



Transcript for “The Harlem Renaissance”

An Audio Program from *This Goodly Land: Alabama’s Literary Landscape*

In Part 1, interviewer Maiben Beard and Dr. Susana Morris of Auburn University present an overview of the Harlem Renaissance. In Part 2, they discuss Harlem Renaissance literature. This transcript has been edited for readability.

Part 1. The Harlem Renaissance.

Ms. Beard: Welcome to *This Goodly Land*’s audio program about the Harlem Renaissance. I’m Maiben Beard. We are talking today with Dr. Susana Morris of the Auburn University Department of English. It’s good to have you with us, Dr. Morris.

Dr. Morris: I’m delighted to be here. Thank you.

Ms. Beard: What do we mean when we use the term “Harlem Renaissance”?

Dr. Morris: Generally, the term refers to a flourishing of African American arts and letters. We generally think of the poetry and the drama, the artwork, the sculpture, and of course texts like Alain Locke’s *The New Negro* come to mind. Those are really definitive moments of the Harlem Renaissance.

Ms. Beard: What time period are we talking about?

Dr. Morris: Now that’s under debate. Generally the conservative estimate would be ... we’re talking about the 1920s. It begins in 1920; it ends in 1929 with the stock market crash. But there are some other estimates that say it starts a little earlier, right after World War I ends, and goes to about 1940. So we’re really talking about a longer time period, but we can say that the 1920s is the height of the movement for sure.

Ms. Beard: When we say Harlem Renaissance, most people think of the Jazz Age. What’s the connection there?

Dr. Morris: Well, that’s interesting. There is a connection, but it’s not as cut-and-dried as it sometimes is cast. There certainly is a time period connection. The Jazz Age is the 1920s, so there’s some overlap in terms of time. The Jazz Age, I think, more specifically refers to music, specifically jazz, ragtime, things of that nature, and is also marked by particular texts such as F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* which came out in 1925.

I think it’s safe to say that oftentimes there’s a racial demarcation between using the Harlem Renaissance and using the Jazz Age, so we would not necessarily claim *The Great Gatsby* as a

Harlem Renaissance text. Even though it's about New York in many ways, it's taking place at the same time, but it's really emphasizing more Jazz Age elements than the Harlem Renaissance. So they're connected, maybe cousins, but not brothers and sisters.

Ms. Beard: Could you tell us a bit about the Great Migration and its connection to the Harlem Renaissance?

Dr. Morris: The Great Migration, there are several, and there is actually one that is happening right now. But, during the Harlem Renaissance, there was a Great Migration where many black folk from the South migrated north to cities such as Chicago, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Detroit, and of course New York. And what happened then is that black folk were once a primarily rural population (most folks resided in places like Mississippi, Alabama of course, Georgia, Florida, etc.), and then were moving into these urban centers in the North, so that was a big shift.

Some estimates say that between 1916 and 1918, approximately 400,000 African Americans migrated from the South to the North. So, a lot of folks ended up in Harlem because of that, maybe not all 400,000, but a good chunk, many, tens of thousands, moved to New York.

Ms. Beard: Why Harlem? What made Harlem so special?

Dr. Morris: Harlem was special for a variety of reasons. As I said, folks were migrating to all sorts of other cities, but black folks and folks in general who were moving to New York and who still move to New York saw it as a cosmopolitan place. It was the biggest city.

There were all these cultural landmarks. There were jobs, there were shows, there were all sorts of fancy people dressing up, there were stars and celebrities, so there were lots of different things. And part of the Great Migration was really about economic movement, so there were jobs in Harlem and people were really interested in that.

Ms. Beard: Did the Harlem Renaissance only happen in New York?

Dr. Morris: No, it didn't. So, in some ways, the, the Harlem Renaissance as a term is a misnomer. What is important to know, however, is that a lot of the cultural activity happened in Harlem, and so that's why it gets the credit. But there were certainly other sorts of cultural moments happening in places like D.C., especially the Baltimore – D.C. area.

There were lots of salons happening where folks were coming in and reading poetry, playing instruments, and things like that. Chicago had its own Renaissance going on and would continue to have one later. So Harlem was perhaps the epicenter, but it certainly wasn't happening just in Harlem. Harlem was indicative of other happenings across the country.

Ms. Beard: There was also a large black population in the South. Was this kind of cultural growth happening there as well?

Dr. Morris: There was. And I think that, going back to the notion of the Harlem Renaissance and an emphasis on Harlem being a bit of a misnomer, there's a lot of travel back and forth. Folks aren't just staying in Harlem or just staying in Chicago or other places. They are coming down to say, Atlanta or Tuskegee or New Orleans, collecting folklore, for example.

