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The Twenties: Harlem and Its Negritude

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When Ralph Ellison came from Tuskegee to Harlem in 1936 and Richard Wright left Chicago the following year, I would say that those migrations marked the tail end of the Negro Renaissance. Dr. Alain Locke, the granddaddy of the New Negro, introduced me to the recently arrived Ralph Ellison in the lobby of the Young Men's Christian Association, and Ellison almost immediately expressed a desire to meet Richard Wright, who was coming briefly to New York for a week or so to attend a writers' conference. I introduced them. They became fast friends. Wright influenced Ellison in the nineteen-forties, as I had influenced Wright in the thirties, as Claude McKay and James Weldon Johnson influenced me in the twenties. But by the time the thirties came, the voltage of the Negro Renaissance of the twenties had nearly run its course. Ellison and Wright were about the last of the young pilgrims to come to Harlem seeking its sustenance. The chain of influences that had begun in Renaissance days ended in the thirties when the Great Depression drastically cut down on migrations, literary or otherwise.

Claude McKay had come to New York from Jamaica by way of Tuskegee before the Harlem Renaissance had properly begun, and soon thereafter he went to live in Europe, leaving the influence of his poetry behind him. McKay might be termed the first of the New Negroes, of whom Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, and James Weldon Johnson were the--466--deans. During the decade of the Renaissance, James Weldon Johnson lived at the corner of 135th Street and Seventh Avenue, in the very middle of Harlem, in a house which, I believe, belonged to his father-in-law and in which his charming wife, Grace, presided over midnight gumbo suppers following their literary soirees. James Weldon helped a number of Negro writers. We all needed help, but in sustenance and encouragement, we needed the examples of others before us who had achieved publication and who had written well and who had projected the feeling that in Harlem good writing might be done and that in downtown New York it might be published. From McKay and Johnson to Richard Wright and Ellison ran the Renaissance connections, with various plugs, switches, and cutoffs between. But the voltage in one way or another came through to all of us.

I arrived in Harlem at the very beginning of this New Negro Renaissance, and I have been in Harlem off and on ever since. Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison came to Harlem several years after the Renaissance had begun to go into decline. By 1935 the Federal Writers Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) was in the process of taking over. It had already taken on Wright before he left Chicago, and soon it took on Ellison in New York. I believe it did them no harm. Certainly, regular checks helped them to survive gastronomically, even to loaf at times and to contemplate their souls. I was never able to enroll in the Federal Writers Project because I had had two small volumes of poems published and a novel, so the government presumed I was well off -- not realizing that a writer cannot eat poems, even when handsomely bound by Alfred A. Knopf. All my relatives were registered in the WPA except me, so they looked down on me as if I did not want to work. Disillusioned and having no regular source of income, Federal or otherwise, I ceased looking for work, WPA or otherwise. I have not had a job since. On the Federal Project, Wright and Ellison worked at writing for the government and got paid. But I just wrote.

It was Harlem's Golden Era, that of the twenties. I was nineteen when I first came up out of the Lenox Avenue subway one bright September afternoon and looked around in the happy sunlight to see if I saw Duke Ellington on the corner of 135th Street, or Bessie Smith passing by, or Bojangles Bill Robinson in front of the Lincoln Theatre, or maybe Paul Robeson or Bert Williams walking down the

avenue. Had I been able to recognize any of them, it would have been only because of pictures I had seen in newspapers or magazines. I had read all about them in the Middle West, where I had gone to school, and I had dreamed of maybe someday--467--seeing them. I hoped, too, I might see in New York some of the famous colored writers and editors whose names were known around the country, like McKay and Johnson and Du Bois, or lesser knowns, like the young George S. Schuyler, Walter White of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, poet Jessie Fauset on the staff of *The Crisis*, or Eric Walrond from the West Indies. And I was sorry by the time I got to New York that Marcus Garvey was in prison and I could not hear him speak. But Ethel Waters was singing in Harlem night clubs, and downtown Sissle and Blake's sparkling *Shuffle Along* had just begun its long and happy run that kicked off a renaissance for the Negro in Broadway musicals.

Aaron Douglas from Kansas was beginning to paint his exotic silhouettes and Barthé from Louisiana to know the feel of clay soon to be molded into bronze. Charles Gilpin had already created *The Emperor Jones* at the Provincetown Theatre, and Paul Robeson was making his concert debut in Greenwich Village. Hall Johnson was gathering together in Harlem the first of his famous choirs. Countee Cullen was publishing his sonnets, and Zora Neale Hurston was writing her earliest stories. Jean Toomer was sending from Washington the poetic sketches that later became his book *Cane*. Mamie, Bessie, and Clara Smith were recording the blues. And Duke Ellington and his "Jungle Band" were at the Kentucky Club and later at the Cotton Club, where Negro patrons were not welcome unless they were very rich, like A'Lelia Walker, or famous, like Bojangles. Cabarets like Edmond's, Baron's, Small's, Leroy's, and the Lido were jumping. And J. P. Johnson, Dan Burley, Fats Waller, and Nappy were playing house-rent piano. All those things were happening during the years when I first lived in Harlem and wrote:

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. . . To the tune of those Weary Blues. . . That is the poem that gave the title to my first book, *The Weary Blues*, published in 1926, a year after Countee Cullen's *Color* appeared.

