Chapter 3: The Talented Tenth

IN HIS 1940 AUTOBIOGRAPHY, The Big Sea, Langston Hughes noted that his 1927 poetry collection, Fine Clothes to the Jew, which dealt with the seedy side of Harlem life, prompted headlines in the black press that read “LANGSTON HUGHES' BOOK OF POEMS TRASH” and “LANGSTON HUGHES—THE SEWER DWELLER.”

Like Hughes, another young black writer, Jamaican-born Claude McKay, was not the sort of writer who feared such controversy. At 23, already the author of two volumes of dialect poetry, McKay traveled to America to study agriculture. As a student at Kansas State College, he read Du Bois's The Souls of Black Folk, a collection of sketches and essays published in 1903. The book shook him “like an earthquake”; soon after, he decided to make a career out of writing poetry and arrived in Harlem in 1914.
Deeply troubled by American racist violence and the terror of the Red Summer of 1919, he wrote the poem, “If We Must Die,” a militant call for self-defense. The poem reads in part:

If we must die, let it not be like hogs Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot, I While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs, Making their mock at our accursed lot…. Like men, we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack, Pressed to the wall, dying but fighting back!

The bold fury and racial pride of the poem made it an anthem for African Americans. Along with his first book of poetry, Harlem Shadows (1922), “If We Must Die” transformed McKay into the first literary star of the Harlem Renaissance. “No Negro poet has sung more beautifully of his race than McKay,” James Weldon Johnson said in a New York Age review, “and no poet has ever equaled the power with which he expresses the bitterness that so often rises in the heart of the race.”

A restless character, uneasy with success yet hungry for it, McKay was never completely comfortable in Harlem. Most whites outside the area viewed him as just another black man, yet he did not feel at ease with members of the black intellectual circle. He left New York in 1922 for the Soviet Union so that he could witness communism firsthand, and later he moved to France. Although he was overseas during most of the Harlem Renaissance, he continued to write about Harlem. “I had done my best Harlem stuff when I was abroad, seeing it from a long perspective,” he later claimed in A Long Way from Home.

McKay eventually returned to Harlem, however. After years of travel and life abroad, the “Negro Mecca” would lure him home again. “Harlem was my first positive reaction to American life,” he once said. “It was like entering a paradise of my own people.”

McKay was one of the many young writers of the Harlem Renaissance who was strongly influenced by W. E. B. Du Bois, one of the most important black intellectual figures of the 20th century. “My earliest memories of written words were those of W. E. B. Du Bois and the Bible,” Langston Hughes recalled.

Du Bois was born and raised in the small town of Great Barrington, Massachusetts. Of mixed heritage—Dutch, French, and African American—Du Bois was light-skinned and relatively sheltered from prejudice. He graduated from high school in 1884, the only black in his class and the first ever to graduate from the school. His ultimate goal was to attend Harvard College, widely regarded as one of the best schools in the country, but Harvard turned down his application for admission. Enthusiastic townspeople, including the high school principal and two ministers, set up a scholarship fund for Du Bois and sent him instead to Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, a school for blacks that aimed to become one of the best educational institutions in the South.
Though deeply disappointed that he could not attend Harvard, the young scholar was eager to journey to the South to “meet colored people of my own age and education, of my own ambitions.” Southern blacks lived in a segregated society, where they could not vote or hold public office, and Du Bois felt that if he wanted to be a leader of his people, he would have to begin there.

Du Bois eventually did attend Harvard, earning a Ph.D. in 1896. By this time, he had been exposed to the brutality of racial prejudice and the nearly inescapable poverty of many southern blacks. Working among the rural poor of the South had inflamed his social conscience, and he grew committed to helping his fellow blacks to lift “the Veil that hung between us and Opportunity.” In his third year at Fisk, he had announced in an editorial that he was devoting himself “toward a life that shall be an honor to the Race.”

Du Bois's brilliance was matched by his pride and ambition. Dogged in his efforts to refute those who doubted “Negro intelligence” and who had initially denied him a place at Harvard, Du Bois studied economics at the University of Berlin in Germany. “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line,” he wrote in The Souls of Black Folk.

