at the heart of American Studies. This neglect was true of black as well as white scholars and intellectuals. Many educated blacks impatient with the progress of the race—impatient with the race itself—dismissed the era. In 1937, two years after the Harlem Riot of 1935, young Richard Wright sneered at virtually all of the literature written by blacks before his time, and he did not exempt the Harlem Renaissance in general from his sneering. “Generally speaking,” he wrote in his essay “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” published in 1937 in the only issue of *New Challenge* magazine, “Negro writing in the past has been confined to humble novels, poems, and plays, prim and decorous ambassadors who went a-begging to white America in the knee-pants of servility.”

Although Wright specifically exempted Langston Hughes in making this sweeping charge, Hughes, who had been one of its brightest stars, took a jaded view of the era when he published an autobiography, *The Big Sea*, in 1940. “I had a swell time while it lasted,” he wrote. “But I thought it wouldn’t last long. . . . For how could a large and enthusiastic number of people be crazy about Harlem forever? But some Harlemites thought the millennium had come. They thought the race problem had at last been solved.” Deeply disillusioned with his major patron, an elderly, volatile, and compelling white woman who sought to impose her views of ideal black art on him, Hughes would look back on those years with some bitterness. “The ordinary Negroes hadn’t heard of the Negro Renaissance,” he wrote. “And if they had, it hadn’t raised their wages any.”

The “renaissance,” he implied, had been mainly a cultural bubble that burst even as racism, poverty, and crime destroyed the dream—or “deferred” the dream, as he put it in his well known poem entitled “Harlem [2]”—of economic and cultural emancipation that had brought most blacks north to New York starting early in the twentieth century.

Fortunately, this dismissal was only one side of Hughes’s sense of the Harlem Renaissance. *The Big Sea* gave him a chance, which he seized, to compose the most detailed account of the Harlem Renaissance left behind by one of its stars. In the process, and despite its sometimes cynical tone and what Nathan Huggins has called his compulsion toward simplicity, the long section of the book devoted to the Renaissance became the cornerstone of future scholarship and analysis. But from the earliest years of the movement (around 1919), and certainly by 1921, when Hughes reached New York, astute black leaders such as W.E.B. Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson knew that they were involved in something special, that they were helping to create and sustain a project not unlike what, say, the Irish had created with the work of writers such as Yeats and Synge. This awareness, as well as the impulse to analyze it, dominates the book that emerged as the Bible of the Harlem Renaissance, *The New Negro* (1925). Edited by the Howard University professor Alain Locke, the volume contained essays, stories, poems, drama, art, and other material. The racial “boosterism” that runs through *The New Negro* dilutes but in no way dissolves its analytical element. Unsure of what they were about, the Renaissance leaders were determined to find answers.

A sense of the authentic texture, the pleasures as well as the dangers of the movement, also pervades novels such as Carl Van Vechten’s *Nigger Heaven* (1926) and Wallace Thurman’s *Infants of the Spring* (1932). These novels are in large part *romans à clef* in which the relationships among the characters amount to a critique, often trenchant, of the age.

James Weldon Johnson's monograph *Black Manhattan* (1930) and his autobiography, *Along This Way* (1933), as well as books by Claude McKay, including his novel *Home to Harlem* (1928), gave and continue to give perceptive readers a sense of important aspects of the subject of black life in Harlem, including its contradictions, denials, neuroses, and legitimate aspirations. All of these authors and most of these works are discussed extensively, and brilliantly, in Huggins's *Harlem Renaissance*. Nevertheless, Huggins's study is far more than a series of explications of literary texts.

Academic works by university professors, such as Nick Aaron Ford's *The Contemporary Negro Novel* (1936) and J. Saunders Redding's *To Make a Poet Black* (1939), ventured in varying degrees to survey and discuss black writers and black artistic culture of the recent past. But scholars of the 1930s and 1940s surely were too close to the heyday of the movement to see its features clearly, to capture its artistic contrasts and density. Many critics were unable to go far beyond its novels and poems, its literature, which contributed to a one-sided, often misleading view of what was by definition a multifaceted phenomenon. (In some respects, this view persists, because the Harlem Renaissance is taught as a subject mainly by professors of English and not by professors of History.)

