

Racial Consciousness, Uplift, and Justice in Harlem Renaissance Poetry

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Abstract

Were you surprised or confused by the recent Black Lives Matter protests? Were some of the arguments for or against the movement hard for you to understand? This essay intends to help readers see, through the lens of poetry, how the current Black experience in America came to be, and what Blacks have been saying and doing about their unequal circumstances for the past 100 years. Throughout the history of civil movements pursuing liberty for marginalized peoples in America and beyond, poetry stands out as an effective and widespread vehicle of advocacy. The Harlem Renaissance of the early 1920s to the late 1930s demonstrated an exceptional assemblage of activists and artists, many of whom were unified by attempts to uplift their race through writing. Tracing threads of racial consciousness, uplift, and justice through the poetry of Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, James Weldon Johnson, and Carrie Williams Clifford, uncovers a Black aesthetic and nationalism expressing double consciousness and intersectionality, that advances recurrent themes such as reclaiming of Black history, promoting education, and advocating for civil rights. Through analysis of Johnson's "Fifty Years," Cullen's "From the Dark Tower," Clifford's "Marching to Conquest," Hughes' "Let America Be America Again" and other relevant works, these topics will be further interrogated. Harlem Renaissance poetry builds the infrastructure of mid-to-late 20th century outpourings of work like the Black Arts Movement and into the first two decades of the twenty-first century, which some scholars have termed a third "Renaissance" of poetry and art. The implications of the aforementioned tenets in modern American society and in Black poetry since the Harlem Renaissance serves as a secondary goal. Enduring ripples of racism towards African Americans in the United States remain to be extinguished through contemporary creativity and advocacy, therefore investigating

past themes of revolution and restoration will inform new paths to achieve authentic and lasting justice.

Keywords: Racial Uplift, Racial Reconciliation, Racial Consciousness, African American Poetry, Harlem Renaissance

Racial Consciousness, Uplift, and Justice in Harlem Renaissance Poetry

Poetry has been a culturally significant and persistent part of African American history since the early writings of enslaved people such as Phillis Wheatley and George Moses Horton. From traditional romanticism, strident departure from classical poetic forms and styles, to innovations of new dialect and style, each era since the founding of America maintains a distinct collection of poetry (Andrews et al., 1997; Jones, 2011; Hodges, 2015a; Shockley, 2011). Poetry connects the human experience with language in a powerful and concise way, challenging and influencing mainstream society in both overt and subversive ways. Black poets have brought forth their troubles, culture, inner thoughts, and much more, to illuminate the American Black experience. The culmination of Black aesthetics and culture throughout the art form have served primarily as a means of resistance to subordination, whether it be enslavement or microaggressions (Andrews et al., 1997; Hodges, 2015d). Poetry has reemerged in our time of digital technology as more accessible and appealing, especially for the younger generations who prefer to listen to readings and performances they can now find readily online (Hodges, 2015). This has contributed to another “Renaissance” of poetry and art in American Black culture during the first two decades of the 21st century ((Hodges, 2015b; Hodges, 2015c; Ryan-Bryant, 2015; Shockley, 2011). Due to poetry’s recorded connection to social movements for racial justice as noted by Andrews et al. (1997) and Ryan-Bryant (2015), this investigation serves as a timely exploration of poetic history. Understanding such a history will inform 21st century trends; for example, how art has helped lead to new outbreaks and uprisings against enduring systemic injustice such as the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement and renewed discussion of critical race theory.

Racial consciousness, uplift, and justice in Harlem Renaissance poetry inherently influence today's Black poetry, and more widely affect how we approach racial justice in American society, by developing a foundational Black culture and pride that provokes reflection and civil resistance. Langston Hughes, Carrie Williams Clifford, Countee Cullen, and James Weldon Johnson works, in particular Johnson's "Fifty Years," Cullen's "From the Dark Tower," Clifford's "Marching to Conquest," and Hughes' "Let America Be America Again" all demonstrate racial consciousness by pointing out differences between Blacks and whites or developing a distinct Black culture, and promote racial uplift through artistic output, God's guidance, and education and agitation of the Black community. Cullen's and Johnson's racial consciousness and resulting double consciousness and intersectionality produces a Black aesthetic and Black nationalism bolstered by racial uplift. Clifford emphasizes a progressive future racial justice won by achieving uplift through education and trust in God. Hughes achieves racial uplift for the Black masses in his poetry by portraying the Black community honestly and with simple, clear language, and develops ideas of racial justice through the proletariat.

Even though the Harlem Renaissance was not fully appreciated for its ingenuity and progressiveness until the 1980s and 1990s, commonalities between the Harlem Renaissance and other eras exist interwoven in poetry throughout the century, as education continues to be an important theme for racial uplift, the Black aesthetic continues to develop, and the debate over race's place in art due to an artist's double consciousness and intersectionality remains. Today's poetry is an amalgamation of all poetic eras according to Hodges (2015a), culminating as Ryan-Bryant (2015) remarks, in the development of "experimental formal techniques as a vehicle for political statement," such as "the performance strategies of slam poetry; fragmentary

and non-narrative organizations; puns, anagrams, and other forms of wordplay; and a wealth of historical, mythological, and cultural allusion” that acknowledge and appreciate the contributions of their ancestors and focus on social critique. Today’s poets build on Harlem Renaissance foundations to address relevant issues, pushing society towards a fuller understanding of racial justice through the promotion of a multicultural society that is dedicated to eradicating discrimination.