Zora Neale Hurston spent lots of time in her native state, or adopted native state, of Florida, and went across into the Caribbean and things like that. So there were smaller pockets of a Renaissance, as it were, happening in parts of the South as well, especially Nashville where Fisk University is, Tuskegee in Alabama, Durham, North Carolina; there were these pockets all across the South.

Ms. Beard: Tell us a little about the Tuskegee connection.

Dr. Morris: Um-hum. A lot of authors, because of the Tuskegee Institute being such a famous place (a place that educated many folk including Harlem Renaissance poet Claude McKay who is a graduate of Tuskegee), and other folks also, taught at Tuskegee.

It really centers heavily in a lot of fiction and a lot of essays, as well. Harlem Renaissance writer Nella Larsen actually taught at Tuskegee for a very short time, and she satirizes it in her 1928 novel *Quicksand*. And so it was iconic, even in the 1920s. Tuskegee definitely had a large shadow looming over the Harlem Renaissance, as it were.

Ms. Beard: What was happening in black culture before the Harlem Renaissance?

Dr. Morris: So many things. There are lots of things happening in black culture. If we think about literature in particular and its connection to political activity, there's a lot of writing happening: slave narratives, antebellum (before the Civil War), and postbellum. Of course politically we have Emancipation happening, Reconstruction in the South, the Great Migration.

So all of these things are impacting what people write about, what people are singing about, what they are dancing to, and there is a lot of writing, which is why the Harlem Renaissance is indeed a Renaissance. A Renaissance implies that there is a rebirth, which means that there was a birth before. And so there was the birth of an African-American literary movement from really the Eighteenth Century onward. So those were some of the things that were happening.

Ms. Beard: What was happening in terms of black politics during this time?

Dr. Morris: Particularly, a lot of historians cite the period right before the Harlem Renaissance as the nadir of black life, meaning that it was its lowest point in some ways, which people might be surprised to hear. One would think slavery would have been the lowest point, but really, after emancipation and after the crumbling of Reconstruction, that's when a lot of the Jim Crow laws came into being. Those did not happen before slavery; those happened after slavery.

Black Codes, laws such as Plessey vs. Ferguson that instituted separate but equal being legal, rampant lynching happening well into the Nineteen Twenties and Thirties, race riots. The Great Migration is spurred by economic disadvantages; that's why people are leaving their farms, leaving sharecropping, which was basically being a peon on a farm, being sort of like a serf.

And so there was a lot happening politically; lots of leaders were emerging to ameliorate these problems. So you have the older vanguard like Frederick Douglass dying and having folks like Booker T. Washington of Tuskegee coming in to take that place with what some would call a type of conservative politics, saying that we can really co-exist in segregation.

And then you have other folks who might be identified as more radical, like W.E.B. DuBois saying, no, we actually need to integrate and we need to fight for political enfranchisement. You

know, the founding of the NAACP in 1909, there were lots of political movements happening, Marcus Garvey's nationalist movement happening in New York. It really was a tumultuous time, and I'm not even mentioning the fact that World War I and all these other things clearly are happening on a national scene. So the world was as tumultuous then as it is now.

Ms. Beard: How is the Harlem Renaissance connected to other artistic movements of this time period?

Dr. Morris: So, at the same time that the Harlem Renaissance is going on, and, of course, the Jazz Age and the Roaring Twenties, we have Modernism happening. We have folks like Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot publishing, H.D. [Hilda Doolittle] and other folk, and so the Harlem Renaissance is connected to larger movements of Modernism, but it's a marked difference as well. They are not interested in the same cultural forms or the same themes, and so they co-exist, but they are not necessarily intertwined completely.

Ms. Beard: What happened to the artists, writers, and performers of the Harlem Renaissance when the Great Depression came?

Dr. Morris: They didn't stop writing, contrary to popular belief. The Renaissance didn't end and people said, oh, I'm going to stop writing. They continued to write, but the time of prosperity was over, and so there was a lot less patronage for the arts in some ways. Of course, with the New Deal in the Thirties, there was support for the arts in different ways, but the private support for the arts shifted.

Some folks continued to publish very much; Langston Hughes has a very successful publishing career well into the Nineteen Sixties. And when he dies is when he stops publishing, essentially. Other people disappear like Nella Larsen, we don't really hear from her after 1929. So there was definitely a continuation of publishing, but the atmosphere had shifted dramatically.

Ms. Beard: Thank you for talking with us, Dr. Morris.

Dr. Morris: Thank you for having me!

Ms. Beard: This is the end of Part 1 of our discussion about the Harlem Renaissance with Dr. Susana Morris of the Auburn University Department of English. Please join us for Part 2 which will focus on the literature of the Harlem Renaissance.

