

Poets of the Harlem Renaissance
Curriculum Development Project

Anne Dunkelberger

ED 863: An Interpretive History of

African-American Education, 1700-1950

December 1, 2009

Overview

In the years following WWI America went through a time of great social and political transformation. This was the decade of women's rights, prohibition, low unemployment, the Red Scare, and the Scopes Trial. It was also a decade of great artistic and intellectual contribution. The steady economy and sense of pride from the war led to a resurgence of creative expression throughout the United States. In New York City at this time, African-Americans experienced a revitalization of their culture. The new opportunities afforded to African-Americans in the 1920s gave them greater control over their lives. African-American artists and intellectuals portrayed their community's unique position through their inspired work.

The "roaring twenties," as the decade is commonly referred to, is also known as the "Jazz Age," due to the new form of music brought to the North by African-Americans from the South. After WWI thousands of African-Americans were moving to northern cities. In northern cities they saw more opportunity; the wages were higher in the North, there was less racism, and more educational opportunities. More importantly, however, there were more industrial jobs for African Americans due to WWI and immigration reform (United Streaming, "The Harlem Renaissance"). Many African-Americans migrating to the North ended up in New York City, particularly the Harlem section of Manhattan. Harlem began attracting African-Americans around 1904 when the Lennox Avenue subway stop was constructed. The new subway stop made traveling to Harlem more efficient. In addition to the Lennox Avenue subway stop, the price of homes in Harlem dropped during this time, allowing many African-Americans to purchase homes for the first time in their lives. By the 1920s Harlem was a community

composed of native New Yorkers, immigrants from the West Indies, and African-Americans from the South (United Streaming, “The Harlem Renaissance”).

The Harlem Renaissance was a movement in the 1920s that celebrated African-American art, music, culture, and literature. This period marked an important shift in America because, for the first time in the United States, the culture of African-Americans was considered significant, or as Langston Hughes stated in his autobiography *The Big Sea*, “The Negro was en vogue” at this time (Jackson, ¶3). More importantly, though, this period was fundamental for African-Americans because it was “the affirmation of a distinct cultural heritage and the visibility of that culture’s manifestation” (Jackson, ¶3). Harlem, located in the Manhattan borough of New York City, was already politically significant to African-Americans. New York City was the national headquarters for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), as well as the Urban League. Charles Spurgeon Johnson, editor of *Opportunity*, encouraged aspiring African-American writers to move to New York City because he recognized the time period as a unique moment for African-American artists and writers (www.jcu.edu ¶2). Among the artists in Harlem was a group of poets for whom the movement was particularly inspiring.

Most students learning about the 1920s will be introduced to such writers as Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Eugene O’Neil. Fewer students, however, will become familiar with the works of African-American writers of the time. This is not an accidental oversight, nor is it based on a difference in talent. The poetry written during the Harlem Renaissance incorporated themes of African pride, individualism, racial solidarity, and, in many cases, disappointment; “Despite the economic boom times, the roaring twenties was a period of great tension between Americans – social,

racial, and moral beliefs were constantly being challenged” (United Streaming, “American in the 20th Century”). Their poetry offers a unique perspective to any student learning about the time period; written in their own words, their poetry demonstrates the power of the narrative in any English or social studies classroom. With this sentiment in mind, this unit is concentrated entirely on the African-American poets of the Harlem Renaissance. Intended to be used in a humanities classroom, the unit focuses on the history behind the poet and work, as well as focusing on the work itself. The first part of the unit emphasizes three of the male writers of the time: Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and Countee Cullen. The latter half of the unit is devoted to two prominent female writers: Gwendolyn Bennett and Jessie Redmon Fauset.

Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and Countee Cullen were all important figures in the Harlem Renaissance. Though there are other male writers who contributed significantly to the movement, Hughes, McKay, and Cullen are, perhaps, the most well-known. All three men used their art not only as a way to express their creative talents, but as a way to communicate political messages. For example, in Claude McKay’s poem “If We Must Die,” inspired by a series of race riots in several northern cities, he is arguing that African-Americans should fight back against their white oppressors; “Like men we’ll face the murderous, cowardly pack, pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!” Similarly to Hughes and McKay, Cullen’s “Heritage” is a complex poem that deals with the issues facing an African-American male. This particular poem, however, is more personal than political because it attempts to rectify the dichotomy between the narrator’s past and present; between his African heritage and his Christian upbringing (Kirby). This conflict between past and present was more ubiquitous in the African-American community at the time of the Harlem Renaissance due to the emphasis artists