In 1922, Claude McKay's *Harlem Shadows* had come out. In 1923, *Cane* appeared and received accolades from the critics of the avant garde.--468--In 1924, Jessie Fauset's *There Is Confusion* was published, and Walter White's novel about a lynching, *The Fire in the Flint*. In 1925, Alain Locke's exciting anthology *The New Negro* appeared. The next year brought Eric Walrond's *Tropic Death* and Walter White's second novel, *Flight*. In 1927, Countee Cullen's *Ballad of the Brown Girl* and *Copper Sun* were published; also James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones* and my second volume of poems, *Fine Clothes to the Jew*.

A banner year for Harlem authors was 1928, the year when the Negro vogue in the arts might be said to have reached its peak. Five novels were published -- *Dark Princes* by W. E. B. Du Bois; *Plum Bun*, by Jessie Fauset; *The Walls of Jericho*, by Rudolph Fisher; *Quicksand*, by Nella Larsen; and *Home to Harlem*, by Claude McKay. In the following year, that of the Wall Street crash, came another Nella Larsen novel, *Passing*, another by Claude McKay, *Banjo*, and the advent of Wallace Thurman with *The Blacker the Berry*. I published *Not Without Laughter* in 1930, just as the Depression set in, so my first novel did not sell very well. A year later, Arna Bontemps published his first novel, *God Sends Sunday*, a little novel of great charm that had very little sale. During the remainder of that decade, nothing much exciting happened, literarily speaking, except for the debut in 1934 of the long-burgeoning talent of one of the most sparkling of Negro writers, Zora Neale Hurston, who blossomed forth in the midst of the Depression with her novel *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, followed in 1935 by another novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Had Miss Hurston's books appeared a decade earlier, during the Renaissance, they might have been best sellers. But it was not until 1940 that a Negro writer achieved that status: Richard Wright's powerful *Native Son* burst like a bombshell on the American scene. It sold a half million copies and was translated around the world.

When Richard Wright first came to Harlem, he lived at the Douglas Hotel, near the corner of 150th Street and St. Nicholas Avenue. There, in a small paper-cluttered room, he worked at completing *Native Son*, which he had begun in Chicago. At the Douglas, Ralph Ellison visited him, as did I and another of his friends, the playwright Theodore Ward. After the success of his novel, Wright got married and moved to Brooklyn Heights -- living in the same house, I believe, in which Carson McCullers lived -- and Harlemites did not see much of him any more. In 1941, Wright published his poetically written *Twelve Million Black Voices*, a folk history of the Negro in America. That same year, written in collaboration with Paul Green, his play, *Native Son*, in which Canada Lee played the role of Bigger Thomas, was presented on Broadway. And in--469--1943 his autobiographical *Black Boy* became a Book-of-the-Month Club selection. Then it was that Richard Wright moved to Paris, bought a farm in Normandy, and never came home any more. In ensuing years, his literary output abroad, so critics contend, was nowhere near the high quality of the books he wrote while still in America. *The Outsider* (1953), *Savage Holiday* (1954), *The Color Curtain* (1956), *Pagan Spain* (1957), and *The Long Dream* (1958) were written in Europe. Richard Wright died in Paris in 1960.

Until he came out of the Mississippi badlands, bringing with him all its mud and violence and hatred, no Negro writer in America had had so large an audience. For several years the big bad "burly nigger" of the Chicago slums, Bigger Thomas, who Wright created in *Native Son*, was a conversation piece for readers everywhere. They took sides, pro and con, on so monstrous a symbol of hate in a black skin. Should or should not Negro writers create such baleful characters? At any rate, Wright acquired a very wide audience indeed. Twelve years after the publication of *Native Son*, in 1952, Ralph Ellison, through his fantastic novel *Invisible Man*, achieved a similar public at home and abroad. But he did not move away from Harlem. Ellison still lives there.

Of the most famous of the Negro Renaissance writers, most are dead. James Weldon Johnson was killed in an automobile wreck in 1938 on the way to New York from his Massachusetts home. Claude McKay, having once been a Communist, became a Catholic and died in 1948 in Chicago. In 1960, Zora Neale Hurston died in Florida and Jessie Fauset in Philadelphia. Dr. Du Bois died in Ghana in 1963. The big names of Harlem writing deserted their old stamping grounds as the years went by. Now almost the last of the living Renaissance writers, besides myself, is Arna Bontemps, long-time librarian at Fisk University in Nashville. I still live in Harlem.

