Movements of Black Culture: The Black Renaissance and Its Legacy

by Ebony Henderson

Abstract

This article analyzes the distinctive history and path of The Black Renaissance. Black Americans hold a long and complicated history in the United States and have found many ways to thrive. Through pain, joy, and death, Black Americans have built a legacy of movements to spur change. Through these changes, Black Americans have worked for justice in their own communities but also have contributed culturally to the world. The Black Renaissance is known to many as The New Negro Movement, and just as its name declares, it indeed gave birth to a new negro. The New Negro Movement was embraced out of creating a new soul for those dealing with the aftermath of reconstruction and Jim Crow, embraced by every man, woman, and child waiting to experience life free from harm and full of joy. The Black Renaissance allowed Black Americans to be heard.

The Black Renaissance was an important and interesting time to me culturally for so many reasons. Initially I was drawn to the era because of the legendary artists and greats who emerged. Born in the 80’s, I would hear artists and actors speak of the greats from the Harlem Renaissance, one of the many names for The Black Renaissance. As a New Yorker, I was a car ride away from the same streets that were vibrant and filled with the ghosts of the past. You’re always asked what era you would reside in, and it’s just never a fun game for an oppressed citizen. However, I often like to discuss the “old days” with older generations which filled me with so many thoughts. In my young life, I’ve noticed such a wide range of events as a Black American, that it made me think about the things my Grandparents may have seen. Headlines today are frightening to many Black Americans but prepared those in the past of the threat level rising around the nation (Beinecke). A lot of current events are terrifying and inhumane, but you realize that someone
in their 90’s has seen so much more. Out of the pain, tears, and sadness, you begin to look around you and see the good, unity and togetherness. When I look back at historical or horrific moments in my culture, I am overwhelmed at the power that’s cultivated, the legacy, and most of all the path set forth for generations to come. During these times strength is sprinkled throughout the Black community. At first glance, our community also produces seeds beyond ourselves. The Black community sends sparks around the world, and this is what The Black Renaissance continues to do. It is important for history to not repeat itself, yet we seem to come full circle. That’s why in times of strife the culture has gathered and rallied to literally save lives, but also establish groundwork for additional rights to be earned. As a Black Woman living in America, I am thankful for the perseverance of the ancestors, which shines bright even in the darkest days a century later.

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IMPORTANT
Congressional Investigation of Mob Violence.

To All Officers of Branches of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People:

A resolution is ready to be introduced in Congress calling for a nationwide investigation of lynching and mob violence. A number of Senators and Representatives have pledged their votes for the resolution.

Support for this resolution must come from all over the United States citizens but especially from members of the N.A.A.C.P.

Branches are urged to write enthusiastic letters endorsing the Congressional investigation to the Senators and Representatives from their states and districts, and every member of the N.A.A.C.P. is asked to telegraph or write his Senators and Representatives.

Time Counted! Act at once and leave no doubt in the minds of the members of Congress that their constituents want mob violence wiped out. The first step is Congressional investigation which will bring all the facts before the country as they would be brought in no other way.

WRITE! TELEGRAPH! AND USE EVERY MEMBER OF THE BRANCH AND ALL OTHERS TO DO LIKEWISE!

JANES WELDON JOHNSON,
FIELD SECRETARY.
The Black Renaissance has influenced Americans and people across the world, but especially the Black community for which the movement started. The start of the movement came about due to the suffering of Blacks. Many faced uncertain beginnings and were not sure how things would become better. Few felt little to no change after slavery. It was now important to rally and bring substantial change themselves. Renown architects of change and literature emerged with consciousness that spoke to every type of negro. The elders hoped for a better future for the young, while the young saw how much the elders went through as slaves. The women could understand the plight of their men who were more likely to die of violence. The wealthy negro knew wealth nor popularity made them any less or more than a negro. Unification was key! Thus, The Black Renaissance has held valuable influence in political movements, Black culture, and worldly relevance.