and intellectuals placed on Africa. Artists and intellectuals captured the tension that existed at the time; African-Americans wanted to progress socially and politically (they still lived in a racist society) while also figuring out new ways to give exposure to and identify with their heritage. So, while the Harlem Renaissance was one of the first instances in the 20th century when whites collaborated with blacks on an intellectual level (what Professor Richard Powell calls “unprecedented border crossing”), by giving new meaning to their African heritage, African-Americans were creating a divide between the races (www.pbs.org). These sources of conflict, and sometimes confusion, are reflected in the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance.

Most of the early work done by Hughes, McKay, and Cullen isn't necessarily political in nature, but exists as a vehicle through which to express the average life of an African-American male. Heretofore, the African-American male did not have much exposure in the literary world. Beginning after WWI, however, African Americans were experiencing more economic freedom and thus, took more control over the representation of their lives through various art forms. African-Americans artists and intellectuals helped to establish a greater respect for their race through their work, and as a result, in the 1920s the African-American community became more mobilized in an effort to fight; as stated by Jeffrey C. Stewart, a professor at George Mason University:

By disseminating positive images of African-Americans as contributors to American culture, many Harlem Renaissance intellectuals hoped to raise the self-esteem of black people themselves. A people with high self-esteem would be more resistant to segregation and discrimination, and more willing to challenge the system than those who were demoralized (www.pbs.org).

McKay, Hughes, and Cullen were different from their white counterparts because they were called, as it were, to uplift their race through their poetry and other writing.

The female poets highlighted in this unit, including Gwendolyn Bennett and Jessie Redmon Fauset, also played a large role in the elevation of their race during the Harlem Renaissance. For these two women, however, their battle was not only to assist in the promotion of their race, but to work to generate positive images of African-American women. In Bennett's "To a Dark Girl" she begins the poem with: "I love you for your brownness, and the rounded darkness of your breast, I love you for the breaking sadness in your voice and shadows where your wayward eyelids rest. " She is complimenting the beauty of African-American girls everywhere. Instead of victimizing African American women she empowers them by focusing on their aesthetic gifts; " Oh, little brown girl, born for sorrow's mate, keep all you have of queenliness, forgetting that you once were slave, and let your full lips laugh at Fate!" This poem signifies an important shift for African American women from slavery to self-actualization. Jessie Redmon Fauset contributed to the Harlem Renaissance as not only a poet and writer, but also as an editor at the *Crisis*, which was the official publication for the NAACP. At the *Crisis* Fauset was able to give a voice to many writers involved in the movement. Although much the credit owed to Fauset for making the *Crisis* popular has been given to W.E.B. DuBois, Fauset is a significant figure for bringing to light in her poems and novels a more accurate portrayal of African-American life (www.psu.edu).

The contributions made by writers during the Harlem Renaissance helped to accredit the experiences and culture of the African-American community. Not only did they call for racial justice through their art, but they helped many in their community to be proud of their African-American heritage. The response to the Harlem Renaissance

was an even greater desire to achieve equal rights in the United States. The community's suffering during the Great Depression notwithstanding, the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s established the path to the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s (www.pbs.org).

Activities

Day One

Objective

- Students will develop an understanding of the Harlem Renaissance through a series of paintings.

Lesson

- Students will be divided into pairs and will be asked to go to the website: www.iniva.org/harlem/intro.html. This website consists of a series of paintings and explanations entitled “Rhapsodies in Black.”
- While looking at the paintings on the website students will discuss in pairs, and then as class why the period was called the Harlem Renaissance.
- The teacher will lead a discussion about the significance of African American art during the Harlem Renaissance, speaking specifically about literature (poetry).

Day Two

Objective

- Students will use critical reading, writing, and discussion skills to learn about Langston Hughes’ contributions to the Harlem Renaissance.