Undoubtedly talented and eager to serve black culture, these scholar-critics nevertheless were ill equipped, for the most part, to see the phenomenon of the black Renaissance as offering valuable insights into the nation as a whole, insights applicable to our understanding of eras well before the 1920s and thus penetrating some of the mysteries of white as well as black culture. Often uneasy about the role of whites in the movement, they usually could not see the extent to which the Harlem Renaissance illuminated the subject of the interdependency of black and white American culture, which was an idea crucial to Huggins as a social observer and crucial to his book. The ability to link the effusions of poets and novelists

not only to artists working in other genres and media but also to economic, historical, and cultural forces, including folkways and folklore, remained beyond the reach of most scholars-critics—but not beyond the reach of Huggins, who had enjoyed an almost ideal scholarly preparation for this task.

By the early 1950s, amidst the disturbing but vibrant political and cultural turmoil that followed World War II, the need became urgent for the development of a broader intellectual vision and a more flexible set of investigative methods that would be the basis of the fundamentally new field of American Studies. The blending of fields of study such as history, literature, music, psychology, and folklore, as well the development of a more inspired brand of cultural theory (that is, before the invasion of the ideas of Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, and other French thinkers transformed our understanding of such theory), reached its first major stage. The Cold War and the reductive ideological wars of truth that pitted capitalism (freedom and America) against communism (oppression and the Soviet Union), in what was in effect a clash of propaganda machines, served to revalue upward the Negro subject just as it energized as never before the American Studies movement. That subject had been seen as *déclassé* by almost all white English professors and almost as many of their black counterparts. Increasingly, however, the “Negro” impinged more on the American consciousness, and periods such as the Harlem Renaissance began to acquire a new importance.

Eras, areas, and personalities that had seemed dull or even beneath notice acquired a new allure as the civil rights struggle unfolded. The Black Power movement, which caught fire in 1965, took the study of the black past to heights of urgency undreamed of (except perhaps by visionary black historians such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Carter G. Woodson in the past). But changes still needed to be made within the academy before the true features of an era such as the Harlem Renaissance could be seen with reasonable clarity. For example, by

1970 no biography of a black writer written by a scholar of literature, black or white, existed. Only later in the decade would the first genuinely “literary” biography of a black writer, Zora Neale Hurston, by Robert Hemenway, be published. Merely a handful of well-researched biographies of blacks of any sort existed, and none of these books could plausibly be called distinguished. Although jazz and the blues had produced able commentators and critics, few aficionados could link these forms to black history or to other significant cultural forms.

The one exception in this tale of scholarly inadequacy in facing the black American subject was the work of those well-placed historians of the United States, including John Hope Franklin, Stanley Elkins, Kenneth Stampp, and Eugene Genovese, who had made slavery and the South one of the premier topics in American historiography. Rival theories argued about the impact of slavery on black culture—whether the slave (the African brought to America) had been a blank slate, his brain and spirit erased by his traumatic experience, or whether aspects of African culture had survived to aid black cultural life during slavery. This controversy about slavery ironically raised the prestige and currency of the black historical subject and stimulated scholarship in other areas of African-American history. Indeed, this was the way in which the Harlem Renaissance found at last its first major interpreter, Nathan Huggins.

