
What Renaissance?: A Deep Genealogy of Black Culture in Nineteenth-Century New York City

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Harlem Renaissance. Two words that hang in the air, begging for more...

Renaissance. The word signifies rebirth. But of what?

Harlem. Which Harlem? Since its founding by the Dutch in 1637, Harlem has existed in many incarnations. From Dutch possession, it was taken over by the British in 1664 and became American at the time of Independence; then transformed from a prosperous agricultural village in the seventeenth century to a site of Irish squatters in the mid nineteenth; annexed to New York City in 1877; and finally emerged as a site of black political and cultural activity around 1910. If the term “Harlem Renaissance” is meant to refer to this latter Harlem born at the beginning of the twentieth century, then how could it already be undergoing a rebirth in the 1920s?

These questions might seem naïve. After all, everybody knows what the Harlem Renaissance is. In the introductory essay to his seminal volume, *The New Negro* (1925), Alain Locke defined Harlem as the site of an early-twentieth-century New Negro culture whose originality and uniqueness he himself was helping to birth. Out of all the urban centers in the North, Locke asserted, Harlem had benefited the most from the ongoing “tide of Negro migration northward and city-ward” such that it now constituted “not merely the largest Negro community in the world, but the first concentration in history of so many diverse elements of Negro life” (Locke 1969, 6). As a result, it was only in Harlem that the transformation of the Negro could take place: “In Harlem, Negro life is seizing upon its first chances for group expression and self-determination” (1969, 7).

According to Locke, a cadre of “new intellectuals” nurtured this emergent group expression by encouraging both “artistic endowments and cultural contributions” and

radical political action, thus transforming Harlem into “a race capital” (Locke 1969, 7, 15). Writing was their weapon of choice. Recently settled in New York, W.E.B. Du Bois founded *The Crisis* in 1911 as the monthly publication of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) with the express purpose of promoting black artistic production *and* political activism. In his early editorials, Du Bois insisted that the magazine would “record important happenings and movements in the world which bear on the great problem of interracial relations, and especially those which affect the Negro-American,” and also further “show the danger of race prejudice, particularly as manifested to-day toward colored people” (qtd in Carroll 2005, 22–23). Some 15 years later, Locke compiled *The New Negro* as an exemplary anthology of black fiction, poetry, literary criticism, art history, music commentary, historical reflections on early cultural manifestations, and sociological observations on present conditions.

The Harlem Renaissance’s agenda encapsulated both propaganda and aesthetics. The purpose of propaganda was clear: to detail the wrongs done to African descended peoples and insist that they be corrected. Aesthetics was a more complex issue. Renaissance spokespersons argued that black artists needed to represent the race through authentic literary and cultural representations, illuminating, in Du Bois’s terms, the special gifts and destiny of the Negro for an ignorant world. But definitions of the Negro’s special gifts and of proper forms of representation were up for debate. Did black authenticity reside in the elite or the folk? Should black artists insert themselves into western high cultural traditions or work to articulate a black vernacular tradition? Should they consider themselves Negro, American, or cosmopolitan?

All these questions had been asked before. Indeed, the Harlem Renaissance has a long prehistory, a deep genealogy that stretches back at least a full century and challenges Locke’s assertion of the originality of Harlem and its “group expression.” Rather than employ the term “renaissance” to connote the birth of a first, new, and unique artistic movement, Locke could have adhered to the word’s literal meaning of rebirth, the reappearance of earlier cultural formations. And rather than focus exclusively on early-twentieth-century Harlem, he could have considered some of the city’s earlier neighborhoods that had been home to black New Yorkers and their institutions.

Before Harlem, there was New York. As Du Bois noted in “The Black North: A Social Study,” a 1901 series for the *New York Times*, blacks were present in the city from its very beginnings. In the colonial period, New York’s black population was small—growing from 630 in 1703 to 3100 in 1771—then waxed (and sometimes waned) throughout the antebellum period reaching a high of 16,300 in 1840 (Hodges 1999, 271, 274, 279). From the 1870s on, however, its numbers increased steadily: in 1880, there were approximately 20,000 blacks living in Manhattan, and 36,000 by 1910 (Du Bois 1901, November 17). After consolidation, in 1910 the entire metropolitan area included over 91,000 (Osofsky 1971, 17). Many found their way to Harlem.

Locke gave one single explanation for the rapid increase of New York’s black population and the creation of Harlem as a black metropolis: immigration. Of the 60,500 blacks in Manhattan in 1910 only 14,300 were born in New York State (Osofsky 1971, 18). The majority came from the South or the Caribbean. Their reasons

for coming north were many, varying from vagrancy and idle tourism to escape from Jim Crow laws in the South and hope for a better life in the big city. Many Harlem Renaissance figures were part of this pattern of immigration, non-native New Yorkers who came to the city as young adults. Zora Neale Hurston trekked north from Florida. Nella Larsen arrived from Chicago, Langston Hughes from Missouri, and Wallace Thurman from Salt Lake City. Others traveled from closer locations, Jean Toomer from Washington, DC, Alain Locke from Philadelphia, and Jessie Fauset from Camden, NJ. Still others hailed from countries of the African diaspora: Claude McKay from Jamaica and Eric Walrond from Guyana.

Before Harlem, however, there had already been waves of northward and city-ward black migration. As Du Bois asserted in "The Black North," the influx of blacks into Harlem was not new, but simply the most recent historical iteration of the infiltration of immigrants into native populations of cities like New York and Philadelphia. "The history of the Negro in Northern cities," he wrote, "is the history of the rise of a small group growing by accretions from without, but at the same time periodically overwhelmed by them and compelled to start again when once the new material has been assimilated" (Du Bois 1901, December 15). As early as the post-revolutionary war period, for example, migration from the surrounding countryside and the Caribbean had resulted in a seven-fold increase of New York's black population between 1790 and 1810 (White 1991, 153; Hodges 1999, 278).