Lesson (see appendix “Day 2”)

- Overview of the Harlem Renaissance, including PowerPoint of photographs and map.
- Introduction to Claude McKay, followed by reading his poem “If We Must Die” (1919). Students will read the poem in small groups, and then individually write a one-paragraph reaction to the poem.
 1. The teacher should use McKay’s poem as a way to engage students in the causes and reasons for the Harlem Renaissance.
- Introduction to Langston Hughes.
- Read Hughes’ “The Weary Blues.”
 1. Read as a class.
 2. Listen to the audio version of “The Weary Blue” using Hughes’ voice while watching real footage of the Harlem Renaissance. Found at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KyqvwC5s4n>
 3. Read the poem independently and answer discussion questions.

Day Three

Objective

- Students will learn about the life of Countee Cullen, and will demonstrate an understanding of his work through various activities.

Lesson (see appendix “Day 3”)

- Introduction to Countee Cullen
- Read “Saturday’s Child” and Hughes’ “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” independently.
- In small groups answer discussion questions on poems.

- Draw two sketches, one depicting Cullen’s relationship to Africa in “Heritage” and one depicting Hughes’ relationship to African in “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.”
- Students will get into pairs and read Cullen’s poem “Heritage.”
 - Dramatic activity: the teacher will break “Heritage” down by stanza (7 total) and will assign each pair to act out their stanza.
- If there is time, students will read James Smethurt’s article “On Race, Homosexuality, and Visual and Verbal Androgyny in Cullen’s Work.”

Day Four

Objective

- Students will identify the contributions made by female poets during the Harlem Renaissance.

Lesson (see appendix “Day 4”)

- Students will watch a short film: “Alice Walker's Themes: Black Female Solidarity and the Rural South” (Found at: California Newsreel . 1992. Discovery Education. 30 November 2009 <http://streaming.discoveryeducation.com/>).
- Introduction to female poets of the Harlem Renaissance, including Gwendolyn Bennett and Jessie Redmon Fauset.
- Students will read the following poems “To a Dark Girl” and “Oblivion” by Bennett and Fauset respectively and answer the discussion questions.

Day Five

Objective

- Students will use what they have learned so far and will work collaboratively to research a new poet and present to the class.

Lesson

- Students will be put into groups where they will choose a Harlem Renaissance poet that has not been discussed in this unit and will lead the class in a mini lesson about the poet’s contributions, including at least two poems.

Day Six

Objective

- Students will present their poets to the class and will lead and participate in a discussion about their poet, as well as contributing to the discussions led by the other groups.

Lesson

- Group presentations of Harlem Renaissance poets

Day Seven

Objective

- Students will analyze and discuss what happened after the Harlem Renaissance, concentrating on the affects of the Great Depression on the African American community in Harlem.

Lesson (see appendix “Day 7”)

- Briefly discuss how the Great Depression affected African Americans in Harlem, including the FDR’s New Deal.
- Students will go to the webpage <http://memory.loc.gov/learn//features/timeline/depwwii/race/race> and read the overview on the Learning Page entitled “Great Depression and WWII: Race Relations in the 1930s and 1940s.” When you are finished, read Langston Hughes’ poem “Let America Be America Again” and answer discussion questions.

Day Eight

Objective

- Students will determine the ways in which the Harlem Renaissance contributed to the Civil Rights Movement in the United States.

Lesson (see appendix “Day 8”)

- Students will read the article from www.pbs.org “Online News Hour.” When you are finished, read it again and underline important words or phrases and include annotations in the margins.

Bibliography

Alice Walker's Themes: Black Female Solidarity and the Rural South. California

Newsreel . 1992. Discovery Education. 30 November 2009

<http://streaming.discoveryeducation.com/>.

America in the 20th Century: The Roaring Twenties. Media Rich Learning~

United Learning. 2003. Discovery Education. 30 November 2009

<http://streaming.discoveryeducation.com/>.

Early, Gerald. "Modern American Poetry: About Cullen's Life and Career".

University of Illinois. November 11, 2009

<http://www.english.illinois.edu/MAPS/poets/a_f/cullen/life.htm>.

The Harlem Renaissance. Discovery Education. 2006. Discovery Education.

30 November 2009 <http://streaming.discoveryeducation.com/>.

"The Harlem Renaissance Brought to You by John Carroll University".

John Carroll University. November 15, 2009

<<http://www.jcu.edu/harlem/index.htm>>.

Jackson, Caroline. "Harlem Renaissance: Pivotal Period in the Development of

Afro-American Culture". Yale University. November 15, 2009

<<http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1978/2/78.02.03.x.html>>.