Huggins credits one of the key players in the controversy, Kenneth Stampp, the author of the acclaimed study of slavery *The Peculiar Institution* (1956), as having “first inspired me to do work in what is now called Afro-American history” (p. ix). But more was needed as a preparation for Huggins’s *Harlem Renaissance*. At least as influential on the young Huggins was Henry F. May, the author of *The End of American Innocence*, about American culture early in the twentieth century. According to Huggins in *Harlem Renaissance*, May “taught me a lot about the 1920s and American intellectual

history" (p. ix). The combined influences of Stamp and May (the latter is quoted at least four times in *Harlem Renaissance*, but his ideas are present in several other places) permitted the breakthrough Huggins needed. Huggins also cites the help of two other major American scholar-teachers. One is Oscar Handlin, who "opened my mind to social and cultural history" (Ibid.). Like Stamp a major figure in American historiography, Handlin helped to shape the profession's understanding of American immigration, ethnic history, and social history in general. The fourth major influence is that of Howard Mumford Jones, whose splendid command of history, literature, and cultural study resulted in *O Strange New World*, about the intellectual life of early America, which won a Pulitzer Prize in 1964, seven years before *Harlem Renaissance* appeared. Jones had been "a friend to me in many ways," Huggins wrote in tribute, "and he encouraged me to write this book when it was only a germ of an idea" (Ibid.).

The point is that in a time-honored way, but one already being hotly challenged by many radicalized students and scholars in leading universities, young Huggins listened respectfully to these and other professors, absorbed their lessons and ideas about scholarship, culture, and life, and then moved on to write his own innovative study. The challenge posed by radical racial politics, quietly resisted by Huggins, should not be underestimated. In 1967, as Huggins was working on this book, another black scholar, not as privileged in his education, and not as receptive to traditional norms of scholarship, published a work that in its weaknesses as well as its strengths indicates the extent to which the political ferment around Black Power in the mid-1960s could both stimulate and weaken black cultural analysis. The author was the autodidact Harold Cruise, whose *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (1967) was also the first attempt to effect a reevaluation of the Harlem Renaissance (although its main interests are elsewhere). In presenting the era or movement as a positive event in African-American his-

tory, Cruise also suggested the extent to which understanding the Renaissance requires synthesizing skills and insights, as well as infusions of sympathy and imagination. Unfortunately, the polemical aspect of the book tends, for some if not most readers, to overwhelm its major insights.

Unlike Cruise, Huggins was interested not in polemics but in provocative, ground-breaking cultural history. As a black scholar working in a time of political and racial turmoil, he wanted to write about the black past but also do so in a way that adhered to the highest professional standards. In a way he was fortunate in his timing. Born in 1927, he was twenty-seven years old when *Brown v. Board of Education* effectively began the end of segregation (although laws had not barred him from integrated schools). He was thirty-seven when Malcolm X died, about forty when Dr. King was assassinated, and a mature forty-four years old when his book appeared. Educated at the University of California, Berkeley, where he earned his B.A., and at Harvard, where he earned his Ph.D., Huggins was at home as a student of history and within the university even though his upbringing was anything but privileged. Orphaned at fourteen, a high-school dropout and day laborer until he became a member of the U.S. military, Huggins finished high school while in the military and then attended Berkeley on the G.I. Bill. Outspoken as an undergraduate, he did not allow political controversy to leave him bitter or disaffected. Instead, he became intellectually confident and even tough. At Berkeley he studied under Stamp and May; at Harvard, he was further trained, formally and informally, by Handlin and Jones.

The fact that these scholars covered American intellectual territory from colonial and revolutionary times to nineteenth-century slavery and immigration in the twentieth century helps to explain perhaps the key point about *Harlem Renaissance* as Huggins planned it. While he probed in his book an important "black" topic in what was for many people an age of

at least moderate racial xenophobia, and obviously felt a measure of race pride in doing so, the main objective for him was to understand better America as a whole. He would not be contained and confined by race. Even as he looked at a small piece of American history—the behavior of some blacks in one place over slightly more than one decade—Huggins tried to see America as a unitary whole. He did so, it seems, out of a high sense of scholarly, moral, and perhaps even spiritual purpose. (It is telling that he dedicated the book to Sue Bailey Thurman, the remarkable wife of the Reverend Howard Thurman, who was himself renowned as a religious thinker and an admirer of Gandhi. The Thurmans had played an important role in Huggins's maturation.) Huggins believed in America, although he also knew America's flaws. Something more compelling than a desire for professional success pushed him. Perhaps it was a desire to show the unity in American life, and to show the variety and possibility in life itself.