Du Bois's vision of black leadership was at heart decidedly elitist. He firmly believed that educated blacks—the small percentage of black intellectuals to whom he referred as the “Talented Tenth”—should provide the strong leadership that the nation's blacks so desperately needed. “The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men,” he wrote. Du Bois insisted that middleclass blacks use their advanced knowledge of modern culture to lead the struggle for black rights. The Talented Tenth theory, which grew out of the conclusions Du Bois had reached in his study The Philadelphia Negro, seemed to him the only way to supplant white leadership.

Despite the Harvard education that separated him from the vast majority of African Americans, Du Bois’s work appealed to a wide audience, from northern liberals to rural blacks in the South. Under his editorship, the NAACP’s The Crisis reached a monthly circulation of almost 100,000 copies.

Du Bois’s philosophy was in direct opposition to that of another black leader, Booker T. Washington, a former slave and founder of the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute for Blacks. Washington held that the way to raise blacks up was to supply job training for them. Speaking before an audience of blacks and whites at the 1895 Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta, Washington exhorted blacks to put aside their aspirations for political and social equality and strive instead to improve their industrial skills before demanding a higher place in American society. In the speech, which Du Bois would call the “Atlanta Compromise,” Washington maintained that the “wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremest folly.” Once blacks had made a substantial economic contribution to the nation, social and political equality would follow.
Although Du Bois initially sympathized with Washington—The Philadelphia Negro had also promoted the virtues of thrift and self-reliance as solutions to the problems faced by blacks—he increasingly began to believe that Washington had contributed significantly to worsening racial relations in the United States. Du Bois was not the only influential black who disagreed vigorously with Washington. Among others were journalists Ida Wells-Barnett and William Monroe Trotter, who felt that Washington's views were a betrayal of their civil rights.

Du Bois contributed to the Harlem Renaissance in many ways besides his work with The Crisis. An annual feature of the periodical was a special children's edition, and in early 1920, with the help of coeditors Jessie Pauset and Augustus Dill, he began publishing another magazine: The Brownies' Book, a monthly that included stories, poems, and short biographies aimed at a young black audience. Du Bois, who professed a great love for children, appeared in each issue as a character named the Crow. “I like my black feathers—don't you?” his alter ego asked of his youthful readers.

Many of the young writers of the Harlem Renaissance fit neatly into Du Bois's vision of a black "aristocracy" that would lead other African Americans to equality. It was the literary editor of The Crisis, a fiercely intelligent woman named Jessie Pauset, who would be the first to herald the talent of such important Renaissance writers as Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, and Langston Hughes.

The independent and intellectually brilliant Pauset was 37 years old when the literary world began paying attention to what Harlemites had to say. She had earned a degree in classical languages from Cornell University in 1905, after which she taught French for 14 years at Washington's Paul Laurence Dunbar High School, where many of the children of the city's black elite were enrolled. (Pauset had hoped to attend Bryn Mawr College, a prestigious women's school in Pennsylvania, but after accepting her application, Bryn Mawr offered to find her a scholarship elsewhere lest she start a wave of integration.) A traditional classicist and Europhile, Pauset traveled to Europe repeatedly before earning a master's degree in French from the University of Pennsylvania in 1919.

Some of her students later noted that Pauset never seemed to be fully satisfied as a teacher and always imagined herself going on to greater things. She was very aware, however, of the double yoke of gender and race bias placed upon her. “Had she not been a ‘colored woman’ she might have sought work with a New York publishing house,” David Levering Lewis wrote in When Harlem Was in Vogue. “There is no telling what she would have done had she been a man, given her first-rate mind and formidable efficiency at any task.” Through her relationship with Du Bois, which had begun while she was attending Cornell, Pauset secured a position as literary editor for The Crisis in 1919.

Seven years earlier, a Florida native named James Weldon Johnson had published The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man, a novel about a light’ skinned black man trying to pass
as a white. Although it received little critical attention, it influenced a number of young black artists of the Harlem Renaissance who were rebelling against a white society at the same time that they were depending on white patrons and white readers to support their creative work.

The son of the first black female teacher in the state of Florida, Johnson was educated at Atlanta University and followed in his mother's footsteps as a director of a high school for African Americans. He edited a small newspaper, studied law, and was admitted to the Florida bar. Johnson had been appointed United States consul to Venezuela and Nicaragua and was field secretary of the NAACP before being named the organization's executive secretary in 1920.