"Jessie Redmon Fauset". Pennsylvania State University Libraries. November 17, 2009

<<http://pabook.libraries.psu.edu/palitmap/bios>

Fauset__Jessie_Redmon.html>.

Kirby, David K.. "On Heritage". University of Illinois. November 11, 2009

<http://www.english.illinois.edu/MAPS/poets/a_f/cullen/heritage.htm>.

Loewen, James W.. Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History

Textbook Got Wrong. New York: Touchstone Simon and Schuster, 1995.

McKay, Claude. Funk & Wagnalls. 2009. Discovery Education. 1 December 2009

<http://streaming.discoveryeducation.com/>.

Online NewsHour Forum: Harlem Renaissance". Public Broadcasting Service

November 11, 2009 <<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/forum/>

february98/harlem_2-20.html>.

Singer, Alan J.. Social Studies for Secondary Schools: Teaching to Learn,

Learning to Teach. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2003.

Smethurst, James. "On Race, Homosexuality, and Visual and Verbal Androgyny in

Cullen's Work". University of Illinois. November 11, 2009

<http://www.english.illinois.edu/MAPS/poets/a_f/cullen/androgyny.htm>.

Zinn, Howard. A People's History of the United States: 1492-Present.

New York: Harper Collins, 2003.

Appendix

- Day 1 PowerPoint
- Day 2
- Day 3
- Day 4
- Day 7
- Day 8

DAY 2

Name: _____

If We Must Die by Claude McKay*

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursed lot.
If we must die, O let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!
O kinsmen we must meet the common foe!
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!
What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

*Claude McKay wrote this in 1919 after a series of race riots in northern U.S. cities. The riots were overwhelmingly white assaults on black communities. McKay wrote this as a way to urge his fellow African Americans to fight back.

Your 1 paragraph reaction:-

The Weary Blues by Langston Hughes

Droning a drowsy syncopated tune,
Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon,
I heard a Negro play.
Down on Lenox Avenue the other night
By the pale dull pallor of an old gas light
He did a lazy sway . . .
He did a lazy sway . . .
To the tune o' those Weary Blues.
With his ebony hands on each ivory key
He made that poor piano moan with melody.
O Blues!
Swaying to and fro on his rickety stool
He played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool.
Sweet Blues!
Coming from a black man's soul.
O Blues!
In a deep song voice with a melancholy tone
I heard that Negro sing, that old piano moan--
"Ain't got nobody in all this world,
Ain't got nobody but ma self.
I's gwine to quit ma frownin'
And put ma troubles on the shelf."
Thump, thump, thump, went his foot on the floor.
He played a few chords then he sang some more--
"I got the Weary Blues
And I can't be satisfied.
Got the Weary Blues
And can't be satisfied--
I ain't happy no mo'
And I wish that I had died."
And far into the night he crooned that tune.
The stars went out and so did the moon.
The singer stopped playing and went to bed
While the Weary Blues echoed through his head.
He slept like a rock or a man that's dead.

Discussion Questions for "The Weary Blues"

1. List a few adjectives that describe the overall tone of the poem.
2. In what way does the poem remind you of the popular blues music at the time? Why do you think Hughes intentionally linked his poem with blues music?
3. What is suggested or implied when Hughes' writes, "with his ebony hands on each ivory key"?
4. Why does it matter if the speaker of the poem is African American?

Heritage by Countee Cullen

What is Africa to me:
Copper sun or scarlet sea,
Jungle star or jungle track,
Strong bronzed men, or regal black
Women from whose loins I sprang
When the birds of Eden sang?
One three centuries removed
From the scenes his fathers loved,
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,
What is Africa to me?

So I lie, who all day long
Want no sound except the song
Sung by wild barbaric birds
Goaded massive jungle herds,
Juggernauts of flesh that pass
Trampling tall defiant grass
Where young forest lovers lie,
Plighting troth beneath the sky.
So I lie, who always hear,
Though I cram against my ear
Both my thumbs, and keep them there,
Great drums throbbing through the air.
So I lie, whose fount of pride,
Dear distress, and joy allied,
Is my somber flesh and skin,
With the dark blood dammed within
Like great pulsing tides of wine
That, I fear, must burst the fine
Channels of the chafing net
Where they surge and foam and fret.