In *Harlem Renaissance*, then, his ultimate concern is to further our understanding of the American nation, from the experience of the first settlers confronting the wilderness and the native peoples down to the present time. Huggins was interested not in celebrating blacks or celebrating (or castigating) whites but in identifying his nation's and his people's ideals, deceptions, obsessions, and capacities for good and evil. As he wrote about his intent in writing *Harlem Renaissance*, Huggins "wanted Harlem in the 1920s not to be the focus of this book, but rather a lens through which one might see a new view: white men and black men unknowingly dependent in their work to shape American character and culture" (p. 12). But he had no jingoistic idea of America as the shining city on the hill. "Whenever Americans do come of age," he wrote conditionally, mordantly, "they will have gained true insight into themselves by the claiming of that dependence" (Ibid.).

The thirty-five years and more since its appearance in 1971 from Oxford University Press have been kind to Huggins's

study of Harlem life in the 1920s and early 1930s. Many volumes on the subject, all clearly indebted to *Harlem Renaissance* despite their own special focus and accomplishment, have come out in the long wake of the book. Perhaps the most accomplished volume on the subject since *Harlem Renaissance* has been David Levering Lewis's vigorously researched, intelligent, and high-spirited *When Harlem Was In Vogue* (1981). Huggins was a pioneer, but one should not infer from that fact that there is something rudimentary or elementary about this volume. The truth is different. His triumph with *Harlem Renaissance* virtually invented a sub-field in American and African-American intellectual history. This book was the foundation on which a succession of scholars, writers, and students, including Lewis, Bruce Kellner, Jervis Anderson, George Hutchinson, Steve Watson, Amritjit Singh, and Cheryl Wall, constructed the edifice of Harlem Renaissance studies. It encouraged or influenced biographies such as those of Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes, as well as the still-expanding list of titles that mark the transformation of our understanding of the age since 1971.

Why did Huggins succeed so decisively? No simple answer can be given to this question. The necessarily complex answer would take in his individual personality and native intellectual ability, his formal and informal training, the age or ages in which he lived, and whatever accidents added to these factors in ways we can recognize. He researched and wrote this volume precisely at a time when black America—and America as a whole—was going through a set of changes of a type and degree of seriousness not seen since the very Harlem Renaissance he was studying. The two movements or eras shared some uncannily similar elements, a similarity from which Huggins benefited. Both eras were marked by the bold assertion, after relatively placid, even timid years, of race pride and a desire for power long denied. Both eras produced unusually large bodies of creative work, often exuberant in tone

but also moody and pessimistic. Both were rocked by debates about the place of blacks in a world dominated by whites, and the place of art in times of radical social change. Both eras produced charismatic black leaders. Men from the 1920s such as the outspoken Marcus Garvey and his Back-to-Africa movement, or Langston Hughes and his outspoken essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926), which called for younger black artists to assert their independence and their race pride, had their counterparts in the 1960s in individuals such as Malcolm X (who died six years before the book appeared), Stokely Carmichael (who, like Garvey, was a West Indian), and the poet and dramatist LeRoi Jones, later Amiri Baraka. Both eras also produced writers who stressed religion and spiritual peace—Arna Bontemps in the 1920s, Robert Hayden in the later era. In both eras, women asserted themselves more boldly than ever before. In Huggins's work, the volatile, complicated present helped to illuminate the past. Shrewdly seen by him, the successes and failures of his time helped him to read with greater accuracy the period he was studying.