The northward migration to New York, Du Bois continued, was followed by the internal movement of blacks within the city. "The Black North" traced migratory patterns later expanded upon in James Weldon Johnson's 1930 history, *Black Manhattan*, and 1933 autobiography, *Along this Way*. Before Harlem, both men noted, black New Yorkers—much like other immigrant groups—settled at the tip of Manhattan, and moved slowly north—to the Five Points area (around Mulberry Street) in the 1820s, and then to what is now Soho and Greenwich Village by mid-century. These neighborhoods were the ground from which diverse political, literary, and cultural formations emanated. In *Black Manhattan*, Johnson continued tracking the northward march of black New Yorkers after the civil war. From Bleecker and Grove Streets, they worked their way up Sixth and Seventh Avenues to the West Twenties and Thirties by 1890, and to the West Forties and Fifties by 1900 (Johnson 1972, 58–59).

In these later decades, according to Johnson, the city witnessed the birth of not one, but of two, black New Yorks, comprised of groups that were socially and geographically distinct: Brooklyn, home to the postbellum black elite, and across the East River, a black bohemia emerging on Manhattan's West Side. Together, these two groups gave rise to a new New York reflected in the richness and diversity of its cultural, social, and economic activity: "During the last quarter of the last century," Johnson wrote, "in New York the Negro now began to function and express himself on a different plane, in a different sphere," although Johnson could have used the plural "spheres" (Johnson 1972, 59).

It was these several antebellum and postbellum New Yorks that provided the fertile ground from which the Harlem Renaissance sprang. Indeed, Johnson observed that although the Renaissance seemed "rather like a sudden awakening, like an

instantaneous change,” it was not. “The story of it, as of almost every experience relating to the Negro in America, goes back a long way,” by which he meant not merely decades but a century or more (Johnson 1972, 260). The misperception of the Harlem Renaissance as sudden and instantaneous, Johnson concluded, lay in the fact that “the Harlem group” was simply the first in African American history to succeed in disseminating Negro work to a broad public and making America “aware that there are Negro authors with something interesting to say and the skill to say it” (1972, 262–63).

Johnson and Du Bois were transitional figures who helped Negro culture enter the twentieth century. Yet, if their writings look forward to the new, they also look back to the old to provide us with a deep, century-long prehistory of black life in New York City.

Antebellum Black Manhattan

In *Black Manhattan*, Johnson adopted a historian’s perspective to argue two related points: that the “literary and artistic emergence” of the Negro American “goes back a long way,” and that “New York has been, almost exclusively, the place where that emergence has taken place” (Johnson 1972, 260). Johnson placed these beginnings in Lower Manhattan at the moment of Emancipation in New York State on July 4, 1827. It wouldn’t be too far-fetched to suggest that a “race capital” was already in formation. Indeed, although New York’s black population was spread throughout the city, its geographic nucleus was the Five Points in today’s Chinatown, from where it stretched east and north through Little Italy, Soho, Tribeca, and Greenwich Village. But, unlike the later Harlem, race, ethnic, and class prejudices threw African Americans—elite and bohemian—as well as poor whites—native born as well as Irish and German immigrants, Catholics and Protestants—together into these dense and compact neighborhoods. It was from this site that New York’s earliest black cultural formations and institutions emerged: churches, schools, mutual aid and literary societies, but also theaters, dance halls, taverns, and quite simply the street.

One central institution in the area was *Freedom’s Journal*, the country’s first black newspaper and progenitor of *The Crisis*. In *Black Manhattan*, Johnson noted the paper’s crucial role as a site of radical political activity in its championing of black Americans’ dignity as human beings, their intellectual capacity, and their rights to citizenship (Johnson 1972, 14). Anticipating later mass immigration movements, founder John Russwurm came to New York from Jamaica. With the help of co-editor Samuel Cornish, he established *Freedom’s Journal* in 1827 and managed to keep it afloat for two years. After a several-year hiatus, the *Colored American* took its place; Cornish provided editorial continuity until the paper was taken over by Philip Bell and Charles Ray.

Johnson listed other early activists as well: James McCune Smith, a fervent abolitionist and agitator for black civil rights, doctor, statistician, essayist, and more;

Alexander Crummell, Episcopal theologian, and in his late years Du Bois's mentor; and three clergymen who at times doubled as newspaper editors: Henry Highland Garnet, Samuel Ringgold Ward, and James W.C. Pennington (Johnson 1972, 15). Embracing patriarchal codes of the day, this male leadership excluded women from their ranks.

Well before Du Bois, these radical activists understood the importance of representation: "We wish to plead our own cause," the prospectus of *Freedom's Journal* proclaimed. "Too long have others spoken for us. Too long has the public been deceived by misrepresentation of things which concern us dearly" (March 16, 1827). To do so, the *Colored American* later added, we must "speak out in THUNDER TONES" (March 4, 1837). Long before the *Crisis*, antebellum black editors encouraged their readers to think about how newspapers could help not only to imagine community (following Benedict Anderson's famous formulation) but also to create community, a "movement" (albeit one without such labels as the NAACP or the Harlem Renaissance) that would bring together representative men and women of the race to coalesce around specific issues and strategies.