Setting the Scene

The Harlem Renaissance, the peak of a wider movement known as the Negro Renaissance or New Negro Movement, constitutes an era of time stretching from around 1919 to 1935, centered around the explosion of African American art that came primarily from Harlem, New York, and the surrounding area. While there has been significant debate over the era’s time frame, literary forms, values, and whether it even reflects a “renaissance” at all, there can be no doubt that there was a significant artistic and socio-cultural shift during the 1920s and 30s, bringing forth fresh ideas from a highly race conscious community of middle and upper class Blacks (Andrews et al., 1997; Cullen & Early, 1991; Hutchinson, 2007; Morley, 2012). Figures such as Alain Locke, W. E. B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, and Marcus Garvey had very different ideas on how to approach this newfound Black identity, ranging from quiet assimilation into white culture, racial uplift through the “talented tenth” (a group consisting of Black intellectuals and leaders of the generation), demanding full rights and fighting vehemently against segregation, to mass exodus back to Africa (Andrews et al., 1997; Hutchinson, 2007). Through art, Blacks developed and debated their ideas and attitudes, in addition to forming social and intellectual organizations and circles such as the Niagara Movement and its successor The

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Universal Negro Improvement Association, and National Urban League, all of which centrally located in Harlem. Magazines and newspapers associated with these organizations, in particular *The Crisis*, published art and literature that further fueled the movement's promotion of the Black aesthetic, cultural nationalism, racial pride, and modernism, serving as important forerunners to future civil rights movements (Andrews et al., 1997; Ryan-Bryant, 2015). Poetry was a common and popular vehicle for the expression of a diverse set of Harlem Renaissance attitudes, in particular for exploring the uniqueness of living as Black artist trying to find his or her way in a recently emancipated, but reconstructed world of segregation and white supremacy (Andrews et al., 1997; Hutchinson, 2007).

Meet The Poets

The following poems and poets cannot possibly represent the entire Harlem Renaissance era, due to its intricate and diverse set of principles, leaders, and contributors. Even so, the poets and poems complement one another and create a narrative describing the attitudes and evolution of the era, spanning both major and minor figures as well as a range of class perspectives. Not generally known or even mentioned in most discussions of Harlem Renaissance poetry, Clifford provides a much needed female middle-class perspective that is well ahead of her time, due to growing up in Chillicothe, Ohio, where she experienced substantially less racism than in most other parts of the country (Clifford et al., 1997; Tucker, 2013). Hughes too strove to influence the lower-middle class Blacks, saying in a letter to William Pickens that "little or no effort is made to reach the great masses of the colored people," and that his work strove to produce understandable and enjoyable poetry for the average person to understand (Miller, 1987, p. 120).

James Weldon Johnson and Countee Cullen represent the upper-class, “talented tenth,” who were highly regarded as well-educated in white communities, and both supported by the wealthy Carl Van Vetchen (Hutchinson, 2007; Kinnamon, 1987; Shucard, 1987). The focal poems represent a chronological arc of the Harlem Renaissance. The earliest poem, Clifford’s “Marching to Conquest,” was published in her volume *Race Rhymes* in 1911. While technically pre-Harlem Renaissance, the poem conveys some of the most dynamic and hopeful verse published during the first half of the 1900s, and therefore strikes a chord with Harlem Renaissance tenets that are expanded upon in her second volume of poetry in 1922, *The Widening Light* (Clifford et al., 1997; Tucker, 2013). In “Fifty Years,” published first in 1913 by the *New York Times* and subsequently in his 1917 volume *Fifty Years and Other Poems*, Johnson evokes African American history from the first slaves that set foot in America, to the start of the 1900s struggling to form an equal society following the abolition of slavery (Price & Oliver, 1997; Johnson, 1917). Cullen’s “From the Dark Tower,” published in his second volume, *Copper Sun* in 1927, further exemplifies the racial divide and consciousness of the era (Cullen, 1927; Leitner, 2015). Finally, Hughes’s “Let America Be America Again” was written in 1935 and published in 1936, wrapping up the Harlem Renaissance and stepping into a new age of political radicalism and insistence on the fulfilment of American liberties for all (Hughes & Rampersad, 2001).

Countee Cullen and Carrie Williams Clifford serve in this selection to represent the formalist poets of the Harlem Renaissance. Cullen’s poetic style was heavily influenced by his adopted father Reverend Frederick Cullen, who was President of the Harlem NAACP and pastor of a Salem Methodist Episcopalian Church. Born in 1903, Cullen was unofficially adopted at around 15 years old, and through the Reverend, Cullen learned about many of the sentiments and

challenges Blacks faced at the time in the political, social, and religious sectors. Cullen's racial and religious consciousness was advised and developed through a key Harlem luminary, and paired with his education at the mostly white DeWitt Clinton high school and college institutions New York University (B.A.) and Harvard (M.A.). His unique background gives his work a perspective that combines white concepts of racial uplift with genuine concern for Black communal issues. Cullen started writing poetry in elementary school and published his first volume, *Color*, in 1925. He was one of the foremost poets and intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance, receiving favorable reviews for even his first volume, which contains many of his now commonly anthologized poems. Highly respected in his time, Cullen received awards such as the Spingarn medal from the NAACP and a Guggenheim fellowship (Cullen & Early, 1991; Shucard, 1987). Many scholars believe that Cullen was gay, although, if he was, he remained closeted like many others at the time (Andrews et al., 1997; Cullen & Early, 1991; Hutchinson, 2007). His work often grapples with the Christian religion, most likely due to his struggle over sexuality and what he saw as other so-called pagan inclinations (Cullen & Early, 1991).