In *Harlem Renaissance*, Huggins avoids snideness, snobishness, defensiveness, or vituperation. Almost every sentence in this beautifully written book indicates that he was secure in his identity as a black man and a scholar, although for some loud critics of his time those terms were typically a contradiction. He profited from the very excesses that he refused to emulate, because those excesses gave him a glimpse at a sometimes reckless way of black political and cultural being that first flared up after World War I. His age also gave him a telling glimpse at the fantastical and perhaps toxic side of extreme cultural nationalism and extreme black pride. His scholarly poise, repeatedly tested and hard-earned in the volatile 1960s, is remarkable in this book. He had the courage and the calm conviction needed to adhere to principles that resisted cynicism and chaos. He maintained standards of schol-

arly and critical thoroughness, dedication, and elegance that neither the Black Power movement nor any other tugging distraction of the age could impede for long.

A historian by training, Huggins crossed over into the study of literature with remarkable ease. Judging by his words here, he possessed the ability not only to feel the power of poems, stories, and other literature but also to criticize them. Unlike so many historians who venture to write about poets and novelists (especially in biographies) and fail to do justice to their subjects, he seemed comfortable in these fields and, to a lesser extent perhaps, in painting, sculpture, drama, and music. He was obviously a man of sophisticated taste and feeling, although there is nothing precious about his book. From the many literary allusions in *Harlem Renaissance* we see that he knew more than a little about British as well as American literature. He was not a show-off about such knowledge, but neither was he defensive about his respect for writers as far removed from the Harlem subject as was Henry James. Huggins more readily understood the Harlem writers and intellectuals because he was familiar with the texts that had made them writers.

Astutely he could see the difference between a respect for tradition and a weakness for imitation. Shrewdly ambivalent about some of Langston Hughes's esthetic decisions, he did not fall, in turn, for the supine infatuation that sometimes marked, for example, Countee Cullen's relationship to Keats. Huggins's analyses of poems by writers as different as Cullen, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, and Sterling Brown are usually on the mark. When he discusses Cullen's mode of being as a writer, and comments on the petering out of Cullen's career, he makes judgments that are amazingly deft and subtle. Perhaps it is no great compliment to say so, but Huggins probably would have made a first-rate literary scholar. However, had he studied English instead of History, Huggins's teachers most likely would have steered him away from a

subject like the Harlem Renaissance. Even in the 1950s blacks simply did not exist as far as most English professors and their courses and curricula were concerned, except perhaps in the work of Herman Melville, Mark Twain, and William Faulkner.

*Harlem Renaissance* also profits from the fact that while Huggins was conducting his research and writing his text, several of the players in the drama of the Harlem Renaissance were still very much alive. In Boston one day in 1967, Huggins was able to listen to Langston Hughes read his poems in public in a celebrated setting. Huggins's tribute to Hughes is, in turn, a tribute to Huggins's ability as a writer and also evidence of the refinement of his sensibility. "It was a cool afternoon," he writes about that day, "but there was a golden sun that came through the windows of the Charles Street Meeting House. And Hughes's ingenuousness warmed everybody as if he were a radiant sun. . . . In the afterglow of that day—far into the night—he chainsmoked cigarettes and talked to me about the 1920s and all the people he thought wonderful (which was just about everybody)" (p. x). Not ten days later, Hughes was dead. "I shall always regret," Huggins concluded, "that my mind and skills will not evoke in these pages the unrestricted gift of self that Hughes's April day was in Boston. But then, so too, all of his artistic life was such a free gift." (Ibid.)

Arna Bontemps, Hughes's best friend and constant correspondent and collaborator, was alive and well when *Harlem Renaissance* appeared, as were other figures from the Renaissance. These included Dorothy West and her cousin, Helene Johnson; the painter Aaron Douglass; the sculptor Richmond Barthé; the folklorist Arthur Huff Fauset; and the iconoclastic writer, artist, and gay pioneer Richard Bruce Nugent. Many of the top musicians of the 1920s were still performing, including the magisterial Duke Ellington and the greatest of them all, Louis Armstrong. Regina Andrews, perhaps the best-

known black Harlem librarian—she was much more than a librarian in her friendships with writers—was also alive and willing to talk. So was Louise Thompson Patterson, the stenographer who had served Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston during the infamous *Mule Bone* episode that led to the rupture of their friendship, and later a leading Harlem communist. A. Philip Randolph, whose socialist magazine *The Messenger* (co-edited with Chandler Owen) had been influential earlier in the century, was a national figure as the preeminent black trade unionist. The novelist and essayist George Schuyler, whose debunking of the Harlem Renaissance had infuriated most of its admirers in its day, was still enraging readers with his newspaper columns.

