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The Harlem Renaissance: A Cultural, Social, and Political Movement

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The Harlem Renaissance was an explosion of creativity and culture within New York City's African American community in the 1920s, however, its true impact far surpassed a mere cultural movement. It was the locus for the radicalization and politicization for a disenfranchised population. The creative minds behind the Harlem Renaissance used artistic expression to prove their humanity and demand equality from an often hostile white America. The literal migration of southern Blacks to the North also symbolized a mental

shift, changing the previous image of the rural, uneducated African-American to one of urban, cosmopolitan sophistication. This new identity led to increased social consciousness, and endowed a population that until this time had only experienced inferiority and depravity. This movement provided a source of release of their oppression and gave them hope, faith, and inspiration to create an empowered identity. This new movement wasn't just a coincidence, however, it was driven by several key circumstances and figures, and among the most important of these was Charles Spurgeon Johnson. He, with the support of philosopher and professor Alain LeRoy Locke, guided the emergence of African-American culture into white-dominated society, and this effort was formally and symbolically launched through their orchestration of the Civic Club Dinner in Manhattan on March 21st, 1924.

Migration to Harlem

In the South, African-Americans were trapped in a sharecropping economy that hardly offered any hope for advancement. Along with these poor economic conditions, African-Americans were socially disadvantaged within the Jim Crow system that didn't acknowledge their voting rights, overlooked lynching, and disregarded unequal education opportunities. The North symbolized the opportunity to escape these horrors of the South as well as the possibility of economic prosperity.[1] New York's Harlem was among the most popular cities of refuge, and by the 1920s, Harlem became a center of black cultural life and the center stage for a cultural and political renaissance.[2] This migration forever changed the dynamics of the nation, physically and mentally. The oppression the African-Americans were fleeing from also symbolized the cultural image they were fleeing from: slave, uneducated, ignorant, oppressed, and inferior. They hoped the North would be a haven from their oppression in the South and a place to re-establish their identity.

This presented a complex dilemma for African-Americans who wanted to embrace their heritage, yet seek a new identity. W.E.B. Du Bois addressed this double consciousness in his 1903 publication of *Souls of Black Folk*, stating that the Negro constantly had this "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others." He claimed that it was the Negro's "dogged strength alone [that] kep[t] [him] from being torn asunder" as he battled these two contrasting identities. [3] In the presence of this duality, a new literary theme emerged. As the African-American struggled with his

own racial identity, many artists began to use this clash as the focal point of their works. This increasing expression of the struggle of double-consciousness created a new market in the field of literature, proposing a new battle: how to combine this distinct “New Negro” identity with the rest of American culture.[4]

Charles Spurgeon Johnson

Charles Spurgeon Johnson was a lifelong advocate for racial equality and promoter of the advancement of African-Americans. As an African-American born of mixed racial heritage in Bristol, Virginia in 1893 he could personally grasp and relate to the struggles of members of his own race. He faced his own obstacles as an African-American in the South, having to travel to Richmond to attend a high school that accepted black students. After graduating, he attended the historically-black Virginia Union University that was also in Richmond.[5] Finally moving North in 1918, Johnson attended the University of Chicago for his graduate work, where he studied under renowned sociologist Robert Ezra Park. It was Park that exposed Johnson to the theory that suggested that the way to break barriers of segregation and discrimination could only come through contact, interaction, and personal relationships with white people. Park claimed that, “Personal relations and personal friendships are the great moral solvents. Under their influence all distinctions of class, caste, and even race, are dissolved into the general flux which we sometimes call democracy.”[6] It was this idea of contact among races that would permeate Charles Johnson’s work towards the advancement of the African-American race.

Johnson was reaching the peak of his academic career in 1918 while studying at the University of Chicago when sociology was making new inroads into American universities. He looked to his academic profession as a means for dismantling the barriers of racism. Always encouraged by Park to use his surroundings as a laboratory, Johnson used Chicago to demonstrate race relations and the way ideas of subordination rise and remain within society.[7] As race riots were erupting in Chicago during the summer of 1919, he conducted sociological research and produced an assessment for the Chicago Commission on Race Relation entitled “The Negro in Chicago.” This assessment demonstrated that the institution of slavery introduced, expanded, and maintained presumptions of Negro inferiority and those attitudes remained even after emancipation. This report penetrated the deep-seated

prejudice that whites had against blacks and the labels stamped upon the two races that led them to believe they were opposites. In his report, he profoundly addressed the issue of racism against African-Americans by stating, “No group in our population is less responsible for its existence. But every group is responsible for its continuance and every citizen, regardless of color or racial origin, is in honor and conscience bound to seek and forward its solution.[8]”