As a columnist for the New York Age, Johnson called attention to many outstanding young black writers. In 1922, he brought them further notice when he published The Book of American Negro Poetry, an anthology of poems by 40 talented black writers, beginning with Paul Laurence Dunbar and ending with Claude McKay. In his introduction to the book, Johnson traced the history of black poetry from its early writers, such as the 18th-century poet Phillis Wheatley, to its dialect poets, such as Dunbar. He stated that the artistic achievements of black Americans had been limited because "the Negro in the United States is consuming all of his intellectual energy in this grueling race struggle."

A former protégé of Booker T. Washington, Johnson also believed in Du Bois's notion of a Talented Tenth. He valued the rich tradition of African-American spirituals, slave songs, and biblical stories, yet he believed that those who had the power to effect social change were the high-minded, scholarly men and women of society. Johnson wrote in his introduction:

> The final measure of the greatness of all peoples is the amount and standard of the literature and art they have produced. The world does not know that a people is great until that people produces great literature and art.... And nothing will do more to change the mental attitude and raise his status than a demonstration of the intellectual parity by the Negro through the production of literature and art.

Another of the six "midwives" of the Harlem Renaissance (with Jessie Pauset, James Weldon Johnson, Charles S. Johnson, Casper Holstein, and Walter White) was Alain Locke. A Phi Beta Kappa Harvard graduate and the first black American to win a Rhodes scholarship to Oxford University in England, Alain Locke was the epitome of Du Bois's Talented Tenth. He came from a well-educated and ambitious family; his mother, from whom he acquired his love of literature, taught at Philadelphia's Institute for Colored Youth. After receiving his degree from Oxford, Locke studied for a year at the University of Berlin and for another year at the Collège de France. He returned to America in 1912, having cultivated an image that he would
keep throughout his life—a high-pitched, affected way of speaking, impeccably tailored suits, and a thin umbrella that he used as a walking stick.

Locke became a professor of philosophy at Howard University. With dramatic arts instructor Montgomery Gregory, Locke sought to bring the spirit of the Harlem Renaissance, with its pride in black America’s cultural heritage, to the relatively staid Howard community. The two sponsored a campus literary club called Stylus, whose membership included Zora Neale Hurston. Hurston's first short story, “John Redding Goes to Sea,” appeared in the May 1921 issue of the club's literary magazine. “We now have enough talent,” Locke wrote at the time, “to begin a movement and to express a school of thought.”

Locke was anxious to foster in his students an appreciation of the African art and European literature that he loved, but he was often criticized for his haughty demeanor. Hurston once described him as the “one who lives by quotations trying to criticize people who live by life.” Locke believed, however, that such disapproval was the price one paid for cultural literacy: “the highest intellectual duty is the duty to be cultured,” he told his students. They should ignore “criticism of exclusiveness, overselectness, perhaps even the extreme of snobbery. Culture will have to plead guilty to a certain degree of this.” With his close ties to Charlotte Osgood Mason, a white patron of the Harlem Renaissance, and despite—or perhaps because of—his air of superiority, Locke was an enormously influential mentor for striving black artists, musicians, and writers in Harlem.

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PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): One of America's principal black intellectuals, W. E. B. Du Bois emerged as the leading voice in the struggle for racial advancement during the first half of the 20th century.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Booker T. Washington at the Tuskegee Institute, 1902, with secretary Emmett Scott. Although Du Bois agreed with Washington's emphasis on economic growth for blacks, he did not agree with Washington that blacks should put off agitating for equal rights.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Although The Brownies' Book, a monthly for young black readers, lasted for only two years, Du Bois looked back on the project “with infinite satisfaction.”

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Du Bois at work on The Crisis, with coeditors Jessie Pauset (left) and Augustus Dill (standing) in the editorial offices. Du Bois was the main voice of The Crisis for 24 years.
PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Author, editor, and NAACP chief James Weldon Johnson firmly believed that African Americans could rise only through the arts. “The final measure of the greatness of all peoples,” he said, “is the amount and standard of the literature and art they have produced.”

By Veronica Chambers

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