In addition, important physical structures from the 1930s had not all given way to the commissioned devastations of “urban renewal.” The YMCA on 135th Street was still very much the way it was when Langston Hughes arrived there in 1921, and the Schomburg Collection branch of the New York Public Library down the street from the Y still occupied its comfy, townhouse-like setting. The nightclub Small’s Paradise, or some facsimile thereof, was still operating, as was the Apollo Theater on 125th Street. Many parts of Harlem had declined into crime-ridden slums, as recorded by Gilbert Osofsky in his study *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto* (the second edition was published, ironically, the same year that *Harlem Renaissance* appeared); but elegant Edgecombe Avenue, Strivers’ Row, the Dunbar apartments, Abyssinian Baptist Church, and many other edifices and other sites familiar to the Renaissance figures were still vital. Many of the faded buildings could still shimmer, if only for observers as imaginative as Huggins, in that immemorial light that revealed secrets of the past.

In writing about the Renaissance, and in contrast to the tenor of his own time, Huggins crossed the color line fairly easily in reconstructing the age. He understood the dilemmas, successes, and failures of Eugene O’Neill and Willis Richardson, Carl Van

Vechten and Claude McKay, Aaron Douglas and the Bavarian artist Winold Reiss, whose color portraits of leading blacks graced Locke's *The New Negro*. Among the lesser strengths of this book—and one can lodge this complaint about every book in existence about the Harlem Renaissance—is its treatment of music, although what Huggins writes about blues and jazz is certainly more than adequate as a contribution to the mainstream of his arguments. This was the age of James Reese Europe, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Fletcher Henderson, and Clara, Bessie, and Mamie Smith. Many of Harlem's upstanding citizens did not see jazz and the blues as valuable expressions of their culture, and some saw the forms as detrimental to black progress. Countee Cullen, for example, refused to find in blues and jazz any poetic inspiration; Hughes took the opposite approach. Huggins arbitrates among these positions, the better to understand how definitions of "culture" in the black 1920s both energized and weakened Harlem.

Operating before the heyday of the revival of American feminism, Huggins is nevertheless respectful of the achievement of women in his text (although, in the fashion of the day, he wrote in his own Introduction to *Harlem Renaissance* about "white men and black men" working to shape American character and culture). He points to and includes figures such as Louise Thompson Patterson and Regina Andrews, who might easily have been left out altogether because they were neither artists nor spokespersons for the movement. Recognizing the importance of Nella Larsen, he writes with insight about her invaluable novels, *Quicksand* and *Passing*. He has less to say about Jessie Fauset, the literary editor of the *Crisis* and the author of four published novels, and less still about Zora Neale Hurston (who, after all, wrote her best work after the Renaissance was over); but he aimed for the representative, not for the comprehensive. About Harlem's gay life, which would become a major topic within Harlem Renaissance studies, he is silent. Later, the topic of the sexuality of Langston

Hughes, for example, would become something of a football, but Huggins stays on the sidelines of that game. Nowhere is his avoidance of the gay topic more elegantly expressed than when he writes of Countee Cullen but only hints at the idea that homosexuality and an illicit relationship with his adoptive father might have been at the root of Cullen's conflicted ideas about religion, art, sex, and his own identity. He writes: "Actually, even his struggle with faith was emblematic of a far deeper and more traumatic rebellion which his training in the genteel convention ill-equipped him to handle. Both as a person and a poet, Cullen tried to free himself of an unusually close relationship with his adoptive father, a minister" (p. 165). Not least of all because Cullen's widow was still alive, but also because of the more restrained approach to such topics even in the "liberated" 1960s, Huggins was compelled to draw the veil at this point.