This audio program is produced for *This Goodly Land: Alabama's Literary Landscape*, a Web site connecting Alabama and its writers. Visit us at www.alabamaliterarymap.org where you can find additional resources on this topic.

This Goodly Land is a program of the Caroline Marshall Draughon Center for the Arts & Humanities, in the College of Liberal Arts at Auburn University, and the Alabama Center for the Book.

The interviewer is Maiben Beard. This program is produced and edited by Midge Coates. Technical assistance is provided by Darryl Crutchley and Sam Singer.

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Thank you for listening.

Part 2. The Harlem Renaissance

Ms. Beard: Welcome to Part 2 of *This Goodly Land's* audio program about the Harlem Renaissance. I'm Maiben Beard. We are talking today with Dr. Susana Morris of the Auburn University Department of English. It's good to have you back with us, Dr. Morris.

Dr. Morris: Thank you for having me back. Thank you.

Ms. Beard: In Part 2, we are focusing on the literature of the Harlem Renaissance. Can you tell us something about the principal writers of this movement?

Dr. Morris: Sure, there were several. Oftentimes, when we think of the Harlem Renaissance, we think of poetry, and rightfully so, and there were many, many popular poets, critically acclaimed poets, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, James Weldon Johnson (who was the older vanguard but continued to publish into the Harlem Renaissance), Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps, lots of folk.

In terms of short story writing, a lot of the folks who wrote poetry wrote short stories. A lot of people were dabbling in multiple genres. So again, we have McKay, and Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston wrote many short stories, and, of course, with novels a lot of the same names, and we would add to that list Nella Larsen, Jessie Fauset, Wallace Thurman, Jean Toomer, Dorothy West. So there was just a large number of folk who were writing in a whole set of genres.

Ms. Beard: What are some of the important themes of this work?

Dr. Morris: There were so many. I think one thing that really categorizes the Harlem Renaissance is there was a debate between what literature, what African-American literature in particular, should look like. So you had folks writing for an older generation, say a DuBois or James Weldon Johnson who were really concerned with positive imagery, positive depictions of African-Americans. And they would lambast, say, more controversial texts like Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* or Carl Van Vechten's texts and things like that.

There was this other notion that we actually need to show the most realistic portion of black life, and that might involve the nitty-gritty, the violence, the gambling, the speakeasies. So that was one big thing. Also, there was a concern with language, using standard language, using dialect forms, and that was something that people were toying with.

Of course, race and racism was something that people came back to again and again. The importance of music (we talked about the Jazz Age last time), people were really interested in musical forms, and of course migration, because the Great Migration is happening. There are lots of stories of the naive Southern person coming into the North, coming into this cosmopolitan place, and how that changes him or her, so that was really important during the time period.

Ms. Beard: Tell us about the important black periodicals at this time.

Dr. Morris: There were a lot of black newspapers during the Harlem Renaissance and, interestingly, one of the most important black newspapers during the Harlem Renaissance is not in Harlem. It's the *Chicago Defender*, it's in Chicago. But there were lots of other ones, *The Pittsburgh Courier* for example, and these newspapers of course had what newspapers have today, headlines and gossip pages and fashion spreads, but they were also political tools which really spoke out against injustices. So lynching campaigns that were happening across the South were really unearthed in places like the *Chicago Defender* where you may not have seen that in a mainstream newspaper. Also, a lot of these newspapers encouraged people to migrate; they said, leave Mississippi, come to Chicago, come to Harlem. So they were tools in the Great Migration as well.

Ms. Beard: How were these periodicals different from the ones that had existed before?

Dr. Morris: That's a good question. In some ways they carried the torch. There were many African-American newspapers in the Nineteenth Century, *The Freedman's Journal*, Frederick Douglass had several newspapers, one of which is *The North Star*, the *Anglo-American* [*Anglo-African*?] is another prominent periodical from the Nineteenth Century. And while those newspapers of course were a lot about abolition and of course women's suffrage, those were two movements that were closely tied together. Really, I would say periodicals like the *Chicago Defender* and *The Pittsburgh Courier*, etc., really carried on that political mandate that the earlier periodicals had.

Ms. Beard: When we were talking earlier, you mentioned a conflict about the kinds of art that people thought ought to be produced, realistic versus uplifting. What influence did that have on writers at this time?

Dr. Morris: Well, it really produced a lively debate that we are still reading about now. The sort of the invective statements that folks like DuBois would publish in newspapers, and other folks would say, no, we actually do need to show these really gritty portrayals. It really galvanized the literature of the time and there were lots of essays being written.

