

## Commercial Dimensions of the Harlem Renaissance – the Press

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**ABSTRACT.** Multicultural concepts recently blooming in cultural studies impose interdisciplinary approach in both research and instruction. This leads to inquiry in the domain of mass culture and commercialism in their historical contexts. The article discusses African American press of the 1920s, its role in stimulating the Harlem Renaissance and traces its entanglement with the mounting commercial forces which resulted in various racial and class tensions.

**KEYWORDS:** Harlem Renaissance; African American press; *The Crisis*.

New challenges facing foreign language teachers' education and particularly recent developments and demands shaped by multicultural concepts, impose interdisciplinary approach in both research and instruction. To understand the dynamically changing *present*, cultural studies (both British and American) formulate questions referring to the *past* contexts in search for answers to *present-day* dilemmas. One of these is research in the domain of mass communication and commercialism seen from the perspective of American culture. The article follows these prerogatives.

The Pragmatic ideas which lay at the foundation of the concept of the New Negro, as well as the whole of the artistic movement of the Harlem Renaissance, developed in the historical context of modernization and urbanization. It was a moment in the evolution of American civilization

when the first signs of the emerging mass society were noticeable. The beginning of the twentieth century witnessed a steady increase of commercialism, a consequence of the economic growth which nearly tripled while the average salary almost doubled, creating a market for products and services. The booming American economy, strengthened by the involvement in the First World War, and closely connected with it mass production, the pressures of the market economy, and the first manifestations of mass consumption – all played a vital role in creating the environment in which the Harlem Renaissance was born and flourished.

The *mass society* critics, who have studied the novel trends that appeared in the American reality, mark the decline of the *organic community*, the rise of mass culture, and the social atomization of *mass man* as central themes. BENNETT (1988:31–32) argues that these themes have manifested themselves in a variety of pessimistic reactions to the processes of industrialization and urbanization and resulted in the development of political democracy, and the emergence of contemporary forms of *mass communication*. For SUSMAN (1984:xx), the basic conflict of the time was between two distinct cultural entities – an older culture, often loosely labeled *Puritan-republican, producer-capitalist culture*, and a newly emerging *culture of abundance*, which, along with economic growth and technological advancement, created a favorable background for the expansion or relocation of goods, services, ideas, and people. This inevitably led to a communications revolution, which in consequence molded the previously dominant oral forms of communication into the new domain of print – in particular, newspapers, magazines and journals – and, with time, also into the technologically novel realms of phonograph records, radio and film. The article discusses the African American press of the 1920s, its role in disseminating New Negro ideals and studies its entanglement with the mounting commercial forces which resulted in racial and class tensions.

The African American newspapers, magazines and journals published by *uplift* organizations played a significant role in popularizing the artistic concepts of the New Negro. According to HUTCHINSON (1997:126), the Harlem Renaissance followed not only (as is often stressed) the black migration and the First World War but also responded to *a whole new matrix of magazines centered in New York City*. Here, the new African American

press not only found its audience but also stimulated further growth of readership. Journals such as *The Crisis*, *Opportunity*, *Messenger*, *Negro World* (to name but a few) were absolutely integral to *the dissemination and institutionalization of New Negro art* (HERRING 2001:582). Also the *white press*, mainly newspapers such as *The Inter-State Tattler*, *The New York News*, *The Amsterdam News*, and *The New York Age* – all stimulated the artistic endeavors of the Harlem Renaissance. Just like the African American journals, those dailies and weeklies – through their editorials, gossip columns, ads for books, poems, society reviews, and city briefs – often commented on Harlem’s cultural elite and raised in their readers interest in the movement.

- (1) The turn-of-the-century witnessed the rise of a consumer culture, when, aside from the sensationalism of the modern tabloid, the frenzy of the best-seller system of publishing, the proliferation of commercial images and slogans, the rise of mass entertainment inexpensive magazines began to appear. (WILSON 1983:42)

In comparison to the limited circulation of the pre-mass magazines based on the subscription by well-to-do families and thus reflecting their expectations, the new, cheap mass magazine influenced a much greater number of readers by providing editorials and articles of common interest. The mass-magazine was directed to the mass audience. LEWIS (1982:7) informs us that even such magazines as, for example *The Crisis*, with its [...] *Harvard – accented editorials*, were not only read by the elite of the *Talented Tenth* but [...] found their way into *kerosene-lit, sharecroppers’ cabins and cramped factory worker’s tenements*, where they were read and often placed next to the Bible as an important reference and guide.