Also a product of a formal education dominated by white culture, Carrie Williams Clifford too uses the Christian religion in her works, demonstrating strong faith in a God that protects and brings justice to her race, one that has a good plan that will unfold in His perfect timing (Clifford et al., 1997; Honey, 2006). Clifford, an educator, civil rights activist, writer, and orator, was born well before the Harlem Renaissance, in 1862, but did not publish her volumes of poetry until 1911 and 1922. The barren landscape of research on Clifford and her poetry consists mostly of brief biographies in scattered resources and short commentaries on her civil rights activism or poetic works, although primary historical records confirm that she was an influential,

respected, and popular poet and civil rights activist during the first three decades of the 1900s (Clifford et al., 1997; Honey, 2006; Roses & Randolph, 1990; Tucker, 2013). Clifford founded the Ohio Federation of Colored Women's Clubs in 1901, its original chapter, and served as its first president. She was also a founding member of the Niagara Movement (although women were not included until the third annual meeting), edited and contributed to several African American publications, and helped establish the D.C. chapter of the NAACP, serving in an administrative role where she focused on youth uplift and protest against lynching. She often entertained prominent figures such as Du Bois, Alain Locke, Georgia Douglass Johnson, and Mary Terrell (Clifford et al., 1997; Honey, 2006; Tucker, 2013). Despite being underappreciated and overlooked by modern scholars, Clifford's poetry portrays markedly progressive topics for the day and serves as an important bridge between 1800s traditional romantic poetry and Civil Rights and Black Arts Movement literatures (Tucker, 2013).

Cullen and Clifford both use traditional European forms in their poetry, often employing pastoral references and themes from Romanticism such as love and nature. Using conventional forms allowed these poets to reach a wider middle and upper class audience of all ethnicities, and to juxtapose topics such as the brutality of racism to the tight constraints of conventional poetic forms and the larger society. Both poets wrestled with their intersectionality (a concept that promotes understanding of both negative and positive patterns of prejudice and their aggravations based on socio-political classifications), as a gay Black male, and a Black woman, attempting to navigate their systemic disadvantages through poetry (Clifford et al., 1997; Cullen & Early, 1991; Nash, 2008; Shucard, 1987). Despite their similarities in form and style, they often clashed over the placement of the subject of racism in their works. Cullen usually coded his

resistance to white supremacy and racist societal values, maintaining an elitist view of racial uplift and following a politics of respectability. In contrast, Clifford is transparent about the system of oppression she lives in and adamant in her push for full integration, as a middle class civil rights activist who promoted racial uplift through a universal change in mental attitude (Clifford et al., 1997; Roses & Randolph, 1990; Tucker, 2013).

James Weldon Johnson, like Clifford, was known primarily for his civil rights work and secondarily for his poetry, while Cullen and Langston Hughes are famed chiefly for their poetic works (Cullen & Early, 1991; Kinnamon, 1987; Miller, 1987; Tucker, 2013). Both stars of the Harlem Renaissance era, Hughes produced the most poetry of anyone in his generation, and Johnson served many different roles across his career, as a civil servant, administrator in the NAACP, civil rights activist, songwriter, novelist, poet, lawyer, teacher, and principal (Kinnamon, 1987; Miller, 1987). Commonly known by modern scholars as the diplomat of the Harlem Renaissance, Johnson represents sophistication and versatility, while Hughes demonstrates down to earth artistic prowess, considered the Harlem Renaissance's poet laureate (Morley, 2012; Kinnamon, 1987; Hughes & Rampersad, 2001). Born in 1901, Hughes was the only one of these poets who survived to see the Black Arts and Black Power Movement take off. Despite dropping out of Columbia after one year, he completed his bachelor's degree at Lincoln University in 1929, but not before publishing his two most significant works: *The Weary Blues* and *Fine Clothes For The Jew*. His work inspired many poets of his generation and the one following, especially through his reading tours in the South from 1931-1932. Hughes served as a mentor and example for many who would later become notable poets, including Gwendolyn Brooks, Margaret Walker, Robert Hayden, and Alice Walker. He also traveled widely, which

influenced his political views and poetic style, embarking on a journey to Africa as a cabin boy on a freighter, voyaging to Paris soon after, living in Russia for a year to film “Black and White,” a Soviet film intended to combat racism, traveling back from that trip through the Orient, and more. Hughes was the first Black artist to live solely off his writings, through his readings, grants, and assistance from patrons (Hutchinson, 2007; Miller, 1987).