*Harlem Renaissance* ends, with its sixth and last chapter, on an apparently odd note. We move not into the future but into the past, as Huggins writes about the rise and evolution of minstrelsy. One might think that Huggins would have started his study with this topic, but the placement is in keeping with his statement that his main target was never the Harlem Renaissance in itself but the American psyche as seen through the lens of the Renaissance. Following earlier attempts at understanding American minstrelsy, such as Constance Rourke's classic study *American Humor*, he remarks on the extent to which the rise of the practice of white men blackening their faces and enacting the roles of blacks (in comic, pathetic, and insulting ways) pointed to the felt inadequacy of white culture in dealing with the neuroses produced by its infamous contradictions, especially those between Puritanism, on the one hand, and the will to lawlessness and licentiousness, on the other. Encouraged by essays and books such as Norman Mailer's *The White Negro* and Franz Fanon's *Black Skins, White Masks*, Huggins attempts to blend

psychologizing with history, sociology, politics, and art. White men blackened their faces to fulfill deep-seated needs of which they were largely unconscious. Enacting the satirized lives of blacks, they unwittingly revealed the spiritual, sexual, and esthetic vacancies in their white lives and “official” white culture.

Blacks, following whites, entered the field of minstrelsy, and with great success. They, too, blackened their faces and exaggerated other racial features for the amusement of deeply appreciative white audiences. What does this have to do with the Harlem Renaissance? Huggins sees parallels between one phenomenon and the other. In his reading, the Harlem Renaissance, which depended to a large extent on white permissions of black behavior, whether that behavior took place in a night club or in a novel, catered to and relieved white senses of inadequacy. This essential function of the Harlem Renaissance called into question the authenticity of its art and the relative hollowness of its pretensions to be an expression of autonomous, liberated black American culture, with culture almost always defined in terms of refinement and moral grandeur.

Huggins understood that such autonomy was not possible. Du Bois had been right and prophetic in his enunciation of the two souls of the American Negro, in the tragedy of black Americans “always” seeing themselves mainly as whites saw them, always measuring themselves by the norms and achievements of a civilization that saw them as less than human. In this sense, the Harlem Renaissance at the time captured something essential about “Negro” culture and also marked the provisional nature of the culture’s progress toward an honest self-appreciation and self-expression. Huggins writes with the assumption, the sure knowledge (unpopular as it might be around 1971), that black American culture, like its white counterpart, remained far short of its goals as enunciated by its most articulate and deserving leaders. And yet one of the strengths of the volume is the way in which it surely presumes

the dignity of blacks even as it sees American blackness as an unfulfilled quality. Thus Huggins refuses the role of propagandist that dogged and retarded black intellectual achievement before and after 1971.

This refusal was no doubt regarded by some black and even some white readers in the headstrong early 1970s as amounting to a form of political and racial delinquency. How could a self-respecting black scholar remain so calmly and coolly analytical, so intellectually elegant, in the face of the many who insisted on the need to confront and denounce racial injustice past and present and to achieve racial separation? To which Huggins might have replied, how can any self-respecting scholar *not* be calmly and coolly analytical? This intellectual and emotional integrity is represented on virtually every page of his book. If the style is truly the man, then the style here speaks volumes about its author's mind and heart. Huggins's sentences run the gamut from the firmly aphoristic to the playful. He never descends to satirizing his subjects, although some of them almost beg to be satirized. Even as he picks apart pretensions and false arguments, or cuts to the core of certain artists' failings, he is respectful and scrupulous about his words. The book is easy to read, and yet Huggins never condescends to the reader.

One hopes that this new edition of Huggins's *Harlem Renaissance* attracts new scholars and students of its subject. As a scholarly topic the era is hardly exhausted. As the foundational text in the field, *Harlem Renaissance* remains an indispensable guide to the facts and features, the puzzles and mysteries, of one of the more provocative episodes in African-American and American history.