For these early black leaders, literacy was key to accomplishing their goals. Given the poor quality of black education north and south, *Freedom's Journal* initially limited itself to advocating basic skills. But in time it came to promote the value of "literary character." Both *Freedom's Journal* and the *Colored American* not only championed blacks' ability to read and write, but also offered compelling portraits and achievements of the race. Editors reviewed works by writers who were already forming a black literary tradition: Ignatius Sancho, Olaudah Equiano, Ottobah Cugano, and Phillis Wheatley (*Freedom's Journal*, May 18, 1828). These writings, editors suggested, would encourage newspaper readers to learn about the race's past struggles and aspirations and thus help them imagine a better future.

To achieve such goals, both newspapers recognized the importance of representing black New Yorkers' efforts to build community. In particular, the *Colored American* assiduously reported on the activities of literary societies such as the Philomathean and Phoenixonian. The organizations' membership was exclusively male and overlapped substantially. Their aims and activities were similar. Black men, they insisted, needed to "toil up the rugged ascent of the 'Hill of Science,' each bearing some mental tribute to the shrine of 'Wisdom's Temple,' placed on its lofty summit" (May 2, 1840). To accomplish this goal, they hosted annual lecture series that covered a broad range of subjects—political and racial, literary and scientific, local and cosmopolitan. Specific topics included sacred music, Christianity, oratorical delivery, chemistry, history, geography, logic, and "the character and capability of colored men." Always the most popular lecturer, James McCune Smith spoke on medical subjects such as "Organs of the Senses," "Circulation of the Blood," and "Phrenology."

Anticipating Du Bois, early black leaders understood that literary character and political rights were inextricably linked. Literary knowledge provided the necessary rhetorical tools "to plead our own cause" and disseminate it to a broad public through the press. Charles Reason, the son of Haitian émigrés, tapped into the British poetic

traditions of Milton and Wordsworth, writing a poem, “The Spirit Voice, Or, Liberty Call to the Disfranchised,” in which he imagined this voice:

’Tis calling you, who now too long have been
Sore victims suffering under legal sin,
To vow, no more to sleep, till raised and freed
From partial bondage, to a life indeed.

(*Colored American*, August 7, 1841)

Inverting the argument, black leaders also insisted that political rights were a precondition of literary and educational achievement. “So much of our religious, literary and local happiness,” they maintained, “virtually depends [upon] the political enfranchisement of our people” (*Colored American*, September 5, 1840). Enfranchisement took many forms. The most pressing was the abolition of slavery. But another, more local issue was Reason’s “Liberty Call”: the imperative for black men to regain the right to vote taken away from them by an amendment to the New York State constitution some years earlier. Worried about the increased presence of free blacks in the state, legislators had determined to deny black men the franchise; in 1821, they passed a bill mandating a voting property qualification of \$250.

Colored American editors Samuel Cornish and Philip Bell reported extensively on black New Yorkers’ fight to regain the franchise. They were soon joined by men of the younger generation, among them James McCune Smith, George Downing, and Henry Highland Garnet, to establish the New York Political Association for the Elevation and Improvement of the People of Color. Long before the Harlem Renaissance, these young activists claimed that they were the *new*—and hence the more knowledgeable and empowered—generation. Their very youthfulness was indispensable to the cause.

Much like the later Du Bois, James McCune Smith was the intellectual leader of his generation. Yet his influence extended beyond the particular time and place of antebellum Manhattan well into the future, most especially in Du Bois’s own thinking: the representation of African-descended peoples as endowed with special gifts and destiny. In 1841, Smith delivered a lecture, “The Destiny of Our People,” at the Philomathean Society, published in pamphlet form two years later. Casting African-descended people as one of God’s chosen races, Smith interpreted the fate of enslaved blacks in terms of a providential history that would result in a special destiny. Describing their suffering and resistance in terms similar to the biblical Israelites, Smith proceeded to argue that, unlike the ancient Jews who never thought of Egypt as home, black Americans were attached through their blood and their tears to the soil of their birthplace. They would never abandon their Egypt, but remain in the United States where, under God’s guidance, they would become agents of their own self-emancipation and fulfill their special destiny. Well before Du Bois, Smith prophesied that it would be the task of black Americans to convert the “form” of the American government into “substance,” and “purify” it by replacing slavery and oppression with liberty. Smith insisted that it

would be intellectual activity, and intellectual activity alone, that would enable blacks to achieve this lofty goal (Smith 1984, 10, 7, 8, 15).

To fulfill their destiny, Smith insisted that blacks needed to cultivate the qualities of spiritual soul and moral character. Like many of the black elite, he further suggested that once achieved these inner qualities would in turn manifest themselves in outer respectability and counter the negative stereotypes of blacks held by most white Americans. “Men of narrow views and limited information,” he wrote in a later essay, “cannot perceive that there is around every intelligent ‘home,’ all the elements of refined manners and dignified deportment . . . [They] are apt to conceive that society and refinement are confined to the little heaven in which they are privileged to ‘thunder,’ regarding all as outcasts—*barbaroi*—who are not embraced within their charmed environ” (Smith 1926, 279–80; Peterson 2011a, 119–32).

To some black leaders, “*barbaroi*” were already visible in an early black bohemia that intermingled with the community’s more serious political and literary institutions. In *Black Manhattan* Johnson began his discussion of 1890s black bohemia with a foray into the past in an effort to locate the origins of a black theatrical tradition: “As far back as 1821 the African Company gave performances of *Othello*, *Richard III*, and other classic plays, interspersed with comic acts at the African Grove, corner of Bleecker and Mercer streets” (Johnson 1972, 78). But, curiously, after a few remarks Johnson focused his attention on one single individual, Ira Aldridge, whose extensive theatrical career at home and in Europe anticipates the internationalism of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century black artists including Johnson himself.