Africa? A book one thumbs
Listlessly, till slumber comes.
Unremembered are her bats
Circling through the night, her cats
Crouching in the river reeds,
Stalking gentle flesh that feeds
By the river brink; no more
Does the bugle-throated roar
Cry that monarch claws have leapt
From the scabbards where they slept.
Silver snakes that once a year
Doff the lovely coats you wear,
Seek no covert in your fear
Lest a mortal eye should see
What's your nakedness to me?
Here no leprous flowers rear
Fierce corollas in the air;
Here no bodies sleek and wet,
Dripping mingled rain and sweat,
Tread the savage measures of

Jungle boys and girls in love.
What is last year's snow to me,
Last year's anything? The tree
Budding yearly must forget
How its past arose or set--
Bough and blossom, flower, fruit,
Even what shy bird with mute
Wonder at her travail there,
Meekly labored in its hair.
One three centuries removed
From the scenes his fathers loved,
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,
What is Africa to me?

So I lie, who find no peace
Night or day, no slight release
From the unremittent beat
Made by cruel padded feet
Walking through my body's street.
Up and down they go, and back,
Treading out a jungle track.
So I lie, who never quite
Safely sleep from rain at night--
I can never rest at all
When the rain begins to fall;
Like a soul gone mad with pain
I must match its weird refrain;
Ever must I twist and squirm,
Writhing like a baited worm,
While its primal measures drip
Through my body, crying, "Strip!
Doff this new exuberance.
Come and dance the Lover's Dance!"
In an old remembered way
Rain works on me night and day.

Quaint, outlandish heathen gods
Black men fashion out of rods,
Clay, and brittle bits of stone,
In a likeness like their own,
My conversion came high-priced;
I belong to Jesus Christ,
Preacher of Humility;
Heathen gods are naught to me.

Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,
So I make an idle boast;
Jesus of the twice-turned cheek,
Lamb of God, although I speak
With my mouth thus, in my heart
Do I play a double part.
Ever at Thy glowing altar

Must my heart grow sick and falter,
Wishing He I served were black,
Thinking then it would not lack
Precedent of pain to guide it,
Let who would or might deride it;
Surely then this flesh would know
Yours had borne a kindred woe.
Lord, I fashion dark gods, too,
Daring even to give You
Dark despairing features where,
Crowned with dark rebellious hair,
Patience wavers just so much as
Mortal grief compels, while touches
Quick and hot, of anger, rise
To smitten cheek and weary eyes.
Lord, forgive me if my need
Sometimes shapes a human creed.
All day long and all night through,

One thing only must I do:
Quench my pride and cool my blood,
Lest I perish in the flood,
Lest a hidden ember set
Timber that I thought was wet
Burning like the driest fax,
Melting like the merest wax,
Lest the grave restore its dead.
Not yet has my heart or head
In the least way realize They and I are civilized.

On Race, Homosexuality, and Visual and Verbal Androgyny in Cullen's Work

James Smethurst

One of the most interesting aspects of many of these openly homoerotic poems is the linking of explicit homoeroticism with a miscegenation of black and white. Perhaps Cullen's purpose in making the couples inter-racial was to heighten a *sense of* transgressive sex that also obscured something of the nature of the real social transgression by figuring sexuality within a racial discourse. These conflicted relationships are filled with anguish, bitterness and disappointment and much of the sexual conflict is displaced into racial conflict, but not to the extent that the homoerotic content of the poem becomes completely obscured. (Though perhaps it is obscured enough to evade the attention of those readers who for various reasons would prefer not to find it.)

This conflation of categories of race and sexuality into is further heightened by the illustrations of Charles Cullen (no relation to the poet) whose (literally) black and white, male and female figures frame the text in Countee Cullen's collections *The Black Christ and Other Poems* and *Copper Sun*, and his *The Ballad of a Brown Girl*. Charles Cullen's female figures are fairly normative representations of women. However, the "male" figures are quite androgynous, if not actually featureless. There is also a peculiar sort of racial androgyny. The black figures are clearly marked as African-American--even the relatively featureless male figures are generally typed by kinky hair or flat noses. However, the white figures, particularly the white male figures, are rendered so that the features that do appear are also typically "black." In fact, when viewed with respect to the particular poems they accompany, it is clear that these white figures often do represent African-Americans. Thus, the illustrations seem to set rigid oppositions of black/white, male/female, but they also set up a frame of a racially and sexually androgynous eroticism that is both male and bi-sexual, where racial and sexual difference are displaced into one another or obscure the other.

