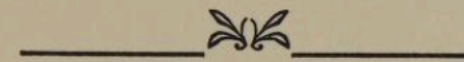


NEGRO
VOICES
IN
AMERICAN
FICTION



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To
L. T. G.

Of equal significance with the wider acceptance of the fiction of colored authors by major publishers was the general tendency to remove the stigma of inferiority from a work simply because it was written by a Negro. After World War I, both publishing houses and national periodicals showed a greater disposition to apply the same yardstick to the productions of Negroes as to the efforts of artists of other races. This more unbiased attitude, much less influenced by racial considerations, was just what the colored literati needed: first, it encouraged them to attain a higher standard of performance than would have been necessary to satisfy the requirements of certain smaller publishing establishments; second, it brought their novels and short stories before the general American reading public; and, third, as an examination of the better anthologies and histories of American literature will reveal, it drew Negro writers, more than ever before, into the main currents of national life and thought. In contemplation of these changes, Charles W. Chesnutt said in 1936: "I have lived to see, after twenty years or more, a marked change in the attitude of publishers and the reading public in regard to the Negro in fiction."¹⁸

VII. HARLEM: MECCA OF THE NEW NEGRO¹⁹

After World War I, Harlem—the most densely settled Negro community in the world and the melting pot of dark folk from Africa, the West Indies, Central and South America, and the hinterlands of the United States—became a national vogue. During the Roaring Twenties *Shuffle Along* and *Runnin' Wild* were major box-office attractions; and a Freud-conscious and war-weary country found exhilaration in the recklessness and dynamics of such lyrics as the theme song of *Runnin' Wild*:

Runnin' wild; lost control
Runnin' wild; mighty bold,

Feelin' gay and reckless too,
Carefree all the time; never blue
Always goin' I don't know where
Always showin' that I don't care
Don' love nobody, it ain't worth while
All alone; runnin' wild.

Among Negro artists and entertainers who vaulted into the limelight during the decade after the Armistice were Charles Gilpin, Paul Robeson, Roland Hayes, Florence Mills, Rose McClendon, Bessie Smith, Ethel Waters, Louis Armstrong, Josephine Baker, and Bill Robinson.

Attracted by Harlem and its celebrities, white folk began to swarm into the black ghetto. Some came to observe, others to ridicule, still more to laugh, but most came to seek exuberant escape in the so-called exotic primitivism of Negro cabaret life. As Langston Hughes says, "thousands of whites came to Harlem night after night, thinking the Negroes loved to have them there, and firmly believing that all Harlemites left their houses at sundown to sing and dance in cabarets, because most of the whites saw nothing but the cabarets, not the houses."²⁰ During these "whoopie" years the Cotton Club on Lenox Avenue became one of the most popular night clubs in the country.

For many reasons, most of which have been stated or implied, the Negro literati of the country likewise drifted to New York City. Noting that nearly all the participants in the Renaissance were migrants to Gotham, Langston Hughes, himself a native of Missouri, observes that "Jessie Fauset was from Philadelphia, Charles S. Johnson from Virginia, Arna Bontemps from California, Countee Cullen from Kentucky, Aaron Douglas from Kansas, Wallace Thurman from Salt Lake City, Rudolph Fisher from Washington, Walter White from Atlanta, Paul Robeson from New Jersey, Ethel Waters from Philadelphia, Richmond Barthe from New Orleans."²¹ While some newcomers were interested in successful colored shows on Broadway and Bohemian patronage of Harlem night life, the more serious were attracted

by the promise of New York City as a center for the florescence of racial art and literature. Leading publishers were opening their doors, important magazines were giving access to their pages,²² and white writers were evincing an increasing interest in Negro life and authorship. Furthermore, Harlem was the home of powerful Negro newspapers, of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and its mouthpiece, *The Crisis*, and of the National Urban League and its organ, *Opportunity*.

New York City's widely circulated Negro magazines, especially *The Crisis* and *Opportunity*, played a vital part in nurturing the Renaissance. "Jessie Fauset at *The Crisis*, Charles Johnson at *Opportunity*, and Alain Locke in Washington," writes Langston Hughes, "were the three people who mid-wifed the so-called New Negro literature into being."²³ Of the role played by *The Crisis* DuBois writes:

By 1920, we could point out that most of the young writers among American Negroes had made first publication in the columns of *The Crisis*. In the next few years we published work from Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, Anne Spencer, Abram Harris and Jessie Fauset.²⁴

Though irregular and shifting in editorial policy, *The Messenger*—with which A. Phillip Randolph, George S. Schuyler, and Wallace Thurman were connected—also served as a medium for Renaissance authors, publishing the first short stories of Langston Hughes. Of brief duration but nevertheless of importance was *Fire*, started in 1926 by Wallace Thurman, Zora Neale Hurston, Aaron Douglas, John P. Davis, Bruce Nugent, Gwendolyn Bennett, and Langston Hughes to "burn up a lot of the old, dead conventional Negro-white ideas of the past, *épater le bourgeois* into a realization of the existence of the younger Negro writers and artists, and provide us with an outlet for publication not available in the limited pages of the small Negro magazines then existing. . . ."²⁵ The Spingarn Medal, offered annually for "the highest or noblest achievement by an American Negro during the

preceding year or years," and the yearly awards of the Harmon Foundation were instrumental in promoting authorship among Negroes. *The Crisis* and *Opportunity* also gave annual prizes for creative writing.

Thus was the stage set for the flowering of the Negro Renaissance in Harlem. National attention was attracted to the black ghetto by the achievements of the race in music and drama as well as by the superficial primitivism of upper Manhattan cabaret life. Colored authors were drawn to New York City by the literary treasure-trove of the black community as well as by the new cordial attitudes of white publishers, editors, and writers. Furthermore, the two major Negro magazines presented the works of Renaissance writers, and generous patrons encouraged literary effort by the offer of substantial prizes and awards.