Yet black performance flourished throughout antebellum Lower Manhattan. In contrast to the community’s other institutions, their venues frequently blurred class and racial boundaries. In the early 1820s William Brown, like John Russwurm an émigré from the Caribbean, opened the African Grove as a pleasure garden to the west of the Five Points. He catered to a cross-section of New Yorkers—members of both the black elite and lower classes as well as local whites—offering ice cream and punch as well as entertainment such as orchestral and vocal music and dramatic recitations (McAllister 2003, 30; White and White 1998, 93). A few blocks south in the heart of the Five Points stood Almack’s, parodically named after a fashionable London social club, and later simply known as Pete Williams’s place. A dance hall that catered to lower-class blacks, it attracted its share of white visitors, too. In his 1842 *American Notes for General Circulation*, Charles Dickens described some of its denizens, focusing in particular on their dress. The landlady is a “buxom fat mulatto woman, whose head is daintily ornamented with a handkerchief of many colours.” Two dancers, young mulatto girls, wear “head-gear after the fashion of the hostess.” The landlord is equally finely attired “in a smart blue jacket, like a ship’s steward, with a thick gold ring upon his little finger, and round his neck a gleaming golden watch-guard” (1842, 36).

Pleasure-seeking black bohemians did not confine themselves to the indoors, however, but just as Harlemites would do a century later, spilled out into the street. Here whites served as mere spectators, training their curious gaze on these “*barbaroi*” and referring to them derisively as black dandies and dandizettes. Some flocked to watch

guests arrive at an African American ball on Mulberry Street and mocked the “tawdry elegance” of the women. Others, observing black New Yorkers stroll up and down Broadway and the Battery in their leisure time, ridiculed their extravagant dress and motley combinations of styles and colors (White and White 1998, 98, 94).

Blacks reacted to such public displays in a variety of ways. Dandies and dandizettes took to the streets to express black pride and black freedom; whites’ derisiveness might have thus reflected a deep-seated anxiety over such declarations of black autonomy and authority. In contrast, community leaders who promoted codes of respectability, were appalled, anticipating by a hundred years Du Bois’s and Locke’s revulsion of Harlem Renaissance depictions of low-down folk. An editorial in *Freedom’s Journal* opined that “nothing serves more to keep us in our present degraded condition, than these foolish exhibitions of ourselves [which make us] complete and appropriate laughing stocks for thousands of our citizens” (July 18, 1828).

Other black leaders, however, were ambivalent. What they sensed was that, long before the Harlem Renaissance, black bohemians had created a distinct black American, or perhaps even black New York, style that resided in its astonishing mixture of European and African, of “high” and “low” (Miller 2009, 81–84). In an 1865 retrospective account, for example, even James McCune Smith recalled with considerable pleasure the parade held on July 5, 1827 to commemorate Emancipation Day in New York State. He began with a description of the paraders led by Grand Marshal of the day Samuel Hardenburgh, “a splendid-looking black man, in cocked hat and drawn sword, mounted on a milk-white steed,” and concluded with the crowd of onlookers: women “with gay bandanna handkerchiefs, betraying their West Indian birth,” and “Africa itself, hundreds who had survived the middle passage, and a youth in slavery” (Smith 1865, 24–25). Writing for *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* in the 1850s under the pen name of Ethiop, William J. Wilson had mixed reactions. He decried the way in which dandyism distracted young men from engaging in political activism, and yet his portrait of the black dandy strutting along Church Street, “alias (black) Broadway,” betrayed his deep fascination with cosmopolitan style:

Here you will find young men of every taste, and some of the finest looking and finest-appearing in the country in form, unsurpassed; in dress, without a rival. If you would know the height of fashion, you can as well learn it there, as in upper tendom. Patent leather boots and claret coats, tight pants and pointed collars, French wrappers, and Scotch shawls, diamond rings and studded breast-pins, gold watches and California chains, all are exhibited here, from finer forms, and with more taste, than above Bleeker Street. (*Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, February 26, 1852)

Long before the Harlem Renaissance, the early black dandy was a cosmopolitan man of the world inhabiting European culture as easily as American and African.

This mixing of class and culture is precisely what defined both the performances and audiences of the African Grove Theater. In *Black Manhattan*, Johnson noted the company’s investment in Western cultural traditions, listing “classic plays” such as Shakespeare’s *Othello* and *Richard III*. Although Shakespeare’s works were not considered

high cultural art in the early nineteenth century but rather plays for popular consumption, Brown's choice exhibited "literary character" and appealed to the taste of the black elite who on other evenings flocked to the Philomathean and Phoenixonian Societies' lectures. But Brown also welcomed the black masses and, more astonishingly, made a bid for white spectators who lost their theater when the Park Theater burned down in 1820. Quite predictably, audience reactions differed dramatically. From the point of view of black actors and spectators, performing Shakespeare constituted a claim to cosmopolitan belonging. In contrast, white spectators flocked to performances because to them they represented yet again an incongruous mixing of high (a famed European dramatist) and low (black bodies in performance). White reviewers underscored this tension between high and low in their hesitation over whether the black actors were "evincing a nice discrimination" in their interpretations, or revealing their cultural ignorance through their use of dialect and excessive gesture (McAllister 2003, 54, 43). Less indecisive was the police's action to close down the African Grove because of its very appeal to whites.