This racial and sexual androgyny of Charles Cullen's illustrations frames a similar androgyny in Countee Cullen's poetry, particularly in *The Black Christ and Other Poems*. As is often pointed out by critics, much of Cullen's love poetry is not clearly marked by racial signs. This lack is usually interpreted as an attempt by Cullen to be "universal," which is sometimes extended into a desire to be white or at least not black. However, it is worth pointing out that most of Cullen's first person love lyrics not only lack racial markers, but are also unmarked as to gender as well. In short, these poems, often filled with loss, confusion, regret and/or resentment, allow space for almost any sort of romantic pairing possible. When seen within the frame of Charles Cullen's illustrations, which both foreground and collapse together categories of race and gender, these poems are far from "white" or "universal" in some abstract sense, but instead quite personal and quite specific with regard to the condition of a gay black man in the early 20th century.

DAY 4

Name: _____

Female Poets of the Harlem Renaissance: Gwendolyn Bennett and Jessie Redmon Fauset

Directions: Read the following poems “To a Dark Girl” and “Oblivion” by Bennett and Fauset, respectively, and answer the discussion questions.



Gwendolyn Bennett



Jessie Redmon Fauset

To a Dark Girl by Gwendolyn Bennett

I love you for your brownness,
And the rounded darkness of your breast;
I love you for the breaking sadness in your voice
And shadows where your wayward eyelids rest.

Something of old forgotten queens
Lurks in the lithe abandon of your walk,
And something of the shackled slave
Sobs in the rhythm of your talk.

Oh, little brown girl, born for sorrow's mate,
Keep all you have of queenliness,
Forgetting that you once were slave,
And let your full lips laugh at Fate!

Oblivion by Jessie Redmon Fauset
From the French of
Massillon Coicou (Haiti)

I hope when I am dead that I shall lie
In some deserted grave--I cannot tell you why,
But I should like to sleep in some neglected spot,
Unknown to every one, by every one forgot.

There lying I should taste with my dead breath
The utter lack of life, the fullest sense of death;
And I should never hear the note of jealousy or hate,
The tribute paid by passers-by to tombs of state.

To me would never penetrate the prayers and tears
That futilely bring torture to dead and dying ears;
There I should lie annihilate and my dead heart would bless
Oblivion--the shroud and envelope of happiness.

Discussion Questions

1. What do you think motivated Bennett to write "To a Dark Girl"?
2. Do you think that Fausett's "Oblivion" was written with a political motive in mind, or do you think this poem is an example of 'art for art's sake'? Please explain your answer.

DAY 7

Name: _____

Directions: Go to the webpage <http://memory.loc.gov/learn//features/timeline/depwwii/race/race.html> and read the overview on the Learning Page entitled “Great Depression and WWII: Race Relations in the 1930s and 1940s.” When you are finished, read Langston Hughes’ poem “Let America Be America Again” and answer discussion questions.

Let America Be America Again by Langston Hughes

. . . I am the poor, white, fooled and pushed apart,
I am the Negro bearing slavery’s scars.
I am the red man driven from the land,
I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek—
And finding only the same old stupid plan.
Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak. . .

O, let America be America again—
The land that never has been yet—
And yet must be —the land where every man is free.
The land that’s mine—the poor man’s, Indian’s, Negro’s
ME—

Who made American,
Whose sweat and blood, whose faith and pain,
Whose hand at the foundry, whose plow in the rain,
Must bring back our mighty dream again.

Sure, call me any ugly name you choose—
The steel of freedom does not stain.
From those who live like leeches on the people’s lives,
We must take back our land again,
America! . . .

DAY 8

Name: _____

Directions: Read the article from www.pbs.org "Online News Hour." When you are finished, read it again and underline important words or phrases and include annotations in the margins.

Titus King of Saline, MI asks:

How did the Harlem Renaissance affect the politics of the decades leading up to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s?