Johnson’s abilities extended beyond his research skills. He was at the prime of his career in a time of increasing militancy towards civil rights, yet he didn’t approach the movement with the same intensity as his counterparts, such as W.E.B. DuBois and Marcus Garvey. Johnson preferred to take a more passive-aggressive approach. This is not to discredit his enthusiasm or assertiveness, but more so to reflect that his strengths lied in coordinating and manipulating. Johnson preferred to be a “sidelines activist” striving for practical ends through more conservative means. While Johnson was studying at the University of Chicago, Robert Park planted in Johnson his theory that increased interaction among races would bring about equality. Johnson would go on to promote that idea through his ability to orchestrate contact between whites and blacks.

National Urban League

Meanwhile, in New York City, organizations were also promoting civil rights for African-Americans. The National Urban League had sprung from three earlier organizations: the Committee for the Improvement of Industrial Conditions Among Negroes in New York (founded in 1906), the National League for the Protection of Colored Women (founded 1906), and the Committee on Urban Conditions Among Negroes (founded 1910). In 1911, these three organizations merged into The National League on Urban Conditions Among Negroes. Its name officially became The National Urban League in 1920.[9] However, its mission was the same all along—it was founded to eliminate racial segregation and discrimination among African-Americans and other minority groups. The agency always valued and believed in practical and technical approaches towards equality. One of its founders was Edmund Haynes, who believed well-planned and realistic agendas were keys to the organization’s success. When Haynes left the organization in 1918, he handpicked Eugene Kinckle Jones as his successor as Executive Secretary to carry on the league’s practical

tactics to achieve racial equality. Under Jones' direction, the League significantly expanded its multifaceted campaign to crack the barriers to black employment. Jones implemented boycotts against firms that refused to employ blacks, pressured schools to expand vocational opportunities for young people, constantly prodded Washington officials to include blacks in government-directed programs, and worked to get African-Americans into previously segregated labor unions.[10] Practicality was the National Urban League's preferred method towards attaining equality.

Entering the 1920s, Johnson was at the forefront of the field of Black Sociology. His highly acclaimed report "The Negro in Chicago" for the Chicago Commission on Race Relations helped land him a position as director of research for the National Urban League in 1921 in New York City. Jones was confident that Johnson's skills would help stimulate the League's approaches in advocacy through its strong emphasis on research. Johnson began his career for the League by conducting and reporting on race relations surveys and editing the League's tabloid-style periodical, *The Urban League Bulletin*, as a way to publicize the league's opinion and its research of race relations. By 1923, he launched the league's monthly publication *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life* as a way to keep the public well-informed on race issues.

Still serving as the league's Executive Secretary, Eugene Knickels Jones' wanted *Opportunity's* practicality to match that of the organization. In fact, he stated this in the magazine's first issue writing, "We shall try to set down interestingly but without sugar-coating or generaliz[ing] the findings of careful scientific surveys and the facts gathered from research." [11] Johnson thus offered the readers of *Opportunity* scientific evidence of the distorted use of data on race by those seeking political, economic, and social gains. He believed the first step towards equality was bringing these pseudoscientific accusations to the light and correcting them. Therefore, *Opportunity* consisted of mostly statistical reports and surveys, scholarly essays, and the occasional miscellaneous literary works.

As Johnson was in the midst of editing *Opportunity*, he witnessed the rise of other magazines in the literary scene around him. Among the most popular were *The Crisis* and *The Messenger*, both of which began publishing more literary works by African-American artists. Seeing the cultural approach to these literary magazines led Johnson to investigate how art

could be used as a more indirect tactic for attaining political and social equality for the Negro. By *Opportunity's* second issue, Johnson proposed that the magazine's emphasis shift from being mainly social and economic to increasingly cultural.[12] To Johnson, the world of the black literati was not merely underappreciated, it was completely obscure. The world of black literature needed a stage of its own on which its exposure would not be able to be suppressed by this normally white-dominated domain. This belief was evident when he boldly stated, "The importance of the *Crisis Magazine* and *Opportunity Magazine* was that it provided an outlet for young Negro writers and scholars whose work was not acceptable to other established media because it could not be believed to be of standard quality despite the superior quality of much of it." [13]