While Hughes combated racism through promoting the importance of lived experiences, James Weldon Johnson was never far from education throughout his life, seeing schooling as a tool for liberation. Johnson was born a decade after Clifford, in 1871, and whether he was obtaining his B.A. from Atlanta University, taking a graduate course at Columbia, serving as a teacher and principal at Stanton School in Jacksonville, or teaching at Fisk University as the Chair of Creative Literature, he was committed to promoting racial uplift through education. He also committed his talents to serving his race and preserving African American literary tradition, serving as a consul in Venezuela and Nicaragua, field secretary in the NAACP, first Black executive secretary in the NAACP, and poetry and essay contributor to many prominent Black publications. He was born and raised in a mostly white community, which helped him develop a cosmopolitan perspective before his education in race relations and the Black community’s wants and needs at Atlanta University, a historically Black college. In contrast to Hughes, who took a working man’s perspective aligning with the “common folk,” Johnson maintained a cautious, middle/upper class ideology, promoting gradual change to create a more unified nation, and using his multiple careers and leadership positions to do so. (Hutchinson, 2007; Kinnamon, 1987; Price & Oliver, 1997)

Despite their differing class perspectives and experiences, Johnson and Hughes both used Black vernacular sources as inspiration for their writing, such as spirituals, jazz, the blues, and traditional dialect, keeping race closely intertwined with their work. While neither were Christians, they understood the importance of the Christian tradition in Black culture. For instance, Johnson's most famous poetic work features "*Seven Negro Sermons in Verse*," using the distinct tonality and form of Black preachers at the time. Clearly versed in the Christian tradition, Hughes uses some Biblical allusions which bolster his poetic authority, but speaks mostly in the voice of the Black community, bringing up subjects as diverse as paying rent, singing the blues, dreaming, miscegenation, and communist sentiments. He commonly used blues music as inspiration for his poetry, which had a subject that tends to be one of despair infused with humor. Blues form was an integral part of his work, created through repeating or similarly stating one long line, and rhyming a third line with the first. He also created the genre of jazz poetry, using the diversity of the Black experience that he was familiar with from his many travels to create a sense of Black pride. He encouraged the beauty found in Black culture, while also making sure to acknowledge the more undesirable aspects of life for all (Hutchinson, 2007; Miller, 1987).

Racial Consciousness

Racial consciousness -- one of, if not the most defining feature of the Harlem Renaissance and its art -- is a recognition of peoples by their race, a system of identification that has been used ever since humans distinguished themselves or others based on skin color. By the Harlem Renaissance period, the term's closest equivalent was what Du Bois termed "double consciousness" in his work *The Souls of Black Folk*. Du Bois asserted that being both Black and

American created tension and strife within oneself and in one's interactions with others, especially as society was pervaded by caricatures and prejudice, such as the "Black mammy" and the "zip coon." He argued that Negroes struggled to identify themselves, since they were not completely American in the traditionally white sense, yet only loosely connected to their African past, having created their own separate culture over the past 300 years (Andrews et al., 1997; Hutchinson, 2007; Morley, 2012). In contemporary terms, scholars generally associate racial and double consciousness with intersectionality, as it encompasses a wider classification system of marginalized peoples, such as gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic status. Jennifer Nash (2008) claims that intersectionality has become an integral tool for investigating issues such as race and gender in light of oppression. By developing a distinctive racial consciousness in their poems, Countee Cullen and James Weldon Johnson explore the concepts of Black aesthetic, Black nationalism, double consciousness, and intersectionality.

Demonstrating racial consciousness through coded metaphors and other figurative language, Cullen's "From the Dark Tower" explores the current state of racial oppression in America and predicts a different future due to the unique characteristics that Blacks possess. The problem presented in "From The Dark Tower" is the unequal, poor treatment of Blacks. Using the word "we" as the first word of the poem, Cullen establishes the speaker as part of the group being mistreated, and calls out to others experiencing the same struggles. Containing repetition and anaphora of the word "not" and "not always," the poem asserts there will come a time when people of color will no longer be used for cheap labor, stand by while others obtain the rewards of their hard work, cajole the "brutes" that they bow down to, or feel sorrowful. Looking to the future in the last six lines, Cullen resolves the problem, comparing Black people to nighttime,

asserting night (Black people) is just as beautiful as day (white people), and plays a unique and vital role in the world. While currently enduring pain and strife, by coming together, colored people can bear each other's heavy, societally constructed burdens and bring forth new sprouts of life and hope (Cullen, 1927; Leitner, 2015). According to the *Oxford Companion to African American Literature* (1997), the depiction of Black beauty and prediction of a changing situation struck a chord with many at the time who were hopeless, complacent, and embarrassed or ashamed of their skin color.

Cullen demonstrates a clear racial divide and consciousness in “From The Dark Tower,” and develops a new Black aesthetic and sense of nationalism. *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature* (1997) states that the term Black aesthetic emerged in the 1960s, referring to a highly specific Black culture and style that had developed as Blacks wrestled with maintaining their place and identity in both African American and American society. Black nationalism, a related term outlined in the *Oxford Companion*, unified Blacks under the category of race and through their shared experiences of enslavement, oppression, and double consciousness. During the Harlem Renaissance, Blacks resolved to push for recognition and reform, by establishing deep-rooted organizations and communities of support, and reconsidering their common African heritage and isolation from main society (Andrews et al., 1997). Some of Cullen’s other works, such as “Ballad of the Brown Girl,” “Incident,” “For a Lady I Know,” and “Tableau,” further his overall expression of racial consciousness; specifically, poems like “Yet Do I Marvel,” “Heritage,” “The Black Christ,” and “The Litany of the Dark People” grapple with the creation of a Black aesthetic and nationalism. These works feature Black beauty, acknowledging and

understanding history's impact on current circumstances and future hope, therefore reinforcing themes found in "From The Dark Tower."