Compounding the confusion between high and low, Western and non-Western, the African Grove Theater performed plays that lay outside of European cultural and historical traditions. Long before Langston Hughes's 1936 *The Emperor of Haiti* (later renamed *Troubled Island*) about the two Haitian revolutionaries Dessalines and Toussaint L'Ouverture, Brown wrote and produced *The Drama of King Shotaway*, a dramatic rendering of an insurrection led by the inspirational Afro-Carib king against British colonizers on the island of St. Vincent. He staged performances of John Fawcett's better-known *Obi; or Three-Finger'd Jack*, which also dramatized a slave rebellion, this time in Jamaica, with Jack as its powerful leader. To Brown, the history of indigenous and slave leaders in the Caribbean was as heroic as that of British kings (McAllister 2003, 95–101, 122–27).

In a final complication of cultural categories, the African Grove Theater added low comedy to its repertoire long before the Harlem Renaissance produced such folk plays as Willis Richardson's 1923 *A Chip Woman's Fortune* or Hughes and Hurston's 1930 *Mulebone*. One of the most popular was the musical *Tom and Jerry* where theatrical enjoyment lay in the blurring of racial and class boundaries which occurred at an even more dizzying rate than in the Shakespearean performances. Even though Tom and Jerry were both Afro-British characters, Brown hired a white actor to play one of the lead roles. Seeking to partake of all aspects of London nightlife, the two men visit fashionable West End establishments such as Almack's before descending on the East End slums where they enter a tavern parodically named All Max, patronized by a motley crew of low-life blacks. In the performance, white becomes black, distinctions between upper and lower classes evaporate (McAllister 2003, 116–18).

From the African Grove Theater pleasure seekers could walk a few short steps to Almack's famed for the dancing of William Henry Lane. A far more skilled performer than the fictional Tom and Jerry, Lane combined African steps, slave dance, and the Irish jig to create a specifically black dance. Often referred to as Master Juba, he could, according to Dickens,

Single shuffle, double shuffle, cut and cross-cut; snapping his fingers, rolling his eyes, turning in his knees, presenting the backs of his legs in front, spinning about on his toes and heels ... dancing with two left legs, two right legs, two wooden legs, two wire legs, two spring legs—all sorts of legs and no legs—what is this to him? (Dickens 1842, 36).

But Lane could not escape white appropriation. Long before black artists of the 1890s and the Harlem Renaissance, he crossed the Atlantic and toured Britain with white minstrel groups who exploited his talents. Despite such appropriations, Johnson insisted, it was the minstrel show that bore witness to the “real beginnings of the Negro in the American theatre” (Johnson 1972, 87).

Black Brooklyn and Black Bohemia at the Turn of the Century

Johnson’s explicit goal in *Black Manhattan* was to trace the development of the Negro in American theater, beginning with the emergence of black vaudeville and musical comedy in New York at century’s end in which he himself played a key role. Johnson was no stranger to New York. In his autobiography, he noted that as a youngster he traveled from his home town of Jacksonville, Florida to spend the summer in Brooklyn with his aunt and uncle. They were part of a black elite, many of whose members had fled from Manhattan to Brooklyn after the 1863 draft riots to form a society of “upper class and well-to-do coloured people” that functioned as “the center of social life and respectability” (Johnson 1972, 59). As in antebellum Manhattan, black Brooklynites lived in pockets within larger white neighborhoods, notably in the Fort Greene and Bedford-Stuyvesant areas. Closing in on itself, Brooklyn’s black elite self-protectively sought to maintain a safe distance from both threatening whites and disreputable blacks.

Indeed, across the East River on Manhattan’s West Side lay a second, vastly different black community: it served both as “the business and social centre” of black men involved in professional sports and the theater, and as the site of an emergent black bohemia, dotted with “gambling-clubs, honky-tonks, and professional clubs” and exuding an “atmosphere in which new artistic ideas were born and developed” (Johnson 1972, 73–74, 78). Acknowledging that they went to Brooklyn only when they “could make it convenient,” Johnson and his brother Rosamond immersed themselves in the entertainment and club life of this postwar black bohemia (Johnson 2004, 354). The best-known club was Ike Hines’s, which Johnson depicted in *Black Manhattan* by simply quoting from his description in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. A latter-day combination of Almack’s and the African Grove, it brought together black dancers, both professional and social, sports figures, minstrels, an aspiring tragedian who regularly recited Shakespeare, as well as whites who, like Dickens, were spending a night out slumming.

Beyond mere entertainment, however, Johnson insisted that this black bohemia nurtured the growth of “early Negro theatrical talent” (Johnson 1972, 78) whose history he traced in some detail. In the late 1860s, Johnson asserted, Negro minstrels

began to reclaim their place on the professional stage with the formation of all-Negro companies such as the Georgia minstrels. These companies provided “stage training and theatrical experience for a large number of coloured men” and were “the start along a line which led straight to the musical comedies of Cole and Johnson, Williams and Walker, and Ernest Hogan ... [who] assembled in New York” (1972, 93, 95), first along Sixth and Seventh Avenues in the Thirties before moving up to the Fifties. This choice of location was not accidental; it was the site of black bohemia but also lay in close proximity to Broadway, known at the time as the Great White Way.

By century’s end, the heart of artistic black bohemia was the Marshall Hotel, home to the Johnson brothers. Antedating the Harlem Renaissance’s famous venues, it was much more than a hotel. As “New York’s center for Negro artists,” it was the premier social gathering place for talented musicians and singers residing in or visiting the city and gradually eclipsed all the other clubs in popularity. Among its patrons were: the Johnsons’ collaborator Bob Cole; the vaudeville team of Bert Williams and George Walker; Walker’s wife, singer Aida Overton; black minstrel Ernest Hogan; poet Paul Laurence Dunbar; composers Will Marion Cook and Harry Burleigh, who had both studied at New York’s Conservatory of Music when Antonín Dvořák taught there; and of course the inevitable white hangers-on. To an even greater extent than at William Brown’s venues, these black artists brought together “high” and “low” cultures in striking juxtapositions: Dunbar penned both dialect and standard English verse; Cook composed “true Negro music” in contrast to Burleigh’s commitment to classical “art songs”; in stark contrast to their blackface stage personae, in real life Williams and Walker appeared throughout the city as dignified, cosmopolitan dandies (Johnson 2004, 320–25). Well before the Harlem Renaissance, these black performers were internationalists, touring across the Atlantic and as far away as Australia.