Johnson looked upon African American arts as a powerful agent of movement toward racial assimilation in American society. As David Levering Lewis noted in *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, Johnson considered African American literature as "a small crack in the wall of racism that was worth trying to widen." Lewis added, "If the road to the ballot box and jobs was blocked, Johnson saw that the door to Carnegie Hall and New York publishers was ajar." [14] Johnson had this unprecedented notion to provide an outlet for African American scholars and writers alike whose work was not acceptable to other media. He sought to expose and arouse public literature and "disturb the age-old customary cynicisms" of the white publishing industry.[15] This meant extending his vision and efforts beyond the creation of *Opportunity*. There was more strategy behind *Opportunity* than merely its publication. Johnson had to find a way to unite black and white audiences. His manipulative and scheming yet compassionate demeanor in doing this would become the hallmark of his approach to bringing black and white literary spheres together.

Alain LeRoy Locke

Alain LeRoy Locke was an African-American born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania just seven years before Charles Johnson. With a successful high school career, graduating second in his class, he went on to Harvard University where he received his undergraduate degrees in English and Philosophy. Locke initially found his inspiration for debunking racism while completing his undergraduate work at Harvard beginning in 1907. However, this inspiration didn't come from classroom lectures; rather it came from the interactions he saw

among his fellow students in spaces such as the dining-room and library. He noted the patterns of black students in the dining-room in a letter home to his mother saying they had “unanimously chosen to occupy a separate table together. Now what do you think of that? It’s the same old lifelong criticism I shall be making against our people.”[16] Locke complained that he couldn’t grasp how his peers “come up here in a broad-minded place like this and stick together like they were in the heart of Africa.”[17]

After graduating from Harvard, he expanded his cultural perspective by attending University of Oxford. He arrived at Herford College of the University of Oxford in 1910 to find that the atmosphere there was very different than what he had experienced at Harvard; there was a sense of equality and unity at this campus where diversity was better embraced. However, he still found discrimination within the university. Even when he left Oxford to study philosophy in Berlin, he saw racism in his evaluations of the participation of minorities in the social, economic, and political spheres. With new inspiration to attack these problems of racial prejudice he returned to the U.S. where he completed his Ph.D. in philosophy from Harvard while teaching English at Howard University.[18]

Locke was drawn to philosophy because it enabled him to understand the culture of racism and gave him the tools to argue that race was a cultivated phenomenon, rather than something based on permanent and innate characteristics.[19] He did not support that racism was inevitable or automatic. Racism did not have instinctive forces. Racism was a form of socialization; science was merely a form of justification.[20] It was these ideas of social biases that he addressed in his doctoral research and dissertation.

Locke presented these ideas at Howard University in a series of lectures titled: “Race Contacts and Interracial Relations: Lectures on the Theory and Practice of Race.” Locke called upon African-Americans to disregard the race consciousness that society had stamped them with and to create their own image. He asserted that race was an “ethnic fiction[21]” that had somehow survived and intensified and would continue to do so because race consciousness psychologically benefitted the elitist majority that so desperately wanted to preserve it. Not blind to the dangers of excessive radicalism, Locke fully believed in a cultural movement as a tactic for political equality in a more subtle disguise.[22] He supported a cultural movement as an approach to lift up the African-American image and tear

down the psychological barriers rooted in racism.

Civic Club Dinner

The year of 1924 marked a significant shift in the Harlem literary scene, sparked by the publication of the novel, *There Is Confusion*, written by African-American author Jessie Redmon Fauset. This novel deviated from the standard norms of the portrayals of African-Americans in literature—specifically African-American women. The female characters in the book exemplified this principle of deviation as they refused to conform, lived by their own rules, and rejected the sexual and social codes of their time. Their confidence to steer their decisions towards their own satisfaction rather than satisfy the societal norms set these fictional characters apart from other characters of the time. Therefore, this set Fauset apart from writers of her era.[23]