The Harlem Renaissance, New Negro Movement, or The Black Renaissance hold names of reverence, which is why each name describes the same period of time. Coined after Alain Locke’s, The New Negro, in 1925 The New Negro Movement takes place between 1917- the early 1930’s. The movement grew into a flourishing era from the need to end such traumatic circumstances for Black Americans. Enslaved Blacks gained their freedom after the Civil War. Reconstruction was an attempt to right the wrongs of slavery and see great progress. Initially things started to change. The Civil Rights movement of 1875 sought to establish equality among all. Blacks were able to vote, run, and lead political office, and even began to purchase land. This ended with the rise of white resentment and the thought of equity among former slaves and former slave owners. White mobs would form and take justice into their own hands as vigilantes. The decades between Reconstruction and the end of WWI saw the beginning of Jim Crow, official and unofficial laws to regulate the progression of Blacks. The rise of anti-black groups such as the KKK reigned terror on Blacks as well. The Klu Klux Klan (KKK) and other hate groups came to power after the Civil War and saw a peak in numbers after WWI. Members of the klan used disguise and terror to promote anti-Black sentiments. Most often members were a part of the elite and powerful groups of society but also included poor whites as well. An uprising of lynchings, murders, and terror is what everyday life for Blacks in the North and South consisted of.

Matters also escalated after Reconstruction through even the late 1960’s when The Great Migration started to wane. After slavery ended many Blacks found themselves free but also in need of financial opportunities. Many freed Blacks traveled up North to factories and large cities to gain employment. Many migrated to leave the harsh segregation that persisted in the South as well. This changed white
The influx of Black residents often overwhelmed cities and led to entire communities being taken over. Harlem itself was a community of Jewish and Italian Americans. Many protested and eventually moved out, changing Harlem to a Black and Caribbean neighborhood. Small towns were segregated and racist in the South, while the North saw a rise in nationalism and “segregation.” Large cities in the North such as D.C., New York, and Chicago experience ongoing racial violence. Violence was thought to only occur in the South but took place in the North as well. This became even more common in northern cities as communities saw an influx of Blacks moving North for opportunity. Violence included riots, hate crimes, and destruction of property.

Tension continued to climb during WWI as Black soldiers were now in uniform, which was often seen as arrogant and the making of an entitled Black man. Black soldiers were mistreated by white soldiers, which included the US Army that produced propaganda fliers to pass out in France. The prestigious 369th out of Harlem was an all-Black brigade fighting beside the French in the Champagne region. The soldiers who fought with honor and vigor against the Germans were earning the nickname Hell-fighters by the German soldiers. Things became even more complicated when Black soldiers received the highest honors ever presented to any American from the French. Upon the return home the violence continued from white soldiers and citizens. The Library of Congress (2009) describes the following:

World War I created a transformation for African Americans from the “old” to the “new.” Thousands moved from the rural South to the industrial urban North, pursuing a new vision of social and economic opportunity. During the war black troops fought abroad “to keep the world safe for democracy.” They returned home determined to achieve a fuller participation in American society. The philosophy of the civil rights movement shifted from the “accommodationist” approach of Booker T. Washington to the militant advocacy of W.E.B. Du Bois. These forces converged to help create the “New Negro Movement” of the 1920s, which promoted a renewed sense of racial pride, cultural self-expression, economic independence, and progressive politics (p, 1).

Many Black soldiers were attacked for wearing their uniform or threatened. After soldiers returned, the economy faced a downturn as jobs became scarce creating greater tensions and resentment. Lynching was on the rise with little to no protection. In some situations, the officials of the town were a part of the mobs. These events would climax and lead to The Red Summer of 1919.

The Red Summer of 1919 made an incredible impact and what most define as
the catalyst for the renaissance that would pour out of Black souls. Violence erupted all over the states, impacting the lives of Black Americans greatly. Families were destroyed, homes lost, and terrorism rose. (Uenuma, 2018) In Elaine, Arkansas Black sharecroppers asked for better wages. After slavery many worked the lands they were once enslaved on, with ownership and very little pay or return. White owners did not agree and showed up as a mob. Leading to 200 Blacks being murdered (p. 4). This massacre led Alain Locke (famed author of The New Negro) to send a press statement by the newly developed N.A.A.C.P. to call on everyone and be alert. This continued all over the Summer in the US. Chicago’s riot led to over a week of fighting, and a staggering number of homes burned and destroyed, when a white mob was angered by a young Black boy drifting to the wrong side of the lake. When police were called, and no arrest were made, fighting broke out for over a week. From Reconstruction through The Red Summer of 1919, Black Americans may have felt mistreated, inequality, and terrorized. The call to action was calling loudly. It was a time to support each other, gain rights, and create a space specifically opened and giving to Black faces and voices, spurring The New Negro and The Black Renaissance.

