EDUP&L 863 Final Project

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Nov 30, 2010

School of Educational Policy and Leadership
African American Women in Harlem Renaissance

Part I: Overview

Harlem Renaissance

Originally called the New Negro Movement, the Harlem Renaissance was a period between the end of World War I and the middle of 1930s in New York City's Harlem that saw the flourishing of African-American art, literature, music and politics. The year of 1935 marked the end of the Harlem Renaissance mostly due to the Great Depression.

The timing for the Harlem Renaissance movement was good. The ending of World War I brought prosperity to the United State. The period before the Great Depression was a time when people could easily find jobs in cities. Between 1920 and 1930, approximately 750,000 African Americans left the South. Many of them migrated to the cities in the North to make a living because they liked the more prosperous and racially tolerant environment. This was called the Great Migration in history. Because of the large number of black people migrating to New York, the Harlem section in Manhattan attracted many African Americans there and it became the largest concentration area for black people in the world where they could encourage each other and communicate in artistic creation.

The Harlem Renaissance was successful not only in the cultural sense, but also in the sociological sense. The rapidly developing Harlem provided a stage for African-Americans of different backgrounds to appreciate the Black life and culture which were neglected before. Because racism and discrimination against blacks were still a major problem many African Americans had to face, creative expression was one of the outlets for African Americans to express their feelings, opinions, and attitudes. Through this creative expression, the Harlem
Renaissance aroused interest in black culture among people in America. The cultural production of the black artists during the movement gained recognition of people in America and around the world.

The Harlem Renaissance also changed the views of the Americans and people around the world about the black population. The great migration of African Americans from south to north and their artistic production in Harlem changed the image of the African-American from undereducated slaves to a New Negro, a term given by Alain Locke (1925). The New Negro could challenge racism and stereotypes of black people. By challenging discrimination, he was able to promote racial and social integration through the expression of literature, art, music, and politics. The idea of the New Negro represented an overt racial pride which characterized the Harlem Renaissance. The Harlem Renaissance in some sense transformed social disillusionment to race pride, according to Locke.

Most of the figures remembered in the Harlem Renaissance were men such as W.E.B. DuBois, Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes. The women of the Harlem Renaissance, except just a few such as Zora Neale Hurston, have been more neglected and forgotten than those male figures. African American women played an active and important part in the Harlem Renaissance. Many of the women addressed not only race issues, but also gender and cultural issues. These women, like their male counterparts, were integral parts of the Harlem Renaissance whose contribution to the movement should not be neglected.

The famous African American women in Harlem Renaissance were active in different fields such as writing (Georgia Douglas Johnson, Hallie Quinn, Zora Neale Hurston), journalism (Alice Dunbar-Nelson and Geraldyn Dismond), art (Augusta Savage and Lois Mailou Jones), singing (like Florence Mills, Bessie Smith, Clara Smith, Ethel Waters, Gladys Bentley), only to
mention a few names. Due to the limited space, in this unit, I will only focus on three figures, Marian Anderson, Regina Anderson, and Jessie Fauset, who made their unique contributions in the Harlem Renaissance in different fields.

*Marian Anderson---Singer Shattered Racial Barriers*

Opera singer (contralto) Marian Anderson was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1897. When Anderson found that she was unable to make a success in the United States, she left the United States for the United Kingdom in 1925. In 1935 Anderson returned to the United States and that year saw her success because of one of her successful performance.

Though she became a famous and successful woman, Marian Anderson still encountered racial discrimination because of her black identity. The most well-known racial event about Marian Anderson occurred in 1939. She was offered a chance to perform a concert in Constitution Hall. The owners of the hall, the Daughters of the American Revolution, however, refused her to sing there because of her black identity. The racial prejudice against her aroused national protests. As a result of the protests, under the involvement of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, the United States Department of the Interior scheduled Marian Anderson to perform at the Lincoln Memorial (visit http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mAONYTMf2pk for the performance). Because of the famous event, the racial discrimination phenomenon attracted more people’s attention in the United States.

In 1955, Marian Anderson became the first African American singer to perform on the Met stage. From 1957-1958, she served as a goodwill ambassador with the United States State Department. She died because of heart failure in 1993. Her death was reported by New York
Because of her achievement, Marian Anderson received numerous awards and honors during her life. She received many honorary doctorates from universities. She received NAACP's Spingarn Award awarded by Roosevelt in 1938. And in 1963, she was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Johnson. She performed at the inaugurations of several presidents. She also performed before heads of other countries many times.

Regina Anderson

Regina Anderson was a playwright and a professional librarian in the New York City in the Harlem Renaissance. Regina Anderson was born in Chicago in 1901. She got her Master of Library Science from Columbia University before she became the first black supervising librarian in the New York Public Library.