We mentioned last time *The New Negro* edited by Alain Locke, and there are lots of manifestos saying this is what writing should look like, this is what art should look like, and people contradicting each other and saying, well, it should look like this. You have someone like Langston Hughes writing "The Negro [Artist] and the Racial Mountain" and talking about what Negro art should look like, and then you have George Schuyler talking about "The Negro-Art Hokum" and saying, we need to get away from this race literature and talk about what black literature should look like, we should have more expansive topics.

So there was really a lot of intellectual rigor and debate happening in the Harlem Renaissance, even though we want to remember rent parties and speakeasies, and that happened too, but there was really the longstanding debate, what does art mean, is art simply for art's sake, is it propaganda, should it try to move people, and that's a debate we see ongoing in African American arts and letters today.

Ms. Beard: Many of the Harlem Renaissance writers that we hear about are men. Tell us about some of the women who were writing at this time.

Dr. Morris: There were many, many women writing in the Harlem Renaissance. I think we often hear about Zora Neale Hurston and with good reason. She was a great author and very, in many

ways, well regarded in her time. But there were other authors, Nella Larsen, Jessie Fauset, Dorothy West, who wrote novels and short stories, who also wrote in periodicals and in magazines and things and did journalistic endeavors. So there were quite a few women authors who were very prominent during the Harlem Renaissance.

Ms. Beard: What was the white community's response to Harlem Renaissance literature?

Dr. Morris: That's really interesting because, during the Harlem Renaissance, what Langston Hughes said is that that's "when the Negro was in vogue." And so African American literature was popular among whites actually, and there were some whites who were quote, trying to "cash in" on this sort of notion that the Negro was in vogue.

Oftentimes there was a lot of patronage from wealthy whites. So Carl Van Vechten who was a photographer, philanthropist, he was a patron to lots of folk and a good friend to many people including Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Nella Larsen. There was also a woman named Charlotte Osgood Mason, and she was a wealthy older white woman who had this interest in all things African and African American, and she sponsored many, many artists, Hughes, Hurston, and other folks.

Some people really were not happy with this notion of patronage. They thought it influenced unduly the art that was being produced because you had to go back to a patron and say "Do you like this? Do you approve of this?", and then they control the purse strings. And so there were a lot of essays written about that thing, that we need to temper our association with certain whites.

And of course there was also this notion of "slumming it" people would say, that whites were coming into Harlem and wanting to go to spaces like the Cotton Club, which incidentally were segregated. Blacks could not go to the Cotton Club and chill and have a good time, they could only serve whites who came in. That was sort of indicative, some would argue, of the relationships between some whites and blacks in terms of patronage, that it really was another patriarchal racist institution.

Ms. Beard: Did the literature of the Harlem Renaissance influence more mainstream writers of this period?

Dr. Morris: You know, I would be loath to say no. However, as we talked about earlier, there are several distinct movements going on, and it's hard to look at Ezra Pound or T.S. Eliot and so on and see the Harlem Renaissance reflected, or vice versa, they are sort of interested in different things. So I think there probably is some overlap and some influence, you know these new ones were not in a vacuum by any means and these were folks on both sides of the movement who were traveling abroad, going to Europe, reading a lot of the same things, but there wasn't a direct correlation that you would see in other movements.

Ms. Beard: How did the Harlem Renaissance influence subsequent generations of black writers?

Dr. Morris: Well, I mean, clearly we are talking about it today, so it is still well studied, very much well studied, almost nowadays to the detriment of some other time periods. The period right before it that doesn't even really have a distinct name, you know the literature of Reconstruction, the pre-New Negro Renaissance, oftentimes gets shafted in a way. So the Harlem Renaissance is very much iconic for one.

There was also a great backlash, actually, against the Harlem Renaissance when we got to the Fifties and Sixties, once we got into the Black Arts Movement in particular, where they said that these types of literatures that came out in the Harlem Renaissance weren't radical enough, that they didn't rely on Afro-centric forms, that they didn't really emphasize black language forms, black idioms, that they were too focused on writing in sonnets and not free verse, things like that, or challenging racism in particular ways.

So the Harlem Renaissance has re-emerged in more recent times, I think more positively, but there was a time when, you know, short of Langston Hughes, that a lot of other folk were saying, we need to relegate this to an earlier time period, a simpler time, rather than recognizing it for its complexities. But, I would say overall, it's still a source of inspiration to current writers in many ways.

Ms. Beard: Thank you for talking with us, Dr. Morris.

Dr. Morris: Thank you for having me.

Ms. Beard: We've been talking about the Harlem Renaissance with Dr. Susana Morris of the Auburn University Department of English.

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