Despite their divergent interests, these artists had one goal in common: that of “raising the status of the Negro as a writer, composer, and performer in the New York theater and world of music,” and convincing white managers to allow them to perform in a “first class, legitimate ‘Broadway’ house” (Johnson 2004, 320). Within the field of art, they were doing radical race work on their own terms. Far beyond anything that William Brown had ever imagined, these performers set their sights beyond black audiences to appeal to white mainstream theatergoers. If successful, they would be guaranteed a good living and would be able to provide jobs for black writers, musicians, and stage hands (Sotiropoulos 2006, 77).

Getting to Broadway meant acceding to racial stereotypes that pandered to the taste of white audiences. In Johnson’s mind, Dunbar was speaking for all black artists of the period when he complained that he was “expressing only certain conceptions about Negro life that his audience was willing to accept and ready to enjoy; that, in fact, he wrote mainly for the delectation of an audience that was an outside group” (Johnson 2004, 306). These conceptions found full expression in the coon song craze. Invented by white performers in the 1880s, the coon song represented whites’ stereotyped perceptions of blacks: character-wise, the coon was a good-for nothing black man who indulged in sex, drink, gambling, and eating watermelon, as well as other more serious

vices such as chicken-stealing and razor fights; linguistically, coon songs incorporated dialect into their verses; musically, they relied on African-derived syncopated rhythms.

Much like the early minstrels, black performers of the period were forced to enter the coon song craze if they hoped to attract large numbers of theatergoers; Ernest Hogan, for example, consolidated his reputation with his 1896 song, "All Coons Look Alike to Me." But these artists subtly worked to subvert the form: they used the word "coon" as little as possible, omitted the worst aspects of the stereotype, and incorporated broader aspects of black life, such as black public meetings and indirect political commentary, into their lyrics. In the process, they were able to garner a black audience as well, and also further the careers of black stage professionals (Sotiropoulos 2006, 95–99).

These black performers sought, however, to move beyond mere subversion. Anticipating the Harlem Renaissance, they aspired to create a theater for, by, and about their own people independent of white control. First, they turned away from minstrelsy toward the less racist form of vaudeville, although they remained indebted to white managers. In 1896, John Isham produced *Oriental America*, the first black show performed on Broadway proper. The play was still built on the minstrel model, yet the finale did not contain the usual cake-walk or hoe-down, but instead showcased black's ability to perform high culture with arias from *Faust*, *Rigoletto*, *Carmen*, and other classical operas, mixing once again high and low cultural forms (Johnson 1972, 96–97).

A second "great step forward," in Johnson's words, came a couple of years later with a shift from vaudeville to musical comedy with George Lederer's Broadway production of *Clorindy—The Origins of the Cake-Walk*, which brought together composer Will Marion Cook, librettist Paul Laurence Dunbar, and "the natural-black-face comedian" Ernest Hogan (1972, 102). Seeking an ever-expanding white audience, Lederer, according to Johnson, "judged correctly that the practice of the Negro chorus, to dance strenuously and sing at the same time ... would be a profitable novelty, ... [and] that some injection of Negro syncopated music would produce a like result" (Johnson 2004, 298). *Clorindy* brought "something entirely new" to Broadway and became "the talk of New York" (Johnson 1972, 103).

But, for black artists, the show marked an even more important development—one instigated by composer Will Marion Cook. Foreshadowing Locke's later call for true group expression, Cook insisted that "the Negro in music and on the stage ought to be a Negro, a genuine Negro ... [and] eschew 'white' patterns," and he himself abandoned his training in classical music. If the economic constraints of the period prevented him from realizing his ambition of composing "Negro opera," Cook was nevertheless widely praised for creating "real Negro melodies" in *Clorindy* (Johnson 2004, 321; Sotiropoulos 2006, 87). The Johnson brothers and their collaborator Bob Cole followed in Cook's footsteps, determined to eschew the coon song craze and bring a "higher degree of artistry" to Negro songs—both music and text. Taking an entirely different approach from Isham, who had placed classical songs within his black vaudeville show, the Johnsons and Cole produced such hit songs as "Louisiana Lizzie," "The Maiden with the Dreamy Eyes," "Under the Bamboo Tree," "The Congo Love Song,"

and others, that brought “high” and “low” together within one song (Johnson 2004, 299, 300, 340).

The title “Congo Love Song” suggests the presence of Africa in black compositions of the period. Indeed, not unlike William Brown before them and Harlem Renaissance writers after them, black artists at this time were eager to portray scenes from the broader African diaspora. In 1903, Bert Williams and George Walker composed the musical comedy *In Dahomey*, followed in 1906 by *In Abyssinia*, a forerunner of Du Bois’s *Star of Ethiopia*. Yet, like other productions destined for Broadway, they needed to negotiate the tastes of white theatergoers. Incredibly successful, *In Dahomey* satirized both African American emigration to the African homeland and the ignorant and corrupt Africans encountered there. In contrast, *In Abyssinia* was much less of a commercial success in its portrayal of Ethiopia as a symbol of black pride, self-determination, and achievement (Sotiropoulos 2006, 135, 141–42, 148–59).