When she worked as a librarian for the New York Public Library, Regina Anderson made her apartment a meeting place for the artists and intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance. In 1924 she organized a dinner for intellectuals and writers in New York. Her guests for this dinner included big names such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, and Langston Hughes. It was at this dinner they brought up some original ideas for the movement. Therefore, the dinner was regarded as one of the coalescing events of the Harlem Renaissance (Lewis, 2010).

Regina Anderson helped found the Krigwa Players (later changed to the Negro Experimental Theatre or Harlem Experimental Theatre) with W. E. B. Du Bois. Anderson wrote several plays during this time which were produced by the players in the theatre. In 1926, Regina
Anderson married William T. Andrews. She also worked for the organizations such as the National Council of Women and the National Urban League. At the United States Commission for UNESCO, she appeared as a representative of the organization. She retired from the New York Public Library in 1967 and died in New York in 1993.

Regina’s plays included *Climbing Jacob's Ladder, Underground, and The Man Who Passed: A Play in One Act*. She was one of ten African American women whose contributions were recognized at the 1939 World's Fair in New York.

**Jessie Fauset**

Jessie Fauset (1882-1961) was a writer, editor, and educator in the Harlem Renaissance. In 1905 she graduated from Cornell University. Her graduate degrees were got at the University of Pennsylvania and at the Sorbonne in Paris.

Jessie Fauset taught Latin and French at high schools in early years. From 1919-1926, he served as literary editor of the *Crisis*, a journal published by the NAACP. During this period, she worked with W.E.B. DuBois. This period when she worked for *Crisis* was her most productive period. She wrote many of the articles, stories, and poems while she worked for *Crisis*. She also promoted such writers as Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, and Jean Toomer. From 1920 to 1921, Fauset published *The Brownies' Book*, a periodical for African American children.

When she left the *Crisis*, Jessie Fauset finished her career in publishing. Instead, she taught French in New York City from 1927 to 1944. At the same time, she continued to write and publish novels. In 1929, Jessie Fauset married Herbert Harris. In 1949, she served as a visiting professor at Hampton Institute for a short period of time, and later taught at Tuskegee
Institute. She died in 1961.

Jessie Fauset published four novels during the Harlem Renaissance including: *There Is Confusion* in 1924, *Plum Bun* in 1929, *The Chinaberry Tree* in 1931, and *Comedy: American Style* in 1933. The number of the novels she published was the most among the writers during the Harlem Renaissance. And she was the second African American woman in the United States elected to Phi Beta Kappa.

Part II: Activities

Activity 1: Review of Harlem Renaissance

Objective: To help students further understand the Harlem Renaissance movement

Review together with the class about Harlem Renaissance and ask the students questions to help them further understand the movement. Examples of questions: what is the impact of Harlem Renaissance on black community? What are the contributing factors to the beginning and ending of Harlem Renaissance? Can you name some of the leading figures in the movement?

Activity 2: Matching names and facts

Objective: to help the students further understand the artists in the unit

Write down the names of the three artists on the left side and the facts about them on the right side of the blackboard. Then ask the student to go to the blackboard to match the names and the facts. Note: one name can be associated with more than one fact.

Activity 3: Listening to the song by Marian Anderson at Lincoln Memorial

Objective: To arouse students’ interest in the figure and learn more about her
Listen to the song (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mAONYTMf2pk) with the class and appreciate it.

Activity 4: Poem Appreciation: *Christmas Eve in France* by Jessie Fauset

Objective: To help students get a sense of the style of Jessie Fauset’s work

Read aloud together with the class “*Christmas Even in France*” written by Jessie Fauset (see Appendix for the poem). Appreciate the language of the poem, discuss with the class what the poem is about, and the theme of the poem.

Activity 5: Presentation: more female figures in the Harlem Renaissance

Objective: To extend the knowledge of the students about the roles African American women played in Harlem Renaissance

Ask the students to do web search as well as use the library resources to locate more African American women in the Harlem Renaissance. Each student is asked to do a presentation on one figure. They should be able to present to the class the biography, the major achievements, and major works (if applicable) of that woman during the Harlem Renaissance.
References:


Appendix: Christmas Eve in France

by Jessie Fauset

Oh little Christ, why do you sigh
As you look down to-night
On breathless France, on bleeding France,
And all her dreadful plight?
What bows your childish head so low?
What turns your cheek so white?
Oh little Christ, why do you moan,
What is it that you see
In mourning France, in martyred France,
And her great agony?
Does she recall your own dark day,
Your own Gethsemane?
Oh little Christ, why do you weep,
Why flow your tears so sore
For pleading France, for praying France,
A suppliant at God's door?
"God sweetened not my cup," you say,
"Shall He for France do more?"
Oh little Christ, what can this mean,
Why must this horror be
For fainting France, for faithful France,
And her sweet chivalry?
"I bled to free all men," you say
"France bleeds to keep men free."
Oh little, lovely Christ--you smile!
What guerdon is in store
For gallant France, for glorious France,
And all her valiant corps?
"Behold I live, and France, like me;
Shall live for evermore."