Among the above mentioned journals, undoubtedly the monthly magazine *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* played the most significant role. The first issue appeared in November, 1910 with a circulation of 1,000 and was available in all of the United States, its possessions and many foreign countries, including several African nations. In the next few years, it became the strongest African American journal of its time, thanks to news cited in the column ‘Along the Color Line’, its editorials, and the drawings and photographs of African Americans. In retrospect, its editor

DU BOIS felt that the drawings and photographs presented in *The Crisis* were as important in generating the journal's popularity as his editorials and the news. He remembers that:

- (2) Pictures of the colored people were an innovation, and at that time it was the rule of most white papers never to publish a picture of a colored person except as a criminal and the colored papers published mostly pictures of celebrities who sometimes paid for the honor. In general, the Negro race was just a little afraid to see itself in plain ink. (DU BOIS 1970:53)

DU BOIS not only edited the journal but also wrote several articles and editorials for every issue. As he recalled in the autobiographical *Dusk Of Dawn*, the journal was to be a highbrow and intellectually focused general-interest magazine circulating among the middle and upper class, respectable, well-mannered African American professionals. Consequently, *The Crisis*, the organ of propaganda of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), became the tribune for racial progress and

- (3) was able to organize one of the most effective assaults of liberalism upon prejudice and reaction that the modern world has seen. (DU BOIS 1986:720)

Years later, DU BOIS enumerated the accomplishments of both the NAACP, and, in particular, *The Crisis*:

- (4) [...] through the *Crisis* [...] We began to organize [African Americans'] political power and make it influential and we started a campaign against lynching and mob law which was the most effective ever organized and eventually brought the end of the evil in sight. Especially we gained a series of court victories before the highest courts of the land which perhaps never have been equaled; beginning with the overthrow of the vicious "Grandfather Clauses" in 1916 and the breaking of the backbone of residential segregation in 1917. (DU BOIS 1986:721)

Besides the political focus, with time the journal began to play an important role in propagating African American arts, becoming a significant forum devoted to the discussion of literature and art criticism topics. Once again, DU BOIS recalls his role and the seminal function of *The Crisis* in sponsoring the African American arts:

- (5) More especially I tried to encourage other Negro writers through the columns of the *Crisis*. By 1920, we could point out that most of the young writers among American Negroes had made first publication in the columns of the *Crisis*. In the next few years we published work from Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, Anne Spencer, Abram Harris and Jessie Faucet. In 1924, through the generosity of Amy Springer, wife of Joel, we were enabled to offer a series of prizes for young Negro writers [...] For several years this competition went on until it grew into what has been called the renaissance of Negro literature, late in the twenties. (DU BOIS 1986:751)

The interest in, and the sponsorship of, young African American writers transformed them overnight into American mainstream-style celebrities. As LEWIS (1982:50) observes:

- (6) the skies over Harlem simmered with stars, candidates for Charles Johnson's ambitious program to promote racial advancement through artistic creativity.

Along with the political propaganda and sponsorship of the arts, in order to survive on the competitive market, *The Crisis* was also interested in profits. In addition to the money obtained from sales and subscription – advertising seemed to be the key to economic success.

Starting in the 1910s, as the Great Migration of African Americans from the South was reaching the northern urban centers, many money-oriented entrepreneurs began to see the economic potential of the profits coming from the African American consumer. Money could be made on the African American market which until then had been considerably neglected (WALKER 1998:213). It soon became obvious that what was needed to sell products and make profits was advertising. MARCHANT (1985) in his *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920–1940*, rightly characterizes advertisers as *high priests* of the developing mass market.

DU BOIS realized the potential of advertising and therefore strove to obtain needed funds from companies advertising their products on the pages of *The Crisis*. It was obvious that the influx of advertising revenues had significant economic importance for the existence of the journal. This is how DU BOIS recalls his advertising policy:

- (7) We got some adverting [...] from Negro businesses; some advertisers were refused – we did not like the wares they offered or suspected fraud. The “Big” advertisers remained aloof; some looked us over, but nearly all fell back on the rule not to patronize “propaganda” periodicals. Besides, they did not believe the Negro market worth entering. (DU BOIS 1970:271)

Paraphrasing DU BOIS’s words we may restate that the *big white* businesses did not regard the African American market a profitable venture. As a consequence, the majority of advertisements were for the products and services of newly established and constantly growing African American-based enterprises. A whole spectrum of advertisements appeared; ads for housing, business opportunities, social and fraternal organizations, restaurants, hotels, books dealing with African American issues, educational institutions, personal services and various commodities (clothes, toys, records, toilet products, etc.). An overview of the advertising presented in *The Crisis* reveals a considerable number of those (often full page ads) devoted to the products of Madam C. J. Walker Mfg. Company Inc..

Madam C. J. Walker was one the greatest success stories of the time. Taking over her mother’s toilet products business which was based on allegedly secret formulas making the texture of hair of African Americans look like that of whites and making their black skin lighter – A’Leila (now known as Madame Walker) developed the enterprise to become one of the richest persons in Harlem. As she became a symbol of ‘racial uplift’, she helped many African Americans by employing them in her factories, and donated large sums of money to charity. Advertisements of her products were omnipresent in the pages of *The Crisis*.

Let us consider a few examples. The December 1930 issue of *The Crisis* presents an ad for *Mrs. C. J. Walker’s Tan-off* which

- (8) will bleach face, hands, neck and make them a clear, light part of your body you’ll be proud to show.