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## **Harlem Renaissance**

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# Introduction

It is a rare and intriguing moment when a people decide that they are the instruments of history-making and race-building. It is common enough to think of oneself as part of some larger meaning in the sweep of history, a part of some grand design. But to presume to be an actor and creator in the special occurrence of a people's birth (or rebirth) requires a singular self-consciousness. In the opening decades of the twentieth century, down into the first years of the Great Depression, black intellectuals in Harlem had just such a self-concept. These Harlemites were so convinced that they were evoking their people's "Dusk of Dawn" that they believed that they marked a renaissance.

Historians have liked to use that word to characterize some moment when a "culture," once dormant, has been reawakened. But even the most conventional of them will confess the concept is a historical fiction, a contrivance of imaginations steeped in resurrections and similar rites of spring. Seldom, however, have the people—the subjects of such history—knowing their roles, inquired of themselves, "how goes the

Renaissance?" While not so exaggerated, that was what Harlem men of culture were doing in the 1920s.

Of course, our own moment of history has given us preoccupations of our own. Harlem now connotes violence, crime, and poverty. For many, it represents a source of militancy, radical social change, and black community culture. "Ghetto" and "Harlem" have become, to most, interchangeable words. Whether we see the ghetto as a center of despair or source of hope, we tend to read back into the past our assumptions, perceptions, and expectations. But the 1920s were almost a half-century ago, and we may miss more than we learn when we force upon that time our own frustrations. Recent histories of that "Black Metropolis" have tended to treat it as always having been a ghetto in the making. Because of our compelling interest in the morphology of the economically deprived, we are likely to be insensitive to the fact that to Harlemites in an earlier decade the concept of Harlem becoming a ghetto would have seemed absurd. James Weldon Johnson believed that Harlem promised a future of "greater and greater things" for the Afro-American; he wrote as much in *Black Manhattan*, notably published in 1930.<sup>1</sup> Johnson's optimism, and that of the renaissance generation, had not been soured by an economic depression which drove home the special vulnerability of Negroes, a war which informed the world of pathological racism, and promises and dreams which were glibly announced and rudely deferred. The generation which Johnson spoke to, which this book is about, was optimistic and progressive. It would take more defeat than they had yet known for them to believe that what they were building would, in time, imprison them.

All of the ingredients for ghetto-making were in evidence in the 1920s. Yet, in those years few Harlem intellectuals addressed themselves to issues related to tenements, crime, violence, and poverty. Even *Opportunity*, the magazine of the Urban League and social work among Negroes, did not discuss

urban problems as much as it announced the Negro's coming of age. In part this was due, no doubt, to the desire of black leaders to stress black achievement rather than black problems. A positive self-image—there was cause for one—was considered the best starting point for a better chance. Inequities due to race might best be removed when reasonable men saw that black men were thinkers, strivers, doers, and were cultured, like themselves. Harlem intellectuals, with their progressive assumptions, saw themselves as the ones most likely to make this demonstration. They were on the threshold of a new day.

Present-day readers are likely to be annoyed with what they will see to be the naïveté of men like Johnson. Some would call them elitists when it comes to culture. With notable exceptions, like Langston Hughes, most Harlem intellectuals aspired to *high* culture as opposed to that of the common man, which they hoped to mine for novels, poems, plays, and symphonies. They saw art and letters as a bridge across the chasm between the races. Artists of both races, they thought, were more likely to be free of superstition, prejudice, and fear than ordinary men. They might meet on the common ground of shared beauty and artistic passion. It was thought that this alliance "at the top" would be the agency to bring the races together over the fissures of ignorance, suspicion, and fear. Despite a history that had divided them, art and culture would re-form the brotherhood in a common humanity.

This was an attitude of cultural elitism. But it is wrong to assume that these black intellectuals, because of it, were not related to the black common man in Harlem. I think that in the early decades of this century most Negroes were apt to agree that it was a good thing to have Negroes writing "good" novels, poems, plays, and symphonies. Not always because they could read, listen, and understand them, but because the fact that these works were written was a remarkable achieve-