Similar to Cullen's poem, James Weldon Johnson's "Fifty Years" uncovers the history of slavery in the United States. In particular, he focuses on the 50 years since the Emancipation Proclamation that was celebrated in tandem with the publication of the poem. Johnson displays clear consciousness of the divides that have historically encumbered Blacks, although refrains from explicitly exposing cruel past and present incidents. For example, he says: "We've bought a rightful sonship here, / And we have more than paid the price" (Johnson, 1917, p. 4). This line does not specify what "price" Blacks have paid in America, instead focusing on asserting what Blacks have earned and therefore do have the right to. While many of Johnson's contemporaries claimed that he was abandoning the Black aesthetic and promoting an accommodationist attitude, his optimism and focus on the success and progress Blacks had experienced provoked a sense of Black nationalism, pride, and unity among the Black masses. Robert Fleming details in *Critical Essays on James Weldon Johnson* (1997) that Johnson wrote four drafts of the poem before its publication, indicative of his struggle between producing a distinctive Black aesthetic and full truth telling; and his assimilationist goals, which were necessary for his support by wealthy whites. This intersectional sentiment represents his overall style, pulled between Black dialect and maintenance of what were seen as white ideals of art, seen by his neat quatrains and traditional rhyme scheme and meter. His struggle also demonstrates a larger point of contention in society during the Harlem Renaissance, that debated the limitations of race as a subject for art, especially in a white society that was still largely ingrained in racist practices.

Racial Uplift

The primary mode of resistance against racism found in literature during the Harlem Renaissance was racial uplift, which Du Bois introduced as a way for intellectuals to present Blacks in their best light, with the goal of being accepted by mainstream society and therefore seen as equal to whites (Morley, 2012). The original Du Boisian concept around how to achieve racial uplift in literature was through the use of traditional European forms, such as Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnets, quatrains, ballads, allusion to Biblical, Greek, and Roman mythology, and simple rhyme schemes. Countee Cullen and other elitist, upper class educated men typically used this method as it allowed them to feel as if they were contributing to the elevation of their race, while still maintaining the patronage of progressive white people like Van Vetchen (Cullen & Early, 1991; Hutchinson, 2007). Another approach to racial uplift branching from the original concept, centered around developing and articulating a distinctive, authentic Black culture based on the traditions of the past, in order to combat the caricatured stereotypes used by whites during the era. This was a popular option for artists who sought to appeal to the middle and lower class masses, like Langston Hughes, and created pride in Negro culture and Black loveliness (Hughes & Rampersad, 2001; Hutchinson, 2007). Both approaches were fiercely criticized by the other, due to promoting assimilation, denying racial consciousness, and shackling themselves to constrictive forms that limited their art and creativity, or by playing into white stereotypes of Blacks and reinforcing negative attitudes surrounding such. No matter their stance on racial uplift, Harlem Renaissance artists created exceptional poetry that mastered elite art forms, or created technically advanced avant-garde works of art that undoubtedly influenced future activism and artistry (Hutchinson, 2007; Kemp, 2013; Morley, 2012).

Clifford's traditional style of poetry portrays racial uplift mostly through Du Bois's conceptualization of the term. Representative of many Black women's poetry during this time, Clifford's poetry is consistent with European poetic styles that may seem docile on the surface, but reveal progress and innovation under closer evaluation. A history of trauma and neglect led many Black women to create their own aesthetic of beauty in art (Honey, 2006), negotiating their "triple consciousness" within the safety of European forms. Maureen Honey (2006), George Hutchinson (2007), and Melissa Kemp (2013) claim that women were allowed to explore a wider, more "taboo" territory by employing nature themes and conventional forms, therefore eluding suspicious white eyes that looked down upon any sort of avant-garde art. Despite their outward acquiescence, these women foreshadowed and kickstarted feminist and modernist movements that were able to expand with increasing women's rights throughout the century (Honey, 2006; Hutchinson, 2007; Kemp, 2013). Even so, most did not dare to approach racism with the head on approach Clifford took in her lyrical poetry volumes, which demonstrate a distinctive racial consciousness and intersectionality by promoting reform specifically through Black women. In her poem "Duty's Call," Clifford calls on women to bring about racial uplift through kind deeds, and her essay "Votes For Children," makes a strong case for women's suffrage by claiming that it will benefit the entire family, especially the up and coming generation of children that women carry the burden of raising. She also transforms subtle phrases such as "boys and girls" into "girls and boys," and intentionally addresses "women" instead of "men" in the featured poem "Marching to Conquest." Clifford demonstrates her loathing of racism and segregation in "Shall We Fight The Jim Crow Car," a civil rights-esce poem promoting public transportation integration, "Peril," and "Character or Color, Which?" and

includes more explicit poems such as: “Little Mother,” “The Birth of a Nation,” and “Race Hate” that detail the lynching of Mary Turner, her husband, and her unborn child, the premiere of the racist movie *The Birth of a Nation*, and the East St. Louis race riot of 1917 (Clifford et al., 1997; Tucker, 2013).