Now that the Black Renaissance was viewed as a need the community of influential and educated Blacks began to organize and advocate for all. A leading organization with significant impact was the creation of the N.A.A.C.P. (established in 1909). Its initial task was to stop the violence facing Blacks every day. In 1908, the N.A.A.C.P states, a deadly race riot rocked the city of Springfield, the capital of Illinois and resting place of President Abraham Lincoln. Such eruptions of anti-black violence – particularly lynching – were horrifically commonplace, but the Springfield riot was the final tipping point that led to the creation of the NAACP. Appalled at this rampant violence, a group of white liberals that included Mary White Ovington and Oswald Garrison Villard (both the descendants of famous abolitionists), William English Walling and Dr. Henry Moscowitz issued a call for a meeting to discuss racial justice. Some 60 people, seven of whom were African American (including W. E. B. Du Bois, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, and Mary Church Terrell), signed the call, which was released on the centennial of Lincoln’s birth (1).

With the rise of nationality due to immigration from Mexico and Central America, and the election of the nation’s first African American President, patterns of violence have risen against Blacks and other minority communities. It’s easy to see that movements in the present have been made in an effort to mimic the past. Black Lives Matter emerged out of the necessary need to bring awareness to the number of Black citizens dying in the custody of police officers around the nation. Citizens around the world took notice of Black Americans and their great renais-
sance creating an opportunity for groups of oppressed people globally. Russians in particular partnered with famed writer Langston Hughes and other notable Black creators to make a film about the South and the plight of Black Americans. Inviting Langston Hughes and other political activists to the Soviet Union. All did not go as planned once the US interfered. Thompson, who was a founding member of the Harlem branch of the Friends of the Soviet Union, saw this film as an opportunity to express her frustration with the bias of American cinema, as well as to further relations with the USSR, which she and others saw as a haven for African Americans and other people of color around the world. The USSR agreed to help with the project, partially because of the success of their 1929 film China Express, about working class revolt in that nation. At this time, the Soviets were actively seeking African American support believing they, as the most oppressed group in the United States, would be the most likely instigators of a Soviet-style working class revolt. They saw the creation of this film was a step towards that goal. The movie, however, was never made. It was initially claimed that the cancellation of the movie was due to a lacking script; however, Hughes later confirmed that the real reason for the cancellation was the unexpected recognition of the USSR by the Franklin Roosevelt administration. Before this, the United States refused to acknowledge the existence of a Soviet state, prompting the USSR to continuously harass and berate the American government. When the US finally agreed to recognition, one of the conditions was that the USSR must cease all propaganda directed specifically towards African Americans. (as cited in Hughes, 1932). Thus, the movie project was dropped. However, the trip to the Soviet Union would always remain an issue for Black artists who dared to tell their story to the world. Twenty years later, Hughes and many artists of The New Negro Movement would be called to testify regarding their allegiance toward the United States, which labeled many as communist and threatened their ability to work in the nation.

Langston Hughes and famed name giver of the movement Alain Locke were acquainted for years, meeting while they were in their twenties. Meeting in Paris as romantic interests, after corresponding for so long the men decided they would be great friends. The New Negro Movement lent a voice to Blacks living lives other than the characters created in the minds of whites. Queer Blacks w Wilson (2011) writes:

While it may appear that “queerness” is a sudden, visible phenomenon (which partially elucidates the venomous backlash to homosexual civil rights), the lesbian, gay, and queer community has traditionally had safe spaces within African American performance com- munities. In Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies: Performance, Race, and Sexuality in the Harlem Renais-
sance, James F. Wilson attests that “as Harlem evolved more fully as a distinct-ly racialized and sexualized site, it soon attracted non heterosexual (or at least bi-curious) downtowners to its clubs, speakeasies, and dancehalls” (29). His exhaustive analysis of historically neglected plays and performances establishes that the black, lesbian, and gay show business of the 1920s allowed for the emergence of distinctive voices that straddled the constructions of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation. (p. 5).