Brooklyn’s black elite was ambivalent about the growing popularity of black vaudeville and musical comedy. While they maintained their residences at a safe distance across the East River, a number of them still ventured into Manhattan to take in a performance. Indeed, shows by Cook, Cole, or Williams and Walker, and featuring actors such as Hogan, were deemed sufficiently creditable race literature that they were reviewed in the *New York Age*, the major black newspaper of the day (Sotiropoulos 2006, 92). Its editor, T. Thomas Fortune, stood at the center of Brooklyn’s elite society. Johnson had met him during his Brooklyn childhood summer when visiting a neighbor’s house where Fortune was staying. While Fortune busied himself writing, young James played with the neighbors’ children with no sense of awe or conception of how prominent the older man was destined to become: newspaper editor, race leader, and radical agitator.

Launching his newspaper career in 1881, Fortune helped found *The New York Globe*, which he then renamed the *Freeman* in 1884, and the *Age* in 1887. Like Russwurm and Cornish before him and Du Bois after him, Fortune wanted his papers both to imagine and create community, specifically a burgeoning activist movement in Brooklyn that would encourage black leaders to coalesce around racial issues. Their ranks included men of the now older generation—George Downing and Charles Reason—as well as of the younger—Fortune’s co-editor Jerome Bowers Peterson and the lawyer T. McCants Stewart. Unlike antebellum activism but in anticipation of the Harlem Renaissance, women such as Maritcha Lyons and Victoria Earle Matthews were welcome; they entered the field of race work both in collaboration with and independent from black men.

So the usually sure-footed Johnson made a historical error when he accused postwar black New Yorkers of a “decline in the spirit of self-assertion of rights” (Johnson 1972, 128). Such shortsightedness may be attributable to two facts: the first, that Johnson lived across the river and paid scant attention to the activist work being carried out in Brooklyn; the second, that he assessed this period from the standpoint of Du Bois’s later, more visible activism, and so found it lacking. In fact, the reporting in the *Globe*, *Freeman*, and *Age* testifies to the creation of social, cultural, and literary community

among Brooklyn's black elite who were joined, in Johnson's words, by "cultivated Negroes living in Manhattan [who] had, for many years, necessarily been going to Brooklyn for social intercourse" (Johnson 2004, 354).

After the antebellum era and before the Harlem Renaissance, this black elite vigorously promoted the cause of literary achievement, and specifically of "race literature." By this, they meant first of all high-quality literary production. "No race," a *Freeman* article titled "Race Literature, Past and Present" proclaimed, "can hope to occupy a conspicuous position in the opinion of the world which has not demonstrated high literary capacity," a term echoing antebellum newspapers' concept of "literary character." Beyond that, they insisted that authors of race literature needed to write in service to the race and represent it in the best light possible. Constructing a lineage of representative black writers just as *Freedom's Journal* had some 60 years earlier, the *Freeman* correspondent first named Phillis Wheatley, then continued on to antebellum authors David Walker, Frederick Douglass, and William Wells Brown, and concluded with contemporary writers (February 20, 1886). Similarly, in their role as editors Fortune and Peterson regularly advertised black-authored books for sale under the rubric "Race Literature: Old & New": their lists focused mostly on contemporary works and included short stories by Charles Chesnutt and Alice Dunbar, poems by Paul Laurence Dunbar, Frederick Douglass's latest autobiography, Alexander Crummell's sermons, works by Booker T. Washington, and finally George Washington Williams's magisterial *History of the Negro Race in America*, which Peterson extolled in a lengthy review (Peterson 2011a, 316, 387).

In contrast to the antebellum period but anticipating the Harlem Renaissance, black women were equally invested in the concept of race literature. In 1892, Mrs A.E. Johnson published an article in the *Age* on the topic titled "Afro American Literature" (January 30, 1892). Three years later, Victoria Earle Matthews, founder of the Brooklyn-based women's club, the Woman's Loyal Union, delivered an address, "The Value of Race Literature," to the First Congress of Colored Women. In it, she emphasized the value of literary achievement and the need for a race literature that would both correct negative stereotypes of blacks held by whites and promote race pride in its readers. While Matthews singled out the same authors as did earlier articles, she also underscored women's contributions to race literature by praising the works of Sarah Mapps Douglass, Charlotte Forten Grimké, Cordelia Ray, Gertrude Mossell, Frances Harper, and others (McHenry 2003, 191–96).

Beyond these individual lists, articles, and lectures, Fortune's newspapers, no differently than the earlier *Freedom's Journal* and *Colored American* or the later *Crisis*, actively reported on black leaders' efforts to create community by institutionalizing their literary and cultural interests. In the early 1880s Fortune helped found two literary societies that, unlike their antebellum predecessors, now welcomed women's voices: the Bethel Literary and Historical Association of which he was its first president, and the later Brooklyn Literary Union led by T. McCants Stewart. Significantly, literary discussion in both societies transcended the boundaries of race literature to include broader traditions in western civilization: Victoria Earle Matthews gave a lecture on

Stoic philosophy while J.A. Arneaux, editor of a volume of Shakespeare's plays, spoke on the topic of drama. Music was provided by members of the Mendelssohn School of Music. In so doing, members of the black elite were insisting on their cosmopolitanism, their freedom to partake in a world of beauty beyond the local, the racial, and even the national.