Other works vital to Clifford’s argument of racial uplift through education, peaceful protest, and social and political activism are “To Howard University,” “Silent Protest Parade,” and in particular, “Marching to Conquest”. Clifford’s repetition of “Marching and marching to conquest” and “As we go marching to conquest” at the end of each stanza emphasizes its occurrence and simulates the rhythm and dynamic of people marching in a parade (Clifford, 1911, p.23). Clifford creates a sing-song quality to the poem, and the song-like intonation of the poem represents a larger song that Clifford sings of freedom from all forms of discrimination, through racial uplift. She mentions God’s guidance (“seeking guidance from the Lord of good”), children’s education (“we’ll teach our girls and boys”), and artistic endeavors (repetition of “Sing it” and “raise a mighty shout”) will “set the captives free,” and help her people march to conquest, foreshadowing Martin Luther King Jr.’s peaceful civil rights activism (Tucker, 2013). Clifford’s poems, especially “Marching to Conquest” model racial uplift in their stereotypically white rhyme schemes, styles, and word choice, yet speak of progressive racial matters and emphasize the need for societal and cultural transformation in race relations.

Racial Justice

The terms racial justice and social justice have only recently become popularized, but their core concepts have been a part of American history since the Emancipation Proclamation of 1862. David Gushee (2013) and Matthew Desmond and Mustafa Emirbayer (2012) argue that

racial justice involves in some way addressing and making amends for the horrific past that African Americans endured through 250 years of enslavement, 100 years of *de jure* segregation, and present day *de facto* discrimination. While racial justice in any form was considered a pipedream or unrealistic sentiment for many Black intellectuals pre-Harlem Renaissance, such as Booker T. Washington who was resigned to accommodationist views, the concept does arise in some Harlem Renaissance works. In most artistic mentions of racial justice, such as Du Bois's and Cullen's works, it remains a far-fetched option only viable in the distant future through divine help. A couple of exceptions to this trend are Clifford's works that contain ahead of her time civil rights ideals, and Langston Hughes's feature poem "Let America Be America Again."

Hughes's poem "Let America Be America Again," calls for racial justice for Blacks, and introduces its extension to other marginalized groups as well, such as Native Americans, immigrants, and poor whites. He holds up the American Dream that the mainstream populace promotes, and debunks it by providing a detailed picture of reality in 1935 America. The poem then calls for the country to fulfill its empty words, provoking a nationalist sentiment that unifies U.S. citizens. From the point of view of a marginalized, astute citizen, the speaker of the poem argues that despite America's claim to be "home of the free" and its veil of virtuosity to the rest of the world, the United States are the rich, white man's land, crushing the very people that built its foundations. The speaker claims through parenthetical aside that "(America never was America to me)," implying that the situation has been a consistent trait of America's history. Johnson uses these parentheses both to draw attention to his bold statements, and manage the unpopularity of these ideas with his white audience by making it a side note. He not only promotes a sense of racial justice through achieving the true American dream through "We, the

people,” he also suggests racial consciousness as discussed earlier, although it becomes intersectionalized through the inclusion of other marginalized peoples, and inherently promotes racial uplift through improvement of the entire United States (Conan, 2012; Hughes & Rampersad, 2001; Masur, 2020).

Hughes’s strong belief in justice due to Blacks and other mistreated groups of people made his work a source of controversy for years to come. While the middle and upper classes, both black and white, generally found Hughes work embarrassing and demeaning, especially during his radical political phase during most of the 1930s, Hutchinson (2007) and Arnold Rampersad (2001) agree that his work promoting social justice and civil rights has forged an unparalleled legacy that inspired many Black Arts Movement artists. Clifford’s work was a similar, if not even more powerful call for redemption, uplift, and justice, warning the country in “Three Sonnets” and other works that what started as a small movement will eventually burst out and claim full heritage as rightful citizens of America. Unlike Hughes’s proletarian movement fighting for social justice, she and Johnson call up a divine reconciliation through a just God. For example, Johnson declares in “Fifty Years,” “God cannot let it come to naught,” and Clifford’s “Jim Crow Car,” says “So surely will his judgment fall with vengeance swift and true” (Clifford et al., 1997; Johnson, 1917). While the four poets chose different methods, forms, and topics to explore in their art, they all expressed a distinct sense of racial consciousness by developing Black culture and wrestling with intersectionality. Cullen hints at a future where Blacks are no longer oppressed after a period of patient waiting and working, Clifford and Johnson promote uplift in the present through education and trust in God, and Hughes focuses on the power of the people to bring about change.

Legacy of the Harlem Renaissance: Two Decades Later & The Black Arts Movement

Rather than focusing on the many successes of the Harlem Renaissance, Blacks in the 1940s developed a highly critical and cynical eye due to the Great Depression and lack of Black progress in the social and political realms. Many critics in the 1940s remarked that the Harlem Renaissance time period was infested with white sentiments, standards, and leaders that diminished Black culture and nationalism. They saw the Harlem Renaissance era as a fad; in fact, Richard Wright stated that the Harlem Renaissance was “nothing but manicured poodles dressed in knee pants of servility curtsying to show that the Negro was not inferior, that he was human” (Hutchinson, 2007, p. 247). The artists and leaders of the 1940s wanted nothing less than full equality, and therefore communist and socialist egalitarianism seemed like a satisfactory replacement for the twisted form of democracy the United States provided. Rather than celebrating Blackness and Black culture, politics and art shifted to focus on exposing racist practices and violence such as lynching and police brutality. While education was still critical to their cause, Blacks wanted to radicalize and revolutionize the youth rather than encourage them toward unity and assimilation (Andrews et al., 1997; Hutchinson, 2007).