Once I was invited to a downtown party that I was especially urged to attend because my host wanted a charming white lady from Georgia who had never met a Negro socially to meet one -- in this case, me. When I was introduced to the lady, she said graciously, "Oh, I am so glad to meet you! When I was at Sweet Briar, I wrote a paper on four Negro poets, and *you* were one of them. Now, let me see! Who were the other three? Oh, yes, Claude McKay was one. What became of him?"

"He's dead," I said.

"Well now, another one -- he wrote sermons in verse," she recalled.

"James Weldon Johnson," I said.

"That's right! What became of him?"--470--

"He's dead," I said.

"Oh, my! Well now, that lyric poet with the pretty name."

"Countee Cullen?"

"Yes, where is he?"

"Dead, too," I said.

"My goodness!" cried the white woman from Georgia. "Are you the *only* Negro poet living?"

Cullen died at the age of forty-three. Among the most beautiful of his poems was "Heritage," which asked, "What is Africa to me?" Had the word *negritude* been in use in Harlem in the twenties, Cullen, as well as McKay, Johnson, Toomer, and I, might have been called poets of *negritude* — particularly Toomer of the "dusky cane-lipped throngs" with his "memories of kings and caravans, high-priests, an ostrich, and a juju man." In "Harlem Shadows," in 1922, McKay had written a poem about a Negro girl in which he presaged the images and sounds of the French-African poets a quarter of a century later:

*Her voice was like the sound of blended flutes
Blown by black players upon a picnic day.
She sang and danced on gracefully and calm,
The light gauze hanging loose about her form;
To me she seemed a proudly-swaying palm
Grown livelier for passing through a storm.
Upon her swarthy neck black shiny curls
Luxuriant fell. . . .* A few years after McKay, Cullen sang:

*You have not heard my love's dark throat,
Slow fluting like a reed. . . .* And in "Heritage" he asked:

*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?* In 1925, in a much translated poem, Waring Cuney wrote of the unsung loveliness of a Harlem girl:--471--

*She does not know her beauty. She thinks her brown body has no glory.
If she could dance naked under palm trees
And see her image in the river She would know.
But there are no palm trees on the street,
And dish water gives back no images.* This poem appeared in the first German anthology of American-Negro poetry, *Afrika Singt*, published in 1929 in Vienna and Leipzig. It also included my

*I am a Negro, Black as the night is black
Black as the depths of my Africa. . . .* and also an excellent translation of my

*I've known rivers. . . . I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it. . . . I've known
rivers, Ancient dusky rivers. My soul has grown deep like the rivers.*

In France as well as Germany, before the close of the Negro Renaissance, Harlem's poets were already being translated. Léopold Sédar Senghor of Senegal and Aimé Césaire of Martinique, the great poets of *negritude*, while still students at the Sorbonne, had read the Harlem poets and felt a bond between themselves and us. In faraway South Africa, Peter Abrahams, who became one of Africa's most distinguished authors, wrote in his autobiography, *Tell Freedom*, how, as a teenager at the Bantu Men's Social Center in Johannesburg, he discovered the Harlem poets of the twenties. There for the first time he read Du Bois, McKay, Georgia Douglass Johnson, Cullen, and myself. Years later when he became a writer, he recorded:

I read every one of the books on the shelf marked American Negro Literature. I became a nationalist, a color nationalist through the writings of men and women who lived in a world away from me. To them I owe a great debt for crystallizing my vague yearnings to write and for showing me that the long dream was attainable.--472--

The Harlem poets and novelists of the twenties became an influence in faraway Africa and the West Indies — an influence reflected till today in the literature of black men and women there. To us, *negritude* was an unknown word, but certainly pride of heritage and consciousness of race was ingrained in us. But because we were Harlemites of the balling and brawling "Roaring Twenties" of midnight cabarets and bootleg gin, Wallace Thurman called us jokingly "the niggerati." In his novel *Infants of the Spring*, Thurman captured the era perfectly as it related to its black bohemians. Now in the sixties, LeRoi Jones, Welton Smith, Calvin Hernton, David Henderson, and numerous young black writers do their balling and brawling downtown in Greenwich Village — integrated. But in the twenties we had so much fun and liked Harlem so well that we did not think about taking the long subway ride to the Village, where white artists and writers gathered. We let them come uptown to us.