Race issues, however, could not be avoided. Both Bethel Literary and Brooklyn Literary were hotbeds of political activism. If members of the Harlem Renaissance represented a broad range of conflicting political positions—from the conservatism of George Schuyler to the Communism of Langston Hughes in the 1930s for example—divergence of political opinion also permeated these two organizations. Both societies hosted lectures and debates, many of which reflected the bitter controversy between the accommodationist policies of Booker T. Washington and the more radical positions of the young Du Bois, then a professor at Atlanta University. Members were divided over questions such as the advisability of industrial or classical education, the quest for wealth rather than education, support of separate or integrated schools, the promotion of capital over labor. One particularly contentious issue was political party affiliation. In the early 1880s George Downing, Stewart, and Fortune formed a cadre of black Democrats who took to the pages of the *Freeman* and the *Age* to denounce blacks' blind loyalty to the Republican Party and support Grover Cleveland's presidential campaigns and administrations before returning to the fold in the 1890s.

Given his adoption of a perspective that looked at the activism of the 1880s and 1890s exclusively from the standpoint of Du Bois's later efforts, Johnson could name only one political accomplishment of the period: Fortune's creation of a national organization, the Afro-American Council, that Johnson deemed the direct predecessor of Du Bois's Niagara movement. Describing the Council's goal as the determination "to protest against the increasing disabilities and injustices to which the race was being subjected," Johnson suggested that the organization was never able to achieve its aims because it could not arouse the necessary "sort of spirit and response on the part of the coloured people of the country" (Johnson 1972, 130–31). But Johnson failed to mention the radical activism—local, short-lived, but successful—that occurred when the Council decided to raise funds and conduct indignation meetings to help T. McCants Stewart win a case against a New York hotel owner who had denied Fortune service.

Johnson also failed to mention another equally significant organization of the period: the American Negro Academy, which, though based in Washington, DC, was founded by former New Yorker, Alexander Crummell, with the strong support of soon-to-be New Yorker Du Bois. As a former schoolmate of James McCune Smith, and later mentor to Du Bois, Crummell provided the necessary link between antebellum and postbellum thinking about the special gifts of the Negro. In the 1870s, he penned an essay whose very title, "The Destined Superiority of the Negro," and very ideas—that God has singled out African-descended people for a special destiny—echoed those of Smith. Like Smith, Crummell proceeded to argue that the history of black Americans was not one of needless suffering, but rather the result of divine Providence, which has endowed this

people with the proper moral character to appreciate the true principles of freedom and citizenship, and thereby “correct” the nation (Crummell 1995b, 194–205).

Crummell’s later lectures, including several addressed to the American Negro Academy in the late 1890s, anticipate Du Bois in both language and thought. In them, Crummell stressed the spiritual over the material. Emancipation, he maintained, “was a change . . . affecting mainly the *outer* conditions of this people . . . But outward condition does not necessarily touch the springs of life. That requires other nobler, more spiritual agencies” (Crummell 1995c, 131). These could only be developed, Crummell insisted, by means of a classical education. Although he never used the Du Boisian term Talented Tenth, Crummell similarly argued that this emergent sensibility would first be developed by an elite class of race men and women—“the molders of its thought and determiners of its destiny,” who would “transform and stimulate the souls of the race” and thus allow all black Americans to attend at long last to their “soul-life” (Crummell 1995d, 202; 1995a, 198; 1995e, 147).

These are ideas that we associate with the turn-of-century Du Bois. In “The Conservation of Races,” an address delivered to the American Negro Academy at the same time as Crummell’s, Du Bois defined race as “a vast family of human beings,” united by commonalities of blood, language, history, traditions, and impulses, “striving together for the accomplishment of certain more or less vividly conceived ideals of life” (Du Bois 1996a, 40). Combined together, these common elements create a “race ideal,” specific racial characteristics which Du Bois defined in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) as well as his 1926 essay, “The Criteria for Negro Art,” by reference to the slave’s sorrow songs that tell of trouble and strife but also sing of hope, faith, and ultimate justice (1996b, 235). “Under God’s high heaven,” this race ideal will allow the American Negro to fulfill his special destiny and transform the nation: “We are the first fruits of this new nation, the harbinger of that black tomorrow which is yet destined to soften the whiteness of the Teutonic today” (1996a, 44; Peterson 2011b, 505–08).

Harlem and Beyond

Speaking for all black New Yorkers, and indeed for all black Americans, in 1827 the editors of *Freedom’s Journal* proclaimed that “we wish to plead our own cause.” They would do so, they insisted, by countering the misrepresentations made by others with their own representations of the special gifts and destiny of the Negro. What these special gifts were proved harder to define: did they reside in the community’s elite class and its highbrow traditions, in the masses and their folk and street culture, or did the processes of artistic expression encourage a merging of the two? Moreover, how could black artists plead their own cause when they were constrained on all sides by white cultural brokers? The resulting tensions, ambiguities, and frustrations—conflictual as well as productive—remained a constant throughout the nineteenth century only to emerge with remarkable force in the Harlem Renaissance in writers as diverse as Locke, Fauset, Hurston, and Hughes.

Despite such similarities, the Harlem of the Renaissance was, as Johnson recognized, unlike its nineteenth-century predecessors in at least one important respect. It was a *somewhere*, a geographically bounded “city within a city,” in which black New Yorkers were “securely anchored,” owning property, establishing community institutions, and creating a vibrant artistic and cultural life. But Johnson was equally prescient when he intuited that the Negro would not be able to “hold” Harlem (1972, 147, 159, 158). Indeed, the 2009 city census tells us that mere 17 percent of a New York’s black population resides in Manhattan. As gentrification intensifies, only six out of 10 of Harlem’s residents are black. In contrast, 35 percent of blacks live in Brooklyn and the Bronx respectively, and 20 percent in Queens. A “city within a city” no longer exists. But that doesn’t mean that Harlem is nowhere. The sights and sounds of blackness permeate the entire city. Harlem is everywhere.

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