The generation growing up during the Great Depression and the 1940s under militant, Communist philosophy resulted in an explosion of art during the late 60s and early 70s called the Black Arts Movement. The movement was catalyzed by the death of Malcolm X in 1965, and its most significant poets included those such as Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal, along with Ethridge Knight, Haki R. Madhubuti, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, Quincy Troupe, and Al Young. Many of these writers were influenced by their Harlem Renaissance ancestors and mid-century poets, primarily Gwendolyn Brooks (the first African American to receive the Pulitzer Prize for

Poetry, for her book *Annie Allen*), seen in their focus on Black beauty, aesthetics, and music (Andrews et al., 1997; Mullen, 2001; Ryan-Bryant, 2015).

Although Harlem Renaissance works continued to be dismissed by scholars and artists into the 1960s and 1970s, the Black Arts Movement ironically demonstrated similar internal conflicts over communist and nationalist ideologies, and over the role of race in art. The Black Arts Movement also similarly experimented with avant-garde styles and topics, challenged Western culture and what it means to be Black in America, developed close ties to Black communities, and ended at least in part due to economic depression (Andrews et al., 1997; Mullen, 2001). Uniquely, the Black Arts Movement was the first to accentuate community engagement as a focal point, as readings and performances became an integral part of the poetic tradition. This element helped artists reach a wider audience and foreshadowed contemporary rap and hip hop (Hodges, 2015a). The coinciding emergence of the Black Power Movement, which was essentially an attempt to escape white colonialism, capitalism, and supremacy worldwide, had close ties to Black arts and aesthetics of the movement, and continues to impact today's ideas of the Black aesthetic (Mullen, 2001). One of the most significant developments of the era was the production of distinct standards for African American art, furthering the Harlem Renaissance desire for self-determination (Shockley, 2011). Even so, some critics claim the movement's militancy and radicalism deterred many artists, in particular females and the LGBTQ+ community. The Black Arts Movement's racial exclusivity was concerning to many people of all races who wanted to achieve peace and move past the hatred of the past, as it often promoted a purification of Blackness that exterminated all whiteness from Black culture and artwork, providing a proscribed formula that was expected to be followed to garner attention and

success. Whatever the limitations of the period, the proliferation of ideas and Black art during this time paved the way for future generations of writers to expand their formulas and create a well-rounded compilation of innovative and exploratory works (Andrews et al., 1997; Mullen, 2001; Ryan-Bryant, 2015). Indicative of demands for reparations and full racial amends, the Black Arts Movement articulated racial justice, as opposed to racial uplift emphasized by the Harlem Renaissance era, despite its growing pains and contentions.

A Third Renaissance of Poetry: The 1990s to Present Day

African American studies became an important aspect of many higher education institutions and organizations during and after the Black Arts Movement, though judgements remained harsh regarding Harlem Renaissance art and poetry throughout the 1970s. Looking more closely at Harlem Renaissance artistic productions due to a revival of interest in ancestry and traditional aesthetics within the Black community, scholars in the 1980s and 1990s rediscovered its ingenuity and historical importance, placing their works in a larger movement for civil rights during the twentieth century (Hutchinson, 2007). This is evidenced by the creation of the nation's first Black poetry academic center: the Furious Flower Poetry Center at James Madison University in 1994 (Hodges, 2005a). Overlooked and underappreciated artists, in particular women such as Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, and Anne Spencer, are now recognized for their achievements, in particular the defiance of mainstream attitudes through subversive means (Thaggert, 2018). Today's Black poetry exists beyond labels, due to the diverse voices that write in the forms and styles of all historical eras and create new ones, although scholars are generally in agreement that the first two decades of the 2000s have seen a third post-emancipation rebirth in enthusiasm for the Black arts in culture and the socio-political scene (Hodges, 2015b; Hodges,

2015c; Ryan-Bryant, 2015; Shockley, 2011). The importance of community performance remains and has grown to encompass both old and new styles, such as jazz, rap, blues, and sermons (Andrews, 1997; Ryan-Bryant, 2015). Another commonality exists in that many poets are engaging in a re-creation of historical and poetic tradition, by taking conventional forms and exploring them through the intricate experiences of those who have been historically marginalized, another reason why Harlem Renaissance art has been revitalized and acknowledged in many artists' works (Hunter, 2020; Jones, 2011; Thaggert, 2018).