409 Edgecombe, then the tallest apartment house on Sugar Hill, was a sort of party-giving center and in-and-out meeting place for Harlem writers and artists. Walter White and his beautiful *café au lait* wife,

Gladys, lived on the top floor there and loved giving parties. The painter Aaron Douglas and his wife, Alta, lived there, too, and always had a bottle of ginger ale in the ice box for those who brought along refreshments. Elmer Anderson Carter, the editor of *Opportunity* who succeeded Charles S. Johnson, was on the floor above the Douglasses, and actor Ivan Sharpe and Evie had a flat there, too, as did -- although much later -- the poet William Stanley Braithwaite, the composer Clarence Cameron White, and the Tea Cup Reader Madam Vanderbilt Smith.

Just down the hill in the Dunbar Apartments lived the famous Dr. Du Bois, the cartoonist E. Simms Campbell, and, nearby, Dan Burley, humorist, newspaperman, and boogie piano player, whose wife was a concert singer. Artists and writers were always running into each other on Sugar Hill and talking over their problems and wondering how they could get a Rosenwald Fellowship, a Guggenheim, or a grant from the Harmon Foundation. It was in the Aaron Douglas apartment, at 409 Edgecombe, that seven of us gathered one night and decided to found a magazine the better to express ourselves freely and independently -- without interference from old heads, white or Negro -- a magazine which we would support ourselves, although none of us had enough money on which to eat.

It was about that time that I wrote, "We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without--473--fear or shame. If white people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. . . . If colored people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either." Various of my friends said, "Amen!" And we set out to publish *Fire*, a Negro quarterly of the arts to *épater le bourgeois*, to burn up a lot of the old stereotyped Uncle Tom ideas of the past, and to provide us with an outlet for publishing not existing in the hospitable but limited pages of *The Crisis* or *Opportunity*. Wallace Thurman would edit *Fire*, Aaron Douglas would be its artist and designer, and John P. Davis (who years later edited the enormous *American Negro Reference Book* for the Phelps Stokes Fund) would be the business manager. All seven of us -- including artist and writer Bruce Nugent, poet Gwendolyn Bennett, novelist Zora Neale Hurston, and myself -- were to be the editorial board, and each of us would put in fifty dollars to bring out the first issue. But not all of us had fifty dollars to put in, so Wallace Thurman, who had a job, assumed responsibility for the printer's bills.

He was years paying off the ensuing indebtedness. As to format, we got carried away with ourselves, and our taste proved extremely expensive. Only the best cream white paper would do on which to print our poems and stories. And only a rich crimson jacket on de luxe stock would show off well the Aaron Douglas cover design. Beautifully laid out, *Fire's* one and only issue was handsome indeed -- and the printer's bills enormous. How Thurman was able to persuade the printer to release the entire issue to us on so small an advance payment, I do not know. But he did. The downtown newspapers and white magazines (except for *The Bookman*) paid no attention to the advent of *Fire*, and we had no money for advertising. Bruce Nugent, jobless and at leisure at the time, was in charge of distribution and collections. Being hungry, Nugent usually ate up on the spot the meager amounts he collected from *Fire's* very few sales. As we had hoped -- even though it contained no four-letter words as do today's little magazines -- the Negro bourgeoisie were shocked by *Fire*. The *Afro-American's* literary reviewer wrote in high indignation, "I have just tossed the first issue of *Fire* into the fire." He claimed that in his poetry Cullen tried "his best to obscure the thought in superfluous sentences" and that I displayed my "usual ability to say nothing in many words," while Aaron Douglas was "permitted to spoil three perfectly good pages and a cover with. . . the meaningless grotesqueness of his creations." When the editorial board of *Fire* met again, we did not plan a new issue, but emptied our pockets to help poor Thurman whose wages were being garnished weekly because he had signed for the printer's bills.--474--Yet somehow we still managed to go dancing at the Savoy on Saturday nights or to Edmond's to hear Ethel Waters sing.

The Negro writers of the twenties, it seems (or perhaps it is only because I am looking back through a golden haze of memories), did not take themselves as seriously as did the writers of the thirties -- the hungry era, when proletarian authors came into vogue; or as did those of the forties, who went from a

depression through a great war; or those of the fifties, when integrationist tendencies of let-us-write-white developed; or of the sixties, when a vengeful James Baldwin called down upon America "the fire next time" and LeRoi Jones of the four-letter words advised all white folks, "Drop dead!" Negro literature began to acquire its share of angry young men.

Now almost nobody's writing has fun in it any more -- not even *The Wig* by Charles Wright, which begins with high hilarity and ends with a red-hot steel rod jabbed into the penis of its smiling hero, who says, "I'm beginning to feel better already." But none of these contemporary Negro writers lives in Harlem, and none of them was even a gleam in their daddies' eyes when the Harlem Renaissance began, and their truculent *negritude* emblazoned in graffiti is designed to *épater* a much more blasé bourgeoisie than that which existed in the far-off days of comparative innocence when, on the printed page, not even Richard Wright's big burly Bigger Thomas dared say, "mother -----!"