

The Philosophy of the Harlem Renaissance and Standpoint Theory

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Harlem Renaissance (c. 1918–37)

- Harlem Renaissance, a blossoming of African American culture, particularly in the creative arts, and the most influential movement in African American literary history.
- Embracing literary, musical, theatrical, and visual arts, participants sought to reconceptualize “the Negro” apart from the white stereotypes that had influenced black peoples’ relationship to their heritage and to each other.
- They also sought to break free of Victorian moral values and bourgeois shame about aspects of their lives that might, as seen by whites, reinforce racist beliefs.
- Never dominated by a particular school of thought but rather characterized by intense debate, the movement laid the groundwork for all later African American literature and had an enormous impact on subsequent black literature and consciousness worldwide.



Alan Locke, *The New Negro* (1925)

“In the last decade something beyond the watch and guard of statistics has happened in the life of the American Negro and the three norms who have traditionally presided over the Negro problem have a changeling in their laps. The Sociologist, the Philanthropist, the Race-leader are not unaware of the New Negro, but they are at a loss to account for him. He simply cannot be swathed in their formulae. For the younger generation is vibrant with a new psychology; the new spirit is awake in the masses, and under the very eyes of the professional observers is transforming what has been a perennial problem into the progressive phases of contemporary Negro life.”

Theorizing Black Art

- After Alain Locke's *The New Negro* writers would explore black art → the foundation, meaning, and direction
- 1926: George S. Schuyler and Langston Hughes published short essays in *The Nation* → examined the racial character of African American art
- Schuyler's "The Negro-Art Hokum" appeared first → dismissed the idea that cultural expression could have a racial basis
 - Argued: all art produced by blacks and whites in the United States is American art that copies European forms and styles → notions of black art were tied to his ideas of black equality
 - To say that there is even something called black art is to say black people are inferior
- Langston Hughes, on the other hand, believed that black art represented the beauty (not inferiority) of African American culture → especially folk culture.

W.E.B Du Bois's Double Consciousness

- W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963) was a political theorists, philosopher, novelist and writer
- Was instrumental in the founding of the NAACP
- Wrote over a dozen books, including these major works:
 - *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903)
 - *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935)
- Theory of Double Consciousness meant to theorize the unique position of black people in America → marginalized, but this marginalization gave them privilege view on society



“Of Our Spiritual Strivings” Orig Published 1897

“Between me and the other world there is an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter around it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? they say, I know an excellent coloredman in town; or, I fought at Mechanicsville; or, Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil?” (1729)

“Of Our Spiritual Strivings” Double-Consciousness

“After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that look on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro: two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (1730).

Creating the Other



This reproduction of a 1900 William H. West minstrel show poster, originally published by the Strobridge Litho Co., shows the transformation from "white" to "black".



Bert Williams was the only black member of the Ziegfeld Follies when he joined them in 1910. Shown here in blackface, he was the highest-paid African American entertainer of his day.

“Of Our Spiritual Strivings”

Double-Consciousness

“The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face” (1730-1731).

The Other



Standpoint Theory

- Standpoint theory: Knowledge stems from social position
- Emerged from Neo-Marxist perspective of Antonio Gramsci that claims that the working class and marginalized people have special access to knowledge and perspective that is not available to the ruling class
- Society has stratified social classes into class, gender, and race → your social position influences what you know
- Questions objective empiricism → E.g. Sandra Harding claims that scientists ignored their own androcentric and sexist method and results (all while they claim neutrality) → if people can recognize their standpoint can make them more aware of positions of power that exist in scientific authority
- If one starts from the perspective of marginalized people, then more likely to see the role of standpoint → will create knowledge that is more critical, coherent and critical



Hillary Clinton visits a working class family in East Harlem during her 2016 presidential campaign.



Black feminist thought

- Black women have unique experiences that result in different perspectives on the world
- On Black women's standpoint: "All African-American women share the common experience of being Black women in a society that denigrates women of African descent" (Collins, 343).
- Different perspectives on the world Ruth Shays: "The mind of the man and the mind of the woman is the same, but this business of living makes women use their minds in ways that men don't even have to think about"