Poets today, such as Amanda Gorman, Elizabeth Alexander, Harryette Mullen, Ruth Forman, Natasha Trethewey, Kevin Young, Tracy K. Smith, Terrance Hayes, Thomas Ellis, Alice Walker, Rita Dove, and Yusef Komunyakaa, are connecting more than ever before with Harlem Renaissance tenets and poetry, inheriting ancestral voices and revising historical memory. Evidence of such includes Forman's book *Renaissance*, which acknowledges modern day connections to Harlem Renaissance poetry and invokes its figures, acting as a historical witness that augments understanding of the Black aesthetic and culture. Moreover, Countee Cullen's influence can be seen in Rita Dove and Elizabeth Alexander's work, and Hughes's essay "The Negro Artist and The Racial Mountain," finds renewed resonance in higher education institutions and in the larger society (Jones, 2011). The avant-garde exploration of the possibilities of language, and a multilayered, fluid Black aesthetic is also a consistent thread in African American contemporary work, representing a deep experience of the remaining effects of racism in the form of microaggressions and systemic injustice (Hodges, 2015d; Hunter, 2020; Thaggert, 2018). Poets today attempt to rupture the folds of "acceptable" social talk, and present at least for a brief period of time, questions and "indigestible" material to a complacent and often

disillusioned society (Hodges, 2015d). Groups such as The Dark Room Collective, Cave Canem Foundation, Affrilachian Poets, The Watering Hole, Furious Flower Poetry Center, and lesser known collectives, conferences, and workshops have made it possible for Gwendolyn Brooks's "furious flowering" of poetic innovation and tradition come to pass in the first decades of the 21st century (Hodges, 2015b; Hodges, 2015c; Jones, 2011). Poets and artists in the future will no doubt continue to engage with the memories of the past and confront further change and liberation, asking what it means to be human and capturing unique perspectives of life experiences (Hodges, 2005).

Beyond Education: Informing New Paths of Resistance and Justice

Racial progress over the past century in America is unprecedented in comparison to historical ethnic and racial division in other countries, and something of significant worth, but we are yet to live in a "post-racial" society. Minority groups, in particular the Black community, feel the effects of racism in many aspects of life. Inherited trauma, microaggressions, *de facto* segregation, the wealth gap, the achievement gap, and systematic racism in politics, the justice system, and education are just a few examples of its present-day impacts (Desmond & Emirbayer, 2012; Gushee, 2013). There are still hindrances to full historic truth-telling, apologizing for our country's horrific past, and reparations, which has become a highly-contested topic. By way of illustration, the U.S. House of Representatives did not formally apologize for slavery and Jim Crow segregation until 2008 and an 1989 bill introduced to Congress to form a reparations council is still under consideration over 30 years later (Foster, 2020; Gushee, 2013). Through poetry and other creative methods, Blacks have been able to express their frustrations and push agendas of change, which are stronger than ever, and informed by a wide variety of

past ideas and attempts to achieve justice. Many are therefore prompted to ask: What can we do, as a society and as individuals, to move towards racial justice and unity, to fulfill Hughes's plea in “Let America Be America Again” to “make America again” (Desmond & Emirbayer, 2012; Gushee, 2013)?

There is no singular, clear path to justice and unity. Acknowledgement, forgiveness, repairs, and unification are goals still yet to be attained, and while their core concepts are admirable and seem simple, a difficult and tricky path lies ahead of us (Gushee, 2013). Just as the artists of the Harlem Renaissance experienced a great deal of strife over differing methods to achieve racial uplift, with no conclusive answer as to which led to equity in a more effective way, several options exist to attain a more equitable society, many of which could be potent methods. Instead of conforming to one “perfect” solution, we should broaden our horizons, and strive to research and carry out many strategies in the multitude of unique situations we will encounter. Many of the best strategies are found foreshadowed in Harlem Renaissance poetry and continued in modern-day poetry, such as education, which involves complete truth-telling through reclamation and recognition of Black history, and fostering a society of multiculturalism. In essence, multiculturalism in society would look like the recognition of all cultures’ merits and an equitable representation in socio-political systems (Desmond & Emirbayer, 2012). For example, the themes in Johnson’s poem “Fifty Years” are increasingly relevant and compatible with our newest federal holiday, Juneteenth, as both renew interest in and promote an accurate understanding of the history of Blacks in the United States.

Both individual and structural change are necessary to create long-lasting and authentic justice and equity. The most ineffectual stance someone can take is to stay neutral on these issues

and do nothing, because this leads to upholding the status quo and therefore an unequal system (Desmond & Emirbayer, 2012; Foster, 2020). At a personal level, non-Blacks can educate themselves on the challenges minority communities, in particular Blacks, continue to face, and revise their attitudes about racism. Non-Blacks can require a continual critical evaluation of their thoughts and attitudes, ask lots of questions, listen more than they talk, learn how to communicate effectively, have discussions with people who have different viewpoints, develop empathy and love, and learn how to invest in others. Then, they can hold those they are close with accountable for doing the same. From an overall societal standpoint, we can strive to embrace the multiculturalism and racial justice that were foreshadowed a century ago in Harlem Renaissance poetry and art, adopting them as immutable freedoms. More diverse political representation, eradication of the wealth and achievement gaps, encouragement towards racial integration, promotion of multicultural mindsets in schools and residential areas, elimination of racial inequalities in the justice system, investment in poor communities, and advisement of the general public towards critical thinking and intelligent, realistic approaches towards racial justice, are examples of a few structural adjustments that will benefit America and move us closer to these goals (Desmond & Emirbayer, 2012; Foster, 2020). This may mean we have to develop new or alternative ways of living in and perceiving the world, but by being open to constructive criticism, we can continue to build a better America dedicated to providing justice and creating what the constitution calls a “more perfect union.”

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