Professor Richard Powell responds:

The Harlem Renaissance affected U.S. political culture well into the 1960s and into the Civil Rights movement in two very different ways. One of the interesting ways that it helped shape future civil rights activities resides in its integrationist overtures and early calls for interracial cooperation. One could argue that the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s was one of the first instances in the 20th century when whites -- albeit white elites and white social reform types -- collaborated with black intellectuals, social activists, educators, and artists in attempts to transform a largely segregated and racist American society. Although one can certainly find all sorts of instances during the Harlem Renaissance when the same old racial paradigms of the past emerged, it was also a moment of unprecedented "border crossing" and collaboration. I'm thinking about the "coming-together-for-the-common-good" of blacks and whites like Franz Boas, Max Eastman, Zora Neale Hurston, Charles S. Johnson, Alain Locke, Claude McKay, H.L. Mencken, Eugene O'Neill, Robert E. Parks, and Paul Robeson, just to name a few. I can't help but think that the Harlem Renaissance, with its ideological invitations to interracial problem solving, had long lasting repercussions on American race relations well into mid-century and later.

Another way that the Harlem Renaissance affected political life during the 1950s and 1960s has to do with its early explorations of black nationalism. From the "back to Africa" ideas of the Jamaican (but based in Harlem) political activist Marcus Garvey, to the encroaching sense of social and economic isolation that black communities (like New York's Harlem and Chicago's Southside) felt during the Depression era and later, the sense that African Americans saw themselves forming a politically and culturally distinct segment of the U.S. population was forged during this period and continually honed and shaped by sociologists, political scientists, historians, etc, in subsequent years.

Professor Jeffrey Stewart responds:

The Harlem Renaissance did have an effect on the decades leading up to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Many of the intellectuals, creative writers, and artists of the Harlem Renaissance saw as one of the purposes of the black arts movement the creation of more positive images of African Americans than had generally existed in American culture before the 1920s. From Alain Locke, the editor of *The New Negro*, an anthology of Black writing, to Charles S. Johnson, the editor of *Opportunity Magazine*, the journal of the National Urban League, to W.E.B. Du Bois, the editor of *The Crisis*, the journal of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, all of them believed that the emergence of a critical mass of Black writers would lead to the creation of a greater variety of images of African American peoples in the media than existed when only European Americans were the authors of plays, poems, novels, and art on the Negro theme in America.

Indeed, Du Bois inaugurated a forum of discussion in the *Crisis* magazine, entitled, "How Should the Negro Be Portrayed?" in which he asked artists to write in and discuss what kinds of images of Black

people ought to be disseminated by artists in America. While there was a wide divergence on how much control should be imposed on what images artists should create, most believed that out of the greater access to the publishing and art world would come an abandonment of the racist imagery that predominated in popular American culture and justified, by dehumanizing Black people, the racist social and political practices that also abounded in America in the 1920s and 1930s. Du Bois even coined the phrase, "all art is propaganda" to reflect his view that the purpose of an art movement among African Americans was to combat the negative propaganda against the Negro coming from racist America with a positive propaganda for the Negro. One way of looking at it is that the Harlem Renaissance attacked the superstructure of White supremacy while legal and political activists in the 1930s and 1940s began to attack the daily practice of racism through the courts and demonstrations. For example, the Harlem Renaissance is generally credited with heightening awareness of the cultural contributions that African and African American peoples have made to American culture, specifically in music, dance, poetry, and speech, as well as in agriculture, medicine, and inventions (see my "1001 Things Everyone Should Know About African American History" for more on this).

Here the idea was that (1) racism in America would be undermined not only through protest against racist practices, but also by changing the prevailing images and associations that European Americans, especially educated European Americans, had about Black people. And then (2) by disseminating positive images of African Americans as contributors to American Culture, many of these Harlem Renaissance intellectuals hoped to raise the self-esteem of Black people themselves. A people with a higher self-esteem would be more resistant to segregation and discrimination, and more willing to challenge the system than those who were demoralized.

Professor William Drummond responds:

Today I interviewed Jacob Lawrence, the country's most celebrated African-American painter and a man who lived through the Harlem Renaissance, for a piece I'm doing for National Public Radio. Based on his answers and my own research into the issues, I'll try to respond to the queries.

The major political theme of the Harlem Renaissance was the rebirth of a people, the creation of the New Negro. Mr. Lawrence talked in particular of the influence on him of the followers of Marcus Garvey. He also spoke of the influence of figures such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Clearly, the political ferment of Harlem influenced the black civil rights lawyers, such as Thurgood Marshall, the labor unionists, such as Asa Philip Randolph, and the young college students from North Carolina A & T who began the freedom rides and the sit-ins in the 1960s.

(article from the website: <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/forum/february98/harlem2.html>)