At the time of the publication of Fauset’s novel, *Opportunity* had been in circulation for a year. Johnson had been working towards his mission to use literature as means to achieve equality for African-Americans for a year as well. Johnson recognized the importance of Fauset’s message and latched onto this opportunity to launch her novel by organizing a dinner at the Manhattan Civic Club to celebrate its publication. Whereas the initial motive behind the Civic Club dinner was to honor Fauset, Johnson saw this event as an appropriate time to unite Harlem’s black literati with white publishers. He wanted to include as many black writers as possible rather than having an event focused exclusively on Fauset. David Levering Lewis revealed how Johnson recognized the state of black literature: “He was satisfied to see the cultural spotlight shining on the Afro-American as never before, and he intended to secure this unique moment for an Afro-American effort at breakthrough.”[24] Johnson wanted to introduce Negro art on a stage where which it wouldn’t be criticized or condemned for racial reasons. Lewis referred to the frequent criticism that black literature often received: “...the white presence...hovered over the New Negro world of art and literature like a benevolent censor, politely but pervasively setting the outer limits of its creative boundaries.”[25] The Civic Club dinner was to serve as an equalizer. It would highlight the potential of up and coming African-American artists in the presence of white philanthropists and publishers that had not yet fully accepted the dimensions that black art could bring to this white-dominated domain.

Working for the National Urban League gave

Johnson connections to high-class white society. After all, the league itself was created through the collaboration of Ruth Standish Baldwin, a woman from elite white society, and Edmund Hayes, a successful African-American. Being the editor of *Opportunity* allowed Johnson to witness the talent of Negro artists whose works he published. With this personal connection to African-American artists, he could easily persuade them to attend. Through his connections to both races, he offered incentives to each one. For the black artists, it meant exposure; for the white publishers, it meant expansion. Whereas his social position was crucial, it was also his demeanor. Lewis describes Johnson saying, "He was, moreover, a man whose passion for dominion expressed itself through secrecy and patient manipulation. Yet it was manipulation for a purpose: to redeem, through art, the standing of his people.[26]"

Johnson was the ideal person to orchestrate the Civic Club dinner; however he needed someone to serve as the spokesman for the event. He chose Alain LeRoy Locke, having him serve as the Civic Club dinner's master of ceremonies.[27] This position suited Locke well, for he was more direct and upfront than Johnson. Johnson preferred to remain behind the scenes where his manipulation was most effective. Locke readily agreed to facilitate the event, for he recognized and supported Johnson's approach to using art as a way to attain political equality. In fact, Johnson's method to using art to gain social equality uncannily exemplified the type of cultural movement Locke advocated for in his lectures at Howard University.

On the night of March 21, 1924, more than 100 publishers, magazine editors, artists and writers gathered at the Manhattan Civic Club to acknowledge and celebrate the emerging abundance of black creative talent. Among the powerful white attendees was Paul Kellogg of *The Survey Graphic*, an influential journal advocating social reform. His presence at the dinner brought significant results. At the night's end, Kellogg approached Johnson informing him that he'd like to devote an entire issue of *The Survey Graphic* to African-American literature to aid in the promotion of black culture in Harlem. In March, 1925, this special issue of the journal was published—a direct result of the Civic Club dinner. Edited by Alain Locke, this issue was titled: "Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro." [28]

In this issue of the *Survey Graphic* Locke did not want Harlem to be mistakenly viewed as the cultural location where African-American art originated. Rather,

he wanted to show how Harlem was the first place in which African-American art began to be accepted. It was where new mindsets united between a white America and a black America. He frequently referenced this "New Negro;" however, a New Negro never emerged, rather the Old Negro vanished. The African-American was discarding this image of the Old Negro in which he was "more of a myth than a man"[29] and finding a renewed self-respect and self-dependence for himself. The Negro had begun challenging his own suppression and the tyrannical forces that convinced him of his own inferiority. This newfound emancipation for the African-American was never psychological or spiritual until Harlem opened the gates to self-expression.

This self-expression arguably began in Harlem at the turn of the 20th century, but it would never have met white society on its own. It was Charles Johnson that found a way to unite the black and white populations through literature. The Civic Club dinner was the momentous occasion that achieved this and appropriately represents Charles Johnson's lifelong advocacy for racial equality. He recognized the power of literature—that art was a subtle but highly effective approach to equality. It was never coercive and never overbearing. Johnson believed he could use these qualities to push for political and social equality without the public ever realizing he was doing so. This was exemplified on March 21, 1924 at the Civic Club dinner—a night disguised as merely the exposure and appreciation of art. However, this night carried much more significance than simply exposing of African-American artists to white audiences, just as Harlem symbolized more than a cultural movement. Harlem represented the embrace of a new psychology and spirit and a racial awakening on a national level. The Civic Club dinner reveals how two men with similar ideas came together to create a cultural moment that would in turn serve to highlight and launch the larger cultural, political, and social movement that was the Harlem Renaissance.

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