The Harlem Renaissance saw Blacks thriving and opening a space and mindset seen by few before. People were drawn to the distinct modern edge. For the first time Blacks were being sought for creative contributions, showing an entire world that imitation would be difficult. Ultimately, they created a movement that brought art and lifestyle to the forefront of Americans and Queer Americans who may have previously missed out on an entire culture and space of their own.

Females also contributed to the homosexual relevance. Many women performing in Harlem brought in their own non – traditional gender roles to the stage and lifestyle. Sex appeal also became grandiose and dream like. Black women never considered the ideal standard of beauty now offered space to the marginalized, and hierarchy to those watching and effectively taking the essence home. Davis-Hayes (2019) notes:

In the African American community between the 1920s and 1940s is fasci-nating. As so many studies of black beauty revolve around the emergence of the Black is Beautiful Movement, her text articulates the aesthetic notions that visualized black respectability throughout the early 20th century but paved the way for a broader acceptance of the black aesthetic more radically known as blackness (p 4).

Lesbians were the first to offer parlors and spaces for all to feel free and wel-come. Black feminism continues today exceeding barriers that began with the Black Women of the New Negro Movement. In 2021, the nation celebrated the election of the first Black female vice president. It was at that inauguration that we heard the brilliant words of Amanda Gorman, a young poet. Time magazine has declared that since 2015 we are now in the third Black Renaissance. After so much sorrow, the community reflects and emerges from the strife. After the Civil Rights of the 1950’s and 60’s, the Black Power Movement arrived sharing messages of beauty and pride. Kendi writes “what we are calling the Black Renaissance—the third great cultural revival of Black Americans, after the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, after the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Black creators today were nurtured by these past cultural revivals—and all those brilliant creators
who sustained Black Arts during the 1980s and 1990s” (para 8). It’s unequivocal that the dynamic relationship between feminism and Black Women breeds power and movement.

Black art emerged during the Renaissance with flair and exuberance. Black Americans were free to live in their blackness unapologetically and display their strengths and talents. Music set the scene for creative exploration and storytelling. During this time, Jazz was born and traveled the world. Many travelled to new locations, where the story of Black Americans was unheard of. Jazz became the pioneering father of sounds today, such as rhythm and blues, R&B, and hip-hop, future genres that would all continue to share the plight of Black life and movements. Talent easily traveled receiving top billing, means, and accreditation for living aloud. Black stories and shows became popular as well. Many were drawn to the Black communities’ natural talents of oral storytelling as an art form. Many believe it to be a skill mastered when whites outlawed Blacks in and out of slavery from reading and writing. Author, Tanya Brown (2014) describes many Blacks performing on the ‘Chitlin’ Circuit. Many of the places were small spaces and clubs that Black performers traveled to reach Black audiences. This brought not only performances but set the example to those who lived in small and remote communities. On display was much more than talent, but also a new breath to the troubles of Black Americans, a full testimony of modern prosperity.

The Black Renaissance is a movement that was created to ultimately define a culture of Americans that were restricted in every aspect of life. The legacy that the movement leaves is one that has yet to end. Black Americans are still reminiscent of the movement’s birth over a century ago, dusting off its energy and tricks of the trade for the new generation., still reeling from its mid-20th century activism, and singing the black anthems of beauty and praise from the 1970’s. The teachings have followed an entire culture throughout the world, sparking revolutions and teachings that many are reiterating. The New Negro Movement has also created an educational space for non-Black Americans to learn and raise their moral consciousness. A better nation awaits on the horizon as more Americans conquer diversity. Once called The New Negro Movement, speaking sounds of freedom, today we are thriving and comfortable with Black just being. Being free to exist in any form or feeling.
References


Hotel Olga. NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project. https://www.nyclgbtsites.org/site/hotel-olga/.