The June 1925 issue brings a full-page advertisement with a heading: “Glorifying Our Womanhood” which reads:

- (9) No greater force is working to glorify the womanhood of our Race than Madame C. J. Walker's Wonderful Hair and Skin Preparations.<sup>1</sup>

In the 1926 issues of *The Crisis* appeared a series of full-page ads (with photographs) of Madame C. J. Walker Mfg. Company Inc.. The advertisements promoted a travel contest sponsored by the company:

- (10) 30,000 miles of it, into fifty cities in fifteen different countries. The beauty of Japan, the charm of China, the babble of India, the mystery of Egypt, the languorous moodiness of Italy, and all in kaleidoscopic sequence – free, absolutely, to the four winners in Madame C. J. Walker's Trip Around the World Contest.

Winners were announced in the November 1926 issue of *The Crisis*.<sup>2</sup> From today's perspective, this advertising series resembles a full-fledged advertising campaign.

The August 1921 issue of *The Crisis* brings another interesting advertisement for the Arenson's Realty Development Corporation lots for sale which starts with a slogan:

- (11) Orchardville – where all good people are welcomed regardless of race, creed, color or nationality and continues: The lots [...] have plenty of room for house, garden, chicken yard, shed, etc., besides a few fruit trees which can be planted later on.<sup>3</sup>

This advertisement, as with the whole of *The Crisis*, did not address average working class African Americans, but rather better-off members of the middle-class; to use Roland Marchant's title referred to above, it successfully *advertised the American Dream*. All the more so that the services, commodities, and opportunities were presented under the banner of *progress* and, according to David Blanke, advertising at the time revolved around three key themes:

- (12) [it] assist[ed] the individual [in] find[ing] meaning in the increasingly complex and bureaucratized world; [...] provided a form of therapy in offering

<sup>1</sup> *The Crisis*, June 1925, p. 103.

<sup>2</sup> These advertisements appeared in February – September 1926 issues of *The Crisis*.

<sup>3</sup> *The Crisis*, August, 1921, p. 189.

“solutions” to many of modern life’s newest problems. Frustration with modernity and the faster pace of living were common, and advertisers sought to ease these psychological pressures by assuring their clients that their goods were the latest, the most progressive products available. [And finally] ads helped to create a new standard of conduct – new moral codes for the uninitiated. (BLANKE 2002:48)

African Americans experienced all of these forces; still the race discrimination which they experienced in a segregated America visibly reflected itself in advertising, too. *Let us train ourselves to see beauty in black* wrote W. E. B. DU BOIS in 1920, stressing at the same time the growing sentiment of racial pride. In the same mode, the editor of one of the African American journals attempted to convince its readers that there was *no better way to start* [the process of racial awareness] *than by purchasing the child a black doll* (QUARLES 1988:149). But here the problems started: how was *black* to be defined?; how *black* did one have to be to be considered *black*? Marcus Garvey had no doubts about his pigmentation, to the effect that his strong belief in the *pure black race* put him in strong opposition to the middle class African Americans who often were of lighter shade. According to LEWIS (1982:41), Garvey consistently

(13) exploited race color taboos, greatly exaggerating the correspondence between position and pigment in Afro-Americans

calling DU BOIS *an unfortunate mulatto who hates the drop of Negro blood in his veins*, and Cyril Briggs a *white man*, Garvey put himself in strong opposition to the *dyed* African Americans of *cross-breed* like the *Dutch-French-Negro editor* (LEWIS 1982:42), meaning DU BOIS.

Garvey in a sense had a point. On the one hand, there was a considerable note of contradiction between the declarations made by middle class African Americans concerning racial awareness and the reality on the other, which was especially visible in advertising. In consequence, *The Crisis* published advertisements such as one from December 1923, presenting the O.K. Colored Doll Co. and its *Negro Crying and Walking Doll* which *has beautiful brown skin*. And again, in October 1924 *Light-Brown Dolls* are advertised, dolls which are



(14) beautiful, unbreakable [...] with curls and pretty dresses, shoes, stockings and beautiful bonnet. They Walk, Talk and Cry.<sup>4</sup>

Middle class African Americans wanted to have lighter pigmentation and straight hair. The Chemical Wonder Company's ad may serve as a concluding quotation to the above discussion:

(15) If colored people groom themselves daintily [sic], destroy perspiration odors, remove grease shine from the face, and use our new discoveries for improving the skin and dressing their hair they will be better received in the business world, make more money, and advance faster (HENRI 1975:163).

As the above discussion indicates, this was *a new standard of conduct – new moral code*, especially for the majority of aspiring middle-class African Americans pursuing the American Dream.

The commercial forces of the flourishing market economy of the 1920s with its developing mass media which manifested themselves primarily in the domain of the press, in a large degree facilitated and strengthened the artistic endeavors of the Harlem Renaissance. As time has shown, these forces also paved ground for significant contributions of African Americans to the mainstream American culture in other spheres, namely the phonograph records industry (the so called “race records”), the radio and film. But these areas may be the focus of future articles.

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